



**Universidad de Valladolid**

## **An Outline of Analytical Pyrrhonism**

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## Abstract

Sceptical concerns baffle us because they go against the widespread conviction that we must have a great deal of knowledge of our world. Nevertheless, in a society that is growing more polarised by the minute—where misinformation and partisanship lurk everywhere and are amplified in echo chambers—taking a sceptical way of thinking based on the justified suspension of judgement may be reasonable. Accordingly, this master's thesis is a bet in favour of a sceptical attitude. The essay aims to ground Pyrrhonian scepticism from an analytic philosophy standpoint. To this end, Pyrrho's best-known argument is reconstructed into a theory for scepticism based on a modal realist framework and the Wittgensteinian notion of hinge propositions. As a result, a novel account of Pyrrhonian scepticism—which could be called “Analytic Pyrrhonism”—is offered. Notwithstanding the proposed scope of research, the grounds and conclusions of this essay might also be compatible with the sceptical principles and goals of Ancient Pyrrhonism.

Keywords: Pyrrho, scepticism, modal realism, hinge propositions.

## Breve Resumen

Las preocupaciones escépticas nos desconciertan porque van en contra de la convicción generalizada de que tenemos un amplio conocimiento de nuestro mundo. Sin embargo, en una sociedad cada vez más polarizada—donde la desinformación y el partidismo acechan en cada esquina y son amplificadas en cámaras de resonancia—, adoptar una forma de pensar escéptica basada en la suspensión de juicio justificada puede ser razonable. En consonancia, este trabajo de fin de máster es una apuesta a favor de una actitud escéptica. El presente ensayo tiene por objeto sustentar el escepticismo pirrónico desde una perspectiva afín a la filosofía analítica contemporánea. Para ello, los argumentos más conocidos de Pirrón se reconstruyen en una teoría para el escepticismo, con base en un postura realista modal y la noción Wittgensteiniana de proposiciones bisagra. Como resultado, se ofrece un planteamiento novedoso del escepticismo pirrónico—al que bien podríamos denominar "pirronismo analítico". A pesar del ámbito de investigación propuesto, la posición escéptica descrita en este ensayo es también compatible con los principios y objetivos del pirronismo antiguo.

Palabras clave: Pirrón, escepticismo, realismo modal, proposiciones bisagra.

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Who is there to hand on the teachings of Pyrrho?

—Seneca, *Natural Questions* 7.32.2<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As translated in Long and Sedley (1987 vol.I, 15)

# An Outline of Analytical Pyrrhonism

## *I. Introduction*

What do I know? Possibly, nothing much. It is tempting to say that it is possible that we all do not know pretty much about anything—if indeed we know anything at all. Furthermore, most of our beliefs may never amount to anything more than that: They are simply beliefs. Of course, it is also possible to hold the opposite, more optimistic views: We know more than a lot—or at least enough—and beliefs can become knowledge somehow—even if by mere luck. Thus, several philosophers might even consider it absurd to doubt that we have all kinds of everyday knowledge in abundance (Lewis 1996, 549).

Holding dearly to those “optimistic” beliefs about the possibility of knowledge has sustained the ongoing epistemological project throughout the ebb and flow of philosophy from Antiquity to our days. However, in a world that is becoming increasingly polarised by the minute—where fake news, conspiracy theories, partisanship, fanaticism and ideological entrenching lurk around every corner and are amplified indiscriminately in echo chambers—reconsidering the worth of a pessimistic or sceptical way of thinking based on a justified suspension of judgement may not be completely preposterous.<sup>2</sup> Scepticism, nonetheless, remains an unpopular philosophical stance. After all, it questions our whole conception of knowledge, foregrounding our insecurities and uncertainties. Hence, philosophers and laypeople have persistently conceived scepticism as a philosophical thorn-in-the-side or, at best, as a pessimistic view that—albeit untenable and self-destructive, both logically and practically—has some philosophical use serving as an epistemological sparring device.

Accordingly, since the dawn of modernity, scepticism has not been taken very seriously as a philosophical theory. Philosophers like Descartes and Moore have approached sceptical arguments as obstacles we must overcome to solve particular philosophical problems. And nowadays, scepticism is mainly a position assumed to be

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<sup>2</sup> It is essential to distinguish a sceptical position based on the suspension of judgement—which by definition abstains from asserting something as being the case—from the mere act of disbelieving or negating something—which, on the contrary, holds a claim to determinate the truth.

false, the only related question being on what grounds to conclude that it is mistaken. Alas, the notion of a systematic sceptical stance is hardly considered or entertained in contemporary philosophy.

Nonetheless, sceptical inquietudes have accompanied humanity's philosophical journey throughout history. They have been present in a wide range of cultures since Antiquity: Chinese sages, Nahuatl poets, Islamic and Indian scholars and, of course, Greek philosophers have entertained, fostered and followed sceptical attitudes. In some well-known instances, philosophers—such as the Hellenistic sceptics and Montaigne—put forth sceptical arguments because they conceived scepticism as a philosophical stance that is genuinely rational—possibly unavoidable, and even therapeutic—and that was in some way able to lead us towards some version of a contented life. And even those philosophers who might have an ambiguous relationship to scepticism, like Wittgenstein, in trying to remain neutral in the face of sceptical temptations, more often than not, ended up articulating sceptical arguments anew. That might as well be the case of Kripke's (1982) interpretation of some of Wittgenstein's thoughts as raising a sceptical challenge to individual rule-following and, as a result, to the notion of meaning itself.<sup>3</sup>

Given how formal epistemology uses sceptical arguments, it is unsurprising that the locus for philosophical discussion on scepticism has orbited around its so-called radical varieties: Cartesian and Pyrrhonian—both of which lack the support of anything like a proper philosophical theory. The former consists of advancing sceptical hypotheses bearing on universal doubt—as the one Descartes wielded in his *Meditations*. This might lead to the conclusion that we cannot be sure of our beliefs. The latter, instead, focuses mainly on dialectical techniques that aim to counter the grounds offered in justification of any belief, thus, concluding that one ought to be sceptical about most—if not all—opinions since none of them appears to be more reasonable than its denial.

However, in this light, philosophical scepticism perhaps does not deserve to be taken more seriously than it already is. This could be the case, as long as scepticism is construed merely as a compendium of daring hypothetical scenarios and epistemological testing techniques. But, if scepticism is to be taken seriously, then it requires a systematic effort to develop it into a formal theory that goes beyond the mere deployment of Cartesian

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<sup>3</sup> In short, according to Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein, there is a sceptical challenge to meaning that arises from the possibility that every previous usage of a word is compatible with different ascriptions of meaning. In this sense, there are different semantic rules that one can say to be following while employing the same term at different times. Hence, the multiple uses of the word made to date do not fix what is meant, and neither would verbal elaborations help since they would also be subject to the same questioning.

hypothesis and Pyrrhonian modes and that, at the same time, justifies the deployment of such intellectual instruments. Such a systematic effort should elaborate on what Cavell identified as the fundamental insight of the sceptic: “certainty is not enough” (2015, 238). And pursuing that insight will be the primary goal of this essay.

Be as it may, Pyrrhonism—in its Sextan version—has gained notoriety in contemporary philosophy for being as close as possible to a systematic philosophical stance. Discussions regarding its plausibility, intellectual scope, ethical implications and consequences for everyday life have gained and lost momentum during the last forty years.<sup>4</sup> Unsurprisingly, the debate among philologists and philosophers has also extended to the content and rationale of Pyrrho’s ideas. But discussions on this topic have focused primarily on whether and to what extent Pyrrho himself was a sceptic in the Pyrrhonian way as understood by Hellenistic and contemporary scholars. This is not the case in the present work.

A serious sceptic must accept a burden of proof and provide some theoretical ground from which he makes his stand. So, instead of merely offering another interpretation of Pyrrho’s philosophy, in this paper, I will attempt to reconstruct and build upon the scarce ideas that are nowadays attributed to Pyrrho with the explicit purpose of outlining a theoretical background for scepticism that can coexist agreeably with other tenets of contemporary analytic philosophy. To this end, I will not assume in advance that Pyrrho’s views are related in any particular way to the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus. Rather, I will offer an “Analytical” account of Pyrrhonism—distinct from the Sextan tradition, though not entirely incompatible with it—consisting of a sceptical theory akin to Pyrrho’s thoughts and conclusions that will be based on a modal realist framework and the Wittgensteinian notion of “hinge propositions.”

With such a purpose in mind, this thesis is organised as follows. Evidence of Pyrrho’s sceptical thinking will be surveyed in §III. Afterwards, §V presents a possible reconstruction of a Sceptic argument based on Pyrrho’s sceptical tenets. §IV and §VI comprise the analytic conceptual framework supporting the Pyrrhonian theory offered in this work. The former explores the notion of possible worlds and the modal realist thesis. The latter delves into the possibility of employing “hinge propositions” as the sceptic’s practical criterion in ordinary life. Lastly, §VII wraps up this essay with some concluding remarks. As a starting point, however, I will sketch some points of interest regarding Pyrrhonian scepticism and its theoretical background in the next section.

