

# Context-Sensitive Pyrrhonism

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## Introduction

One of epistemic contextualism's central promises is a response to the (Cartesian) skeptic.<sup>1</sup> Thus, briefly: When the skeptic says “You don't know that you're not dreaming” (as a premise) and “You don't know that you're sitting by the fire” (as a conclusion), she equivocates on “know”. There's a high-standards sense of “know” according to which one doesn't know skeptical hypotheses don't obtain and a low-standards sense according to which one knows ordinary things, but skeptical arguments rely for their persuasiveness on an illicit transition between high and low standards.

Several philosophers<sup>2</sup> have recently offered context-sensitive accounts of belief: accounts according to which whether one believes that  $p$  depends, in part, on some facts about the alleged believer's context. These are sometimes explicitly related to epistemic contextualism, claiming support from some of the same evidence, and/or postulating epistemological importance of the same contextual factors—usually salience of alternative possibilities and practical environment. But since these accounts (1) concern belief rather than knowledge and (2) are metaphysical rather than semantic, they cannot offer the contextualist's signature refutation of skepticism.

This paper suggests that context-sensitive accounts of belief can advance our understanding of skepticism after all. In particular, I will offer a new interpretation of Pyrrhonian skepticism as we find it in Sextus Empiricus. To do so, I will rely on a specific context-sensitive account of belief, namely my *sensitivism*; but I expect a similar interpretation is possible on many of the accounts cited in footnote 2 above. I hope, by the conclusion, to have made a case both that contemporary context-sensitive epistemology is worth paying attention to for scholars of ancient skepticism and that Sextus Empiricus is worth taking seriously for contemporary epistemologists.

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<sup>1</sup>For classical instances of the promise, see Cohen (1986; 1988) and DeRose (1995).

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., Weatherson (2005; 2012; 2016), Ganson (2008), Sturgeon (2008), Clarke (2013), Leitgeb (2013; 2014), Greco (2015), and Dodd (forthcoming). Note that some of these are presented as context-sensitive accounts of *rational* belief rather than of belief *simpliciter*.

The plan is as follows. §1 gives an overview of the sensitivist view to be applied to Pyrrhonism. I will not argue here that sensitivism is true, but I will give some illustrative applications of the view which give some motivation for it. Next, §2 gives an exposition of some central features of Pyrrhonian skepticism, especially as it differs from the more familiar Cartesian variety of skepticism. Finally, §3 sets out the sensitivist interpretation of Sextus’s skepticism.

## 1 Sensitivism

Belief is context-sensitive. This is the sensitivist’s central claim. To be more precise: whether one believes that  $p$  depends, in part, on a space of serious alternatives, and this space can change from context to context. Note the contrast with epistemic contextualism (Rysiew 2009): sensitivism concerns *belief*, not belief *ascriptions*. Sensitivism is thus more closely analogous to pragmatic encroachment than contextualism.

The next subsection (§1.1) provides an example to illustrate the view; then, §1.2 supplies some more detail, including references to other work defending sensitivism.

### 1.1 An Illustration

Consider the following variations on a dialogue, inspired by Hawthorne (2004). Angelina hates her job, and she hasn’t been doing very well at it. Tomorrow, she’s got an important meeting with the boss at lunchtime—if she doesn’t go to the meeting, she’s sure she’ll lose her job. But Angelina needs this job—she doesn’t think she can find anything better, so she doesn’t want to get fired. There is a lottery drawing tonight.

(LUNCH) Angelina: I’ll be going to lunch with the boss tomorrow.

Brad: Oh, so you believe that your lottery ticket is a loser? After all, if you’re a winner, you won’t be having lunch with the boss tomorrow. Why did you get a ticket if you thought it would lose—or what changed your mind since buying it?

There are several ways Angelina could reasonably respond, including each of the following.

(REVISE) Angelina: Oh yeah, I forgot about that. I guess I might not be having lunch with the boss tomorrow after all. Let’s hope not!

**OR**

(STICK) Angelina: Oh yeah, I forgot about that. Well, still, even if I win the lottery, I'll be having lunch with the boss tomorrow—I won't check the draw results until the afternoon.

**OR**

(ELABORATE) Angelina: Well, come on. If you want to be really pedantic about it, I guess it's just very likely that I'll be having lunch with the boss tomorrow. But that's not what I meant. Of course I'm not sure my ticket will lose—but I realize that's most likely. What I meant was that I'll be having lunch with the boss tomorrow unless something really extraordinary happens. Heck, it's possible a meteorite could crash into the office tonight, too, and then I certainly wouldn't be going to lunch with the boss tomorrow.

**OR**

(REJECT) Angelina: Come on, you know that's not what I meant. I just meant that I'll be having lunch with the boss tomorrow unless something really extraordinary happens. But look, let's be realistic: my ticket isn't going to win. I'm going to have lunch with the boss tomorrow.

In (LUNCH-REVISE), it seems Angelina has changed her mind over the course of the conversation. At the start, she believed that she would have lunch with the boss tomorrow, but at the end she no longer believes this.

In (LUNCH-STICK), the opposite happens: Angelina sticks to her guns. When the previously-unconsidered lottery possibility comes before her, she still judges that she will have lunch with the boss tomorrow.

In (LUNCH-ELABORATE), as in (LUNCH-REVISE), Angelina offers an opinion which seems to conflict with her initial statement (“it's just very likely that I'll be having lunch with the boss tomorrow,” versus “I will be having lunch with the boss tomorrow”). But she also offers an elaboration of her initial claim to specify more precisely what she meant by it, and given this elaboration, there is no conflict. Under this elaboration, Angelina still endorses her initial claim.

