Sextus Empiricus’s Promissory Note

1. Introduction

At *Outlines of Skepticism* I.31-34, Sextus Empiricus gives an abstract sketch of the Pyrrhonist’s procedure for inducing suspension of judgment, from which tranquility is supposed to fortuitously follow. It is intended as a preface to the outline of the Modes that Sextus presents at *PH* I.35-177. The Modes are general argument schemata employed by the Pyrrhonist to induce suspension of judgment and the discussion at *PH* I.31-34 is supposed to give the reader an outline of the Modes’ structure. Sextus writes that suspension of judgment “comes about—to put it rather generally—through the opposition of things” (*PH* I.31).\(^1\) By “oppositions,” Sextus means equally compelling appearances, beliefs, arguments or, generally, evidence in support of incompatible propositions or “conflicting accounts” (*PH* I.10). The point of the Modes is to help the Pyrrhonist find equipollent arguments or reasons in support of either side of an opposed pair of propositions, with the goal of bringing the intellect to a standstill. This much of the passage is clear and should be uncontroversial: It is just a very general description of the Pyrrhonist’s argumentative strategy. In the final paragraph of this expository sketch, Sextus gives the following little argument, which, following Harald Thorsrud,\(^2\) I shall call the “Promissory Note”:

[W]e sometimes oppose present things to present things […] and sometimes present to past or future things. For example, when someone propounds to us an argument we cannot refute, we say to him: ‘Before the founder of the school to which you adhere was born, the argument of the school, which is no doubt sound, was not yet apparent, although it was really there in nature. In the same way, it is possible that the argument opposing the one you have just propounded is really there in nature but is not yet

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apparent to us; so we should not yet assent to what is now thought to be a powerful argument’ \((PH\ I.33-34)\).

This argument is perplexing, because it seems so obviously poor, and yet Sextus appears to think it has probative force and appears to recommend it to a Skeptic as a means to free herself from a dialectical bind. When she cannot find an argument directly opposed to her opponent’s argument, she can whip the Promissory Note from her pocket and—somehow—this is supposed to balance the rational pull of her opponent’s argument. But she has not produced this argument and, without the argument in hand, it is difficult to see why the Pyrrhonist, let alone the Dogmatist, should be moved to suspend judgment. The Dogmatist has actually given an argument and it is one that the Pyrrhonist admits “is now thought to be a powerful argument,” yet we await the counterargument. How could a non-actual argument have probative force? Sextus does not even give an outline of an opposed argument: The Promissory Note does not tell us anything about this possible opposed and equipollent argument except that it is supposed to be equipollent and opposed.

One might be tempted to say something like the following in Sextus’s defense. Sextus is in the habit of sometimes deliberately propounding arguments of “feeble plausibility” \((PH\ III,\ chapter\ heading,\ xxxii)\). The Pyrrhonian skeptics, Sextus tells us, “are philanthropic and wish to cure by argument, as far as they can, the conceit and rashness of the Dogmatists” \((PH\ III.280)\). They will cure any Dogmatist of their conceit and rashness, but not all Dogmatists are good dialecticians and not all Dogmatists suffer from this disease to the same degree:

[The Skeptics] employ weighty arguments, capable of vigorously rebutting the dogmatic affliction of conceit, against those who are distressed by a severe rashness, and they employ milder arguments against those who are afflicted by a conceit which is superficial and easily cured and which can be rebutted by a milder degree of plausibility \((PH\ III.281)\).

This is why “those with a Skeptical impulse do not hesitate sometimes to propound arguments which are weighty in their plausibility, and sometimes apparently rather weak” \((PH\ III.281)\). It is a characteristic of the Pyrrhonist’s philanthropic attitude to occasionally give poor arguments when it would serve a therapeutic end.
Granting the point that Sextus’s philanthropic impulse may explain away the arguments of feeble plausibility, his philanthropy is not sufficient to argue that the Promissory Note argument is intended to be a mild cure for a mild case of Dogmatism. Sextus is exhorting the Pyrrhonist to use the Promissory Note, at least in part, as a balm for the Pyrrhonist to apply to herself. Presumably, then, it cannot be propounded as a deliberately feeble argument: How could I convince myself that an argument that strikes me as feeble is equipollent to an argument that strikes me as powerful, so powerful, in fact, that I cannot find a refutation? Besides, according to Sextus’s origin story, Pyrrhonists begin their lives as Dogmatic “men of talent” who fall into the “skeptical persuasion” quite by accident, after a long investigation. Presumably, with that origin story, Sextus also intends to underscore the thoroughness and depth of the Pyrrhonist’s investigations prior to her conversion (PH I.12). This is what causes the Pyrrhonian skeptic to (honestly) despair of deciding philosophical questions, and so to suspend judgment, and so to find tranquility (as it were, fortuitously) and, thereafter, to fall into the skeptical persuasion.

I argue that, in fact, this apparently feeble little argument is better than it looks. In section 2, I consider and reject three plausible interpretations of the Promissory Note argument, each of which tries to ground the Skeptic’s suspension in the expectation that some opposition will come to light in the future. These responses, which interpret the Promissory Note as, broadly-speaking, an empirical argument, are unsatisfactory. The appeal to possible oppositions, rather than actual oppositions, is by no means unique to the Promissory Note argument. In section 3 I consider three other cases in which Sextus appeals to merely possible oppositions, each of which follows the same general pattern. I argue these cases show that, despite Sextus’s use of temporal language and his emphasis on cases of actual disagreements, the reference to time in these arguments is incidental to the force of the argument. Sextus’s appeals to possible oppositions are appeals to simple logical possibilities, not to the possibility of some future, actual disagreement. Finally, in section 4 I give my analysis of the Promissory Note. I contend that the argument trades on purely logical considerations. Sextus’s insistence that the promised argument exists “in nature” indicates that he intends not the temporal possibility of future disagreement, but the mere logical possibility; it is this logical possibility of an equipoised counterargument that presents a skeptical challenge for the Dogmatist. Briefly: Given the possibility that there is an equipollent counterargument, the evidence for the Dogmatist’s conclusion—the apparently convincing
argument he propounds—does not in fact favor his conclusion over an opposed proposition. His assent appears arbitrary, for, given that it is possible that there is an equally compelling argument to an opposed conclusion, his argument underdetermines his belief. It would seem to be just an accident that he believes what he believes on the basis of his argument. When understood as part of the Pyrrhonist’s dialectical strategy, the argument succeeds—it meets the Pyrrhonist’s dialectical goals by forcing her Dogmatic opponent to defend an otherwise compelling argument.

2. The Possibility of Future, Actual Disagreement

The most common type of response to the puzzle raised by the Promissory Note is to try to locate an argument for Sextus that, in one way or other, generalizes on his experience as an expert practitioner of the skeptical persuasion. A battle-hardened Pyrrhonian skeptic, like Sextus, has successfully discovered many opposed arguments to counter many Dogmatic assertions and, so, she is confident that she will eventually find a reply. I will consider and reject three attempts at such a response.

According to one line of interpretation, the Promissory Note is an argument by pessimistic induction.3 The Dogmatist presents an apparently strong argument; however, the history of philosophy is littered with arguments that seemed strong when they were first propounded, but were eventually countered by equipollent and opposed arguments. In fact, from any given point in the history of philosophy, the arguments that seemed strong in the past, are overturned and seem less plausible at a future time. Indeed, the Pyrrhonist’s own conversion experience appears to confirm this observation. So, although she does not know what the argument will be, the Pyrrhonist may argue by induction that the present plausibility of the

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3 I owe this suggestion to Michael Augustin. The suggestion is also found (and rejected) in Diego Machuca, “The Pyrrhonian Argument from Possible Disagreement,” Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 93 (2011): 148-161, p. 154, fn.13. The idea behind pessimistic induction is simple, but powerful. I am skipping over some complications, but the following sketch will serve our purposes. As a point of historical fact, most scientific theories and explanatory hypotheses have been rejected, only to be superseded by newer theories and explanatory hypotheses. This is true of any point in the history of empirical science; from any given time, the theories and hypotheses of the past are false and are superseded by newer ones. So, by induction, any theory is likely to be false and will be superseded; therefore, our current scientific theories are likely false. On the interpretation of the Promissory Note argument I am considering, Sextus is advising the cornered Pyrrhonist to argue in a similar sort of way. Pessimistic induction is frequently regarded as a problem for scientific realism. Scientific realism is committed to the idea that our best scientific theories are (at least partially) true. The argument from pessimistic induction undercuts this thesis in the obvious way. For a good example of pessimistic induction employed in an argument against certain forms of scientific realism, see Larry Laudan, “A Confutation of Convergent Realism,” Philosophy of Science 48 (1981): 19-49.
Dogmatist’s argument will likely be offset by an opposed and equipollent one in the future. One “should not assent to what is now thought to be a powerful argument,” since many such arguments have been encountered in the past. Therefore, the present convincingness of the argument is offset and suspension of judgment follows.

