2 Disagreeing with the Pyrrhonist?

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1. INTRODUCTION

For the Pyrrhonian skeptic, disagreement is an integral part of the skeptical way of inquiry (see Pyrrhonian Outlines I 165).¹ The fact that there is undecidable disagreement about a given issue makes the Pyrrhonian skeptic unable to decide that issue, and suspension of judgment emerges. But is suspension of judgment the appropriate response in this case?

In this paper, I address two related topics. In the bulk of the paper, I examine critically Jonathan Barnes’ contention to the effect that disagreement alone is not enough to yield suspension of judgment; additional Agrippa’s modes need to be invoked as well (Barnes 1990: ch. 1). I argue that nothing prevents the Pyrrhonian skeptic from suspending judgment only due to disagreement. In fact, that is exactly what Sextus himself points out: “And because of the dispute [that is, the undecidable disagreement over a certain issue] we cannot choose or reject anything, and so end in suspension of judgment” (PH I 165; see Barnes 1990: 17). But does any form of disagreement yield suspension of judgment?

To answer this question I consider recent debates about the epistemology of disagreement (see, e.g., Feldman & Warfield 2010). According to the Total Evidence View, what is reasonable for us to believe depends on the total evidence available to us.² I argue that this view clearly provides a sufficient condition for the Pyrrhonian skeptic to suspend judgment due to disagreement alone. If the total evidence available to us—including the Pyrrhonian skeptic—does not favor any side of an issue over which there is disagreement, suspension of judgment is the natural outcome.

In order to examine these topics, however, it is important to be clear about the nature of the disagreement the Pyrrhonian skeptic is involved with and whether the Pyrrhonist is indeed part of the disagreement. I discuss these issues in the bulk of the paper (Sections 2–4). The identification of the relevant kind of disagreement the Pyrrhonist is engaged with paves the way for the ensuing discussion about the connection between disagreement and suspension of judgment (Sections 5–7).
2. DISAGREEMENT AND SUSPENSION OF JUDGMENT

Can the Pyrrhonist suspend judgment simply on the basis of disagreement? When Sextus presents the Five Modes of suspension of judgment, the first is the mode deriving from dispute (or disagreement). As he tells us:

According to the mode deriving from dispute, we find that undecidable dissension about the matter proposed has come about both in ordinary life and among philosophers. Because of this we are not able either to choose or to rule out anything, and we end up with suspension of judgment. (PH I 165)

As this passage makes it clear, not every kind of disagreement (or dissention or dispute) produces suspension of judgment: undecidability is required. Sextus does have a point. Suppose that a party to a dispute claims that $P$, without providing any argument in support of that claim. Suppose now that the opposing party claims that not-$P$, similarly without offering any argument. Being unsupported claims, the Pyrrhonist is unlikely to find either the initial claim or its negation equally persuasive, since no consideration is offered as to why $P$ (or not-$P$) is actually the case. In order to have the same persuasive force, contradictory (or, for that matter, even contrary) claims need to be supported by suitable arguments. Brute, unsupported disagreement does not matter for the suspension of judgment: it is just a clash of opposing claims. What is needed is a disagreement that is supported by suitable evidence. And as long as there are arguments supporting each side of the dispute, the disagreement is no longer brute. In fact, if the arguments are equally good, it may not be at all clear how to decide the issue. The conflicting arguments make the case for each side of the dispute, and in light of them the Pyrrhonist ends up being unable to decide between the opposing views. Suspension of judgment then emerges.

There is a philosophical motivation in support of the irrelevance of unsupported, or table-stomping, brute, disagreement. If no arguments are advanced in favor of the opposed conclusions, there is no reason for the Pyrrhonist (or anyone else for that matter) to suspend judgment about the issues under consideration. Propositions are simply asserted without any support to back them up. It would be arbitrary to favor or to reject any such propositions, and without any reasons in support of them, the Pyrrhonist has nothing that indicates the significance of the disagreement, and nothing that would leave him or her in a suspensive mode.

In this case, given the complete absence of any reasons, the debate lacks any philosophical significance. Needless to say, philosophical debates are never of this sort, since a variety of arguments and counterarguments are always advanced. In light of this, the Pyrrhonist may offer, dialectically, reasons in support of each of the opposed conclusions, as a way of making
the debate philosophically relevant and richer. This, in turn, may lead to reasons of equal persuasive force being offered, which will eventually lead to the suspension of judgment.

The situation is philosophically richer if the disagreement emerges from a context in which a number of arguments are offered in favor of the relevant dogmatists’ views. Eventually, these dogmatists reach rock bottom, and are unable to give any additional reason for some claim that is taken to be fundamental. In this context, the debate is already philosophically rich, and the Pyrrhonist can use the mode of hypothesis to indicate why it would be arbitrary to favor one side of the debate over the other. Suspension of judgment then emerges.

Note that if it is claimed that no reason is offered in support of a given claim, since that claim is self-evident, that itself is a reason in favor of the claim. After all, if something is (taken to be) self-evident, it wears its support on its sleeves, as it were, and thus, the claim of self-evidence amounts to a form of justification for the relevant claim. Faced with this consideration, the Pyrrhonist will point out that there are multiple conceptions of self-evidence, and there is no agreement as to which of them (if any) delivers the suitable form of justification. According to certain conceptions, something is self-evident if its truth can be immediately determined by the meaning of the relevant terms alone. According to other conceptions, however, self-evidence is a matter of having a suitable grasp of the relevant proposition via a suitable intellectual faculty. But there is disagreement about the adequacy of any such views, and the Pyrrhonist will be unable to settle the resulting dispute.

The point of these remarks is to indicate that the debates that are relevant for the Pyrrhonist to suspend judgment about—the philosophically significant debates—are those in which arguments are offered or those that are embedded in a network of arguments and counterarguments. These are the debates for which suspension of judgment matters.

Granted that the disagreement needs to be undecidable, how should this concept be understood? There are at least two possible ways of understanding it: (a) The undecidability is in principle. In this case, it is not possible to decide the issue even after all relevant evidence is provided. Alternatively, (b) the undecidability is only relative to the evidence available in a particular context, in a particular moment in time. In this case, given the available evidence, the issue cannot be decided.

