

AGRIPPAN PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT: In this article I consider Sextus' account of the Five Modes and of the Two Modes in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. I suggest that from these we can derive the basic form of a number of different problems which I refer to as "Agrippan problems," where this category includes both the epistemic regress problem and the problem of the criterion. Finally, I suggest that there is a distinctive Agrippan problem present at the beginning of Hegel's *Science of Logic*.

KEYWORDS: Pyrrhonian Scepticism, Modes, epistemic regress problem, Hegel

1. Introduction

In his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus attributes two sets of modes to "the more recent Sceptics" (*PHI*: 164).¹ These are the Five Modes (*PHI*: 164-77) and the Two Modes (*PHI*: 178-79). In his account of Pyrrhonian Scepticism, Diogenes Laërtius attributes the Five Modes to a Sceptic² called Agrippa.³ Accordingly, it is common to refer to these as the 'Agrippan modes.' Since it is not unusual firstly to hold that the Two Modes amount to a compact restatement of the problem expressed by way of the Five Modes,⁴ and secondly to attribute the Two to the same author as that of the Five,⁵ we can also refer to the Two Modes as 'Agrippan modes.' Ultimately, the

¹ *PH* = Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. J. Annas and J. Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Reference is provided to book and Fabrician section number. Translations have occasionally been altered.

² I will follow common practice and capitalise 'Sceptic' when referring to the position of the Pyrrhonian sceptic as portrayed in the works of Sextus, and capitalise 'Dogmatist' when referring to their opponents, in response to whose philosophical claims the Sceptics attempted to prompt a suspension of judgement.

³ Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans. P. Mensch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), IX: 89

⁴ See, for example, J. Barnes, *The Toils of Scepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 117; R.J. Hankinson, *The Sceptics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995): 189; G.W.F. Hegel, "On the Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy, Exposition of its Different Modifications and Comparison of the Latest Form with the Ancient One," in *Between Kant and Hegel: Tests in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, eds. G. di Giovanni and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000): 335; R. Bett, *How to be a Pyrrhonist: The Practice and Significance of Pyrrhonian Scepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 108-09.

⁵ See, for example, Barnes, *The Toils of Scepticism*: 117, n.3; T. Brennan and J. Lee, "A Relative

attribution of these modes to Agrippa is not terribly important, since none of his works survive and we know nothing about him beyond his brief mention in Diogenes' account of the Pyrrhonian tradition, but it provides a useful label with which to group together the sceptical material under examination here.

I shall argue that the famous trilemma embedded in the Five Modes and its more compact expression as a dilemma in the Two Modes provide us with the basic form of philosophical problems which can be called 'Agrippan problems.' These include the 'epistemic regress problem,' the 'problem of the criterion,' Hegel's peculiar 'problem of beginning,' and others besides, although it is not my intention to provide an exhaustive list. I aim to identify the defining characteristics, then, of a fairly extensive family of problems. I suggest that, at their simplest, these problems confront us with a dilemma between the arbitrariness of a claim put forward without any support and the arbitrariness of a claim put forward on the basis of fundamentally inadequate support. This essay, which will involve a certain amount of jumping around in the history of epistemology, is primarily exploratory, but I hope that it can contribute to laying the foundations for productive work on these problems in the future by enabling that work to draw upon connections of the kind made explicit here. That work strikes me as important, as I take it that the thought that our various beliefs or the various propositions to which we assent might be shown to be ultimately arbitrary in terms of their justification is a deeply disturbing one.

In **Section 2** I will give an account of the Five Modes and examine the case for isolating a trilemma produced by the application of three modes within the five. In **Section 3** I will examine Sextus' expression of the Two Modes and argue that these express the same general problem-form as the trilemma, now condensed into a dilemma. I should emphasise that a substantial portion of **Sections 2** and **3** will be spent examining interpretative or historical claims to the effect that the presence of the trilemma or dilemma in question in the Five Modes and the Two Modes was augmented in various ways by Pyrrhonian Sceptics in order to address Dogmatic defences of foundationalism. My intention is not so much to challenge

Improvement," *Phronesis* 59, 3 (2014): 269. See K. Janáček, *Studien zu Sextus Empiricus, Diogenes Laertius und zur Pyrrhonischen Skeptizismus* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008): 176-77, for a dissenting view, arguably supported by M. Catapano, "The Two Modes of Scepticism and the Aporetic Structure of Foundationalism," *Méthexis* 29, 1 (2017): 114. This issue does not strongly concern me here. If one should agree that the Two Modes represent a development in the presentation of the Five Modes and think it likely that it is therefore a student or a follower of Agrippa who is responsible for this development, then one can take the term "Agrippan" in the title of this essay to refer to problems with their ancestry in the work of Agrippa's school, rather than problems with their ancestry in the work of one philosopher called Agrippa.

these interpretative or historical claims as it is to head off in advance the philosophical claim that might be made on the back them: that without augmentations of this kind the Sceptical arguments of the Agrippan modes lose some of their efficacy.⁶ Finally, in **Section 4**, I will argue that the general problem-form derived from the Agrippan modes is instantiated in a number of distinct problems, including the epistemic regress problem, the problem of the criterion, and suggest that Hegel's "problem of beginning" should be added to this list.

2. The Five Modes and the Epistemic Regress Problem

The Five Modes, as is the case with all of the Sceptical modes, are intended to bring about a suspension of judgement (*epoché*) concerning some claim under investigation.⁷ They achieve this by the generation of equipollent oppositions, whereby both some claim⁸ that P and some opposing claim that \neg P⁹ are rendered equally convincing, or are shown to be equally well supported, so that it would be illegitimate to assert the truth of either.¹⁰ Both Sextus and Diogenes present the Five Modes in the same order. I will provide a brief survey of them here.

The first, the mode of dispute, applies when "undecidable dissension about the matter proposed has come about" (*PHI*: 165). If the dissension or disagreement is undecidable, at least on the basis of the evidence currently available, it seems that the reasonable thing to do is to suspend judgement accordingly. The second mode, the mode of infinite regression, suggests that when the evidence provided in support of some claim in fact tends towards an infinite regress of supporting evidence, it then offers no real support as "we have no point from which to begin to establish anything" (*PH*: 166). Given that the claim in question on the matter at

⁶ I am not attributing this philosophical claim to defenders of the various interpretative or historical claims.

⁷ Sextus prefaces his discussion of the modes by saying, "I shall set down the modes through which we conclude with suspension of judgement" (*PHI*: 35).

⁸ As I am introducing Agrippan problems by way of a discussion of Pyrrhonism, I shall tend to use "claim" as a neutral term rather than "proposition" or "belief" as it seems to me to be anachronistic to import a contemporary distinction between propositional and doxastic justification into a reading of Sextus. It seems to me that the Agrippan modes could be applied in both contexts.

⁹ Of course, it need not be P's strict negation, but merely some claim which is incompatible with P and which therefore implies \neg P.

¹⁰ I follow K. Vogt, "The Aims of Skeptical Investigation," in *Pyrrhonism in Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. D. Machuca (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011): 40-41, in taking Sextus' concern to be the rational status of the claim, rather than concerns of a psychological nature about the context in which an individual is likely to be persuaded by the claim.

hand is effectively unsupported, an opposing claim can be asserted as equally convincing, so the reasonable thing to do is again to suspend judgement on the matter.

