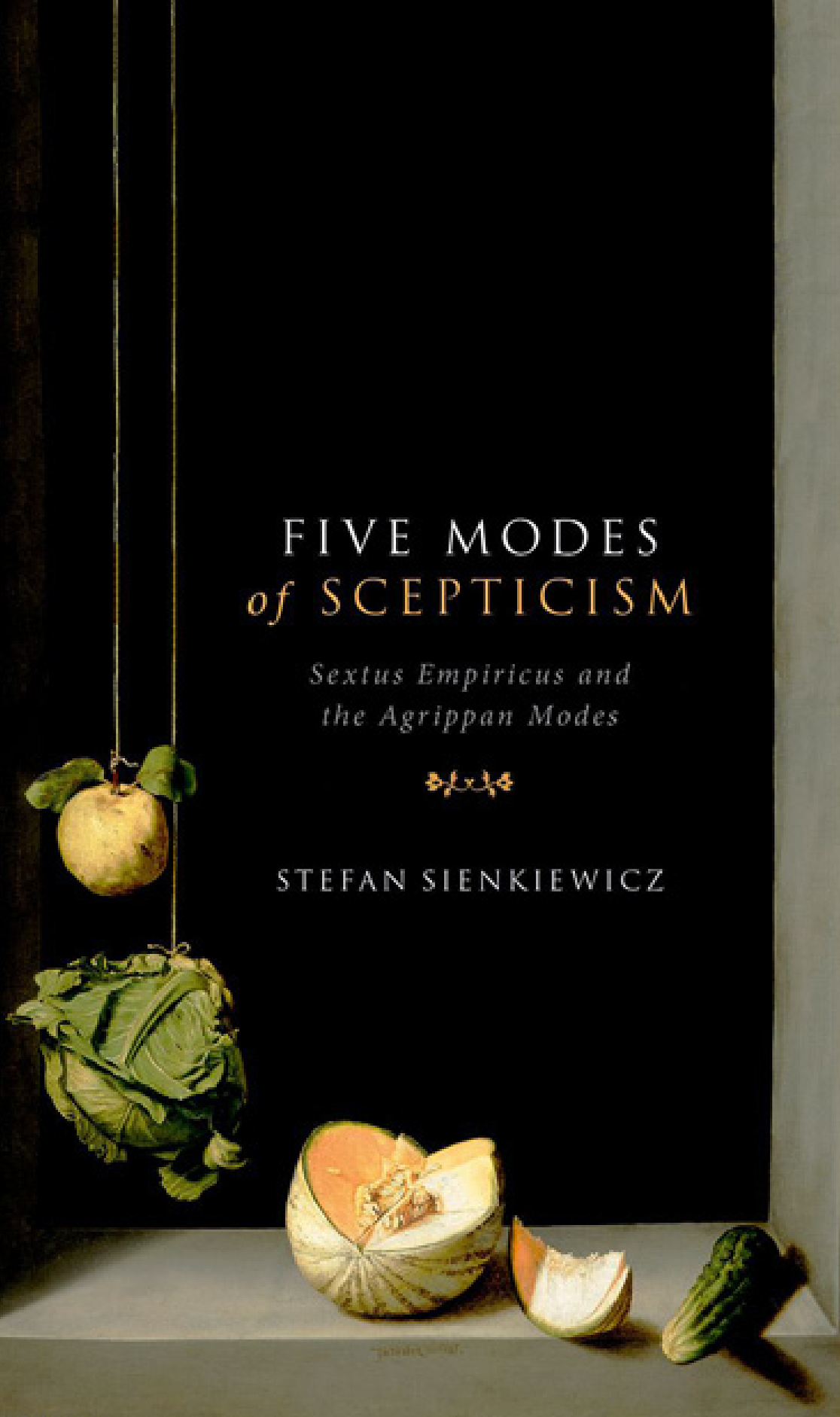
FIVE MODES *of* SCEPTICISM

Sextus Empiricus and the Agrippan Modes

STEFAN SIENKIEWICZ



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Stefan Sienkiewicz

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For my parents, Richard and Naz—for everything.

