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Reidian Common Sense: An Antidote to Scepticism?

1 Common Sense and Scepticism

Scepticism is in most cases disliked. Much of contemporary epistemology can be construed as a response to the modern incarnation of scepticism, i.e. the view that justification is impossible or that nothing is known, either in general or about a certain area of discourse (say, unperceivable objects).¹ In contrast to this, its ancient relative did not preach theory or rely on dubitable premises. The Pyrrhonists² were concerned with a way of life, the aim of which was *ataraxia*—tranquility of mind—and its method *epoché*—suspension of judgement. Whereas it had much influence in the early modern period (due to translations that made the works of Sextus Empiricus, the Pyrrhonist's chief author, available to scholars at the time), it had not been taken seriously by contemporary scholars of ancient philosophy until a few decades ago, 'because it was regarded as a patently absurd or far-fetched form of skepticism,'³ and the attention it received outside the ancient philosophy classroom was practically non-existent.

One reason for the neglect of Pyrrhonian scepticism is the *apraxia* objection,⁴ which states in its evidential mode that sceptical life is impossible and in its pragmatic mode that sceptical life is impractical. The pragmatic mode presupposes that sceptical life (i.e., life without opinion or beliefs) is possible, but argues that

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1 Cf. Peter Klein, "Skepticism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/skepticism/>>.

2 Ancient Scepticism encompasses two broad traditions, each of which was subject to transformations and different proponents with varying views on scepticism. For the first tradition, Academic Scepticism, see Diego Machuca, "Ancient Skepticism. The Sceptical Academy," *Philosophy Compass* 6 (2011): 259–266. For the second tradition, Pyrrhonian Scepticism, see idem, "Ancient Skepticism. Pyrrhonism," *Philosophy Compass* 6 (2011): 246–258. I will use 'Pyrrhonian scepticism' and 'scepticism' interchangeably on most occasions. Context makes clear where I intend to distinguish Pyrrhonian scepticism from the modern versions of scepticism.

3 Diego Machuca, "Ancient Skepticism. Pyrrhonism," 248.

4 Cf. Katja M. Vogt, "Scepticism and Action," *Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 165–180, and Gisela Striker, "Sceptical Strategies," *Doubt and Dogmatism*, eds. Malcom Schofield, Myles F. Burnyeat and Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980): 54–83.

we *should not* be sceptics, on the grounds that it would be imprudent, dangerous, or bad to be so. According to the evidential mode, sceptical life is impossible. It claims that in order to act, we need beliefs. For example, the action of reaching for my mug requires belief in it being there, or, to echo a common accusation, alluding to fellow philosophers requires the belief that they exist. The idea is that addressing, quoting, or meeting people requires belief in their existence, their qualities, and so on.⁵ Given that the self-proclaimed sceptic does drink his coffee and does argue with other philosophers, the evidential mode concludes that we *are not* and that we *cannot* be sceptics.⁶ As readers of Sextus' works will know, this objection misses its target by miles. Given that we will discuss his reply in detail below, a very short summary of the Pyrrhonian reply to the *apraxia* objection is adequate. According to Sextus, the sceptic acts in line with those appearances that force their assent upon him. That is, he drinks because he is thirsty, but suspends any opinion as to whether the mug is *really* there, or whether it is just an idea, an illusion and so on.

In this paper, I discuss Thomas Reid's (1710–1796) common-sense-based version of the *apraxia* objection, because it appears to be immune to Sextus' reply and so still has a chance to succeed. It is much more radical, in that it is not based on action, but on life and the human condition. Thus, it is not only by acting that the sceptic betrays his philosophy, but in fact merely by being human.

Basing his objection on common sense, Reid makes his objection far more threatening by comparison with other attacks on (ancient and modern) scepticism. Most philosophical arguments against scepticism make use of heavy-weight assumptions which are easy for the sceptic to avoid.⁷ The common-sense strategy purports to overcome this by shifting the discussion to a pre-theoretical point. As with the sceptic, the common-sense-based attack depends on no theoretical assumptions, and so it appears the sceptic is forced to agree. If scepticism is ruled out by something that is a precondition for the discussion, for action in general, or even more broadly, life, and we only need common sense to see this, there appears to be no way out for scepticism.⁸ And while this seems like the version of the *apraxia* objection we just dis-

5 This polemic accusation is made by George E. Moore in his discussion of philosophers who disagree with his list of common sense propositions. He also mentions that their use of 'we' betrays their position, because clearly such usage implies the existence of other human beings. Cf. George E. Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense," in *Philosophical Papers*, Muirhead Library of Philosophy, ed. George E. Moore (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1958): 40–41.

