

# Where Pyrrhonian Skepticism Draws the Line: Suspension of Judgment and Practical Life in Sextus Empiricus

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Pyrrhonian skepticism, as presented by Sextus Empiricus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, is centered on the practice of suspending judgment (*epochē*) in response to opposing arguments of equal strength. This paper asks the following question: how do Pyrrhonian skeptics determine when suspension of judgment is appropriate, and how does this practice avoid undermining rational action and everyday life? This question is philosophically important because Pyrrhonian skepticism is often criticized as being self-defeating: if judgment is suspended across the board, it seems that belief, reasoning, and action would become impossible. Clarifying whether Empiricus offers a principled limit to suspension of judgment is therefore essential for understanding whether Pyrrhonian skepticism can function as a coherent philosophical position rather than a purely negative one.

To answer this question, this paper closely examines key passages from Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, focusing on his account of suspension of judgment, appearance, and the guidance of life. It also engages with contemporary scholarly interpretations that debate the scope and coherence of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Through this textual and interpretive approach, the paper argues that Pyrrhonian skepticism does not require suspending judgment about everything; instead, Sextus Empiricus limits suspension of judgment to non-evident claims about reality, while allowing action based on appearances and everyday practices. This shows that Pyrrhonian skepticism can avoid dogmatism without making rational action impossible.

This interpretation contributes to ongoing scholarly debates about whether Pyrrhonian skepticism collapses into total disbelief or can sustain meaningful action. By showing that Empiricus offers a disciplined and selective account of *epochē*, the paper challenges readings that portray Pyrrhonian skepticism as incoherent or paralyzing.

Understanding where Pyrrhonian skeptics draw the line for suspending judgment is not only crucial for interpreting ancient skepticism accurately, but also for broader philosophical discussions about belief, rational restraint, and the limits of human knowledge.

First, let's look into an overview of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Pyrrhonian skepticism, as described by Sextus Empiricus, is best understood not as a theory about what is true, but as a philosophical practice aimed at inquiry without commitment. Empiricus defines skepticism as an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way whatsoever, where these oppositions lead to suspension of judgment (*epochē*) and, eventually, tranquility (*ataraxia*) (Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, iv). The skeptic does not begin with the goal of rejecting belief outright. Instead, skepticism arises from continued investigation and the repeated experience of encountering equally persuasive but conflicting arguments.

A central concept in Pyrrhonian skepticism is *epochē*, the suspension of judgment. According to Empiricus, suspension occurs when the skeptic finds that opposing arguments are "equal in force" (*isostheneia*), making it unreasonable to affirm one side over the other. Importantly, this suspension is not a deliberate decision to withhold belief at all costs. Rather, it is presented as a natural result of inquiry when no claim appears more justified than its rival. As Empiricus emphasizes, the skeptic "neither affirms nor denies anything" about the underlying nature of things (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, x).

The goal of this practice is *ataraxia*, or freedom from mental disturbance. Empiricus argues that dogmatic beliefs about what is good or bad by nature generate anxiety, because they create expectations and fears that cannot be reliably satisfied. When judgment is suspended, these disturbances lessen, not because the skeptic has discovered the truth, but because they no longer insist on claims that go

beyond what appears (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, xii). In this sense, Pyrrhonian skepticism is practical and therapeutic rather than purely theoretical.

At the same time, Empiricus is careful to deny that skepticism leads to total inactivity. He repeatedly insists that skeptics continue to live ordinary lives, responding to appearances and necessities without committing to beliefs about how things really are. As he puts it, the skeptic lives according to appearances, guided by nature, feelings, laws and customs, and learned skills (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, xi). This claim is crucial, since it is meant to show that suspension of judgment does not eliminate action, choice, or practical reasoning.