It does not seem reasonable to attribute to Pyrrhonism the commitment to something as strong as (a). This amounts to a form of negative dogmatism rather than Pyrrhonism. Clearly the Pyrrhonist is in no position to assert that the dispute is in principle undecidable. Presumably evidence needs to be offered in support of this conclusion, and the adequacy of such evidence is itself open to skeptical investigation.

In contrast, alternative (b) is more plausible, since it implies no commitment to negative dogmatism. After all, what is currently undecidable given the available evidence may turn out to be decidable once new evidence emerges. This interpretation highlights the fact that the process of suspension
of judgment is sensitive to the available evidence in a given context: the evidence at disposal of those involved in the relevant debate. As soon as evidential considerations change, the process of skeptical investigation (comparing, contrasting, and weighting arguments) continues. And provided that it seems to the Pyrrhonist that the relevant arguments display equal persuasive force, suspension of judgment repeatedly emerges (PH I 1–15).

Thus, since on this interpretation of “undecidable” suspension of judgment may happen repeatedly over time, no negative dogmatism is involved. There are two reasons for this. First, the stance is not dogmatic in the sense that suspension of judgment is not considered the final outcome of the dispute: the issue under examination can be (and often is) reopened at some stage. New evidence may be brought to bear on the problem under consideration, new arguments can be raised, or new interpretations of the relevant issue can be advanced. Second, since the Pyrrhonist repeatedly suspends judgment about the issue, in a very clear sense the issue is not resolved. Its resolution is, in fact, left open. But in this case no negative dogmatism is assumed: no claim is ever made to the effect that the issue cannot in principle be resolved. However, if the available evidence does not allow one to decide the relevant issue, the disagreement is undecidable—the Pyrrhonist, at least, is unable to decide it. Suspension of judgment, for the time being at least, is then motivated.

These considerations suggest that, in order to induce suspension of judgment, the disagreement needs to be such that (a) arguments favoring the opposing views are advanced, and (b) these arguments are equally persuasive: the available evidence does not favor one view over the others. The disagreement is then undecidable given available evidence. The arguments in question need not be conclusive, of course. A weak argument for a claim can be counterbalanced by an equally weak argument for the opposing claim. At any point in the debate, stronger arguments can be offered by any of the parties involved. This will in turn require equally strong arguments from the opposing party. When the opposing arguments are not readily available, the Pyrrhonist may offer them, dialectically, on behalf of the relevant party. In the end, it is the equal force of the arguments advanced in the dispute—that is, the available evidence is unable to single out one view over the others—that induces suspension of judgment. It is in virtue of these arguments that the Pyrrhonist is unable to choose between the opposing sides of the dispute.

The Pyrrhonist need not—and, of course, does not—offer a theory of the conditions under which arguments are equally persuasive. Presented as a conception about the nature of arguments, any such theory is just the sort of thing about which the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment. Rather than relying on such a theory, the Pyrrhonist simply reports on whether the relevant arguments appear to be equally persuasive. If they appear that way to the Pyrrhonist, he or she would be unable to decide between them—until additional arguments are presented. As a result, suspension of judgment follows. If, however, one of the arguments in the dispute seems to be more persuasive than the other arguments, the Pyrrhonist will try to find a counterargument.
to counterbalance the more persuasive one. Once such a counterargument is provided, suspension of judgment will, once again, emerge.

The important point here is the piecemeal nature of this strategy. Suspension of judgment is obtained on a case-by-case basis, by considering, comparing, and contrasting arguments for conflicting claims. The considerations leading to suspension of judgment should not be thought of as being decisive in the sense that once the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment about a certain issue that settles the matter. Matters are not conclusively settled within Pyrrhonism: the skeptical (Pyrrhonian) investigation always continues. Otherwise, the Pyrrhonist would become a dogmatic philosopher, rather than a skeptic (PH I 1–15).

3. THREE KINDS OF DISAGREEMENT

In his examination of Pyrrhonism, Barnes challenged the idea that disagreement is sufficient for suspension of judgment (Barnes 1990: 24–35). Disagreement clearly is not a necessary condition for such suspension, since one can suspend judgment about an issue without the existence of any disagreement ever taking place.

Before addressing the issue of the sufficiency of disagreement for suspension of judgment, some preliminary considerations are needed. Barnes considers three kinds of disagreement (1990: 13–15). They can be formulated as follows:

(D) A **positive disagreement** occurs whenever two parties offer incompatible answers to a given question.

(D₁) A **disagreement in opinion** occurs whenever either there is positive disagreement, *or else* one party offers an answer to a question that the other party rejects (or vice versa).

(D₂) A **disagreement in attitude** occurs whenever the opposing parties hold conflicting attitudes toward the issue under consideration (e.g., to accept a given proposition as the answer to a question is one attitude; to reject such proposition is another; and to suspend judgment about the issue is yet another).

According to Barnes, there is a very clear implication relation between these kinds of disagreement:

all positive disagreements are also disagreements in opinion, and all disagreements in opinion are also disagreements in attitude; but not the other way about. (Barnes 1990: 15)

But is this assessment correct? Given the way the concepts have been characterized, it is uncontroversial that positive disagreement entails disagreement in opinion—that is, (D) entails (D₁). But this entailment seems to have been
artificially designed: it obtains from the simple fact that \((D_1)\) is a disjunction and one of its disjuncts is, alas, \((D)\)! By fiat then, disagreement in opinion follows from positive disagreement. (After all, by disjunction introduction, \(A \lor B\) follows from \(A\), for any \(A\) and \(B\).) The key distinction here is, in fact, between positive disagreement (which involves conflicting answers to a question) and disagreement in attitude (which involves conflicting attitudes toward the proposed answers).