6 Cf. Suzanna Obdrzalek, "From Skepticism to Paralysis," *Ancient Philosophy* 32 (2012): 370.

7 A fitting example for a popular heavy-weight defence against scepticism is externalism, both in its semantic form or as a claim about mental content. For semantic externalism, see Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," *Minnesota Studies in Philosophy of Science* 7 (1975): 131–193. For externalism about mental content, see Colin McGinn "Charity, interpretation, and belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1977): 521–535.

8 The similarities to Wittgenstein and contemporary hinge-epistemology are no surprise, given Reid's influence on Moore, and Moore's influence on Wittgenstein. For the presence of Reid in the circles of

carded, it has to be observed that it did not fail for structural reasons, but for making an assumption Sextus did not share. As Reid's version is grounded on common sense, the idea is that there is no assumption involved that Sextus cannot share. So, if we find something that really is a precondition for discussion, action or life (and according to Sextus there appear to be such things: without appearances that force our assent we would be inactive, see section 3), that contradicts something to which Sextus is committed, the *apraxia* objection would be successful.

However, the shift to a pre-theoretical point is faced with a dilemma. Either the ability to engage with the sceptic is lost, or the strategy risks forfeiting its advantage. If the sceptic refuses to acknowledge that which is impossible not to acknowledge (according to common sense), there is no common ground left between the disputants. Historically, this leads either to ignorance towards or ridicule of the sceptic. On the other hand, any bit of theory that is endorsed can be used by the sceptic again. Later in the paper (section 4) we will see a version of this dilemma, and how it endangers Reid's argument against the sceptic.

Another reason for discussing Reid in this context is that common-sense-based arguments are still being performed to this day. The following passage from Kit Fine's article "The Question of Realism" published in 2001 is a vivid example of the relevancy of common sense as a strategy against scepticism:

However, in this age of post-Moorean modesty, many of us are inclined to doubt that philosophy is in possession of arguments that might genuinely serve to undermine what we ordinarily believe. It may perhaps be conceded that the arguments of the skeptic appear to be utterly compelling; but the Mooreans among us will hold that the very plausibility of our ordinary beliefs is reason enough for supposing that there must be something wrong in the skeptic's arguments, even if we are unable to say what it is. Insofar, then, as the pretensions of philosophy to provide a world-view rest upon its claim to be in possession of the epistemological high ground, those pretensions had better be given up.⁹

According to Fine (who echoes what has become dogma in some circles of philosophy),¹⁰ no matter how good or convincing the sceptic's argument is, we should retain all our ordinary beliefs in response, even if we are unable to find any fault in the sceptic's arguments due to the high plausibility of our ordinary beliefs. The term 'common sense' does not appear in Fine's proclamation, but both his talk of ordinary beliefs and his reference to George E. Moore (1873–1958)—who famously attempted

Moore and Russell, see Ronald Beanblossom, "Russell's Indebtedness to Reid," *The Monist* 61 (1978): 192–204.

9 Kit Fine, "The Question of Realism," *Philosopher's Imprint* 1 (2001): 2.

10 Other contemporary examples include David M. Armstrong, "A Naturalist Program: Epistemology and Ontology," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 73 (1999): 77–89; David Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996): 549–567, and Jonathan Schaffer, "On What Grounds What," *Metametaphysics. New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, eds. David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 347–383.

to refute idealism by merely holding up his hands, and wrote the *Defence of Common Sense* in 1925—suffices for us to take this as an instance of a classic appeal to common sense.

Reid, in contradistinction to Moore, developed a theory that attempts to put this attack on firm ground. In other words, Reid attempted to move the appeal to common sense away from a rhetorical device (used as a last resort in the face of glaring objections) to a sensible and philosophically sound method.

