Georgia State University
ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

Philosophy Theses | Department of Philosophy

8-1-2012

Hegel's Critique of Ancient Skepticism

John Wood
Georgia State University

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

Recommended Citation
Wood, John, "Hegel's Critique of Ancient Skepticism." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2012.
http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/philosophy_theses/113

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

HEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF ANCIENT SKEPTICISM

by

JAY WOOD

Under the Direction of Dr. Sebastian Rand

ABSTRACT

Recent work on the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel has emphasized his interest in skeptical concerns. These contemporary scholars argue that, despite common opinions to the contrary, Hegel actually had a very keen interest in skepticism, one that informed and motivated much of his overall project. While I welcome this recent literature, I argue here that contemporary scholars have overemphasized the importance of skepticism for Hegel. By looking closely at Hegel's arguments against skepticism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, I argue that Hegel's anti-skeptical arguments are in fact major failures. Hegel's failure is at odds with the emphasis that contemporary literature places on Hegel's interests in skepticism. For a philosopher who was supposedly centrally concerned with skeptical issues, Hegel sure does not act like it. I conclude that the tension here is the result of contemporary scholars' overemphasis of the role that skepticism plays in Hegel's project.

INDEX WORDS: G.W.F. Hegel, Skepticism, Ancient skepticism, Epistemology, Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrhonian skepticism

HEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF ANCIENT SKEPTICISM

by

JAY WOOD

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

2012

Copyright by
Jay Wood
2012

HEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF ANCIENT SKEPTICISM

by

JAY WOOD

Committee Chair: Sebastian G. Rand

Committee: Jessica N. Berry

Daniel A. Weiskopf

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2012

DEDICATION

For my mother, who cares nothing about the content of this paper, but plenty about its author.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Dr. Rand for his guidance and advice, and for dragging me, kicking and screaming, to the end.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 1: HEGEL'S GENERAL APPROACH TO SKEPTICISM 5

1.1 Hegel's Own Skeptical Leanings 5

1.2 Two Kinds of Skepticism: Modern Skepticism 6

1.3 A Modern Example: David Hume 8

1.4 Hume on Causation 9

1.5 Can the Self-Presenting Character of Mental States really be Doubted? 10

1.6 The Strength of Ancient Skepticism: Sextus Empiricus 13

1.7 The Modes 17

1.8 A Preliminary Objection: Paralysis 20

1.9 Two Types of Ancient Skepticism: Pyrrhonians vs. Academics 22

CHAPTER 2: HEGEL'S BASIC ANTI-SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT 24

CHAPTER 3: EVALUATING HEGEL'S CRITICISM 27

3.1 Hegel's Argument as an "Implausibility" Objection 27

3.2 Hegel's Argument as an "Impossibility" Objection 29

3.4 Responding to Pinkard: The Distinction between Academic and Pyrrhonian Skepticism 33

3.5 Against Hegel's Rejection of the Academic/Pyrrhonian Distinction 35

CONCLUSION 38

BIBLIOGRAPHY 40

INTRODUCTION

A paper on Hegel's relation to skepticism may seem odd. What could Hegel, the idealist metaphysician, the builder of "metaphysical castles,"[1] have to say regarding issues of skeptical concern? Very little of interest, it may appear. And, until fairly recently, literature on Hegel's own epistemological project was rare—a fact which may at least indicate how little importance has been attached to the subject by modern scholars.[2] Appearing in 1989, Michael Forster's *Hegel and Skepticism* is a welcome exception to this trend. In the opening pages, Forster laments the "long tradition in the literature on Hegel which either overlooks his profound interest in epistemology or explicitly holds that he was dismissive or careless about it." This traditional misconception, he continues, "is in large measure attributable to a failure to pay sufficient attention to Hegel's critical interpretation of the skeptical tradition."[3] As a result of this misconception, Forster contends, scholars have overlooked the profound role that the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics played in the development of Hegel's overall philosophical project.[4] More recently, in a 2003 paper, Kenneth Westphal echoed Forster's complaint, indicating that the tide had not yet shifted: "mainstream Hegel scholarship has disregarded Hegel's interest in epistemology, hence also his response to scepticism."[5]

---

[1] This is part of Michael Forster's characterization of the common view about Hegel's (lack of) epistemological concerns. In his "Introduction," Forster explains he is attempting to disprove "the quite erroneous and damaging impression of [Hegel]—and to some extent of German Idealism generally—as an epistemological delinquent building metaphysical castles on sands which the first flood of skepticism would be bound to wash away" (p. 3).

[2] Important exceptions to this include: Michael Forster's *Hegel and Skepticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), Tom Rockmore's *Hegel's Circular Epistemology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), and Kenneth Westphal's *Hegel's Epistemological Realism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989).

[3] *Hegel and Skepticism*, p. 3.

[4] One major benefit of Forster's analysis is that he focuses on a wide range of Hegel's texts, showing how skeptical worries motivate various transformations in Hegel's thought. See, e.g., Chapter 3, wherein Forster traces the transformation of Hegel's conception of ancient skepticism as it progresses through three Hegelian texts: *The Positivity of the Christian Religion*, the *Phenomenology*, and the *Philosophy of History* (pp. 49-54). Westphal's article (cited in n. 5 below) also argues that Hegel's view of Pyrrhonian skepticism underwent important modifications throughout Hegel's career (pp. 150-2), but, whereas Forster points to Holderlin and Schelling as major influences (pp. 48-50; 53), Westphal identifies Hegel's interaction with G.E. Schulze as pivotal (p. 151).

[5] "Hegel's Manifold Response to Scepticism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*," p. 149.

As both Westphal and Forster argue, this mainstream view of Hegel as being ignorant or dismissive of epistemological issues (and, more specifically, of skeptical worries) is incorrect. Hegel's philosophy is informed through his explicit engagement with certain skeptical arguments.[6] The misconception of Hegel that results from this commonly held view is doubly problematic. On the one hand, Hegel scholarship suffers, since commentators fail to engage what may turn out to be a central focus of Hegel's overall project. If one of Hegel's explicit aims is to overcome skeptical arguments, then the tendency to ignore or deny Hegel's interest in this area will undoubtedly impoverish contemporary analyses by failing to consider why Hegel pursues just the philosophical issues he does. On the other hand, contemporary epistemology is robbed of a potentially interesting view. For if Hegel has in fact succeeded in putting to rest even a few skeptical worries, then much more attention ought to be paid—and much more credit given—to his project by contemporary epistemologists.[7]

Studies like Westphal's and Forster's are a welcome addition to the literature. At the very least, they dispel prejudices about Hegel, and thereby clear the way for new approaches to his texts. Yet, both are focused on defending Hegel's *own views* against certain epistemological charges. Forster, for example, argues that Hegel's works reflect an "effort to construct a philosophical position capable of withstanding the assaults of the skeptics."[8] Naturally, part of Forster's project involves looking at Hegel's own arguments against certain skeptical positions, but this is by no means the focus. Indeed, the majority of Forster's project deals with showing how Hegel can *defend* his position from skeptical attack. My aim in this paper is to look at Hegel's relationship to skepticism from the other direction: I am interested in how Hegel *attacks* the skeptical position.

---

[6] See Hegel's "The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy" for an early example of his interaction with skepticism. This essay, published in 1802, can be found in the Di Giovanni and Harris anthology, *Between Kant and Hegel*, pp. 313-362.

[7] For a critical evaluation of some epistemological interpretations of Hegel, including that of Wilfrid Sellars, see Westphal's "Hegel's Manifold Response to Skepticism," p. 158.

[8] *Hegel and Skepticism*, p. 1.

Now, Forster's cause is certainly a worthy one, and it is on the basis of works like his and Westphal's that more specific analyses like the current one can get underway: asking whether or not Hegel's anti-skeptical arguments are successful is of course only an interesting question once we realize that he was in fact interested in this success in the first place. Moreover, Hegel's views on skepticism ought to themselves be of contemporary epistemological interest, since he turns the common views about ancient and modern skepticism on their head: Hegel dismisses modern skeptics, such as Hume and Descartes, as being philosophically uninteresting.[9] Instead, Hegel focuses on ancient skepticism, claiming that "it alone is of a true, profound nature."[10] The reasons for this are traced below.

Despite my enthusiasm towards the recent projects on Hegel's epistemological concerns, there is still too little consideration given to Hegel's specific arguments *against* the skeptic and the characterization of skepticism that these arguments presuppose. Even Forster admits that Hegel's treatment of skepticism appears inconsistent in various places.[11] In fact, Hegel's descriptions of skepticism can appear flat-out wrong at times. In the opening pages of the "Scepticism" section in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel attributes what appears to be an obviously false claim to Pyrrhonian skepticism: namely, that it "proves with certainty the untruth of all."[12] Surely this is a misrepresentation of Pyrrhonian skepticism.[13] Yet, the recent wave of literature also suggests that Hegel's project is motivated in large part by ancient skeptical arguments, that Hegel recognized *these* arguments as being the ones most worthy of attention. Thus, if recent arguments from Forster and others are to be taken seriously, it better be the case that Hegel's conception of ancient skepticism is accurate. Moreover, we ought to expect that Hegel's anti-skeptical arguments are successful, since this

---

[9] Regarding Hume's skepticism, Hegel claims that it has "been given a more important place in history than it deserves from its intrinsic nature" *Lectures on the History of Philosophy (LHP)* Vol. 3, p. 369. Hegel's reasons for saying this are explained below.

[10] *LHP*, Vol. 2, p. 331. Much more will be said about Hegel's prioritization of ancient over modern skepticism below.

[11] *Hegel and Skepticism*, pp. 36-7.

[12] *LHP*, Vol. 2, p. 333. For a claim by Sextus Empiricus, Hegel's chosen representative of Pyrrhonian skepticism, see the very first lines of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (hereafter cited as *OP*): "Academic [skeptics] have asserted that [the truth] cannot be apprehended. [The Pyrrhonian] skeptics continue to search" (*OP* 1:1:3-4); see also *OP* 1:33.

[13] As will be discussed below, the Pyrrhonian does not claim to prove anything, much less with do so with certainty.

is one major aim—indeed, perhaps the central aim—that Hegel purportedly set for himself. Fortunately, the last few decades enjoyed a resurgence of interest in ancient Pyrrhonian skepticism as well, shining a new light on Hegel's major target.[14] By revisiting the writings of Sextus Empiricus in particular, helpful advances can be made in understanding whether Hegel's anti-skeptical arguments do in fact defeat his most formidable philosophical foe.

