It is a pleasant thought to imagine a mind exactly poised between two parallel desires, for it would indubitably never reach a decision, since making a choice implies that there is an inequality of value; if anyone were to place us between a bottle and a ham when he had an equal appetite for drink and for food there would be no remedy but to die of thirst and of hunger. In order to provide against this difficulty the Stoics, when you ask them how our souls manage to choose between two things which are indifferent and how we come to take one coin rather than another from a large number of crowns when they are all alike and there is no reason which can sway your preference, reply that this motion in our souls is extraordinary and not subject to rules, coming into us from some outside impulse, incidental and fortuitous. It seems to me that we could say that nothing ever presents itself to us in which there is not some difference, however slight: either to sight or to touch there is always an additional something which attracts us even though we may not perceive it. Similarly if anyone would postulate a cord, equally strong throughout its length, it is impossible, quite impossible, that it should break. For where would you want it to start to fray? And it is not in nature for it all to break at once. Then if anyone were to follow that up with those geometrical propositions which demonstrate by convincing demonstrations that the container is greater than the thing contained and that the centre is as great as the circumference, and which can find two lines which ever approach each other but can never meet, and then with the philosopher’s stone and the squaring of the circle, where reason and practice are so opposed, he would perhaps draw from them arguments to support the bold saying of Pliny: *Solum certum nihil esse certi, et homini nihil miserius aut superbius.* (“There is nothing certain except that nothing is certain, and nothing more wretched than Man, nor more arrogant.”)\(^1\)

1. This short essay that I have quoted here in full, “How our mind tangles itself up,” was probably composed at the same time as the much longer and better known *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (or at least part of it).
In the *Apology*, the same topics are dealt with in a fully detailed way, inasmuch as Montaigne considers our cognitive limits in a skeptical light, mostly supported by the works of Cicero and Sextus Empiricus. As noted by Popkin, we can recognize there almost all the Pyrrhonian tropes, and even, I think, a sort of sceptical philosophical engagement by Montaigne himself. Particularly in his criticism of the vanity of human knowledge (incapable of finding the truth it covets), Montaigne offers a presentation of skeptical philosophy through its principal concepts: *epokhē* or suspension of judgment, *ataraxia* or tranquility, antinomic argument, sceptical expressions, and the practical criterion that allows the philosopher to get on with his life, the *phainómenon*. This last theme is the object of an important commentary that will lead us to the problem I wish to discuss. Montaigne recognizes in Pyrrhonian skepticism an example of a radical doubting philosophy—“an endless confession of ignorance, or a power of judgment that never inclines to one side or to the other”—and the importance of controversies around the question of how a Pyrrhonian could live his philosophy. Nevertheless, he doubts that his position would stop him from simply living his life. This is how he comments on the anecdotes that claimed that a skeptic would throw himself under moving carts or jump into an abyss:

[A] That goes well beyond his teaching. He was not fashioning a log or a stone but a living, arguing, thinking man, enjoying natural pleasures and comforts of every sort and making full use of all his parts, bodily as well as spiritual—[C] in, of course, a right and proper way. [A] Those false, imaginary and fantastic privileges usurped by Man, by which he claims to profess, arrange and establish the truth, were renounced and abandoned by Pyrrho, in good faith.4

Once the short essay I quoted at the start is placed beside these lines, it may cause us no little amazement. Isn’t the interpretation of philosophical skepticism that we find in the *Apology* in radical opposition to what we find there? The idea of a radical doubt (a perfect balancing of wishes and of opposite reasons that would support them) was

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2 I will not develop this point further here, as I discussed it in detail in Eva (2001). However, I think that many passages quoted here, as well as the interpretation that will be offered, may provide provisional support. Actually the interpretation of Montaigne as a skeptic philosopher, once embraced by his contemporaries, became again almost a consensus, even if there is of course very different readings on the meaning of his skepticism.

3 II, 12, 505A, 563.

4 *Id. ibid.*