The paper proceeds as follows. I will show in section 2 that we can plausibly assume that Reid did in fact put forward a common-sense-based *apraxia* objection in the evidential mode against Pyrrhonian scepticism (and one that goes beyond mere polemics). Section 3 explores the relationship between Reid's notion of belief and Sextus' notion of assent and finds that they are closely connected. Given this close connection, in the fourth section, after dealing with two objections, I will argue that Reid's *apraxia* objection is either not threatening Pyrrhonian scepticism or not sharing enough common ground with Pyrrhonian scepticism to be successful. In section 5, I conclude that Reid's common-sense-based *apraxia* objection fails.

2 Reid's Attack on Pyrrhonian Scepticism

Most of Reid's work is directed against the way of ideas and its proponents, such as Hume, Locke, Berkeley or Descartes. According to the way of ideas, the direct objects of perception are ideas, rather than external objects. From this point on it is but a short step before one descends into sceptical concerns that knowledge of external objects is impossible if ideas are our only source of information. According to Reid, Hume deserves credit for having exposed the scepticism that was already implicit in the way of ideas' first formulations. Both Berkeley and Reid found this scepticism to be unacceptable. But where Berkeley preserved the way of ideas, and instead rejected the external objects, Reid preserved the external objects and rejected the way of ideas.

Nevertheless, I shall argue that we can also find arguments in Reid against other forms of scepticism, such as Pyrrhonian scepticism. Although I do think that Reid was aware of Pyrrhonian scepticism and that he aimed at refuting it on some occasions, I don't want to rely on a historical argument, nor do I aim for a purely historical claim.¹¹ Rather, I think that Reid appears to have a theory that sustains his argument against Pyrrhonian scepticism, and so we should read it as such (even though

¹¹ Hume scholars have long since sought to find out which editions, if any, of Sextus' writing were available to scholars in the early modern period and to Hume in particular. A good summary of these findings are presented in Peter S. Fosl, "Skepticism and the Possibility of Nature," in *Pyrrhonism in Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Diego E. Machuca (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011): 145–170.

he ignored, or perhaps was not aware, of some of the subtleties of Pyrrhonian scepticism).

For us, the most relevant discussion of Reid's anti-sceptical arguments is that of Philip de Bary. De Bary claims the four arguments he discusses (labelled A-D below) are mere polemics, however, I feel A and B are serious and threatening, while only C and D can be termed polemics. The four arguments are as follows:¹²

- A. I never heard that any sceptic run his head against a post, or stepped into a kennel, because he did not believe his eyes. (EIP 234a)
- B. If a man pretends to be a sceptic with regard to the informations of sense, and yet prudently keeps out of harm's way as other men do, he must excuse my suspicion, that he either acts the hypocrite, or imposes upon himself. (IHM 170)
- C. Pyrrho the Elean, the father of this philosophy, seems to have carried it to greater perfection than any of his successors [...] And therefore, if a cart run against him, or a dog attacked him, or if he came upon a precipice, he would not stir a foot to avoid the danger, giving no credit to his senses. But his attendants, who, happily for him, were not so great sceptics, took care to keep him out of harm's way; so that he lived till he was ninety years of age. (IHM 20)¹³
- D. If a sceptic should build his scepticism upon this foundation, that all our reasoning and judging powers are fallacious in their nature, or should resolve at least to withhold assent until it be proved that they are not, it would be impossible by argument to beat him out of this stronghold. And he must even be left to enjoy his scepticism. (EIP 447b)

De Bary argues that all these should be read as mere polemics, because (i) Reid's chief aim is Hume, and (ii) these arguments mischaracterise Hume. Additionally, (iii) it is implausible that Reid is serious here, given that elsewhere he gives a correct picture of Hume.¹⁴ From the viewpoint of de Bary, Reid is either inconsistent or the arguments are polemics, and so he chooses the latter option.

I agree with the second and third claim, the arguments do mischaracterise Hume and Reid is aware of this. For example, right before the first argument (A) Reid ac-

¹² The passages from Reid's *Inquiry* are cited from Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, The Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid, ed. Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) = (IHM). The rest of Reid's work is cited from the eighth edition of the Hamilton edition: Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. Sir William Hamilton (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1983) = (EIP), Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, ed. Sir William Hamilton (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1983) = (EAP), Thomas Reid, *Reid's Letters*, ed. Sir William Hamilton (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1983) = (Letters). With regards to Sextus' works, I'm using Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, eds. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) = (PH).

