Georgia State University
Digital Archive @ GSU

Philosophy Theses | Department of Philosophy

12-19-2008

Against Pyrrhonian Equipollence

John Everett Button
jbutton1@student.gsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/philosophy_theses

Recommended Citation
Button, John Everett, "Against Pyrrhonian Equipollence" (2008). *Philosophy Theses.* Paper 48.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at Digital Archive @ GSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Archive @ GSU. For more information, please contact digitalarchive@gsu.edu.

AGAINST PYRRHONIAN EQUIPOLLENCE

by

JOHN BUTTON

Under the Direction of Dr. Tim O'Keefe

ABSTRACT

The production of equipollence is the most important part of the Pyrrhonian skeptic's method for bringing about the suspension of judgment. The skeptic produces equipollence methodically, by opposing arguments, propositions, or appearances, in anyway whatsoever, until he produces an equality of "weightiness" on both sides of the conflicting views. Having no appropriate criterion to break the deadlock of equipollence, the skeptic (or his interlocutor) is left with no reason to accept either view. I have two main aims in this paper. My first aim is to distinguish between two different types of equipollence; that produced in the Pyrrhonist, called Psychological Equipollence, and that demonstrated to the dogmatist by the Pyrrhonist, called Normative Equipollence. My second aim in this paper is to argue that equipollence cannot be produced when the skeptic uses only epistemic possibility of error to oppose some compelling *p*.

INDEX WORDS: Pyrrhonian skepticism, Sextus Empiricus, Equipollence, Ancient epistemology, Epistemology

AGAINST PYRRHONIAN EQUIPOLLENCE

by

JOHN BUTTON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

Copyright by
John Everett Button II
2009

AGAINST PYRRHONIAN EQUIPOLLENCE

by

JOHN BUTTON

Committee Chair: Tim O'Keefe

Committee: Stephen Jacobson
Sebastian Rand

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
May 2009

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION 1

2 PYRRHONISM BRIEFLY 3

A.) The Skeptic's Method 3

B.) The Skeptic's Criterion of Action 5

C.) Sextus' Goals and Motivations 9

3 CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS FOR EQUIPOLLENCE 12

A.) The Method of Equipollence 12

B.) Psychological Equipollence 14

C.) Normative Equipollence 16

4 RESPONDING TO NORMATIVE EQUIPOLLENCE 19

A.) Defense against 'Possible Counterarguments' 20

5 EVALUATING PSYCHOLOGICAL EQUIPOLLENCE 33

A.) Sextus' Appeal to Epistemic Possibility 33

B.) Failure of the Micawber Policy 37

C.) Conclusion 39

WORKS CITED 41

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A Pyrrhonian skeptic methodically produces equipollence by collecting, arranging, and opposing equally compelling considerations for and against every dogmatic argument, proposition, or appearance. With this method of producing equipollence, the skeptic attempts to suspend judgment on every *p* he is confronted with. Sextus Empiricus acknowledges in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, however, that a skeptic may not always have an equally compelling consideration available to oppose some compelling *p*. In such situations, Sextus proposes that the skeptic will respond by opposing the compelling *p* with the epistemic possibility of ~*p*. If this technique doesn't succeed, then equipollence cannot be produced.

In this paper, I intend to defend the thesis that Sextus' technique of opposing some compelling *p* against the epistemic possibility of ~*p* is not a sufficient consideration for producing equipollence upon *p* for either the skeptic or his dogmatic interlocutor. I have two main aims in defending this thesis. My first aim is to distinguish between two different types of equipollence. The first type of equipollence is that produced in the Pyrrhonist via The Method of Psychological Equipollence, called Psychological Equipollence. The second type is that demonstrated to the dogmatist by the skeptic via The Method of Normative Equipollence, called Normative Equipollence. My second aim is to argue that neither the skeptic, nor the dogmatist, will produce their respective types of equipollence when they oppose some compelling argument, proposition, or appearance with epistemic possibility, because such a possibility alone does not provide one good reason for thinking that the compelling argument, proposition, or appearance is false.

This thesis has five sections. Starting with the second section, I give a description and explanation of Pyrrhonism, and Sextus' goals and motivations. In the third section I define The

Method of Equipollence and distinguish between two species of the method and thus two different types of equipollence: Psychological Equipollence and Normative Equipollence. In Normative Equipollence, the considerations on each side of a question are equal in rational weight, so that the person has no reason for preferring one view to the other, whereas in Psychological Equipollence the considerations carry equal force, as a matter of psychological fact, although the skeptic does not positively affirm this. Normative Equipollence carries a normative commitment for the dogmatist to suspend judgment, whereas Psychological Equipollence carries no normative commitment, as the skeptic's suspension is involuntarily induced. In the fourth section, I argue that the dogmatist can maintain their belief if faced with a skeptical attack on dogmatism with Sextus' epistemic possibility technique. In the fifth section I attack Psychological Equipollence. I argue that Psychological Equipollence cannot be achieved when the skeptic is faced with a compelling *p*, which he can't refute, and opposes this *p* with the epistemic possibility that ~*p*.

CHAPTER 2: PYRRHONISM BRIEFLY

The Pyrrhonian skeptic is an investigator or inquirer who has the ability or mental attitude of opposing appearances and judgments in any way whatsoever (*PH* I, 8-9). [1] Pyrrhonian skepticism has the epistemic goal of suspension of judgment and the ethical goal of *ataraxia*, or peace of mind. Sextus defines 'appearance' as the objects of sense perception and 'judgment' as the objects of thought (*PH* I, 9-10). The skeptic finds that by opposing arguments and appearances (in any way whatsoever) the skeptic suspends judgment, meeting his epistemic goal. Upon suspending judgment, a peace of mind befalls the skeptic. This description is too brief, however; more explanation is necessary.

A.) The Skeptic's Method

The process begins when the skeptic is investigating some question, field of enquiry, or anomaly. Essentially, when investigating the matter, the skeptic finds conflicting appearances, arguments, opinions, etc. The skeptic weighs all the relevant considerations on each side and is unable to decide between the competing considerations (*PH* I, 26). From this step of bringing (at least) two conflicting arguments, propositions, or appearances against each other and being unable to find either of them more compelling than the other, the skeptic is driven to recognize equipollence or *isostheneia*, which literally means 'equal force on both sides'. The Method of Equipollence becomes the skeptic's signature method of neutralizing arguments, appearances, or propositions by setting into opposition equally strong propositions or arguments on both sides of

[1] All quotations from the writings of Sextus Empiricus come from R.G. Bury's translation of the Greek text. The abbreviation 'PH' refers to the 'Outlines of Pyrrhonism'. The number immediately following these abbreviations is the book number, and the second number identifies the relevant passage.

any issue that arises, and thereby producing an equal balance of plausibility on both sides of the issue.[2] The skeptic produces equipollence in any way whatsoever, which includes any combination of propositions, arguments, or appearances. I stress the phrase "in any way whatsoever" because Sextus' use of 'appearances' is somewhat ambiguous. Appearances include rational, irrational, and non-rational considerations such as thoughts, ideas, sense-impressions, emotional dispositions, and mere arbitrary preference.[3] Thus, Sextus allows the skeptic to admit more than just dogmatic statements into the Method of Equipollence. I will provide three examples using arguments and appearances.

1.) Appearance vs. Appearance:

The same tower appears round from a distance, but square from close at hand (*PH* I, 32).

2) Argument vs. Argument:

When one contemplates God, he may suspend judgment when he considers two opposing arguments. The first is Descartes' Ontological Argument, which states that because God has all perfections and existence is a perfection, God exists. The Argument from Evil claims that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with an all good, all powerful, and all knowing god. Because evil exists, God cannot exist.

3) Argument vs. Appearance:

I am at the zoo and I witness a zebra in the wildlife area entitled, "African Zebras," and so I think I see a zebra. But then a strange man next to me states that the animal could

[2] Although, for ease of reference, I will continue to talk about 'both' sides of an issue (e.g., whether or not God exists), I do not mean to imply by this usage that, for any issue, there need be only two possible positions regarding it.

[3] Let me provide a few examples. In book three of Outlines, Sextus contrasts arguments for one not having a body against arguments for the *apparent existence* of one's body and arguments for the impossibility of motion with the apparent possibility of motion (*PH* III 49, *PH* III 65). In book one, Sextus seems to allow mere emotions to be an evaluative force for the skeptic when he evaluates dogmatic statements, because he states that the skeptic only yields to those things which move him emotionally and drives him compulsorily to assent (*PH* I, 193). Moreover, Sextus allows the mere *appearance* of absurdity in a valid argument to be a legitimate consideration in counter-balancing that argument (*PH* II 250-251). If the argument is valid and the premises are granted as true, then it is rational to either accept the argument, or point out what's wrong with it. Pointing out the absurdity of a conclusion, or simply not liking an arguments conclusion is not a rational response.