In (LUNCH-REJECT), Angelina rejects winning the lottery as a serious possibility. It doesn't matter where she would have lunch if she won the lottery, because she believes she will not win the lottery. This is the only one of the four versions of (LUNCH) in which Angelina believes outright that her lottery ticket is a loser. However, as in (LUNCH-ELABORATE), Angelina says that her initial claim did not mean what Brad apparently took it to mean: she was, at that point, offering no opinion on whether she would win the lottery, or on where she would eat if she were to win.

All four versions of the (LUNCH) dialogue are natural (at least if construed as conversations over email, to explain why Angelina and Brad are expressing themselves in uninterrupted paragraphs). Sensitivism gives us a model of belief

on which we can take what Angelina says at face value, as sincere assertions expressing beliefs. This is not as easy to do on a naïve, context-insensitive model of belief.

(LUNCH-ELABORATE), in particular, is difficult to accommodate without sensitivism. If we want to take Angelina’s initial assertion as sincere, then we must take her to believe that she will be having lunch with the boss tomorrow, without qualification. That is, as of her first utterance, she must believe that she will have lunch with the boss tomorrow, regardless of whether she wins the lottery and regardless of whether the office is hit by a meteorite tonight, or else she believes that she will not win the lottery, and that the office will not be hit by a meteorite tonight. But then she must have changed her mind by the time she makes her second utterance: then she claims that it is only very likely that she will have lunch with the boss tomorrow; she does not rule out the possibility of going elsewhere or nowhere for lunch tomorrow, in particular in case she wins the lottery or the office is hit by a meteorite tonight. But Angelina claims not to have changed her mind: what she says about the lottery and meteorite scenarios does not contradict the belief she initially expressed.

By contrast, here is the sensitivist idea, which lets us take Angelina at her word. At each stage of the conversation, Angelina has a certain range of alternative possibilities in mind. At the beginning of the conversation, in all versions of (LUNCH), no possibility in which Angelina wins the lottery is under consideration. Brad’s questions, however, bring the lottery possibilities to salience, and so Angelina considers them—if only briefly, as in (LUNCH-REJECT). The four different cases result from different ways Angelina might react to having lottery possibilities made salient.

When Angelina makes her initial assertion, the belief expressed thereby is just that in all the alternative possibilities then under consideration, she will have lunch with the boss tomorrow. In (LUNCH-REJECT), Angelina judges that the lottery possibilities are so unlikely that they are not worth considering. She therefore refuses to give any judgment on where she will have lunch tomorrow in case she wins the lottery. Lottery possibilities have been made salient, but Angelina nevertheless does not take them into consideration; her range of alternative possibilities remains as it was. In (LUNCH-ELABORATE), she concedes that if she wins the lottery, she will not have lunch with the boss tomorrow; she also raises meteorite possibilities to salience and judges that these are also possibilities where she would not have lunch with the boss tomorrow. But because lottery and meteorite possibilities are so unlikely, she still believes, at least, that she is very likely to have lunch with the boss tomorrow. This does not contradict her initial belief, because her initial belief was silent on lottery and meteorite possibilities. In (LUNCH-STICK), Angelina judges that even if she wins the lottery, she will still have lunch with the boss tomorrow. Therefore, even when lottery possibilities are under consideration, she still counts as believing that she will have lunch with the boss tomorrow. We might see this as an expansion of her initial belief: where initially she believed simply

that in ordinary (non-lottery) scenarios, she would have lunch with the boss tomorrow, after Brad’s questions, she comes to believe that that she will have lunch with the boss tomorrow in both lottery and ordinary scenarios. Finally, in (LUNCH-REVISE), consideration of lottery possibilities leads Angelina to abandon her initial belief. This may be because she took lottery possibilities to be among her initial range of alternatives, but had overlooked them. Of course, there are any number of reasons Angelina may have changed her mind here; I will have more to say about changing one’s mind in §3. For now, suffice it to say that despite the fact that this is the version of the (LUNCH) dialogue most simply explicable on the naïve context-insensitive view of belief, just what it is to change one’s mind in this way is not obvious.

This is all easier to see with pictures.

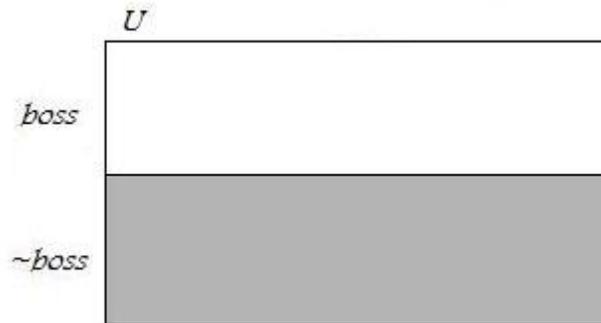


Figure 1: Angelina’s initial state.

Think of the rectangle labelled “U” (for “Universe”) in Figure 1 as the space of alternatives under consideration by Angelina at the start of the dialogue. Let *boss* be the proposition that Angelina will have lunch with the boss tomorrow. The possibilities above the horizontal line in the middle of the box are possibilities where *boss* is true; those below the line are possibilities where *boss* is false. The possibilities below the horizontal line are shaded, to indicate that Angelina is ruling them out. That is, according to Angelina, none of the  $\neg$ *boss* possibilities under consideration correspond to the actual world.