¹³ Brookes identifies this as a quotation from Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Robert D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979): 475 (DL IX.62.). See the Explanatory Notes in Brookes' edition of Reid's *Inquiry* (p. 222).

¹⁴ See Philip de Bary, *Thomas Reid and Scepticism: His Reliabilist Response*, Routledge Studies in Eighteenth-Century Philosophy 3 (London: Routledge, 2002), 7–19.

knowledges that Hume agrees that doubt with regard to the senses cannot be upheld (EIP 234a). But with regard to the first claim, I disagree with de Bary. As Louis Loeb pointed out, when Reid discusses the figures of the way of ideas, the chapter on Hume is the shortest.¹⁵ Loeb also shows that only some passages of Hume are quoted by Reid (throughout his works) and that Reid ignored many features of Hume's theory, acknowledgement of which would have brought Reid—too close for comfort—to Hume. In place of viewing Reid mainly as an opponent of Hume, we should instead read him as an opponent of the way of ideas. This is supported by Reid's own self-perception, gained from sources such as the following letter from Reid to Dr. James Gregory (date unknown), in which he sums up his philosophical achievement as working against the way of ideas:

The merit of what you are pleased to call my philosophy, lies, I think, chiefly, in having called into question the common theory of ideas, or images of things in the mind, being the only objects of thought. [...] I think there is hardly anything that can be called mine in the philosophy of mind, which does not follow with ease from the detection of this prejudice. (Letters 88b)

If we take de Bary's claim that the arguments misrepresent Hume along with Loeb's findings that Hume is not a central figure in Reid's writings, we are no longer required to see these arguments to be directed against Hume. As a result, I am rejecting de Bary's first claim that Hume is the primary target, and instead propose that the primary target is the alleged Pyrrhonian sceptic, for the following two reasons.¹⁶

Firstly, arguments A, B and C are instances of the *apraxia* objection (A and B of the evidential, C of the pragmatic mode), which Pyrrhonian scepticism has been confronted with from its inception. The *apraxia* objection and its two modes has already been discussed, so we can content ourselves with this rough reconstruction of the evidential *apraxia* objection (to be referred to later):

- (1) If you are a sceptic, you have no beliefs.
- (2) If you have no beliefs, you cannot act.
- (3) You can act.
- (4) It is not the case that you have no beliefs.
- (5) It is not the case that you are a sceptic.

The first premise sums up the sceptic's claim that he lives without beliefs (PH I 8), while the second premise is the core of the *apraxia* charge, namely, that beliefs are necessary for action. Coupled with the observation that sceptics do act and conduct their lives in an orderly fashion (3), we can reason via *modus tollens* and conclude that the sceptic must have beliefs (4) and is therefore not a sceptic at all (5).

¹⁵ See Louis E. Loeb, "The Naturalisms of Hume and Reid," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 81 (2007): 66.

¹⁶ For if the argument is successful, there are no Pyrrhonian sceptics.

Secondly, there is an inconsistency between the four arguments and between some of the arguments and Reid's broader work. The last argument (D) recommends not to engage with the sceptic, while the first three (A-C) do engage with the sceptic. The story about Pyrrho suggests sceptical life is possible, while arguments A and B suggest that scepticism is actually impossible and every self-proclaimed sceptic a fraud. This could be taken as evidence for the claim that his attitude is merely polemical, but the other inconsistency is, I think, more important, i.e. that between arguments C and D and Reid's philosophy of mind. Given this inconsistency, I suggest that only arguments C and D are polemics and that A and B remain as serious attacks on alleged Pyrrhonian sceptics.