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<sup>4</sup> Arguably, the influential papers by Frede (1979), Burnyeat (1980) and Barnes (1982) kicked off a renewed interest in philosophical analyses of Ancient Pyrrhonism.

## *II. Pyrrhonism without Theory*

Scepticism has played a central part in our philosophical progress. But, except for a few philosophers who showed some sympathy toward sceptical arguments,<sup>5</sup> scepticism has hardly received any serious consideration as a viable theoretical option during the development of contemporary analytic philosophy. Within contemporary philosophy practices, sceptical attitudes seem to serve mainly, if not solely, as an epistemological lever. But this is not a new development. From the Renaissance onwards, the philosophical aim of sceptical thinking has been used, for the most part, to test the conditions advanced by any given theorist as legitimate requirements that must be satisfied by a would-be knower to know something indeed. After all, that is how Descartes employed sceptical thinking at the dawn of the modern philosophical tradition in his quest to ground philosophy on a new rational foundation of basic knowledge (Cooper 2012, 277).

Nowadays, scepticism—besides being a historical curiosity—occupies mainly an instrumental role in philosophy: For most philosophers, sceptical arguments only help us enhance—and, if possible, foolproof—our epistemological theories. Consequently, philosophers continue to construe scepticism mainly from the outside with the sole purpose of refuting it—or, at the very least, finding some suitable epistemological accommodation to it. In other words, contemporary philosophers conceive sceptical arguments only as practical tests framed in terms of a paradox. In this way, philosophy can intellectually benefit from sceptical challenges without conceding plausibility to the existence of real-life sceptics (Wright 1991, 89). And thus, the “sceptic” is magically transformed into a mere intellectual construct, the product of our realisation that some beliefs that shape our conception of knowledge are inconsistent (Pritchard 2005, 192).

It is possible, however, that philosophy—or, more accurately, philosophers—tends to misrepresent our reality as well as that of others (Diamond 2003, 11). This is likely the case for our sceptical concerns. Cavell, for instance, entertained the idea that scepticism was rooted in an attempt to convert the human condition—wonder before the uncertain and the unknown—into a riddle, a mere intellectual challenge (1979, 493). If that is the case, then the sceptic’s approach to our reality appears to be deflected from it and the truth. But, as Diamond points out, the philosophical understanding of the sceptic’s thought is deflected further still as philosophers think and rethink it while ignoring the fundamental

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<sup>5</sup> Including those philosophers that Williams has labelled as “new sceptics” (1991, chapter 1)—such as Nagel (1986), Stroud (1984) and Unger (1971; 1975).



insight of the sceptic by considering it as yet another intellectual difficulty (2003, 18-9).

Arguably then, if Pyrrhonian scepticism has become somewhat of a fashionable object of interest for contemporary philosophy, it is not because most scholars think of it as a viable philosophical theory. Instead, their prevailing interest in Pyrrhonism stems from the possibility that there seem to be some intriguing arguments in its favour, the responses to which might strengthen contemporary epistemological theories. We could thus say that the current interest in scepticism is fundamentally theoretical, whereas, in stark contrast, Ancient scepticism—mainly Sextan Pyrrhonism, but also otherwise—was explored and nurtured by philosophers who intended their lives to be reflective of their philosophy (Cooper 2012, §5.5-5.7).

So what did the Ancient Sextan Pyrrhonism consist of? The answer is relatively simple. According to Sextus:

Scepticism is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equal force of the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquillity (PH I.8).

In sum, a Pyrrhonian sceptic—in the Sextan sense—appears to be someone who has a very particular skill set. Sextus's sceptic must be able to find, for any specific proposition P, both an argument in favour of it and an equally convincing argument against it. As a result, the equal force of the opposing arguments leads the Sextan Pyrrhonist to a suspension of judgement about P. Once a sceptic suspends judgement, he or she can suddenly and fortuitously gain tranquillity of mind and moderation of suffering regarding things forced upon us—the goals which the would-be sceptic sought after from the very beginning (PH I.25-6).

Sextan Pyrrhonism is not a regular philosophical theory, nonetheless. As a philosophical system, it limits itself mainly to expound on a method for applying—in dispute or reflection—a set of dialectical tools called “modes.” However, we could expect that if scepticism is to be a systematic philosophical stance, in addition to a practical or prescriptive component, it would comprise a theoretical component offering acceptable grounds or reasons (Striker 1980, 54). Nevertheless, in the case of Sextan scepticism, this does not seem to be the case. Sextus's Pyrrhonist can suspend judgment on all questions, including whether there are reasons to pursue the prescribed method or whether knowledge is possible in the first instance. This condition, in turn, seems to preclude

Sextan Pyrrhonism from having any theoretical basis (Williams 1988, 549).<sup>6</sup>

Now, if practice and not theory is primary to scepticism, it would be understandable that Sextus avoided grounding the Pyrrhonian method on a theoretical basis. From his perspective, Pyrrhonism stresses the primacy of technique, so “becoming a sceptic depends on acquiring an ability, not on proving or even assenting to a thesis” (Williams, 554). But, if that is the case, Pyrrhonian scepticism cannot arguably be systematised or formalised into a philosophical theory (Williams 1988, 556). Moreover, Sextan scepticism would not be meant for everyone. Instead, it is reserved only for those rare “men of talent” who are 1) capable of coming up with equipollent oppositions, and 2) interested in inquiring “what in things is true and what false, thinking that by deciding these issues they would become tranquil” (PH I.12).

Since 1562—when the first known Latin translation of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* was published—Sextus’s Pyrrhonism has offered philosophers the most systematic sceptical position available.<sup>7</sup> Exposure to it played no small part in shaping the ideas of figures such as Montaigne and Descartes. Nonetheless, Sextan Pyrrhonism seems to be predominantly a practical movement justified by teleological reasons—i.e., achieving tranquillity. Moreover, it not only seems to lack an explicit theoretical background but also to be exclusively reserved for those curious individuals who have the knack for mastering a particular set of abilities.

However, this does not have to be the case: Pyrrhonian scepticism can become a more appealing and accessible—or “democratic”—philosophical stance if the proper theoretical framework is provided to support its practical method and goals. And perhaps, the right place to look for the most suitable theoretical component for Pyrrhonian scepticism would be its philosophical forefather's ideas. This possibility will be explored hereafter.

### *III. Pyrrho’s Possible Words*

Pyrrhonian scepticism took its name from Pyrrho of Elis, a philosopher of ancient Greece

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<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it could be argued that “the various ‘Modes of Suspension’ look like a more or less systematic working through of [very general epistemological] arguments” in favour of sceptical conclusions (Williams 1988, 550).

<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding, general sceptical arguments remained a part of philosophy throughout the Middle Ages, and long-available ancient authors, such as Cicero and Augustine, preserved some accounts of the sceptical positions from Antiquity, especially those of the New Academy.

who became the adopted figurehead of later Pyrrhonian tradition thanks to Aenesidemus.<sup>8</sup> Although Pyrrho did not leave any writings of his own, his reputation was preserved and promoted in a few reports by Timon—who was Pyrrho’s pupil.

Even though Pyrrho is considered the forerunner of a particular philosophical movement, none of the advocates of the so-called Pyrrhonian scepticism seemed interested in reconstructing Pyrrho's philosophical thought. For instance, in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus mentions Pyrrho only once, heedfully referring to him as a role model for living according to the sceptical precepts. According to Sextus, “Pyrrho appears to us to have attached himself to Scepticism more systematically and conspicuously than anyone before him” (PH I.7). Therefore, one should be cautious in concluding that Pyrrho’s philosophical dispositions were identical to those of the posterior sceptical movements purportedly inspired by his thoughts and deeds.

However, the seeming indifference towards the possible structure of Pyrrho’s philosophical system is quite understandable. Surprisingly little is known about Pyrrho's life and even less about his philosophical viewpoints. Since the man himself did not leave any written record of his ideas, the most significant source of Pyrrho's philosophical perspective, according to the academic consensus, is a paragraph from Aristocles’s *On Philosophy*—which has been preserved in Eusebius’s *Praeparatio Evangelica*.<sup>9</sup> Following Perin (2018) and Bett (1994), a more or less neutral translation of Aristocles’s passage would be:

It is necessary above all to consider our own knowledge; for if it is our nature to know nothing, there is no need to inquire any further into things. There were some among the ancients, too, who made this statement, whom Aristotle has argued against. Pyrrho of Elis was also a powerful advocate of such a position.

He himself has left nothing in writing; his pupil Timon, however, says that the person who is to be happy must look to these three points: first, what are things [*pragmata*] like by nature? Second, in what way ought we to be disposed toward them? And, finally, what will be the result for those who are so disposed?