In Figure 2, the box *U* has been expanded. Now, as well as the ordinary possibilities which were included in *U* in Figure 1, there are also some lottery possibilities. The proposition that Angelina will win the lottery is represented by *lott*. The portion of *U* where *lott* is true is unshaded, to indicate that Angelina is not ruling out the possibility of winning the lottery. Furthermore, there is some overlap between the *lott* portion and the  $\neg$ *boss* portion, and this is unshaded: Angelina is not ruling out the possibility of both winning the lottery and missing lunch with the boss—which is why Brad brought up the possibility of winning

	$U$	$\sim\text{lott}$	$\text{lott}$
$\text{boss}$			
$\sim\text{boss}$			

Figure 2: After Brad raises lottery possibilities.

the lottery.

In the state represented by Figure 1, Angelina judges that all unrejected possibilities under consideration are ones where she would have lunch with the boss tomorrow; therefore, in that state, she counts as believing that she will have lunch with the boss tomorrow. On the other hand, when Brad asks about what would happen if Angelina wins the lottery, Angelina starts to consider lottery possibilities. If she thereby comes into the state represented in Figure 2, she believes that she will have lunch with the boss tomorrow, because there are now some unrejected possibilities she is considering where she will not have lunch with the boss tomorrow. However, if the ordinary possibilities are much more likely than the lottery possibilities, Angelina will still count as believing that she is very likely to have lunch with the boss tomorrow.

## 1.2 Details

Let's be more precise. We want to postulate something invariant across Angelina's dialogue with Brad in (LUNCH-ELABORATE)—call it a *doxastic state*. Let's say a doxastic state consists of the following three elements.

1. A set  $U$  of possible worlds (possible according to the agent, that is).
2. An ordering  $\prec$  on those worlds.
3. A collection  $\mathcal{C}$  of sets of possible worlds (“context sets”).

The sets of possible worlds  $c \in \mathcal{C}$  represent contexts: we characterize a context by the set of possibilities taken seriously, or the set of “live” possibilities, in that context. The ordering gives us something like a plausibility relation on the possible worlds: if world  $x$  is ahead of world  $y$  in the ordering, then the agent is disposed to rule out  $x$  in favour of  $y$  in any context in which both  $x$  and  $y$  are live. We assume that the ordering gives us a non-empty set of ‘most

plausible' worlds for each context set. Then we say that an agent believes that  $p$  in or relative to a context represented by  $c$  just in case  $p$  is true at all the most plausible worlds in  $c$ .

This gives a picture of what remains constant about Angelina's beliefs over the course of (LUNCH-ELABORATE): her dispositions to rule out one possibility in favour of another do not change. But *something* does change for her when Brad raises new possibilities. At the end of the dialogue, she is no longer in a position to sincerely assert, without qualification, that she will be going to lunch with the boss tomorrow. Therefore, we postulate an additional fact about Angelina not captured by her doxastic state:

4. An distinguished set  $c_o \in \mathcal{C}$  (the "occurrent context set").

This set,  $c_o$ , consists of the set of possibilities currently live for Angelina. This lets us capture the notion of *occurrent* belief: an agent occurrently believes that  $p$  just in case she believes  $p$  relative to  $c_o$ . What changes for Angelina when Brad raises lottery possibilities—possibilities she previously did not take seriously, but is not inclined to ignore once Brad raises them—is her occurrent context. In official sensitivist parlance: throughout (LUNCH-ELABORATE), Angelina believes *boss* relative to the context  $c_1$  depicted in Figure 1 but not relative to the larger context  $c_2$  depicted in Figure 2; at the start of the dialogue, her occurrent context,  $c_o$ , is  $c_1$  and so she occurrently believes *boss*; but at the end,  $c_o = c_2$  and so she does not occurrently believe *boss*.

This transition contrasts with what we see in (LUNCH-REVISE). Here, Angelina revises her initial judgment, which I think is best understood as a change to her doxastic state. In (LUNCH-STICK), we see Angelina's occurrent context expand just as in (LUNCH-ELABORATE), but this time she is willing to rule out Brad's lottery possibilities, and so she continues to occurrently believe *boss*, albeit relative to a different context set. Finally, in (LUNCH-REJECT), Angelina refuses to take lottery possibilities seriously: she does not expand her occurrent context set as Brad suggests.

On this picture there is a fundamental difference between two ways of losing the occurrent belief that  $p$ : *belief revision* as in (LUNCH-REVISE) and *context change* as in (LUNCH-ELABORATE). The former amounts to a genuine changing of one's mind, while the latter may simply mean thinking about the question whether  $p$  differently, perhaps changing one's provisional assumptions. This difference between belief revision and context change will figure prominently in our sensitivist explication of Pyrrhonism in §3.

Defending sensitivism would be outside the scope of this essay, but readers seeking arguments in its favour should refer to:

- Clarke (2013), which argues that, by extending sensitivism to degrees of belief as well as outright belief, we can resolve the notoriously difficult problem of giving a unified account of both notions without running into the usual paradoxes.

- Clarke (forthcoming), which argues that we need sensitivism to hold on to the platitude that an assertion of  $p$  is sincere if and only if the speaker believes that  $p$ .
- Clarke (forthcoming), which uses a sensitivist framework to provide a novel solution to the preface paradox (Makinson 1965).

## 2 Pyrrhonism

So much for sensitivism. In this section, we turn to the Pyrrhonian skepticism to which we will apply sensitivism. Because Cartesian skepticism is more familiar to most contemporary epistemologists, I shall emphasize differences between Pyrrhonian and Cartesian skepticism.