Consider, however, the alleged entailment relation between \((D_1)\) and \((D_2)\). Suppose that the parties in the debate have a positive disagreement about a certain issue: they offer incompatible answers to the relevant question. However, none of the parties is particularly wedded to the answers they provide, so the parties neither accept nor reject the answers that are offered. They are only pursuing the answers, while fully acknowledging the incompatibility of the proposals under consideration. To pursue an answer is to have an attitude toward a proposition that falls short of commitment. Whereas acceptance and rejection are attitudes that demand such commitment, the situation is very different for pursuit, which only invites the open exploration of possibilities allowed by the range of entertained answers. In this case, despite the disagreement in opinion, no disagreement in attitude emerges. \((D_1)\) does not entail \((D_2)\). Since to pursue an answer does not involve either the acceptance or the rejection of the propositions under consideration, no conflicting attitudes are invoked: only the exploration of possibilities without commitment is at issue.

It may be objected that, since none of the parties involved in pursuing a class of answers is in fact committed to the relevant answers, there is really no disagreement. The proposals under consideration are not provided as answers, but only as possibilities to be explored.

This objection misses the point. Clearly there is disagreement between the two parties, given that incompatible responses to the issue under consideration are being advanced. Whether the proposed responses are endorsed or not by the respective parties, the fact remains that the responses are incompatible with one another. Whether anyone accepts or rejects the statements: The shares were getting more expensive, The shares were not getting more expensive, there is a clear incompatibility between them. They offer contradictory answers to the question:

(Q) Why did Thomas sell his shares?

Two parties could be involved in a positive disagreement as they pursue answers to \((Q)\). One party could suggest that, since the shares were getting more expensive, it seemed to be a good moment for Thomas to sell them and increase his profit by earning more per share. In contrast, the other party could note that, since the shares were not getting more expensive (they may have been at some stage, but not at that point), it seemed the right time for Thomas to sell them in order not to lose money. The fact that the parties are not particularly wedded to their responses—but are just pursuing
the answers—highlights that, as opposed to Barnes’ claim, disagreements in opinion need not translate into disagreements in attitude.

Note that we have here genuine disagreement, since the different parties offer conflicting answers to (Q). But since the parties are not committed to their answers, there is no disagreement in attitude. In fact, there is agreement at the level, with both parties just pursuing their answers.

The point matters since the attitude of pursuit seems to be one that Pyrrhonists exemplify while conducting their skeptical inquiry, since no commitment is involved. This attitude paves the way for the nondogmatic form of investigation that is central to the Pyrrhonian stance.

Once the distinction between disagreement in opinion and disagreement in attitude is drawn, the issue arises as to whether the Pyrrhonist should be considered part of the dispute. Some of Sextus’ writings have been interpreted as acknowledging that this is the case. For instance, Barnes (1990: 14–15) suggests that Sextus’ discussion of the criterion (or standard) of truth is a candidate for such interpretation. Sextus tells us:

Of those who have discussed standards [of truth], some have asserted that there is one (e.g., the Stoics and certain others), some that there is not (among them, Xeniades of Corinth and Xenophanes of Colophon who says: ‘but belief is found over all’); and we suspend judgment as to whether there is one or not. (PH II 17)

According to Barnes, the disagreement in this case is trilateral, since the Pyrrhonists are themselves part of it “in so far as they suspend judgment” on the matter (1990: 15).

However, does the fact that Pyrrhonists suspend judgment on the issue under consideration entail that they are part of the disagreement? Suspending judgment expresses not a solution to the problem at hand, but the (current) inability to decide it. It offers an attitude of suspension toward the issue—provisional and revisable no doubt—rather than an approach to solve it. In this sense, it is odd to consider the Pyrrhonist as one of the parties in the dispute, since given the suspension of judgment the Pyrrhonist makes no claim (nor is any implied) about what the solution to the problem ultimately is (or could be).

It is indeed inadequate to consider the Pyrrhonist as part of the dispute. One counterintuitive consequence of taking Pyrrhonism in this way is that, from the sheer fact that the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment on an undecided issue, that issue would thereby be decided. Barnes insists on this point:

[I]f we suspend judgment over [a particular issue], we are siding with one of the parties of the [disagreement] and therefore deciding it. (Barnes 1990: 23)

According to Barnes, this is precisely what Sextus is committed to. Why is this the case?
Talking about the unending disputes among dogmatic philosophers (that is, those who defend views about the subject matter they investigate), Sextus asks:

Now, will they say that the dispute is decidable or undecidable? If undecidable, we have it that we must suspend judgment; for it is not possible to make assertions about what is subject to undecidable dispute. But if decidable, we shall ask where the decision is to come from. (*PH I* 170)

Underlying this passage, Barnes identifies a certain principle, that he calls the “Principle of Disagreement,” and which supposedly justifies the link between the undecidability of a dispute about a certain issue and the suspension of judgment about that issue:

If someone is aware that there is an undecided dispute about [a certain question Q], then he ought not to accept or reject any proposed answer to Q. (Barnes 1990: 21)

It is the Principle of Disagreement, as formulated by Barnes, which entails the conclusion that the Pyrrhonist, by suspending judgment on an undecided dispute, settles the issue:

[T]he Principle [of Disagreement] requires us to resolve the dispute in Sextus’ favor. And so, in this particular sort of case, the Principle leads to a decision. (Barnes 1990: 23)

It is unclear, however, that Sextus is committed to being part of the dispute. As noted above, to suspend judgment is not to provide an answer to a given question. It is to express the inability to provide such an answer, at least at that moment, given the available evidence. This proposal also has the advantage of not turning the Pyrrhonist into a party to the dispute, and thus the mere fact that the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment about a given issue does not entail that the issue has been decided.5

A different way of interpreting passages such as *PH II* 17 is by insisting that instead of being part of the disagreement, the Pyrrhonist only reports on the debate’s state of play. Considering the issue of the existence of a criterion of truth, Sextus tells us, some have advanced positive views about the topic, arguing for the existence of such a criterion, whereas others have advanced negative views, arguing for its nonexistence. The Pyrrhonist, however, is unable to decide the issue, and suspends judgment about it. In order to consider the Pyrrhonian attitude as part of the disagreement, one would need to take the suspension of judgment as one of the ways of disagreeing about the topic at hand. But it is unclear that, no matter how it is construed, suspension of judgment could be viewed as a way of being part of the dispute. The
dispute is not about the attitude one should take about a certain issue (in this case, the existence of a criterion of truth). Rather the dispute is about the issue. Suspension of judgment, being provisional and motivated locally—given the available evidence in a particular context—does not provide a way of disagreeing about a given topic, since it fails to yield any content, any answer, to the topic under consideration. So far, report the Pyrrhonists, we have been unable to decide the issue. That is not an answer to the issue, but a confession of the Pyrrhonists’ inability to settle it.