[α] He [Timon] says that he [Pyrrho] reveals that things are equally indifferent and unmeasurable and undecidable [*indeterminate*];

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<sup>8</sup> Long and Sedley (1987 vol.I, 468-69) provide examples of Aenesidemus's allusions to Pyrrho.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek text might be found in Long and Sedley (1987 vol.II, 5 text F).

[β] for this reason neither our sensations nor our opinions tell the truth or lie.

[χ] For this reason, then, we should not trust them, but should be without opinions and without inclinations and without wavering, saying about each single thing that it no more is than is not, or [that it] both is and is not, or [that it] neither is nor is not.<sup>10</sup>

[δ] Timon says that the result for those who are so disposed will be first speechlessness, but then tranquility or freedom from worry; and Aenesidemus says pleasure. These, then, are the main points of what they say.

As is the case with almost every topic in philosophy, the passage above is not exempt from controversy.<sup>11</sup> Given the lack of additional sources, most scholars have assumed that the contents of Aristocles's passage are accurate—for otherwise, any hint of Pyrrho's philosophy would be entirely lost to us. But, even under such an assumption, different exegetical issues remain. Perhaps the most fundamental of these problems resides in determining how to interpret [α]—which is taken to embody Pyrrho's answer to the question: "What are things [*pragmata*] like by nature?". From this point of view, fragment [α] seemingly stands as the central premise of the whole argument contained in Aristocles's passage and, hence, [β] and the subsequent inferences would follow from it.

Among the scholarly literature, there are two interpretative options concerning [α] and its inferential relationship with [β]: the metaphysical and the epistemic readings. According to the metaphysical or objective interpretation, Pyrrho claims without hesitation that reality has, in itself, "no definite character" (Bett 1994, 153; 2000, 20). Thus, in this reading, Pyrrho is said to hold a substantial belief about the nature of things—namely, that they are by nature "indeterminate" insofar as they have no defined features or properties. By contrast, on the epistemic interpretation—called subjective as well—, Pyrrho's central tenet is that things are only indeterminable or undecidable to us—that is, we cannot determine or decide—and thus are not able to know—what things are really like (Stopper 1983, 275, 292-93; Brennan 1998 417-18, 425; Castagnoli 2002, 447). According to this view, Pyrrho would be limiting himself to the claim that we cannot know what things are

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<sup>10</sup> According to Bett, the more popular interpretation is that the three expressions are three distinct and independent options (1994, 159). Nevertheless, it is also possible to find alternative interpretations (Stopper 1983, 272-4; Bett 1994, 160-2).

<sup>11</sup> To begin with, as Stopper (1983, 272) and Perin (2018, 24) have pointed out, it is hard to tell which elements of the passage originate from Aristocles, which from Timon, and what, if anything, corresponds to Pyrrho's thought. Few authors believe Aristocles quotes directly from Timon, but many take his paraphrase of Timon to be mostly accurate.

really like because we do not have reliable access to the way things are by nature.

As would be expected, both interpretations have weaknesses. On the one hand, the objective interpretation must deal with at least one serious objection. According to this reading, Pyrrho espoused a specific “dogmatic opinion” without any further logical warrant since no justification is provided for it in the text. But then, it is possible to argue that Pyrrho’s metaphysical argument appears to be self-defeating for, even if [α] is presumed to be true, one could not hold to it based solely on principle because [β] states that all our opinions—including those about the nature of things—do not “tell the truth or lie.” The conclusion of Pyrrho’s metaphysical argument would seem to come back with a bite.

On the other hand, the subjective reading faces no less severe obstacles. Firstly, it also seems to make Pyrrho’s assertion self-refuting, similarly to its competitor: If we cannot know what things are like, then no one can neither know that things by nature are such that we cannot know what they are like (Perin 2018, 26). Moreover, as partisans of both interpretative options have agreed, most epistemic readings of [α] wreck the logic of the passage as we have it, rendering an argument from [α] to [β] nonsensical if the text stays unaltered (Svavarsson 2004, 271).

Hence, most proponents of an epistemological reading have advocated modifying Aristocles’s text. The suggested emendation, due to Eduard Zeller back in 1905, reverses the direction of the inference between [α] and [β] (Bett 1994, 141). That is, rather than deriving from the status of the *pragmata* the conclusion that our sensations and opinions do not tell the truth or lie, Pyrrho is said to posit a somewhat familiar sceptical argument: things are unknowable to us because neither our senses nor our reason are accurate or reliable (Stopper 1983, 293; Brennan 1998, 432).

Not all epistemic interpretations require amending the text, however. Brunschwig, for instance, has argued that the inference from [α] to [β] is acceptable in a subjective way—albeit question-begging—if we assume that sensations and beliefs are themselves *pragmata* and thus fall within the scope of the first premise (1994, 199–202). Svavarsson (2004), in contrast, has made a case for a subjective interpretation arguing that Sextus’s arguments must be presumed to be a fuller version of Pyrrho’s stance. Accordingly, things can be said to be undecidable to us “on the grounds that nothing invariably appears in the same way” (Svavarsson 2004, 288).

Now, even though the exegetical manoeuvres around the extant evidence of Pyrrho’s thoughts have been barely scratched, it would be hard to deny that there is contention regarding the meaning and implications of every part of Aristocles’s passage. In any case,

one question inevitably arises without further ado: Could Pyrrho indeed be a Pyrrhonist—that is, in the way we have come to understand that philosophical movement from the Sextan corpus? The more cogent answer seems to be in the negative. As purported in the epistemic reading, Pyrrho appears to belong to a different sceptical lineage than the one described in *Outlines of Scepticism*. He would hold that nothing can be known because the nature of things is cognitively inaccessible to us. And, according to the metaphysical reading, Pyrrho appears even less akin to Hellenistic Pyrrhonian scepticism since he would seem to hold dogmatically that things have no determinate properties. Be as it may, in both instances, Pyrrho appears to assume a distinct theoretical background to his argument. Thus, it might be the case that Pyrrhonism as we know it is, in fact, not grounded in Pyrrho's philosophical theory at all.

And perhaps trying to interpret Aristocles's passage to discover what was really in Pyrrho's head and connect it to another ancient philosophical movement is futile. After all, the fact that a later sceptical tradition took Pyrrho as an inspiration is understandable no matter which of the two interpretations is presumed to be correct. According to [δ], Pyrrho's philosophical stance is nothing but a promise of *ataraxia*—the Pyrrhonian golden fleece—based on the withdrawal from a life based solely on opinions and beliefs. Therefore, it is evident that a strong connection between Pyrrho's ideas and those of any later Pyrrhonists exists.

That being said, instead of further adding to an unexciting and repetitive exegetical task, now I would like to pursue a different line of thought. Taking whatever evidence we have of Pyrrho's alleged ideas mostly at face value—that is, Aristocles's passage without any emendation—, in what follows, I will present one way in which those ideas can be reconstructed systematically into a sceptical theory—reminiscent of and more or less compatible with Ancient Pyrrhonism—that fits comfortably within contemporary analytic philosophy.

With this goal in mind, let me first restate what I take to be the core of Pyrrho's argument:

- (A) Things [*pragmata*] are equally indifferent, unmeasurable and undecidable.
- (B) Therefore, neither our sensations nor our opinions tell the truth or lie.
- (C) For this reason, we should not assent to beliefs or opinions but suspend judgement (being without opinions and inclinations).
- (D) Then, we should not assert anything about any object, but limit so say that it

no more is than is not, or [that it] both is and is not, or [that it] neither is nor is not.

Unfortunately, as I have already pointed out, the first premise appears to be an ungrounded metaphysical commitment. It could be easy and tempting to hold to it merely by faith—in some sort of dogmatic foundationalist manoeuvre. But that would be a very uninteresting and halfhearted job for one aiming to offer rational and reasonable grounds for a sceptical philosophy. Instead, I would like to find a theoretical way to support a premise similar to [A]—that, hopefully, the sceptic and the non-sceptic could find plausible. Therefore, the next section will introduce a conceptual framework that might serve as a philosophical ladder needed to achieve a Pyrrhonian theory.

#### *IV. World(s) of Possibilities*

Pyrrho's argument, like any other sceptical argument, must face some severe self-refutation charges if it is to become a tenable philosophical theory. But, the odds seem dire: Could an aspiring sceptic say anything meaningful about reality—that it is undecidable, for instance—without asserting anything about how things are? Well, maybe. And “maybe” might be all the sceptic needs. Perhaps considering different possibilities is the best way to ground a sceptical theory properly. As Lewis pointed out, “logical space is a paradise for philosophers. We have only to believe in the vast realm of *possibilia*, and there we find what we need to advance our endeavours” (1986, 4).

And talking about possibilities is indeed a common practice in contemporary philosophy. Today, it is not easy to wander far in analytic philosophy without bumping into talk of *possibilia* or possible worlds. And the theoretical usage of possible worlds is not confined to metaphysical claims. References to possible worlds can be found as crucial theoretical elements in epistemology, ethics, decision theory, semantics and philosophy of mind (Berto and Jago 2019, 12).