The third mode, that of relativity, at least as it is described by Sextus, appeals to the relativity of varied perceptions and thoughts concerning the matter at hand to motivate a suspension of judgement over the veracity of any particular perspective (*PH I*: 167). A natural way to read Sextus' account of this mode is as suggesting that, given that some object can appear one way to Perceiver A and another way to Perceiver B, there is no way to know how the object really is, and that we must therefore suspend judgement on the matter.¹¹ The fourth mode is the mode of hypothesis, which applies in those instances where some Dogmatic interlocutor asserts the truth of something "which they do not establish but claim to assume simply and without proof" (*PH I*: 168). This mode points out that the assertion in question appears completely arbitrary since no attempt has been made to support it. It is therefore no more convincing than an opposing assertion that might be made equally arbitrarily, so it is reasonable to suspend judgement on the matter.

Finally, Sextus describes the mode of reciprocity, which covers the familiar, problematic scenario in which the evidence upon which some claim relies for its support includes, at some point, that claim itself, so that its justification is viciously circular (*PH I*: 169). Like the mode of infinite regression, this is taken to undercut the value of that evidence, so that the claim in question is effectively unsupported. An opposing claim can again therefore be equally convincingly asserted, so that the reasonable thing to do is to suspend judgement on the matter. This is only a rough account of the Five Modes, and it obscures a number of important interpretative

¹¹ On Fogelin's reading, addressed below, the mode of relativity appears to have precisely the same function as that of dispute. Hankinson agrees, suggesting that "Relativity, at least in its Agrippan context, should perhaps not be treated as a separate Mode at all" (Hankinson, *The Sceptics*, 185). Sienkewicz, rightly it seems to me, suggests that either relativity reduces to the mode of dispute, or it in fact renders dispute impossible. This would be the case if, rather than the mode of relativity indicating the possibility of dispute by calling attention that the same object can appear one way to Perceiver A and another way to Perceiver B, it instead amounted to the claim that the same object *is* one way, in accordance with the relation it bears to Perceiver A, and *is* another way, in accordance with the relation it bears to Perceiver B (S. Sienkewicz, *Five Modes of Scepticism: Sextus Empiricus and the Agrippan Modes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 147-53). It can look, therefore, as though we are better off ignoring the mode of relativity when paying attention to the Five Modes. Below, however, I will address an alternative reading of the mode of relativity which assigns it a distinctive, important role of its own.

issues, but it will suffice as a starting point for the remainder of this investigation.¹² The Sceptics famously claimed that, rather than the use of the various modes prompting in them a deep unease at the thought that they had no good reason to believe anything, they instead found that a sense of tranquillity (*ataraxia*) followed their suspension of belief (*PHI*: 25-29). This extraordinary suggestion, however, is not under investigation here.

Readers familiar with the *Posterior Analytics* have tended to notice that the combination of the modes of hypothesis, reciprocity, and infinite regress coincides with Aristotle's account of the challenge to the possibility of knowledge through demonstration.¹³ As Aristotle's account suggests, it looks as though there is a specific sceptical problem which can be generated by the application of these three modes together, one which can be used to ask of any claim P whether it has been merely arbitrarily asserted, corresponding to the mode of hypothesis, or whether it depends for its support on some other claim E1. If the latter, then the focus then switches to E1. If this latter claim has been asserted arbitrarily, then this presumably nullifies the support which it offered to P. If, on the other hand, E1 is supported by some claim E2, then the investigation continues. Should this chain of supporting claims eventually repeat, so that E2 turned out to rely upon E1, or indeed P, for its support, then the support for P is thought to be undermined by the circularity of the argument. This corresponds to the mode of reciprocity. If the chain neither terminates somewhere arbitrary nor repeats, then the support is thought to be undermined by the unacceptability of an infinite regress. Thus, together, these three modes look as though they pose a sceptical challenge to the justification of any claim whatsoever.

¹² Barnes, *The Toils of Scepticism*, and Sienkewicz, *Five Modes of Scepticism*, are extended studies of the Five Modes. My brief summary here has the Sceptical modes, for the most part, motivating a suspension of judgement on the grounds that it is the epistemically responsible or reasonable thing to do under the circumstances. Sienkewicz, however, makes a strong case for the claim that the Pyrrhonian Sceptic as presented by Sextus is not entitled to a theoretical framework that allows her to suspend judgement on the basis of what the rational thing to do is (See Sienkewicz, *Five Modes of Scepticism*: 22-46 for a discussion of this issue in the context of the mode of disagreement, for example). I cannot adjudicate this matter here, but see C. Perin, *The Demands of Reason: An Essay on Pyrrhonian Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 33-58 for an argument that the Sceptic *is* committed to standards of rationality.

¹³ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*: 72b, 5-24. I have no intention here of attempting to provide an interpretation of the nature of Aristotle's defence of the possibility of immediate, undemonstrated knowledge.

This combined or systematic use of three of the Five Modes as they appear in the *Outlines* is attributed to Sextus in Barnes' study of the Agrippan modes,¹⁴ and it clearly corresponds to what is today discussed either as the 'epistemic regress problem,'¹⁵ or, acknowledging its ancestry in the presentation of the Five Modes, the 'Agrippan trilemma.'¹⁶ A survey of all of the contexts in which this problem has arisen throughout the history of western philosophy cannot be accomplished here. There is good reason to assign it a fundamental role in the development of German Idealism,¹⁷ and it continues to receive significant attention in contemporary epistemology, where no clear consensus has formed concerning its adequate solution.¹⁸ Although I will suggest later on that the general form of the trilemma occurs in a number of distinct problems, the text of *PHI*: 164-69 reads as though it is problematising the providing of evidence in support of claims in the manner which now occurs in discussions of the epistemic regress problem, and so it is in

¹⁴ See Barnes, *The Toils of Scepticism*, 118. However, see Bett, *How to be a Pyrrhonist*, 123-24 and Sienkewicz, *Five Modes of Scepticism*, 189-91, for suggestions that the Pyrrhonian Sceptic, as described by Sextus, is not entitled to (and largely does not) invoke the three modes in this systematic fashion, but only in a piecemeal fashion. It is possible, as Bett acknowledges, that Agrippa might have intended his modes to have a systematic function, even if elements of Sextus' characterisation of Pyrrhonian scepticism prevent him from endorsing this.

¹⁵ See, for example, A. Cling, "The Epistemic Regress Problem," *Philosophical Studies* 140, 3 (2008): 401-421; T. Kajamies, "A Quintet, a Quartet, a Trio, a Duo? The Epistemic Regress Problem, Evidential Support, and Skepticism," *Philosophia* 37, 3 (2009): 523-34; S. F. Aikin, *Epistemology and the Regress Problem* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 8-43.

¹⁶ See, for example, R. Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 114, or M. Williams, *Groundless Belief: An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 183. Both Fogelin and Williams suggest that their choice of title reflects an emphasis that the problem is a trilemma between three equally problematic justificatory alternatives, suspecting that referring to the problem as the epistemic regress problem involves a misleading emphasis upon only one of these. I am not particularly worried about this and will continue to talk about the epistemic regress problem, especially in **IV**. This is because, as I shall explain there, I think that the term "Agrippan trilemma" can also be misleading in this context.