Suppose, however, that the issue under consideration was to determine the appropriate attitude one should take toward a given issue: acceptance, rejection, or suspension of judgment. In this case, since the topic under consideration is the appropriate attitude to be adopted, and since suspension of judgment is one of the relevant attitudes, the Pyrrhonist would be addressing the issue, engaging with the debate. The Pyrrhonist would then be part of the dispute. Nonetheless, the Pyrrhonist would only be a nondogmatic part of the debate, since he or she would advance no particular position. Only a temporary suspension of judgment will eventually emerge. Until, that is, additional evidence is invoked, additional arguments are advanced, and the dispute resumes. In any case, this kind of disagreement, focusing on the attitude rather than on the subject matter, is clearly the exception rather than the rule. By and large, debates tend to be topic oriented, rather than attitude oriented; they tend to be substantive rather than, as it were, methodological.

Disagreements in attitude often depend on positive disagreement. In fact, it seems that the fundamental form of disagreement is positive disagreement. Consider the debate between Platonists and nominalists about mathematics. Platonists insist that mathematical objects exist independently of our linguistic practices and psychological processes. Nominalists, in contrast, deny the existence of these objects (see, for instance, Azzouni 2004). One could claim that the disagreement here is, ultimately, a disagreement in attitude: should one accept the claim that mathematical objects exist (following the Platonists), or should one reject the existence of such objects (as the nominalists insist)? Note, however, that conceived as a disagreement in attitude, the debate ultimately relies on the subject matter: whether the relevant mathematical objects exist or not. Without reference to such objects (whether they exist or not) the debate—and hence the disagreement in attitude—cannot get off the ground. It is the object-level question about the existence or not of mathematical objects that animates, constraints, and makes possible the debate. Without that, the disagreement in attitude could not possibly emerge. Hence, the crucial disagreement concerns positive disagreement (disagreement about the answers to the guiding question) rather than disagreement in attitude.

It is therefore surprising that Barnes suggests that the proper, authoritative, understanding of disagreement in Pyrrhonism is disagreement in attitude:
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(D2) [i.e., disagreement in attitude] gives the largest—and, I suppose, authoritative—explanation of what Sextus understands by a [disagreement]. (Barnes 1990: 15)

However, continues Barnes, “as a matter of fact most of the disagreements which he [Sextus] reports are disagreements in opinion” (1990: 15). It is, in fact, expected that the focus of Sextus’ discussion would be on disagreements regarding opinion, since these disagreements provide the context in which particular views are confronted and defended. And the Pyrrhonian investigation emerges precisely from the contrast between the different views about the issues under consideration, by examining the (negative and positive) views that are asserted, explored, and defended. Clearly, given the disjunctive formulation of disagreement in opinion that Barnes offered (see [D1] above), the relevant component is the one involving positive disagreement: disagreement about the answers provided to a certain question, rather than disagreement in attitude (which are, in any case, much less common).

It may well be that the Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment generates a strong reaction from the dogmatists, who will ask on what grounds have the Pyrrhonist suspended judgment. This will, no doubt, yield a debate about attitudes—and the Pyrrhonist will eventually suspend judgment about that as well. But the point remains that disagreement in attitude is the exception rather than the rule regarding disagreement.6

4. THE PRINCIPLE OF DISAGREEMENT: TROUBLES AND TENSIONS

Barnes’ emphasis on disagreement in attitude forces him to face another implausible consequence: that the Principle of Disagreement, as he formulated it on behalf of Sextus, does not depend on disagreement, since no dispute among opposing views is required by this principle. As Barnes argues:

[T]he Principle of Disagreement is not really a principle of disagreement. The Principle states that I must suspend judgment over [a question Q] if I am aware of an undecided dispute over [Q], that is to say, if I am aware (i) that different people have taken different attitudes to [Q], and (ii) that no decisive reasons have yet been adduced in favor of any answer to [Q]. Now it is plain, I think, that the Principle would remain true even if clause (i) were omitted; for what grounds and warrants the Principle is the connection between suspension of judgment and the lack of decisive reasons—and it is clause (ii) which makes this connection. Yet clause (ii) does not invoke the notion of dispute. Dispute is invoked only in clause (i), which is otiose. (Barnes 1990: 23–24)
Barnes concludes that

The Principle of Disagreement makes reference to [disagreement], but it does so, as it were, accidentally. Hence, it is only a superficial feature of Agrippa’s first mode that it deals with disagreement. Essentially, the mode has nothing to do with [disagreement]. (Barnes 1990: 25)

This is a very surprising conclusion. First, note that it was Barnes who explicitly formulated the Principle of Disagreement; the principle has never been explicitly articulated by the Pyrrhonist. And it is expected that the Pyrrhonist would not advance, let alone defend, such a principle: doing so would turn Pyrrhonism into a dogmatic philosophy, rather than an open-ended practice of investigation. For the Principle of Disagreement expresses a particular view about rationality, namely that one should not rationally accept or reject those claims about which there is known undecided dispute (see Barnes 1990: 21). But why should the Pyrrhonist endorse such a conception of rationality?

Furthermore, the existence—or, at least, the possibility—of a dispute is required for any disagreement to get off the ground. After all, without such a dispute there would be no opposing reasons offered in support of the subject of disagreement. It was Barnes’ commitment to taking disagreement in attitude as basic that led him to this unexpected conclusion about Pyrrhonism. This is clear in the way he expressed clause (i) of the Principle of Disagreement, according to which “different people have taken different attitudes to [Q]” (Barnes 1990: 23; italics added). The operative disagreement is formulated in terms of attitudes, and that is the clause that Barnes then went on to deem “otiose” (Barnes 1990: 24).

