

Context-Sensitive Pyrrhonism

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CCAP 2016

Setup

- A context-relative view of belief opens up interesting new options for interpreting Sextus-style Pyrrhonian scepticism.
- A context-relative view of belief raises questions to which Sextus provides interesting (& not bizarre) answers.

Context-Sensitive Belief

- Context-relativity of (rational) belief:
 - Clarke (2013, forthcoming)
 - Greco (forthcoming)
 - Dodd (forthcoming)
 - Leitgeb (2013, 2014)
 - Weatherson (2005, 2012, 2016)
 - Ganson (2008)
 - Sturgeon (2008)
 - ...

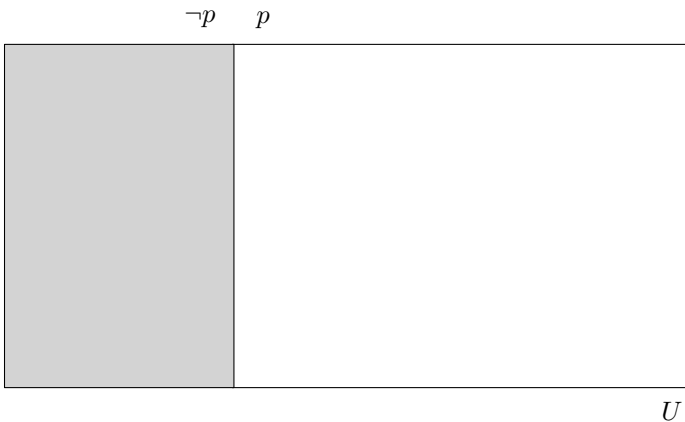
Outline

- 1 Sensitivism
- 2 Pyrrhonism
- 3 Sensitivist Pyrrhonism

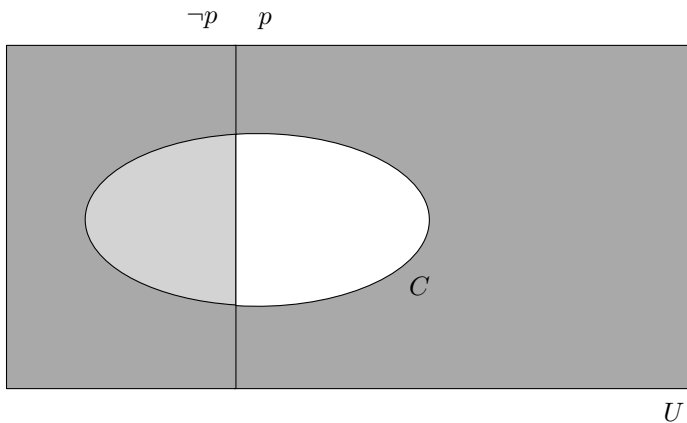
Context-Sensitive Belief

- To believe p is to rule out (doxastically) **all** not- p possibilities.
- Context determines the quantifier's domain (a set of possibilities).
- Analogy with assertion: think of common ground/presuppositions in a conversational context.

Assertion



Assertion



Context-Sensitive Belief

- What work does sensitivism do?
- Lets us account for *sincere assertion* (Clarke under review).
 - Principle: An assertion that p is sincere iff the assertor believes p .
- Eliminates the usual problems for belief = credence 1 (Clarke 2013).
- Accounts for the kind of cases epistemic contextualists & company like to talk about.
- Application: the preface paradox (Clarke forthcoming).

Questions for Context-Sensitive Belief

- Here's Mary. In a context where BIV possibilities are live, she doesn't believe she has hands; at the bus stop, she does.
 - So does she or doesn't she believe that she has hands?

Sensitivist Belief States

- Capturing an agent's beliefs isn't as simple as giving a set of propositions.
- Rather, we need a set of propositions *for each context*.
 - For a more complicated story, see the full paper.

Occurrent vs Dispositional Belief

- An agent has an occurrent context at a time.
- These are the possibilities she takes seriously at that time.
- Whatever she believes relative to that context, she *occurrently* believes.
- To believe something is always to believe it *in* or *relative to* some context.

Questions for Context-Sensitive Belief

- Mary believes she has hands rather than having lost them in an accident, rather than being born with different genes, etc.
- Mary doesn't believe she has hands rather than being a handless BIV.