¹⁷ See, for example, R-P. Horstmann, "The Early Philosophy of Fichte and Schelling," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. K. Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 120-21; T. Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 94, 98-100; P. Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 8-10.

¹⁸ Klein suggests that, "Many contemporary epistemologists take the epistemic regress problem as *a*, if not *the* central problem, in epistemology" (P. Klein, "Human Knowledge and the Infinite Progress of Reasoning," *Philosophical Studies* 134, 1 (2007): 1).

the context of this problem that I will continue to discuss the Agrippan modes for the time being.

Given that engagements with the systematic combination of three of the Five Modes both predates and postdates Sextus' account, it is not surprising that there has been a tendency on behalf of philosophers to separate the modes of the trilemma from the modes of dispute and of relativity when engaging with the Five Modes. Thus, for example, Fogelin distinguishes these two from those making up the trilemma by referring to the former as "challenging modes" and the latter as "dialectical modes."¹⁹ The thought governing this division is that the challenging modes, rather than themselves being sufficient to motivate a suspension of judgement, call attention to an actual or even merely possible difference of opinion on whether or not it is the case that P. In doing so, they give rise to an investigation into the evidence that might be put forward in support of holding that P. This investigation is accordingly referred to the dialectical modes, which, at least according Fogelin, is bound to result in a suspension of judgement, since he holds that "no justificatory program seems to show any prospect of solving the Agrippa problem."²⁰

This way of isolating the trilemma within the context of Sextus' account seems to me both to have been the most influential and to be the most elegant way of recombining the material of the Five Modes. It is the problems that appeal to the modes of the trilemma which will be my focus in discussing the nature of Agrippan problems later on. It is worth acknowledging, however, that there is no clear indication in Sextus' text that the Five Modes are to be divided in this fashion, and when Sextus does suggest that the modes might be used collectively, he mentions all five.²¹ A longer discussion of Sextus' attitude concerning the combination of the three of the Five Modes into a trilemma falls beyond my concerns here.²² It is enough to have shown that the possibility of extracting this trilemma from the Five Modes exists, and that it is this problem which has continued to draw significant philosophical interest from philosophers since Sextus' time.

¹⁹ Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*, 116

²⁰ Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*, 193

²¹ See *PHI*: 170-77. This passage is held to be difficult to interpret, and the tendency has been to reject it as incoherent (See, for example, Barnes, *The Toils of Scepticism*, 114). A sophisticated reading is provided by Sienkewicz (Sienkewicz, *Five Modes of Scepticism*, 157-66), although even this discusses the interrelations only of four of the Five Modes, with the author finding the mode of relativity to be incompatible with the others.

²² Famously, Sextus' use of the Agrippan modes in *PHI*: 20 suggests the combined application of the modes of the trilemma.

Before moving on, however, I should acknowledge that it has recently been suggested by Brennan and Lee that, although we should retain the reading of dispute as a challenging mode, the Agrippan trilemma is better understood as an Agrippan tetralemma because the mode of relativity in fact targets putative self-supporting claims, as distinct from arbitrary assertions and claims which rely upon circular or infinitely regressive chains of supporting claims.²³

This looks as though it is an important point to address. Arguably the most common response to the epistemic regress problem has been to defend some variant of foundationalism, often the suggestion that there are some basic claims which are self-supporting.²⁴ Defenders of this perspective will not be moved by the suggestion that this opens them to the mode of hypothesis, since, they will claim, there is a world of difference between a merely arbitrary assertion, opposition to which can be immediately asserted just as convincingly, and the self-supporting claims which they are endorsing, opposition to which, they suppose, is unreasonable. It looks as though the Sceptic needs a strategy to respond to such a claim, and according to Brennan and Lee, this was the function of the mode of relativity.²⁵

The suggestion made here is that Sextus has mixed up his account of the mode of relativity in the Five Modes with the account of relativity which belongs to the earlier, Aenisdeman Ten Modes.²⁶ Instead, Brennan and Lee direct us towards the other classical statement of the Five Modes, that of Diogenes Laërtius. Diogenes describes the mode of relativity quite differently: ‘The mode concerned with relativity says that a thing can never be understood in and of itself, but only in relation to something else.’²⁷

²³ Brennan and Lee, “A Relative Improvement.” This view receives support in Bett, *How to be a Pyrrhonist*, 119.

²⁴ As Catapano points out, in the historical context of the Pyrrhonian Sceptics, the Stoics would argue that claims made on the basis of certain ‘cataleptic’ impressions required no support from additional claims (Catapano, “The Two Modes of Scepticism and the Aporetic Structure of Foundationalism,” 110, n.12). For a more recent defence of the idea that there can be certain basic beliefs which require no further support, see L. BonJour, “Foundationalism and the External World,” *Noûs* 33, s13 (1999): 229-49.

²⁵ Hankinson, by contrast, entertains the notion that self-supporting claims might be considered a limit case for the application of the mode of reciprocity (Hankinson, *The Sceptics*, 189). Brennan and Lee reasonably point out that the mode of reciprocity does not appear to have been used in this way (Brennan and Lee, “A Relative Improvement,” 256).

²⁶ The Ten Modes are not my concern here, but their general characteristic is relativity in the sense suggested by Sextus’ account of relativity in the Five Modes. Compare *PHI*: 167 with *PHI*: 36-39.

²⁷ Diogenes Laërtius, *The Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, IX: 89.

Brennan and Lee accordingly suggest that this can be reasonably read not to refer to relativity as described above, but to express a rejection of the idea that one might know that P by considering P in and of itself, and not by appeal to the justificatory relations that P bears to other claims. Their suggestion for the use of the mode of relativity is as follows:

If a Dogmatist claims that something can be known through itself—that an axiom is self-justifying, self-explanatory, self-evident, etc.—then the sceptic who employs the mode of Agrippan Relativity will counter that nothing can be known in this way. Whatever is epistemically grounded, must be grounded in something distinct from itself: thus, anything that is alleged to be grasped through itself is in fact unknown.²⁸

On this reading, the mode of relativity does seem to be directed precisely at the claim that something can be asserted in isolation without further support and yet still be considered to be possessed of some kind of justificatory force, or not to be merely arbitrary. Accordingly, Brennan and Lee suggest that we really ought to refer to the “Agrippan Tetralemma” when considering the traditional horns of the epistemic regress problem. Still, putting aside the historical question of Agrippa’s original statement of the Five Modes, I think that there may be good reasons to continue to operate simply with the trilemma in the context of this essay. The first of these is that the mode of relativity, so understood, seems as though it commits the Sceptic dogmatically to the rejection of the possibility of self-supporting claims. Complex scholarly discussions about the extent to which the Pyrrhonian Sceptic is entitled to any theoretically developed beliefs aside,²⁹ it does not look as though a clear argument is provided in the account of the mode of relativity which would license the Sceptic’s dismissal of some putatively self-supporting claim, still less convince the Dogmatist convinced of its validity to suspend judgement over it.

One might think that a reasonable response here would be to say something similar about the three modes making up the classical trilemma.³⁰ For example, it

²⁸ Brennan and Lee, “A Relative Improvement,” 254.

²⁹ The debate about the extent of the Pyrrhonian Sceptic’s legitimate theoretical commitments is not the focus of this essay, but even according to the defenders of a more moderate interpretation of Sextus on this score (M. Frede, “The Sceptic’s Beliefs,” in *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, eds. M. Burnyeat and M. Frede (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 1-24), is the classic statement of this position), the Sceptic is not permitted to hold the kind of philosophically complex beliefs involved in the rejection of the possibility of self-supporting claims.