> very well be a cleverly painted mule (because of recent painted mule hoaxes), and that if I cannot discount such a possible defeater, then I do not know that I see a zebra.

It is from this point (for any these examples) that the skeptic, having the appearance of equipollence, is caused to suspend judgment. Once the skeptic suspends judgment, a peace of mind befalls the skeptic, as a shadow follows a body (*PH* I, 29). This method relieves the skeptic of any judgment at all on any issue whatsoever, leaving the skeptic neither to affirm nor deny anything: "the skeptic ventures no proposition whatsoever that includes a truth or probability claim."[4] The Pyrrhonist approaches every argument, appearance, or proposition as if it can be counterbalanced, so that he does not maintain any appearance or proposition whose truth or falsity is supported by a preponderance of weight of argument. Sextus states,

> The main basic principle of the Sceptic system is that of opposing to every proposition an equal proposition; for we believe that as a consequence of this we end by ceasing to dogmatize (*PH* I, 12).

The importance of this last point cannot be overstated; it is crucial to the success of the skeptical method of producing suspension of judgment (on any and all beliefs) that the skeptic be in a position to counterbalance any argument, proposition, or appearance. If the skeptic comes across at least one argument, proposition, or appearance which cannot be counterbalanced, then the skeptic cannot suspend judgment via The Method of Equipollence.

B.) The Skeptic's Criterion of Action

The question may arise, "How does the skeptic live without maintaining beliefs?" According to Sextus, the skeptic has a criterion of action, which is to say that the skeptic has a criterion that allows him to perform some actions and abstain from others, while maintaining

[4] (Johnson 1978, 89)

absolutely no dogmatic beliefs (*PH* I, 21-22). Before we can understand the skeptic's criterion of action we must first understand what Sextus means by "dogmatic belief." Sextus does not dispute that things appear to the skeptic (e.g. the non-epistemic appearance that a tower is round), but disputes whether the underlying object is in fact as it appears (e.g. that the tower is *actually* round) (*PH* I, 19).[5] The skeptic only assents to those things which are evident, or given in appearance. The dogmatist, in contrast, is one who commits himself to some *p* being true of the objective world and is thus assenting to a non-evident matter; viz. he assents to a matter which goes beyond that which is given in appearance (*PH* I, 13). Sextus clarifies the skeptic's use of 'belief' when he states,

> For the word "believe" has different meanings: it means not to resist but simply to follow without any strong impulse or inclination, as the boy is said to believe his tutor; but sometimes it means to assent to a thing of deliberate choice and with a kind of sympathy due to strong desire, as when the incontinent man believes him who approves an extravagant mode of life. [The skeptic's] belief is a matter of simple yielding without any consent, here too there must be a difference between us and them (*PH* I, 230).

Here Sextus further distinguishes between dogmatic belief and the skeptic's belief. To have a dogmatic belief is to possess a psychologically avoidable attitude directed towards some non-evident matter. To have a non-dogmatic, or skeptical, belief is to possess a psychologically unavoidable attitude directed towards some evident matter. Thus, the skeptic rejects those beliefs which are the result of conscious assent, and allows those kinds of beliefs which play a causal role in explaining behavior. The skeptic's "beliefs" are the direct result of those phenomenal appearances which force the skeptic's assent. The skeptic does not deny or abolish phenomenal appearances themselves, because they are involuntary affections and feelings which present

[5] Burnyeat distinguishes between an epistemic and non-epistemic reading of the skeptic's use of the word 'appear'. The skeptic, according to Burnyeat, does not use 'appear' in the epistemic sense. For further reading see Burnyeat [1998], 47-52.

themselves forcefully upon the skeptic (*PH* I, 19-20). The skeptic involuntarily complies with these appearances without making any judgment about the true nature of the appearance; viz. the skeptic adheres to those appearances that force themselves upon him while suspending judgment on whether things truly are as they appear.

Sense-appearance is not all that is involved when the skeptic says he follows appearances. Sextus is prepared to include both objects of sense and objects of thought, and even goes so far as to speak of things which appear to both reason and thought (*PH* II, 10).[6] Moreover, the most important set of appearances are those which are annexed to the skeptic's argumentative enquiry, which is one of the most important portions of a skeptic's way of life. Thus, it seems we can say that the skeptic adheres involuntarily to both "sensory" and "non-sensory" appearances. Sensory appearances are those appearances which generate sensory mental states through his organs of perception: for example, the appearance that the honey is sweet. Non-sensory appearances are those appearances (not directly from his sense organs) which generate non-sensory mental states: for example, the appearance that piety is good, the appearance that a certain inference is valid, or even the appearance that two opposing arguments are equally convincing. Keep in mind, when Sextus speaks of any of these appearances, the appearing is 'phenomenological', i.e. how things *look*.[7] For example, Sextus may say that an argument looks sound, but clearly he isn't referring to perceptual appearings. The phenomenal (i.e. non-judgmental) appearances are what guide the skeptic's life.

With this in mind, the skeptic abides by his appearances, as described in Sextus' four-fold observances. The first is a guidance of nature, which is the ability to experience and think. The skeptic is guided by his own natural capacity to use his senses and exercise his mental faculties.

---

[6] (Burnyeat 39, 1998) Burnyeat makes a compelling case that it would be impossible to regard all the skeptic's appearances as impressions of sense.
[7] (Barnes 1998, 63)

Thus, it can appear, for example, that the tower is round, or that two claims contradict each other. The second is the constraint of the passions, which would include hunger and thirst driving one to eat and drink. For example, if the skeptic is craving an apple and sees an apple before him, he will eat it with no thought, reasoning, or inference. His hunger or thirst is what explains his behavior which is enough; dogmatic belief need not be invoked. The third observance is the tradition of laws and customs, whereby the skeptics passively concur with the doctrines and traditions of their community. For example, one might imagine a Pyrrhonist in a congregation of a Catholic church making the sign of the cross on his body with everyone else, while the priest announces, "In the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen." Here the skeptic is merely following a routine out of habit, and with no further thought of the actual matter. Perhaps a more simplistic example would involve the thoughtless habit of driving on the side of the road that is normal in our community. Here the skeptic would follow the custom of driving on the right side of the road, and he does this automatically. Lastly, they follow the instruction of the arts, where they participate in those intellectual or artistic endeavors that they adopt (*PH* I, 23-25). Sextus, for example, (being a doctor) would claim that he simply followed the instructions from his instructor, absorbing the information and then performing his task in the same manner as he would if he were to see an apple that he wanted to eat. If the patient is bleeding he automatically puts pressure on the wound just as one would immediately lift one's foot if one stepped on a thorn. Thus, these "everyday observances" are characterized by their involuntary, automatic, and passive affections that the Pyrrhonist experiences and follows without decision or critical examination.[8]

[8] Sextus distinguishes between living in accordance with beliefs and following appearances. However, it is debated among scholars how fine a distinction is intended by Sextus. There are two separate interpretations. The "Rustic" interpretation states that the skeptic attacks all beliefs and assents only to those sense-impressions forced upon him; viz. he has no beliefs whatsoever. The "Urbane" interpretation claims that the skeptic attacks philosophical and

C.) Sextus' Goals and Motivations

Outlines of Pyrrhonism is made up of three books. Book I is devoted to setting forth the purpose, principles, logical methods, criterion, and end or aim of Pyrrhonism. Books II and III are devoted to undermining all dogmatic positions dialectically, while also distinguishing Pyrrhonism from other philosophical schools. Sextus wrote *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* with two separate projects in mind. His first project is to give a coherent and consistent account of Pyrrhonism (*PH* I, 3). His second project is to provide a sturdy criticism of the dogmatist's beliefs, undermining their reasons so that they have no more reason to maintain their belief than they have to reject it (*PH* II, 1).

There are basically two different audiences whom *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is written for: those who are skeptics and those who are dogmatists. For those who already follow a Pyrrhonian lifestyle, Sextus' text acts like a helpful reference. If the skeptic is ever in need of a counterview, or if he needs a reminder of the reasons that undermine a dogmatic position, he need only refer to the text and choose from an entire arsenal of arguments against dogmatic positions (*PH* II, 103). Sextus' text helps the inquiring skeptic continue his inquires.