However, if the emphasis were instead on positive disagreement, it would become clear that the Principle of Disagreement is indeed a principle of disagreement, since a (potential or actual) dispute needs to be in place for the disagreement to get off the ground. That dispute needs to be, at least, about possible answers to a certain question. Thus, at least positive disagreement is presupposed. Otherwise, if no dispute were involved, the antecedent of the Principle would not be satisfied. Recall that the Principle refers to a dispute one is aware of: “If someone is aware that there is an undecided dispute about [a certain question Q], then he ought not to accept or reject any proposed answer to Q” (Barnes 1990: 21). Although the dispute may not be about certain attitudes, it needs to be, at least, about possible answers. This seems to provide a more plausible reading of the Principle. (As will become clear shortly, however, I have serious concerns about this principle and the way in which Barnes has used it on behalf of the Pyrrhonist.)

It may be suggested that the Pyrrhonist uses the Principle of Disagreement only dialectically. Used dialectically the Principle would indicate that, according to the dogmatic philosophers’ own standards, these philosophers ought to suspend judgment. This is a principle that a dogmatic philosopher may recognize as cogent.
However, the claim that Pyrrhonists are invoking the Principle of Disagreement dialectically presupposes that they are trying to convince dogmatic philosophers to suspend judgment about the issues involved in an undecided dispute. But it is unclear that this is the Pyrrhonists’ goal. Pyrrhonists are just reporting on the outcome of their investigation. And even if this were the Pyrrhonists’ aim, it would have rather limited success. For some dogmatic philosophers may not accept the Principle of Disagreement, in which case they would have no reason to suspend judgment. They may be aware of an undecided dispute, but being part of it, they may just claim that the rival parties are just wrong in holding the beliefs they do. Being dogmatic philosophers, and having views they hold, they may just reject the Principle and proceed with their business.

But can one really deny the Principle of Disagreement? Barnes argues that any such denial leads directly into incoherence. After all, if I consider a dispute to be truly undecided, I cannot then offer my own reasons favoring one side of it as being conclusive—otherwise these reasons would, in effect, decide the dispute, and it would no longer be undecided. As Barnes points out, suppose that

I recognize that there is a dispute about the authenticity of the *Magna Moralia*, some holding that the work was written by Aristotle himself and others holding that it is a later counterfeit. I believe, further, that the dispute is still undecided [. . .]. Nevertheless (if the Principle is false) it is rational for me to hold that the work is not authentic. Now it seems clear to me that this is incoherent; for how could it possibly be rational for me to plump for authenticity, thus opting for one side of the dispute, and yet still to maintain that the dispute is undecided? (Barnes 1990: 22)

In other words, if I can rationally decide against the authenticity of *Magna Moralia*, I can no longer maintain that the dispute is undecided, since whatever justifies my decision would also thereby settle the dispute.

In response, it is important to determine the status of the dispute. One thing is for it to be undecided; quite another is for it to be undecidable. The modal force of the construction makes a crucial difference. Consider, first, that we are dealing with a merely undecided dispute, which can be, in principle, decided once a good enough reason is provided. Thus, it would be inappropriate to suspend judgment on an issue if additional considerations could settle the dispute, given that suspension of judgment is understood by Barnes as an answer to the disagreement, as a way of settling it. Now recall the way in which Barnes has formulated the Principle of Disagreement:

If someone is aware that there is an undecided dispute about [a certain question Q], then he ought not to accept or reject any proposed answer to Q. (Barnes 1990: 21)
Since the principle is formulated in terms of undecided disputes, there is no incoherence in denying it. In fact, the principle seems to be false. Suspension of judgment is not the required—let alone the rationally required—response to an undecided dispute. Better, stronger arguments favoring one of its sides seem to be what is called for. In this sense, if I think there are good reasons that justify my claim that Aristotle did not write *Magna Moralia*, and if these reasons are better than those offered by the opposing parties in the debate, I will indeed deny that the dispute is undecided.9

If the dispute, however, were undecidable, the situation would be different. If nothing in principle could ever decide a given dispute, then suspension of judgment seems to be called for. But how can one be in a position to establish that a dispute is undecidable in this sense? If the Pyrrhonist were required to establish such undecidability, this would force Pyrrhonism straight into dogmatism. The dogmatic philosophers are those who will need to realize the undecidable status of the dispute. The Pyrrhonist may help by indicating that the undecidability of the dispute follows, in each particular case, from the dogmatists’ standards. But, once again, Pyrrhonists do not endorse the Principle of Disagreement; they are unable to do that without abandoning Pyrrhonism. What account of the principle should be offered then?

Rather than interpreting the Principle of Disagreement as a Pyrrhonian constraint on rationality, it is better to understand it as describing a practice, a stance of investigation—a feature of the Pyrrhonist, who is not in the business of convincing people of what they ought to believe. Pyrrhonists are simply reporting on their engagement with conflicting views, and they express their inability to decide between rival accounts. Recall the way in which Sextus introduced the mode of dispute (or disagreement):

According to the mode deriving from dispute, *we* [the Pyrrhonists] find that undecidable dissent about the matter proposed has come about both in ordinary life and among philosophers. Because of this *we are not able* either to choose or to rule out anything, and *we end up* with suspension of judgment. (*PH* I 165; italics added)

It is clear that Sextus describes here the Pyrrhonist’s situation. It is the Pyrrhonist who encounters the undecidable dispute, and because of it, it is the Pyrrhonist who is unable to decide on the issue under dissension. The result is suspension of judgment: by the Pyrrhonist, of course.

In light of these considerations, recall what the Pyrrhonist says about undecidable disputes (note, in particular, in the passage below, that Sextus explicitly indicates that the dogmatic philosophers are those who assess the status of the dispute as decidable or undecidable):

Now, will they [that is, the dogmatic philosophers] say that the dispute is decidable or undecidable? If undecidable, *we* [that is, the Pyrrhonists] have it that we must suspend judgment; for it is not possible [for the
Pyrrhonists] to make assertions about what is subject to undecidable dispute. (*PH I* 170)

Note, once again, the Pyrrhonists’ insistence that they are the ones who suspend judgment. It is not possible for them to make assertions about issues that are under undecidable dispute, since they are unable to choose among rival views. In this way, there is no need to settle Pyrrhonists, as Barnes does, with the commitment to the dogmatic Principle of Disagreement. We have here a description of the Pyrrhonist’s attitude that makes sense of why suspension of judgment emerges without dogmatism.