### 2.1 Suspended Judgment

The Pyrrhonian differs from the Cartesian skeptic in focussing on the avoidance of belief rather than on the impossibility of knowledge (or justified or rational belief). Accordingly, and strikingly, the Pyrrhonian skeptic not only does not share the Cartesian skeptic's doctrine that knowledge is impossible, she has no doctrines at all.

Nevertheless, the Pyrrhonian and the Cartesian skeptic appeal to similar arguments, though they use them to different effect. Thus, both skeptics might point out that one cannot tell one is not dreaming, and that if one is dreaming, one cannot trust perceptual appearances. The Cartesian skeptic might then conclude that one does not know one is sitting by the fire. That is, the Cartesian skeptic might endorse the claim that one does not know one is sitting by the fire. The Pyrrhonian, on the other hand, might employ an argument with this proposition as its conclusion, but she does not therefore endorse or believe the conclusion. Rather, she employs the argument as a means to eliminate belief that one is sitting by the fire.

Cartesian Story: Here's an example of something I don't know: that I am sitting by the fire. After all, my only evidence for this (my only basis or justification for believing it) is that it currently appears to me (perceptually) to be so. But I could be dreaming, and were I dreaming, my perceptual appearances would be unreliable. Therefore, I do not know that I am sitting by the fire.

Pyrrhonian Story: It appears to me that I am sitting by the fire. This will lead me to believe that I am sitting by the fire unless I can produce an opposing appearance equal in strength. When I consider the possibility that I might be dreaming (in which case my perceptual

appearances are misleading), I find that I am no longer inclined to believe that I am sitting by the fire. What a relief!

Note that I have not characterized the Pyrrhonian skeptic as one who *claims* that belief is to be avoided; rather, she is one who *does* avoid belief. Pyrrhonians will, indeed, sometimes say that belief leads to unhappiness, or that it is better to avoid belief, but these claims are hedged with (implicit or explicit) disclaimers: “So far, it seems to me that. . .,” “Given our opponents’ assumptions, it seems to follow that. . .”

Pyrrhonian skepticism, then, is not characterized by certain claims or doctrines, but rather by a certain *practice*: the practice of suspending judgment. Moreover, the Pyrrhonian has distinctive tools for producing suspension, namely the “modes” or “tropes”. These are a battery of argument-forms designed to defeat the pull appearances have on our judgment. For example, if it appears to the skeptic that she sees a blue plastic cup, she can deploy the mode “depending on the quantities and preparations of existing objects” (*PH* 1.129).<sup>3</sup> The plastic looks blue now, but were it sliced thin enough and examined under a microscope, it would appear to have a different colour. Thus, she says, we can say what the cup-shaped block of plastic is like, and what the thinly-sliced plastic is like, but we cannot say what the nature of the plastic is like in itself “because of the anomalies in the appearances which depend on [its composition]” (*PH* 1.132). Other appearances might call for other modes, but the method of considering alternative possibilities—alternative appearances—is general.

But why would one want to suspend judgment? Sextus gives an answer: suspended judgment leads to tranquillity (*ataraxia*), or at least removes a barrier to tranquillity.<sup>4</sup> Here is Sextus, at *PH* 1.12:

Men of talent, troubled by the anomaly in things and puzzled as to which of them they should rather assent to, came to investigate what in things is true and what false, thinking that by deciding these issues they would become tranquil.

On the contrary, Sextus says, the skeptics have found (so far) that these issues cannot be decided, and so they suspend judgment. Surprisingly, this suspension quiets the disturbance brought on by anomalous things.

There’s an interpretive question here: which beliefs, exactly, disturb our tranquillity? One answer: all beliefs are disturbing. There are no benign beliefs whatsoever. An alternative answer: any belief can be disturbing, but any particular belief may lie dormant much of the time. If this is correct, the skeptic need only suspend judgment on those questions actively producing disturbance. On the other hand, if the first answer is correct, then Descartes’ meditator may

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<sup>3</sup>*PH* = *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. All translations are taken from Annas and Barnes (2000).

<sup>4</sup>I won’t have much to say about Academic (as opposed to Pyrrhonian) scepticism, but it’s worth noting that the Pyrrhonian emphasis on tranquillity marks an important point of difference: while both Pyrrhonians and Academics recommend suspension of judgment, “there is no evidence of Academic interest in tranquillity” (Schofield 1999, 331).

have had the right idea—rooting through all of his beliefs to sort wheat from chaff. (For this Pyrrhonian meditator, it’s all chaff.)

## 2.2 Pyrrhonian Belief

This question suggests another, a question which has seen a vigorous debate in recent decades: does the Pyrrhonian skeptic have beliefs, and if so, what are they?

Sextus does address this question directly (at *PH* 1.13), but his all-too-brief remarks do not settle the question. If anything, *PH* 1.13 complicates things: Sextus there distinguishes between a “broad” and a “narrow” sense of belief, such that Pyrrhonians do have beliefs in the broad sense, but not in the narrow sense. Just how we should understand Sextus’s distinction is not obvious, nor is it obvious whether Sextus’s remarks at *PH* 1.13 are consistent with the rest of what he says.

There are a number of ways to interpret the question posed here. That is, when we ask what, if anything, the Pyrrhonist believes, we might be asking:<sup>5</sup>

- What propositions is the Pyrrhonist permitted to believe?
  - Frede (1979; 1984) argues that the Pyrrhonist is permitted to believe *that it is still raining*, but not *that it is really still raining*.
  - Fine (2000) and Perin (2010) argue that the Pyrrhonist is permitted to believe *that it appears to her that honey is sweet*, but not *that honey is sweet*.
- What belief-like attitudes is the Pyrrhonist allowed to have?
  - Barnes (1982; 1990) and Burnyeat (1980; 1984) interpret Pyrrhonian assertions as expressives, unlike genuine non-skeptical assertions. Experiencing an appearance may resemble belief insofar as one experiences something as true; but the skeptic does not judge that her appearances are true (or false).

