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Haptic Reductions

A Sceptic's Guide for Responding to the Touch of Crisis

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ABSTRACT: This chapter identifies two contrasting methodological reductions utilized in philosophical scepticism: withdrawal/doubt [R-]; immersion/attention [R+]. Moving toward a feminist ethics grounded in phenomenological scepticism, Aumiller explores how reduction relates to experiences of personal and global uncertainty such as a pandemic. Reduction involves our entire embodied being, challenging how we are fundamentally in touch with the world. How we respond to being disrupted makes all the difference.

KEYWORDS: Scepticism; Phenomenology; Ethics; Touch; Uncertainty; Disruption; Epoché

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GLOSSARY

Dogmatism

The reduction of existence to a system of beliefs or a world-view. A necessarily conscious or unconscious reduction that provides orientation. Reduction for the sake of stability and confidence. The appearance of a fixed position. The condition for a subjective stance.

Haptic Dogmatism

Conscious and unconscious beliefs that belong to my body. The way my body is accustomed to come into touch with itself, with others, and with the world. The way I grasp myself (as self) through my grasp of the world. Belief in the form of personal and cultural habits and practices involving touching and not touching.

Scepticism

Modes of reduction that disrupt dogmatic reductions. Reduction that results in instability, disorientation, momentary or prolonged self-doubt. The (negative) reduction of (positive) reduction without its own content. The condition for subjective or epochal shifts.

Haptic Scepticism

Experiences of touch that call touch itself into question. The disruption and disorientation of our beliefs and practices involving touch and belonging to touch. The possibility for transformed touch-relations.

Equipollence

To be caught between two who each demand one's full fidelity. Two in the form of equally viable dogmatic reductions, two contradictory convictions, two equally intoxicating jealous lovers, two overwhelming but conflicting sensations or urges. The splitting of the subject who is stuck in the middle. The splitting which is subject.

Epochē A methodological suspension of belief/disbelief performed at the beginning of phenomenological reduction (Husserl). The affective experience of being suspended at the end of phenomenological reduction (Pyrrhonism). A dead end where beginning begins (Hegel). The repeated collapse of epistemological enquiry, which drives enquiry. The opening of the possibility for ethical responsiveness in the space of uncertainty and undecidability.

Withdrawal [R-]

Methodological reduction in the form of stripping away assumptions, beliefs, and experiences that can be initially doubted. Holding open distance between subject and object, reducer and reduced. The sensation of isolation and deprivation.

Immersion [R+]

Methodological reduction in the form of the accumulation of phenomenological standpoints. The reduction of all beliefs, affects, and sensation to impressions. Attention to the surface. Closing distance between subject and object, the one employing reduction and the one reduced. The sensation of sensual excess and being-with-others.

INTRODUCTION

Epistemology questions what we can know. It aims at producing dogmatic reductions in the form of stable positions that securely orient us in the world. From one perspective, scepticism trolls epistemology by performing different modes of reduction that dismantle dogmatic reductions and belief. From another perspective, sceptical disruption is the internal engine that drives enquiry, allowing for the transformation of knowledge and belief.

This chapter reduces the rich history of philosophical scepticism to two modes of reduction: *Reduction as Modes of Withdrawal* [R-] and *Reduction as Modes of Immersion* [R+]. I turn to early modern philosophy to illustrate the first mode of reduction. Here I highlight Descartes's appropriation of a classical sceptical method for the sake of dogmatic proof. Reduction as withdrawal systematically strips away layers of belief about the world until it reaches the one thing that can't be reduced any further. In my reading of Descartes for the purpose of this discussion, 'the irreducible' is in the position of the one who employs reduction without fully calling himself into question.