This is an apparently plausible interpretation. Sextus makes several references to time in *PH* I.33-34. He says that the Pyrrhonian skeptic will “sometimes oppose present things to present things […] and sometimes present to past or future things” and the Promissory Note argument is supposed to be a case of the latter. The powerful argument now propounded existed at a time before it was actually thought of and asserted. So, although now the Dogmatist’s argument seems strong, it is possible that the Pyrrhonist is in the same situation with respect to her equipollent, but opposed argument, as the Dogmatist was before he grasped the argument he presently propounds. Thus, it looks as though Sextus is urging the embattled Pyrrhonist to marshal the historical evidence and project into the future by induction. “In the same way” as the Dogmatist’s powerful argument was out there, before he grasped it, so the Skeptic’s argument is likely out there and it will likely become known with time.

Although an argument by pessimistic induction might be a powerful way to generate skepticism with regarding philosophical theories, and so suspension of judgment with respect to philosophical claims, the Promissory Note argument is not an instance of it. Pessimistic induction is a form of induction and, so, involves an enumeration of empirical cases. The more cases enumerated, the more secure, and so more compelling, the inductive inference. In *PH* I.33-34, however, Sextus does not enumerate any cases—he gives one case and, if just that one case is intended as the basis for the induction, then the Promissory Note argument is indeed feeble. Although Sextus makes reference to past and future, the temporal aspect does not play much of a role in the argument. The point does not seem to be that in the past such and such occurred, therefore, the same is likely to occur in the future.

According to an interpretation advanced by Diego Machuca, the Promissory Note argument is actually a version of the Agrippan Mode of Disagreement. Machuca calls this the

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“Argument from Possible Disagreement.” The thought is that the Pyrrhonist does not now assent because she recognizes the possibility that in the future, she might come across an opposed argument. The recognition that it is possible to discover a disagreement in the future constitutes, in a sense, a meta-argument and this meta-argument is the one the Pyrrhonist now finds sufficiently compelling to match the force of the Dogmatist’s present argument.⁵

But Sextus describes the Pyrrhonian as someone with an ability to set out oppositions between things and these are equipollent but conflicting “accounts,” not simply contrary propositions and appearances. This is true of all the Modes, including the Mode of Disagreement. I take the Mode of Disagreement to be a tool, like the other Modes, for generating equipoised arguments (or reasons, i.e. logoi) and not simply an appeal to the fact that there is, or could be, actual disagreement. Sextus describes equipollence as an “equality with regard to being convincing or unconvincing” (PH I.10; cf. PH I.190, I.196, I.198, I.233).⁶ Although “convincingness” is psychological notion, equipollency is accomplished by argument and evidence; the balance is achieved when the weight of the evidence for and against some proposition appears equally credible or plausible.⁷ Equipollency brings the intellect to a “standstill” (PH I.10; cf. PH I.8), because the cognitive pull is equal on both sides of the opposition is equal (PH I.196). But mere disagreement is not compelling. Anyone can simply negate a position; however, without arguments, or an appeal to some sort of grounds in support,

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⁵ Machuca, citing Sextus’s argument against induction at PH II.204, insists that his argument is not a version of the foregoing argument by pessimistic induction (“The Pyrrhonian Argument from Possible Disagreement,” p. 154, fn. 13).

⁶ Katja Vogt, “The Aims of Skeptical Investigation,” (pp. 40-41) expresses reservations about the suitability of “more convincing” as a translation of pistoteron on the grounds that convincingness is a matter of psychology and Sextus is speaking of a quality of appearances after the evidence in support of them has been assessed. I do not believe these two ideas are in conflict.

⁷ There is disagreement over exactly how to understand “equipollency” and the manner in which Sextus deploys equipollency in his arguments, including the Modes. I am taking a controversial stance on the matter, which I am not going to go out of my way to defend in the present essay. See, e.g. Paul Woodruff, “The Pyrrhonian Modes,” in The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Skepticism, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 208-231. Woodruff contends that the argumentative strategy of the Modes is an appeal to “causal invariability,” not undecidability (p. 216 ff.) and that an appeal to equipollency is Sextus’s favorite rhetorical argumentative strategy “outside of the Modes” (p. 211). As I read Sextus, equipollency is a feature of the way two opposed appearances or arguments strike the mind, not a rational factor appealed to in the course of an argument (“convincingness” is a pathè). The Modes—like the rest of Sextus’s arguments—are supposed to generate considerations that balance out the apparent plausibility of the opposed positions. The debate about “equipollency” is tied up with the related matter of whether and in what sense the Skeptic is committed to epistemic norms and the sense in which she holds beliefs.
such disagreement is childish gainsaying. Disagreement on its own should not have any probative force, since not all opinions are equally plausible. Disagreement between relevant authorities, however, would have some force and it is most likely that the Skeptic would invoke the Mode of Disagreement when she seeks to rebut Dogmatic assertions made on the back of an authority. But that is not what Sextus is doing in the Promissory Note argument, for although Sextus refers to the founder of the Dogmatist’s school in the passage, the possible opposed argument Sextus cites is not presented as the argument of any equally authoritative figure. The argument is just supposed to stand on its own merits.

Harald Thorsrud also makes the Promissory Note argument rest on an empirical generalization. According to Thorsrud, what does “the work of the missing argument” in preventing the Pyrrhonian skeptic from believing the Dogmatist’s thesis on the basis of the proffered argument is a habit of mind she has developed. “Since it has, so far, been possible for the sceptic to construct an equally convincing counter-argument for any view,” she “is not even inclined to accept views that are currently unopposed.” That is, because of her experience, the mere possibility of a convincing counter-argument is enough to balance the scales of judgement. And [...] since she has so far always been able to construct an equally convincing counter-argument for any view, the sceptical disposition has the effect of leaving her unmoved by any rational considerations.

In his view, then, the Promissory Note argument is an expression of a habitual stance, a psychological quirk developed by the Skeptic through the repeated experience of successfully suspending judgment by means of equipollent counterarguments. So, although Thorsrud would likely deny that the Skeptic reasons inductively, according to this interpretation, she undergoes a psychological process structurally similar to an inductive argument: She projects observed regularities into the future.

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10 *Ancient Scepticism*, p.133.
11 *Ancient Scepticism*, p. 134.
12 *Ancient Scepticism*, p. 134.
But, again, Sextus is not relying on any kind of generalization from past experiences in Promissory Note argument—or not obviously so. Whether rational or not, the force of past experience does not play an explicit role in the argument. If the point Sextus were making is that the Skeptic will not be moved to accept any rational considerations, because of her long experience generating counterarguments, why, then, does he not make a report of that long experience? The simple answer is that he is not reporting on a psychological habit; he is providing an example of an argument scheme. In the context in which he presents the Promissory Note, he is introducing the Modes and is speaking, abstractly, about how skeptical arguments generate suspension. He is elaborating on the description of skepticism given in PH I.7-11. There he tells us that the “skeptical persuasion” is defined by the characteristic activity of the Pyrrhonian Skeptic. A Skeptic is someone who generates opposed and equipoised accounts (i.e. *logoi*) and they generate these opposed accounts, in part, by finding conflicts in appearances: “opposing what appears to what appears, what is thought of to what is thought of, and crosswise, so as to include all oppositions” (PH I.9). He repeats the point that this is the Skeptic’s argumentative strategy in the passage leading up to the Promissory Note argument and then gives the Promissory Note argument as an instance of creating an equipollent conflict by opposing what appears to something that is “really there in nature,” but is not yet apparent. Hence, in the Promissory Note passage, he is not reporting on how things seem to him and so he is not reporting that past experience inclines him to anticipate a counterargument; rather, he is giving us an example of one of the general ways the Pyrrhonist deploys arguments to achieve suspension.