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STEFAN SIENKIEWICZ

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Introduction

This book has as its focus a particular type of philosophical scepticism and a particular aspect of that particular type of scepticism. The type of scepticism in question is Pyrrhonian scepticism and the particular aspect of that type of scepticism is its Agrippan aspect.[1] Pyrrho and Agrippa are shadowy characters—Agrippa the shadowier—and in the following pages not one citation of either Pyrrho or Agrippa is to be found. This is for the simple reason that none of their writings (if, indeed, Pyrrho wrote anything at all[2]) survive.[3] Instead, the main textual source for this study, which is also our main textual source for ancient Pyrrhonism in general, is *The Outlines of Pyrrhonism* by the third-century AD doctor and philosopher Sextus Empiricus.[4] It is the version of Pyrrhonian scepticism presented to us in the pages of Sextus' *Outlines* with which I shall be concerned.[5]

[1] Other varieties of scepticism—for example the Academic and the Cartesian—do not feature.

[2] According to Sextus, Pyrrho wrote a poem for Alexander the Great (*M* 1.282). Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of the Philosophers* claims, at one point, that Pyrrho wrote nothing at all (I 16) and, at another, that he left nothing in writing (IX 102). Whatever the truth of the matter, it is reasonable to infer that none of Pyrrho's writings was philosophical.

[3] Agrippa is mentioned once in Diogenes Laertius IX 88. There are no other mentions of him in the ancient texts and none of his works survive. The situation regarding Pyrrho is marginally better. His name crops up in Diogenes Laertius, Sextus, and Plutarch; and in Eusebius' *Preparation for the Gospel* (*Praep. evang.* XIV xviii 1–4) a summary is offered of some aspects of his thought by his student Timon. I discuss this passage in greater detail in Chapter 1 n. 17. For further information on Pyrrho see Sedley (1983), pp. 14–16 and Bett (2000).

[4] '*PH*' is the standard abbreviation.

[5] I shall also, occasionally, make reference to Sextus' other works, namely *Against the Mathematicians* 1–6 and *Against the Mathematicians* 7–11 (the standard abbreviation is *M*). However, my main focus will be on the *Outlines*. For the Greek texts I have used the standard Teubner editions: *PH* (ed.) Mutschmann and Mau (1958); *M* 7–11 (ed.)

Unless I say otherwise, by 'sceptic' I should be taken to mean Pyrrhonian sceptic, by 'Pyrrhonian sceptic' I should be taken to mean Pyrrhonian sceptic as presented by Sextus in the *Outlines* and by 'Agrippan aspect of Pyrrhonian scepticism' I should be taken to mean those five argument forms (or 'modes') which Sextus outlines for us at *PH* 1.164–79 and which Diogenes Laertius (IX 88) attributes to Agrippa.[6] They are the modes of disagreement, hypothesis, infinite regression, reciprocity, and relativity. These are by no means the only argument forms Sextus discusses in the *Outlines*—*PH* 1.35–63, for instance, is taken up with an exposition of ten Aenesideman modes and *PH* 1.180–6 adverts to eight modes which target causal explanations. However, I shall not comment upon either of these other sets of modes, unless, in so doing, light is shed on one or more of the Agrippan modes.[7]

Why this Agrippan focus? There are at least three reasons. First, these modes lie at the heart of the sceptic's argumentative practice. Sextus adduces them time and again in the *Outlines*—indeed they can be seen to underpin both the ten Aenesideman modes and the eight modes against casual explanation, though to fully elaborate on this claim would require writing a different book from the one I have written.

Secondly, these argument forms have intrinsic and abiding philosophical interest. I hope a sense of their intrinsic philosophical interest emerges from the subsequent pages. As for evidence of their abiding interest, one might point to the fact that there has, in recent years, been a surge of interest in the epistemology of disagreement.[8] Indeed, taking the longer view, one can point to the fact that the sceptical problem posed by the combined modes of infinite regression, reciprocity, and hypothesis

Mutschmann (1914); *M* 1–6 (ed.) Mau (1961). Translations of *PH* are based on Annas and Barnes (2000). Translations of other ancient texts are my own.

[6] Sextus attributes the modes to 'the more recent sceptics' (*οἱ νεώτεροι*) at *PH* 1.164. These sceptics are presumably more recent than the 'older sceptics' (*οἱ ἀρχαιότεροι*) of whom Sextus speaks at *PH* 1.36 and to whom he ascribes the ten modes. Elsewhere, at *M* 7.345, Sextus attributes the ten modes to Aenesidemus, so we might date the more recent sceptics of *PH* 1.165 to somewhere between Aenesidemus and Sextus, that is between 100 BC and AD 200. For further detail on Aenesidemus' dates see Glucker (1978), pp. 116–18 and on Sextus' see House (1980).

[7] For reflections on the Aenesideman modes see Annas and Barnes (1985), Striker (1996a), and Morison (2011) and on the eight modes against causal explanation see Barnes (1983).