I locate the second mode in ancient scepticism with a focus on the birth of phenomenology in Pyrrhonism. Reduction as immersion provisionally welcomes all descriptive accounts of belief or experience. In the context of phenomenological scepticism, reduction does not have to do with the distillation of excess to an essence. Instead all beliefs, judgements, ideas, sensations, emotions are reduced to the same playing field, treated equally as impressions (phenomena). This reduction accumulates impressions [R+] rather than stripping away what can be doubted [R-]. Rather than questioning what is real/truthful/right, reduction as immersion attends to the surface: the sensational and affective points of contact between one's body and the world. Phenomenological scepticism is a reduction to the surface or skin. Yet, the surface is limitless insofar as relationality is infinite.

Like the mode of withdrawal, the mode of immersion also appears to reach a dead end, an *epochē* as it is first defined in ancient phenomenological scepticism. In this case, reduction in the form of

attention to the surface often leads to an irreducible in the form of a contradiction between impressions or within a single impression.¹

Despite the sceptic's attempt to remain epistemologically indifferent or neutral, the encounter with contradiction within our impressions challenges our ability to move through the world. An encounter with contradiction is an embodied experience sometimes leading to the experience of mental and psychological paralysis. Yet, life demands that we make a move (even in the form of not moving or not making a choice). But once again, I argue, the one employing or attending to reduction does not fully allow himself to be called into question by reduction. He fails to fully grasp himself within the contradiction of his own impressions.² *Immersion withdraws*, finding tranquil release from the tension and overwhelming fullness of reduction.

The two contrasting movements — withdrawal and immersion — lead to the same place: an epistemological crisis. But sceptical method, which is stunted by a premature stopping point (an 'irreducible' subject who may be disrupted further), shields the sceptic from experiencing this crisis as personal, which is to say, from experiencing it at all.

My own desire is to give method a little push, making reduction personal. When followed through to its own logical end, reduction gives rise to personal disorientation and radical self-doubt.³ At the end of methodological reduction is the experience of reduction when reduction bites the hand that first employed it on another.⁴

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- 1 The Pyrrhonists refrain from speculating whether contradiction itself exists in reality or in our accounts of the world. They do however describe how contradiction can be experienced at the level of affect and sensations. Impressions of all kinds fall into contradiction. Although there are different modes that lead to *epochē*, I highlight equipollence and contradiction because they are critical for how ancient scepticism is taken up in German idealism and twentieth-century phenomenology.
 - 2 Hegel's sceptical phenomenology locates the subject in the very crack or contradiction within substance. Although ancient philosophy does not share a sense of modern subjectivity, Hegel argues that the shadow of the modern 'self' is born in this very moment of disruption in ancient scepticism. The experience of self-doubt precedes and conditions the self.
 - 3 Socratic and Pyrrhonist dialectic shows us that a challenge to one's belief needn't come from the outside. Contradiction is encountered within the logic of one's own beliefs. Critique is internal, a form of self-relation. This sceptical insight is the foundation for nineteenth-century philosophy having different implications for German idealism, Marxism, psychoanalysis.
 - 4 Methodological reduction may be employed for the sake of a proof or refutation. In this case, the end point or conclusion is predetermined from the beginning. Reduction

Methodological reduction has to do with epistemology and its limits. Experiential reduction implicates the reducer in his method, demanding accountability precisely when an individual is in a state of paralysis (*epochē*). Experiential reduction is the condition for a kind of ethical responsiveness and responsibility, which takes place from a space of ambiguity and undecidability. Ethics is set into motion from a place of being suspended.

I give reduction a little nudge, by highlighting the role of haptic sensation in the formation and disruption of belief. Knowledge and belief are impressions inscribed on our skin from infancy onwards, finding a home in our body and between bodies through our haptic relations and rituals: what I call 'haptic dogmatism'.

The history of epistemology and its negative double, scepticism, utilizes the sense of touch as a tool to question what we can know. These traditions also question touch itself as the object of enquiry. Is touch reliable? Can we trust our own sensation? By relocating both dogmatic and sceptical reductions in the body and between bodies-in-touch, I explore how different modes of reduction bring us into touch with ourselves, others, and the world. I turn to touch as a primary mode of being-with-others-in-the-world.