Regardless of how we construe the question, we can contemplate a moderate and a radical answer, according to whether the skeptic is permitted more or fewer belief-like attitudes to more or fewer propositions.

I won’t try to settle this debate (these debates) here. This is the upshot for present purposes: The skeptic is permitted *something* that might be mistaken for belief/*dogma*. Whether this *something* is genuine belief is a subject for debate; but that there is such a *something*, as discussed in *PH* 1.13, is uncontroversial.

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<sup>5</sup>My framing of the debate here owes a lot to Morison (2014). See also Vogt (2012) for a treatment of the question consonant with my sensitivist interpretation of Sextus.

## 2.3 Appearance and Reality

We also know that Sextus took himself to have answers to the following objections:

- It's *impossible* to be a (radical) Pyrrhonist. One cannot completely avoid belief.
- Being a (radical) Pyrrhonist precludes (rational, intentional) *action*. To act implies (or requires) belief.

Sextus addresses both objections, although his response to the former is indirect (see Vogt 2012, 651ff.). Thus, if belief is indeed necessary for action, then we have reason to think Sextus would allow the Pyrrhonist at least some beliefs.

But we can find reason to think Sextus put some limits on what sorts of belief the Pyrrhonist can act on. Sextus says that the Pyrrhonist “follows appearances”, letting appearance be the criterion of action. *PH* 1.23 lists four sources of such appearances which guide the Pyrrhonist’s actions: “guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise.” *M* XI 166 gives an example:<sup>6</sup>

And if compelled by a tyrant to perform some forbidden act, [the Pyrrhonist] will choose one thing, perhaps, and avoid the other by the preconception which accords with his ancestral laws and customs; and in fact he will bear the harsh situation more easily compared with the dogmatist, because he does not, like the latter, have any further opinion over and above these conditions.

The skeptic’s use of appearance as a guide to action contrasts with having a standard by which to judge “the reality or unreality of something” (*PH* 1.21). We also learn, in *M* XI and *PH* 3, that the Pyrrhonist avoids disturbance by avoiding the belief that things are thus-and-so (especially: good or bad) *by nature*.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.4 Investigation

Here is a puzzling feature of Pyrrhonian skepticism: the skeptic is still inquiring. This seems puzzling because the skeptic seems to have, via the modes, a means of suspending judgment on any question whatsoever. That is, if the modes work, they should work universally; one need not investigate a specific question to determine whether the Pyrrhonist will wind up suspending judgment or assenting to some answer or other. What room is left for investigation?

And yet, Sextus contrasts the still-investigating skeptic with the dogmatist, whose inquiry ends with settled opinion. Indeed, the very name “skeptic” means

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<sup>6</sup>*M* XI = *Against the Ethicists*. All translations are taken from Bett (1997).

<sup>7</sup>There is some debate about whether, when Sextus argues that believing things are good or bad by nature leads to disturbance, he is arguing *in propria persona* or showing that his dogmatic opponents are committed to this conclusion. See Svavarsson (2011), §4.

“inquiring”. Furthermore, Sextus writes that the skeptics even engage in natural science, though not “in order to make assertions with firm conviction about any of the matters on which scientific beliefs are held,” but rather “in order to be able to oppose to every account an equal account, and for the sake of tranquillity” (*PH* 1.18). Therefore, our explication of Pyrrhonism should have it that the skeptic can inquire, and has a better claim to be an inquirer than the non-skeptic.

We might also add that there is a distinctive sort of skeptical inquiry—that the distinctive skeptical practice of using the modes to produce suspended judgment is itself investigation. (See Vogt 2011; Olfert 2015 for developments of this perspective on skeptical inquiry.) I will give some comments on viewing the skeptical practice as investigation when I come to the sensitivist explication of Pyrrhonism, but my main focus under this heading will be allowing the skeptic to engage in investigation even *without* applying the modes.

## 2.5 Summary

We now have the following elements as characteristic of Sextus’s Pyrrhonism:<sup>8</sup>

1. The Pyrrhonist suspends judgment (on everything).
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. Pyrrhonism is possible.
5. The Pyrrhonist can lead a normal life, acting in normal ways.
6. Pyrrhonians follow appearances, holding no opinion about reality.
7. The Pyrrhonist is still investigating.

My aim in this paper is to give a sensitivist explication of Sextus’s Pyrrhonism which bears all of these characteristics without inconsistency. I will return to the list in §3.4 to evaluate the sensitivist interpretation.

For now, note that it is at least apparently difficult to hold all six points. Point 1, in particular, makes points 3–5 difficult: (3) If the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment on everything, how can she nevertheless have beliefs? (4) It seems impossible to suspend judgment on everything—yet there were avowed Pyrrhonists. (5) It at least seems that suspending judgment on everything would leave one unable to act on anything—yet Sextus was a working physician as well as a Pyrrhonist. The sensitivist interpretation aims to integrate all seven points without contradiction.

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<sup>8</sup>To save space, and because it has more to do with self-help than epistemology, I leave out discussion of Sextus’s (to my mind rather dubious) claim that suspending judgment removes a barrier to tranquillity.