I do not wish to wade too far into the complicated issue of whether, or in what sense, the Pyrrhonist, as Sextus describes her, is committed to canons of rationality or argumentative and epistemic norms, nor the related matter of the scope of non-philosophical beliefs acceptable to Pyrrhonian.13 But it does seem to me that the Pyrrhonist can be committed to argumentative and

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epistemic norms, without being dogmatically committed. It is my view that the Pyrrhonist is committed to rationality both in the sense that she engages in rule-governed dialectical activity and also that she is *reasons responsive*. Human beings are rational animals in this minimal sense, at least, for giving arguments and considering arguments (whether good or bad) is, in fact, a way to affect human belief and behavior. It is a normal part of human life activity to give arguments and to be reasons responsive. But this reasons-responsiveness does not have to entail any reflective acceptance of the ultimate *correctness* of any of epistemic norms—that would be a piece of skeptically unacceptable philosophical dogma. The Pyrrhonist’s commitment to the probative force of argument is just a reflection of her natural human psychological reaction to considering an argument or weighing evidence. Hence, the Skeptic does not *need* to appeal to past experiences to explain her inclination to suspend judgment (unless she is producing an argument by induction). She need only appeal to the equipollency of the arguments on both sides of a question, which is a function of their *apparent* convincingness or plausibility. Equipollent arguments are such that they make “objects that appear equal in respect of convincingness and lack of convincingness” (*PH* I.196). This equality “in respect of convincingness” leads the Skeptic into indeterminacy, with respect to the question—a state described by Sextus as “an intellectual feeling in virtue of which [Skeptics] neither deny nor posit anything investigated in a dogmatic fashion” (*PH* I.198). The feeling of indeterminacy is, I take it, the affective element accompanying the “standstill of the intellect” caused by the recognition that the question is apparently undecidable on the available arguments.

The main point of the schemata under discussion in *PH* I.31-34 is to explain to the reader the various ways by which a Skeptic generates equipollent arguments that lead the mind into indeterminacy and that is what the Promissory Note is supposed to illustrate. The unifying theme of Sextus’s schemata is that the recognition of the equipollent arguments for incompatible

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*Knowledge and Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. pp. 3-15, which deal directly with interpreting Sextus. See also Jacques Brunschwig “The ὅσον ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ formula in Sextus Empiricus”, in *Papers in Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 244-258, for an interesting take on Sextus’s frequent use of the qualifier “as far as the argument goes,” in connection with suspension of judgment, which bears on the “urbanity” vs. “rusticity” question.


15 As I read Sextus, there is an affinity between his position on the norms of reason and Hume’s position (his criticism of Pyrrhonian Skepticism notwithstanding). See Janet Broughton, “Hume’s Naturalism about Cognitive Norms,” *Philosophical Topics* 31 (2009): 1-19.
propositions erodes conviction by showing the ultimate *arbitrariness* of belief.\textsuperscript{16} One’s reasons for holding a belief will appear arbitrary when it is recognized that there is an apparently equally compelling argument for a contrary proposition and one is, thus, unable to arbitrate between these contrary propositions. Conviction naturally slips away as it becomes apparent that one’s available evidence underdetermines belief. Suspension follows, “as far as the argument goes” (*PH* I.19). But, by generating equipollent arguments and by generating them in his schematic, almost automatic way, Sextus highlights the arbitrariness of all our argumentative practices, so far as the nature of “unclear matters” is concerned—that, to anticipate my argument somewhat, is the real force of the Promissory Note.

Sextus may not accept any doxastic commitment to the ultimate correctness of any argumentative and epistemic norms, but his argumentative practices imply a dialectical commitment. Dialectically, Sextus appears to assume that, for any given assertion, it is appropriate to demand justificatory reasons in support of the truth of that assertion. He also appears to assume that the process of dialectical argument, as a means of inquiry, can only end when the truth of a claim has been fully established by a finite, non-circular, and non-arbitrary set of justificatory reasons.\textsuperscript{17} If one further assumes, as it appears Sextus does assume, that dialectical argument is a rational way to settle belief and inquire into truth—and it is not unreasonable for Sextus to assume this, if he thinks his Dogmatic opponents believe it—then two important epistemic principles plausibly follow. Both concern justification and are the normative analogues to the natural habits of a reasons-responsive human described above. The first is that an epistemically responsible agent may assent to a proposition only if she possesses a finite, non-circular, non-arbitrary set of justificatory reasons or evidence, adequately establishing the truth of that proposition. I take this to be a plausible requirement, one which does not presuppose that an agent’s reasons *infallibly* connect their beliefs to the truth, but which does presuppose that an agent’s belief is justified only if she possesses evidence that appropriately ties her belief to the truth and that is, in principle, accessible to her conscious inspection.\textsuperscript{18} But the central norm, or, if


\textsuperscript{17} See, e.g., the opening comments of *PH* in which he describes the three kinds of philosophy (*PH* I.1-4).

\textsuperscript{18} Robert Fogelin makes the point that, once we have given up on the “evidentialist” demand for justificatory reasons, we are not engaging with the skeptic anymore and have, arguably, conceded the point to her (“The Sceptics
you prefer, rule, is a commitment to what has been called the underdetermination principle: Belief in a proposition is adequately justified only if the evidence in support of that proposition favors the truth of that proposition over a logically incompatible one.\textsuperscript{19} I take it that these two norms in conjunction support the rule that whenever your belief is underdetermined by your available evidence, suspend judgment.

Give these principles a psychological or normative gloss as you please—it does not matter for my main point. Following my own inclination to thread needles when I find them, I will say that the Skeptic is committed to the underdetermination principle, not in any dogmatic way, but only in the sense that it is presupposed by the Skeptic’s characteristic activity and “chief constitutive principle,” that “to every account an equal account is opposed” (\textit{PH} I.12).\textsuperscript{20} She conforms her cognitive behavior to the underdetermination principle, without doxastic commitment. It is in opposing equally weighted accounts—arguments, evidence, and reasons—that suspension is generated and suspension of judgment is most naturally seen as the outcome of equipollence when equipollency leads one to see that one’s reasons do not uniquely determine belief.\textsuperscript{21} Indeterminacy is the feeling—a passive affectation—of a mind brought to a standstill by the equipollence of conflicting accounts. That equipollency leads the mind to suspend judgment is a natural cognitive habit and a commitment of our argumentative practices, one captured by underdetermination principle. The Dogmatist and the Skeptic have very different attitudes toward the cognitive habit prescribed by, or captured by, the underdetermination principle, but both are nevertheless committed to the suspension of judgment in the face of equipollency \textit{because} equipollent accounts underdetermine belief.


\textsuperscript{20} This expression, Sextus explains, is to be understood as a report of the Skeptic’s experience that to this point she has found an equipollent argument to oppose (\textit{PH} I.202-203) or as an exhortation enjoining the Skeptic to look for an equipollent argument (\textit{PH} I.204-205); in neither case, is the Skeptic’s use of the expression it to be understood as a Dogmatic assertion. See \textit{PH} I.187-208 for Sextus’s overview of the proper uses of the characteristic Skeptical expressions.

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. \textit{PH} I.198-199 (on the expression “everything is undetermined”)}
3. Merely Possible Oppositions

The foregoing attempts to interpret the Promissory Note as somehow grounded in experience each emphasize the temporal language in which Sextus couches his presentation of the argument. Either, on the “pessimistic inductive” reading, the Pyrrhonist is inferring from particular cases of past failures of rational argument, to the likelihood of future failures, or, on the “possible disagreement” reading, she is inferring she is eventually going to come across a compelling, but opposed appearance, or else, she has been conditioned by past experience to a habitual cast of mind that disposes her to expect she can come up with a counterargument at some future time. I contend, however, that the temporal aspect of Sextus’s presentation is a red herring. It is irrelevant to Sextus’s point that the opposed appearance is one that the Pyrrhonist might come across at some future date, for Sextus is clear that the argument to which he appeals is one that is “really there in nature”—it already exists. This is the point of arguing that the Dogmatic argument was “really there in nature” before the founder of the Dogmatic school grasped it: Sextus establishes the logical possibility that there is an equipollent counterargument.