Touch is informative both in its knowledge and in the limits of its knowledge. However, the reduction of touch to its epistemic or negative epistemic character represses a deeper ontological significance of being-in-touch. Touch is sensational (a matter of phenomenology and aesthetics), cultural (a matter of society and politics), relational, and reciprocal (a matter of intimacy and ethics). How does method isolate these different registers of being-in-touch? When do these layers of touch come back into touch?

From a phenomenological perspective, an individual may try to describe how different sensational encounters impress themselves against her being. From a metaphysical or ontological view, we may question how existence is in touch with itself. Ancient philosophers and natural scientists approached this question through different

reveals nothing, but instead supports positive or negative dogma. The conclusion is determined from the start. 'To follow reduction to its own logical end' means to pursue method until it cannot be performed further. The path of reduction self-destructs when it encounters the appearance of a dead end or 'the irreducible'.

modes of ‘micro-reductions.’⁵ What is the most fundamental unit of existence? How do these units touch? Is existence held together through the mediation of gaps and cracks? Or is existence fully immersed in itself, in the way that the ocean touches itself through waves enveloping waves?

The question of how we come into touch as individuals is a question of how existence as a whole is in touch with itself. How does existence touch itself through our individual touching? How is my ontological relationship to existence expressed in my individual touch? How can singular experiences of touch transform my relationship to existence?

One of my motivations for engaging the history of phenomenological scepticism is to practice a feminist ethics that attends to the experience of radical uncertainty brought about by today’s global crises. The path of reduction — both through withdrawal and immersion — leads me to a new beginning, a heightened sensitivity to the sensation of the unknown. This chapter concludes with the introduction of ‘haptic scepticism’, which I identify as an oscillating movement between withdrawal and immersion in the embodied experience of *epochē*, taken equally as an end and a beginning. Haptic scepticism is a moment of call-and-response. It is found in the sensation of being disoriented, of being suspended, of being acted upon. It is equally in our active response to disorientation, resulting in a transformed relationship to self and other in the experience of uncertainty.

TWO MODES OF SCEPTICAL REDUCTION: WITHDRAWAL AND IMMERSION

In the following, I offer a snapshot of two varieties of scepticism that initially seem to have very different methods. I’m interested in how these philosophical methods resonate with our everyday experiences, especially during periods of intense uncertainty brought about by an event such as a pandemic.

One method offers insight into the experience of isolation, while the other offers insight into the experience of being immersed amongst

5 Hanna Andersen, ‘The History of Reductionism versus Holistic Approaches to Scientific Research’, *Endeavour*, 25.4 (2001), pp. 153–56.

many bodies. The latter touches upon the experience of an overabundance of competing desires and sensory overload. The excess of Being. The former touches upon the overwhelming sensation of absence and deprivation. The excess of Nothingness.

Reduction as withdrawal can be represented in the model of the sceptic who takes a step back to gain critical distance from an object of enquiry or desire. Reduction as immersion can be represented by the sceptic who immediately takes an eager step forward without hesitation, walking directly into a new encounter.⁶

As I retell this history, I relocate these methods in the body and between bodies. To this end, I've been reimagining sceptical methods by pairing them with movements that represent different impulses and relations. I use these simple gestures as a way to meditate on different concepts with my body.

When people think of the sceptic, they may imagine someone with crossed arms and a furrowed brow, someone who approaches all subject matter with a hesitant reluctance even before a new proposal has been introduced. This popular image of the 'doubting Thomas' is echoed in the history of philosophy in early modern scepticism. It is the variety of scepticism that Descartes performs in the first books of his *Meditations* when he employs a method driven by a hyperbolic doubt.⁷