³⁰ This is not one of Brennan and Lee’s responses. To discuss these would require going deeper into discussions of the interpretation of Sextus than I can afford to here. My goal here is not to dispute Brennan and Lee’s historical conclusions about the Agrippan modes, but merely to head off the suggestion that might be made on the basis of those conclusions, that something like the

might be suggested that it would be equally dogmatic for the Sceptic to simply rule out the possibility of circular justification. I am not sure that the comparison is quite as clear as this, however. The other three modes, as I read them, are designed to make it clear that, for any claim that P , $\neg P$ can be asserted equally convincingly. They achieve this by showing that the claim in question is not distinguishable from an arbitrary assertion. In the case of hypothesis, this involves no more than just pointing out that an opposing claim can be equally as groundlessly put forward. In the case of reciprocity, this is achieved by showing that, despite the appearance of some support for P , this support in fact reduces to simply asserting P , so that again, $\neg P$ can be equally convincingly asserted. In the case of the infinite regress, this is achieved by showing that the apparent support on offer is continuously postponed, so that it never becomes clear that the Dogmatist in question is doing more than arbitrarily asserting P . Showing that this is the case does not involve a dogmatic statement of the illegitimacy of circular or infinite support.

With Brennan and Lee's account of relativity, the case is less straightforward. The suggestion would have to be that the mode of relativity makes it clear that the putatively self-supporting claim is in fact indistinguishable from an arbitrary assertion, but it is not at all obvious how this would be achieved by means of this mode. The statement of the mode suggests no procedure for showing that this is the case, as the modes of the trilemma do. It appears simply to rule out the possibility of self-supporting claims as a matter of principle. It therefore seems to require, at the very least, *more* in the way of dogmatic commitment than the modes making up the trilemma.³¹

Additionally, I would suggest as a second reason for thinking that we can proceed with the traditional extraction of a trilemma from the Five Modes, that the trilemma may very well be all that the Sceptic needs in order to respond to claims that are put forward as self-supporting.³² All that is required is to point out that the claim that a certain claim that P is self-supporting prompts a demand for the justification of this claim in turn. If no evidence for thinking that P is self-supporting can be provided, then it seems indistinguishable from a case open to the mode of hypothesis. If the evidence provided turns on asserting the truth of P ,

relativity mode is essential to the horns of the epistemic regress problem.

³¹ There might be an exception to this case if the original Pyrrhonian Sceptics deploying the Five Modes were engaging with opponents who were defending various claims on the basis of the claim that infinite regresses, for example, can provide genuine support, but I take it that they were not.

³² See Brennan and Lee, "A relative improvement," 270, n.23. Their remarks here suggest that they might accept this point, although the possibility that they are entertaining is not the same as the one I have argued for here.

then the mode of reciprocity applies and P again appears arbitrary. Alternatively, the evidence provided may tend towards an infinite regress, in which case again it may seem as though no support for the claim that P is self-supporting has really been provided, in which case again it appears arbitrary.³³

It therefore seems that the traditional account of the trilemma is sufficient for the Sceptic to suggest that one should suspend judgement in the face of a putatively self-supporting claim. Since that case was the principal reason here for engaging with these concerns about the mode of relativity, I will continue to pay attention primarily to the modes of hypothesis, reciprocity, and infinite regress as I continue to consider the Two Modes, and engage no further with the discussion of the Agrippan tetralemma.

3. The Two Modes

Sextus describes the Two Modes in the following manner:

Since everything apprehended is thought to be apprehended either by means of itself or by means of something else, [the Two Modes] are thought to induce puzzlement about everything by suggesting that nothing is apprehended either by means of itself or by means of something else.

That nothing is apprehended by means of itself is... clear from the dispute which has occurred among natural scientists over, I suppose, all perceivable things and intelligible things – a dispute which is undecidable, since we cannot use either something perceivable or something intelligible as a criterion because anything we may take has been disputed and so is unconvincing.

And for the following reason they do not concede either that anything can be apprehended by means of something else. If that by means of which something is apprehended by means of something else, they throw you into the reciprocal or infinite mode; and if you should want to assume that that by means of which another thing is apprehended is itself apprehended by means of itself, then this is countered by the fact that, for the above reasons, nothing is apprehended by means of itself. (*PHI*: 178-79)

As I suggested earlier, I think that this can be read as a restatement of the argument of the trilemma located in the Five Modes.³⁴ The simplest way to express

³³ See Klein, “Human Knowledge and the Infinite Progress of Reasoning,” 14-15, for an extremely clear contemporary use of this strategy. It is worth noting that Klein is explicitly targeting foundationalism and explicitly making use of the modes of the trilemma to do so.

³⁴ Janáček goes further, suggesting, that the presentation of the Two Modes provides the first genuinely systematic account of the use of the Agrippan modes: “I believe that here is where we first find the model according to which the five loosely bound modes receive a logical order” (Janáček, *Studien zu Sextus Empiricus, Diogenes Laertius und zur Pyrrhonischen Skeptizismus*:

this is to suggest that the rejection of the possibility of apprehending something immediately, or by means of itself, corresponds to the application of the mode of hypothesis, while the rejection of the possibility of apprehending something mediately, or by means of something else, corresponds to the application of the modes of reciprocity and infinite regress. Just as the argument of the trilemma appeared to pose a problem for the justification of any claim whatsoever, here the Two Modes are held to “induce puzzlement about *everything*.” However, there are two idiosyncrasies of the presentation of the Two Modes that must be addressed, although I shall attempt to do so as briefly as possible. The first of these is the apparent absence of the mode of hypothesis from the account of the Two Modes and the second is the appeal to the problem of the criterion in the first of the Two. Happily, they can be dealt with together. My contention in both cases is that these idiosyncrasies provide, as was the case with the alternative reading of the mode of relativity examined in the previous section, interesting suggestions concerning the historical use made of the Agrippan modes by the original Pyrrhonian Sceptics, but do not provide philosophical restrictions on later uses of these modes which focus their attention upon the trilemma.

As stated, the first idiosyncrasy is that there is no explicit mention of the mode of hypothesis in the statement of the Two Modes. Instead, it looks as though Sextus references the mode of dispute when rejecting the possibility of unsupported knowledge. This might suggest that if there is a trilemma present in the Two Modes, it consists of dispute, reciprocity and infinite regress.³⁵ Barnes considers this a weakness in the presentation of the Two Modes, complaining that “they ignore the hypothetical mode – which... is a mode of the first importance to the Pyrrhonists.”³⁶ Of course, I agree with Barnes that the mode of hypothesis is of the first importance. As I have sketched the epistemic regress problem in **Section 2**, the Agrippan modes function by drawing attention to the justificatory arbitrariness of claims, and it is the mode of hypothesis that most directly emphasises this. The modes of reciprocity and infinite regress, as I have sketched them, function by stripping away the illusion of support, and rendering the claim in question indistinguishable from an arbitrary hypothesis. In this sense, one might say, hypothesis is the most fundamental of the modes.

176). Translations from Janáček are my own.