But what are those possible worlds? Most of us believe that, ultimately, things could have turned out differently in various ways. Not only all of history could have played out differently, but also the present might have been distinct from what we experience: stars and planets, heroes and villains, the colour of your eyes and that of my shirt, and even the words you are reading right now could have been plenty different. Nevertheless, in every scenario we can conceive of—regardless of how things turned out—all those things would have been a part of a single, maximally inclusive, all-encompassing situation.

Therefore, intuitively, a possible world is a way all things could be (Lewis 1973, 84; Berto and Jago 2019, 11). But, as Kripke points out, possible worlds are not “discovered by powerful telescopes” (1972/1980, 44), for arguably, we only live in one world: the actual world. Instead, possible worlds are stipulated: “*given by the descriptive conditions we associate with it*” (Kripke 1972/1980, 44). But we can only stipulate things that we can conceive and think of.<sup>12</sup> Thus, possible worlds are also conceivable worlds (Lewis 1970, 176).<sup>13</sup>

Now, taking Kripke’s and Lewis’s ideas into account—and also loosely following Adams (1974, 211; 225)—let me put forth the following somewhat formal postulate: (i) *Every possible world is depicted or specified by a unique maximally consistent set of propositions,  $w$ , that stipulates an all-encompassing situation in (logical) space at a particular moment in time.* A set of propositions is said to be consistent if and only if those propositions can all be true in conjunction. Hence, according to (i), “for every possible world,  $w$ , and every pair of contradictory propositions, one member of the pair is true in  $w$ , and the other member is false in  $w$ ” (Adams 1974, 211).

Since  $w$  is a maximal set—namely, a set that cannot be expanded by adding any other element—, every proposition shall either be true or false with respect to every possible world. So, to each possible world corresponds a perfectly detailed description of how all things are within the full extension of (logical) space at a specific point in time. Consequently, (ii) *Possible worlds are spatially isolated from each other.* In this sense, we could think of possible worlds as pictures of distinct combinations of whatever is. Moreover, spatial isolation implies that there are no causal connections between possible worlds whenever time is not considered.

The idea that possible worlds correspond to a set of propositions makes it easy to think of them as being identified merely by stipulation rather than being discovered or revealed through direct interaction. As a result, we can conceive, think and talk about existing possible worlds without appealing to some causal relationship. It is crucial, nevertheless, to remember that possible worlds are not identically reducible to a set of propositions. As Lewis put it, “We make languages and concepts and descriptions and imaginary representations that apply to worlds. We make stipulations that select some worlds rather than others for our attention [...] But none of these things we make are the

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<sup>12</sup> According to Yablo, a proposition is conceivable—in a philosophical sense—for a particular individual if and only if one can imagine the coherent conditions or situation one takes to verify it (1993, 29).

<sup>13</sup> This relation, nonetheless, does not imply that possibility and conceivability are equivalent or co-extensional terms. It might as well be true that, as Mill suggested, “our capacity or incapacity of conceiving a thing has very little to do with the possibility of the thing in itself” (Mill 1874, II.V.6).



worlds themselves” (Lewis 1986, 3).

In addition to (i) and (ii), let us assume that logical space is somehow complete so that “absolutely every way that a world could possibly be is a way that some world is” (Lewis 1986, 86). Accordingly, let me also state: (iii) *There is a plenitude of possible worlds, at least as many as we can conceive as being consistent*. If, as Yablo suggests, “the conceivable is *ordinarily* possible and that conceivability is *evidence* of possibility” (1993, 2), at least all possibilities we can conceive of can be accounted for by stipulating the descriptive sets corresponding to distinct possible worlds. Thus, there is a corresponding possible world for every conceivable maximally consistent set of propositions that specifies an all-encompassing situation at a particular time. Nonetheless, there might also be possibilities that nobody has conceived—or will conceive—of. Hence, there might be an indefinite multiplicity of possible worlds.<sup>14</sup>

The postulates above, however, leave out the notion of time. Therefore, following Adams (1974, 211) again, let me also stipulate that: (iv) *Any consistent temporal sequence of possible worlds is a possible world-story*. More formally, allow every possible world-story, up to time  $t$ , to be specified by a single consistent chain,  $h$ , of maximally consistent sets of propositions  $w^t$ , temporally ordered from  $t=0$  up to  $t=1$ . Thus, we could think of a possible world as a constitutive stage or event in a larger possible world-story, much like a page is a constituent of a book. In this way, one possible world may be said to correlate or influence another one through time causally.<sup>15</sup>

A word should be said about propositions to make postulates (i) to (iv) more precise.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, let me also stipulate that (v) *propositions convey—or identify—specific characterisations of things or entities of any ontological category*. To remain neutral in what follows with respect to its existence and nature, let us simply assume that

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<sup>14</sup> It might also be the case that the consistency requirement constrains conceivability directly. In that case, all conceivable worlds would be possible worlds. However, if it is possible to conceive logically impossible worlds—that is, worlds for which the describing set is not consistent such as a world where there are round squares—the totality of possible worlds must then be a subset of the collection of all conceivable worlds. See previous note.

<sup>15</sup> This claim might raise the question of whether different world-stories are casually isolated one from another—at least to some extent. Although this temporal causal correlation is an exciting topic, I will not delve into the potential answers and their consequences since it falls beyond the scope and grounds of this work.

<sup>16</sup> According to Plantinga (1974, 44), we could alternatively think of both worlds and propositions in terms of states of affairs. However, we would still need to define the tricky notion of state of affairs—which could be understood in an almost circular way as specifications or configurations of entities that constitute a world. In this way, a possible world would be a maximally consistent state of affairs. Propositions would then depict states of affairs, and a proposition would be said to be true in a possible world if and only if the state of affairs corresponding to it is indeed an element of that world. In this work, I prefer to bet on an economy of elements.

*propositions are bearers of truth and falsity*. Thus, we could say that any proposition *P* is true at a possible world *w* only if *P* conveys an accurate characterisation of the entities that are parts of that world.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, if the way *P* specifies things does not obtain in *w* or is not the case in *w*, then *P* is said to be false at *w*. But each proposition shall either be true or false in respect to every possible world insofar *w* is a maximally consistent set of propositions—and each proposition either characterises rightly how things are in *w* or it does not.<sup>18</sup>

Now, per (iii) and (v), any given non-contradictory proposition might be an element of the descriptive sets of multiple possible worlds—indefinitely so, perhaps. Thus, (vi) *to every non-contradictory proposition P corresponds a non-empty—and possibly infinite—set of possible worlds in which P is the case*. This, however, does not forcibly entail that propositions are identical to sets—a thesis that Lewis, among others, posits (1986, 53-4).<sup>19</sup> But, constraining the relations between propositions and set to mere correspondence allows us to analyse and think of propositions as sets without acquiring any serious commitment regarding the nature of propositions.

According to the present approach to possible worlds, the actual world must be a possible world, one among many possibilities: “What actually is the case, as we say, is what goes on here. That is one possible way for a world to be” (Lewis 1986, 5). The actual world thus can be specified by a maximally consistent set of propositions. Furthermore, the history of the real world is one possible world-story. But then, in what regard are the actual and non-actual possible worlds different? After all, as Quine rightly notes: “one’s ontology is basic to the conceptual scheme by which he interprets all experiences, even the most commonplace ones” (Quine 1948, 29). Thus, it would seem natural for some people to grant the actual world a special place in their ontological structure by saying that there are two levels of being: actuality and mere existence. The actual world has the superior sort of being—i.e., actuality—whereas the merely possible worlds have some kind of diminished being since they lack actuality (Adams 1974, 215).

Nevertheless, this is not the only way to think about possible worlds. For instance,

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<sup>17</sup> This notion builds on Wittgenstein’s insight that: ‘to understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true’ (Wittgenstein 1922, §4.024).

<sup>18</sup> It is possible to differentiate between stating that something is true or false at a world and stating that it is true or false in a world (Lewis 1986). The latter requires that whatever entity is said to be true in relation to any world belongs to that same world as a part or constituent. I will not discuss the potential implications of the difference, mainly because it would require adding to the metaphysical content of the suggested thesis without barely any explanatory gains.

<sup>19</sup> Montague (1970) and Stalnaker (1976) have also defended that propositions should be understood as sets of possible worlds.

Lewis (1970; 1986) offers an alternative ontological view called “modal realism”. The *modal realist thesis* is simple and might be stated in the following way: *The actual world—that is, the world we are located in—is but one among many worlds that exist in the same way.* According to Lewis, there is no distinction between being and existence.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, no particular ontological property separates merely possible worlds from the actual world. In his words, “it is true that our world alone is actual; but that does not make our world special, radically different from all other worlds” (Lewis 1970, 184). Therefore, the idea “there are things that do not exist but could have” is mistaken since the other non-actual possible worlds exist in precisely the same sense as the actual world.