In what follows, I give a full analysis of Hegel's treatment of skepticism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, from his choice of target in the ancient skeptic to his particular arguments against this position. My paper is divided into three main sections. In Chapter 1, I explain Hegel's general approach to (and interest in) skeptical questions, including his distinction between ancient and modern skepticism, with Sextus Empiricus serving as a reference point for the ancient position and Hume for the modern. I also address Hegel's reasons for thinking that ancient skepticism, not modern, poses the real philosophical threat. In Chapter 2, I recount Hegel's basic anti-skeptical argument in the *Phenomenology*. Finally, in Chapter 3, I consider and evaluate two different lines of interpretations of Hegel's anti-skeptical arguments. In each case, I offer reasons to think that Hegel fails to criticize the Pyrrhonian skeptic adequately. On the one interpretation, Hegel wrongfully rejects (or perhaps ignores) the Pyrrhonian distinction between belief and assent. On the other line of interpretation, proposed by Terry Pinkard,[15] Hegel wrongfully rejects an important distinction between Academic and Pyrrhonian skeptics. Because of Hegel's rejection of these distinctions, his anti-skeptical arguments cannot be successfully employed against the Pyrrhonian skeptic, who is considered to be his major target. I conclude by offering some comments on Hegel's failure—a failure which, according to the recent literature sympathetic to Hegel's epistemological project, seems entirely inexplicable.

---

[14] A few examples (and there are many, many more): Annas and Barnes's *The Modes of Scepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Casey Perin's *The Demands of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Burnyeat and Frede's anthology, *The Original Sceptics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997); and Diego Machuca's anthology, *New Essays on Ancient Pyrrhonism* (Netherlands: Brill, 2011).

[15] *Hegel's* Phenomenology*: The Sociality of Reason* (hereafter cited as *HP)* (Cambridge, New York: 1994).

CHAPTER 1: HEGEL'S GENERAL APPROACH TO SKEPTICISM

1.1 Hegel's Own Skeptical Leanings

Hegel criticizes ancient skepticism in a few different places.[16] The critique that is perhaps most well known, and the one I am most interested in here, occurs in the middle of the *Phenomenology of Spirit.* The *Phenomenology* proceeds by considering various candidate positions, and then "critiquing" each one. Two points about this process need to be emphasized up front. First, Hegel's arguments throughout are meant to constitute a "critique" in the Kantian sense, meaning the arguments aim to show that each position is necessarily *limited*. Once the limits of each position have been exposed, Hegel argues that it must progress into a new position, or "shape of consciousness."[17] Thus, in the case of skepticism, his criticism amounts to showing that skepticism is unsustainable, in some fashion or other, and that it must pass into what Hegel calls "The Unhappy Consciousness."[18] So it is important to note that Hegel is not necessarily out to show that ancient skeptics are wildly off base, but only that they are failing to see a certain limitation (perhaps because they have overlooked a presupposition that is involved in their position or activity).

This notion of "critique" leads to the second point of emphasis. The *Phenomenology* proceeds by analyzing candidate positions by means of *internal* critique—that is, only those propositions to which Hegel's interlocutor agrees are used in the analysis of the positions under consideration.[19] As Hegel says in the "Preface," "if the refutation [of a fundamental proposition or principle] is thorough, then *it is*

---

[16] See, for example, *PhG* ¶204-5; *LHP* Vol. 2, pp. 328-373; and *The Encyclopedia Logic,* p. 124.
[17] *PhG* ¶89.
[18] See *PhG* ¶202-206.
[19] This may already sound strange to someone familiar with Pyrrhonian skepticism: insofar as these skeptics claim to live entirely without beliefs, it is hard to see what 'materials' Hegel could use to get the critique going. Presumably, the internal critique is supposed to proceed by evaluating *the beliefs* tied to each position, and, in this case, there are no beliefs. In fact, even *Hegel himself* admits this notion elsewhere: "in view of the nature of Scepticism, we cannot ask for any system of propositions. Sextus...says that Scepticism…is not a preference for certain propositions" (*LHP* p. 345). There seems to be an obvious tension between this view and the general strategy in the *PhG.* Although I am not quite sure how to reconcile this apparent inconsistency, I will say a bit more about this anomaly in the concluding section.

derived from and developed out of that fundamental proposition or principle itself—the refutation is not pulled off by bringing in counter-assertions and impressions *external to the principle.*"[20] In other words, Hegel attempts to evaluate each of the various positions he considers without reference to any considerations besides those supplied by his interlocutor.

In this last sense, Hegel's task in the *Phenomenology*, can be understood in part as a skeptical one. Indeed, anyone who is at all familiar with the works of Sextus Empiricus should recognize that this is as sounding very much like his description of the Pyrrhonian position. Indeed, Hegel calls the progression within the *Phenomenology* "self-consummating skepticism."[21] So, although Hegel eventually argues against skepticism in this text, he nonetheless retains a close affinity to the Pyrrhonian skeptics.

1.2 Two Kinds of Skepticism: Modern Skepticism

> *Hume's* scepticism…should be very carefully distinguished from *Greek scepticism*. In Humean scepticism, the *truth* of the empirical, the truth of feeling and intuition is taken as basic; and, on that basis, he attacks all universal determinations and laws, precisely because they have no justification by way of sense-perception.[22]

In order to understand Hegel's arguments against the skeptic, it is first necessary to appreciate his narrow focus, for Hegel is not concerned with all skeptics. In fact, the skeptical arguments most frequently emphasized in philosophy courses—arguments due to Descartes and Hume—are not Hegel's particular targets. Instead, his anti-skeptical arguments in the *Phenomenology* are aimed at the arguments of the more radical ancient skeptics. This is an important distinction for Hegel, since he takes the ancient variety of skepticism to pose the real philosophical threat. One main reason Hegel is unconcerned with modern skepticism is that it turns out to be overly dogmatic, on Hegel's account (and,

---

[20] *PhG* ¶ 24 (my italics).
[21] *PhG* ¶78.
[22] Hegel, GWF. *The Encyclopedia Logic*, p. 80.

not coincidentally, on Sextus Empiricus's account, too). In other words, modern skeptical arguments require too many unfounded presuppositions to be taken seriously.

This form of skepticism takes the content of our immediate conscious experience to be veridical and self-evident. Modern skeptics, Hegel says, "make it fundamental that we must consider sensuous Being, what is given to us by sensuous consciousness, to be true; all else must be doubted."[23] So, modern skepticism considers (what we may now call) our mental states to be "self-presenting"[24]—i.e., these states are *immediately* available to us, and, as a result, beliefs about them do not require any further justification. Yet, the modern skeptic does not merely ascribe this self-presenting status to his mental states. In order for a modern skeptic to get his arguments off the ground, he must also presuppose that these self-presenting mental states stand in a certain *evidentiary relation* to other mediated, inferential beliefs. The general problem addressed in modern skepticism, then, is to figure out how one could ever justify inferential beliefs—beliefs, that is to say, about things other than one's own mental states or "impressions" (beliefs about the existence of the external world, God, causation, essences, other minds, universals, properties, and so on). The salient point here for Hegel is that modern skepticism grants a fundamental and veridical status to items in our immediate consciousness, and then raises doubts about other things *on the basis of* these (allegedly) epistemically secure mental items. An example will help to make this clearer. Roughly, the worry is that modern skeptical arguments smuggle in an entire theory of the mind, a theory which may turn out to be questionable.[25]

---

[23] *LHP,* Vol. 2, p. 331. This point will be made clearer in the discussion of Hume below.

[24] See Roderick Chisolm's "The Problem of the Criterion" for a contemporary treatment of this notion, especially pp. 597-600.

[25] To anticipate the important difference between this modern view and the ancient: the Pyrrhonian skeptic eschews the extra "theoretical baggage" (to use a term from Michael Williams) of the modern skeptic's theory of mind. She may agree that things appear thusly to her, now, but she need not be led by this appearance to further beliefs about how appearances 'work'—beliefs about the nature of human sensory organs, the human mind, the nature of thoughts, external objects, and the like. So the Pyrrhonian does not put forward claims *about* appearances; she simply notes that they appear (see *OP* 1:10). She likewise refrains from making claims about the justificatory relationship between beliefs about one's mental states and beliefs about the external world. See Section 1.6 below.

1.3 A Modern Example: David Hume

Hume is one obvious example,[26] I think, of a modern skeptic from Hegel's point of view. Hume's skeptical impact upon Kant is emphasized by Kant himself as well as by Hegel. And this impact upon Kant links Hume indirectly to Hegel, insofar as the latter is a post-Kantian. In his *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, Kant highlights Hume's skeptical impact on metaphysics generally, as well as his impact upon Kant's own particular project. Of particular importance for the current discussion is Kant's focus on Hume's skeptical arguments against our notions of cause and effect (and the relations of necessity that such notions involve). As Kant says, Hume "demonstrated irrefutably that it was entirely impossible for reason to think *a priori* and by means of concepts such a combination as involves necessity."[27] And Kant takes the upshot here to be quite radical. Hume's conclusions, if they could be arrived at effectively, would be "as much to say that there is not, and cannot be, any such thing as metaphysics at all."[28] Moreover, immediately after this discussion of Hume's skeptical arguments, Kant makes his (now famous) "confession" that "my remembering David Hume was the very thing which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a quite new direction."[29] Thus, it is not merely that Hume's writing in general was a catalyst for Kant's work; in particular, it was Hume's *skeptical* worries that motivate Kant.

Hegel himself identifies the importance of Hume for Kant. As he says in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, the historical importance of Hume "is due to the fact that Kant really derives the starting point of his philosophy from Hume."[30] And later, Hegel claims that Kant's philosophy "has in the

---

[26] Descartes is the other likely candidate here, yet his relation to Kant and Hegel is not as clear as to Hume, so I do not deal with him here. Additionally, as we shall see, Hume's arguments put modern skeptical assumptions on full display, making it easy to highlight the problem that Hegel finds with modern skepticism.
[27] Kant, *Prolegomena*, Ak. 4:257. More will be said about Hume's skeptical arguments below.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] *Prolegomena,* Ak. 5:260.
[30] *LHP* Vol. 3, p. 369.

first place a direct relation to that of Hume."[31] Moreover, it is the *skeptical* aspects of Hume that Hegel emphasizes most in the *Lectures*, not Hume's positive, naturalistic proposals.[32] Now, there is some debate[33] as to whether or not Hume is really a skeptic at the end of the day.[34] I do not intend to touch upon this debate at all, for we need only an example of a skeptical *argument* and Hume has certainly offered us one such argument in his discussion of causality.