6 I've returned to this trope of two sceptics in several publications to tease out different registers of what I see as contrasting impulses within the history of phenomenological scepticism. See for example, 'Sensation and Hesitation: Haptic Scepticism as the Ethics of Touching', in *A Touch of Doubt: On Haptic Scepticism*, ed. by Rachel Aumiller (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 3–29 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110627176-002>>. My division of the history of scepticism into two models is itself a practice of reduction. A model can function as a caricature, reducing a complex set of practices or beliefs to one defining feature, which is exaggerated to represent the whole. Reduction as exaggeration allows a model to play out the internal logic of the principles that it represents. As the model plays out its comic role, the cracks and contradictions of a complex system rise to the surface. From one perspective, internal contradiction might be evaluated as the shortcomings of methods or beliefs: a cause for critique or rejection of the entire system. From another perspective, the place where a system pulls at the seams reveals a new kind of value that the system itself had not anticipated or that it sensed but attempted to suppress: a cause for questioning, for reflection, reevaluation, and transformation. From both perspectives, contradiction is the irreducible that can be interpreted as an end or new beginning.

7 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. by John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Descartes is interesting for a study of

Suspicion	movement: stepping back; pushing away
Doubt	I hold open a negative space between my outstretched arms, hollowed belly, and chest with a curved cat spine and inward tilted pelvic.
Hesitation	
Subtraction	
Negation	
Distance	

Table 1. Modes of Withdrawal [R-].

Descartes employs a sceptical method to the end of upsetting that method, following its own logic and arriving instead at a conclusion that is contrary to its premise (a sceptical move if there ever was one). We may question however, as many have, whether Descartes reached his conclusion prematurely without thoroughly following the sceptical reduction to its own logical end. Descartes systematically strips away each layer of his beliefs about existence until he reaches certainty, ‘the irreducible’ that he perhaps did not have the courage to cast into question (his self).

Reduction in the form of withdrawal casts everything under suspicion until it encounters the one thing that proves itself worthy of trust. Methodological doubt or suspicion is the process of keeping the other at an arm’s length. By pushing the other (in question) away and taking a step back, withdrawal maintains a critical distance between oneself and other, between the inquiring subject and object of enquiry.

During heightened periods of pandemic, we became familiar with living in a constant state of withdrawal, treating the other as a potential contagion, navigating our way through crowded streets while main-

reduction, because many of the countless critical references to his name across contemporary scholarship in the humanities employs a caricature. Descartes’s philosophy is dogmatically reduced to the word ‘dualism’, without pausing to question the complexity or potential value of dualities. Descartes himself was not a sceptic, but ironically became equated with doubt, since his most celebrated work employs a well-known sceptical method, which traditionally leads the reducer to a space of uncertainty.

taining a calculated distance whenever possible. I cast the proximity of the other into doubt, until they receive a negative test result.

In order to be certain, in order to be safe, I isolate myself. From a space of isolation, I can at the very least have some confidence in my own precautions. Yet, self-certainty secured in isolation soon gives rise to the most extreme forms of self-doubt. With her arms stretched out in front of her in an effort to hold the other back, the sceptic finds herself gazing at the back of her own hand.

The ego that is secured through withdrawal proves to be an uncertain foundation to support the structure of one's entire systems of beliefs. As Descartes questions the existence of the parchment in his hands, his eyes drift to his own hands, which he also must doubt. I think therefore I am. Am I? The suspicion cast on the other falls back onto the self. Can I trust this other existence? Can I trust? Can I trust myself?

Prolonged distance and isolation amplify self-doubt to more extreme existential levels, resulting in the experience of radical scepticism, the experience of being-reduced. In isolation, it is difficult to know if what one experiences is similar to others' experience. The shadow of self-doubt calls into question what one is experiencing and thinking.

Reduction as withdrawal is the experience of falling out of touch with the world and thus with one's self. And yet, this negative space that separates us — that separates me from myself — also becomes a new medium through which we remain in touch without touching.

I am neither critiquing nor prescribing withdrawal. Rather I'm curious about how self-disruption opens up possibilities for new kinds of relations when crisis requires us to radically question our personal, communal, and global beliefs and practices. What happens when we lean into the sensation of self-doubt? For the moment, I leave aside the self-doubting subject in her isolation, but will return to question both the risks and ethical value of dwelling in the experience of reduction as withdrawal.