[8] See, by way of example, the anthologies by Feldman and Warfield (2010) and Christensen and Lackey (2013).

has been a perennial source of reflection for epistemologists. In the words of Laurence Bonjour it is 'perhaps the most crucial in the entire theory of knowledge'.[9]

Thirdly, and for my purposes most significantly, those commentators who *have* discussed the Agrippan modes, have—for the most part—failed to distinguish, or to distinguish sufficiently carefully, between two importantly different perspectives on these modes. It is the articulation of these two different perspectives which is the central theme of this book.

The Agrippan modes are introduced to us by Sextus at *PH* 1.164 as modes of *epochē*—a sceptical term of art which Sextus glosses for us at *PH* 1.10 as a standstill of the intellect (*στάσις διανοίας*), owing to which we neither reject nor posit anything (*δι᾽ ἣν οὔτε αἱρομέν τι οὔτε τίθεμεν*). The term is often translated by the phrase 'suspension of judgement' and this is the translation adopted in these pages. In subsequent chapters I adopt the following characterization of the phenomenon: some epistemic subject, S, suspends judgement with regard to some proposition, P, just in case, having considered the matter, S neither believes P nor believes not-P.[10] This book, then, asks of the five Agrippan modes, both individually and collectively, how they bring about suspension of judgement, so understood. In particular, to reiterate its central theme, it identifies two different perspectives on this question: one might ask how some dogmatic philosopher comes to suspend judgement on the basis of one or more of these modes, or one might ask how a sceptic comes to suspend judgement on the basis of one or more of these modes.

[9] Bonjour (1985), p. 18.

[10] The 'having considered the matter' clause is important because it prevents suspension of judgement arising too easily. Without it, I would stand in a relation of suspended judgement to a whole range of propositions just by virtue of never having entertained any of the propositions in question. For example, until writing this sentence, I have never given a moment's thought as to whether or not Parmenides was left-handed. I therefore neither believed nor disbelieved the claim, but that is not to say that I suspended judgement on the matter. Sextus himself emphasizes that suspension of judgement over some question only arises once the arguments on both sides of the question have been considered (*PH* 1.8). For a recent analysis of the concept of suspended judgement, which departs from this Sextan way of construing suspension of judgement and instead argues that having considered whether P is neither necessary nor sufficient for suspending judgement over P see Friedman (2013), pp. 165–81. On Friedman's view 'one suspends judgment about p only if one has an attitude that expresses or represents or just is one's neutrality or indecision about which of p, ¬ p is true' (Friedman (2013), p. 179).

These are different questions because the sceptic and the dogmatist are very different sorts of epistemic agent. One basic difference is that the sceptic, unlike the dogmatist, is restricted with regard to the sorts of belief he can hold. As Sextus informs us in a celebrated passage of the *Outlines*—*PH* 1.13—the sceptic does not hold any beliefs, the holding of which involves assenting to some unclear object of investigation of the sciences (*τήν τινι πράγματι τῶν κατὰ τὰς ἐπιστήμας ζητουμένων ἀδήλων συγκατάθεσιν*). Two main interpretative traditions detailing the sorts of beliefs a sceptic is prohibited from holding have sprung up from the well-tilled soil of the *PH* 1.13 passage, the details of which do not need to concern us here in this Introduction—they will concern us later. It will suffice to say that, according to one of these traditions, the sceptic is prohibited from holding beliefs which have theoretical content (which I term the Content Interpretation) and, according to the other, the sceptic is prohibited from holding beliefs which are arrived at by a process of reasoning (which I term the Grounds Interpretation).[11] For the moment, let us refer to these prohibited beliefs as 'theoretical beliefs'. The *PH* 1.13 passage, therefore, tells us at least one thing about the respective ways in which a sceptic and a dogmatist come to suspend judgement on the basis of the Agrippan modes: the dogmatist *can* reach suspended judgement by relying on various theoretical beliefs, but a sceptic *cannot*.

Of those commentators who have probed the working of the Agrippan modes, the most significant treatment to date is that of Jonathan Barnes.[12] Though there have been (albeit briefer) treatments of the modes by R. J. Hankinson, Harald Thorsrud, and Paul Woodruff, it is Barnes's work which will provide the main focus for this study.[13] It has two main aims. The first is to show that the reconstruction offered by commentators, like Barnes, of some of the modes—in particular the modes of infinite regression and reciprocity—is a dogmatic one. By this I mean that it is a reconstruction which captures perfectly well how a dogmatic philosopher might come to suspend judgement on the

[11] Barnes (1982) and Burnyeat (1984) can be seen as representative of the Content Interpretation, Frede (1987) and Morison (2011) of the Grounds Interpretation. I elaborate on these two traditions of interpretation in greater detail in Chapter 1.