³⁵ This is how it has commonly been taken. See, for example, Barnes, *The Toils of Scepticism*, 117-18, P. Woodruff, “The Pyrrhonian Modes,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. R. Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 226, or Sienkewicz, *Five Modes of Scepticism*, 166.

³⁶ Barnes, *The Toils of Scepticism*, 119.

The tendency among interpreters of the Two Modes who have not been content to regard them as a flawed presentation of the Sceptic's arguments has been to connect Sextus' use of dispute here to the matter of claims that are put forward as foundational or self-supporting, the same issue that concerned us in the discussion of the alternative account of the mode of relativity previously. Specifically, the dominant interpretation of this passage is that while the modes of reciprocity and infinite regression function, in the second of the Two Modes, just as they do in the formula of the epistemic regress problem which we extract from the Five Modes, the function of dispute as it occurs in the first of the Two Modes is to introduce another, distinct problem: the problem of the criterion.³⁷ This is the second idiosyncrasy.

The problem of the criterion is distinct from the epistemic regress problem. The latter targets the attempt to provide evidence in support of a claim, while the former targets the suggestion that a claim can be recognised as true because it is authorised by a criterion of truth.³⁸ Although they are different problems, however, they both make use of the three modes of the trilemma. Accordingly, I shall go on to suggest that both are instances of what I am calling Agrippan problems. For now though, I will provide a brief explanation of the problem of the criterion and explain why it is thought to be invoked in the context of the Two Modes.

Among the Sceptics' Dogmatic opponents, appealing to a criterion in order to argue that a particular claim was true without needing to support it with further evidence was a common strategy.³⁹ Whether the criterion in question is formulated in terms of the human subject making the claim, in terms of the relevant cognitive faculty, in terms of the nature of an appearance which gives rise to a claim, or in terms of some other possibility, the general character of this procedure involves appealing to a criterion where that criterion is a principle which can be used to distinguish truth from falsity. A good criterion, accordingly, would seem to be one that accurately sorts true claims from false ones.

The problem of the criterion works by questioning whether or not the criterion in question is in fact a good one, or why we should suppose that it accurately sorts true claims from false ones. As Sextus would put it, it prompts a

³⁷ Various versions of this interpretation are defended in Hankinson, *The Sceptics*, 189-191; Catapano, "The Two Modes of Scepticism and the Aporetic Structure of Foundationalism;" Sienkewicz, *Five Modes of Scepticism*, 167-77.

³⁸ Here I am following A. Cling, "Reasons, Regresses, and Tragedy: The Epistemic Regress Problem and the Problem of the Criterion," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 46, 4 (2009): 333.

³⁹ Sextus addresses various Dogmatic accounts of purported criteria of truth in *PHII*: 48-79.

dispute about the criterion. It appears that the way in which one would justify a particular criterion is to refer to claims which are known to be true, and which the criterion accurately sorts. These claims, of course, cannot be the same as the original claim, on pain of circularity or reciprocity. But if the Sceptic asks how it is that these other claims are known to be true, then the Dogmatist cannot appeal again to the same criterion, again on pain of circularity. Should the Dogmatist simply assert the validity of a particular claim *or* a particular criterion without being able to authorise or evidence it, then it is no more than an arbitrary hypothesis. And if the Dogmatist is forced to cycle through a non-repeating, never-ending sequence of claims and criteria, this is suggestive of an infinite regress. Sextus provides a brief statement of the problem of the criterion, explicitly referring it, as I have here, to the modes of the trilemma, in *PHII*: 20.⁴⁰

That Sextus is referring to his treatment of the problem of the criterion in the account of the Two Modes is clear from his account of the first of those modes. There, as we have already seen, he suggests that a dispute about something, be it a matter of perception or of thought, that is held to be apprehended by means of itself will be undecidable, “since we cannot use either something perceivable or something intelligible as a criterion because anything we may take has been disputed and so is unconvincing” (*PHI*: 178).

Clearly, the text here suggests that the challenge from the Sceptic to the Dogmatist who holds that a certain claim can be apprehended by means of itself in virtue of the fact that it is authorised by what they suppose to be the criterion of truth is to inquire into the reasons for accepting that criterion. The argument will be that the case for the criterion will result in an undecidable dispute, because the Sceptic will refer the case to the modes of the trilemma in exactly the manner sketched above. If the dispute surrounding the criterion is undecidable, we have no compelling reason to accept that the claim in question is in fact a genuinely self-supporting one. This account, coupled with the more straightforward applications of the modes of reciprocity and infinite regress in the case of things which are held to be apprehended by means of something else, constitutes the dominant interpretation of the manner in which the Two Modes are held “to induce

⁴⁰ “In order for the dispute that has arisen about criteria to be decided, we must possess an agreed criterion through which we can judge it; and in order for us to possess an agreed criterion, the dispute about criteria must already have been decided. Thus the argument falls into the reciprocal mode and the discovery of a criterion is blocked – for we do not allow them to assume a criterion by hypothesis, and if they want to judge the criterion by a [nother] criterion we throw them into an infinite regress.

Again, since a proof needs a criterion which has been proved and a criterion needs a proof which has been judged, they are thrown into the reciprocal mode” (*PHII*: 20).

puzzlement about everything,” or to prompt one to a suspension of judgement over any given claim. It seems to me to make good sense of the text of the *Outlines*.

It is worth emphasising that, in the application of the problem of the criterion to what are put forward as self-supporting claims, it becomes clear that the mode of hypothesis is not in fact absent from the system of the Two Modes in Sextus, since the text of *PHII*: 20 explicitly makes use of it.⁴¹

In addition, the suggestion might be made that the mode of hypothesis is also more directly implicit in the statement of the first of the Two Modes, because, if the claim in question were indeed merely an arbitrary assertion, it would be obviously equipollent to any incompatible alternative.⁴² The only kind of unsupported claim that therefore needs dealing with is the kind which is held to have a special, foundational status which distinguishes it from a merely arbitrary assertion, and so it is this kind of claim which receives focus in the statement of the mode. This strikes me as a plausible reading, but even if it were to be rejected, the mode of hypothesis is still present *a*) in that, at least according to the interpretation I offered earlier, the modes of reciprocity and infinite regress operate by showing that apparently supported claims are in fact indistinguishable from arbitrary hypotheses, and *b*) in the invocation of the problem of the criterion in the first of the Two Modes as we have just seen. It would be a mistake, therefore, to suppose that the mode of hypothesis is absent from the Two Modes.

It seems clear then that the Sceptics making use of the Two Modes intended them to target both claims put forward on the basis of other claims, and those put forward as self-supporting, and thereby to cause trouble for justification in general, in a manner which we would now categorise as an application of the epistemic regress problem. It also seems, on the basis of the text of Sextus' *Outlines*, that their preferred methodology for targeting putatively self-supporting claims was to invoke a different problem, the problem of the criterion, in order to supplement their application of the epistemic regress problem. I do not intend to raise any criticisms about this procedure here.⁴³ However, if it were to be suggested, on the

⁴¹ This point is also common to the accounts of the Two Modes which I have labelled the dominant interpretation. See Hankinson, *The Sceptics*, 191, Catapano, “The Two Modes of Scepticism and the Aporetic Structure of Foundationalism,” 117, and Sienkewicz, *Five Modes of Scepticism*, 171-72.

⁴² See Hankinson, *The Sceptics*, 189-90, for a suggestion to this effect.