1.4 Hume on Causation

Hume famously denied that we ever have any justified knowledge of external causation.[35] To take the classic example, we perceive one billiard ball striking another and then we perceive the latter ball moving. We are tempted to claim that the first ball caused the other to move. Moreover, we are tempted to claim that our knowledge of this relationship is based on our perceptions of the billiard balls. Yet Hume thinks this attribution of causal efficacy is unwarranted, strictly speaking. Since this knowledge is based on perception, and we never perceive anything but the movement of two objects, we are unwarranted in attributing causal efficacy to the billiard ball; at no point did we perceive the causal link itself. If we consider the matter closely, he says, "we find only that the one body approaches the other; and that the motion of it precedes that of the other, but without any *sensible* interval."[36]

---

[31] *LHP* Vol. 3, p. 426.

[32] Hegel (rightly) takes Hume's skeptical worries to be an instance of the more general problem of how universality can *ever* arise out of a succession or collection of particular instances: how is it that we can derive *any* universal claims (such as causal necessity) from a purely empirical basis? After explaining Hume's problem with necessity, Hegel goes on to say, "It is the same thing in respect of the universal…universality is a determination which is not given to us through experience," since empirical experience is merely a series of individual impressions (*LHP* p. 372).

[33] For example, see Kevin Meeker's "Hume: Radical Skeptic or Naturalized Epistemologist?"

[34] For Hegel, however, there is no question as to whether Hume counts as a skeptic, at least in the modern sense of the word: see, e.g., pp. 363-4 in *LHP* Vol. 3, where Hegel relates Hume's philosophy—and, indeed, all of modern skepticism—to the "subjective idealism in Berkeley;" see also the introductory remarks on Hume in the same volume: "we must add to what has preceded [viz., the discussion of Berkeley] an account of the Scepticism of Hume" (*LHP*, 369).

[35] See Barry Stroud's excellent discussion of Hume's skepticism regarding cause and effect in *Hume*, pp. 42-67.

[36] *Treatise*, 1.3.2; my emphasis.

It is a generalized version of this worry that motivates the rest of Hume's skeptical arguments:[37] we have access only to our own mental states—including sensible experience—yet our reason constantly tries to make inferences about things outside of our minds.[38] In brief, the problem is that although only a portion of our beliefs are self-presenting (namely, those about mental states),[39] our knowledge claims stretch far beyond these apparently unproblematic beliefs. And modern skepticism is focused on questioning the justificatory status of beliefs about things that are *not* self-presenting.[40] We can see this focus in the discussion of Hume above. In order to understand Hume's worries, we must first assume that a certain set of claims—namely, those about one's own mental states—are epistemologically unproblematic. Epistemic worries arise when we try to make claims about things outside of our minds—claims that are supposedly based only upon unproblematic claims about our mental states.

1.5 Can the Self-Presenting Character of Mental States really be Doubted?

Now, there is of course no problem with making presuppositions, so long as they are well-justified. And it may be difficult to imagine an argument that could call into question Hume's presupposition that one has immediate access to one's own mental states, that one's own mental states are self-presenting. Yet, if there were an argument that denied the self-presenting status of mental states, then the modern skeptic's worries could be dissolved by showing that they rely on questionable (or false) presuppositions. I think there are at least two ways to generate such arguments, which I will

---

[37] Hegel makes the parallel point, when he claims that Hume has shown that "universality is a determination which is not given to us through experience" (referenced in n. 32 above).

[38] See, e.g., Hume's discussions of: our notion of underlying substances (*Treatise* 1.1.6); our beliefs about abstract ideas (*Treatise* 1.1.7); our belief in the existence of persisting external objects (*Treatise* 1.2.6); and our notions of the self (*Treatise* 1.4.6).

[39] See, e.g., Hume's discussion of the causal genesis of our perceptions in the *Enquiry*: Since the "mind has never any thing present to it but the perceptions," we cannot prove that external objects cause our perceptions (p. 105).

[40] Michael Forster sums up this point well: "Typically, the modern skeptic's specific problems concern the legitimacy of proceeding from claims about a certain kind of subject matter, the knowledge of which is assumed to be absolutely or relatively unproblematic, to claims about a second kind of subject matter, the knowledge of which is not felt to be unproblematic in the same way" (Forster, 11).

sketch below. However, I will not go into detail about either, since my concern is not to defeat modern skepticism, but simply to show that Hegel is justified in claiming that this variety of skepticism is in fact weaker than its ancient counterpart—and, thus, why ancient skepticism, not modern, is Hegel's real target in the *Phenomenology*.

Firstly, as Forster notes, certain varieties of eliminative materialism deny that we have mental states at all.[41] Materialists of this variety claim that (apparently) mental 'items'—beliefs, desires, memories, and so on—are in fact physical phenomena. This claim is fleshed out in a number of ways. For example, Peter Carruthers claims that the mind and brain are *identical*, and so all mental states are in fact brain states.[42] In a related fashion, an eliminative materialist may claim that talk of mental states is couched in terms of a Folk Psychological theory that is simply too burdened with explanatory shortcomings to remain tenable. In other words, the *framework* within which talk of 'the mental' takes place should eventually be abandoned in favor of a view that is better informed by neuroscience. According to Paul Churchland, the eliminative materialist holds that:

> our common-sense conception of psychological phenomena constitutes a radically false theory, a theory so fundamentally defective that both the principles and the ontology of that theory will eventually be displaced, rather than smoothly reduced, by completed neuroscience. Our mutual understanding and even our introspection may then be reconstituted within the conceptual framework of a completed neuroscience.[43]

In Carruthers's and Churchland's varieties of eliminative materialism there is the claim that there is no 'mind,' yet Churchland's proposal is much more radical. For it is not simply the case—as the mind/brain identity theorist may[44] hold—that mental talk will eventually be *reduced to* physical talk, thus forcing

---

[41] *Hegel and Skepticism*, 21.

[42] "The [mind/brain] identity-thesis is a version of strong materialism: it holds that *all mental states and events are in fact physical states and events*" ("The Mind is the Brain", p. 301, my italics).

[43] "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes." (pp. 67-90).

[44] I am hesitant here simply because it is often unclear how Carruthers intends his identity claim to be taken. It is, e.g., not the case that we *mean* "the brain" when we utter something about "the mind": "The identity-thesis…is not…a thesis about meaning." However, he says in the next breath that our terms for conscious states and our terms for brain states "refer to the very same thing" (p. 301). On the other hand, it unclear that he has in mind a *reduction* (or a reduce-ability) of the mental to the physical. This last proposal appears to be a thesis about how we can treat two ontologically *distinct* things. For example, we can 'reduce' a credit card to a 'plastic rectangle',

the mental talk out of fashion. Instead, as our background assumptions change, talk about self-presenting belief states will simply *cease to be meaningful*, in much the same way that talk of phlogiston has ceased to be meaningful.[45]

Alternatively, one may doubt the other half of the modern theory of mind by raising difficulties about the "I" that allegedly experiences mental states. Hume himself raises questions about personal identity later in the *Treatise*, when he claims that men are "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement."[46] Additionally, Galen Strawson has argued for what he calls a "thin conception" of the self, claiming that, contrary to our common-sense assumption that one continuous, self-same subject or self underlies all our experiences, there are in fact many "*numerically distinct*" selves.[47] In other words, he says, "the idea of the long-term persisting self…is an illusion."[48]

I remain neutral here with regard to the persuasiveness of any of these arguments. All I have intended to show is that the modern skeptic's seemingly unquestionable theory of mind in fact rests upon points of debate: that sense can be made of mental states generally (and of "self-presenting" and "not self-presenting" states in particular), and that there is an "I" that is the subject of those mental states. And if this is true, the modern skeptic has more work to do before he is in a position to raise his skeptical difficulties at all. In brief, the doctrine of self-presenting mental states seems to require at least two different components—a certain *mental state*, on the one hand, and its perception by a *subject*, on the other. Thus, because the modern skeptic is committed to this picture, the modern skeptic remains

---

while still coherently (and rightly!) holding that the card is not *merely* the plastic that constitutes it. For a great discussion of this, see Lynne Rudder Baker's "Non-reductive Materialism."

[45] I do not mean to say (absurdly) that the term "phlogiston" fails to hold *any* meaning in our discourse. However, recall that the discussion is about the *self-presenting* character of mental states; i.e., it is about some way that mental states *are*. So the analogy remains apt: just like it is nonsensical to talk about phlogiston being, say, fire-like, it may likewise, according to the eliminative materialist, become equally nonsensical to talk about mental states being self-presenting (or not, for that matter).

[46] *Treatise* 1.4.6.

[47] "The Self," p. 556-60. Strawson explicitly, and sympathetically, references Hume's *Treatise*, as well as works by William James.

[48] "The Self," p. 560.

vulnerable in at least two ways. If one could show that either of these presuppositions is problematic, he could undermine all of modern skepticism.

Therefore, it seems that modern skepticism involves a dogmatic acceptance of a certain theory of mind.[49] Indeed, both Hegel[50] and Sextus[51] would be apt to deny that modern skepticism is any form of skepticism *at all*, since it merely doubts on the basis of dogmatic presuppositions. Since these presuppositions are placed beyond doubt, modern skepticism fails to be as radical as ancient skepticism. And since Hegel is concerned with showing that all forms of skepticism are problematic, he is right not to aim his arguments at the modern skeptic alone. Doing so would leave open the possibility that some other flavors of skepticism remain untouched by Hegel's critique. So we turn now to skepticism in its ancient form.

1.6 The Strength of Ancient Skepticism: Sextus Empiricus

We have seen that modern skepticism requires a few (perhaps questionable) presuppositions. Ancient skepticism, on the other hand, attempts to operate without any such presuppositions,[52] and instead consists in a sort of perpetual doubt and questioning. Indeed, it is perhaps the central tenet of Pyrrhonian skepticism that the search for truth is never over. And, since any search for truth presupposes some doubt to be resolved, continuing this search amounts to continuing to doubt. Hegel almost always cites Sextus Empiricus when discussing ancient skepticism,[53] so I begin with his major work, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.

---

[49] Michael Williams identifies a second presupposition in this theory of mind: not only does it prioritize self-presenting states over non-self-presenting ones, but further, it assumes that this hierarchy of mental states "corresponds to the objective structure of empirical justification" ("Sceptism without Theory," p. 585).
[50] See, e.g., *LHP* Vol. 3, pp. 363-4: "[modern] scepticism has…the form of idealism; i.e., of expressing self-consciousness or certainty of self as all reality and truth."
[51] See n. 54 below for a clear indication Sextus would call this dogmatism.
[52] And, as noted previously, the ancient skeptic's approach is very much akin to that of Hegel in the *Phenomenology*; see Section 1.1 above.
[53] Cf. *LHP* Vol. 2, pp. 311ff; Hegel's earlier essay, the "Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy" also makes heavy reference to Sextus Empiricus.