But what exactly is the connection between undecidable disagreement and suspension of judgment? To address this issue is the main point of the next sections.

5. IS UNDECIDABLE DISAGREEMENT SUFFICIENT FOR SUSPENSION OF JUDGMENT?

We can now return to the issue of whether the mode of disagreement is sufficient to yield suspension of judgment independently of the other modes (circularity, infinite regress, etc.). In some passages, Sextus seems to suggest that this is a possibility:

\[
\text{That nothing is apprehended by means of itself is, they say, clear from the dispute which has occurred among natural scientists over, I suppose, all objects of perception and of thought—a dispute which is undecidable, since we cannot use either an object of perception or an object of thought as a standard because anything we may take has been disputed and so is unconvincing. (*PH I* 178)}
\]

Note that in this passage Sextus invokes the mode of disagreement as a way of blocking the adequacy of making dogmatic assertions about a given subject matter, which will eventually lead to suspension of judgment. The Pyrrhonist cannot adopt as a criterion (that is, as a standard) to settle a dispute something that has been itself disputed, given that, due to the dispute, it would be unconvincing to do so.

Barnes reconstructs this argument as follows:

1. On every issue \([Q]\) there has been (or might be) disagreement.

2. If a disagreement is to be decided, then we need a yardstick to decide it.

3. If we are to use a yardstick \([Y]\) for issue \([Q]\), we must be justified in holding that \([Y]\) is appropriate for \([Q]\).

4. On any question of the form ‘\([Y]\) is appropriate for \([Q]\)’ there is undecided disagreement. (Barnes 1990: 28)
Using the Principle of Disagreement, Barnes concludes, on behalf of the Pyrrhonist, that we should suspend judgment on every issue. The argument he presents goes as follows:

From (4) by the Principle of Disagreement:

(5) For no $Y$ and no $[Q]$ are we justified in holding that $Y$ is appropriate to $[Q]$.

Hence, by (3) and (5):

(6) For no $Y$ and no $[Q]$ may we use $Y$ for $[Q]$.

Hence, by (1) and (2) and (6):

(7) No issue is decided.

Hence, by the Principle of Disagreement again:

(8) On every issue $[Q]$, we should suspend judgment. (Barnes 1990: 28)

In this way, according to Barnes, the Pyrrhonist would obtain a universal suspension of judgment (that is, a suspension of judgment on every issue) based on disagreement alone.

There are, however, problems with this reformulation of the argument. Barnes himself acknowledges that premises (3) and (4) are questionable, and he raises some objections to them (1990: 29–35). Consider, first, premise (3). Why should we think that in order to use a standard of evaluation for a given issue (a yardstick), we must be justified in holding that such standard is appropriate for the issue under consideration? This seems to assume a particular internalist requirement for the use of standards of evaluation, since not only is it required that the standards be appropriate for the issue, but one also ought to be justified in holding that the standards are appropriate. But there is no reason to believe that the Pyrrhonist is an internalist. In fact, since internalism is a particular philosophical doctrine about justification, it is precisely the sort of view the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment about (see Bueno 2011).

In response, Barnes may suggest that all that is needed is that the standard in question (that is, the relevant yardstick) be appropriate for the issue under consideration (Barnes 1990: 33–34). Whether we are justified in believing in the appropriateness of the standard is an additional, and ultimately unnecessary, constraint. What matters, the argument goes, is the appropriateness of the standard rather than our justified belief in it. Clearly, Barnes’ response assumes an externalist account of justification, rejecting the additional demand on justification made by the internalist. However, similarly to internalism, externalism is also a philosophical view about justification, and as such, it is a doctrine about which the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment (see Bueno 2011). It is, thus, unclear that the Pyrrhonist would advance an argument that relies on such a doctrine—any more than on internalism.
Moreover, if the argument Barnes presents on behalf of the Pyrrhonist were only used dialectically, that is, as something dogmatic philosophers, but not Pyrrhonists, would endorse, the fact that the argument relies on the internalist premise (3) would limit substantially its scope. Even dialectically, Barnes’ reconstruction of the argument is not very effective.

The status of premise (4) is similarly problematic. Why is it the case that, for any question as to whether a given standard is appropriate for a certain issue, there is undecided disagreement about such question? This premise clearly requires proper support. But which considerations will be relevant to support it depend on the way in which the premise is interpreted. According to Barnes, premise (4) could be taken as an empirical, historical claim (1990: 29–31), or as a rational, theoretical claim (1990: 31–32). In the former case, the premise asserts that there has been undecided disagreement about every question regarding the appropriateness of a standard to an issue. This may well be the case. However, Barnes insists, if the Principle of Disagreement is supposed to have any weight, more than purely empirical considerations need to be adduced. It is certainly possible that historically a given debate has not been settled, but from this fact alone one is not forced to suspend judgment about the relevant issue. For despite what the parties in the debate may say, an argument may have been produced that settles the debate—even if the parties involved fail to recognize the argument.

It is unlikely, however, that the Pyrrhonist would consider Barnes’ response decisive. After all, Barnes seems to assume that it is possible to settle a debate independently of what is claimed by the parties involved. But presumably, given the disagreement, even what counts as an appropriate standard may be subject to debate, in which case, settling the debate will not be so easy as Barnes supposes. Furthermore, Barnes also seems to assume that the debate could be settled independently of considerations regarding the adequacy of the standards that need to be used to settle it. But how is that possible? If the standards are inadequate, they will fail to establish the debate. And even if they are adequate, given the disagreement, an argument needs to be offered for their adequacy, which is subject to additional disagreement.