### 3 Sensitivist Pyrrhonism

Now that we have statements of Pyrrhonism and of sensitivism, we can begin putting the two together, to produce a sensitivist explication of Pyrrhonism.

#### 3.1 Suspended Judgment and Tranquillity

The main innovation of the sensitivist Pyrrhonism I propose is interpreting the Pyrrhonist's suspension of judgment as context change rather than belief revision (cf. §1.2). Someone who occurrently believes that  $p$  can cease to do so without a change of doxastic state by changing the set of possibilities she takes seriously. This, I suggest, is just what the Pyrrhonian modes help one to do.

This is easier to grasp with a concrete example than in the abstract. Suppose an agent  $SE$  occurrently believes some troubling proposition, say *that Nigel Farage is out there somewhere*. That is, there is some set of possibilities  $SE$  currently takes seriously—call that set  $c$ —some of which he rules out or rejects. In all of the unrejected possibilities, it is true that Farage is out there somewhere.  $SE$ , wishing for moderation of feeling in matters forced upon him, desires not to (occurrently) believe this proposition. There is a course of action  $SE$  can take to find peace without gathering any new evidence, without changing his choice of which possibilities in  $c$  to reject. So  $SE$  recites to himself an appropriate mode, perhaps reminding himself of cases where he or someone else has been misled by the news, or of the unreliability of testimony in general, or perhaps even evil demons and *The Matrix*. Accordingly,  $SE$  attends to a possibility where he has all the same Farage-related appearances as in the actual world, but where those appearances are misleading. This is a possibility  $SE$  is not disposed to rule out in favour of those unrejected possibilities in  $c$ , so in his new, updated context, characterized by the expanded set  $c'$  resulting from adding the new possibilities, it is no longer the case that all unrejected possibilities are Farage-possibilities. Thus,  $SE$  no longer occurrently believes that Farage is out there somewhere

Briefly:

1.  $SE$  occurrently believes Farage is out there somewhere.
2. By using an appropriate mode,  $SE$  attends to a previously-ignored non-Farage possibility.
3. Since  $SE$  does not reject the new possibility,  $SE$  does not believe that Farage is out there somewhere relative to the new context. In other words,  $SE$  no longer occurrently believes that Farage is out there somewhere

On this picture,  $SE$  has gone from belief to suspension without changing his doxastic state. Recall that a doxastic state is context-independent, consisting of the believer's dispositions to believe certain propositions in certain contexts. (Or: to reject certain possibilities given certain sets of possibilities.)  $SE$  has not

changed any of those dispositions, but has triggered one that was previously dormant.

### 3.2 Pyrrhonian Belief, Appearance and Reality

As we saw in §2.3, the role of appearances for the Pyrrhonist is to give a practical criterion—that is, the criterion by which one chooses how to act. In our sensitivist framework, this role is played by one’s occurrent beliefs, one’s beliefs in the current context. And this is independently plausible: plausibly, it is one’s occurrent beliefs in a situation that hook up with one’s desires to result in action. Given whatever set of possibilities are live at the moment, one acts according to what is true in the unrejected possibilities in that set. Where does the set of live possibilities come from? For the Pyrrhonist, it comes (not from philosophical or scientific reasoning, but) from “guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise” (*PH* 1.23).

On the other hand, Pyrrhonists hold no opinions about reality, about how things are by nature. Sensitivist explication: none of the Pyrrhonist’s beliefs, local as they are, entail any cross-contextual commitment. To believe that  $p$  is true in reality, not just according to current appearance, is to commit to believing  $p$  in other contexts than the current one, perhaps even in *all* contexts. On the other hand, for any proposition a Pyrrhonist believes relative to some context, there is another context where the Pyrrhonist lacks that belief.

Note that on this version of Pyrrhonism, the distinction between beliefs about appearances and beliefs about reality is not a difference in the contents of the beliefs or in the propositions believed. Rather, it is a distinction between different relations one might bear to a content/proposition. To believe that it appears that  $p$  is just to believe  $p$  relative to one’s current context. To believe that in reality,  $p$ , on the other hand, is to have a cross-contextual commitment to  $p$ —perhaps to believe that  $p$  relative to all contexts, or perhaps to all contexts one can easily be put into. Thus, we do not interpret Sextus’s commitment to an appearance/reality distinction as a metaphysical commitment about something like the structure of experience. Rather, Sextus’s talk of this distinction has to do with the sort of attitude a Pyrrhonist takes to the things she believes.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.3 Investigation

The skeptic, Sextus tells us, is still investigating—unlike the dogmatists. What can this mean in the sensitivist framework? After all, I’ve characterized the skeptic as being rather slippery: she’s always willing to change contexts, to

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<sup>9</sup>Compare (Frede 1979; Frede 1984) on believing that  $p$  versus believing that  $p$  is true, or believing that *really*  $p$ .

change the space of possibilities under consideration. This is the behaviour of a politician, not a serious investigator.

But for all that a Pyrrhonist is skilled at context-shifting to preserve tranquillity, it does not follow that the Pyrrhonist exercises her context-shifting skill in response to every awkward question, and neither does it follow that Pyrrhonists have no other skills. That is: although I have characterized the Pyrrhonist's suspension of judgment as not involving belief revision, I do not claim that Pyrrhonists never revise their beliefs. (How dogmatic that sounds!)

What would constitute genuine belief revision on the sensitivist picture? Recall the constituents of a sensitivist doxastic state: a set of possibilities, a set of contexts (subsets of possibilities), and an ordering or hierarchy on those possibilities. Belief revision, for the sensitivist, consists in changes to one or more of these constituents. Thus, one might revise one's beliefs by...