For those who dogmatize, Sextus' text proves to be a formidable challenge to the justification of their beliefs. Sextus is interested in providing an internal critique of the dogmatist's position (*PH* II, 12, II 259, II 102, III 29). Sextus' ultimate goal, in regards to this dialectical challenge against the dogmatist, is to cure *all* dogmatists, as best he can, of their rashness and self-conceit because he is a "lover of his kind" (*PH* III, 280). Because the dogmatist would insist that his beliefs are rationally supported and not merely arbitrary preferences, the skeptic will challenge the dogmatist on his standards of rationality. Sextus goes so far as to say

---

theoretical beliefs, but allows the skeptic to maintain ordinary "everyday" beliefs (Barnes 1998, 61). It should be noted that in this paper I am assuming the Rustic interpretation of Sextus' description of Pyrrhonism.

that the methods or beliefs of the dogmatists actually provoke the skeptic to challenge him (*PH* III, 152). According to Sextus, the skeptic will challenge the dogmatist on his terms and will bring the dogmatist to a suspension of judgment that arises from the impasse arising from the dispute (*PH* III, 238). Sextus' goal of bringing the dogmatist to a suspension of judgment on all beliefs is epistemic insofar as it is concerned with justified belief. Thus, we can say, Sextus has the *epistemic* goal of undermining the dogmatist's rational basis for his beliefs and his epistemically optimistic attitude that rationality can resolve a dispute.[9] Sextus' epistemic goal extends to anyone who holds a belief because he believes a dogmatist is *any* person who believes at least one proposition to be true (*PH* I, 223-224). Moreover, Sextus may be the only person (as far as he knows) who practices Pyrrhonism. Thus, Sextus, in attempting to cure the "dogmatists", is targeting anyone other than himself insofar as most, if not all, people hold beliefs. This broad understanding of 'dogmatist' suggests a type of crusade against dogmatism. This crusade against dogmatism is even explicitly suggested by Sextus when he states that his criticisms and refutations of the dogmatists' positions will bring about "the demolition of the Dogmatic sophistry and the establishment of the Suspensive philosophy" (*PH* II, 9).

The skeptic, in attempting to "cure" dialectically the dogmatists' self-conceit and rashness, is willing to use any kind of argument, proposition, or appearance (consistent with what he conceives as the dogmatist's epistemic code to achieve this (*PH* III, 280). As Sextus states,

---

[9] Some may argue that Sextus has only an *ethical* goal in mind, i.e. leading the dogmatist to ataraxia by alleviating the dogmatist of the *disturbances* that follows from anomalies and conflicting appearances (*PH* I, 26-28). However, Sextus never says this is his goal. When Sextus discusses disturbances, he is discussing the inquirer's experience of disturbances, not the dogmatist's. More importantly, his statements in no way suggest that he is advocating Pyrrhonism. He states quite explicitly that he wishes to "cure" the "ailments" of *rashness* and *self-conceit* of the dogmatist, which strongly suggests that he is concerned with the justification of their beliefs. (*PH* III, 280). This point is not only consistent with the general attitude and attack against dogmatism which is so prevalent throughout the book, but is also supported in such passages like the following, "We do not propound such arguments with the intention of abolishing appearances, but by way of pointing out the rashness of the Dogmatists; for if reason is such a trickster…surely we should view it with suspicion" (*PH* I, 20).

> The skeptic propounds arguments which differ in strength, and employs those which are weighty and capable by their stringency of disposing of the Dogmatist's ailment, self-conceit, in cases where the mischief is due to a severe attack of rashness, while he employs the milder arguments in the case of those whose ailment of conceit is superficial and easy to cure…. (*PH* III, 280-281)

Sextus, using the metaphor of a physician who is trying to treat a patient with some illness, will present counter-arguments, counter-propositions, and counter-appearances as treatments to particular beliefs of the dogmatist. The skeptic will continue to challenge the dogmatist until the dogmatist finds himself with no reason to prefer his belief. Sextus clearly thinks that if the dogmatist is honest in his evaluations of the skeptic's counterattack, that the dogmatist will find his belief as an arbitrary preference and not rationally supported (*PH* II, 258, III 6, I 90). Insofar as the dogmatist is honest and is committed to standards of rationality, he is committed to suspending judgment.

CHAPTER 3: CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS FOR EQUIPOLLENCE

In this section I will concentrate on defining equipollence. I will distinguish two separate species or types of equipollence. The first type of equipollence is that produced in the skeptic as described by Sextus Empiricus. I will call this 'Psychological Equipollence'. The second type of equipollence is that demonstrated to the dogmatist by the skeptic. I will call this latter type 'Normative Equipollence'. But first I will explain why we must distinguish between two separate types of equipollence.

A.) The Method of Equipollence

The Method of Equipollence is the opposing of some argument, proposition, or appearance with an equal consideration(s), so as to balance or cancel out the strength of the opposing sides, creating equipollence, and motivating a suspension of judgment as to the truth of the issue. However, because the skeptic is attempting to balance opposing considerations for himself and the dogmatists, two associated species of The Method of Equipollence are born. There are essentially two main differences which characterize the different types of The Method of Equipollence: the scope of considerations available to the skeptic for opposing arguments, propositions, and appearances, and the reason why equipollence leads to suspension of judgment. First, I will describe The Method of Equipollence as it relates to the skeptic.

The skeptic's method for producing equipollence in himself is distinct from his method for attempting to demonstrate equipollence to his dogmatic interlocutor. The skeptic, as an inquirer, collects, arranges, and presents equally compelling considerations for and against some argument, proposition, or appearance so that he is no longer inclined to accept either side. The

scope of those considerations which the skeptic is willing to entertain in his Method of Equipollence is very broad. Because the skeptic produces equipollence by opposing objects in any way whatsoever, he will use rational, irrational, and non-rational considerations such as thoughts, ideas, sense-impressions, emotional dispositions, and even arbitrary preference; he will use any consideration to produce equipollence. Essentially, anything goes for the skeptic, so long as he produces equipollence in himself via The Method of Equipollence. The skeptic's suspension of judgment follows equipollence in the same manner that *ataraxia* follows suspension of judgment: causally.[10] The suspension of judgment, for the skeptic, is a psychologically induced mental state that befalls the skeptic when he has the appearance of equality between competing considerations. Thus, *epochê* is a mental state which is simply induced, with no judgment or commitment whatsoever. This is in contrast to the Method of Equipollence when used by the skeptic against the dogmatist.

As discussed in the previous section, Sextus makes clear that the skeptic will argue dialectically against his dogmatic interlocutor by fairly and impartially examining the dogmatist's view and then undermining the rational basis of that view by exercising his ability of producing equally powerful arguments which oppose the dogmatist's arguments (*PH* II, 12). Thus, the scope of those considerations available to the skeptic for opposing his dogmatic interlocutor's arguments is much narrower.[11] The skeptic, when attempting to demonstrate equipollence to his dogmatic interlocutor, is restricted to rational considerations; viz. the skeptic is restricted to arguments or propositions which his dogmatic interlocutor can rationally evaluate and believe. If the dogmatist finds himself with no reason to maintain his view, then the skeptic

---

[10] (Hankinson 1998, 30)

[11] One may initially object that (*PH* III, 280-281) seems to allow the skeptic the same 'anything goes' latitude with regard to the dogmatist as he has for himself. However, given Sextus' desire for an accurate and impartial criticism of the "dogmatic philosophy" in (*PH* II, 12) we must interpret (*PH* III, 280-281) to mean that the skeptic will propound arguments of differing *rational* strengths to achieve his end.

will have successfully used the dogmatist's own rational standards to demonstrate an instance of equipollence for the dogmatist.[12] Given the dogmatist's rational commitments, he *ought* to suspend judgment. Thus, the dogmatist suspends judgment because his rational commitments dictate that he ought to.

Given the points I have just outlined, I will now distinguish two species of The Method of Equipollence. The more general category of The Method of Equipollence has two associated types which I will call 'The Method of Psychological Equipollence' and 'The Method of Normative Equipollence'. The Method of Psychological Equipollence is the method used by the skeptic to produce Psychological Equipollence in himself. The method has an extremely broad scope in regards to those considerations at the skeptic's disposal. The equipollence it produces in the skeptic is causal in its relationship to the skeptic's suspension of judgment. The Method of Normative Equipollence is the method used by the skeptic to demonstrate Normative Equipollence to his dogmatic interlocutor. The method is much more restrictive in scope than The Method of Psychological Equipollence.