The argument in PH I.34 is not the only argument of the Outlines that appeals to possible oppositions. PH I.40-41, I.94-99, I.143-44, and III.233-34 all appeal to possible oppositions and I will now turn to consider three of these arguments.22 I will show that these arguments all employ a similar argumentative strategy. In each case it is clear that, although Sextus uses temporal language, mere logical possibilities, not diachronic possibilities are the issue. That is, Sextus’s arguments do not depend on the temporal possibility of actually discovering—or even expecting to discover—the opposition in the future. Suspension of judgment in these cases is supposed to be generated by the recognition that there are counter-possibilities to a given Dogmatic claim, such that (a) were they to obtain, the Dogmatic claim in question would be false and (b) the grounds proffered in support of the Dogmatic claim cannot rule out these counter-possibilities.23 That is, given (a) there is a demand for justification, which, given (b) is not met,

22 This list was compiled by Annas and Barnes (Outlines of Scepticism, p.12, fn.60). Machuca (“The Pyrrhonian Argument from Possible Disagreement”) considers each of these cases, except PH I.94-99. This is an important oversight. Machuca reads each argument as an instance of a general “Argument from Possible Disagreement” and, in each case, Sextus’s apparent reference to time are central to Machuca’s interpretation. But, as we will see, PH I.94-99 does not invoke time.

and the Dogmatic claim is underdetermined by the grounds offered. Hence, the Dogmatic claim appears arbitrary.

**Argument 1: The value of gold**

As an illustration of the Ninth Mode (“that depending on frequent or rare encounters” (*PH* I.37; *PH* I.141)), Sextus gives the following argument:

Again, what is rare is thought to be valuable, but not what is familiar and easily available. For instance, if we conceive of water as being rare, how much more valuable would it appear to us than everything which seems valuable! Or if we imagine gold as simply strewn in quantity over the ground like stones, who do we think would find it valuable then, or worth locking away? (*PH* I.143)

Since, therefore, the same objects seem now striking and valuable, now not, depending on whether they impress us frequently or rarely, we deduce [...] we will not be able to state baldly what each external existing object is [really] like (*PH* I.144).

In *PH* I.144, Sextus makes a reference to time—what seems to be striking and valuable “now”—but the argument in *PH* I.143, which makes us unable to say “baldly” how things are, clearly depends on a logical point. Consider a reverse Goldfinger, a villain who develops a scheme to radically increase the gold supply, making gold bars as common as stones. Should someone implement such a scheme, it would drive down the value of gold. We see from this thought experiment that our present estimation of the worth of gold has nothing to do with its intrinsic nature. There are logical possibilities under which gold, remaining itself the same, becomes worthless. Hence, our present grounds for judging that gold is really valuable are undermined by a logically possible scenario. Whether at some future time a reverse Goldfinger really does implement this scheme is irrelevant. Merely acknowledging the logical possibility is enough to reveal to us that the grounds for holding that gold is valuable are arbitrary. The judgment that gold is valuable depends on the contingent fact that gold is relatively rare. Yet, those very same grounds would support the appearance that water is valuable: if it were less common than it is now, water would be esteemed as valuable as gold; indeed, in light of the fact that we require it to live, water need not become very rare at all before it would appear more valuable than gold.
The argument is an instance of opposing a “present” appearance to a logically possible opposition. Notice that this argument gives the Skeptic a general way to undermine the belief in the intrinsic value of certain types of things—construct a logically possible scenario in which the objects in question are either more or less common than they are now and ask yourself whether we would continue to value those objects at the same rate, were that scenario to obtain. This procedure depends in no way on whether the scenario will obtain in the future. But this does not affect the judgment that the value of gold would be much lower than it is, if it were much more common than it is. The possibility relevant to our judgment in this case is a synchronic, logical possibility—a counter-possibility—not a diachronic possibility we expect to meet within the timeline.

**Argument 2: The cleverest person**

After dismissing the Sage as the criterion of truth (PH I.38) on the grounds that the Dogmatists will disagree on the question of which school’s Sage should be most convincing (and, note, the plausibility of that argument depends on the point that the disagreement in question is a disagreement amongst relevant authorities), Sextus considers the suggestion that we should simply defer to the person agreed upon by everyone as the cleverest person “of everyone present and past” (PH II.39) and regard this person’s judgment as the criterion of truth. He rejects this suggestion on the following grounds:

> [S]ince there are many—indeed, pretty well infinitely many—grades and degrees of cleverness, we say that it is possible that someone else should be born who is even cleverer than the one we say is cleverest of everyone present and past. Then just as we are required to find convincing because of his cleverness the one who is now said to be the most intelligent of everyone present and past, so we should rather find convincing the cleverer one who will exist after him. And when he is born, we should expect in turn that someone else will be born, cleverer than him; and someone else cleverer than him; and so ad infinitum. [...] Hence, even if someone is allowed to be the cleverest of everyone past and present, still, since we cannot say affirmatively that there will be no-one shrewder than him (for that is unclear), we shall always have to wait for the judgment of the cleverer person who will exist later, and never assent to the one who is now superior (PH II.40-41; the first set of italics are mine).
Sextus couches his argument in temporal language, but, as before, time is irrelevant to the force of the argument. The temporal reference arises by way of a dialectical concession. Sextus is imagining a case in which, given that we cannot find the Sage convincing, we decide to abide by the judgment of the person we all agree is the cleverest person, present or past. This cleverest person’s judgment is the criterion of truth and whatever this person says, “we are required to find convincing because of his cleverness.” But time is not an essential feature of Sextus’s argument. Rather, Sextus is urging us to consider the logic of “cleverer than” to undermine the suggestion that the cleverness of some cleverest person would be rationally adequate as a criterion of truth. Given that there are “pretty well infinitely many” degrees of cleverness, it is always possible, in principle, for there to be someone cleverer than the cleverest person “at present,” because it is always possible, in principle, for there to be someone cleverer than any given clever person. But the grounds for accepting the judgment of the cleverest person “at present” is this person’s cleverness, which is logically possible to supersede. Hence, our choice to defer to the judgment of this cleverest person “present or past” appears arbitrary, for we have decided to defer to this person because of his cleverness and yet we also recognize that someone could, in principle, be cleverer. Thus, on the very grounds by which we have decided to defer to this person, we would also have to defer to a different person, who may judge differently. So the proposed grounds will not adequately establish the truth.

The force of this argument does not depend on the possibility of discovering in the future, within our timeline, some person cleverer than the cleverest person to date. Let us assume we have found the cleverest person, past or present. Let us assume she has maxed-out the biological and physical limitations on human cleverness, such that there is no possibility that, in the future, we will find someone cleverer than she. Even assuming that we have found the cleverest person who shall ever live, the argument goes through: There is still a logical possibility that someone could be cleverer, and then that person would be the standard of truth on the grounds that the cleverest person is the standard; there is no a priori guarantee that this logically possible cleverer person will agree with our biologically-maxed-out cleverest person; therefore, the choice of this biologically-maxed-out cleverest person is doubtful, even though no one else will ever be found who is cleverer than her. The general argumentative strategy in both this case and the last is the same. There is a logically possibility that exposes the grounds of a claim as unconvincing and,
so, belief in that claim on those grounds is arbitrary, for the existence of this possibility shows that the grounds underdetermine belief. Belief, on those grounds, would violate the underdetermination principle. Think of it this way: If the bare logical possibility that there could be a cleverer person than the cleverest person to date did not undermine the convincingness of the cleverest person’s judgments, the temporal possibility of finding a cleverer person at some future time would not matter to us. If the existence of the counter-possibility were not the issue, then today we would go with the cleverest person today and tomorrow, with the newly discovered cleverer person and we would not be bothered by the change in standards. But the fact is that conviction would be destabilized today, before we discover the cleverer person tomorrow, because the possibility of this change in the standard shows there is no sufficiently firm connection between belief and the truth on these grounds.

