IS THE PYRRHONIST AN INTERNALIST?

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1. Introduction

The Pyrrhonist is a well-known troublemaker, who systematically challenges those who claim to have knowledge, or justified belief, by raising doubts as to whether, according to their own standards, they do in fact know what they claim to know, or are justified in believing what they claim to be justified in believing. Not surprisingly, Pyrrhonism has also been criticized. And the typical form of criticism charges the view with incoherence: in order to effectively criticize philosophical proposals, the Pyrrhonist needs to make assumptions, and by making the latter, the Pyrrhonian stance is ultimately undermined. After all, the Pyrrhonist advertises his/her stance as one that does not involve making claims (in particular about the ultimate nature of things). If such claims are implicitly or explicitly invoked in the critical evaluation of philosophical views, the Pyrrhonist brings through the back door what he/she was allegedly trying to avoid in the first place. A form of this criticism is implied in Jonathan Barnes’ quite insightful treatment of Pyrrhonism (see Barnes 1990), in which it is stated that the Pyrrhonist may end up assuming an internalist conception of knowledge as part of his challenge to dogmatic philosophy. If Barnes’ interpretation were correct, it would constitute a strong criticism of Pyrrhonism—even if Barnes himself does not present his interpretation as a criticism of the latter.

In this paper, I resist this assessment of Pyrrhonism, at least as presented in Sextus Empiricus’ extant works, in particular in his Outlines of Pyrrhonism (Annas & Barnes 2000). I argue that, as a philosophical doctrine about the nature of knowledge, or justification, internalism is precisely the sort of view about which the Pyrrhonist suspends

* My thanks go to John Collins, Gavin Enck, Richard Greene, and Eric Thompson for helpful discussions of the issues addressed in this paper. Special thanks are due to Diego Machuca, who wrote detailed and insightful comments on an earlier version of this work. His comments also led to substantial improvements.
judgment. Moreover, properly articulated, Pyrrhonism offers a critical
way of addressing the internalism/externalism debate which, being less
committed, is also in some respects more illuminating.

2. An Internalist Pyrrhonism?

Pyrrhonism is a particular attitude of investigation: the ability to oppose
appearances and objects of thought in every possible way, in order to
try to determine which things (if any) the skeptic, or the Pyrrhonist,¹
should assent to. However, as Sextus Empiricus notes, since “to every
account an equal account is opposed” (Outlines of Pyrrhonism (PH) I 12;
see also PH I 202–205), and since these opposed accounts are equally
persuasive to the skeptic, he is unable to decide between them, and
suspends judgment. As a result, the Pyrrhonist ends up holding no beliefs
about the underlying features—or the true nature—of the phenomena. In
Sextus’ own words:

Scepticism is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear
and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of
the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to
suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquility. (PH I 8)

Central to the Pyrrhonian strategy of investigation is the exploration of
Agrippa’s modes—disagreement, relativity, hypothesis, circularity, and
infinite regress (PH I 164–177).² With these modes the Pyrrhonist has
a strategy to make explicit that, according to the standards embraced by
dogmatic philosophers, the latter seem to be unable to assent to their
own doctrines. In outline, the (well-known) strategy is this: To begin
with, the Pyrrhonist points out that there is disagreement regarding the
true nature of a given object. In order to try to settle the disagreement,
the dogmatic philosopher cannot simply assert without argument his
or her view about the issue; otherwise, someone could just as easily
assert, also without argument, the negation of the dogmatist’s claim.
None of these maneuvers would be persuasive (hypothesis). Moreover,
in order to support his or her view, the dogmatic philosopher cannot
offer a reason that presupposes the truth of that view, given that such

¹ I will use these terms interchangeably.
² For the purposes of the present paper, relativity won’t play any role. So, I’ll ignore it
here.