Modern scholars have emphasized this practical dimension of Pyrrhonian skepticism. A paper published by Casey Perin in the *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* regarding the extent of Skeptic suspension of judgement argues that Empiricus' skeptic does not abandon rational norms altogether, but instead refrains from making claims that exceed the available evidence (Perin, 2015). Additionally, a paper by Robert Fogelin, an American philosopher and scholar of modern day Pyrrhonism, similarly notes that Pyrrhonian skepticism is directed primarily against dogmatic philosophical theories, not against everyday reasoning or behavior (Fogelin, 1994). These interpretations suggest that skepticism is selective in scope, even if Empiricus himself does not always state this explicitly.

Nevertheless, the tension remains. If the skeptic suspends judgment whenever opposing arguments are equally persuasive, it is still unclear how broad this suspension is meant to be. Does it apply only to abstract philosophical claims, or does it extend to ordinary beliefs as well? This question lies at the heart of the debate over whether Pyrrhonian skepticism can consistently allow for action and rational life. The next section examines this problem more closely by focusing on the charge that Pyrrhonian skepticism collapses into total doubt or practical paralysis.

Despite Sextus Empiricus's insistence that the Pyrrhonian skeptic continues to live and act, many readers have argued that Pyrrhonian skepticism threatens to undermine belief and action altogether. The core of this concern lies in the apparent scope of *epochē*. If the skeptic suspends judgment whenever opposing arguments are equally persuasive, and if such opposition can be generated for nearly any

claim, then it seems that suspension of judgment should extend to all beliefs. This raises the question of whether Pyrrhonian skepticism collapses into total doubt.

One version of this objection focuses on practical action. Ordinary life appears to require beliefs such as beliefs that food will nourish, that fire will burn, or that certain actions will have predictable outcomes. If the skeptic suspends judgment about these claims, critics argue, it becomes unclear how action is possible at all. The skeptic would seem unable to choose one course of action over another, since doing so would require some belief about what is preferable or effective. In this reading, Pyrrhonian skepticism appears to lead to paralysis rather than tranquility.

A related objection targets the coherence of Pyrrhonian skepticism as a philosophical position. If the skeptic suspends judgment about all propositions, then it seems they must also suspend judgment about the claim that suspension of judgment leads to tranquility. This has led some critics to accuse Pyrrhonian skepticism of self-refutation. If skepticism relies on claims it cannot endorse, then it appears unstable or inconsistent. Fogelin describes this worry as the concern that skepticism "undercuts the very standards it needs to survive as a rational position" (Fogelin, 1994).

These objections have played a central role in modern interpretations of Empiricus. Some scholars argue that Empiricus' attempt to separate belief from appearance ultimately fails, since acting on appearances still seems to involve some form of belief. Others maintain that the skeptic's reliance on customs, laws, and habits amounts to an implicit endorsement of their reliability. If this is correct, then Pyrrhonian skepticism may not genuinely avoid belief, but only disguise it under different language.

Another paper by Perin about the demands of reason articulates this challenge by asking whether suspension of judgment can be normatively justified without presupposing standards of belief that skepticism itself rejects (Perin, 2010). If the skeptic continues to follow appearances because they seem compelling, it is unclear why this does not count as a form of belief or assent. Similarly, Katja Vogt, another modern-day philosopher, notes in her paper about skeptic epistemology that from a modern epistemological perspective, it is difficult to see

how reasoning and action can proceed without at least minimal commitments about what is likely or reasonable (Vogt, 2020).

These concerns suggest that the problem facing Pyrrhonian skepticism is not merely rhetorical, but structural. Either suspension of judgment applies universally, in which case action seems impossible, or it applies selectively, in which case the skeptic must explain where and why the line is drawn. Empiricus clearly wants to avoid the first option, but whether he can successfully defend the second remains contested. The next section turns to Empiricus' own account of how the skeptic lives according to appearances, which forms the basis for his response to the charge of paralysis.

