The existence of Skepticism in the history of philosophy is the existence of a scandal. Can Skepticism even be included in that history? Insofar as it is concerned with truth, Sextus Empiricus suggests that Skepticism is one of the “most fundamental kinds of philosophy” (PH, I, 1, 4); yet, he avoids to call it a school (airesis) and talks about it as a “movement” (agōgē). The vagueness of this term captures in fact a very precise paradox: if we conceive of the history of philosophy as a history of doctrines, then Skepticism is not a philosophy since it cannot - by definition - be construed as a doctrine. The very idea of a skeptical doctrine, dogma, or system is incoherent. Should the Skeptics speak the truth, they would immediately contradict themselves since their claims would fall under the heading of dogmatism which is precisely what Pyrrhonian Skepticism is meant to rule out.

This ambiguity still reverberates today. Insofar as it belongs to the history of Hellenistic philosophy, contemporary philosophers treat Skepticism as a “kind of philosophy” identifiable by its quasi-doctrine. Yet, many, if not most, perceive it as an anti-doctrine in opposition to which philosophy defines itself. On this view, philosophy must reject Skepticism, just as the Platonist philosopher is an anti-sophist. As a consequence philosophy, if it must engage Skepticism, must do so with the intention of refuting it. But one can go further and suggest that philosophy doesn’t even have to engage Skepticism. It may be sufficient to simply exclude it from philosophy in principle. In Philosophical Dialectic, Nicholas Rescher has argued that Skepticism violates the first principle of “informative adequacy” which states (borrowing the formulation to C. S. Pierce) “never bar the path of inquiry… never adopt a methodological
stance that would systematically prevent the discovery of something that could turn out to be true.” As a consequence concludes Rescher, radical Skepticism must be excluded since “if we adopt this line… all progress is blocked from the very outset.” Thus, insofar as it appears to refuse the parameters of philosophical debates, Skepticism is not even worthy of refutation.

What do these accounts assume? I contend that the answer points not simply to Skepticism itself but, more importantly, to our unquestioned assumption according to which philosophy must be a matter of constructing doctrines and that its history is a portrait gallery of systems. The first lesson we can learn from the Skeptics is that we should be wary of this. It may be that philosophy can occur outside of systems, doctrines, and dogma. It may occur in other guises: descriptive, for instance, as Sextus suggests we should read his work. Or one could demonstrate the possibility of a skeptic way of life simply by living it. In such a case, the Skeptic’s answer to the challenge of justifying herself wouldn’t be a matter of defending a thesis but a matter of deeds and ethos. Thereby, there would still be a huge difference between not professing a doctrine (not being a Dogmatist) and having nothing to say at all. But one can still offer arguments of some sort, as Sextus’ *Outlines of Skepticism* relentlessly does. But since they cannot be a direct defense of Skepticism, these arguments constitute a strategy of critical intervention within the very display of dogmatic doctrines.

If, in principle, there cannot be a skeptical system, there is a “movement” that animates skeptical thinking and operates through specific and determinates steps:

Skepticism is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to epochē (suspension) and afterwards to ataraxia (tranquility) *Outlines of Skepticism* (PH), I, 8.
To talk of Skepticism as “ability” is to insist that Skepticism is not so much a philosophy that has something to say, as it is a philosophy that invites us to do something. Praxis may need to be coherent in order to express itself; yet, it cannot be reduced to its expression since what matters is its performance. Skepticism is an undertaking; its first movement is to set up an appearance against another appearance, a belief against another belief or an appearance against a belief. This leads to equipollence, an “equality with regard to being convincing or unconvincing; none of the conflicting accounts takes precedence over any other as being more convincing” (I, 10). The next movement is epochē (suspension of judgment) defined as “a standstill of the intellect owing to which we neither reject nor posit anything” (idem). Finally, the third one is ataraxia (tranquility) “freedom from disturbance or calmness of the soul” (idem).

If Skepticism is better construed as the performance of this three-part movement, what is the connection between them and in particular between epochē and ataraxia? One would probably assume that this must constitute either an inferential relation (“if equipollence then epochē” or “epochē entails ataraxia”) or a causal relation (equipollence is the cause of epochē which, in turn, causes ataraxia). Yet, Sextus simply states “first” and “afterwards,” thereby leaving unexplained how we should understand the order of this skeptical movement.