B.) Psychological Equipollence

'The Method of Psychological Equipollence' will be understood as the method, used by the skeptic, of opposing any considerations whatsoever to produce Psychological Equipollence in himself. 'Psychological Equipollence' will be understood as the apparent balance of strength (for the skeptic at that moment) for (at least) two conflicting arguments, propositions, or

[12] As I will explain in the section on Normative Equipollence, the skeptic is not asserting that there are equipollent considerations in regards to the dogmatist's belief. Moreover, he is also not asserting that the dogmatist *ought* to suspend judgment. The skeptic would only say such things undogmatically.

appearances.[13] He will use and oppose, in any way whatsoever, rational considerations, irrational considerations, or non-rational considerations. [14] Any consideration will do for finding the apparent balance between (at least) two conflicting views. The skeptic won't claim there actually is a balance of strength between two competing views. Instead, he would talk of how the two competing views appear to him at the time. As Sextus states, "As to whether they are equal we make no positive assertion; but what we state is what appears to us in regard to them at the time of observation" (*PH* I, 196). The skeptic's evaluation of conflicting views is determined simply by how the arguments or appearances subjectively weigh upon him; their credibility or otherwise is not a matter of objective probabilities.[15] Psychological Equipollence is a subjective state of mind which arises when the skeptic is not inclined towards either position as a consequence of his opposing conflicting considerations.

The skeptic's psychological disposition is the motor which drives his philosophical inquiries. Hence, when the skeptic finds Psychological Equipollence, he involuntarily and automatically suspends judgment. Psychological Equipollence is, thus, responsible for causing the skeptic's suspension of judgment in the same manner as his suspension of judgment causes peace of mind. As Julia Annas states it,

> Suspension of belief is not a conclusion of any inference; rather, pointing out differences in persuasion puts us in a position where we are led to find no more reason to hold our beliefs about value than their opposites, and hence, as a matter of fact, to suspend judgment.[16]

And Jim Hankinson says,

---

[13] 'Balance of Strength' is a rather inexact notion. When Sextus describes a balance of strength, sometimes he says a balance of probability or improbability (*PH* I, 10) plausibility or implausibility (*PH* II, 79), or credibility or incredibility (*PH* I, 196).

[14] Because the skeptic has no commitment to any rational standard, he need not necessarily oppose only rational views against other rational views; he may also oppose, in Psychological Equipollence, non-rational, or irrational things. For example, the skeptic's *desire* to believe in life after death may produce enough psychological force for the skeptic to produce Psychological Equipollence when opposed to arguments for there being no life after death.

[15] (Hankinson 1998, 27)

[16] (Annas 1986, 6)

> Thus, *epochê* is not the conclusion of a philosophical argument; rather it is a psychologically-induced mental state.[17]

Psychological Equipollence does not carry an obligation to suspend judgment for the skeptic, because it is not logical in its nature. Rather the skeptic is psychologically compelled or induced by Psychological Equipollence to suspend judgment. The suspension of judgment is not and cannot be a normative commitment, i.e. something the skeptic does because he *should*, because a normative commitment would be a rational commitment and thus inconsistent with his skepticism. Suspension of judgment is a *psychological* phenomenon, i.e. a mental happening which follows naturally, without effort or consent from the skeptic.

C.) Normative Equipollence

The skeptic is psychologically compelled to suspend judgment by producing Psychological Equipollence in himself in anyway, and with any consideration, whatsoever. Conversely, instances of equipollence demonstrated to the dogmatist, by way of the skeptic's rational counter-considerations, carry a normative commitment, i.e. the dogmatist *ought* to suspend judgment out of rational caution. 'The Method of Normative Equipollence' refers to the dialectical countering against the dogmatist's beliefs, presented by the skeptic to the dogmatist, with the goal of Normative Equipollence. 'Normative Equipollence' is the apparent balance of rational considerations, as judged by the skeptic's dogmatic interlocutor according to his rational standards, for (at least) two conflicting arguments, propositions, or appearances.[18]

---

[17] (Hankinson 1998, 30)

[18] The dogmatic interlocutor's rational standards are any of those conditions which the dogmatist may put on an idea for acceptability. For example, these standards may be understood in terms of justification, warrant, plausibility, implausibility, certainty, uncertainty, probability, improbability, credibility, incredibility. Whatever rational

Normative Equipollence undermines the rational basis of the dogmatist's belief by demonstrating that he has no more reason for his belief as for a conflicting view. If the dogmatist is consistent with his own requirements of rationality, then instances of Normative Equipollence present the dogmatist with a dilemma: the dogmatist may either produce some non-arbitrary reason for preferring his belief or he ought to suspend judgment on his belief. Without a non-arbitrary reason to choose his belief, the dogmatist is required, on the strength of his own standards of rationality, to suspend judgment since he has no reason to prefer his belief to a conflicting alternative. The dogmatist suspends judgment because instances of Normative Equipollence give him reason to.

Because the skeptic argues dialectically, adopting provisionally whatever rational standards are accepted by his dogmatic interlocutor, the skeptic's attack on dogmatism is not itself dogmatic (*PH* I, 13-15). The skeptic merely follows his appearances, be it when the skeptic, following his affections, announces undogmatically that a dogmatic position seems to have just as much rational support in its favor as against it. Unlike the dogmatist, the skeptic does not *believe* that his dialectical challenge against the dogmatist's position commits the dogmatist to suspending judgment; it merely *seems* to the skeptic that the dogmatist is committed to that. The skeptic, having suspended judgment upon the ability of rationality to resolve disputes, practices The Method of Normative Equipollence (as with all of his skepticism) habitually. [19] In the skeptic's own mind, he is not attempting to rationally justify or establish any dogmatic conclusion for himself; he is merely following his skeptical disposition.

What remains unclear, however, is why philosophers should care about what the Pyrrhonist says if he doesn't assert anything. If the Pyrrhonist doesn't actually assert anything,

---

standards the dogmatist maintains for some argument (e.g. that p must be *plausible* to maintain a belief in p), those will be the standards which the skeptic will provisionally adopt to argue dialectically against the dogmatist.

[19] (Thorsrud forthcoming, ch 7)

then how can he pose a philosophical challenge? To answer this, we must understand the relationship between the distinctive character of the skeptic's dialectical challenge and the type of response which the dogmatist is committed to making. Sextus says frequently that the skeptic is merely reporting his mental state when he "announces" arguments (*PH* I, 4, I 203, I 197, I 193).[20] Affection is not only connected causally to the skeptic's assent, but it is also causally connected to the skeptic's non-assertion. The skeptic makes no assertions to the truth or falsity of any particular proposition. Instead the skeptic makes avowals, which are also a result of affections.[21] So, while the skeptic doesn't challenge the dogmatist with rational arguments, as that would be to assert something, he does "present" chains of thought which resemble rational arguments. Once the skeptic announces his mind non-assertively, the dogmatist interprets the skeptic's announcements in terms of his epistemic code, transforming its status dramatically. Indeed, not only do the skeptic's chains of thought look like rational arguments, but the dogmatist is committed to treating them as though they are rational arguments.[22]

Thus, instances of Normative Equipollence are determined by the dogmatist and are the result of the arguments presented by the skeptic in The Method of Normative Equipollence. The Method of Normative Equipollence is the more restrictive species of the Method of Equipollence. Instances of Normative Equipollence commit the dogmatist, by his own rational standards, to suspend judgment.

---

[20] An account of how exactly the skeptic does this is controversial and outside the scope of this paper. I wish to avoid the discussion of what kind of a "speech act" the skeptic utilizes, and assume, for the sake of this argument, that the skeptic does in fact practice a speech act which is consistent with his skeptical lifestyle. For a detailed discussion of the skeptic's "speech act" see Barnes [1998], 64-67.

[21] (Hankinson 1998, 279)

[22] (Bailey 1990, 38)

CHAPTER 4: RESPONDING TO NORMATIVE EQUIPOLLENCE

The dogmatist, using his rational faculties (to the best of his ability), would evaluate conflicting views according to his epistemic standards. The dogmatist would weigh the evidence or reasons for the contrasting views, and then he would evaluate whether or not the view was reasonable to maintain in light of the conflicting evidence. If the rational strength is balanced, then the dogmatist has no reason to choose one view over another, and ought to suspend judgment. As far as Sextus can tell, the dogmatist has no beliefs which he can maintain non-arbitrarily, for he clearly states (undogmatically),

> All the matters of dogmatic inquiry which I have examined appear to me to be such that no one of them is preferable to the one in conflict with it in respect of credibility or incredibility (*PH* I, 199)[23]

Sextus challenges the dogmatists with the desire to force them into a suspension of judgment for *all* beliefs. However, for the skeptic to proceed successfully with his goal, he must demonstrate to the dogmatist that he has no more reason for or against every *p*. Sextus acknowledges that there may be times when the skeptic may be unable to refute the dogmatist's beliefs, and proposes, in such instances, that the epistemic possibility of error is enough to demonstrate Normative Equipollence. I will argue that when the dogmatist has a rationally supported belief, and is opposed by Sextus' argument for the epistemic possibility of error, that the dogmatist is justified in maintaining his belief.