In response to the charge that Pyrrhonian skepticism makes action impossible, Sextus Empiricus argues that suspension of judgment does not eliminate practical life because the skeptic continues to live according to appearances. This claim is central to Empiricus' defense of skepticism and appears repeatedly in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Rather than denying experience or refusing to act, the skeptic refrains only from making claims about how things are by nature, while still responding to how things appear in everyday life (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, xii).

Empiricus draws an important distinction between belief (*doxa*) and appearance (*phainomenon*). Beliefs involve assent to claims about truth, especially claims about what is real, good, or bad by nature. Appearances, by contrast, are passive experiences that impose themselves on us regardless of our theoretical commitments. As Empiricus explains, the skeptic does not deny that things appear in certain ways; rather, they suspend judgment about whether things are actually as they appear (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, xi). This distinction allows the skeptic to act without endorsing any underlying metaphysical claims.

To clarify how this works in practice, Empiricus outlines what he calls the "fourfold guidance of life." According to this account, the skeptic is guided by nature, feelings and sensations, laws and customs, and instruction in skills or arts (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 100). For example, the skeptic eats when hungry, avoids pain, follows social conventions, and practices learned skills, not because they believe these actions are justified by objective truths, but because

they appear appropriate given their circumstances. Action, in this view, does not require belief about what is ultimately true, only responsiveness to appearances and practical necessity.

This account is meant to block the charge of paralysis directly. Empiricus emphasizes that skeptics are not inactive or detached from ordinary life. Instead, they "yield to what appears," while remaining non-committal about claims that go beyond immediate experience (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 102). The skeptic's actions are therefore guided, but not grounded in dogmatic belief. This distinction allows Empiricus to maintain that skepticism is compatible with action, choice, and practical reasoning.

Contemporary scholars have offered different interpretations of how successful this strategy is. Robb Dunphy, a professor of philosophy at the University of Sussex, argues that Empiricus presents skepticism as a process that emerges from inquiry rather than as a fixed doctrine, which helps explain why suspension of judgment does not function as a universal prohibition on action (Dunphy, 2021). In this reading, *epochē* is not imposed indiscriminately, but arises specifically in contexts where inquiry fails to yield a decisive conclusion. Perin similarly suggests that the skeptic's reliance on appearances should be understood as a form of non-epistemic assent, one that does not commit the skeptic to claims about truth or justification (Perin, 2015).

Still, questions remain about whether acting on appearances can truly be separated from belief. If the skeptic consistently follows appearances, it may seem that appearances function as a substitute for belief rather than a genuine alternative. Empiricus anticipates this concern by emphasizing that appearances compel action without requiring endorsement. The skeptic does not claim that appearances are reliable or truthful; they merely acknowledge that appearances are unavoidable. Whether this distinction can fully sustain skepticism without collapsing into hidden belief is the issue that must now be addressed more directly.

The next section therefore turns to the central claim of this paper: that Pyrrhonian skepticism draws a principled line between what must be suspended and what need not be, and that this line is neither arbitrary nor incoherent.

The account of living according to appearances provides the key to understanding where Pyrrhonian skepticism draws the line for suspension of judgment.

While critics often assume that *epochē* applies universally, Empiricus' text suggests a more limited and principled scope. Suspension of judgment targets dogmatic claims about how things are by nature, while leaving room for practical engagement with appearances, customs, and necessities of life. This distinction explains how skepticism can avoid both dogmatism and paralysis.

First, Empiricus is clear that suspension of judgment applies to claims that go beyond what is evident. These include metaphysical claims about the true nature of reality, as well as evaluative claims about what is good or bad by nature. When such claims are met with equally persuasive opposing arguments, the skeptic suspends judgment rather than affirming one position over another (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, vii). Importantly, Empiricus does not claim that these beliefs are false; instead, he refrains from committing to them because inquiry does not yield a decisive outcome. Suspension of judgment is therefore tied to the limits of justification, not to a blanket rejection of belief.