In the opening lines of his major work, Sextus describes his skepticism, and distinguishes it from two other schools of thought:

> In the case of what is sought in philosophy, I think, some people have claimed to have found the truth, others have asserted that it cannot be apprehended, and others are still searching. Those who think that they have found it are the Dogmatists…[The Academic Skeptics] have asserted that it cannot be apprehended. The [Pyrrhonian] Skeptics continue to search." (*OP* 1:1; 2-4)

We have then, on Sextus' view, three apparently distinct kinds of philosophy, two[54] of which are skeptical: the so-called Academic and Pyrrhonian philosophies. Sextus associates himself with the latter position, and tells us a few lines later that he will offer us an "outline account" of Pyrrhonism.

Notice that Sextus is already making a qualification here: he is not offering us a full-blown, detailed account of his position, but merely an outline. Sextus further qualifies his account:

> Concerning the Skeptic Way we shall now give an outline account, stating in advance that as regards none of the things that we are about to say do we firmly maintain that matters are absolutely as stated, but in each instance we are simply reporting, like a chronicler, what now appears to us to be the case.[55]

It is easy, I think, to view this passage as an instance of Sextus' merely hedging his bet in order to guard against potential inconsistencies later on. Thus, we might think, he is simply introducing these qualifiers early on—such as "it appears to me" or "we do not maintain that matters are absolutely as we say"—so as to keep the option open later to revise his earlier position (or, worse, to abandon it entirely). And, since Hegel is concerned with showing that the skeptic's *position* possesses an internal contradiction, such bet-hedging can be particularly problematic for our discussion. If Sextus is willing to abandon—or substantially revise, at least—his position, then Hegel's criticisms will be aimed at a moving target. For the moment, however, I want to set this worry off to the side and take Sextus's claim at face value, so as to avoid delving into whether or not Sextus is making these claims disingenuously.

---

[54] Sextus claims that Academic skepticism is really not skepticism at all, but rather a form of dogmatism. Cf., *OP* 1:33:223, where Sextus says that Skeptics are to be distinguished from those who merely "put forward some points skeptically, whenever, as they say, he is doing 'gymnastics'". This, Sextus explains, does not make someone a Pyrrhonian Skeptic, "for he who dogmatizes about any single thing or prefers any *phantasia* [appearance] at all to any other as regards credibility and incredibility, or makes an assertion about something non-evident, acquires the dogmatic character."

[55] *OP* 1:1:4.

Tracing the genesis of Pyrrhonian skepticism will help to make the skeptical activity clear. During her efforts to determine the truth of a claim P, the skeptic found herself presented with equally strong (or "equipollent") arguments for and against P. In light of these equipollent arguments, the skeptic first enters a state of suspended judgment (or *epochē*) with regard to P,[56] and later, after this suspension, finds tranquility (or *ataraxia*). According to Sextus, the "Skeptic Way" is a certain kind of "disposition" to bring about equipollent arguments, with the aim of achieving *ataraxia*.[57]

So, for example, suppose a Pyrrhonian skeptic were attempting to discover whether or not God exists. Upon hearing Descartes' ontological argument, she finds herself compelled to believe that God does in fact exist. Yet, suppose she later hears a formulation of the problem of evil, and finds this problem to count as equally compelling evidence *against* God's existence. In the face of equally good evidence for and against her initial claim ("God exists"), she suspends judgment with regard to this claim, and finds herself at rest. From what has been said so far, the skeptical activity can be schematized as follows:

Opposition ("P" and "not-P") → *Equipollence* → *Epochē* → *Ataraxia*[58]

Importantly, however, the Pyrrhonian skeptic is not one who simply *undergoes* this type of experience (schematized above). Nor is she one who undergoes this many, many times. Instead—and this is no doubt what makes the Pyrrhonian so radical—she takes this initial set of experiences and

---

[56] At least temporarily—nothing precludes the skeptic from re-examining the arguments for and against P at a later time, or from coming up with new arguments for or against P.

[57] *OP* 1:4, 8-9.

[58] This schema is adopted from Myles Burnyeat's article "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" (p. 29). Burnyeat lays out the sequence as follows:

Conflict → *Undecidability* → *Equal Strength* → *Epochē* → *Ataraxia.*

Aside from his terms, I have revised his version slightly, since he includes "undecidability" *before* equal strength. This is surely a mistake (since the equal strength is precisely what makes the case undecidable), unless he intends "undecidable" to describe only the lack of criterion (in which case "undecidable" is simply a poor word choice).

appropriates them to serve as a kind of model[59] or guide for how to live her cognitive life. In other words, *every time* a belief candidate pops up, the skeptic runs through this process. This is why Sextus says that the Pyrrhonian is one who has a certain "disposition" to enter into the kind of "practice" schematized above.[60] Moreover, it is not open to her simply to stop engaging in this practice when presented with a new belief-candidate. Were she to do so—say, she affirms it because she is feeling lazy, or because she believes she has already found the answer[61]—she would no longer be engaging in a search for truth. And, since Sextus says skeptics "continue to search," this would disqualify her from being skeptic, properly speaking.

In light of these last considerations, however, the initial schematization needs a bit of revising, for it begins with a *given* opposition. Yet, Sextus tells us that the opposition is brought about *by the skeptic herself*.[62] Hence the following revision:

Initial claim ("P") → *<u>Skeptical Argument (for "not-P")</u>* → *Equipollence* → *Epochē* → *Ataraxia*

It is important to note that the skeptic's suspension of judgment is not a matter of laziness or of a weakness of will. On the contrary, her suspension is necessitated by the rational nature of her search. Since she lacks any means by which[63] to judge that P is a more reasonable conclusion than not-P, and

---

[59] A bit of caution is warranted here, since my claim that the skeptic uses a "model" may imply that she is also decided in advance of any issue that knowledge is unattainable. This, of course, could commit her to a very strong claim about the possibility of knowledge, and would render her indistinguishable from the Academics. According to Michael Williams, the Pyrrhonian can avoid this by emphasizing "the primacy of technique. Becoming a sceptic depends on acquiring an ability, not on proving or even assenting to a thesis" ("Scepticism without Theory," p. 554).

[60] *OP* 1:5:11: the skeptic "is the person who has the aforementioned *disposition*" (my italics); and later, at *OP* 1:6:12: "the main origin of Skepticism is the *practice* of opposing to each statement an equal statement" (my italics).

[61] Of course, if she stopped for this reason—viz., that she believes she has already discovered the answer—she would be guilty of dogmatism, and not mere laziness.

[62] *OP* 1:4:8: "The Skeptic Way is a disposition to oppose phenomena and noumena to one another." That is, the skeptic *does the opposing*, and does not, say, just *receive* conflicting arguments passive.

[63] More will be said about this lack of means or "criterion" in the next section.

since P and not-P are opposed[64] to one another, she cannot *rationally* believe either P or not-P.[65] For example, suppose I am wondering where there are an even or odd number of hairs on Barack Obama's head. Since I currently have no evidence that counts in favor of the oddness or evenness of the number, and I also lack any means to obtain any such evidence, I have no rational grounds for claiming that the number is odd, nor have I any grounds for claiming the number is even. Thus, it is not merely prudent to withhold judgment in this case—it is the *only reasonable* thing to do.

So far a few features of Pyrrhonian skeptic's position are salient. First, the variety of skepticism aims at a particular goal, *ataraxia*, or "an untroubled and tranquil condition of the soul."[66] Additionally, it has a strategy for achieving this goal, that of generating equipollent arguments. Finally, this strategy must be a matter of constant practice if one is to count as being a skeptic. More about this strategy needs to be said.

1.7 The Modes

A discussion of the ancient skeptical strategies or "modes" will bring the distinction between ancient and modern skepticisms into sharper focus and help us to see how ancient "appearances" are not quite analogous to modern mental states. The ancient skeptic relies on certain "modes" or forms of argumentation to generate equipollent arguments.[67] A full treatment is not in order here, so I will describe them only briefly, since an outline of the strategy will suffice to make Hegel's criticism clear. Additionally, and more importantly, Sextus himself claims that the list of modes he provides is not to be considered complete. As he says, "I shall set down the modes or arguments by means of which

---

[64] In this case, there is obviously an outright contradiction involved, and not merely an opposition. However, Sextus claims that "opposed statements" is intended to encompass all "inconsistent statements" and not just a claim and its negation. Thus, for example, claims like "unicorns weigh 1,000 pounds" and "unicorns do not exist" would count as "opposed statements."

[65] For further discussion, see Casey Perrin's *The Demands of Reason*, especially Chapter Two, "Necessity and Rationality." Here he argues that "it is necessary for the Sceptic to suspend judgment *if* he is to satisfy, as he aims to do, the demands of reason" (p. 38).

[66] *OP* 1:4, 10.

[67] *OP* 1:13-1:17.

suspension of judgment is brought about, without, however, maintaining anything about their number or force." That is, Sextus admits there may be other modes that are not listed here, and it may also turn out that these modes may well be "unsound." [68] Since Sextus himself is aiming only for a general picture of the modes, we ought not to expect that we will discover everything there is to know about the strategies, even by means of a thorough investigation of them.

Sextus presents the modes in four groups, roughly organized by date and subject, although he is clear about not maintaining any beliefs about the rightness of the organization.[69] The "Ten Modes,"[70] which we are told were handed down from the "older Skeptics," deal with *epochē* regarding what Sextus calls "external 'facts.'"[71] These modes are almost exclusively focused on issues of sensory perception—save the tenth mode, which focuses on social, ethical and political issues. Sextus offers several run-of-the-mill skeptical worries. Humans are only one of many types of animal, and animals possess radically different sense organs, so how can we be sure human sense perceptions are veridical or complete? Objects look either bigger or smaller based on our proximity to them, yet we assume the object remains the same size. How can this be? Since we notice differences in our visual perceptions when our eyes are bloodshot, or when we have jaundice, how are we to confirm that our 'normal' visual perceptions are not somehow obscured? In most cases, Sextus aims to show that we have equally good epistemic reasons for endorsing or denying the belief (or faculty) under consideration, because we cannot find a criterion by which to judge competing claims. Consider again this last example about obscured vision. We notice that differences in sense organs result in different perceptions (i.e., appearances) and also that sense organs differ from person to person. For example, some people have stronger eyesight than

---

[68] *OP* 1:13:35.
[69] *OP* 1:14:38-9.
[70] *OP* 1:14:36-163. To wit: the one based on the variety of animals, on the differences among humans, on the differences in the make-up of the sense organs, on the circumstances, on positions, on admixtures, on the quantity and constitution of external bodies, on relativity, on frequency of occurrence, and on customs and laws (1:14:36-7).
[71] *OP* 1:14:163.

others, some a keener sense of smell, and so on. Since each of us can judge only according to what appears to us, we are unable to determine whether claims like "honey is sweet" and "marble is hard" describe the way honey and marble *actually are*, or whether this is *merely how they appear* to us.