[23] This attitude is suggested by Sextus throughout his Text. For example, Sextus also states, regarding the skeptic's Modes, that every matter of inquiry is handled by the Modes to force a suspension of judgment (*PH* I, 169).

A.) Defense against 'Possible Counterarguments'

There are times when a dogmatist will have a convincing argument for his belief, and no opposing view to counter his belief. If a dogmatist has good reason to believe *p* and no opposing views or considerations to not believe *p*, then he is committed to believing *p*. The Method of Normative Equipollence is dependent upon opposing arguments that balance the justification, pro and con, for *p*. Without such opposing factors, Normative Equipollence is not possible for the dogmatist, and thus, a normative suspension of judgment will not occur. If the skeptic is unable to refute a particular dogmatic claim, then the dogmatist is able to maintain his belief, and the skeptic fails at eradicating dogmatism. Sextus anticipates such a problem, and uses epistemic possibility to argue that he cannot rule out the possibility that further evidence will turn up on the other side (*PH* I, 33-34). Although Sextus has many arguments which seem to challenge any dogmatic claim, he clearly recognizes the epistemic possibility that his arguments may be unsound or that his arguments are not all encompassing of dogmatic inquiry.[24] I will argue that, for the dogmatist, appealing to epistemic possibility alone is insufficient for producing Normative Equipollence. First I will explain the two different types of epistemic possibility which Sextus uses.

Sextus' uses epistemic possibility to motivate his arguments.[25] However, Sextus does not define or specify his use of epistemic possibility, except to say that the skeptic uses 'possible' loosely, i.e. uses modal terms without concern or inquiry as to if they "indicate realities" (*PH* I, 195). Despite Sextus' lack of clarity, epistemically motivated counterarguments by the skeptic

[24] Although Sextus characterizes his epistemically motivated argument as a sort of ace-in-the-hole for when he has no good retort to a dogmatic claim, the skeptic clearly reserves himself the ability to produce the argument in any situation whatsoever.
[25] I provide textual support and detailed analysis of that textual support further on in the section.

cannot be evaluated by the dogmatist without some analysis of the skeptic's use. Sextus use of epistemic possibility could be generalized as the following analysis,

> It is epistemically possible that *p* for S if and only if S does not know that it is false that *p*, when S considers *p*.

Epistemic possibility bears on the way the actual world may be, for all we believe we know. Sextus maintains two different uses of epistemic possibility when he appeals to the possibility of equally justified counter-arguments, counter-propositions, and counter-appearances. Broadly speaking, the two types of epistemic possibility that he uses are 'evidential epistemic possibility' and 'non-evidential epistemic possibility'.

1) Non-Evidential Epistemic Possibility

Non-evidential epistemic possibility may be the broadest type of epistemic possibility. [26] A non-evidential epistemic possibility that *p* is the possibility that *p* is the case, absent evidence for or against *p*. This type of epistemic possibility is used when one is ignorant and has no evidence for or against claiming that *p*. In such a state of ignorance, S can truly say, "For all I know, it's possible that p and it's possible that ~p, I don't know yet." For example, in regard to a complicated proof of 2+2=5,[27] a person unfamiliar with math may truthfully say, "It is possible

[26] (Bealer 2004, 16) What I am calling non-evidential possibility is similar to what Bealer refers to as a 'could' of-ignorance.

[27] One example of a fallacious proof of 2+2=5 is the following:
If we let x^2 = x squared
1) let x = 2+2
2)[multiply by x-1] x(x-1)=(2+2)(x-1)
3) x^2 -x = 2x+2x-2-2
4)[subtract 3x] x^2-4x=x-4
5)[multiply by x-5] (x-5)(x^2-4x)=(x-5)(x-4)
6)x^3-9x^2+20x=x^2-9x+20

that the proof is right, and it's possible that the proof is not right. I honestly don't know enough about math yet." When one asserts a non-evidential epistemic possibility in the proposition, "It's possible that *p*", they are asserting a true proposition if and only if they have no evidence, one way or the other, that *p*. Once one gains adequate evidence for or against *p*, what was meant previously cannot truly be said when asserting an epistemic possibility.

2) Evidential Epistemic Possibility

When S asserted a non-evidential epistemic possibility that *p*, he had no more reason, as far as he knew, to think one way or the other whether *p*. An evidential epistemic possibility, in contrast, is where one gains some degree of evidence in support of the possibility that p.[28] When one asserts an evidential epistemic possibility with the proposition, "It's possible that *p*", they are asserting a true proposition if and only if they have some degree of evidence that *p* is the case. For example, even though we have a proof of Fermat's Last Theorem, one could still say truthfully, "It's possible that the proof for Fermat's Last Theorem is mistaken since I have been mistaken in the past."[29] In this example, the subject had adequate evidence to assert that the proof of Fermat's Last Theorem was mistaken despite his evidence in favor for *p*. He considered the potential fallibility in his judgment based on past experiences of being mistaken. Hence, in

---

7)x(x-4)(x-5)=(x-4)(x-5)
8)[divide by x-4] x^2-5x=x-5
9)[add 4x] x^2-x=5x-5
10)x(x-1)=5(x-1)
11)[divide by (x-1)] x=5
(1) stated x=2+2, therefore 2+2=5

[28] (Bealer 2004, 16) What I am calling an evidential epistemic possibility is similar to what Bealer refers to as a 'could' of-less-than-complete-certainty.
[29] (Bealer 2004, 16) This was the example used by Bealer for what he classified as a 'could' of less-than-complete-certainty.

asserting the possibility of *p*, motivated by his past experience, he was asserting an evidential epistemic possibility for *p*.

Of these two broad categories of epistemic possibility, i.e. evidential and non-evidential epistemic possibility, we can better understand, and analyze, the type of epistemic possibility which Sextus uses. The first type of argument by Sextus that I will discuss is motivated by an evidential epistemic possibility. Sextus provides *inductive* evidentiary support to justify the assertion that there is an evidential epistemic possibility that *p* has an equally weighty counter-argument, counter-proposition, or counter-appearance. I will now discuss his argument for the existence of an evidential epistemic possibility.

3.) Evidential Epistemic Possibility Argument

According to Sextus, when the skeptic has no retort to a dogmatist's argument, he argues for the evidential epistemic possibility of error in judgment as a means of counterbalancing the apparently sound argument. Sextus states,

> …when someone propounds a theory which we are unable to refute, we say to him in reply, "Just as, before the birth of the founder of the School to which you belong, the theory it holds was not as yet apparent as a sound theory, although it was really in existence, so likewise it is possible that the opposite theory to that which you now propound is already really existent, though not yet apparent to us, so that we ought not as yet to yield assent to this theory which at the moment seems valid. (*PH* I, 31-35)

Sextus is essentially arguing that one cannot discount the possibility that conflicting evidence will turn up, because such conflicting evidence has surfaced before. Sextus is attempting to construct a single argument that applies to all dogmatists.[30] However, in the passage above,

[30] It is possible for one to characterize the above passage (*PH* I 31-35) as Sextus describing a principle which states that one should suspend judgment on any *p* if it is epistemically possible that ~*p*. Hankinson characterizes the

Sextus gives little inductive support for the epistemic possibility of conflicting evidence turning up. Consequently, Sextus has provided weak evidential support for his epistemic possibility. If the dogmatist has good reason to maintain his belief, then Sextus' argument alone does not demonstrate an instance of Normative Equipollence for the dogmatist. I believe we can provide stronger evidential support for Sextus' argument from Sextus himself. Specifically, Sextus says elsewhere that he has found equally plausible arguments for every argument he has ever considered,

> Every argument investigated by me which establishes a point dogmatically, it seems to me there is opposed another argument, establishing a point dogmatically, which is equal to the first in respect of credibility and incredibility (*PH* I 202-204).

In another passage he states,

> I conceive that up till now I myself have apprehended nothing owing to the equipollence of the opposites; and therefore also nothing that is brought forward to overthrow our position seems to me to have any bearing on what we announce (*PH* I, 200).

These passages suggest that Sextus can provide more evidential support to strengthen his argument. Thus, I will provide the strongest version of Sextus' evidential epistemic possibility argument. This first argument is meant to provide the dogmatist with strong inductive evidence to call forth this possibility. The argument is inductive, and in its strongest form, would look something like the following,

1) Every argument, proposition, or appearance ever considered by us has been met by an equally plausible counter-argument, counter-proposition, or counter-appearance.

---

passage in this way calling this principle the 'Micawber Policy' (Hankinson 1999, 30). Assuming the dogmatist is initially committed to such a principle, it is clear that the dogmatist cannot accept such a principle for at least two reasons. First, the principle is clearly self-referential, demanding one to suspend judgment upon the principle itself. Second, even if the principle wasn't self-referential, the principle dictates that no proposition, regardless of the evidence, can ever be rationally maintained, because there is always the epistemically possible that one could be wrong. Such a conclusion would be negatively dogmatic (i.e. Academically skeptical), and thus, a dogmatic principle, because it would be dictate that the truth cannot be discovered.