These considerations suggest a perfectly straightforward reading of the passage by Sextus that we are examining (PH I 178; quoted in the beginning of this section), which does not rely on the problematic Principle of Disagreement nor does it settle Pyrrhonism with implausible premises (as Barnes’ reconstructed argument does). Here is the reading: The fact that there is a dispute about standards makes it difficulty to see how such a dispute could be settled. With standards being disputed, the Pyrrhonist cannot simply assume a given standard, given that other parties to the debate would question such a standard. And without any standard being adopted, the dispute cannot be settled. It would be dogmatic to settle the dispute without any standard (clearly, this is not an option for
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a Pyrrhonist), and unconvincing to settle it with a standard that has been disputed. As Sextus notes:

We cannot use either an object of perception or an object of thought as a standard because anything we may take has been disputed and so is unconvincing. (*PH I* 178)

Being unable to decide the dispute, the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment.

Furthermore, note that Sextus need not assume in this context any additional skeptical mode; just the mode of disagreement is needed. It is the disagreement about the standards that makes it unconvincing for the Pyrrhonist to simply assume a given standard as appropriate, since those who question the proposed standard will be unmoved. Of course, Sextus could have easily used other skeptical modes in this context. For instance, he could have invoked the circularity mode, and noted that any attempt at settling the adequacy of a standard will, in turn, require a standard, whose adequacy also needs to be settled by yet another standard—and a regress would loom. Sextus could have done that, and he does raise considerations along these lines elsewhere in his examination of standards. But it is important to emphasize that in the context of this passage (*PH I* 178), Sextus provides no such arguments. The disagreement mode stands on its own.

We are now in a position to consider the second interpretation of premise (4), according to which the premise is taken as a rational, theoretical claim. One ought to conclude *rationally* that there is undecided disagreement about any question involving standards. This is the interpretation that Barnes favors (1990: 31). However, he argues, on this interpretation, the mode of disagreement on its own is not enough to produce suspension of judgment. After all, interpreted as a rationally supported claim, premise (4) requires the use of the remaining skeptical modes (infinite regress, circularity, etc.) to be properly supported. But in this case, as reconstructed by Barnes, the disagreement mode would have no autonomy: its force would ultimately derive from the remaining skeptical modes. Taken on its own the mode of disagreement would fail to induce suspension of judgment (Barnes 1990: 32).

Given the considerations just made above, I do not think the Pyrrhonist is in any way forced to grant this point. On the contrary, as noted, there is a perfectly straightforward reading of *PH I* 178 in which no additional mode is invoked. This suggests that Sextus can use the disagreement mode as something that leads to suspension of judgment, independently of the remaining modes.

What is the status of premise (4) then? Whether it is considered empirically obtained or rationally supported, it does need evidence for it. Presumably, however, the Pyrrhonist would use it only dialectically, so that it is from
the point of view of the dogmatic philosopher that the premise in question has whatever support it may have.

One of the motivations that Barnes has to reconstruct the argument in the way he did is to show that the Pyrrhonist could provide a completely general argument for suspension of judgment on every issue. But it is unclear that the Pyrrhonist intends to offer such an argument. Pyrrhonism tends to be localized, focused on particular arguments, on specific considerations, rather than on a single, all-embracing argument that would establish universal suspension of judgment. The strength of Pyrrhonism is found in its case-by-case examination of dogmatic views (whether philosophical or scientific), rather than in a one-for-all, almost Cartesian argument for suspension of judgment.

For these reasons, Barnes has not succeeded in raising doubts about the possibility that the mode of disagreement all by itself can lead to suspension of judgment. If according to the dogmatic philosophers’ own standards there is undecidable disagreement about a given topic, then the Pyrrhonist, and everyone else for that matter, will be unable to decide the issue. As a result, the Pyrrhonist will end up suspending judgment about the topic under consideration. Thus, in those cases in which there is undecidable disagreement, the mode of disagreement leads to suspension of judgment, independently of any additional mode (circularity, infinite regress, etc.).

But is every topic subject to undecidable disagreement? This seems to be an open issue, better approached on a case-by-case basis. In order to establish such a general claim (namely, that there is undecidable disagreement on every topic), the Pyrrhonist would need to make a dogmatic assertion and provide reasons to support it. This would clearly undermine Pyrrhonism. The more natural strategy for the Pyrrhonist is to explore the disagreement mode dialectically. And rather than attempt to provide a single, all-encompassing argument for suspension of judgment based on disagreement, the Pyrrhonist will explore particular undecidable disagreements, as they emerge, as sources of suspension of judgment. Pyrrhonism is in no way less significant for having these less embracing aspirations. More radical, Cartesian forms of skepticism, which aim for all-encompassing arguments, often end up with the dubious honor of being incoherent. Faced with such a dark prospect, the Pyrrhonist is better off simply reporting on the use of the disagreement mode to suspend judgment about particular issues, and continue investigating.

6. DISAGREEMENT: A PYRRHONIAN STANCE

If the Principle of Disagreement is not something that Sextus would defend and assert, what attitude does the Pyrrhonist have toward disagreement? As I noted above, undecidable disagreement provides a sufficient condition for suspension of judgment. But why is this the case?
At this point, it will be useful to examine recent debates about the epistemology of disagreement (Feldman & Warfield 2010). A significant proposal in this debate is the Total Evidence View (Kelly 2010). According to this view, what is reasonable for us to believe depends on the total evidence available to us. If after considering the total evidence available to us, we are still unable to decide an issue, suspension of judgment seems to be an appropriate response. In fact, suppose a disagreement persists even after the total evidence has been considered. In this case, the disagreement is undecidable: no additional evidence could be offered (at least at this point) to decide it. As a result, we have here a clearly sufficient condition for the Pyrrhonist to suspend judgment due to disagreement alone. If the total evidence available to us (including the Pyrrhonist) does not support any side of an issue over which there is disagreement, suspension of judgment naturally emerges.