Argument 3: The apple

The clearest case is found in Sextus’s discussion of the Third Mode, the Mode Sextus describes as “depending on the constitutions of the sense organs” (PH I.36; PH I.91). After giving the reader a series of examples of opposed appearances that arise from the different constitutions of the sense organs, “so as not to waste time” (PH I.94), Sextus announces that he has a general argument to the conclusion that sense experience does not provide conclusive grounds for judging the nature of the objects of perception:

Each of the objects of perception which appears to us seems to impress us in a variety of ways—for example, an apple is smooth, fragrant, sweet, and yellow. It is unclear, then, whether in reality it has these qualities alone, or has only one quality but appears different depending on the different constitution of the sense-organs, or actually has more qualities than those which are apparent, some of them not making an impression on us (PH I.94).

Sextus is asking us to consider an arbitrary object of sense perception—an apple. The apple appears to us in sense experience as smooth, fragrant, sweet, and yellow (apples do not make spontaneous noises, so the auditory modality is left out). There are three logical possibilities:

(a) The apple really has exactly those qualities that it appears to have.

(b) The apple really has fewer qualities than it appears to have.
(c) The apple really has more qualities than it appears to have.

(a)-(c) are mutually inconsistent and exhaustive possibilities. That (a) is a possibility is clear from sense experience. Sextus argues that (b) is a possibility on the grounds that “the apple can be undifferentiated but observed as different depending on the differences among the sense-organs by which it is grasped” (PH I.95) and refers the reader back to PH I.53-54 in support. I would like to focus on the argument Sextus gives at PH I.96-97 for the logical possibility of (c). Sextus argues that just as it is possible for a person who is blind and deaf from birth to judge that the apple has fewer qualities than it appears to us to possess, thanks to the “constitution” of this person’s sense organs, “[s]o it is possible that we too, having only the five senses, grasp from among the qualities of the apple only those we are capable of grasping, although other qualities can exist, impressing other sense-organs in which we have no share, so that we do not grasp the objects perceptible by them” (PH I.97; my emphasis).

Notice that, if it were the case that there were other qualities in the apple, graspable by other sense organs, or fewer, it would not be possible for us to discover this fact using our human sense organs. Hence, Sextus’s point has nothing to do with whether the disagreement between our sensory appearances and the sensory appearances of some other being with differently constituted sense organs could be discovered at some future time. Here Sextus does not use temporal language. The bare possibility is the point. Sextus’s argument is that since (a)-(c) are inconsistent and incompatible possibilities, but between which we cannot decide, it follows that the nature of the apple is not known to us by means of our sensory appearances. Sextus asserts just this: “So if it is possible that only those qualities exist in the apple which we think we grasp, and that there are more than them, and again that there are not even those which make an impression on us, then it will be unclear to us what the apple is like” (PH I.99).24

It seems to me that Sextus’s “apple argument” holds for all the cases he considers in the First, Second, and Third Modes, rendering the first three Modes, in a way, otiose—and perhaps

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24 One might protest that we could settle which of (a)-(c) obtains through some other means—say, some sophisticated measuring device. But such a suggestion just changes the question. Sextus is considering the notion that we grasp the nature of an object of the senses by means of our sensory appearances. The sensory appearances are the grounds for belief under investigation. The point is that my grounds for thinking the apple is fragrant, sweet, smooth, and yellow, and nothing else, are exactly the same as the grounds for another animal to think the apple has more or fewer qualities. Upon these grounds, there is no way to decide the disagreement. Asking to use a measuring device arguably concedes Sextus’s point.
this is his intention, for he transitions to his discussion of the Fourth Mode with the statement that adoption of the Fourth Mode will allow him to “actually leave the senses aside” (PH I.100). For example, I assume that a pit viper sees the world differently from the way I do. But, it is not necessary for me to actually discover the disagreement to lose confidence in the notion that the beliefs I form on the basis of my perceptual experiences really reveal to me the “deep” nature of the objects of perception. It is enough to see that the viper and I would be forming our beliefs in the same sort of way—visual sensory appearances—and that the constitution of our sense organs and bodies might affect the way things appear to each of us. Seeing the possibility of conflicting judgments derived from the same grounds suffices to generate doubt that the way things appear to me on the basis of my human sense organs is a faithful reflection of the way things in fact are. I am justified in believing the world really is the way it appears to me in my visual experience, only if the pit viper is justified in believing the world really is the way it appears to him on the basis of his visual experiences. Yet, our beliefs are in conflict and there seems to be no way to adjudicate the dispute between us by appeal to our perceptual experiences—a violation of the underdetermination principle.

Sum up: The other appeals to possible oppositions follow a pattern. Even when expressed in temporal language, time is not the point. The appeals to possible oppositions are not instances of a general “Argument from Possible Disagreement,” for the point is not that disagreement is discoverable at some future date. The argument I have just sketched above shows this clearly. I have no way to determine, using my senses, whether the objects of the senses have more or fewer qualities than they in fact appear to me to have; nevertheless, I recognize that there is a real possibility that, in reality, they might.

Why, then, does Sextus focus so much on cases of actual disagreement, particularly in his presentation of the Ten Modes? I would suggest that Sextus’s biological, historical, anecdotal, apocryphal, and mythological cases are designed to demonstrate the existence of specific logical

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25 As Long and Sedley point out (Hellenistic Philosophers, p...), there appears to be a “dialectical progression” in the first four of the Ten Modes from disagreement between animals, to disagreement between humans, to disagreement between the senses, to disagreement deriving from different circumstances. See also Pierre Pellegrin, “Sextus Empiricus,” in The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 120-141, who comments on the “concessive waves” of Sextus’s arguments (p. 123).
possibilities to those who might not have otherwise considered them. Someone from a small, closed, and isolated community might not consider the possibility that, e.g., marriage customs could be different than they in fact are in his little community. To get this person to understand that it is possible, it might be necessary to give them a real case. A white-knuckled commitment to the natural propriety of heterosexual monogamous marriage arrangements begins to appear strained once it is pointed out that, in other communities, polygamous and same-sex marriages exist and are accepted as perfectly natural in those communities. To someone unacquainted with biology, it might seem incredible that, say, this flower could have properties other than those that appear to his senses. But once he learns that bees can see UV light (so I am told) and accepts that, therefore, to a bee this flower would appear very different, he might come to recognize, as a general possibility, that the objects of sense might have more or fewer properties than those which they appear to us to have. But, to generate the skeptical argument, all that is necessary is the premise that the discrepancy is possible and that, given the available evidence or grounds, the discrepancy could not be rationally settled—whether or not anyone expects to discover the disagreement. The Pyrrhonist points out that there is a counterfactual possibility according to which the grounds on which conviction would purport to rest appear to support a contrary judgment; hence, the grounds for conviction underdetermine belief. Sextus’s elaborate catalogue of purported actual disagreements simply underscores the logical point that the available grounds for belief do not adequately determine belief. The Modes are devices for generating the counter-possibilities with equipollent grounds and the examples Sextus gives his readers support the plausibility of such counterfactuals. Consider, for instance, Sextus’s summary of the First Mode:

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Janet Broughton also draws attention to this feature of Sextus’s use of the Modes (see Descartes’s Method of Doubt, pp.42-44).

It is worth pointing out that not all of the oppositions Sextus lays out in his discussions of the Modes (PH I.35-163) are cases of actual disagreements. I am not just referring the ones recognized as possible oppositions. For example, PH I.46 Sextus argues that it is likely that “given that animals’ eyes contain mixtures of different humors, that they should also get different appearances from existing objects,” from the observation that magicians achieve different lighting effects by treating their lamp-wicks with different mixtures. In this case, Sextus is not saying anyone has confirmed this opposition, but that it is possible. If you think about most of the cases in the First Mode, you’ll find that these are appeals to mere possibilities, since no one can straightforwardly confirm that things appear different to different animals.