If we take Reid's writing at face value it seems that he denies the actual and possible existence of Pyrrhonian sceptics. With regard to the modality in play, I assume Reid would say that God could have constituted us in such a manner that we are able to live without beliefs, but he has not and therefore such sceptics cannot exist. Pyrrhonian sceptics live without beliefs, but according to Reid's philosophy of mind there are at least two sources of beliefs we cannot resist: Immediate beliefs caused by our constitution and beliefs that arise from the workings of our mental faculties. In terms of the first category, Reid postulates that our constitution forces some beliefs upon us e.g. the belief that we are conscious:

Can any man prove that his consciousness can't deceive him? No man can: nor can we give a better reason for trusting to it, than that every man, while his mind is sound, is determined, by the constitution of his nature, to give implicit belief to it, and to laugh at, or pity the man who doubts its testimony. (IHM 17)

An example for the other source is perception, where Reid holds that:

[W]e shall find in [perception] these three things: First, Some conception or notion of the object perceived; Secondly, a strong and irresistible conviction and belief of its present existence; and, Thirdly, That this conviction and belief are immediate, and not the effect of reasoning. (EIP 258a)

Both our mind and the employment of our senses already force beliefs upon us. This, I take it, rules out the Pyrrhonian life without beliefs, as does the conclusion of the evidential *apraxia* objection. Thus, it makes no sense for Reid to engage with the sceptic by using arguments that presuppose that the sceptic can act (as do arguments C and D). The 'stronghold' of argument D is a paper castle at best, because as soon as the sceptic becomes hungry, he has to crawl out. All that is left to Reid is to engage with those who still claim to be sceptic and rub it into their faces how life involves immediate beliefs forced upon us by nature (and Reid rarely misses out on such an opportunity).

3 Reidian Belief and Pyrrhonian Assent

Thus far, we have seen that Reid's engagement with scepticism can be taken seriously by his formulating an instance of the *apraxia* objection in the evidential mode that is anchored in his theory of the mind (which, in turn, is based on his methodology of common sense). In this section, I wish to consider the potentially undermining parallels between Reidian belief and Pyrrhonian assent.¹⁷ Reid's *apraxia* objection does not function when Pyrrhonian assent is taken as the key mental state. But it is not clear whether there really is a substantial difference between Pyrrhonian assent and Reidian belief. Both Reid and Sextus characterise their mental state phenomenologically and functionally. By showing how these characterisations are almost identical, I hope to cast doubt on the idea that Reidian belief differs (sufficiently enough) from Pyrrhonian assent.

Reid's philosophy of mind is revolutionary in many ways, and it is what truly distinguishes his attack on the way of ideas. Instead of merely concluding that the way of ideas is wrong (given that it leads to scepticism), he puts something in its place that, according to Reid, comprises less flaws and greater explanatory power. The first notable feature of Reid's philosophy of mind is his faculty psychology. Instead of trying to reduce all mental activities to a single source, Reid finds, based on his own introspection, many mental faculties that exist independently, although closely connected with each other. Belief is mostly associated with the faculty of judgement,¹⁸ but accompanies many mental processes.

On the Reidian philosophy of mind, belief is simple and cannot be defined any further.¹⁹ Although there is no systematic discussion of belief, given that it plays an important role in perception and in his reply to the sceptic, we can still reconstruct his theory of belief from the relevant passages. The feature he gives the most credit to is its irresistibility. For example, Reid cites this feature in response to the sceptic who advises suspending judgement on the existence of the external world, for objects can exist without perception, just as perception can exist without the object. Reid replies:

[I]t is not in my power [to get rid of my belief in external objects]: why then should I make a vain attempt? It would be agreeable to fly to the moon, and to make a visit to Jupiter and Saturn; but when I know that Nature has bound me down by the law of gravitation to this planet which I inhabit, I rest contented, and quietly suffer myself to be carried along in its orbit. My belief is carried along by perception, as irresistibly as my body by the earth. And the greatest sceptic will find himself to be in the same condition. (IHM 169)

¹⁷ For the time being, I'm only focussing on Sextus' notion of forced assent. As Katja M. Vogt points out, there is also 'a kind of assent [...] that is not necessitated but is yet sufficiently passive in order to differ from assent or judgement as the dogmatists envisage it. Involuntary and non-doxastic assent play this role;' see Katja M. Vogt, "Appearances and Assent: Sceptical Belief Reconsidered," *Classical Quarterly* 62 (2012): 661.

¹⁸ See EIP 414b.

¹⁹ See IHM 28.