2) Therefore, it's very probable that the next argument, proposition, or appearance to be considered will be met by an equally plausible counter-argument, counter-proposition, or counter-appearance.

This is perhaps the strongest evidential epistemic possibility argument that the skeptic could use when attempting to undermine the rational support for the dogmatist's unopposed argument. The skeptic tries to demonstrate Normative Equipollence to the dogmatist, by using the evidential epistemic possibility of discovering an equally plausible argument to oppose the dogmatist's unopposed argument. For the above argument to have any rational "weightiness" at all, however, it must at least *appear* cogent to the dogmatist. If premise one is false, then the dogmatist has no reason for accepting the argument's conclusion. Thus, we must analyze the first premise. I believe we have good reason for rejecting premise one.

3a) Rejecting the First Premise

The plausibility of the skeptic's argument will depend on the backgrounds beliefs of the dogmatist, and there's no reason to believe that all dogmatists will share the same relevant background beliefs. Moreover, there is no reason to believe the dogmatist shares the skeptic's experience in finding equipollent considerations for each dogmatic assertion. I think it is reasonable to suggest that it is unlikely that the dogmatist could honestly maintain the truth of the first premise. The beliefs which the dogmatist maintains need not be complex either. Just as an example, there are many propositions, to my knowledge, that have never been challenged by an *equally* plausible counter-argument, counter-proposition, or counter-appearance. For example consider the following list,

1. Round squares are impossible.
2. Necessarily, if one knows that p, then p is true.
3. Necessarily, if p is true and q is true, then p&q is true.
4. Everything is identical to itself.

I know of no instances of equally plausible considerations that oppose (1-4). Moreover, even if one could produce counter-considerations to (1-4), those counter-considerations would have to be just as intuitively compelling; propositions (1-4) are so intuitively compelling that it is highly unlikely that one could produce enough support to rationally doubt them.[31] I have little doubt that anyone else would also have a similar intuitive reaction to (1-4). For these reasons, I think it is reasonable to believe that it is likely that the dogmatist would reject premise one.

However, the first premise being false would only mean that it is false that *every* argument, proposition, or appearance has been met by an equally plausible counterargument, counterproposition, or counter-appearance. One could argue that premise one is too strong. Consequently, they may suggest that we replace "every" with "most" or "many." Stating premise one this way does seem more accurate, descriptively, of philosophy. Even this revision of premise one has problems.

First, the dogmatist may still find premise one to be false, i.e. it may be false in the dogmatist's experience that *most* arguments, propositions, and appearances have been successfully challenged by an equally plausible counterview. Second, (and more troubling for the argument) is that if the revised premise one is true, the strength of the argument is substantially lessened because now we are admitting less evidential support for the conclusion. While a weaker first premise makes it more likely to be accepted by the dogmatist, it also narrows the scope of those unopposed arguments for which it can counterbalance. If the weaker inductive

[31] I stress the word "intuitively" compelling because I am assuming here that intuitions can be taken as evidence for or against propositions.

argument is brought against an extremely convincing and weighty argument, the dogmatist is much less likely to find the argument rationally weighty enough to produce Normative Equipollence. For example, according to the revised premise, *most* arguments can be met by an equally justified counterargument, and thus, it is likely that the Argument from Evil has an equally justified counterargument that I am unaware of.[32] But this evidential epistemic possibility *alone* does not shake my belief in the conclusion of the evidential Argument from Evil, because there is so much evidence in support of the Argument from Evil. Although *most* arguments may have such a counter-response that is equally justified, I would easily reason that the evidential Argument from Evil is not one of them.

However, all of the considerations up until this point assume that the argument does in fact have some degree of counterbalancing potential, regardless of the strength of the premises. I will now argue that, regardless of the evidential strength of Sextus' argument, it undermines its own rational support because it is self-referential.

3b) Self-undermining Character of the Argument

If premise one is true, then the argument provides extremely good evidence for the possibility of there existing an equally compelling argument, proposition, or appearance with the opposite conclusion. However, if premise one is true, then the dogmatist has good reason to doubt the cogency of the entire argument itself, because the argument is self-referential. That is, if Sextus' argument is cogent, then we have good inductive support that Sextus' argument *itself*

---

[32] The Argument from Evil takes the following form:
1.) If there were an all-powerful and all-good God, then there would be no evil in the world, unless that evil is logically necessary for an adequately compensating good.
2.) There is lots of evil in the world.
3.) Much of that evil is not logically necessary for any adequately compensating good.
4.) Therefore, there is no God who is all-powerful and all-good

has an equally plausible counterargument "out there" that maintains an opposite conclusion. Whatever evidence supports a possible counterargument against Sextus' argument is just as great as the evidence supporting his argument itself. If one finds the possibility of a counter-argument against Sextus' argument rationally moving enough, then one would be committed to suspending judgment on the argument itself, thus neutralizing the rational strength of the argument and thus, its counterbalancing effectiveness.

At first blush, it may seem that Sextus is in an enviable position. He cheerfully admits that some of the arguments he uses have a self-undermining character, which he describes as a sort of purgative. For example, he states,

> And just as purgative medicines expel themselves together with the substances already present in the body, so these arguments are capable of canceling themselves along with the other arguments which are said to be probative.
> (*PH* II 188)

Sextus is essentially saying that many of his arguments refute, or cancel themselves out, along with those arguments they are opposed to. One should notice, however, that Sextus' evidential epistemic possibility argument is not self-refuting. Something is refuted when it has been shown to be false through some form of argument. His argument doesn't show itself to be unsound. Rather, if the dogmatist finds the first premise compelling, then he will have as much reason to believe his argument is cogent as he does that his argument is not cogent; viz. if the dogmatist assumes the argument has rational force, then the argument, because it applies to itself, undermines its own rational force. Because the argument undermines its own rational support, the evidential epistemic possibility that Sextus was arguing for (in this case) is undermined. Sextus' argument doesn't provide the justification necessary to assert an evidential epistemic possibility, because one would be truly ignorant, given the argument's self-undermining nature,

as to whether there is good reason to assert such a possibility. Instead, Sextus' argument supports a non-evidential epistemic possibility; viz. "It's possible that an equally justified counterargument exists," and its equally supported opposite "It's possible that there is not an equally justified counterargument that exists." Sextus' argument ends up implicitly supporting a non-evidential epistemic possibility, not an evidential possibility. However, a non-evidential possibility is actually endorsed by Sextus. He states, in regards to claims like 'maybe,' 'maybe not,' 'possibly', and 'possibly not,' the following,

> Still it is evident, as I think, that these expressions are indicative of non-assertion. Certainly the person who says "perhaps it is" is implicitly affirming also the seemingly contradictory phrase "perhaps it is not" by his refusal to make the positive assertion that "it is." (PH I 195-197)

I will now argue that the fact that it is a non-evidential epistemic possibility that there are equally plausible counter-considerations (which the dogmatist doesn't possess) does not make it reasonable for the dogmatist to believe that there is equally strong support for and against *p*.

3c) Sextus' Non-evidential Epistemic Possibility

Sextus uses non-evidential epistemic possibility throughout his text as a tool to bring about Normative Equipollence for the dogmatist. For instance, Sextus claims that we cannot judge a cultural practice as actually good or bad, even if the practice is shared between every nation known, because there could be a nation of people, whom we are unaware of, that do not share everyone else's custom (*PH* III, 234). For another example, Sextus challenges the assumption that one can resolve a dispute of what are the right objects of choice and avoidance by assenting to the majority of mankind. He appeals to non-evidential epistemic possibility by

claiming that no one can visit the whole of mankind and determine what pleases them because there could be undiscovered communities which have radically different appreciations (*PH* I, 89-90).[33] However, the non-evidential epistemic possibility of error isn't enough to undermine one's rationally supported beliefs, because it is not, by itself, a reason. In those cases where the skeptic appeals only to non-evidential epistemic possibility in opposing a dogmatic claim, the dogmatist will always be able to maintain his belief. An example should help make this clear.