Sextus concludes his discussion of the Ten Modes thusly:

> by this [tenth] mode…so much anomaly in "the facts" has been shown, *we shall not be able to say how any external object or state of affairs is in its nature*, but only how it appears in relation to a given way of life, [to sense organs X, Y, and Z], and so forth. And so because of [these modes] we must suspend judgment about the nature of the external 'facts.'[72]

The problem here is a familiar one:[73] what we lack in these cases is any sort of *criterion* according to which we could say "appearance X is veridical," but "appearance Y is not." Once we phrase the problem this way, we can see how this strategy can be extended beyond objects of perception. And Sextus carries out this extension as he continues the discussion of the "Five Modes," which were handed down by "the more recent Skeptics."[74] Here the general schema is much the same, although the focus is now on a wider category of beliefs.

According to one of Sextus's arguments, "anything proposed for consideration is either a sense object or a thought object;[75] but whichever it is, there is disagreement concerning it."[76] Disagreement implies a need for justification, and this is where the justificatory problems begin. Take some candidate belief P, a claim about sensory[77] objects. Why believe P? If we simply assert it dogmatically, then one could just as easily assert not-P dogmatically, thus leaving us at an impasse. If, however, we are justified

---

[72] *OP* 1:14:163, emphasis added.
[73] This will be especially familiar to readers of the *PhG.* See ¶81-2 in the "Introduction."
[74] *OP* 1:5:164ff.
[75] This, of course, appears to be a fairly strong philosophical commitment. In fact, it appears to be very similar to the view of a modern skeptic, such as Hume or Descartes. However, I do not think Sextus intends to claim that this is a hard and fast distinction. When he explains earlier a distinction between body and soul, he qualifies it as follows: "human beings *are said to be* composed of two elements, the soul and the body" (*OP* 1:14:79, my emphasis). Thus, I think we can be charitable here and assume he means this to be a *merely hypothetical* presupposition, not something to which Sextus would remain committed—i.e., it is not something he *believes*.
[76] *OP* 1:15:170.
[77] It should be clear how, *mutatis mutandis*, this strategy would work for a thought object.

in believing P, we are so insofar as we believe on the basis of *some other* reason. Call this reason a second belief, J (for "justificatory belief").

Just like the initial claim P, however, J will itself require grounding. If J is about a sense object, we have simply pushed back the question, and now the second J-belief needs further justification. Infinite regression looms. On the other hand, if J is about a thought object, then it will also require further justification, lest we assert it dogmatically. Now we are faced with either an infinite regression (if we posit more thoughts to do the justificatory work), or a circularity (if we point to a sense object to justify the thought object). This should all sound familiar to modern epistemologists: the worry is about how one could ever *sufficiently justify* any claim without falling into foundationalism, circularity, or an infinite regression.

1.8 A Preliminary Objection: Paralysis

At this point, however, a common misconception rears its head in the form of a "paralysis" objection. We have said that the Pyrrhonian skeptic subjects *everything* to doubt, including her own mental states. Yet, if this is so, how can she ever perform a single (conscious) action? After all, it seems as though I need *lots* of beliefs (including ones about my own mental states) in order to perform just about any action at all. For example, I *believe* that Oct. 1 is my mother's birthday, and I *believe* that today is Oct. 1, and so I call to wish her a happy birthday; I *believe* that my meeting begins at noon, and I *believe* that the office is 20 minutes away, and I *believe* that the clock is currently showing 11:30 am, so I decide to leave the house.[78] It is easy to see how our lives are saturated with examples like this—examples, that is, wherein our failure to hold *even one* of the beliefs would prevent us from taking the action. Just imagine, for example, how the phone call would be impacted if I had no more reason for

[78] I have abbreviated the examples for simplicity, but there are *plenty* more beliefs involved in both cases. In the first case, e.g., I also believe that the calendar I am looking at is accurate, that the number I am dialing is my mother's phone number, that this object I sense is a telephone, and so on.

believing that the calendar is accurate than not. So, insofar as the Pyrrhonian claims to have *zero* beliefs, she ought never to take any actions at all. Yet, of course, she does act, which ought to indicate that she must hold at least some beliefs.[79]

Common as this criticism may be, it is adequately addressed by Sextus early on in *Outlines.* He points out a distinction between what we might call two kinds of *cognitive* attitudes that we take towards different content in our experience: mere "assent," on the one hand, and full-fledged "belief" on the other. The skeptic, he says, gives her "assent" to those things that are "forced upon" her, such as sense impressions. Thus, for example, when a skeptic touches a hot stove, she will not say 'I seem not to feel hot.'[80] Instead, she will merely *assent* to this appearance,[81] which is to say, she will endorse only the weaker, qualified claim: 'I seem to feel hot now.'[82] She will, however, refrain from making any stronger claims in this case, such as "*the stove* is hot," since this claim involves a commitment to how some object *actually is*, independent of appearances. Moreover, this latter claim would rely upon—and thereby commit the skeptic to—many connected beliefs.[83] This latter claim involves a belief about something that is "non-evident"—namely, the stove itself and its properties—and these are the beliefs that the skeptic rejects. She does not, however, "reject the things that lead [her] involuntarily to assent in accord with some passively received *phantasia*, and these are appearances."[84]

So Sextus gets around the criticism by drawing two different distinctions: on the one hand, between "belief" and mere "assent," and on the other, between a "non-evident" reality and "evident"

---

[79] This criticism is raised by Hume in his *Enquiry*, pp. 102-114.
[80] This is adapted from Sextus's example at *OP* 1:7:13.
[81] See *OP* 1:10:19: "Those who claim that the Skeptics deny appearances seem to me not to have heard what we say. For…we do not reject…appearances." See also *OP* 1:13.
[82] I am tempted to append an "it appears to me now that" clause to the front of this claim, although I am unsure whether or not Sextus would agree.
[83] For example, it commits me to beliefs about what kinds of things stoves are—say, the kind that can get hot—as well as beliefs about kind of thing heat is—it's the kind of thing that can occur 'in' objects, the kind of thing that I can be effected by, etc.. I do not mean for these to sound overly 'scientific' philosophical; I certainly do not mean that one must be a physicist to believe that stoves are hot!
[84] *OP* 1:10:19.

appearances. It is by *assenting* only to *appearances* that the skeptic can act in a way that is consistent with her claim to hold no *beliefs* (about the way things are *in reality*).

1.9 Two Types of Ancient Skepticism: Pyrrhonians vs. Academics

We have seen how modern skepticism qualifies as dogmatic. Yet Sextus is also at pains to distinguish his skepticism from another sort of skepticism: the so-called Academic skepticism. And this distinction is one that has serious implications for Hegel's criticism, since he takes it to be a merely "formal" distinction,[85] while Sextus takes it to be quite significant. According to Sextus, this latter skepticism exhibits a dogmatic character, and understanding the distinction is requisite before one can adequately analyze Hegel's arguments in the *Phenomenology*.

It is important to note right away that the two schools are closely related, as even Sextus admits.[86] The difference that Sextus seems to highlight is the way in which each school treats the various 'meta' claims, or "slogans," as Sextus calls them: "I determine nothing," "everything is indeterminate," "everything is non-apprehensible," and so on.[87] It is a unique feature of Pyrrhonian skepticism that it holds these claims to be *self-refuting*,[88] while an Academic skeptic would hold these to be true claims about the way things are by nature. So the Pyrrhonian does not believe that she has no beliefs, nor does she apprehend that everything is non-apprehensible. Thus, when Sextus says Pyrrhonian skeptics "do not affirm or deny anything," he notes immediately that they say this "not on the assumption that things are in their nature such as to produce non-assertion in every case"—for this would plainly commit them

---

[85] *LHP* Vol. 2*,* p. 311.
[86] Hence Sextus relates the Academic skeptic Arcesilaus very closely to the Pyrrhonian tradition, citing only a small difference between them: Arcesilaus firmly maintains that *ataraxia* is good *by nature* (*OP* 1:33:232-4).
[87] *OP* 1:18-28.
[88] See, e.g., *OP* 1:7:14: "the Skeptic does not put forward these slogans as holding absolutely. He considers that…the "Nothing more" slogan says that it itself is no more the case than its opposite, and thus it *applies to itself along with the rest*" (my emphasis).

to a belief about the non-evident—"but simply as making evident that we, now, when we are uttering it, and in the case of the particular matters in question, are experiencing this *pathos*."[89]

Yet, as indicated in Sextus's original division, the Academic claims that the truth "cannot be apprehended." For this reason, Sextus calls the Academic skeptic dogmatic. While the Pyrrhonian takes his arguments to show merely that, thus far, we appear to have failed in our quest for knowledge,[90] the Academic skeptic takes her arguments to show conclusively that no one could *ever* have a belief that counts as knowledge. Sextus sums up this difference nicely later in the *Outlines*:

> The Members of the New Academy, although they say that all things are non-apprehensible, differ from the Skeptics, it appears, even in the very statement that all things are non-apprehensible (for they firmly maintain this, while it seems to the Skeptic that maybe something can be apprehended). (*OP* 1:33; 226)

Thus it seems that the Academic skeptic is also guilty of a form of dogmatism. Hegel will attempt to make trouble with Sextus's distinction, claiming that there is in fact no significant difference between the two skeptical positions.[91] Whether Hegel's decision to collapse the distinction is a good one or not is a matter of debate, and more will be said about this distinction in the last chapter.

---

[89] *OP* 1:20:192-3.

[90] See, e.g., Sextus's discussion of the "everything is indeterminate" slogan. When a Pyrrhonian says 'everything is determinate,' "what is said comes down to this: 'all of the matters of dogmatic inquiry that I have considered appears to me to be such that not one of them seems to me superior, as regards credibility and incredibility, to anything inconsistent with it'" (*OP* 1:24:199).

[91] For example, in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel claims that any apparent difference between Pyrrhonian and Academic schools "has but little signification" (*LHP* Vol. 2, p. 311).