In Lewis’s opinion, non-actual objects are not ontologically different from actual objects; the only difference is that the former are simply not here (Lewis 1986, 2). Instead, he advocates an indexical theory of actuality: Expressions such as “the actual world”, “actual”, and “actually” are indexical—which means that their reference varies systematically depending on the relevant features of the context of utterance (Lewis 1970, 184-5). Other examples of indexical terms are pronouns like “I” and adverbs such as “here” and “now”.

Since “the actual world” means only “this world”—that is, the world in which the utterance occurs, the expression “This is the actual world” is true whenever uttered in any possible world (Lewis 1970, 186). Nevertheless, that is not to say that all possible worlds are simultaneously actual in the same context of utterance because actuality is a property that any given world possesses, not absolutely, but only relative to its inhabitants. Thus, most worlds and things fail to be actual from the perspective of any particular individual in any given world. Furthermore, the proposition “All worlds are actual” is false whenever uttered in any world (Lewis 1970, 186).

The *modal realist thesis*—added to (i)-(vi)—completes the conceptual framework intended to support what I take to be a version of the Pyrrhonian argument. To summarise, the conceptual framework I have offered in this section is based on the notion of possible worlds—i.e., ways all things could be at a point in time. According to it, possible worlds can be stipulated through maximally consistent sets. Furthermore, there is a plenitude of possible worlds—as many as logically conceivable—and each possible world exists in the same way as its peers. And, even though possible worlds are isolated causally, some of them can be said to be temporally correlated when we stipulate world-stories—that is, when we order them in a temporal sequence that is logically consistent.

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<sup>20</sup> In this specific point, Lewis follows Quine (1948, 23).

Now, before getting to the central issue of this thesis, let me put forth a couple of remarks that follow from the modal realist approach I have described so far. Firstly, hereafter we will be focusing solely on modal statements—that is, sentences dealing with possibility and necessity—in the logical sense. Since each possible world is said to correspond to a maximally consistent set of propositions  $w$ , any other notion of modality metaphysical, physical or of any different nomological order—would presumably be subordinated to the specific characterisation given by  $w$ . This must be the case because  $w$ —being a maximal set—*a fortiori* states all the valid frames for making and evaluating different modal assertions—including the corresponding domains of related possible worlds and the specific accessibility relations that apply over such sets.

In the same sense, if there are many worlds, and every logically consistent way that a world could be is a way that some world is, every descriptive set  $w$  must also specify whether the modal realist thesis is true or not in the corresponding world. Insofar as—according to (iii)—no gaps are assumed to be present in logical space, modal realism, of some flavour or another, depicts the actual metaphysical reality in some possible worlds but is entirely false in others. Nonetheless, when considering the entire logical domain of possible worlds without any restriction,<sup>21</sup> *the modal realist thesis is possible trivially*—just as any other proposition. Thus, we might use the modal realist thesis as a premise without committing to it as a metaphysical law or necessity. In this way, in the worst-case scenario, modal realism is nothing more than a serviceable hypothesis (Lewis 1986, 3).

#### V. A Possible Formulation for an Analytic Sceptical Argument

As mentioned in §III, the fundamental assertion in the Pyrrhonian argument—viz. Things [*pragmata*] are equally indifferent, unmeasurable and undecidable—appears to be, at the same time, the weakest link in his rationale. Luckily, to keep the argument simple, we can separate this claim into three parts: X is undecidable, X is unmeasurable, and X is equally indifferent. “Things are undecidable” seems to be the critical statement since undecidability entails both unmeasurability and indifference. This is the case insofar as measuring anything requires comparing two things. But if the characteristics of no particular thing are decidable or determinable, then no two items are comparable. Hence, “things are undecidable” implies that “things are unmeasurable”. A similar line of thought leads to the conclusion that if something is undecidable—and thus unmeasurable—, we cannot

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<sup>21</sup> Aside from the requirement of consistency, of course.

differentiate its value or determine a preference about it. Therefore, indifference or lack of preference follows from undecidability and unmeasurability.

The Pyrrhonian argument relies on a specific characterisation of *pragmata*—an ancient Greek term usually translated simply as “things.” However, “things” is a vague umbrella concept. What items should we consider to be undecidable? Taking a hint from Brunschwig (1994, 200), I will assume that the term ‘*pragmata*’ refers to all kinds of things, including possible worlds. Hence, now I will provide a Sceptical argument that is Pyrrhonian in nature albeit modal in structure—which already sets it apart from Pyrrho’s alleged affirmations. I think this is an appropriate strategy because it might help the Pyrrhonian sceptic avoid grounding his theoretical efforts on some unjustified first principle and thus avoid any potential self-refutation charges associated with this issue. Furthermore, since talk of *possibilia* is a regular practice in analytic philosophy, the proposed Pyrrhonian argument fits comfortably within our current philosophical standards.

Based on all previous considerations, an analytic Pyrrhonian argument might now be rebuilt based on Pyrrhonian ideas in the following way:

- (1) It is possible that the actual world is only one among multiple possible worlds that exist in the same way exactly.
- (2) Therefore, stipulating the maximally consistent set of propositions, *w*, that rightly depicts—or represents—the actual world is an undecidable problem.
- (3) If overall actuality is undecidable, the truth-value of propositions about the actual world cannot be ascertained—with one exception.
- (4) Given (2) and (3), the truth-value of (almost all) propositions about the way things are in actuality cannot be ascertained.
- (5) For this reason, we cannot logically determine whether our beliefs and opinions about the way things are true or false in actuality.
- (6) Hence, logically, we are solely justified in suspending judgement with respect to propositions about how things are in the actual world.
- (7) When we suspend judgement about some proposition, we have nothing to affirm in that regard—thus, all we can say about (almost) any proposition is that (a) it possibly is true no more than it possibly is false; or that (b) it both might be true and might be false; or that (c) it might not be true, but it might

not be false either.

This Pyrrhonian argument relies on the weaker of two available options. Premise (1) merely states that the *modal realist thesis* is possibly true in the actual world rather than asserting the stronger claim that modal realism is necessarily true—which is perhaps more consistent with what Lewis and other modal realists hold to be the case. There are two good reasons for betting on the weaker tenet, nonetheless. On the one hand, as I have already stated in the previous section, if modal realism is embraced genuinely with all its consequences, one might as well bite the bullet—before it is even shot—and accept that the *modal realist thesis* can only be possibly but not necessarily true; for otherwise the genuine modal realist risks falling into a logical inconsistency—that is, of course, only if he is genuinely committed to the existence of a complete and continuous logical space of *possibilia*. On the other hand, if the Pyrrhonian argument goes through for the weaker claim, it also goes through for the stronger one, *a fortiori*. But both the aspiring sceptic and the non-sceptic can find more plausible and reasonable a premise that commits to mere possibility rather than a settled—yet controversial—principle. Therefore, the weaker claim remains more serviceable.<sup>22</sup>

According to (i), all possible worlds—as wholes—are determined by maximally consistent sets of propositions. This is the case for the actual world as well as for any possible world in which the sky is red instead of blue. But let's not forget that by combining propositions into non-maximal yet consistent sets, we can also stipulate parts of possible worlds. Consequently, our actual subjective experience, if described through a set of propositions, is a part of one possible world: the actual one.

The notion of subjective experience might come with much philosophical baggage to some of us. To keep things as parsimonious as possible, I will limit to assume that the subjective experience is something that happens (passively) to the experiencer and that whatever appears to the experiencing subject at any point in time—or through time if we talk about world-stories—can be described propositionally. Thus, to each experience corresponds a set of propositions  $\varepsilon$  that depicts the perceptions—understood as conceptualised sensations rather than judgements—, ideas and other cognitive impressions that appear or happen to the subject of the experience. In this way, the descriptive set of my present experience includes, for instance, the propositions: “It appears to me that the sky is blue,” “I think that today is Wednesday,” and “I remember

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<sup>22</sup> As a bonus, if someone would like to negate dogmatically that the modal realist thesis is possibly true, then the not-so-desirable burden of proof concerning the (logical) impossibility of the premise shall rest on their shoulders. This seems to be a fair dialectical rule.

that Nairobi is the capital of Kenya”.

Nevertheless, when we consider (vi), things—and worlds—take a sudden turn. Although our subjective experience is a part of a single possible world—i.e., the actual world—, the proposition(s) that characterise our phenomenal experience is a subset of a class of maximally consistent sets of propositions. Thus, to the propositional depiction  $\varepsilon$  corresponds a set  $W$  of different possible worlds—infininitely many of them as it is—that is consistent and compatible with the contents of  $\varepsilon$ . But, if that is the case, the actual world is logically undetermined by the description of our experience.