Imagine that I find the problem of evil as providing extremely good grounds that God doesn't exist. Moreover, imagine that it looks to me like all of the arguments for God's existence are invalid or rely on very dubious premises. Since the considerations on each side do not weigh equally, what I should (and would) do is assent to the proposition that God does not exist. However, the skeptic may argue that although he knows of no counterarguments against my argument, there may be an equally powerful counterargument "out there" that we are both unaware of. To argue that, for all we know, there may be an equally powerful argument we are unaware of, is to argue for the non-evidential epistemic possibility of an equally powerful counterargument. If the skeptic were to argue that the non-evidential epistemic possibility of an equally powerful counterargument is enough to create Normative Equipollence, as I believe Sextus is, then he is essentially arguing something like the following:

> 1.) For any p, for which the dogmatist possesses supporting evidence, it is epistemically possible that there are equally weighty reasons for ~p of which we are unaware. [34]
> 2.) Therefore, for any p, we should suspend our judgment on p.

[33] It is not clear, however, why Sextus thinks the mere possibility of error, or the possibility of conflicting evidence turning up, undermines the *dogmatist's* justification for some unchallenged belief. Sextus seems to assume that one must have certainty (i.e. where one can assert *p* and know that there is, in fact, no possibility that ~*p*) to maintain a rational belief. However, this apparent 'certainty standard' is at odds with Normative Equipollence, which merely requires that one has more reason in support of his view, than against his view. Hankinson notes this as well. He states that such a standard from Sextus, i.e. one must be certain of p or one doesn't know that p and thus must suspend judgment upon it, may be the remnants of an earlier Aenesidemean Pyrrhonism (Hankinson 1998, 184).

[34] This argument is referring to non-evidential epistemic possibility

One may ask why the conclusion follows from premise one. The argument seems implicitly to assume that because there is an non-evidential epistemic possibility that *p* is false, that we have no more reason to believe *p* than ~*p*, and that if we have no more reason to believe *p* than ~*p*, then we should suspend judgment. The entire implicit assumption is false, i.e. it is false that I have as much reason to believe *p* as I do ~*p*. For example, there could be good reason to believe p, "There is a zebra in front of me," for example. While the premise would be correct if it said it was *possible* that there existed equally good reasons to believe that ~*p*, that "It is not the case that there is a zebra in front of me," it does not follow that I do not have good reason to believe *p*. Put differently, it is certainly possible that my evidence is different than it is in fact, viz. it is possible I have equal justification for ~*p* as I, in fact, have for *p*. However, I have as a matter of fact more reason to believe *p* than ~*p*.[35] It is not rational to consider *possible* arguments as holding much weight, if any. A simple example will help make this clear. William Craig responds to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's evidential formulation of the 'Argument from Evil' by stating that God *may* have morally sufficient reasons for the evil that we do not know, and that the evil is necessary for some adequately compensating good. In other words, there is a non-evidential epistemic possibility of some morally sufficient reason that God has that we do not know about, that will justify *all* the evil in the world. Sinnott-Armstrong responds to this,

> I must admit the possibility that the cited evil is necessary for some adequately compensating good…. Despite this possibility, we have no *reason* to believe that the cited evil is *actually* necessary for some adequately compensating good.[36]

[35] I would like to thank Dr. Jacobson for this point
[36] (Sinnot-Armstrong 2004, 141)

It is this point that I think is the prevailing opinion. The epistemic possibility of ~*p* is not itself a reason to suspend judgment upon *p*. Moreover, even if the epistemic possibility of ~*p* did in fact provide a reason to believe ~*p*, we still have more reason to believe *p*.

Thus, the opposing of a rationally supported *p* with a non-evidential epistemic possibility alone is not enough to create an instance of Normative Equipollence. If the dogmatist has good reason to believe *p*, and his belief is challenged by only the non-evidential epistemic possibility that ~*p*, then the dogmatist still has more reason to believe *p*. Normative Equipollence is impossible for the dogmatist without a balance of opposing reasons. Thus, for any instance where a dogmatic belief is not rationally challenged, or is challenged by the non-evidential epistemic possibility of error, the dogmatist is rationally committed to maintaining that belief.

CHAPTER 5: EVALUATING PSYCHOLOGICAL EQUIPOLLENCE

The success of Pyrrhonism, in regards to the skeptic's universal suspension of judgment, is predicated upon the skeptic's ability to practice The Method of Psychological Equipollence (*PH* I, 8). Sextus clearly states that the skeptic's universal suspension of judgment is the direct result of the skeptic's production of Psychological Equipollence via The Method of Psychological Equipollence (*PH* I, 12, I 196, I 200, I 203). What does the skeptic do, however, when he is confronted with an argument, proposition, or appearance which he is unable to refute? As discussed in the previous section, the skeptic responds that he will oppose the presently convincing *p* against a future appearance: the non-evidential epistemic possibility of an equally convincing ~*p*. The skeptic's response may either be understood in a strong sense or in a weak sense. If understood in a strong sense, then the skeptic is committed to a negative dogmatism. If understood in a weak sense, then the skeptic's response is philosophically trivial. In this last section, I will argue two different claims. First, I will argue that the skeptic's response must be understood in the weak sense. Secondly, I will argue that the skeptic's invoking of the epistemic possibility of ~*p* for some compelling *p*, which he can't refute, is not sufficient for the skeptic to produce Psychological Equipollence.

A.) Sextus' Appeal to Epistemic Possibility

The Method of Psychological Equipollence requires opposing arguments, propositions, or appearances of equal weightiness to succeed in producing Psychological Equipollence. What does the skeptic do, however, when on the basis of all available evidence and considerations, that

it still seems overwhelmingly the case that *p* to the skeptic? When the skeptic comes across a view for which he cannot refute, Sextus says that the skeptic will invoke opposing "future things" (i.e. the non-evidential epistemic possibility that ~*p*) to that view which confronts him in the present (*PH* I, 33). The skeptic does not know how the compelling *p*[37] will fare against future evidence, and that, for all he knows, a compelling counter-consideration might turn up in the same manner as the current compelling *p*. Jim Hankinson refers to the skeptic's use of non-evidential epistemic possibility [38] as the skeptic's "Micawber Policy," stating, essentially, that the skeptic will suspend judgment upon any *p* if it is epistemically possible that ~*p*.[39] When opposed to some *p* which can't be refuted by the skeptic, the Micawber Policy is supposed to be sufficient to produce a suspension of judgment in the skeptic. One might consider this non-evidential epistemic possibility as the skeptic's ace-in-the-hole when he is not in possession of any other counterbalancing considerations to balance his scales.

The Micawber Policy can either be understood in a strong sense or in a weak sense. If understood in a strong sense, then the Micawber Policy would dictate that if the skeptic comes across some compelling *p*, which he can't refute, then the skeptic *will* oppose *p* with the epistemic possibility that ~*p*, and *will* suspend judgment upon *p*. The application of the

---

[37] I say "compelling *p*" because, if he doesn't find *p* compelling, then he will not assent to *p*. Instead, he will simply produce Psychological Equipollence by opposing the great preponderance of support for *p* against his lack of being convinced by *p*. This point is suggested by Sextus when he states,

> If there should be an argument which leads us to a confessedly absurd conclusion, we shall not assent to the absurdity just because of the argument but avoid the argument because of the absurdity (*PH* II, 251).

[38] Recall that in the previous section on Normative Equipollence, I argued that Sextus' use of epistemic possibility is non-evidential. This conclusion is actually endorsed by Sextus, when he explains that the *skeptic's* use of epistemic possibility. Sextus actually claims quite explicitly that the skeptic's use of 'possible' is always non-assertive. He states, in regards to terms like 'maybe', 'maybe not', 'possibly', and 'possibly not' the following,

> Still it is evident, as I think, that these expressions are indicative of non-assertion. Certainly the person who says "perhaps it is" is implicitly affirming also the seemingly contradictory phrase "perhaps it is not" by his refusal to make the positive assertion that "it is." (PH I 195-197)

[39] (Hankinson 1998, 30)

Micawber Policy, in this strong sense, dictates that no compelling *p* can be dogmatically assented to by the skeptic, because the dogmatist will always oppose the compelling *p* with the non-evidential epistemically possible that ~*p*, and will always find Psychological Equipollence from the opposition; viz. because any claim whatever, no matter how compelling, may turn out to be subsequently false, the skeptic will suspend judgment upon every claim.[40] But a consistent skeptic cannot commit themselves to undecidability in any strong sense without being negatively dogmatic.[41] As Sextus states the differences between the Academic skeptics (i.e. negative dogmatists) and the Pyrrhonists,

> [The Academic Skeptics'] affirm that all things are non-apprehensible, yet differ from the Sceptics even, as seems probable, in respect of this very statement that all things are non-apprehensible (for they affirm this positively, whereas the Sceptic regards it as possible that things may be apprehended) (*PH* I, 226).