CHAPTER 2: HEGEL'S BASIC ANTI-SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT

At the start of his discussion of skepticism in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel notes that skepticism is "*in itself* the negative, and that is the way it must exhibit itself."[92] The notion of "negativity" at work here is unusual. Hegel tells us in the *Encyclopedia* that "the negative on its own account is nothing but distinction itself…the negative is distinction as such, determined as not being identity."[93] Despite the typically Hegelian verbiage, I think this can be fairly easily understood in relation to the case of the Pyrrhonian skeptic: when a dogmatist takes some belief B to be true, the Pyrrhonian tries to argue for another belief (not-B) that is equally worthy of endorsement. So Hegel would describe the dogmatist's belief as a sort of assertion of *identity*[94] between two things: the belief and reality. The dogmatist believes that B corresponds, or accurately represents, the way things are. What the skeptic does in response is try to generate an argument to show that this apparent identity may be mistaken—that is, that there may in fact be some *difference* between the way things actually are and the way the belief says things are. The way she does this is by showing that the negation of B is equally plausible, and so we cannot be sure which of the conflicting claims 'matches' reality. It is in this sense that Hegel calls skepticism "the negative." Moreover, it is not open to a skeptic simply to stop making negative arguments. Engaging in this particular activity is what makes someone a skeptic in the first place.[95] Hence Hegel's claim that skepticism is "*in itself*" negative.

Yet, since the skeptic still has to act, she must accordingly endorse—however minimally—certain claims. Indeed, Sextus tells us that skeptics hold to "appearances" and "live without beliefs but in

---

[92] *PhG* ¶202.
[93] *Encyclopedia*, p. 186 (§119, Addition 1).
[94] I don't mean anything complicated here: just as we might think of a photograph as being in some sense "the same as" the person it represents, so we may describe a dogmatist's belief as held to be "the same as" reality. I don't mean, of course, that the photograph of me is literally the same as me, but, on the other hand, we are alike in a way that, say, my photograph and my neighbor are not alike.
[95] Two important points support Hegel's claim here. (1) Sextus often stresses the performative component of skepticism, calling it "activity" (*OP* 1:3:7*)*, a "disposition" (*OP* 1:4:8), and a "practice" (*OP* 1:6:6). (This notion is also stressed in Williams's claim that "becoming a sceptic depends on acquiring an ability."). (2) Sextus's claim that one who dogmatizes "about any single thing" should not be counted as a skeptic (see n. 54). Indeed, this was the reason I gave for Sextus to deny that Hume was a skeptic, properly speaking.

accord with the ordinary regimen of life, since we cannot be wholly inactive."[96] Although the skeptic may realize that none of her beliefs can be fully grounded, she nonetheless assents to some things, with the qualification that she does not hold these to be true of the world. For example, the skeptic may pay for her groceries, rather than steal them, since it appears that stealing them would violate some legal or social rule. So, she may act in accordance with this appearance, even though she may realize the law may not be ultimately just, or that the rule may not apply to her in this case, or some other reason. According to Hegel, the skeptical position "avows that it is an entirely *contingent individual* consciousness—a consciousness which is *empirical*, which orients itself in terms of what has no reality for it, which obeys what is not essential for it, and which acts on and actualizes what has no truth for it."[97] Hegel is here emphasizing both that the skeptic lives according appearances, and that these appearances are not claimed to be true or representative of the way the world is. In other words, the skeptic does not claim that the appearances to which she assents have a status that is "essential" or "real"—rather, it is simply what seems to be the case to her, now. Think, for example, about the difference between someone doing volunteer work because they believe it is a way to do God's work, and someone who simply signs up for volunteer work because all of his friends or work associates are volunteering. In the former instance, the action rests upon a full-fledged belief that this is the right action to take, while in the latter instance, the action is a result of 'going through the motions,' so to speak. The skeptic's way of life is much more akin to—though not quite the same as—the latter instance, since that instance involves no positive belief about the goodness of doing volunteer work.[98]

At this point Hegel has caught the skeptic in what looks like a performative contradiction: on the one hand, the skeptic withholds belief about all claims; yet, on the other hand, she acts *as if* she believes

---

[96] *OP* 1:11; 23.
[97] *Phenomenology* ¶205.
[98] I do not mean to imply that the skeptic merely "follows the crowd." Typically, one says this about someone who blindly adheres to whatever everyone else is doing. But, importantly, the Pyrrhonian exhibits an incessant desire to figure out the truth about things *for herself* (see, e.g., *OP* 1:11-4 and 1:6:12).

all sorts of things to be true. (For example, the band-wagon volunteer above seems to hold some beliefs about, say, how his decision may affect his reputation, career, love life, etc.) As Hegel says, the skeptical self-consciousness:

> speaks about the nullity of seeing, hearing, and so on, and it *itself sees*, *hears*, and so on. It speaks about the nullity of ethical essentialities, and then it makes those essentialities themselves into the powers governing its actions. Its acts and its words always contradict each other.[99]

The issue seems to be this: the skeptic claims, for example, that there is no such thing as a morally right action. Yet, the skeptic does not go around punching people and stealing their wallets. On the contrary, she lives according to the customs and laws of her society, which do not allow for violence and theft. So Hegel wants to claim that, insofar as the skeptic acts in accordance with the laws and customs of her city, she is likewise committed (in some fashion or other) to some belief—perhaps the belief that 'one ought not to punch others and steal their wallets' or that 'one ought to live by the rules and customs of his society.'

[99] *PhG* ¶205 (Hegel's emphasis).

CHAPTER 3: EVALUATING HEGEL'S CRITICISM

It is not immediately clear how exactly Hegel's objection is supposed to reveal a problem for the Pyrrhonian skeptic. This section offers three interpretations of Hegel's anti-skeptical argument, the first two of which are very closely related, as well as an analysis of each interpretation.

3.1 Hegel's Argument as an "Implausibility" Objection

Perhaps the easiest way to understand Hegel's objection is as being akin to Hume's "Paralysis Objection" from above. Forster also makes the connection between Hegel and Hume. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel's argument "seems to echo the view championed by Hume in the modern period that the Pyrrhonist ideal of a life without belief proves vain in the face of action, which of necessity involves beliefs."[100] On the one hand, the skeptic says she is not committed to any beliefs. Yet, on the other hand, *it seems as though all actions require beliefs*, and the skeptic certainly acts. Thus, there seems to be some tension between a skeptic's claim that she believes nothing and her active life. This is what Hegel means when he says that the skeptic's "acts" and "words" are in contradiction with one another.[101]

Michael Williams has rightly identified an ambiguity in this charge against the skeptic. There are "two quite distinct ways of excluding the possibility of a life without belief."[102] It either takes the form of a "psychological" objection, as in the case of Hume, or a stronger, "logical" objection. Williams cites a well-known passage from the *Enquiry* to show that Hume's charge is indeed a psychological charge of *impracticality*, rather than a logical charge of *impossibility*: since "nature is always too strong for principle," the skeptic simply lacks the psychological 'strength' to maintain skeptical attitudes during her

[100] *Hegel and Skepticism*, p. 40.
[101] *PhG* ¶205.
[102] "Scepticism without Theory," p. 552.

interactions with the world.[103] Just before the passage that Williams cites, the psychological character of Hume's charge is made even more explicitly:

> These [skeptical] principles may flourish and triumph in the schools; where it is, indeed, *difficult*, *if not impossible*, to refute them. But as soon as [the skeptics] leave the shade, and by the presence of the real objects, which actuate our passions and sentiments, are put in opposition to the *more powerful principles of our nature*, they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined sceptic in the same condition as other mortals."[104]

Williams is therefore correct to point out that Hume's anti-skeptical argument is one about whether or not the Pyrrhonian has the psychological strength or mental wherewithal to remain skeptical in the face of her active life. And, thus, Williams concludes that the "Humean objection is not to the theoretical coherence of the sceptical outlook, but the feasibility of putting it into practice."[105]

To this objection of implausibility, the Pyrrhonian skeptic's response will sound very much like the response to the "Paralysis" objection from above. Since Hume's objection rests on the assumption that the skeptic does not assent to *any* claims at all, the Pyrrhonian can point to different kinds or levels of belief. In fact, this is just what Sextus tries to do when he distinguishes between "assent" and "belief." In the case of belief, we assert something non-evident[106] with "firm confidence," whereas in the case of assent we passively accept something.[107] For example, I may believe that it will not snow in Miami this July. In this case I am in a position to put forward (what I take to be) strong reasons for the belief, and so I may hold the belief with confidence. Alternatively, I may merely assent to the proposition that my coffee is hot, acknowledging simply that it does *appear* hot *to me*, *now*, without making any further claims about the state of affairs in the world that this appearance may be said to represent.[108] In other

---

[103] *Enquiry*, p. 110.
[104] *Enquiry*, pp. 109-10 (my emphasis).
[105] "Scepticism without Theory," p. 552.
[106] See *OP* 1:7:13-4: "The Pyrrhonist assents to nothing that is non-evident."
[107] When Sextus distinguishes himself from the Academic philosophers, he notes that Academics are "strongly persuaded…whereas we say that we simply make a concession without any pro feeling" (*OP* 1:33; 230).
[108] For example, it may turn out that it isn't coffee, but black water, or that "heat" and "cold" aren't actually properties of liquids, or that my sensations of hot and cold are being somehow affected by the circumstance, my sense organs, etc..

words, I am not particularly apt—nor, perhaps, am I even able—to defend or justify the claim; I am simply not compelled to deny the claim, since things do appear thusly to me, now.[109]

Now, this distinction between assent and belief seems to address adequately Hegel's charge, at if the argument is merely intended to show that the skeptical life is too difficult to maintain. Since the skeptic conducts her life in accordance with various appearances, and since her attitude towards these appearances is not one of belief, but mere assent, she can account for how it is possible for someone to live a life without belief.

3.2 Hegel's Argument as an "Impossibility" Objection

However, Williams also recognized that this charge can be reformulated, not as a charge of impracticality, but of logical *impossibility*. Perhaps this is what Hegel has in mind.[110] In order for this charge to stick, a few assumptions need to be in place, including, first and foremost, one about the relationship between belief and action. Simply put, one who charges the skeptic as attempting to engage in an impossible activity must claim that *all actions require beliefs.* And this means that the anti-skeptical argument necessarily rests on a certain views about human agency and about how beliefs factor into human action.

More need not be said here: a skeptical response to this charge is readily available. It involves the skeptic pointing out two things. First, she need only repeat the assent/belief distinction to show that the claim "all actions require beliefs" need not be believed. And, if the claim is turned into "all actions require *assent*," there is no conflict with this claim and Sextus's claim that the skeptic lives without *belief*. Since the anti-skeptical argument is aimed at showing some sort of inconsistency between the

---

[109] In this context, Sextus talks of the skeptic assent to appearances that are "forced upon" the skeptic (*OP* 1:7:13). At *OP* 1:10:19, he further describes this variety of assent: "[skeptics] do not reject the things that lead us involuntarily to assent in accord with a passively received *phantasia*, and these are appearances."