So yes, per (1), there might be a plenitude of possible worlds—that exist in a genuine sense—in which, “It appears to me that the sky is blue,” “I think that today is Wednesday,” and “I remember that Nairobi is the capital of Kenya” are true. Furthermore, in some of them, my experience accurately corresponds—or represents—what is the case in those worlds. In such instances, it is actually the case that the sky is blue, that it is Wednesday and that Kenya’s capital is Nairobi. However, per (1), there might also be other equally real worlds in which my experience misrepresents the way things are in the actual world for one reason or another. I could, for instance, be under the spell of an illusion or a deception—we could blame that on an evil demon, a super-computer or the randomness of entropy—, or I might have made one or several mistakes—maybe I am misinformed of Kenyan political changes—, or I might have simply been hallucinating or dreaming.

Be as it may, (2) seems to follow from (1). Objectively identifying the actual world appears to be an undecidable problem given the possibility that other worlds exist and can be called actual when experienced from within. We simply lack any objective criterion, standard or algorithm to decide which possible world should be called “actual” among the different possibilities within  $W$ .<sup>23</sup> We only have  $\varepsilon$  to hold to, but it does not seem to provide enough grounds to justify an expansion of the experienced actuality to the real prize through deductive or inductive mechanisms. This appears to be an obvious implication of modal realism since, according to Lewis:

[I]f we take an a priori point of view and ignore our own location in time, the big difference between the actual world and other worlds should vanish. That is not [only] because we regard all worlds as equally actual but rather because if we ignore our own location among the worlds we cannot use indexical terms like ‘actual’” (1970, 187).

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<sup>23</sup> Aenesidemus pointed to a similar problem. According to some interpretations, he concluded that suspension of judgment resulted from the realisation that “there is no firm basis of cognition” (Castagnoli 2018, 73).

Now, if locating and specifying the actual world is an undecidable issue—and given (1) this is contingently true—, we lack the means to compare and differentiate among the different ways actual things and actual events might be by nature—as long as they are consistent with our experience. And if we cannot decide, compare or differentiate among consistent possibilities, there is no way forward for us to logically determine or ascertain the truth-values of propositions about the actual world.<sup>24</sup> Due to our inability to fixate actuality entirely by objective criteria, we are impeded to verify or falsify that any given proposition conveys—represents or depicts—what is the case at the world we inhabit. Thus, we have (4). Please note that I claim this to hold for “almost all propositions” because there is one clear exception: Propositions belonging to subset  $\varepsilon$  stand fast in the actual world for sure. In other words, those propositions about that which appear to us as subjective experience are undoubtedly true for us in the actual world no matter what. After all, “scepticism about our own actuality is absurd” (Lewis 1970, 186)—even if our own actuality is spatially or logically reduced to our phenomenal experience.

Moving forward, according to (v), propositions stand as the contents of our opinions and beliefs. Consequently, (4) logically entails (5): Our beliefs about how things are in the actual world also have uncertain truth-values. The term “belief” is commonly used to “refer to the attitude we have, roughly, whenever we take something to be the case or regard it as true” (Schwitzgebel 2021). So, once we realise that (4) is—possibly—the case, any belief is, in fact, unascertainable—that is, it can neither be verified nor falsified. Therefore, we lack logical justification for assenting or holding any belief as being true or false. And in that case, we are better off suspending judgement about such belief or opinion since we solely have grounds to do that—at least from a logical and epistemological point of view. Consequently, from (5), we can support (6).

Finally, when we suspend judgement about some particular issue or thing, we have nothing substantial to assert about that thing. At least, that would be the case if our assertions are to be truthful. Notwithstanding, this does need to imply that we are rendered speechless or mute suddenly or that our utterances become meaningless. We could say many things about what might be the case since there are many different ways the actual world could be. But, in acknowledging (1)-(5)—and considering the apposite proviso regarding propositions related to our subjective experience—, the most we could say about any proposition about things in the actual world is that (a) it possibly is true no more than it possibly is false—alternatively, that it is equally possibly true and possibly false; or

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<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that some—or in all likelihood most—people could and would choose an ad hoc criterion. Yet, it would not be a logically objective decision in any case.



that (b) it both might be true and might be false, or that (c) it might not be true, but it might not be false either.

The analytic Pyrrhonian argument above is logically consistent and general enough to ground a systematic sceptical stance. But, unlike Ancient Pyrrhonism, this analytical approach relies on some logical notions about possibilities. Hence, most of the sceptical hypothesis of the Cartesian kind—deceptive demons and brains in vats included—might also be regarded in some way or another as particular instantiations of it.

Notwithstanding, at this point, you could be saying: “Hold up, wait a minute. Something ain’t right.” And indeed, something is amiss since Pyrrho’s argument was supposed to be a path towards ataraxy. According to [δ], Timon posits that tranquility or freedom from worry results from the suspension of judgement—after and possibly because of speechlessness. Should not then—at least in theory—any systematisation of Pyrrhonian stance conclude that suspension of judgement leads the sceptic to tranquillity and freedom from worry? That is quite right. However, the connection between a life devoid of beliefs and a life free of concern cannot be grounded solely in the conceptual framework that has been provided up to this point. In that case, this Pyrrhonian theory is not complete yet. So, to explore whether analytic Pyrrhonists can find freedom of worry, we must first settle on how we can get through life without having any dogmatic beliefs.

## *VI. Hanging Around Pyrrhonian Worlds*

Ancient Pyrrhonists argued that their scepticism was compatible with ordinary human life. How then do analytic Pyrrhonian sceptics go about it? We certainly have needs and feelings; we also seem to think and communicate and possibly engage with other human beings in some way or another. And surely, most of us do not think of ourselves as mere automatons or zombies—in a philosophical or folkish way. But the question about the feasibility of the sceptical way of life is not merely rhetoric. Objectors and defenders of scepticism have discussed this topic many a time without agreement.

The simplest way out of this issue would be to agree to disagree and suspend judgement on the matter—“haters gonna hate” anyway. But that is not a philosophically acceptable nor a good sporting response. Another easy but also likely unsatisfactory answer would be to argue that, from the analytic Pyrrhonian rationale, we could conclude that having nothing to assert about most propositions—which is a form of “speechlessness”—might be, by its own right, “a wonderfully trouble-free attitude to have”

that leads to a tranquil life (Bett 1994, 165).<sup>25</sup>

However, all that the Pyrrhonian argument arguably accomplishes is providing grounds for the most radical and generalised type of doubt. And contrary to the Pyrrhonist's wishes, not a few people could find this situation disturbing. Some would even be baffled or stunned speechless due to "fear, anxiety or perplexity" (Burnyeat 1980, 139; Bett 1994, 165). So, instead of passing smoothly into a new state of equanimity, this paralysing situation might lead to an incapacity to coherently engage in action and thought. Thus, there would still be objectors questioning whether—and if so, how—a Pyrrhonist can live an ordinary life without beliefs (Frede 1979; Burnyeat 1980; Barnes 1982).

Sceptical ideas, nonetheless, have once and again been faced with several objections, including charges of self-refutation and logical inconsistency. These charges do not seem to undermine the analytic Pyrrhonian argument seriously. However, two other relevant objections must be addressed to fulfil the goals of this thesis. First, as has already been noted, there is the apraxia charge. It is unclear whether anyone can lead an "ordinary" human life—or even merely survive—without beliefs. Since, arguably, believing is a fundamental feature of human cognitive activity, someone who does not form any opinions whatsoever may be unable to act—or even think.

In the second place, a related albeit distinct objection follows from Hume's claim that "nature is always too strong for principle" (EHU 12.23). Thus, from the Humean point of view:

[A] Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: Or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge any thing, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence [...] And though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples, and leave him the same, in every point of action and speculation, with the

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<sup>25</sup> According to Aristocles's report of Timon's view, Pyrrho's lack of concern about the nature of the world around us was one source of his legendary tranquil demeanour. In the same way, a few of us would likely just accept that uncertainty reigns supreme in the logical space of possibilities and find peace within it. At the very least, those who realise that our epistemological expectations are nothing but dead weight might feel lighter in spirit and less apprehensive about reality and being right about it. In these rare cases, tranquillity could come, not as a directly willed act but fortuitously—as Ancient Pyrrhonists promised.

philosophers of every other sect, or with those who never concerned themselves in any philosophical researches (EHU 12.23).

Hume's criticism builds on the apraxia objection but goes further. According to it, even though Pyrrhonian scepticism seems to be logically coherent, no one may likely succeed in adhering to it in everyday matters—as Ancient Pyrrhonists claimed to be able to do. This might be the case insofar as a life without beliefs leads to fatal inaction, contrary to the natural order of things. But, in a one to one contest, Nature is too strong for philosophical wishful thinking. Therefore, Pyrrhonists—defeated by their inherent disposition and need for believing—would be unable to conform to their sceptical tenets (Johnsen 2001, 528).

For Hume, Pyrrhonian scepticism hence amounts to nothing more than a philosophically amusing criticism of the human condition:

When he awakes from his dream, he will be the first to join in the laugh against himself, and to confess, that all his objections are mere amusement, and can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them (EHU 12.23).