- ...changing one's stock of possibilities. This is the sort of revision we practise all the time in introductory epistemology classes: imagine the possibility that everything seems the way it does, but in fact one is deceived by an evil demon; imagine the possibility of a massive conspiracy to hide the fact that our head of state has been assassinated; imagine that you have a correct belief about the number of coins in the successful job candidate's pocket, but only by accident.
- ...gaining the ability (or disposition) to consider some set of possibilities together (in certain circumstances). Without adding to one's universe of recognized possibilities, one might nevertheless learn to pay attention to certain possibilities when thinking about a certain question or problem. For example, as one becomes more experienced or better trained with respect to, say, certain sorts of experiments, one might learn to control for certain sources of error. This is plausibly a matter of learning to keep certain error-possibilities in mind under the relevant circumstances. More mundanely, my driving instructor teaches me to check my blind spot before changing lanes because I must not ignore the possibility that there is a vehicle there, not appearing in my mirrors. The novice driver takes seriously too small a set of possibilities when thinking about whether it is safe to change lanes.
- ...changing the precedence ordering among one's recognized possibilities. This can happen in mundane ways. Before examination, the doctor recognized both the possibility that the patient is coughing blood and that she is not, but is not disposed to reject either in favour of the other; after examination, the no-blood-possibility is rejected. Or take a theoretical example. Take a triangle, and draw lines connecting each vertex to the midpoint of the opposite side. Is there a point where these three lines all intersect? Before encountering a proof (or an authoritative opinion), one is not ready to reject either the possibility of intersecting or the possibility of not intersecting in favour of the other; afterward, one rejects the possibility

of the lines' not intersecting.

Here, then, are three forms of belief revision, all of which, I claim, are available to the Pyrrhonist. Expanding one's stock of possibilities is a genuine form of belief revision, and it is open to—indeed, essential to—the Pyrrhonist. The process of developing the Pyrrhonist's signature skill—setting out oppositions of equal strength—surely involves, centrally, recognizing certain possibilities; some of these will be unthought-of by the uninitiated, so that becoming a Pyrrhonist requires adding them to one's stock.

Likewise, training oneself to bring such possibilities to mind regularly is certainly possible for the Pyrrhonist, and probably essential in at least some cases: if there are propositions belief in which always or usually brings disturbance, the Pyrrhonist will want a prophylactic, not just a treatment. The seasoned Pyrrhonist, then, plausibly trains herself to avoid letting any context lead her to believe that anything is good or bad by nature .

The third sort of revision, too, is open to the Pyrrhonist investigator on the present explication, without committing her to dogmatic belief. One comes to favour one possibility over another, but one does not lose the ability to suspend judgment about the patient's symptoms or about the lines' intersection. This is because the good Pyrrhonist will have yet other possibilities she can turn to, possibilities where the target proposition is not true, but which she will not rule out.

If investigation involves seeking and responding to evidence, investigation is open to the Pyrrhonist.

Shouldn't there also be a distinctively *skeptical* form of inquiry, in which the modes centrally figure? I think we can accommodate this too. Here's an illustration.

Imagine a new Pyrrhonian TV show. "Paranormal investigation" is now a genre of TV show; ours will be another of this kind, with Pyrrhonian skeptics investigating the allegedly supernatural. Some of these shows (e.g., *Ghost Hunters*, the most successful of the bunch) involve people with the trappings of (TV-)science taking Lab Equipment into the field to see if they detect ghosts. But another sort of paranormal investigation show (e.g., *Fact or Faked: Paranormal Files*) instead features special effects experts in a studio trying to recreate footage supposedly showing aliens or ghosts or whatnot.<sup>10</sup> This is a sort of investigation too. When it appears that  $p$ , a natural explanation of the appearance is that  $p$  is true ("in reality"). By investigating alternative explanations—by attempting to debunk the appearance that  $p$ —we learn something. At the very least, looking for ways the available evidence might be misleading clears the way for intelligently gathering new evidence. Perhaps we find that the video director could have

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<sup>10</sup>This sentence almost makes it sound like *Fact or Faked* might not be ridiculous. Let us oppose to this appearance Wikipedia's synopsis of episode 224, part two: "[G]uest WWE wrestler Kofi Kingston helps Bill's team investigate a Stonehenge mystery." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fact\\_or\\_Faked:\\_Paranormal\\_Files](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fact_or_Faked:_Paranormal_Files), accessed 7 August 2016.

produced the effect of interest (without a ghost but) with a bedsheet and a flashlight; we can then search the relevant area for a bedsheet with eyeholes cut into it.

So I propose a spinoff, with experts in the modes rather than experts in video effects. Just as the cast of *Fact or Faked* attempt to dispel the appearance of supernatural phenomena attaching to the videos they tackle on their program, our spinoff (working title: *Appearance or Reality: Normal Files*) has expert skeptics attempting to dispel all sorts of appearances.

Sometimes they consider apparently cogent arguments, deploying (say) the Agrippan modes to show that the argument must be either circular, or infinitely regressive, or rely on an unsupported hypothesis. This may have the effect of debunking the argument's original persuasiveness, but it might also help us understand better what is involved in endorsing the argument: here's the trilemma, pick your horn.