Furthermore, to reach epochē is not to give up inquiring. The suspension of judgment must cancel dogmatism without cancelling the possibility that we could, in principle, reach a truth beyond appearances. The noumenal order (the non-evident, or non-manifest i.e., the real insofar as it does not appear) remains fundamentally neutral; it neither inclines in one direction nor in the other. This point is carried by the phrase: “no more this than that” which expresses how equipollence ends up in equilibrium (I, 188-191). The noumenal world remains silent or neutral revealing no more this than that about itself. Of course, this very claim is itself open to
suspension. “When we utter the phrase ‘in no way more’ we are not affirming that it is itself certainly true and firm: here too we are only saying how things appear to us” (I, 191). Insofar as it is meant to be descriptive, and insofar as description is opposed to determination the three constitutive moments of Skepticism remain themselves open to the possibility of their own suspension.

Skeptics suspect that behind all dogmatic claims lurks a decision which, at bottom, is arbitrary. As Sextus construes it, true assent is given to what imposes itself to our judgment: “We do yield to things which passively move us and lead us necessarily to assent” (I, 193). This assent is not a choice; it is a compulsion before an appearance and only insofar as it is an appearance; in the case of antinomies concerning what is non-appearing, however, nothing compels and there cannot be assent.

Yet, the whole strategy deployed by Skepticism is at the service of a goal, namely: ataraxia. Freedom from disturbance is more than a topic of ethical theory; it is the criterion of philosophy. To be a philosopher is to conquer fears and desires and the esteem one should bestow upon a philosophical school depends primarily on its ability to lead people to this end. The very practice of epochē is an ethical act, not just an epistemological stand.

Up to now the goal of the Skeptic is ataraxia in matters of opinion and moderation of feeling in inescapable matters. For Skeptics began to do philosophy in order to decide among appearances and to ascertain which are true and which are false, so as to become tranquil; but they came upon equipollent dispute, and being unable to decide on this, they suspended judgment. And when they suspended judgment, tranquility in matters of opinion followed fortuitously (PH. I, 25-26).
Yet, can Skepticism have a goal? A goal is believed to be objectively good; so as a critique puts it: “if Skepticism has a goal it must accept a claim that declares the nature of something to be such and such.” Sextus appeals to a definition of the goal that is borrowed from dogmatism: “A goal (telos) is that for the sake of which everything is done or considered, while it is not itself done or considered for the sake of anything else. Or: a goal is the final object of desire” (I, 25). This claim simply states an initial appearance. After all, it is puzzlement over conflicting appearances that leads to disturbance and, initially at least, the quest for settling these conflicts by discovering the truth about them seemed to be the mean through which ataraxia could arise. This is how things appeared when the Skeptics engaged in philosophy in the first place. In the course of their quest, however, the Skeptics discovered that philosophy itself is the disease for which it is supposed to be the cure.

A second-order difficulty arises at this juncture. If philosophy has failed to provide the knowledge it promised, how can we find solace in this situation? When Faust, recognizes his enduring ignorance, the result is certainly not ataraxia but torment; in Goethe’s words: “all joy is snatched away/ What is worth knowing, I can’t say/ I can’t say what I should teach/ to make men better or convert each.” The emergence of ataraxia out of this situation remains perplexing. Second, if ataraxia is nevertheless attained why keep the inquiry open? The only solution is to disconnect the goal of the inquiry (which is to ascertain truth) from the initially stated goal i.e., freedom from disturbance. In other words, the Skeptics discovered that ataraxia can be attained by other means. On the one hand, from the fact that we haven’t found wisdom, we have no right to assert that wisdom cannot be found. Hence, we have no reason to close the inquiry. On the other, it appears that ataraxia doesn’t need the attainment of wisdom in order to occur. But then, the consequence is that ataraxia is not the direct result of epochē; rather, it happens alongside
the open inquiry. What then could be the connection that links the second to the third moment? How do we move from epochē to ataraxia? Sextus Empiricus offers only one clue to answer this question: the story of Apelles. What this story is supposed to mean, however, is problematical.