Striker, “The Ten Tropes of Aenesidemus,” on whether there is a unifying strategy to the Ten Modes.
But if the same objects appear dissimilar depending on the variation among animals, then we shall be able to say what the existing objects are like as observed by us, but as to what they are like in their nature we shall suspend judgement. For we shall not be able ourselves to decide between our own appearances and those of other animals, being ourselves a part of the dispute and for that reason more in need of someone to decide than ourselves able to judge (PH I.59).

In this passage, Sextus gives us a general argument derived from the oppositions in the First Mode. If the objects of perception appear different to different animals because of their different constitutions, then our human perceptual appearances do not provide adequate grounds for judgment. The cases described in the discussion of the First Mode provide evidence in favor of the antecedent of this conditional. Each opposition shows that it is possible for two parties to arrive at contrary judgments regarding the objects of perception, on the basis of sensory appearances. The dispute is equipollent, for each of the contrary appearances is thought to be convincing because they are supported by relevantly similar grounds or “argumentative strategy.” In the First Mode, the grounds in question are an animal’s perceptual appearances. Suspension follows from the recognition that we, humans, have no reason to prefer our own sensory appearances to the appearances of the nonhuman animals. The nonhuman animals are equally convinced by their perceptual appearances. Our appearances are “part of the dispute,” since their adequacy as grounds for judgment have been directly brought into question. Sextus’s point is not that we will be biased in favor of our own case because of self-interest (as in, e.g. nepotism); rather, the point is that we cannot rationally judge in favor of our own appearances, since these very appearances are being called into question as convincing grounds for judgement by the equipollent oppositions. We cannot side with human perceptual appearances, since nonhuman animal perceptual appearances, qua perceptual appearances, would seem equally to have a claim to truth. If human perceptual appearances are convincing, then the perceptual appearances of nonhuman animals should be convincing, for the very same reasons. Siding, without argument, in favor of our own perceptual appearances simply begs the question. So, one must give an independent argument to tip the balance. As PH I.60 makes clear, Sextus is arguing

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29 Morison, “The Logical Structure of the Sceptic’s Opposition.”
that any attempt to adjudicate the debate in favor of human sensory appearances, without adverting to some external authority or “third party,” presupposes that human appearances do adequately tie belief to truth. Nonhuman animals would have every right to disagree with us, for their grounds for believing in the contrary proposition are equipollent.

4. The Promissory Note

The observations of the previous section have established that for those arguments of the *Outlines* that appeal explicitly to possible oppositions, these counter-possibilities as logical possibilities, not as concrete and anticipated future events, are the relevant opposed appearances. The Promissory Note is described in a context in which Sextus is illustrating, as he puts it, “how suspension of judgment comes about for [the Pyrrhonist]” (PH I.31). He tells us that suspension of judgment “comes about—to put it rather generally—through the opposition of things” (PH I.31) and the remainder of the passage is intended to provide, as it were, an architectonic of the Pyrrhonist’s argumentative strategy, with which we are already familiar. The various Pyrrhonian Modes are just ways of articulating different specific equipollent oppositions within this superstructure. Whether it is due to sense of epistemic duty, or blind impulse of a cognitive habit, we seem to be committed to the underdetermination principle, or something like it, and Pyrrhonist’s argumentative strategy exploits this commitment, undermining confidence through the use counter-possibilities. Available evidence underdetermines belief because there is a counter-possibility, which, because it is supported by an equipollent argument, cannot be ruled out on the available evidence. So, it looks like arbitrary “bias” to retain conviction and the psychological pressure to suspend judgment is supposed to arise, in the dialectical context, from the recognition of this arbitrariness. But the recognition that an equipollent dispute could arise, and that one’s present grounds for conviction cannot rule this out, suffices to destabilize that conviction, and any temporal possibility that one might discover an actual disagreement is beside the point.

We are now in a position to understand the force of Sextus’s Promissory Note. Sextus proffers the Promissory Note as an illustration of the general point that the oppositions the Skeptic uses to generate an equipollent argument does not have to actually exist. The Promissory Note is of a piece with the rest of his appeals to possible oppositions. As with the cases I discussed in section 3, though Sextus uses temporal language, the point is about logical
possibilities. It is true that Sextus says the opposing argument is not “now” apparent, but he claims that, nevertheless, it “is really there in nature.” This appears to be a dialectical concession Sextus demands from his Dogmatic interlocutor, for as the Dogmatist would hold that “argument of the school” to which he belongs was “really there in nature” before it was discovered, so too the Dogmatist should concede that Sextus’s counterargument “is really there in nature,” if a counterargument is possible.\(^{31}\) I take it that when Sextus says an argument could exist “in nature” without being apparent, he means the argument exists—in the way that abstract possibilities do—but it is has not been articulated. However, it is only the apparentness of the argument that is affected by temporality. The counterargument is really there, “in nature,” but at the moment, the Skeptic cannot yet articulate its premises. So, although Sextus writes that the Promissory Note is an example of opposing a thing that is “present, to past or future things” (PH I.33), the logical possibility such an argument is the point. If an argument can exist “in nature,” before it is apprehended, then it presumably could keep existing “in nature” unapprehended.\(^{32}\)

In PH I.34, Sextus envisions a case in which a Dogmatist presents an argument that, as he says, “is now thought to be a powerful argument.” He does not say so explicitly, but it is reasonable to suppose that he has in mind a case in which the premises of the Dogmatic argument are apparently true and the conclusion appears to follow, and, hence, an argument that appears to be rationally convincing—it appears to pass epistemic muster. The Promissory Note argument raises the possibility that, although the Dogmatic argument appears rationally compelling, it does not adequately establish the truth, for it is possible that there is an equipollent counterargument. The recognition of this logical counter-possibility—the Promissory Note—is supposed to establish that the Dogmatic argument does not justify belief in its conclusion because it shows that the argument, the Dogmatist’s current evidence, does not favor the truth of

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\(^{31}\) Obviously, the Pyrrhonist is not committed to the real existence of this argument (If she is debating a Stoic, for example, the Stoic will presumably hold that arguments are composed of *lekta* and so are abstract incorporeals, with a subsistent, but non-existent, mode of being). \(M\) VIII.70: “sayables” subsist in virtue of being objects of rational appearance.

\(^{32}\) One might wonder whether there is not after all some role for the nature Pyrrhonist’s past experience finding successful refutations to play in the argument. I am happy to grant that experience could have role, but if there is any role in the argument for experience to play (and I note, again, that Sextus does not mention this in PH I.34), then it is only to make the possibility of an equipollent argument appear plausible. As I argued in section 2 and 3, experience is not the inferential basis for the suspension of judgment when Sextus appeals to possible oppositions; rather, to the extent that past experience plays a role at all in the Promissory Note, it plays a role analogous to the specific cases of disagreement cited in the Ten Modes. It makes the existence of a specific logical possibility apparent. My thanks to John Mahalen and Patrick Hassan.
its conclusion over the incompatible conclusion of the possible equipollent counterargument. Hence, despite the fact that the Dogmatic argument appears compelling, it is not worthy of commanding our assent and so “we should not yet assent to what is now thought to be a powerful argument” (PH I.34).

The argument hinges on the idea that the possibility of an equipollent counterargument is enough to show that the Dogmatic argument does not present sufficient evidence in favor of the Dogmatic conclusion over an incompatible proposition—assent to the conclusion on the basis of the proffered argument, in other words, violates the underdetermination principle. But how? Unfortunately, Sextus does not tell us what, exactly, he has in mind. However, I believe we can reconstruct an interesting argument on Sextus’s behalf.