By contrast, Empiricus repeatedly emphasizes that appearances themselves are not subject to suspension. The skeptic does not doubt that honey appears sweet or that pain feels unpleasant. As Empiricus explains, appearances are “passively received” and do not involve claims about truth (PH I.19). Suspending judgment about appearances would be incoherent, since appearances impose themselves regardless of what one believes. What the skeptic suspends is the further claim that appearances accurately reveal the nature of things. This distinction allows the skeptic to respond to experience without endorsing any theory about its reliability.

This framework also explains why practical action does not require belief in the Pyrrhonian sense. When the skeptic eats because they are hungry or avoids pain, they are not acting on a belief that food is objectively good or that pain is objectively bad. Rather, they are responding to how things appear under the guidance of natural impulses and social practices. Perin argues that this kind of responsiveness should be understood as a form of non-epistemic assent, which does not commit the skeptic to truth claims or justificatory standards (Perin, 2010). Action, in this view, is compatible with suspension because it does not involve asserting how things truly are.

One might object that this distinction simply replaces belief with a weaker form of belief under another name. However, Empiricus resists this interpretation by emphasizing that the skeptic does not treat appearances as reliable indicators of reality. Appearances guide action only because they are unavoidable, not because they are trusted. The skeptic follows appearances without endorsing them, much as one might follow a custom without believing it reflects any deeper truth. This is a crucial difference between Pyrrhonian skepticism and forms of fallibilism that still affirm beliefs as likely or probable.

Recent scholarship supports this reading. Dunphy argues that Empiricus' skepticism is best understood as a disciplined response to epistemic failure rather than a global attitude of doubt (Dunphy, 2021). In this interpretation, *epochē* arises specifically when inquiry confronts equally compelling alternatives, not whenever any belief is at stake. Similarly, the account of suspension developed in another recent work by Dunphy on Empiricus emphasizes that suspension is directed at claims with epistemic ambition, not at ordinary engagement with the world (Dunphy, 2023).

Taken together, these considerations suggest that Pyrrhonian skepticism draws a clear and defensible boundary for suspension of judgment. Suspension applies to non-evident, dogmatic claims about reality, while practical life proceeds through responsiveness to appearances and social norms. This boundary is grounded in Empiricus' distinction between belief and appearance and is supported by his account of how skeptics continue to live and act. Far from being arbitrary, the line reflects a consistent commitment to epistemic restraint: the skeptic refuses to go beyond what inquiry can justify, but does not deny what experience makes unavoidable.

The remaining question is whether this boundary is stable under further scrutiny. Critics may still argue that acting without belief is incoherent or that skepticism undermines rational standards altogether. The next section addresses these remaining objections and explains why Pyrrhonian skepticism can respond to them without abandoning its core commitments.

Even if Pyrrhonian skepticism draws a principled line between dogmatic belief and practical engagement, critics may still worry that this distinction is unstable. The most persistent objections

claim that acting without belief is incoherent, that skepticism undermines rational norms, or that the skeptic must secretly rely on beliefs despite denying them. Addressing these concerns is necessary to determine whether Pyrrhonian skepticism can function as a coherent philosophical position.

One common objection holds that action without belief is impossible. According to this view, choosing one action over another requires at least some belief about what is preferable or effective. If the skeptic truly suspends judgment, then it seems unclear how they can act intentionally rather than randomly. However, Empiricus' account suggests that this objection rests on an overly narrow understanding of action. The skeptic does not deny motivation or responsiveness; instead, they deny that motivation must be grounded in beliefs about truth. As Empiricus explains, appearances compel action directly, without the need for theoretical endorsement. Hunger leads to eating, pain leads to avoidance, and social norms guide behavior without requiring judgments about what is good or bad by nature.