Sometimes they consider perceptual appearances. Since this is a TV show, we can spice up some of the modes here: we can get an actual jaundiced person (with some added yellow makeup for the cameras) to look at things and report their colours; we can get sickly folks to taste honey and find it uninteresting. The result of this exercise might simply be that the original appearances become unpersuasive, or it might lead to new avenues of research: check yourself for jaundice and other ailments before trusting your senses; check with other observers; never be completely certain, but be aware of these

Sometimes our experts will be really stuck. (Or at least they'll pretend to be, for the audience's sake.) They won't be sure where the mistake in the argument is, how the appearance could be otherwise. They will then fall back on that old standby, awareness of their own fallibility. "Before its author was born, this argument (which is no doubt sound) was not yet apparent, though it was really there all along. In the same way, it is possible that the argument opposing this one is really there but is not yet apparent to us; so we should not yet assent to what is now thought to be a powerful argument." (Adapted from *PH* 1.34.) The audience is thereby encouraged to develop virtuous epistemic humility.<sup>11</sup> Again, the result of this manoeuvre might just be to dampen the appeal of the original argument, or it might also help us to keep alert to possible counter-arguments and sources of error in our thinking as we continue to investigate.

This is investigation with the modes. It's not (necessarily) unrelated to regular investigation, by which I mean investigation which is not distinctively Pyrrhonian or skeptical: investigation with the modes clears the way for investigation by ordinary means—gathering evidence, etc.

Here's a sensitivist explanation of what's going on with our TV investigators: when one encounters a persuasive bit of evidence, an appearance that *p*, our

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<sup>11</sup>The producers of *Appearance or Reality* do not recommend or condemn either humility in particular or virtue in general.

skeptics help one to get to the truth by bringing to our attention alternative not- $p$  possibilities where we receive the same appearance. Maybe that’s a UFO, they say, or *maybe* it’s a kite with lights attached. Maybe you’re late for class, or maybe you’re just having a bad dream. The immediate effect is suspension of judgment until we can rule out the alternative possibility raised by the skeptic, but it also has the effect (for the motivated inquirer) of showing what kind of further evidence we should seek. Is there a way we can detect a kite-string in the video? *Am I dreaming?* The result of gathering such further evidence will be a revision to one’s doxastic state—one might come to reject one possibility in favour of another, if for example one finds an apparent kite-string in the video, or if one wakes up—even though the Pyrrhonist will be back again with more modes for the revised doxastic state. (Are you sure you didn’t just dream of waking up?)

### 3.4 Scorecard

Let’s revisit the list of properties characteristic of Pyrrhonian skepticism from §2.5. The list is reproduced below, with comments on how our sensitivist Pyrrhonism does justice to each item.

1. The Pyrrhonist suspends judgment (on everything).
  - Suspension of judgment on a proposition is achieved by shifting context to add unrejected possibilities in which the proposition is false. The Pyrrhonist suspends *on everything* insofar as for any context  $c$  and proposition  $p$ , if the Pyrrhonist believes  $p$  in  $c$ , then there is a context  $c'$  (reachable from  $c$  by mental effort) such that the Pyrrhonist does not believe  $p$  in  $c'$ . In other words: any proposition in any context is liable to suspension via context change. Pyrrhonist does not suspend on
2. Pyrrhonian suspension is achieved via the modes.
  - The modes function to expand the Pyrrhonist’s occurrent context as described above. By coming to take seriously a not- $p$  possibility which one is not disposed to rule out, one comes not to believe  $p$ .
3. There is a sense of “belief” in which Pyrrhonists do have beliefs, notwithstanding the above.
  - In any context, the skeptic will have beliefs. What makes the skeptic a skeptic is: (1) she actively seeks and achieves suspended judgment, on any proposition whatsoever, whenever doing so would help achieve tranquillity and, accordingly, (2) there is no proposition she is unable to suspend judgment on by means of a mode-driven context change.
4. Pyrrhonism is possible.
  - It is impossible to avoid occurrent belief entirely—this is the seed of truth in the objection. But the Pyrrhonist recommends only that one (be able to) eliminate any given occurrent belief. This is not obviously impossible.

5. The Pyrrhonist can lead a normal life. Pyrrhonists look just like you and me.
  - Pyrrhonists can act on their occurrent beliefs of the moment. That is, they can choose one action over another based on what, according to their beliefs relative to their current context, will be best for them. Nevertheless, they will be quick to abandon any such belief (by shifting contexts) should it lead to disturbance.
6. Pyrrhonians follow appearances, holding no opinion about reality.
  - When the Pyrrhonist believes something relative to her occurrent context—relative, that is, to a set of possibilities shaped by the way things appear to her in the moment—this does not commit her to holding the belief in any other context. In particular, the Pyrrhonist’s doxastic state does not contain any privileged context representing the way things really are. All of her beliefs are fleeting.
7. The Pyrrhonist is still investigating.
  - As we saw in §3.3, belief revision is possible for the Pyrrhonist. The Pyrrhonist can gather evidence and respond to it by altering her doxastic state in several ways, most importantly by changing which possibilities she is disposed to rule out in favour of which others. She can run experiments, see what happens, and change her mind on that basis. All this happens without dogmatic belief: no matter how her investigation changes her doxastic state, it will not produce beliefs she cannot dispense with by using the modes.

In short, then, the sensitivist view presented in this paper bears the hallmarks of Pyrrhonism and so deserves to be considered as an explication thereof. Nor, on this explication, does the Pyrrhonist face the apparent contradictions we saw at the end of §2.5: each of points 3–5 are cashed out in ways consistent with the explication of point 1. This is a significant advantage of the sensitivist explication. To be sure, this is indeed an explication, and as anachronistic as you like: I do not pretend that Sextus was a sensitivist. But if he’d had the opportunity, Sextus *should* have been a sensitivist.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>[Acknowledgments]

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