To see why the mere logical possibility of an equipollent dispute between two arguments might undermine the evidential weight of an actual argument, consider how a Dogmatist would go about setting a dispute in favor of his claim, were he to actually hear an equipollent counterargument. Let argument A be the Dogmatic argument and let B be the equipollent counterargument. In the face of B the Dogmatist cannot merely insist on A as a reason in favor of his conclusion. To do so would be unreasonable fist-pounding, begging the question against the opposed position, since we have stipulated that A and B are equipollent arguments. One cannot simply disregard what is acknowledged to be an effective counterargument just because it contradicts the conclusion of an argument that one found compelling beforehand. Surely this would be an instance of “being a party to the dispute,” as Sextus puts it. Insisting on the truth of the Dogmatist’s conclusion as confirmation of the truth of the premises of A and, so, for the convincingness of A over B would be circular. B is equipollent with A and, hence, B is as good of a reason to believe the opposed conclusion as A is to believe the Dogmatist’s conclusion; yet, the two propositions cannot both be true. Thus, the Dogmatist cannot invoke the supposed truth of his conclusion as a reason to discount B in favor of A. Therefore, if actually confronted with an equipollent counterargument, the Dogmatist would be forced to produce some further reasons in favor of the premises of A over the premises of B. That is, the Dogmatist would have to look for the independent tiebreaking considerations, over and above the convincingness of A, on pain of violating the epistemic norms to which he is committed. But, as soon as the Dogmatist moves to defend A, Pyrrhonist can invoke the Modes to find an equipollent argument to show that the
argument in favor of $A$ does not adequately establish that $A$ is a decisive reason to accept the Dogmatic conclusion.

I imagine the dialectic would play out something like this. When the Dogmatist moves to give a further reason in favor of the premises of $A$ over the premises of $B$, and so of $A$ as a decisive reason for the Dogmatic conclusion, the Pyrrhonist will demand justificatory reasons for accepting this further reason. Whatever justificatory reason the Dogmatist offers must not be arbitrary or circular, and so the Pyrrhonist will demand an argument to establish that this is the case. The truth of the premises of $A$ cannot simply be assumed, and argument $A$ cannot feature in its own justification, on pain of circularity. So, the Pyrrhonist’s strategy is to continue to press the case that there is a legitimate need for further justificatory reasons and reasons for these reasons, and so on. The Dogmatist will be sent into an apparently infinite regress, robbing Peter to pay Paul, according to the Pyrrhonist, looking for some non-circular, non-arbitrary way to halt the regress. Without some answer to this regress problem, the Dogmatic argument $A$ does not appear to be decisive, in light of the equipollent counterargument $B$. A foundationalist or a coherentist will say that there is a way to legitimately stop this regress of justification. That either theory of justification succeeds in doing what their proponents claim they do is controversial and the Pyrrhonist replies to these responses are well-rehearsed elsewhere, so I will not repeat them. Instead I point out that, even granting that some version of foundationalism or coherentism will adequately respond to the regress problem, it must nevertheless be conceded that $A$ was not of itself a sufficiently convincing reason to accept the Dogmatic conclusion, given the existence of the equipollent $B$. The Pyrrhonist has the Dogmatist arguing about something else now and this new argument will require justification, over and above the original argument. That is all Sextus requires in order for the Promissory Note to do what the Pyrrhonist needs it to do.

It is tempting to think that while the foregoing considerations will have some plausibility in cases in which one is actually confronted with equipoised arguments, they should have no force in cases in which we are considering merely possible equipoised counterarguments. But

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notice that above we have gamed-out the defense of argument A against an equipollent argument and have seen that any defense will leave the argument exposed to skeptical assault, simply because A will require further dialectical engagement and leave space for the Pyrrhonist to apply her Modes. Hence, even if no one ever propounds an equipollent counterargument, one is left in the uncomfortable position of apparently assenting to the Dogmatist’s conclusion on the back of A only because A now appears to be a strong argument and not because, ultimately, one could rationally defend the argument, for were someone to propound an equipollent counterargument one would not have an adequate reply. The notion that conviction should not be unsettled merely by the recognition that an equipollent counterargument is possible looks suspiciously like the reasoning of a debtor who comforts himself with the thought that he is under no obligation to repay his debts until the collections agent actually knocks on his door.

It does not matter whether or not anyone ever expects to hear the premises of equipollent counterargument B at some time in the future. If by the soothsaying of some clairvoyant mystic, we come to know that the world will end before anyone has a chance to discover and propound the premises of B, it would nevertheless remain true that were someone to discover the premises of B, the opposed conclusion would appear compelling. I take it that the Pyrrhonist’s tactic is to challenge the Dogmatist, in light of the Promissory Note, to say exactly how it is not merely a happy accident that he believes his conclusion, rather than the opposed conclusion, given that he acknowledges that were he to hear B, he would have to produce some kind of defense of A. And if, in this counterfactual scenario one could not establish the rational probative force of argument A when confronted with an equally good argument B for a contrary proposition, then it would seem one could not defend A, if one were actually called upon to do so. But if one could not produce adequate reasons to accepting A over an equipollent counterargument, when confronted with one, doubt is cast on the adequacy of A as a reason that decisively establishes the truth of the Dogmatist’s conclusion. The argument appears to underdetermine belief in its own conclusion.

From a dialectical standpoint, I believe the argument succeeds. Given the norms under which the Dogmatist and the Pyrrhonist are operating, the Dogmatist is under dialectical pressure to defend his argument in the face of the Promissory Note. But once he begins this defense, the Dogmatist reopens the inquiry and the Pyrrhonist can press the attack. The Promissory Note
functions as a dialectical wedge—it is a way for the Pyrrhonist to open up sufficient space for argumentative engagement and, once this space is opened, the Dogmatist is forced to continue arguing. The onus is now on the Dogmatist to defend an argument that had seemed convincing and that he had hoped would settle the investigation. When he does, he will thereby give the Pyrrhonist an opening to apply the Modes. The Dogmatist must find some other reason, such that the probative force of this reason together with A overbalances the possible probative force of B, or else rules out the possibility of any such counterargument. Yet doing so concedes the point to Sextus. Sextus was looking for a reason not to assent to an argument that now appears sound. His point was that this argument, A, did not license rational assent to the Dogmatic conclusion because an equipollent counterargument is possible. To see the need for some further reason that, together with A, provides a reason in favor of the Dogmatic conclusion, is to acknowledge that, after all, A was not itself a sufficient reason to believe that conclusion. An infinite regress threatens. If the Dogmatist argues the additional reason together with A is a reason to assent to the Dogmatic conclusion over any incompatible proposition, Sextus can simply produce a new Promissory Note and begin the process over again. Since, on the face of it, the same argument dynamics would play themselves out, there appears to be no way to deal with the regress. Hence, in this way, the Dogmatist is backed into confronting the Pyrrhonian Modes, challenged to find some finite set of non-circular, non-arbitrary justificatory reasons in favor of his thesis.

The norms generating the trouble for the Dogmatist are plausible as norms governing epistemic responsibility. Insofar as we are demanding reasons and justification for belief, the underdetermination principle is not unreasonable. It insists that one’s evidence is adequate only if it gives one a reason in favor of a proposition over incompatible propositions. This strikes me as an intuitive requirement on adequacy of evidence. While we are striving to be epistemically responsible agents, we should adjust our beliefs to the evidence and the evidence should establish the truth of our beliefs. If the available evidence is a good reason to believe some proposition, then it had better be good enough to allow us to rationally adjudicate between this proposition and some incompatible proposition. Failing this, it is difficult for me to understand how the available evidence could be good enough to license assent. If you were to hear evidence in a trial, which did not favor the defendant’s innocence over his guilt, it would be unreasonable to believe he is innocent (obviously, not believing someone is innocent is not the same thing as
judging that they ought to be found guilty in a legal context). If this is right and if the norms under which the Dogmatist and the Pyrrhonist are conducting their debate have both dialectical and epistemic force, then the Promissory Note is a significant weapon in the skeptical arsenal. For, since the Promissory Note forces the Dogmatist to continue justifying his propositions, it provides an entry, given any argument, for an application of the Modes. If these have real skeptical force, then so does the Promissory Note.