As Sextus explains in the passage above, the Academic Skeptics' position is negatively dogmatic because they commit themselves to the claim that one can never be in a position to know the truth regarding any non-evident matter of dogmatic inquiry. A commitment to every non-evident matter being incapable of resolution would be equally dogmatic for the skeptic. The skeptic is in no position to say how the Micawber Policy will affect him in the future and what the outcome of opposing it to the compelling *p* will be. Sextus repeatedly states that the skeptic makes no positive assertion to what appears to him at the moment of his reporting it, as things may very well be different than how they appear to him (*PH* I, 4-7, I 35, etc.). For this same reason, the skeptic is in no position to say what he will, in fact, do in the future. What he says he will do in the future must be understood in modal terms as well, i.e. he may or may not use the Micawber Policy (in the future) against some compelling *p* which he can't refute. Thus, the Micawber

[40] (Hankinson 1998, 183)
[41] (Hankinson 1998, 183)

Policy, understood in the strong sense, gives the skeptic two dogmatic commitments. First, it commits the skeptic to a permanent suspension of judgment, because the skeptic will always be swayed by the possibility of error in judgment. Second, it commits the skeptic to certain future behavior, i.e. that he will respond to every compelling *p*, which he can't refute, with the Micawber Policy. For both of these reasons, the strong sense is inconsistent with Pyrrhonism, and leaves the Pyrrhonist with dogmatic commitments.

The Micawber Policy must be understood in the in the weak sense if the skeptic is maintain an authentic skeptical stance and avoid dogmatic commitments. When the skeptic responds to the question of what he will do if he is confronted with some compelling *p* which he cannot refute, he will say that he will oppose the *p* with the Micawber Policy and suspend judgment. In the weak sense, this will be understood as stating that the skeptic may or may not oppose *p* with the non-evidential epistemic possibility that ~*p* which may or may not cause a suspension of judgment. Understood weakly, the skeptic makes no future commitment as to what he would do and puts no permanent weight upon his non-evidential epistemic possibility in the event that he does invoke the Micawber Policy. If the skeptic opposes the compelling *p* with the Micawber Policy, then he will see how it inclines him at that moment. While this weak understanding is more consistent with Pyrrhonism, the skeptic's response loses considerable force. The skeptic can make no positive claim as to how the Micawber Policy will fare for him each time he uses it or if he will even use it all. His response becomes vacuous and philosophically trivial. Of course, the skeptic, as a matter of fact, may or may not use the Micawber Policy and may or may not be swayed by it, but such a trivial response does not preserve the skeptic's Pyrrhonian stance; it doesn't accomplish anything. The weak understanding amounts to the truism that the skeptic may or may not suspend judgment. Thus, the skeptic is in no position to claim that the Micawber

Policy will incline him towards a balance of his scales or that he will actually invoke it at a later date (or even that it's *likely* that such things will happen). Thus, the skeptic's response is not an "ace-in-the-hole" for the skeptic when he is faced with overwhelming evidence that *p*, but rather a philosophically trivial truism which lacks any force whatsoever.

I have now shown that the skeptic's response to the question of what he does when faced with some compelling *p*, which he can't refute, is vacuous and philosophically trivial. The weak understanding of the Micawber Policy alone gives us no reason to think that the policy will actually succeed in producing Psychological Equipollence. However, one may still wonder if the Micawber Policy, when it is invoked, is useful to the skeptic. I will now argue that the skeptic cannot preserve an authentically skeptical stance in such instances where he opposes some compelling *p* with the Micawber Policy.

B.) Failure of the Micawber Policy

Suppose, that at time *t*, on the basis of all available evidence and considerations, that it still seems overwhelmingly the case that *p* to the skeptic. What will the skeptic do? If the skeptic invokes the Micawber Policy, as Sextus suggests he may, then the skeptic will not produce Psychological Equipollence. I have already argued that the opposing of a rationally supported *p* with a non-evidential epistemic possibility alone is not enough to create an instance of Normative Equipollence. Specifically, I argued that if the dogmatist has good reason to believe *p*, and his belief is challenged by only the non-evidential epistemic possibility that ~*p*, then the dogmatist still has more reason to believe *p*. Although the skeptic is not *committed* to standards of rationality, as the dogmatist is, the skeptic is greatly psychologically affected and moved by

rational considerations. Although The Method of Psychological Equipollence allows any consideration, whatsoever, to balance the skeptic's scales, rational considerations are clearly the most influential considerations 'weighing' upon the skeptic. Moreover, rational considerations make up almost all of those considerations used by the skeptic to produce Psychological Equipollence. A brief reading of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* makes this point clear, as rational argument is the chief consideration used throughout the text to bring the skeptic to a suspension of judgment.

Insofar as the skeptic is strongly swayed by rational argument, and the non-evidential epistemic possibility of error alone is not rationally compelling, the Micawber Policy alone (opposed to some compelling *p*) won't sway the skeptic towards Psychological Equipollence. Left with nothing but the Micawber Policy to preserve his skeptical stance, and discovering that it provides no good reason to think ~*p*, the skeptic will assent to the compelling *p*, as the psychological 'weightiness' of reason tips his scales towards *p*, with nothing at that moment to stop it. Thus, Sextus' Micawber Policy alone is not sufficient to produce Psychological Equipollence for some compelling *p*.

One may argue, however, that given the subjective nature of the skeptic finding Psychological Equipollence, I cannot rule out the possibility that the skeptic will find his scales balanced by the invoking of the Micawber Policy. It is true that I must admit the possibility of the skeptic finding Psychological Equipollence. But to admit that this is possible is not to admit that it is true or even that it is plausible. As I have already argued above, the weak understanding of the Micawber Policy shows that Sextus does not claim, one way or the other, how the policy will fare for the skeptic, and thus, Sextus gives us no reason, based on the weak understanding alone, to believe that the Micawber Policy will produce Psychological Equipollence. Moreover,

if the skeptic is strongly inclined by rational considerations, as I have just argued, and has compelling reasons for *p* and no good reasons against *p*, then the skeptic will incline towards *p*. Thus, as dogmatists, we are justified in believing that the Micawber Policy will not sway the skeptic to balance his scales, and the mere possibility that the skeptic will produce Psychological Equipollence by the invoking of the Micawber Policy doesn't give us good reason to think that he will.

C.) Conclusion

In this section I have argued for several claims. First, I argued that the skeptic's "Micawber Policy" must be understood in a weak sense so as to avoid dogmatic commitments. However, understood properly, the skeptic's "Micawber Policy" becomes a philosophically trivial policy, losing its "ace-in-the-hole" reputation. Second, I argued that the Micawber Policy is not a sufficient tool for the skeptic to preserve an authentically skeptical stance in the face of such instances where he has a compelling *p*, which he can't refute. Because the weak understanding gives us no reason to believe in the Micawber Policy, and because the skeptic is affected greatly by rational considerations, and the Micawber Policy is not rationally compelling, the skeptic won't find it effective enough at balancing the strength of some compelling *p*. Lastly, I argued that, although I must admit the possibility that the Micawber Policy will be found compelling by the skeptic, this possibility alone does not give me good reason to believe that the skeptic *actually* will find it compelling.

In this paper I have leveled a series of different attacks against the skeptic's use of epistemic possibility. I believe I have successfully argued that when the skeptic fails to be able to

refute some compelling *p*, epistemic possibility alone cannot force the dogmatist to give up his position or help the skeptic preserve an authentic skeptical position.

WORKS CITED

Annas, J. (1986). "Doing without objective values: ancient and modern strategies." The Norms of Nature: Studies in Hellenistic Ethics. M. Schofield and G. Striker. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press**:** 3-30.

Barnes, J. (1998). "The Beliefs of the Pyrrhonist." The Original Sceptics: A Controversy. M. Burnyeat and M. Frede. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co.**:** 58-91

Bailey, A. (1990). "Pyrrhonean Scepticism and the Self-refutation Argument." *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 158 (Jan., 1990): 27-44

Bealer, G.(2004). "The Origins of Modal Error". *Dialectica* Vol. 58 No.1(2004): 11-42

Burnyeat, M. (1998). "Can the Skeptic Live His Skepticism." The Original Sceptics: A Controversy. M. Burnyeat and M. Frede. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co.**:** 25-57.

Hankinson, R. J. (1998). The Skeptics. Routledge.

Hume, D., (1987) [1748]. An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding. ed. by Eric Steinberg. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing.

Johnson, O. (1978) Skepticism and Cognitivism. Berkley, University of California Press.

Sextus Empiricus. (1933) Outlines of Pyrrhonism. trans. by R.G. Bury. Cambridge, Harvard University Press

Sinnott-Armstrong , W. (2004). "Atheism Undaunted". God? A debate between a Christian and an Atheist. William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. New York, Oxford University Press: 129-150.

Thorsrud, H. Ancient Skepticism. (forthcoming) Berkeley, University of California Press/Acumen.