⁴³ Indeed, this account seems clearly preferable to the alternative strategy considered in **Section 2**, where the mode of relativity was required in order for the Sceptic to answer the defender of foundationalism, since the appeal to the problem of the criterion offers a clear argumentative procedure for coming to a suspension of judgement over claims which are put forward as having foundational status, while the alternative reading of the mode of relativity appeared simply to

basis of the account of the Two Modes, that a supplementary appeal to the problem of the criterion is required in order for Sceptic applying the epistemic regress problem to arrive at a suspension of judgement in the face of a claim which is held to be self-supporting, I think that we should disagree.

I would instead like to suggest a simpler reading of the Two Modes: one that need not commit the Sceptic simultaneously to appeal to two different problems in order to ensure the strength of her procedure. The suggestion is that the Two Modes can be thought of as a straightforward restatement of the modes of the trilemma, but this time as a dilemma.⁴⁴ Here the reference to undecidable dispute in the account of the first of the Two Modes indicates that undecidable dispute is always possible in the case of something that has been put forward without any support, or arbitrarily. Therefore, the first mode, which states that nothing can be apprehended by means of itself, really expresses the mode of hypothesis. The second mode, which states that nothing can be apprehended by means of something else, problematises any support that might be provided, by pushing that support either towards reciprocity *or* towards an infinite regress. The Two Modes therefore express a dilemma between the arbitrariness of an unsupported claim and the arbitrariness of fundamentally inadequate attempts at support.

This account is in fact suggested by Janáček's reading of *PH II*: 85,⁴⁵ which, as he notices, is an instance of the application of the Two Modes to Dogmatic disputes concerning the existence of truths. As Janáček has it, "The first mode occurs when the Dogmatists arguing with one another claim something without proof. This dispute is undecidable. The second mode occurs when one wants to prove something. The result is either circularity or regress."⁴⁶ This simplified application of the Two Modes does seem amenable to the idea that the dispute here

reject them as a matter of principle.

⁴⁴ To this extent, the account of the Two Modes might be said to anticipate Kajamies' claim that the epistemic regress problem can be expressed, at its simplest, as a "duo" (Kajamies, "A Quintet, A Quartet, A Trio, A Duo?," 533-34).

⁴⁵ "There is a dispute about truths among the Dogmatists; for some say that some things are true, and some that nothing is true. And it is not possible to decide the dispute; for if you say that some things are true, you will not be found convincing if you say it without proof, because of the dispute; and if you actually want to bring a proof... if you say that the proof is true you fall into the reciprocal argument and in addition you will be asked for a proof of the fact that it is true – and another proof for that, and so on *ad infinitum*" (*PH II*: 85).

⁴⁶ Janáček, *Studien zu Sextus Empiricus, Diogenes Laertius und zur Pyrrhonischen Skeptizismus*, 180

is a symptom of the presence of arbitrary hypothesis. It also avoids necessitating an additional discussion of the problem of the criterion in the case of the first mode.⁴⁷

At this point, however, one might wonder how this account addresses the matter that the appeal to the problem of the criterion was thought to address in the dominant interpretation of the Two Modes discussed above. The objection might be that, by restricting the reading of the Two Modes to the options of the trilemma and shifting focus from the manner in which the mode of dispute confronts the advocate of a foundationalist response to the epistemic regress problem with the problem of the criterion, I have robbed the Two Modes of some of their argumentative efficacy. I would respond in exactly the same manner as I responded to the case for insisting that the mode of relativity must be added to the trilemma in **Section 2**. In the face of what is presented as a basic or foundational claim, although the Sceptic certainly might apply the problem of the criterion if the Dogmatist appeals to a criterion to authorise the claim, she could just as well simply ask what the evidence is for supposing that this claim is in fact an instance of such a self-supporting, immediately justified claim. Even if an appeal to a criterion is made, the Sceptic can just as well ask what evidence there is for supposing that this claim *is* in fact authorised by that criterion. There is thus no real need for the Sceptic to diverge from the practice of asking for supporting evidence. The epistemic regress problem as presented in this account of the Two Modes can then apply in a manner which is as problematic as ever for the Dogmatist to respond to, without the Sceptic necessarily having to engage in additional discussion of the problem of the criterion.

I conclude that the most fundamental kind of sceptical problem that we inherit from Sextus and the Pyrrhonian Sceptical tradition can be expressed at its simplest in terms of a dilemma, as it is in the case of the Two Modes. On the one hand one confronts the apparent arbitrariness of a claim that is made without any support, and on the other the apparent arbitrariness of a claim whose support can be shown to be fundamentally inadequate. And in fact, in the discussion above, we have already encountered two distinct problems which appeal to this dilemma.⁴⁸ I would now like to suggest that these are not the only two.

⁴⁷ This is not to dispute the dominant interpretation of *PH* I: 178-79 put forward by Hankinson, Catapano, and Sienkewicz, which tie the first of the Two Modes to the problem of the criterion. It is merely to suggest that, at least on one occasion in Sextus' works, he appears to apply the Two Modes in this more straightforward manner, without needing to invoke a second problem.

⁴⁸ The discussion so far has taken place in terms of the epistemic regress problem, but I take it that it is clear that the problem of the criterion can also be expressed in terms of a dilemma: either *a*) a particular claim *or* a particular criterion is asserted merely arbitrarily, or *b*) inadequate attempts are made to authorize claims and criteria, where those attempts result in circular or

4. Agrippan Problems

At this point we have examined both the Five Modes and the Two Modes. I have made a case for isolating the epistemic regress problem as a trilemma of modes from within the former and argued that this problem can also be presented in a more streamlined manner, as a dilemma, by appealing to the latter. I have also argued that although the application of this problem might be augmented by appealing to an alternative account of the mode of relativity, or to the problem of the criterion, the modes of the trilemma alone are enough to pose a serious challenge to justification of any claim. Finally, we have also encountered, however briefly, two distinct problems which make use of the Agrippan modes: the epistemic regress problem and the problem of the criterion. I now wish to examine this further, and to suggest that these two are not the only 'Agrippan problems,' where this term refers to a problem which uses the Agrippan modes to argue for a sceptical conclusion.

Before going further, however, I would like to briefly address a matter of terminology. I am by no means the first person to notice that different problems make use of the Agrippan modes. Sankey, for example, suggests that the problem of the criterion is an instance of "a more general form... sometimes known as *Agrippa's Trilemma*."⁴⁹ I am not inclined to adopt this usage because, as I have already noted, the same term is often used to refer specifically to the epistemic regress problem.⁵⁰ Cling offers an excellent analysis of the epistemic regress problem and the problem of the criterion and suggests that they are both instances of what he refers to as "the paradox of reasons,"⁵¹ where this term indicates problems concerning justification which force one towards the Agrippan modes which have been our focus so far. In light of their Pyrrhonian heritage, I suggest that we refer to problems of this kind simply as 'Agrippan problems.'

Cling also, accurately in my view, indicates that the epistemic regress problem and the problem of the criterion do not exhaust the range of Agrippan

infinitely regressive reasoning.

⁴⁹ H. Sankey, "Epistemic Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 42, 4 (2011): 562.