Pyrrhonism

- Sceptics are people with a certain ability:
 - To produce tranquillity...
 - ...by producing suspended judgment...
 - ...by setting out oppositions of equal strength.

Pyrrhonism

- How does this ability work? By using the modes.
- These are a battery of argument-types, often appealing to one or another kind of relativity, which oppose things to each other.
- When you find yourself in danger of judging that p , use a mode to get an equal-strength appearance that not- p .

A Pyrrhonist's Beliefs

- Question: What's in the range of the quantifier “everything” when the Pyrrhonist says “[we] suspend belief on everything”?
 - Rustic: no exceptions. Suspend on EVERYthing.
 - Urbane: some exceptions.
- Sextus distinguishes a wide and a narrow sense of belief (*PH* I 13)—Pyrrhonists avoid one but are OK with the other. What does this distinction amount to?

Problems

- Objection: You just *can't* be a (rustic) Pyrrhonist: it's *impossible* to avoid belief entirely.
- Objection: (Rational) action requires belief. So how can a Pyrrhonist act?

Summary

- 1 The Pyrrhonist suspends judgment.
- 2 Pyrrhonian suspension is achieved via the modes.
- 3 There is a sense of “belief” in which Pyrrhonists do have beliefs, notwithstanding the above.
- 4 Pyrrhonians follow appearances, holding no opinion about reality.
- 5 Suspending judgment removes a barrier to tranquillity.
- 6 The Pyrrhonist is still investigating.
- 7 Pyrrhonism is possible.
- 8 The Pyrrhonist can lead a normal life, acting in normal ways.

1. Suspension

- Pyrrhonian elimination of belief/suspension of judgment doesn't involve **belief revision** but rather **context change**.
- When one is troubled by belief that p , one changes the set of possibilities one takes seriously so as to eliminate that belief.
- How does this work? Think about animals, or foreigners, or perspective, or
- Now you're thinking about a possibility you were ignoring previously.

2. Modes

- What do the modes do?
 - For the apprentice Pyrrhonist, they get you to **revise** your beliefs by adding new possibilities to your stock.
 - For the certified Pyrrhonist, they get you to **take seriously** erstwhile-ignored possibilities.

3. Belief

- Our Pyrrhonists have “local” beliefs, specific to any given context. (Wide belief)
 - They go along with appearances.
- But these beliefs have no deeper cross-contextual significance. (Narrow belief)
 - In particular, there’s no (non-trivial) distinguished context representing the sceptic’s most considered view, what she really **really** believes.

4. Appearance and Reality

- The Pyrrhonist follows appearances, taking no stand on how things are by nature or in reality. What does this mean?
- Option 1: The Pyrrhonist is careful about what grounds she will use to reject possibilities, or to bring possibilities to mind.
 - Philosophy is not allowed.
 - Use instead “guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise” (*PH* 1.23).
- Option 2: The Pyrrhonist does not privilege any context, any set of possibilities, over any other.
 - There is no answer to the question of what she **really** thinks, or how she thinks things **really** are.
 - Whatever she thinks at any given moment is just that.

5. Tranquillity

- On this interpretation, you don't need to (and can't) meditate & root out all disturbing beliefs.
- It's just certain active, occurrent beliefs that might be disturbing.

6. Investigation

- The main idea is that Pyrrhonist suspension is context change, not belief revision.
- But that doesn't mean the Pyrrhonist can't revise her beliefs.
 - When you get new appearances, you can follow them.
- Thus, the Pyrrhonist can investigate.

7. Action

- Objection: (Rational) action requires belief. So how can a Pyrrhonist act?
- Context-relative response:
 - Pyrrhonists have beliefs.
 - In particular, in any context, they will have certain occurrent beliefs. These are the beliefs one acts on.
- Alarm bells: Why didn't Sextus just say something like this?
 - Well, he says Pyrrhonists go along with appearances (without holding opinions). It's not always easy to see how this "acquiescence" differs from belief—
 - i.e., maybe he does say something like this.

8. Impossibility

- Objection: You just can't be a (rustic) Pyrrhonist: it's simply *impossible* to avoid belief entirely.
- Context-relative response:
 - For any context C , it's impossible to avoid having any beliefs relative to C .
 - But it is possible to do what the Pyrrhonist asks: for any p , if you believe p in your current situation, you can get (by mental effort) to a situation where you do not believe p .

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