Turning to how belief originates, Reid alternates between belief being suggested by sensation or being created by natural signs. The reason why belief arises in these cases is unknown to us, or it happens ‘by a natural kind of magic.’²⁰ Alternatively, and this has both a phenomenological and an abductive reading, it is a result of our constitution or of nature.²¹ It might be that these are still expressions of the irresistibility of belief, in the sense that it feels as if nature, or our constitution, forces the belief upon us. If that is not the case, however, these expressions could also be inferences toward the best explanation. It may be a law of human nature that when we perceive an apple, a belief that the apple exists, as we see it, is created alongside the perception. This law, together with the information that a subject perceives an apple, permits us to deduce that the subject also has the corresponding belief. A third option here is Reid distinguishing speculation from proper science.²² All that can be said is that it is caused by our constitution, and nothing more can, or should, be said. This line of interpretation is supported by the following passage in which Reid talks about the information that is suggested by vision, namely colour and position, and nothing else:

Now, this material impression, made upon a particular point of the retina, by the laws of our constitution, suggests two things to the mind, namely, the colour, and the position of some external object. No man can give a reason, why that same material impression might not have suggested sound, or smell, or either of these along with the position of the object. That it should suggest colour and position, and nothing else, we can resolve only into our constitution, or the will of our Maker. (IHM 100)

The next feature of Reidian belief is its immediacy. Belief is often not a result of reasoning but occurs immediately:

When I hear a certain sound, I conclude immediately, without reasoning, that a coach passes by. There are no premises from which this conclusion is inferred by any rules of logic. It is the effect of a principle of nature, common to us with the brutes. (IHM 50)

How a sensation should instantly make us conceive and believe the existence of an external thing altogether unlike to it, I do not pretend to know; and when I say that the one suggests the other, I mean not to explain the manner of their connection, but to express a fact, which every one may be conscious of; namely, that by a law of our nature, such a conception and belief constantly and immediately follow the sensation. (IHM 74)

I know moreover, that this belief [in a perceived object’s present existence] is not the effect of argumentation and reasoning; it is the immediate effect of my constitution. (IHM 168)

²⁰ See IHM 36.

²¹ See IHM 70.

²² Ryan Nichols, *Thomas Reid’s Theory of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2007), 26.

Finally, Reid maintains that belief plays a pivotal role in guiding action. Further to the point that we cannot suspend judgement, he adds that even if we could suspend judgment, we should not:

I resolve not to believe my senses. I break my nose against a post that comes in my way; I step into a dirty kennel; and, after twenty such wise and rational actions, I am taken up and clapt into a mad-house. Now, I confess I would rather make one of the credulous fools whom Nature imposes upon, than of those wise and rational philosophers who resolve to with-hold assent at all this expence. (IHM 170)

Besides this being an instance of the pragmatic mode of the objection, we can see what role belief plays in action. Belief keeps us out of harm's way and it guides our actions. In his *Essays on the Active Power of Man*, Reid distinguishes between three kinds of action: voluntary, involuntary and mixed actions. There are three classes of principles of action, which belong to the three kinds of action. Mechanical principles determine the involuntary actions, animal principles determine the mixed actions, and rational principles determine the voluntary actions.²³ In contemporary parlance, we would only call the voluntary actions proper actions (where involuntary sneezing, sleep-walking and breathing are not considered actions at all).

Belief is essential for voluntary actions (that are guided by the rational principles), but even the animal principles require associated beliefs. Without the beliefs that are formed in perception (that the perceived object is like it seems to be) we cannot explain why someone moves towards the perceived object. If I know that there is merely the illusion of an apple in front of me, I would not, despite my hunger, attempt to eat it (and here we can also argue that it is my belief that the apple is an illusion that forms part of my refusal to grab the apple). But if I believe that it is a real apple, I would reach for it, and so we see that belief plays an important role for action.