⁵⁰ One might also be uncomfortable with insisting on the "trilemma" formulation; on the one hand because, as I have suggested in light of my reading of the Two Modes, it might, at its simplest, be expressed as a dilemma, and on the other because the sheer variety of responses to the epistemic regress problem that have now been developed by epistemologists renders the term "trilemma" rather misleading (See Aikin, *Epistemology and the Regress Problem*, 46, for the suggestion that it might in fact be a "*hexalemma*").

⁵¹ Cling, "Reasons, Regresses, and Tragedy," 338.

problems. He suggests that such problems might target proposals for “evidence that a proposition is true; a criterion of truth that sanctions a belief; an epistemic principle that a belief would be a case of knowledge or justified belief; an account of how the state of affairs described by a proposition is possible; factors that would make a belief valuable whether or not it is true, likely to be true, or reasonably believed to be true...”⁵² Elsewhere, Franks suggests this kind of problem can also occur in a metaphysical, rather than only an epistemological context, as one concerning the grounds of the reality of things, and attributes engagement with such a problem to Schelling, in particular.⁵³ Agrippan problems, or sceptical arguments to the effect that beliefs that we hold to be justified are in fact quite arbitrary seem to arise in a wide variety of contexts, and across the history of philosophy.

Here I would like to make a small, rather unusual addition to the list of recognised Agrippan problems by suggesting that a distinctive one occurs at the beginning of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, in which he attempts to provide a rigorous derivation of the fundamental categories of thought, believing that earlier accounts of the categories such as those of Aristotle or Kant had not been properly justified.⁵⁴ There we encounter the following passage:

The beginning of philosophy must be either *something mediated* or *something immediate*, and it is easy to show that it can be neither the one nor the other; so either way of beginning runs into its rebuttal.⁵⁵

The formulation of this problem, which we can call the ‘problem of beginning,’ seems to echo the expression of the Two Modes examined earlier.⁵⁶ The rejection of immediacy suggests the justificatory inadequacy of beginning with an arbitrary hypothesis and the rejection of mediation suggests the justificatory inadequacy of beginning with something that depends on fundamentally

⁵² Cling, “Reasons, Regresses, and Tragedy,” 338.

⁵³ See Franks, *All or Nothing*, 19, n.11.

⁵⁴ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 525.

⁵⁵ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 45. Translation altered.

⁵⁶ It turns out that I am not alone in recognising this resemblance. The same suggestion is made by Hentrup (M. Hentrup, “Hegel’s Logic as Presuppositionless Science,” *Idealistic Studies* 49, 2 (2019): 151). Hentrup and I have arrived at this conclusion quite independently of one another, however, which I take to speak in favour of its plausibility as an interpretative claim. Hentrup, however, seems to take Hegel to be attempting, in his *Logic*, to solve a particular problem expressed in Sextus’ account of the Two Modes. I am merely reading the latter as expressing a more general problem-form of which the problem that Hegel is attempting to solve is just one instance.

inadequate support. The allusion to a rebuttal or refutation suggests the sceptical strategy of generating an equipollent opposition in order to motivate a suspension of judgement. It is not surprising that Hegel should find that he is confronted with a sceptical problem in this context.⁵⁷ In attempting to provide an account of the fundamental categories of thought, he is often at pains to emphasise that strict standards for the justification of such an account must be met.⁵⁸ Of course, it is precisely attempts at justification that Agrippan problems tend to target. Accordingly, I will suggest that Hegel's problem of beginning amounts to a distinctive Agrippan problem, but first an immediate objection presents itself to this claim: Hegel's statement of the problem appears to recall the following passage from the opening of Fichte's early *Wissenschaftslehre*:

Our task is to *discover* the primordial, absolutely unconditional first principle of human knowledge. This can be neither *proved* nor *defined*, if it is to be an absolutely primary principle.⁵⁹

Here again the rejection of an appeal to a principle which has been merely arbitrarily defined or to one which problematically defers the matter of justificatory authority resembles the presentation of the Two Modes. But in Fichte's case it is clear that this is not a distinctive Agrippan problem, but merely an instance of the application of the epistemic regress problem. Fichte's description of his task in the passage above indicates that he shares a commitment common to much of post-Kantian German Idealism: that of deriving a systematic set of theoretical and practical positions from a single, fundamental or basic principle.⁶⁰ Given this commitment, Fichte's response to a sceptic who challenges any one of his philosophical claims is therefore to claim that they are all ultimately adequately supported by the fundamental principle which he identifies. Although the specifics

⁵⁷ His own engagement with the Pyrrhonian Sceptical tradition has long been acknowledged, and is perhaps best exemplified in Hegel, "On the Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy." A longer discussion of Hegel's engagement with Pyrrhonism cannot be accomplished here.

⁵⁸ See, for example, his insistence that in providing such an account of the categories of thought, that they "must be exhibited in their *necessity* and it is essential that they be *derived*" (G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline: Part I: Science of Logic*, trans. K. Brinkmann and D.O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), §42).

⁵⁹ J.G. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)*, trans. P. Heath and J. Lachs (New York, NY: Meredith Corporation, 1970): 93. The resemblance of the passage from Hegel's *Logic* to Fichte's passage is noted by di Giovanni in his translation of the former, cited above.

⁶⁰ This feature of German Idealist philosophy is discussed in E. Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, trans. B. Bowman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 155-64; Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860*, 98-99; and Franks, *All or Nothing*, 386-87 (and throughout that work).

of Fichte's solution to the problem of identifying such a principle do not concern us here, it should be clear that Fichte defends a kind of foundationalist response to the epistemic regress problem.⁶¹

If the passage from Hegel's *Logic* recalls Fichte's problem of identifying a first principle, one might assume that Hegel, too, is engaged in providing a foundationalist response to the epistemic regress problem when he first sets out and then attempts to solve his problem of beginning, in which case there is no distinctive Agrippan problem to be found here. As with Fichte, the details of the solution Hegel provides to his problem need not concern us now,⁶² but I think that there is a good case to be made for thinking that, in Hegel's case, the problem in question is not just another instance of the epistemic regress problem, along with the assumption that some sort of foundationalism must provide a solution.

Put simply, the case turns on two features of Hegel's project. Firstly, he arguably is committed to foundationalist response to the epistemic regress problem at least in the context of justifying the account of the fundamental categories of thought that he develops in his *Logic*,⁶³ and secondly, the solution to his problem of beginning is not that response. We can treat these, briefly, in turn.

Although it is unlikely to be universally accepted, it is at least far from uncommon to attribute to Hegel a version of the same goal as that of Fichte seen above: that of identifying an unconditional principle to which other philosophical claims can appeal for their support. According to such an account, Hegel's proposal for such a fundamental principle is what he refers to as 'the concept.' The details of Hegel's account of the concept do not concern us here.⁶⁴ What matters is that it

⁶¹ An interesting discussion of Fichte's defence of an unconditional first principle as a response to scepticism is provided in D. Breazeale, "Fichte, Skepticism, and the 'Agrippan Trilemma,'" *Fichte-Studien* Band 44 (Leiden: Brill, 2017): 3-16.

⁶² One interpretation of Hegel's solution to his problem of beginning is provided in Hentrup, "Hegel's Logic as Presuppositionless Science," 153-60. I provide a somewhat different interpretation in R. Dunphy, "Hegel and the Problem of Beginning," *Hegel Bulletin* (forthcoming).