A second objection claims that Pyrrhonian skepticism undermines rational standards altogether. If the skeptic suspends judgment whenever arguments appear equally persuasive, then it may seem that reasoning itself loses its authority. Yet Empiricus does not reject reasoning; rather, he uses reasoning extensively to arrive at suspension of judgment. Skepticism, on this account, presupposes rational evaluation and argument comparison. What it rejects is not reason, but the move from rational inquiry to dogmatic conclusion when the evidence does not warrant it. Perin emphasizes that Pyrrhonian skepticism should be understood as a position that respects the demands of reason precisely by refusing to go beyond them (Perin, 2010).

A further objection suggests that the skeptic's reliance on appearances amounts to a covert form of belief. If the skeptic consistently follows appearances, critics argue, then appearances must function as trusted guides to action. Empiricus addresses this concern by insisting that appearances are followed not because they are reliable, but because they are unavoidable. The skeptic does not claim that appearances reveal truth; they merely acknowledge that appearances occur and exert practical force (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, vii). As recent scholarship

has argued, this distinction allows the skeptic to act without attributing epistemic authority to appearances (Dunphy, 2023).

Finally, critics may argue that Pyrrhonian skepticism cannot explain why suspension of judgment should lead to tranquility if the skeptic continues to face uncertainty. Empiricus' response is that mental disturbance arises not from uncertainty itself, but from the insistence on having the truth. When the skeptic relinquishes the demand for certainty, anxiety diminishes even though inquiry continues. Dunphy notes that tranquility is not the goal that motivates skepticism, but an outcome that emerges when dogmatic attachment is set aside (Dunphy, 2021). In this sense, skepticism does not promise certainty or peace through knowledge, but through epistemic restraint.

Taken together, these responses suggest that Pyrrhonian skepticism can withstand the most serious objections raised against it. By distinguishing belief from appearance, rejecting dogmatism without abandoning reason, and allowing action without epistemic commitment, Empiricus presents a form of skepticism that is demanding but coherent. While skepticism may challenge common assumptions about belief and rationality, it does so in a way that remains consistent with lived experience and philosophical inquiry.

This paper has argued that Pyrrhonian skepticism, as articulated by Sextus Empiricus, draws a principled and defensible line for suspension of judgment. Rather than requiring doubt about everything, Pyrrhonian skepticism restricts *epochē* to non-evident, dogmatic claims about reality and claims that exceed what inquiry can justify. At the same time, Empiricus allows for practical engagement with appearances, customs, and necessities of life. By maintaining this distinction, Pyrrhonian skepticism avoids both dogmatism and epistemic paralysis, presenting itself as a coherent and livable philosophical position.

Clarifying this boundary is important because much of the criticism directed at Pyrrhonian skepticism depends on the assumption that suspension of judgment must be global. As this paper has shown, Empiricus consistently resists that interpretation. His distinction between belief and appearance, along with his account of living according to the fourfold guidance of life,

demonstrates that skepticism is not a rejection of experience or action, but a refusal to go beyond what experience and inquiry can support. Suspension of judgment is thus not arbitrary, but responsive to epistemic conditions, specifically, the presence of equally persuasive opposing arguments.

This interpretation contributes to ongoing scholarly debates about whether Pyrrhonian skepticism is self-defeating or practically incoherent. By engaging closely with Empiricus' text and with contemporary interpretations, this paper has defended the view that Pyrrhonian skepticism preserves rational evaluation while resisting unwarranted commitment. Skepticism, on this account, is not a failure of reason but an expression of epistemic discipline. It reflects a commitment to intellectual humility that refuses to mistake persuasive argument or familiar practice for truth about the nature of things.

The broader philosophical significance of this argument lies in its challenge to a common assumption about belief and rationality, namely, that rational life requires firm commitments to truth. Pyrrhonian skepticism offers an alternative model, one in which inquiry, action, and reflection continue without the need for epistemic certainty. Understanding where Pyrrhonian skeptics draw the line for suspension of judgment helps clarify how ancient skepticism can function as a stable philosophical stance, and why it remains relevant to discussions about the limits of knowledge, the demands of reason, and the value of restraint in philosophical inquiry.

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