So far, I have been speaking of the probative force of the Promissory Note in normative terms. One might worry that, in the foregoing reconstruction of the argument, I have “over-intellectualized” the Pyrrhonist, committing her to the propriety of epistemic and rational norms. But, as I mentioned in section 3, this is not my position and I do not intend to commit Sextus to the ultimate correctness of any such norms. The Skeptic is a reasons-responsive animal, in the sense that her cognitive behavior conforms to rules the Dogmatist would express as epistemic norms or canons of rationality; however, the Skeptic does not thereby assent to the correctness of these rules. This includes the underdetermination principle. As I understand Sextus, equipollency is a matter of the apparently equal convincingness of the evidence in favor of both sides of an opposition. That is, the appearances and arguments strike the mind, pulling the faculty of judgment with equal force into opposite directions; when indeterminacy of this sort affects the mind, suspension of judgment happens, in a causal way. I think it is fairly easy to see that the Promissory Note argument can be couched in these more psychological terms as well and the argument dynamics considered above will play themselves out, mutatis mutandis. The Dogmatist’s argument $A$ is a convincing argument—upon consideration, it compels the mind to assent to its conclusion (that is just what a “convincing” argument is). But, the Pyrrhonist points out, it is possible that there is an equally convincing counterargument $B$, an argument such that were that argument propounded, it would have the effect of compelling the mind to assent to a conclusion inconsistent with the conclusion of $A$. So, had the Dogmatist heard $B$ rather than $A$, he would believe the conclusion of $B$ rather than the conclusion of $A$. Hence, $A$ underdetermines his belief and it looks like an accident that he happens to believe the conclusion of $A$. Fate tipped his assent one way, rather than the other.

One might also worry that the Promissory Note, as I have reconstructed it, is too powerful, obviating the need for the Skeptic to use any other argument in her repertoire. Why
would she not always appeal to a Promissory Note? There are at least two reasons why this worry is misplaced. First, the Promissory Note concerns Dogmatic assertions supported by arguments and it would not have force against other types of evidence. It does not, for example, have force against perceptual appearances and if the Pyrrhonist seeks to rebut Dogmatic assertions made on the back of perceptual appearances, the Ten Modes are more appropriate. Second, convincingness, as I understand Sextus, is supposed to be a psychological property of an appearance or an argument—the convincingness of a convincing appearance or argument is the attractive power, by which it compels assent. But, not every argument will be convincing in every case to every dialectical partner. The context of the debate in which the Pyrrhonist finds herself will dictate what tactics are appropriate. The Promissory Note will not always be the best tool for the job at hand, since the Skeptic’s most devastating tactic is to deploy the Dogmatist’s own philosophical views against him. The usefulness of the Promissory Note consists, at least in part, in its power to spring the Skeptic herself from an apparent bind, but once the Promissory Note has been deployed and the Dogmatist starts arguing with the Skeptic again, she is free to use any of the tools at her disposal to cure his rashness and conceit—the most effective tools for this task come from the Dogmatist’s kit.

But does the Promissory Note point to a general sceptical argument that no argument should be convincing, which does not, ultimately, reduce to the familiar Pyrrhonian Modes? Although a full appraisal of this claim falls outside of the main scope of this paper, I will suggest that perhaps it does. Suppose you have an apparently valid argument with apparently true premises. Suppose you are confronted with an apparently equipollent valid counterargument with apparently true premises. Since both arguments are valid, since they reach inconsistent conclusions, they cannot both be sound. You could retain your position; however, you would need to argue that one of the premises of that valid counterargument is false. You could insist that since your conclusion is true and your argument is valid, the counterargument, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, must have false premises. But this seems like fist-pounding. So, you should produce a set of reasons that favor the premises of your argument over the premises of the counterargument; otherwise, it is difficult to understand how your argument can be said to establish the truth of its conclusion. Your argument seems to underdetermine belief. Assuming that we accept some version of the epistemic norms set out in section 3, in light of the
counterargument, you need to show that your argument’s premises are true with a train of justificatory reasons that is finite set of non-circular, non-arbitrary. Notice that the existence of my equipollent counterargument forced you to defend your premises, if you will retain your conviction in your conclusion and notice that you have to do this by giving some other set of reasons in favor of your premises.

Now suppose someone proposes to you that it is possible that there is a valid, equipollent counterargument opposed to your argument. This is an argument such that, were you to hear it, the abovementioned dialectic would play itself out. Were you to hear it, you would recognize the need to produce an independent argument on behalf of your premises, or else give up belief in your argument’s conclusion. Do you need to produce an argument in favor of your premises? If you accept that such a counterargument is possible, you might, for you are admitting that you would be under the immediate obligation to reply, were you to hear the argument. Now, you have not heard the counterargument, but why should that matter? You certainly will not feel the need to defend your argument, but that is a different question. If you believe the argument establishes the conclusion, you should be able to produce reasons in support of the premises, such that they would overcome the counterargument’s probative force. You surely are not simply asserting the premises without evidence in favor of these premises. So you provide the supporting evidence. Notice, however, that you have thereby just given additional reasons in support of the argument and this looks like an admission that, on its own, the argument was not capable of adequately establishing the truth of the conclusion. Perhaps you think the premises of the argument are self-evident or that you can refuse to grant an equipollent counterargument is not possible. In either case, however, it looks to me that you have to give further reasons above and beyond the premises of the argument. In the former case, some story about the nature of self-evidence is in order; in the latter, some argument that there can be no equipollent counterargument. Barring cases of mathematical or logical proofs, it is difficult to see that this can be pulled off. But things could get worse. Once you have responded to the Promissory Note, and provided the requisite backing justification for your premises, it is possible for to produce a new Promissory Note—an equipollent counterargument to the argument that the premises of your first argument were true. One could produce another Promissory Note for this argument—the possibility that there is an equipollent counterargument to the premises of the argument that
the premises of the first argument are true. And so on, ad infinitum. Hence, it looks as though the original argument you presented is not, in fact, a sufficient reason for belief in the conclusion.

I will not stand by the foregoing sketch, for many details must be filled in. The key move, of course, is the claim that the existence of possible equipollent counterarguments genuinely violates the underdetermination principle; that is obviously a contentious claim. But it certainly sounds odd, to my ears anyway, to insist that an argument adequately supports its conclusion, while admitting that, were you to hear a counterargument, you would be forced to supply some set of reasons in support of the premises of your argument. What is interesting about this sketch is that it suggests that no argument (or, no argument the premises of which are not self-evident) stands on its own merits. Any argument stands in need of some further set of reasons supporting its premises. In the end, I suspect, this problem, simply reduces to the familiar regress problem, generated by the so-called “Agrippan Trilemma.” The regress will have to be blocked and there must be an argument that this regress-blocking move is neither arbitrary nor involves a vicious circle.

5. Concluding remarks

I have argued that the Promissory Note argument in PH I.34 depends not on any temporal possibility of ever meeting with the promised counterargument at any future time, but only upon the claim that a counterargument is logically possible. The Promissory Note is a device to force the Dogmatist to continue providing arguments to defend his arguments, thereby giving the Skeptic an opening to apply the Modes and to keep the Skeptical investigation going. Sextus’s argument has some force. It should be puzzling to anyone who holds the minimum Dogmatic standard of rational investigation: Investigation should, eventually, terminate in conviction and this conviction should be grounded in evidence that provides decisive, non-arbitrary justification in its favor. I have also suggested Sextus’s remarks contain a sketch of a philosophically interesting argument, an argument that would purport to show no argument, taken in isolation, sufficiently justifies its conclusion. In this respect, then, the Promissory Note perhaps deserves to be ranked alongside Sextus’s more celebrated skeptical arguments attacking the foundations of logic, such as those undermining the so-called “indicative” signs (e.g. PH II.97-133; M VIII.141-298), purporting to establish the circularity direct syllogisms, induction (e.g. PH II.195-199; PH II.204), and the famous demonstration against demonstration itself (M VIII). Further analysis of
the argument and further investigation is required to transform Sextus’s sketch into a fully-articulated skeptical argument; I have made gestures in this direction, however, a comprehensive logical analysis of the argument falls outside of the scope of the present essay. Perhaps the lesson we should take from the Pyrrhonists is that you cannot engage in the search for ultimate foundations without running into these sorts of skeptical problems.\footnote{I wish to thank Michael Augustin, Andrew Bollhagen, Patrick Hassan, John Mahlen, Marina Marren, Kevin Marren and Voula Tsouna for their helpful comments on early drafts of this paper. Special thanks are due to Mohamed El-Baghdadi, Mohamed Najjar, and Aliah Tohamei for patiently listening to me air these ideas in several undergraduate philosophy courses only tangentially connected to skepticism.}
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