Before turning to Sextus' account of assent, I will summarise the findings. On the phenomenological side of the Reidian account of belief, belief is irresistible and immediate. On the functional side of his account, belief is a necessary constituent of action. The same three features are present in the following passages from Sextus, in which he replies to accusations not dissimilar to those Reid has voiced against him in his *apraxia* objection:

Those who say that the Sceptics reject what is apparent have not, I think, listened to what we say. As we said before, we do not overturn anything which leads us, without our willing it, to assent in accordance with a passive appearance—and these things are precisely what is apparent. When we investigate whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear, and what we investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent—and this is different from investigating what is apparent itself. (PH I 19)

23 EAP 543.

Thus, we find that Sextus' key mental state is assent to the appearance, which we can neither control nor resist. Although not expressed verbally, the assent is also immediate, rather than the product of reasoning. Sextus' entire point is that suspension of judgement is not exercised over the appearances. If assent to them were the product of reasoning, one would be able to reason against them to reach *epoché* again. I therefore conclude that Pyrrhonian assent is both irresistible and immediate.²⁴ Does it thus also play a role similar to Reidian belief with regard to action?

Thus, attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions—for we are not able to be utterly inactive. These everyday observances seem to be fourfold, and to consist in guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise. By nature's guidance we are naturally capable of perceiving and thinking. By the necessitation of feelings, hunger conducts us to food and thirst to drink. By the handing down of customs and laws, we accept, from an everyday point of view, that piety is good and that impiety is bad. By teaching of kinds of expertise we are not inactive in those which we accept. And we say all this without holding any opinions. (PH I 23, 24)

I take the answer to be 'Yes'. This, in effect, fits neatly with Reid's account of action, and even goes beyond the mere minimum by including the acknowledgement of custom, laws and expertise. It can be concluded that all three features which characterise Reid's mental state, that he calls 'belief', namely irresistibility, immediacy and its role in action, are also true of Sextus' mental state, which he calls 'assent'.²⁵ Now turning to the *apraxia* objection and applying it to Sextus' notion of assent in the place of Reidian belief, it is clear Sextus would disagree with (1): Being a sceptic does not mean resisting assenting to the appearances that are forced upon us. But he would agree with (2): If we were able to resist assenting, we would have no guidance for our actions. Something crucial would be missing for living life, sceptical or otherwise. Sextus also agrees with (3), naturally, because he thinks that he can act. The first conclusion, that it is not the case that we do not assent, follows. Only the second conclusion, which hinges on the first premise (the one Sextus disagrees with), does not follow, for in Sextus' account the sceptic does assent to the appearances.

In order not to equivocate, the other option is to read the argument in such a way that (1) is true on Sextus' account, and as a consequence the rest of the argument fails—(2), (4) and (5) would be rendered false. On the other hand, if we want (2) to be true, a part of the argument can function, namely (2) to (4), but that only

²⁴ An objector might cite PH I 9, in which Sextus says that the sceptic opposes what appears to be both with what appears to be and what is thought of, but PH I 19 makes clear that the arguments against the appearances serve the aim to 'display the rashness of the dogmatics,' and not to suspend judgement about the appearances.

²⁵ This is also supported by the other passages in which Sextus discusses assent, see PH I 113, 193, 230, 233 and PH II 10, 251–2.

shows how important the mental state is that Sextus calls ‘assent’. It does not demonstrate that scepticism is impossible.

4 Two objections

Before moving to the conclusion and determining where these parallels leave Reid’s *apraxia* objection, two objections are to be considered. Both of which depend on features of Reid’s account of belief which have hitherto not been touched upon.

The first feature is that ‘[b]elief admits of all degrees, from the slightest suspicion to the fullest assurance.’²⁶ At the same time, Sextus appears to directly negate the corresponding thesis of degrees of assent, when he says ‘that appearances are equal in convincingness or lack of convincingness’ (PH I 227). Although this is far from a full answer (which would require an entire paper in itself), I do not think this to be Sextus’ final position on this matter. The passage that most clearly speaks against this is the very last section of the *Outlines* titled “Why do Sceptics sometimes propound arguments that are of feeble plausibility?” Here, Sextus, comparing the sceptic with a doctor, states that, for philanthropic reasons, the sceptic will use weighty arguments for some ‘patients’, but weak arguments for others, for everyone to reach *ataraxia*. That is, this section presupposes that arguments differ in convincingness. Having established that a difference in convincingness is possible at all, the next step would be to subsume arguments under appearances to conclude that at least some appearances differ with respect to convincingness. A second line of defence can be based on (at least, my) psychological reality. If assent is to be a state that does not allow for degrees, I have no idea what Sextus’ assent is. The only notion one can be aware of introspectively that comes close to Sextus’ assent is forced upon one with various degrees of strength, depending on the phenomena, time, place, and so on. Thirdly, if all things are equally strong with regard to forcing assent to them, it trivialises the ability of the sceptic Sextus is talking about in the fourth section of the first Book, i.e. the ability to ‘set out oppositions of things which appear and are thought of in any way’ (PH I 8). He himself says that by ‘ability’ he means nothing fancy, but still, it seems it would make things much too easy. The worst counterexample could endanger belief in the best theory, for ‘worst’ and ‘best’ are already categories that presuppose that some things are more convincing than others. As this is far from sufficient as an argument, I choose to read PH I 8 as speaking of the ability to have, even for belief in very convincing theories, the right countermeasure.