⁶³ I provide no discussion here of how Hegel's logical material relates to his discussion of the making of empirical judgements in his *Philosophy of Spirit*, nor of how Hegel understands empirical judgements to be justified. Hegel's problem of beginning, as I understand it, is an Agrippan problem local to the epistemology of logic, as the term is treated in Hegel's work.

⁶⁴ A compelling account of Hegel's notion of the concept which I take to support this view is provided in B. Bowman, *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 31-43. Bowman suggests that Hegel's concept is the structure of self-referential, autonomous negation which he takes to function as "the absolute foundation of Hegelian logic and metaphysics" (Bowman, *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity*, 52).

plays the key role in the kind of foundationalism that Hegel endorses in the context of his *Logic*. He claims, for example, that “the concept is to be regarded indeed, not just as a subjective presupposition but as *absolute foundation*.”⁶⁵ It is back to the concept, as foundational principle, that the account of the various categories explored in Hegel’s *Logic* are traced.⁶⁶

The reason that Hegel’s problem of beginning cannot be, as in the case of Fichte, an attempt to provide an unconditional first principle, is that Hegel’s elaboration of such a principle, the concept, is not provided as the solution to the problem of beginning. The elaboration of the concept does not take place until the third book of Hegel’s *Logic*, while the work *begins* instead with the abstract category of “pure being,” which is emphatically not an unconditional first principle. Indeed, its coherence appears to be quickly rejected in favour of a discussion of more determinate categories.⁶⁷

The crucial point here, which I cannot explore in detail, is that Hegel, unlike Fichte, does not begin with a foundational principle and derive philosophical claims from there, but envisages the setting out of such a foundational principle as the result of a process of philosophical reasoning.⁶⁸ Thus, after suggesting that the *Logic* begin not with its fundamental principle but with the abstract category of pure being, Hegel claims that, in the context of the argument of his *Logic*, “*progression* is a retreat to the *ground*, to the *origin* and the *truth* on which that with which the beginning was made, and from which it is in fact produced, depends.”⁶⁹ This is reiterated in the passage cited above in which Hegel emphasised that his account of the concept is one of an absolute foundation, where he acknowledges that he found it necessary to begin with something abstract, “the foundation of which... must therefore be sought.”⁷⁰ From this we can conclude that Hegel’s problem of beginning is not an expression of the challenge he faces in providing a foundationalist response to the epistemic regress problem in the context of an account of the categories of thought, but instead the problem of where to begin an investigation of the categories of thought in such a way that the beginning is not problematically arbitrary, even though it does not constitute

⁶⁵ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 508.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Franks, *All or Nothing*, 377-79, for another argument to this effect.

⁶⁷ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 59-82. A good discussion of this topic is provided in R. Pippin, *Hegel’s Realm of Shadows: Logic as Metaphysics in The Science of Logic* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 183-210.

⁶⁸ See Bowman, *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity*, 43-61 and 166-200 for an account of Hegel’s model of philosophical demonstration.

⁶⁹ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 49.

⁷⁰ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 508.

any kind of self-supporting foundation. I suggest that this problem constitutes a distinctive, perhaps idiosyncratically Hegelian, Agrippan problem.

A brief examination of Hegel's remarks in the immediate context of the problem provides us with a clearer understanding of what Hegel perceives to be the inadequacy of beginning either with something mediated or with something immediate. He spells this out in the language of presuppositions:

Being is what makes the beginning here; it is presented indeed as originating through mediation... and the presupposition is of a pure knowledge which is the result of finite knowledge, of consciousness. But if no presupposition is to be made, if the beginning is itself to be taken *immediately*, then the only determination of this beginning is that it is to be the beginning of logic, of thought as such.⁷¹

We need not be lured into a discussion of the more obscure elements of this passage, nor of the sense in which Hegel takes the category of being to somehow solve the problem he is considering.⁷² I want only to point out that this passage makes it clear that by "beginning with something mediated" Hegel means beginning with something which relies upon some presuppositions to demonstrate its validity, while by "beginning with something immediate" he means beginning with something that presupposes nothing. I take it that this again shows that Hegel's problem of beginning shares the dilemmatic form of an Agrippan problem, where the dilemma is between the problematic arbitrariness of something asserted without any support, and the problematic arbitrariness of something asserted on the basis of fundamentally inadequate support. In Hegel's case, there is a question mark hanging over the legitimacy of what is presupposed at the beginning of a logical investigation, and therefore on the beginning itself,⁷³ while an attempt to

⁷¹ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 47-48.

⁷² I provide an account of the way in which Hegel takes the category of being to solve his 'Agrippan' problem of beginning in Dunphy, "Hegel and the Problem of Beginning."

⁷³ Hentrup takes it that what is problematic about relying on presuppositions in this context is that it defers the matter of the justification of the beginning indefinitely, so that it is an appeal to the mode of infinite regression (Hentrup, "Hegel's Logic as Presuppositionless Science," 151). Hegel's remarks to the effect that a science of logic is not entitled to presuppose the findings of other sciences, rely upon axioms or a recognised method, or even assume an account of its own subject matter at the beginning, suggest to me another possibility. It may be that the apparent support offered by what is presupposed at the beginning of such a science is undermined precisely because all of its basic principles, its "forms of reflection... rules and laws of thinking... are part of its content and they first have to be established within it" (Hegel, *Science of Logic*: 23). In other words, Hegel might not need to argue that the presuppositions in question form a vicious circle or tend towards an infinite regress, but instead could argue that they constitute the 'arbitrariness-of-something-based-on-fundamentally-inadequate-support' horn of an Agrippan

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begin without presuppositions is simply to begin with something that is obviously arbitrary as it has nothing supporting it. In the latter case, a Sceptic can oppose any suggested beginning to an alternative that has equally groundlessly been put forward. In the former case, because the validity of what has been presupposed has not been established, a Sceptical opponent is again entitled to hold that it can be equally convincingly opposed to an alternative. Either way, it looks as though a sceptical rebuttal faces any attempt to get Hegel's account of the categories of thought off the ground.

Hegel's problem of beginning is therefore an Agrippan problem which challenges the very possibility of beginning an investigation into the fundamental categories of thought in a manner which is not vitiated by the problematic arbitrariness of the starting point of the investigation, just as the epistemic regress problem challenges the very possibility of holding a claim to be supported by evidence without that evidence being revealed to be fundamentally arbitrary, or the problem of the criterion challenges the very possibility of authorising a claim by appealing to a criterion of truth without both claim and criterion appearing to be problematically arbitrary. Problems of this kind, Agrippan problems, have preoccupied philosophers from antiquity, through the period of German Idealism, and up to the present day.⁷⁴ Their pervasiveness suggests a deep unease concerning the extent to which the content of our thought can escape the threat of being revealed as fundamentally arbitrary. If, as I do, one finds the Pyrrhonian Sceptics' claims to discover tranquillity in the eye of this storm implausible, it seems that there is little choice but to continue in the attempt to solve problems of this kind, although it is certainly easier said than done.⁷⁵

problem because they are presupposed *at the beginning* of science that permits no such thing, on his conception of it. I cannot explore this topic further here.

⁷⁴ It should be noted that I am not suggesting here that because there is a wide variety of Agrippan problems, a successful solution to one will share the same form as a successful solution to another. Such a discussion must take place elsewhere.

⁷⁵ This paper was written during a fellowship at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies at the University of Hamburg.