Hume's argument relies on the idea that human beings are by nature required to hold beliefs in order to act and reason. And it does not matter that our efforts to justify and defend most of those beliefs are doomed to irremediable failure: humans would keep on believing stuff. And the human condition might indeed be that whimsical. I find it hard to disagree that Hume's conjecture is possible, even though he offers no further argument for asserting that belief is naturally necessary—as Johnsen (2001, 560) points out. But then, the aspiring analytical Pyrrhonist does not need to hold that Hume's view is false. All that is required to surpass both the apraxia and the Humean challenges is for the analytic Pyrrhonian theory to provide a logically consistent way to succeed in everyday life while remaining aware of the—possibly whimsical—epistemic condition of humanity.

Now, Ancient sceptics were well aware of the first of these objections. In response to the apraxia problem, they would describe their actions as being guided by passively grasped and unreflectively pursued appearances. Sextus, for instance, tackles the apraxia challenge directly by responding to objectors that Pyrrhonists do not consider the passive assent to appearances as instances of believing in something, “for the Sceptics assent to

the feelings forced upon them by appearances” (PH I, 13). Moreover, Sextus elaborates on this point by enlisting the kinds of appearances that, according to his tradition, provide practical guidance in everyday life:

Thus, attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions—for we are not able to be utterly inactive. These everyday observances seem to be fourfold, and to consist in guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teachings of kinds of expertise (PH I, 23-4).

Sextus’s response seems well aligned to the ideas of earlier Pyrrhonian sceptics—at least according to the scant reports we have on the matter. While defending that Pyrrho did not depart from the common way of life, Timon posited appearances—i.e., “what appears”—as a practical criterion for life (Long and Sedley 1987 vol.I, 15H; 18).<sup>26</sup> And Aenesidemus followed suit by arguing that Pyrrho himself acted according to appearances while “determining nothing in a doctrinaire fashion” (Long and Sedley 1987 vol.I, 468; Castagnoli 2018, 73).<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, an analytic theory of Pyrrhonism would do right by also regarding appearances as the practical criterion for living without beliefs. To this end, our conceptual framework already allows us to hold to whatever appears in our subjective experience as being certain in the actual world. However, as Sextus suggests—in everyday life, we seem to hold fast to a wide range of other apparent suppositions—in no way limited to our subjective experience—without proper justification. Therefore, according to Ancient Pyrrhonists and common sense, the required notion of appearance needs to be broader in scope to be considered an efficient, practical guide.

Fortunately, in Wittgenstein’s notion of hinge propositions, we might find one way within analytic philosophy in which we can make philosophical and practical sense of the Pyrrhonian lifestyle based on appearances instead of on beliefs. Wittgenstein’s ideas—particularly those contained in *On Certainty*—are arguably compatible with Pyrrhonism

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<sup>26</sup> According to Diogenes Laertius (9.104-5), Timon claimed that he did not depart from everyday practices and agreed to appearances everywhere. Moreover, Diogenes Laertius also reported that later Ancient Pyrrhonists affirmed what was apparent “without also affirming that it is of such a kind” (in Long and Sedley 1987 vol.I, 15 H).

<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Castagnoli suggests that it is probable that, like Sextus after him, Aenesidemus included cultural conventions and social norms among the scope of appearances, together with sensations (2018, 73).

(Pritchard 2019, 92).<sup>28</sup> Wittgenstein's final writings, however, are fragmentary affairs that he did not edit. Hence, there is a limit to how far we can legitimately extrapolate from them an argument that is at the same time compatible with scepticism and genuinely Wittgensteinian (Pritchard 2011, 193).<sup>29</sup>

Even though Wittgenstein's philosophical response to scepticism remains debatable, one thing seems straightforward: 'hinge' propositions are a way in which Wittgenstein limited—and even ruled out—the (adverse) effects that universal doubt might impose on ordinary life. Furthermore, the notion of hinge propositions can be easily related to the Pyrrhonian argument offered in this work since, at the very heart of this Wittgensteinian framework, lies the claim that the propositions we hold to be most certain lack evidential backing by their very nature (OC, §253).

Consequently, Wittgenstein concludes that those propositions that ground our approach to the world have a unique epistemic role. Wittgenstein famously uses the metaphor of the 'hinge' to describe this special kind of proposition—whence they get their name:

[...] the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted.

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just can't investigate everything, and for that reason, we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC, §341–3)

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<sup>28</sup> Even if this is not the case, there is evidence that Wittgenstein was interested in Pyrrhonian scepticism and—at least to some degree—influenced by Fritz Mauthner's work on Pyrrhonian scepticism. See Sluga (2004)

<sup>29</sup> Some philosophers believe that OC is incompatible with a sceptical view since it would aim to debunk scepticism by revealing it to be semantically self-defeating. Coliva, for instance, claims that "Wittgenstein thinks scepticism is ultimately semantically nonsensical" (2010, 210). Stroll's (1994, 2005) and Moyal-Sharrock's (2004) arguments are similar. In contrast, other interpreters of OC hold that Wittgenstein acknowledged sceptical challenges as legit—at least to some degree—and thus attempted to provide us with some answer to it. For some of these readers, OC offers a therapeutic approach that can cure us—conceptually—of the sceptical dilemma. According to McGinn, this therapeutic approach "shows, from a position of reflection, that the sceptic doubts are ones that we may properly ignore" (2008, 379). Kern (2004) and Minar (2007) hold similar opinions. Lastly, for other interpreters like Wright (2004) and Williams (1991), Wittgenstein's ideas instead lead to some pragmatic accommodation to scepticism, which allows us to continue our ordinary life in the shadow of philosophical doubt. Wright, for example, does not characterise Wittgenstein's approach to doubt as a direct challenge to the intelligibility of scepticism but as a framework that, at the least, allows for "a 'liveable' accommodation with it" (2004, 47).

These hinge ‘foundations’ for our actions and thoughts are not only not self-justifying nor self-evident but also not justified by any other thing we may believe or assume to know. Notwithstanding, the certainty we attach to these ordinary claims ensures that they do not have—and even more do not need—any epistemic status at all:

One says “I know” when one is ready to give compelling grounds. ‘I know’ relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. Whether someone knows something can come to light, assuming that he is convinced of it.

But if what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes (OC, §243).

Like many contemporary epistemologists, Wittgenstein holds that any rightful claim of knowledge implies that one can offer relevant grounds to justify that claim. However, it follows from this premise that any claim to know—or believe in the sense of holding something to be actually true—any hinge proposition is, at the very least, logically improper or misused (OC, §6). In claiming to know or believe a proposition, one seems to imply that one can offer some grounds that would support that claim. However, the bases that can serve as justification must be more certain than the proposition one claims to hold epistemically. Hinge propositions, therefore, are not evidentially grounded since nothing seems to be more certain than hinge propositions themselves. As a result, no epistemic claim could ever be adequately made regarding them (OC, §438; 484; 487; 550–1; 574; 576).

Nevertheless, hinge propositions are also logically immune to rational and logical doubt by the same token. The hinge role of a proposition ensures that any claim to doubt such a proposition would be incoherent within the logical framework we are using to assess it. Therefore, any doubt regarding a particular hinge commitment will also be groundless and, hence, logically improper. In Wittgenstein’s words: “There are cases where doubt is unreasonable, but others where it seems logically impossible” (OC, §454). After all, whatever could serve as a ground for an expression of doubt regarding a particular proposition must also be more certain than the proposition doubted. Yet, nothing seems to be more certain than any given hinge proposition.

In sum, hinge commitments are exempt from epistemic evaluation because no claim to know—or believe—or doubt such a proposition could ever be made appropriately (Pritchard 2005,197-8). Wittgenstein also thought that the nature of hinge propositions allows them to serve as the fixed point that gives grounds to our everyday actions and

reasonings (OC, §201; 411; 414). Furthermore, hinge commitments stand fast to us and are ever-present, but this fact does not mean that they are cast in stone because different propositions play a hinge role in different situations. In case of a change of context, a proposition previously considered to be a hinge commitment can even be doubted from a different context on the basis of another hinge proposition. Therefore, we could claim that hinge propositions are, in some sense, the Wittgensteinian practical criterion (OC, §422)—just as appearances are the standard for Ancient Pyrrhonists.

Although Wittgenstein says much more in OC, this brief description of the role of hinge proposition—on which there is ample agreement (Pritchard 2005, 198)—is enough for our present endeavour. The notion of hinge propositions is logically compatible with the analytic Pyrrhonian argument: Just as one cannot doubt a hinge proposition, one cannot, with good reason, believe it either. After all, as Wittgenstein points out, “the difficulty is to realise the groundlessness of our believing” (OC, §166).<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the main thesis about hinge propositions seems to neutralise any form of paralysing universal doubt.<sup>31</sup> As Wittgenstein repeatedly claims, “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty” (OC, §115).<sup>32</sup> Thus, Pyrrhonian scepticism can also be subjected to healthy limitations by regarding appearances as hinge commitments

Hinge propositions could be the standard that analytic Pyrrhonists follow in their approach to ordinary life. In this way, our actions and thoughts can be said to be guided by some passive commitments that do not constitute beliefs. This seems to be likely the case since even the Sceptical argument is founded in a tacit or unacknowledged background consisting of language, historical and cultural assumptions, academic conventions, etc. Hence, it is true that “doubt itself rests only on what is beyond doubt” (OC, §519).