[110] It is, after all, a fairly weak criticism to say that skepticism is simply 'too hard' and therefore ought to be rejected. Certainly reading Hegel is a difficult, if not impossible, activity, though surely Hegel would not find this an interesting reason to reject Hegel!

skeptic's assertions and her actions, to claim that a life without *assent* may be impossible is no longer to point out a problem for the skeptic, since this is a claim with which Sextus would agree.[111] Furthermore, Sextus can (and should) also point out that the claim "all actions require beliefs" itself rests on many justifying reasons, and these justifying reasons are worth analyzing. Claims like "all actions require belief," involve a whole slew of views about human nature, human action, the mind, and so on. So the second point of response here from the skeptic works by pointing out that the anti-skeptical charge of impossibility is only believable—indeed, on meaningful—on the basis of many other beliefs, some (or all) of which may be held dogmatically by the non-skeptic.[112]

It thus appears that, regardless of whether we interpret it as a charge of implausibility or of impossibility, the charge of Paralysis does not adequately address the skeptic. However, things appear to have gone too smoothly: on the one hand, given Hegel's (allegedly) strong interest in ancient skepticism, and his somewhat dismissive view of Hume, it seems odd that Hegel would simply mimic Hume's famous anti-skeptical argument.[113] Moreover, even if we read the charge, not as Hume's, but a stronger charge of impossibility, Hegel seems to be running together two kinds of belief or affirmation, the distinction between which is central to the Pyrrhonian position and is expressed very early on in the *Outlines* by Sextus. Thus, in order to be charitable, we ought to attempt to reformulate Hegel's anti-skeptical argument in such a way that he does not simply overlook a central Pyrrhonian distinction. Surely, if Hegel's interest in ancient skepticism is as keen as someone like Forster claims, we should not expect Hegel's treatment to be so uncharitable (or flat out ignorant).

---

[111] See *OP* 1:11:23: "Holding to appearances, then, we [skeptics] live without beliefs but in accord with the ordinary regimen of life, since we cannot be wholly inactive."

[112] For example, it is hard to understand how the impossibility charge can get off the ground without the following belief: "actions are *by nature* the kind of things that presuppose full-fledged beliefs; without the latter, the former remains forever impossible." And claims about how things are "by nature" and about future (im)possibilities are precisely the kind Sextus wants to avoid (see, e.g., *OP* 1:10:19; *OP* 1:11; and *OP* 1:13:32-4).

[113] Forster (p. 40-1), for example, thinks that, in the *PhG*, Hegel does in fact simply copy Hume, but that Hegel's "more original criticism" occurs elsewhere (*LHP* Vol. 2 and "The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy").

3.3 Hegel's Argument as a Charge that the Skeptic's Position is Logically Inconsistent

There is of course much more to be said about the distinction (or lack thereof) between assent and belief and what this means for the possibility of living a skeptical life.[114] However, we need not detain ourselves with this issue any further, because there is at least one other way to read Hegel's charge such that it would hold *even if* we could draw the distinction between belief and assent.

Another interpretation of Hegel's criticism rests not on some practical difficulty regarding how or whether the skeptic acts, but rather on the very manner in which the skeptic represents her skepticism to herself.[115] Proponents of this reading, such as Terry Pinkard,[116] argue that the tension is not between the skeptic's skeptical activities and her everyday activities, but rather with the *very way the skeptic conceives of her own skeptical activity*. In other words, even if the skeptic could do away with the impracticality charge (say, by finding some way to live without any beliefs, or by drawing a distinction between kinds of belief), she would still be involved in a contradiction.

On the one hand, through the *systematic* application of the modes to any claim to knowledge with which she is presented, the skeptic seems to be in a position to show that *any* claim to knowledge is attached to a particular subjective point of view, and, thus, that the claim lacks the objective status that knowledge requires. For example, when someone claims that honey really is sweet, the skeptic may invoke the first mode, based on the variety of animals, to show that it may be the case that the honey only *appears* sweet to us humans, but that it may appear quite differently to a different sort of animal. Thus, the skeptic may conclude, we ought not to make any claims about the honey *itself*, but only about how it appears *to us*. Insofar as the central aim of skeptical arguments seems to be that of pointing out that each claim to objective knowledge is in fact based on some limited, subjective point of view, she appears to affirming a deep subjectivity or relativism: every time I think I am in possession of a belief

---

[114] Cf. the Frede and Burnyeat essays in their anthology *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*.
[115] This kind of criticism lines up nicely with the discussion of Hegel's project in the *PhG*, especially with the notion of "internal critique" (see Section 1.1 above).
[116] See pp. 67-72 in *HP.*

that is true of the world, independent of my subjective viewpoint thereof, the skeptic shows that the claim is not independent in this way, and thus lacks objectivity. In other words, the skeptic seems to be some sort of relativist. However, on the other hand, the skeptic can arrive at this position only by assuming a universal, objective standpoint in her arguments and determining that no subjective claims to knowledge actually succeed. As Pinkard puts it, "the skeptic [her]self must assume the detached universal point of view to see that all claims to knowledge are themselves relative to a subjective point of view."[117] Thus, it looks as if the skeptic claims to occupy only a particular or subjective position, and also that, in order to arrive at that subjective position, she must also assume the objective, universal position.

This interpretation also finds textual support, both in the *Phenomenology* and in Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy.* In the former text, Hegel describes skepticism thusly:

> By way of that self-conscious negation, self-consciousness itself engenders *for itself both the certainty of its own freedom* and the experience of that freedom, and it thereby raises them to *truth*. What vanishes is the determinate, that is, the distinction which, no matter what it is or from where it comes, is established as fixed and unchangeable.[118]

Let us clarify. Through his doubting activity (which Hegel describes as "self-conscious negation"), the skeptic realizes that he is not required to hold *any* particular belief; i.e., the skeptic recognizes himself as *free* insofar as his thoughts remains unrestricted. Yet these negations take the form of (purportedly) universal arguments.

We can look to the discussion of the "Five Modes" above to see why Hegel would think these arguments have this universal form. When the Pyrrhonist wants to evaluate any candidate for belief P, she looks to see what belief J counts as evidence for P. By appealing to one of the modes, she can then show that, regardless of whether J is a thought object or a sense object, the justificatory process runs aground, either on account of its being dogmatic, circular, or involving an infinite regression.

---

[117] *HP*, p. 68.
[118] *PhG*, ¶204 (Hegel's emphasis).

According to Pinkard's reading, this process leads to the following consequence. The skeptic is precluded from affirming the existence of *any* particular ("determinate") thing that presents itself to her. Thus, the world of appearances with which she is confronted cannot be assumed by her to be veridical. For although the skeptic admits that things *appear* some way or other, she nonetheless does not *believe* these appearances accurately represent the way things are. The crucial point for Pinkard's reading, however, is that this eschewal of the particular, determinate world—and, therefore, the commitment to relativism—takes place *as the result of* universal arguments.

In his *Lectures,* Hegel describes the skeptical position similarly when he says "the older Scepticism does not doubt, being certain of untruth, and indifferent to the one as to the other…[I]t proves with certainty the untruth of all."[119] The point worth emphasizing here is that the skeptic, according to this Hegelian view, is *certain* of untruth. This certainty is just what Pinkard has in mind when he describes the "tension" within the skeptical position: "the skeptic claims that *all* claims to knowledge are relative to the subjective point of view of *one* individual."[120]

Therefore, Pinkard's interpretation seems to do justice to Hegel's characterization. Yet, the question we must now consider is whether or not Hegel's own characterization of ancient skepticism is fair. And if it is not found to be fair—as I will argue presently—we may well wonder whether or not the recent wave of literature is even correct to say that Hegel's project is in large part a response to ancient skeptical worries.

3.4 Responding to Pinkard: The Distinction between Academic and Pyrrhonian Skepticism

I hope it is obvious at this point that, if his argument really is as Pinkard says, then Hegel has conflated the Academic and Pyrrhonian skeptics in his charge. The self-conception objection rests on the claim that skeptics "prove with certainty the untruth of all." This latter claim, however—that all is

[119] *LHP* Vol. 2, p. 333.
[120] *HP*, p. 68.

untrue—is explicitly rejected by Sextus. In fact, he says, "it seems to the [Pyrrhonian] Skeptic that maybe something can be apprehended."[121] So it looks as if Pinkard's reading of Hegel's criticisms will work only if the both the Pyrrhonian and Academic skeptics are committed to the claim that all knowledge is impossible. Yet the Pyrrhonian does not assert this claim—in fact, he explicitly denies it. Therefore, it looks as if Hegel's criticism has missed the point entirely.

Hegel, however, will want to respond that there is no meaningful distinction between the two varieties of ancient skepticism. The distinction, he says, is "certainly very formal, and has but little signification, but [one] to which the Sceptics in their subtlety undoubtedly attached some meaning."[122] One way he will deny the distinction is by simply claiming that the Pyrrhonian does in fact deny that any knowledge is possible; the skeptic merely *claims*—perhaps disingenuously—that he does not.[123] Ancient skepticism, he says, "is completely at a point, and perfectly decided [with regards to the 'certainty of untruth'], although *this decision is not truth to it*."[124] In other words, the Pyrrhonian skeptic must endorse the impossibility of knowledge, but he simply fails to assert this claim.

Now the systematic character of the Pyrrhonian system does offer some support for Hegel's claim. What was initially appealing about Pyrrhonian skepticism was the repeatability of its strategies. Whereas the modern skeptic was tied down to very specific problems—as a result of being tied down to very specific presuppositions—the ancient skeptic possessed a strategy for showing any claim whatsoever to be unworthy of belief. Indeed, it was this universal ability to doubt that made ancient skepticism so much more dangerous in Hegel's eyes than modern skepticism.

Yet, Hegel is mistaken in his characterization of Pyrrhonian skepticism as having already decided in advance, as it were, that all is unknowable. First of all, as noted above, Sextus hedges about the effectiveness of the modes, noting that, through these moves, "it *seems* that suspension of judgment is

---

[121] *OP* 1:33:226.
[122] *LHP* Vol. 2, p. 311.
[123] This is likely what Hegel has in mind when he talks about the skeptic reinforcing "sophistry" at *PhG*, ¶204.
[124] *LHP* Vol. 2, p. 333 (my emphasis).

brought about."[125] In other words, the Pyrrhonian skeptic is not committed to the claim that the modes actually result in suspension of judgment in every case. Furthermore, Sextus does not claim that the list of modes is exhaustive or that any of them is even *sound*."[126]

3.5 Against Hegel's Rejection of the Academic/Pyrrhonian Distinction

If we take him seriously, Sextus's claims offer us good reasons to reject Hegel's conflation of Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism. For, on the one hand, the Academic skeptic believes with confidence that even those knowledge claims which he has not yet investigated must necessarily fall short of actual knowledge. Yet, on the other hand, the Pyrrhonian will find no support for this belief.