[12] See Barnes (1990a) and Barnes (1990b).

[13] See Hankinson (1995), Thorsrud (2009), and Woodruff (2010).

basis of these modes, but which cannot capture how a sceptic might come to do so.[14] The reason for this is that on the proposed reconstruction, the sceptic would have to hold a variety of theoretical beliefs to which he is not entitled.

The second aim is to effect a change of perspective by approaching the question of how the modes in general are meant to bring about suspension of judgement *not* from the point of view of the dogmatist, but from the point of view of the sceptic. In this respect, the book can be seen as opening up an alternative to a line of thinking advanced by Michael Frede. On Frede's view, the various first-person locutions that pepper the *Outlines*—locutions such as 'we come to suspend judgement'—are to be understood as claims made by a sceptic who adopts, temporarily and purely for dialectical purposes, a set of dogmatic assumptions and patterns of reasoning.[15] The present work can be seen as an attempt at seeing how far one can take these locutions at face value—that is, taking them as claims which a sceptic makes on his own behalf and not for purely dialectical reasons.

Lest this point be misunderstood, let me stress that, in what follows, I take no view as to whether Sextus *himself* was a sceptic who lacked all theoretical beliefs.[16] In the following pages I often speak of Sextus 'formulating an argument' or 'drawing a conclusion' or 'objecting to a line of reasoning', activities which, one might reasonably think, would require the holding of at least some minimally theoretical beliefs. The point is simply to see how one might characterize the sceptic's behaviour if, *pace* Frede, one interprets those first-person utterances in the context of the Agrippan modes as utterances made by a sceptic who makes them sincerely and not for purely dialectical reasons.

In reconstructing the Agrippan modes from a sceptical and not a dogmatic perspective two questions in particular will be distinguished from one another and addressed: the question as to how the sceptic puts the modes to use in his tussles with his dogmatic opponents, and the question as to how a sceptic might come to suspend judgement on the

[14] Note that the dogmatist could either be the historical figure with whom the sceptic tussled or the contemporary historian of philosophy who anatomizes, analyses, reconstructs, and passes judgement on the effectiveness of the sceptic's arguments.

[15] See Frede (1987c), pp. 204–5.

[16] Lorenzo Corti has emphasized to me in conversation the importance of distinguishing Sextus from the sceptic referred to in his pages.

basis of those modes. The starting point for my response to these questions is grounded in an insight I share with Benjamin Morison, who has recently raised the possibility of interpreting the Agrippan modes in light of the sceptic's method of equipollence.[17] This is a method that involves opposing to every argument one encounters, an argument of equal force but with a conclusion incompatible with the conclusion of the original argument.

It will emerge that the Agrippan modes end up having very different argumentative structures depending on whether we think of them from the perspective of the sceptic or from that of the dogmatist. What inferences can be drawn regarding Sextus' literary intentions from this fact is not a question I pursue. It may be the case that in texts where he discusses the Agrippan modes, Sextus is self-consciously simultaneously addressing both a sceptical and a dogmatic reader, aware that the Agrippan modes could equally bring a sceptic and a dogmatist to suspend judgement. But my concern in this book is not to divine Sextus' literary intentions. It is simply to stress that the modes will have to display these different argumentative structures—depending on whether we think of them as working on a sceptic or on a dogmatist—irrespective of whether Sextus himself recognized that fact.[18]

The details of my attempt to give an account of the sceptic's deployment of the Agrippan modes—both against his dogmatic opponent and against himself—in terms of his equipollent ability will emerge in the following pages and chapters. For the remainder of this Introduction I shall outline the overall structure of this book and the main conclusions that are drawn in each of its chapters.

Unlike Gaul, it is divided into six parts. The first five deal with the modes individually. The final sixth considers them in combination with one another. The order in which I treat the modes does not reflect Sextus' ordering. Though we both begin with disagreement, we then diverge.[19] My reason for altering the order in which Sextus presents them is purely for ease of exposition, as the following sketch of each chapter should make clear.

[17] Morison (2014), §3.5.2.

[18] My thanks to the anonymous reader for drawing my attention to this point.

[19] My running order: disagreement, hypothesis, infinite regression, reciprocity, and relativity. Sextus': disagreement, infinite regression, relativity, hypothesis, and reciprocity.