The second feature of Reidian belief that is missing from Pyrrhonian assent is the content of Reidian beliefs. While Sextus’ assent is supposed to be non-committal in every conceivable sense, Reidian beliefs are, among other things, beliefs that the perceived objects are in reality as they seem to be, existing mind-independently and ex-

²⁶ EIP 327b.

ternally from us, and so on.²⁷ This goes far beyond Sextus' account of assent and also seems to contradict it. Does this mean that Reid's *apraxia* objection is successful after all?

Although we have seen that there is a difference between Reidian belief and Pyrrhonian assent in terms of its alleged content, Sextus could actually be too close to Reid for the objection to be successful. Consider the situation from the point of view of Sextus. He hears of this mental state that feels a certain way, it is forced upon us, we cannot resist it, it occurs immediately, it guides our actions, it helps us crossing the street. 'All this,' Sextus may say, 'I find, too, when I introspectively observe the goings on of my mind. Surely, he must speak about that assent that is forced upon us by the appearances.' Only at this point does Reid say: 'No, because this belief is a belief in the mind-independent existence of the external objects of our perception.' It is only this last step that Sextus cannot take. But Sextus is not constituted differently. Hence, the dilemma from the introduction appears again. Either Sextus agrees to everything that is found in introspection or not. If he does, then there is no belief in the external existence of the objects of perception, for this does not appear to Sextus, and we have to read Reid differently. Perhaps it is not actually the content of the beliefs, but an expression of how the appearances feel. Surely the appearances are such that things appear to be independent of our minds and in a certain distance from us (i.e., they seem to be external). In this case, Reid's *apraxia* objection fails, as in this interpretation it does not contradict Pyrrhonian scepticism. A successful *apraxia* objection requires a theory of belief that goes beyond what we find in introspection. According to the other horn of the dilemma, Sextus and Reid disagree about what is found in introspection. In this case there is no more room for debate. The common ground the *apraxia* objection requires does not exist. Thus, Reid, in this reading, thinks scepticism is wrong, but there is no way to ever communicate this to the sceptic successfully. Additionally, we all have the power of introspection, and I personally do not find my perceptual beliefs to be committed to mind-independent objects. We also would have to explain the attractiveness of non-realist philosophies, when everyone always believes, as part of how perception works, that these non-realist philosophies are wrong. Be that as it may, both options have their problems, and so this qualifies as a true dilemma: Either one is forced to perform mental gymnastics in our interpretation of Reid, or we are left with an implausible and problem-burdened view of beliefs.

²⁷ Reid's first principle number five captures this: 'That those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be' (EIP 445).

5 Conclusion

If Reid bases his *apraxia* argument merely on introspection, it does not succeed. The only route to success would be to claim that Sextus is confused or lying, or that Sextus and Reid are constituted differently. Both these routes are not particularly promising. If he goes beyond introspection, Sextus is not obliged to follow. For every reason Reid adds as a premise to his case, Sextus can find a reason that speaks against it. This is especially easy given that the other big common-sense philosopher, Moore, embraces the way of ideas as part of his common sense philosophy:

I hold it to be quite certain that I do not directly perceive my hand; and that when I am said [...] to 'perceive' it, that I 'perceive' (in a different and more fundamental sense) something which is (in a suitable sense) representative of it.²⁸

I conclude, therefore, that no matter what route Reid is taking, he cannot beat the Pyrrhonian sceptic with his version of the *apraxia* objection.

²⁸ Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense," 55.