A story told of the painter Apelles applies to the Skeptics. They say that he was painting a horse and wanted to represent in his picture the lather on the horse’s mouth; but he was so unsuccessful that he gave up; took the sponge on which he had been wiping off the colors from his brush, and flung it at the picture. And when it hit the picture, it produced a representation of the horse’s lather. Now the Skeptics were hoping to acquire tranquility by deciding the anomalies in what appears and is thought of, and being unable to do this they suspended judgment. But when they suspended judgment, tranquility followed as it were fortuitously, as a shadow follows a body” (P.H. I, 28-29)

The difficulty raised by the story engages the coherence of Skepticism. Analogically, epochē is to the Skeptic what throwing the sponge is to Apelles. One could assume that Apelles reaches the goal by not striving for it anymore and that, likewise, the Skeptic finds freedom from disturbance when she no longer pursues the truth. The goal is attained by giving up on the mean to reach it. Apelles initially assumed that through mastery over his technique he would create the effect he was striving for and, similarly, the proto-Skeptic, at the beginning of her investigations, believed that she must grasp the final truth about non-appearing nature if she is to enjoy ataraxia. On Hadot’s interpretation, Apelles achieves perfection in art by renouncing art; likewise, the Skeptic realizes philosophy’s work of art (ataraxia) by renouncing philosophy.

On closer examination, however, this interpretation is unfit. The story tells us that Apelles was frustrated, but not that he abandoned painting. Sextus’ point cannot be to suggest that we should give up the search since this would go against the stated function and purpose of Skepticism. A
Skeptic does not throw the sponge. The point is not to reach the goal by renouncing inquiry, but to reach the goal while simultaneously keeping the inquiry open, thus, by maintaining that its fulfillment, sophia, is possible.

The only account of how ataraxia is related to epochē is the story of Apelles; yet, it does not allow us to extract a practical rule that could be presented as the Skeptical precept on how to cure human woe. It is so because a Skeptic suspends belief about every dogmatic claim she has encountered so far. “The phrases ‘I have no apprehension’ and ‘I do not apprehend’ also show the Skeptic’s own feelings, in virtue of which he refrains, for the moment, from positing or rejecting any of the unclear matters being investigated” (I, 201). The two conditions: (a) this is the expression of the inquirer’s personal pathos and (b) it has only provisional (not universal) validity remind us that the Outlines is a report, not a recipe. All skeptical statements contain within themselves the possibility of their own annulment.

The incident contributes to Apelles’ transformation; likewise, the Skeptic undergoes a transformation. Epochē leads her to realize that she can experience ataraxia without having attained enlightenment. Yet, Sextus’ laconic words: “first” and “afterwards” that connects the three instances of the skeptical movement resist being construed as inferences. The Skeptic’s transformation need not have occurred on the basis of any argument; it does not even call for a refutation of her prior assumptions since it could still be that wisdom would yield freedom from disturbance. If the “afterwards” that links epochē to ataraxia cannot be construed as an inference, it is equally impossible to understand it as a causal relation. It is true that the Skeptic must retain a minimalistic conception of the goal and the good throughout her efforts, but the suspension of judgment doesn’t occur for the sake of achieving ataraxia, just as Apelles didn’t throw the sponge for the sake of creating the effect he was seeking. The phrase: “tranquility followed as
it were fortuitously, as a shadow follows a body” does not express a causal relation between the body and the shadow but stresses their fortuitous simultaneity.

There is no skeptical teaching about ataraxia and there cannot be one since ataraxia can be brought about by something other than a belief. Instead, epochē opens up a space where ataraxia may occur. In Apelles’ story the effect is achieved without intention, through chance. Sometimes what is most admired about a work of art came about fortuitously. Apelles is lucky, and luck is chance that ironically imitates technique. If it is so then the story of Apelles indicates two distinct and parallel planes. It is possible on one plane to continue the inquiry, to maintain the quest for truth and to be even more determined about it than the Dogmatists who claim that they have found the truth or the Academics who claim that the truth cannot be found and, on another plane, to experience ataraxia.

Our inclination to believe an appearance when it manifests itself does not compel us to hold that p is true. It is because there is a difference between being inclined to believe and actually believing, or between acknowledging an appearance and upholding it that those who have criticized Skepticism either for having no beliefs or for having beliefs when they should not have any have missed the point on both counts. But why would this lead to tranquility? We noticed earlier that the story of Apelles is meant to illustrate a transformation. What was fervently desired is eventually fortuitously encountered. To the epistemological difference between inclination and belief corresponds a difference in the attitude one can have towards one’s own thoughts. The Skeptic is indeed a changed person; she is not identical with her thoughts anymore. An inner doubling has occurred whereby she can detach herself from her own judgments, observing in a second order how she is inclined to accept some of them, how they do indeed appear to her. By becoming a spectator of her thoughts, a zone of play between herself
and her beliefs has opened; I would contend that it is in this space, in this leeway that ataraxia emerges.