I begin, in Chapter 1, with the mode of disagreement. After some preliminary remarks about how the phenomenon of disagreement should be understood, I distinguish two different principles (consistent with Sextus' remarks in the *Outlines*) which connect the phenomenon of disagreement with suspension of judgement and two corresponding versions of the mode of disagreement. One version, which turns on the phenomenon of disagreement between epistemic peers, is, I argue, a dogmatic version of the mode—dogmatic in the sense that the sceptic cannot come to suspend judgement on the basis of it. This is because the dogmatic version of the mode turns on a number of theoretical claims which a sceptic is not in a position to believe. A second version, which turns on the notion of undecided disagreement forms the basis of a sceptical version of the mode—that is, a mode on the basis of which a sceptic might come to suspend judgement. This is because, it is argued, it is one and the same thing to suspend judgement on the basis of undecided disagreement and to suspend judgement on the basis of a pair of equipollent arguments.

To make sense of how the sceptic comes to suspend judgement on the basis of the mode of disagreement is, therefore, one and the same project as making sense of how the sceptic comes to suspend judgement on the basis of his own equipollent ability. In the latter part of the chapter I argue that, whether one adopts the Content Interpretation or the Grounds Interpretation, it is possible to make sense of how the sceptic comes to suspend judgement on the basis of his equipollent ability—and therefore on the basis of the mode of disagreement. However, I also point out that the explanation of the sceptic's coming to suspend judgement is more involved if one adopts the Grounds Interpretation. This is because, on the Grounds Interpretation, the sceptic cannot believe that he is rationally required to suspend judgement. Following a distinction drawn by Casey Perin, I suggest how someone who adopts the Grounds Interpretation might make sense of how the sceptic comes to suspend judgement by distinguishing two phases in the sceptic's career: a proto-sceptical phase during which the sceptic suspends judgement because he believes it is the rational thing to do and a mature sceptical phase during which the sceptic suspends judgement not because he believes it is the rational thing to do, but because he has developed a psychological disposition to do so.

The chapter closes by moving away from the question as to how the sceptic comes to suspend judgement on the basis of the mode of

disagreement and reflects on the fact that undecided disagreement is utilized by the sceptic in two ways: the sceptic is both a chronicler of undecided disagreements that rage between various dogmatists and himself a creator of undecided disagreement by virtue of exercising his equipollent ability. An appreciation of these two ways in which the mode might be deployed is shown to offer the beginnings of a response to an objection that has sometimes been made regarding the power of the mode of disagreement—namely that instances where the mode will be effective are few and far between.

Chapter 2 centres on the mode of hypothesis. The opening sections clarify what is involved in the act of hypothesizing, and a distinction is drawn between dogmatic and sceptical hypotheses—where the former are those hypotheses which the sceptic's dogmatic opponent puts forward to avoid falling victim to either the mode of infinite regression or the mode of reciprocity, and the latter are those hypotheses which the sceptic puts forward and which he casts in opposition to the dogmatist's. Three different versions of the mode are then extracted from the *Outlines* and it is argued that the third of these is the most significant (and indeed underpins the other versions). It is noted that the mode of hypothesis, when utilized by a sceptic, is a limiting case of the sceptic's method of equipollence: to the dogmatist's hypothesis the sceptic opposes his own incompatible hypothesis and these hypotheses are equipollent because they are supported by precisely the same kind of argument, namely no argument at all.

Being a limiting case of the method of equipollence, the mode of hypothesis therefore emerges as a unique Agrippan mode. Unlike the mode of disagreement (which Chapter 1 showed could have both a sceptical and a dogmatic face) and unlike the modes of infinite regression and reciprocity (which Chapters 3 and 4 go on to show also have sceptical and dogmatic incarnations), the mode of hypothesis is just an instance of the sceptic's method of equipollence. Chapter 2 concludes by giving an account—parallel to that given regarding the sceptical version of the mode of disagreement in Chapter 1—of how, on both the Content Interpretation and the Grounds Interpretation, the sceptic can come to suspend judgement on the basis of the mode of hypothesis.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the mode of infinite regression. Barnes's reconstruction of the mode is analysed and a modified version of it is offered so that it yields a suspensive conclusion. It is then argued that this

modified version is a dogmatic version of the mode, for, on Barnes's view, some epistemic subject suspends judgement on the basis of the mode of infinite regression by framing to himself an argument with a number of theoretical premises, for example the premise that infinitely regressive arguments are bad kinds of argument. It is noted that when the sceptic exercises the mode of infinite regression that is merely a particular instance of his method of equipollence: opposing to one infinitely regressive argument another infinitely regressive argument with a conclusion incompatible with the conclusion of the original argument. A sceptical version of the mode is then constructed, and an account given of how, on both the Content and the Grounds Interpretation, the sceptic is able to come to suspend judgement on the basis of the mode.