However, the Pyrrhonist will not take the Total Evidence View as the appropriate conception of the nature of evidence. It is, after all, a philosophical view about evidence. Not surprisingly, there is disagreement about the adequacy of such a view (see Kelly 2010), and the Pyrrhonist ends up suspending judgment about it. One may think that this puts the Pyrrhonist in the awkward position of suspending judgment over a view that, if true, would provide a sufficient condition for suspension of judgment based on disagreement alone.11

I do not think this is a predicament Pyrrhonists face. Consider the distinction between the content of a statement (what it represents the world as being) and the pragmatics of asserting a statement (the conditions under which one is entitled to assert something). Pyrrhonists suspend judgment only about the former. The latter, properly understood, is not a theoretical claim. It is just a reflection of the Pyrrhonian practice of using language nondogmatically. By asserting what seems to them, Pyrrhonists are not committed to the content of what is asserted. This leaves them free to assert, in a nondogmatic way, what seems to them to be going on. Thus, even though Pyrrhonists suspend judgment about the Total Evidence View—as a philosophical conception about the nature of evidence—they can still describe the suspension of judgment as something that emerges from the undecidable disagreement over a certain issue. Given that the total evidence available fails to support any of the rival proposals, suspension of judgment emerges.

Note that suspension of judgment emerges. The issue here is not whether such suspension is rationally justified, or supported by appropriate standards. The Pyrrhonist is not offering a theory of suspension of judgment. Such a theory, as with any theory, would be the object of a Pyrrhonian investigation, and eventually the Pyrrhonist would end up suspending judgment about it as well. Instead of developing such a theory, the Pyrrhonist simply describes a practice of investigation, and the situation under which suspension of judgment becomes apparent.

It may be objected that, by invoking the total evidence available, one does not obtain a serious form of skepticism. If the evidence is collected responsibly, and taken properly into account, it is only very rarely that it will point equally
strongly at opposite directions. Thus, typically, the total evidence available will not lead to suspension of judgment. In order to obtain suspension, Pyrrhonists will need to choose the evidence selectively. But in this case they are no longer serious inquirers interested in the truth, and the form of skepticism they produce is not very serious (Lammernanta 2008: 15).

In response, note, first, that the Total Evidence View does not require that the evidence supports equally well contradictory (or even contrary) claims. Rather, the evidence is such that one is unable to decide whether $P$ or not-$P$ is the case. If the total evidence available supported $P$ and not-$P$, it would be seriously misleading as evidence. Moreover, Pyrrhonists are not selectively choosing the evidence. If they were doing that, we would have grounds to safely ignore them. Rather, in those cases in which the available evidence seems to support one party to a dispute, the Pyrrhonist will, dialectically, raise doubts as to whether the evidence does offer such support, by indicating, depending on the particular details of the case, that relevant alternatives that would undermine the evidence have not been properly ruled out. Thus, the conclusion that the evidence favors one party to the dispute needs to be reconsidered.

It is not surprising then that the arguments considered by Pyrrhonists may seem to be equally persuasive to them. Rather than generating an irresponsible form of inquiry, Pyrrhonists are extremely careful and thorough in their assessment of debates, trying to avoid making judgments without proper evidence. If it turns out that the evidence, in the end, fails to support properly either side of an issue, suspension of judgment emerges.

It may also be objected that the Total Evidence View makes disagreement irrelevant. If it is the total evidence available to an inquirer that is significant, then the fact that someone disagrees with that inquirer does not matter—only the total evidence does (Kelly 2005). However, as Kelly (2010) now insists, the fact that there is peer disagreement is relevant, since this fact is itself part of the total evidence. This means that the Pyrrhonist will perform an even more thorough examination of the evidence, taking into account, as part of the total evidence, the relevant peer disagreements. The result, if the total evidence available fails to properly support any side of a dispute, is—once again—suspension of judgment.

7. CONCLUSION

If the discussion above is near the mark, the mode of disagreement provides a direct route to suspension of judgment, independently of the remaining modes of Agrippa. This highlights the significance that this mode has for the Pyrrhonian investigation: a significance that Sextus clearly recognizes. As long as the disagreement is undecidable—as long as the total evidence available to us (at least in a given moment) fails to single out any view in a given dispute—suspension of judgment emerges. In the end, can we really disagree with the Pyrrhonist?12
NOTES

1. I use the standard way of referring to this work by “PH,” followed by book and paragraph numbers. I adopt the translation in Annas & Barnes (2000).
2. For an extended discussion of this view, see Kelly (2010).
3. For additional discussion of this issue, see Barnes (1990: 29–32). I will examine Barnes’ account below.
4. Needless to say, in many instances disagreements in opinion are accompanied by disagreements in attitude. My point is that this need not be the case in general.
5. Another reason why Pyrrhonists do not settle the issue when they suspend judgment is because such suspension has no epistemological or ontological foundation (see Machuca 2011: 70–74).
6. If contemporary debates about the epistemology of disagreement focus on conflicting doxastic attitudes toward a proposition, the Pyrrhonist attitude of suspension of judgment is part of the dispute. But this is just an artifact of the way in which these debates are framed. As noted, disagreement in attitude ultimately presupposes positive disagreement.
7. Of course, dogmatic philosophers may realize that their judgment, siding with one of the parties of an undecided dispute, is unwarranted, and they may conclude that the appropriate stance in this case is to suspend judgment. They are free to follow the Pyrrhonists’ example of suspending judgment should they decide to do so.
8. As I discussed above, for the Pyrrhonist, suspension of judgment is not a doxastic attitude of belief, and thus it fails to provide an answer to the issue under dispute.
9. It may be argued that Barnes takes “undecided” to mean that the available evidence thus far fails to decide the dispute, and thus suspension of judgment is appropriate. If additional evidence ends up favoring one side of the dispute, such suspension will need to be abandoned. Note, however, that on this understanding of “undecided,” the Principle of Disagreement can still be denied: in fact, this is exactly what one will do in order to look for additional evidence that favors one side of the dispute!
10. I have defended here the sufficiency of undecidable disagreement for the suspension of judgment, emphasizing the empirical nature of this process. For a similar conclusion, but based on normative considerations, see Lammenranta’s essay in this volume. In a future work, I intend to compare these two approaches to disagreement—the empirical and the normative—and their implications to skepticism.
11. After all, as noted, if the condition of total evidence is satisfied, and no side is favored, suspension of judgment is clearly motivated.
12. My thanks go to Diego Machuca and Markus Lammenranta for extremely valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper. Their feedback led to substantial improvements.

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