This is no mere mincing of words, as Hegel seems to think.[127] It means that the Academic skeptic is vulnerable to certain Humean worries about inductive reasoning, while the Pyrrhonian is not. For the Academic skeptic must be committed to what Barry Stroud calls the "Uniformity Principle."[128] This principle, identified by Hume in the *Treatise,* holds that "instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same."[129] Applied to the current debate, the issue is whether or not the Academic skeptic can hold that future candidates for belief will be (at least in all relevant respects) the same as those candidates thus far encountered. If he were not so committed, then he would have no reason to think that the next belief candidate he comes across can be adequately addressed by reference to one of the modes. And if he cannot be sure that future candidates for belief can be addressed by one of the modes, then he has no justification for assuming that all things are inapprehensible.

---

[125] *OP* 1:14:36 (my emphasis).
[126] *OP* 1:13:35.
[127] See the sections of the *LHP* Vol. 2 cited in n. 122 above.
[128] *Hume*, p. 54.
[129] *Treatise*, 62; 1.3.6.4-5.

And it is at this point that we can see why Sextus's qualifiers in his discussion of the Modes are crucial. With regard to the Modes, Sextus denies that he is "maintaining anything about their number or force," and leaves open the possibility that "they may well be unsound, and there may be more than the ones I shall mention."[130] If we take him seriously, then it remains an open possibility that one of the Modes turns out to be problematic. This would mean that the equipollent arguments generated by way of it are likewise problematic, and thus we are left with a whole series of claims that now lack a counterargument that asserts its negation. Therefore, the Pyrrhonian is not even committed to the claim that, *thus far*, each belief candidate has been adequately shown to stand in equipollent opposition to its negation.

Another comment from Sextus shows that he refrains from judgments about future belief candidates. Before introducing the modes, he discusses the various ways that skeptics may generate an opposition between claims, such as opposing "phenomena to phenomena or noumena to noumena, or *alterando*."[131] Interestingly, Sextus includes another sort of opposition that focuses on time:

> we sometimes oppose…present things to things past or to things future; for example, when somebody brings up an argument that we are not able to refute, we say to him: 'Just as before the birth of the person who introduced the system which you follow, the argument supporting that system did not yet appear sound although it really was, so also it is possible that the opposite of the argument you now advance is really sound despite its not yet appearing so to us, and hence we should not yet assent to this argument that now seems so strong'.[132]

This passage raises two separate points. First, it seems that we have, at least on occasion, held some claim P to be irrefutable and later discovered an argument against P. So we ought not to deny the possibility that our epistemic position could in the future be importantly different, such that it becomes appropriate to deny P. And, secondly, if things could be different enough in the future to allow us to *deny* some claim P, we may also find good reason to come to believe some other claim (say, P's negation, not-P). These are strong reasons to think that Sextus is not committed to the impossibility of knowledge.

---

[130] *OP* 1:13:35.
[131] *OP* 1:13:31-2.
[132] *OP* 1:13:33-4.

There may be an even more radical thread underlying Sextus' point here.[133] Rather than sticking to talk about future *arguments* against P, Sextus also makes reference to the founding of the "*system*" that his interlocutor follows. This leaves Sextus open to the possibility that a more radical conceptual change could occur, with the result that P is no longer even a meaningful claim. The Churchland discussion is helpful here, for he is making an analogous claim with regards to folk psychology. If neuroscience can progress in the way envisioned by Churchland, folk psychology as a whole—including, at least, its talk of propositional attitudes, knowledge and learning—will be replaced by science in such a way that many of our 'common sense' ways of talking and thinking will cease to be meaningful.[134]

These considerations give us good reasons to think that Sextus is not—and, indeed, should not be—committed to claims about future belief candidates. Thus, it seems that the two skepticisms are in fact importantly different with regard to how each considers the issue of the possibility of knowledge. And since Pinkard's interpretation relies upon this claim about the possibility of knowledge, his view stands or falls with the Academic/Pyrrhonian distinction. I have argued that the distinction is both real and vital for understanding Sextus' text, so I conclude that Pinkard's interpretation is problematic.

---

[133] This plays upon a feature of the discussion Churchland above.

[134] Churchland's vision could have relevant implications for the current discussion, since Hegel's discussion of skepticism occurs within the section on "Self-Consciousness," and the issue on the table is how the skeptical consciousness thinks about itself. Unfortunately, I lack the neuro-scientific background to discuss what these implications would be and how they would or would not affect Hegel's anti-skeptical arguments and his overall project in the *Phenomenology.*

CONCLUSION

I have traced a few different interpretations of Hegel's arguments against the skeptic. Finding that none of them accurately portray the Pyrrhonian's position, I conclude that Hegel has failed to critique the skeptic on the skeptic's own terms. The first problem Hegel encounters is his rejection (or ignorance) of the Pyrrhonian distinction between assent and belief. His rejection, I think, implies an obvious misreading of the skeptics, since this distinction is quite clear in Sextus's writing.

So, in order to be charitable to Hegel, we were forced to look for another interpretation of his criticism, one that does not so grossly misrepresent the skeptic. This led us to a plausible interpretation from Pinkard, one that seems to fit in nicely with other Hegelian texts on skepticism. Yet, we saw that this second line of interpretation also ran aground. This time, the failure stems from Hegel's refusal to take the distinction between Academic and Pyrrhonian skeptics seriously. I have argued that the distinction is a real one, and that this distinction allows the Pyrrhonian skeptic to escape Hegel's critique. Moreover, just like the distinction between assent and belief, the second distinction between Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism was also seen to be an obvious and central one to Sextus's texts.

Thus, on either line of interpretation, Hegel appears to be fudging something quite obvious about the Pyrrhonian skeptical position. For this reason, it seems to me that we ought to rethink quite seriously the views of those like Forster, who argue that his engagement with the ancient skeptics was of central importance for Hegel's philosophical project. If it were true that Hegel was chiefly concerned with addressing—and defeating—Pyrrhonian skepticism, we would expect an extensive and fair treatment of these skeptics from Hegel. Yet, when we investigate Hegel's own texts, we find the opposite: Hegel seems to be committing some obvious blunder or other in his dealings with Pyrrhonian skepticism.

Of course, none of this is to say that recent projects like Forster's are without value. His book is crucially important to blocking the long-held assumption that Hegel was ignorant of, or unconcerned

with, skeptical worries. Yet, I have intended to provide some reasons to think that Forster may be swinging this discussion too far back in the other direction. While it is certainly true that Hegel was concerned—to some degree, at least—with skeptical worries, it does not at all seem obvious that Hegel was exclusively, chiefly, or even largely concerned with ancient skeptical arguments. My reasons for thinking Hegel was not so concerned resulted from our taking up Forster's project from the other direction, so to speak: rather than focus on how Hegel's mature system may avoid skeptical attack, I zoomed in on Hegel's anti-skeptical arguments in a few central texts. Finding his anti-skeptical arguments to be largely inadequate, I conclude that we have good reasons to question the picture of Hegel painted in recent literature as one who is chiefly concerned with epistemological worries—and, in particular, skeptical ones.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ameriks, Karl. "Recent Work on Hegel: The Rehabilitation of an Epistemologist?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LII, No. 1, March 1992 (pp. 177-202).

Burnyeat, Myles. "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*. Burnyeat, Myles, and Frede, Michael, eds. Hackett. Indianapolis. 1997 (pp. 25-57).

Carruthers, Peter . "The Mind is the Brain," *Reason and Responsibility*, 13th ed.. Feinberg and Shafer-Landau, eds. 2008 (pp. 301-9).

Chisolm, Roderick. "The Problem of the Criterion." *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*. Huemer, Michael, ed. Routledge. New York. 2002 (pp. 590-601).

Churchland, Paul. "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes." *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXXVIII, No. 2, Feb 1981 (pp. 67-90).

Forster, Michael. *Hegel and Skepticism*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA. 1989.

Frede, Michael. "The Sceptic's Beliefs." *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*. Burnyeat, Myles, and Frede, Michael, eds. Hackett. Indianapolis. 1997 (pp. 1-24).

Hegel, G.W.F.. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 2. Haldane and Simson, trans. University of Nebraska Press. Lincoln. 1995.

_____ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 3. Haldane and Simson, trans. University of Nebraska Press. Lincoln. 1995.

_____*Phenomenology of Spirit*. Pinkard, Terry, trans. Online edition. 2008. http://web.mac.com/titpaul/Site/Phenomenology_of_Spirit_page_files/Phenomenology%20of%20Spirit%20%28entire%20text%29.pdf

_____*The Encyclopedia Logic*. Geraets, T.F., Harris, H.S., and Suchting, W.A., trans. Hackett. Indianapolis. 1991.

_____"The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy." *Between Kant and Hegel*. Di Giovanni and Harris, eds. Hackett. Indianapolis. 2000 (pp. 313-362).

Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 2nd ed. Steinberg, Eric, ed. Hackett. Indiana. 1993.

_____*A Treatise on Human Nature*

Kant, Immanuel. *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, 2nd ed. Ellington, James, trans. Hackett. Indianapolis. 1977.

Meeker, Kevin "Hume: Radical Skeptic or Naturalized Epistemologist?" in *Hume Studies*, Volume XXIV, Number 1 (April, 1998) 31-52.

Perin, Casey. *The Demands of Reason.* Oxford University Press. Oxford. 2010.

Pinkard, Terry. *Hegel's* Phenomenology: *The Sociality of Reason*. Cambridge University Press. New York. 1994.

Rockmore, Tom. *Hegel's Circular Epistemology.* Indiana University Press. Bloomington. 1986.

Rudder Baker, Lynne. "Non-reductive Materialism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind*, pp. 109-126. McLaughlin, Beckerman, and Walker, eds. Oxford. New York. 2009.

Sextus Empiricus. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism.* Mates, Benson, trans. Oxford University Press. New York. 1996.

Strawson, Galen. "The Self." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind* (pp. 541-64).

Stroud, Barry. *Hume* (from *The Arguments of the Philosophers* series, Honderich, Ted, ed. Routledge & Kegan Paul. New York. 2005).

Taylor, Charles. *Hegel.* Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1975.

Westphal, Kenneth R.. *Hegel's Epistemological Realism*. Kluwer. Dordrecht. 1989.

_____"Hegel's Manifold Response to Scepticism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* New Series, Vol. 103, (2003), pp. 149-178

Williams, Michael. "Scepticism without Theory." *The Review of Metaphysics,* Vol. 41, No. 3 (Mar., 1988), pp. 547-588