Chapter 4 has a similar structure to Chapter 3, though here the mode under scrutiny is the mode of reciprocity. Following Barnes, three different kinds of reciprocity are identified in the *Outlines*, and it is argued that only one of these kinds of reciprocity—formal reciprocity—is relevant to an understanding of the mode. Barnes's reconstruction of the mode is then analysed and for analogous reasons to those mentioned in Chapter 3, it is argued that the version of the mode offered by Barnes is a version by which a dogmatist might come to suspend judgement, but not a sceptic. Chapter 4 closes as Chapter 3 closed. It is noted that the sceptic's use of the mode of reciprocity is a particular instance of his equipollent ability, and a sceptical version of the mode is presented. According to this version of the mode, the sceptic suspends judgement when confronted by a pair of equipollent reciprocal arguments just as he did when confronted by a pair of equipollent hypotheses in Chapter 2 and by a pair of equipollent infinitely regressive arguments in Chapter 3.

Chapters 1–4, then, form—or should form—a coherent whole. In Chapter 1, the sceptical version of the mode of disagreement was shown to be equivalent to the phenomenon of equipollent argumentation but where the type of equipollent argumentation in question is left unspecified. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 can be thought of as providing examples of particular kinds of equipollent argumentation—hypothetical argumentation in the case of Chapter 2, infinitely regressive argumentation in Chapter 3, and reciprocal argumentation in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5, by contrast, is an anomalous chapter, partly because the mode with which it is concerned—relativity—is an anomalous mode.

One respect in which it is anomalous is the fact that it occurs twice in the *Outlines*, once as an Aenesideman mode, and once as an Agrippan one. Chapter 5 opens by remarking on this fact, and argues that the Agrippan mode of relativity must be understood in terms of the Aenesideman mode. The rest of the chapter can be viewed as presenting any Sextan interpreter with two dilemmas. The first dilemma is to decide with which type of relativity Sextus is concerned—for three different kinds of relativity are to be found in Sextus' discussion of the mode. It is argued that only one of these kinds of relativity is non-trivial, but if this is the kind of relativity one opts for, then one faces a second interpretative dilemma when it comes to integrating the non-trivial version of the mode of relativity into a system which includes the other four Agrippan modes. For it is argued that the non-trivial mode of relativity is incompatible with the mode of disagreement. Given the importance of the phenomenon of disagreement, and given the fact that a relativistic thesis is very much the sort of thesis over which a sceptic would suspend judgement, Chapter 5 closes by suggesting that, if the choice a Sextan interpreter faces is a choice between rejecting the mode of disagreement or rejecting the mode of relativity, opting for the latter course of action is preferable.

The sixth and final chapter analyses how the Agrippan modes (excluding relativity for the reasons given in Chapter 5) are meant to work in combination with one another. In the *Outlines* Sextus presents us with two such combinations, which, following Barnes's terminology, I refer to as 'nets'. The first half of Chapter 6 offers reconstructions of each of these nets in turn. In particular, I present a new version of Sextus' first net which interprets it in terms of three possible dialectic scenarios that obtain between a sceptic and three kinds of dogmatic opponent, and suggest, *pace* Barnes, that, though complex, it does not lack philosophical cohesion. Regarding the second net, which is often seen as superior to the first, it is noted that it is not free from fault—in particular regarding its omission of the mode of hypothesis.

The final part of the chapter compares both nets with a third net not to be found in the pages of Sextus but devised by Barnes. It is observed that Barnes's net is easier to comprehend and free from many of the defects which afflict both Sextus' first and second nets. However, after noting that Barnes's net omits the mode of disagreement, a fourth, modified version of Barnes's net with disagreement incorporated, is presented. The chapter closes by reflecting on the fact that all the various nets thus

far considered rely on a number of theoretical assumptions which a sceptic himself cannot make.

The chapter (and the book) therefore ends on an ironical note: though the sceptic is perfectly able to deploy any of the modes individually (indeed, one of the morals of Chapters 1–4 was that in deploying the modes the sceptic is merely exercising his equipollent ability), when it comes to organizing them into a sceptical system, this is a task which, as it turns out, only a dogmatist can perform.