To be consistent with the sceptical stance, a key feature of the sceptical standard is that we passively acquiesce to it. In describing what is apparent, Pyrrhonists—from Timon, and maybe Pyrrho himself, to Anenesidemus and Sextus—have made clear that appearances, by their nature, cannot be doubted since they are passively received, and one cannot but assent to them without requiring any epistemic grounds or further

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<sup>30</sup> Such a statement inevitably reminds us of Hume’s claim regarding the whimsicality of the human condition.

<sup>31</sup> As Wittgenstein puts it: “a doubt that doubted everything is not even a doubt” (OC, §450).

<sup>32</sup> See also OC, §341; 354; 458.

justification.<sup>33</sup> And according to the analytic Pyrrhonian argument, that is the case for the contents of our subjective experience, which are true in the actual world without a doubt. Therefore, we could say that  $\epsilon$  is a consistent set of hinge propositions.

As Wittgenstein puts it at one point, hinge propositions are not investigated in ordinary life; instead, they “lie apart from the route travelled by inquiry” (OC, §88). Furthermore, since we are ordinarily unaware of these hinge commitments *qua* commitments, the certainty we attribute to hinge propositions is, therefore, natural and pre-rational—i.e., ‘animal’ and ‘primitive’ rather than the result of ratiocination (OC, §359; 475). Hence, we could say that believing is not the only way that life can go on and that Nature might provide other means of fulfilling the human condition. Contrary to Hume’s expectations, the sceptic’s hinge commitments are unreflectively assented to and are exempt from his scrutiny in ordinary circumstances.

Taking hinge commitments related to what appears to us in subjective experience as the practical criterion for the analytic Pyrrhonist is adequate in yet another sense. As Williams (1991) noted, hinge propositions might be context-dependent. Hence, different propositions can play the role of hinge commitments in different contexts. Context-dependence could explain why we can never evaluate our hinge commitments epistemically. In attempting to do so, we change the relevant context of assessment—and thus—the hinge propositions we are passively committed to.

A contextualist conceptualisation of the Pyrrhonian practical criterion might seem, at first, misaligned with scepticism. For starters, contextualism has been proposed as a remedy to sceptic concerns. Lewis (1996), for instance, suggested that contextualism could be used to ward off generalised scepticism by confining it to an epistemological vault.<sup>34</sup> More important, however, might be that a contextual approach to appearances requires some variability in determining what practical guides the sceptic should follow in different circumstances. Nevertheless, Pyrrhonian scepticism seems to comfortably accommodate the notion of changing contexts insofar as the sceptic passively acquiesces to these changes. Hence, different propositions can indeed play the role of hinge commitments in different contexts in logical accordance with our ever-shifting

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<sup>33</sup> Sextus Empiricus states that “the standard of the Skeptical persuasion is what is apparent, implicitly meaning by this the appearances, for they depend on passive and unwilling feelings and are not objects of investigation” (PH I, 22). The ‘fourfold’ everyday observances that Sextus describes as part of the Pyrrhonian practical criterion are, thus, beyond sceptical doubt. These observances are passively acknowledged since the sceptic does not formulate judgements about them.

<sup>34</sup> But even then, Lewis accepts that as soon as we engage “in the systematic philosophical examination of knowledge,” we must come face to face with “the compelling argument that we know next to nothing” (1996, 529).



subjective experience.

How then do analytic Pyrrhonian sceptics go about life? The best answer seems to be: just like everyone else. That is, by attending and following the hinge commitments present in our subjective experience, including perceptions, ideas and memories that we take to be related to conventions and know-how.<sup>35</sup> By introducing the notion of hinge commitments in his conceptual framework, the analytic Pyrrhonist is able to accommodate both the apraxia and the Humean objections. Nature does not necessarily demand believing one thing or another to enable humans to act and reason. It is also possible that humans can live a pretty ordinary life without holding willingly and consciously any belief. Instead, we can get-by by solely acquiescing—in an epistemically neutral way—to the guidance of whatever appears to be possibly true in the actual world according to our subjective experience.

Given that analytic Pyrrhonists can lead an ordinary life, perhaps they do not need to be apprehensive or dumbfounded by the possibility that almost nothing can be ascertained about the actual world. Their life might be surrounded by insurmountable uncertainty, yet these sceptics can find guidance in whatever appears in their subjective experience. This confidence in itself contributes to a feeling of equanimity. One does not need to be right about things in the actual world; we just need to be able to live in it. But, even more, analytic Pyrrhonists do not need to bet their tranquillity in assenting to unsubstantiated opinions—and given the option, it does not seem that doing so is a worthy gamble after all. Therefore, they are undisturbed by unexpected situations and failed expectations, welcoming change fully hearted and clear-minded. Following a life devoid of unfounded beliefs, they might achieve freedom of worry—or more precisely: “tranquillity in matters of opinion and the moderation of suffering in matters forced upon us” (PH I.25).

## VII. “*Ou Mallon*”

Once upon a time, Brentano (1894/1998) imagined the development of philosophical ideas progressing in cycles, with scepticism being a recurring motif along the journey. And, indeed, sceptical arguments might be generally regarded as neither new nor particularly fancy. But, at the same time, scepticism has been an unpopular philosophical stance throughout history. Not even considered in contemporary mainstream philosophical discussions as a proper philosophical theory, nowadays, sceptical arguments mainly serve

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<sup>35</sup> A possible follow-up question could be: Does this mean we are some sort of automatons after all? Discussing possible answers does not seem to be pertinent here.

in an instrumental capacity within philosophy. For most philosophers, sceptical hypotheses—which constitute the flesh and bone of Cartesian scepticism—are nothing but challenges that philosophical systems must overcome to improve. And this might be the case due to the lack of an adequately grounded sceptical theory.

Ancient Pyrrhonism, for its part, is a well known sceptical tradition. Notwithstanding, it is regarded chiefly as a dialectical method for dealing with philosophical preoccupations. Seem under that light, the odds of formalising Pyrrhonian scepticism into a theory are hardly appealing. Hence, it has ended up either as a philosophical curiosity—leading to discussions about its feasibility and its proper interpretation being—or as a philosophical attitude reserved for rare “men of talent”—as Sextus would put it.

Contrary to this bleak perspective about Pyrrhonism, in this essay, I have tried to show that Pyrrhonian scepticism can become a more appealing and accessible philosophical stance if the proper theoretical framework is provided to support it. To this end, we can seek inspiration from the ideas of the Pyrrhonian figurehead: Pyrrho himself. Although there is scant evidence regarding Pyrrho’s views, it is possible to identify the central argument on which he based his sceptical philosophy. Furthermore, his tenets and rationale can be reconstructed into a Pyrrhonian argument compatible with the contemporary standpoint of analytic philosophy. This novel approach to Pyrrhonian scepticism can be grounded in a simple conceptual framework based on some tenets of modal realism—possibly against Lewis’s conception of the theory (1986, 117).

The analytic Pyrrhonian argument based on a genuine modal realist thesis is faithful to Pyrrho’s sceptical stance. It is also logically consistent and general enough to ground a systematic sceptical perspective without drawing upon unjustified principles. Unlike the approach taken by Ancient Pyrrhonists—particularly in the Sextan corpus—the analytic version of the Pyrrhonian argument does not require an exceptional talent or disposition to apply dialectical methods. Instead, it relies solely on embracing the possibility that there is a plenitude of possible worlds that can be actual. From entertaining such a possibility, it follows that since we can only grasp a part of the actual world from experience, the rest of it has to be either stipulated arbitrarily or recognised as being undecidable.

Furthermore, this novel theoretical account of Pyrrhonian scepticism—which could be called “Analytic Pyrrhonism”—is compatible with the sceptical principles and goals of Hellenistic Pyrrhonism. Analytic Pyrrhonists can lead an ordinary life devoid of beliefs—and oblivious to the apraxia and the Humean objections—by following the appearances presented to them in their subjective experiences. This is plausible insofar as we understand that appearances, in their role as the practical criterion, can be regarded as

hinge commitments that are not known or believed—but that can neither be doubted. Thus, this sceptical stance can be applied in our day-to-day—just like Ancient sceptics aspired to do. And, if we consider that being without opinion reduces the sources of stress and anxiety, the Pyrrhonian lifestyle might lead to authentic freedom of worry. This connection, however, would need to be explored further in the future, together with some other philosophical implications of the analytic Pyrrhonian theory.

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