The second sceptical mode of reduction arguably has little to do with suspicion or doubt. I identify this second kind of reduction with varieties of ancient scepticism and phenomenology. I associate this sceptic with charismatic figures such as Socrates, Pyrrho, Apuleius,

Sensation	movement: overstepping; drawing near; leaning in
Addition	I fold over myself, intertwining limbs, breathing into twists and binds, filling in the cracks with fat and flesh.
Accumulation	
Yea-saying	
Affirmation	
Proximity	

Table 2. Modes of Immersion [R+].

and the young Augustine: philosophers who wandered outside of the city walls, participating in the local customs of the towns they passed through, enthusiastically entertaining the views of each new companion that they encountered along the way.⁸ From this perspective, the sceptic is someone who is willing to occupy an interlocutor's narrative at least for the length of their shared journey.

On the surface, the fantasy of ancient scepticism is to live a life free of dogma. You might imagine that being without dogma would entail a categorical rejection of all beliefs. Paradoxically, this mode of reduction instead entertains a fantasy of a kind of polyamorous-bliss,

8 Although Socrates preferred to engage his interlocutors in Athens, Plato offers one account of Socrates seducing his walking companion beyond the city walls (Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995)); some say that Pyrrho entertained every person who crossed his path for hours on hours (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. by R. D. Hicks, 2 vols, Loeb Classical Series (London: Heinemann, 1925; repr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), II: *Books 6–10*). I read Apuleius, a student of Plutarch, as a sceptic, although he is too much of a sceptic to commit to any doctrine, even one that denies having a doctrine. Apuleius, much like his protagonist Lucius from *The Golden Ass*, was happy to adapt to the customs of the places that he passed through on his travels. Augustine recounts his participation in the foreign ideas and customs of the groups of which he was a temporary member (Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Garry Wills (New York: Penguin, 2006)). In his first autobiographical dialogue, *Soliloquies: Augustine's Inner Dialogue*, trans. by Kim Paffenroth (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), Augustine confesses to his inability to fully adhere to the new dogma of his post-conversion beliefs.

in which one partakes in a bit of everything without fully giving oneself over to any One (dogma, god, truth, emotion, sensation, lover).⁹

If there is something prudish or frigid in modes of withdrawal, phenomenological scepticism requires promiscuity.¹⁰ Like Apuleius, who filled his bag with forbidden foreign objects that he collected along his travels, the phenomenological-sceptic is a collector of impressions: shiny novelties gathered along her adventures, including her own impressions and the second-hand impressions of her interlocutors. She can hardly choose a favourite standpoint amongst the accumulation of so many impressions collected along the way.

Reduction may be viewed as the process of keeping the other at an arm's length [R-]. However, reduction can also be viewed as the practice of leaning into another, leaning into the sensational otherness of another, the practice of yea-saying without committing oneself to any one thing completely [R+].

When something unfamiliar brushes up against us — a way of being in touch with existence that is unlike our own — it is often difficult to distinguish attraction from anxiety or stimulation from irritation. The new sensation threatens to change us in ways we cannot predict or control.

In response to the unfamiliar, both dogmatic reduction (which explains the strange sensation in familiar terms) and sceptical withdrawal (which pushes the strange out of reach) can be utilized as modes of avoidance to shut down a potential disruption. Ironically, the phenom-

9 The authors of the original accounts of these sceptics employ excess or exaggeration as methodological reduction. Apuleius's and Augustine's hyperbolic autobiographical narratives present caricatures of the authors themselves, self-consciously blurring the line between fact and fiction. We only know of the lives of Socrates and Apuleius through second-hand or third-hand accounts, often self-consciously presented as unreliable gossip, hearsay of hearsay: a narrative device employed by Plato and Diogenes Laertius. The ancient sceptic is a model of the living embodiment of contradiction: represented by the competing contradictory accounts of Pyrrho's life, the performative contradiction between Plato's philosophy and Socrates's life, Apuleius's epistemological and erotic infidelity, and Augustine's inability to reconcile his pre-conversion and post-conversion selves.

10 In fact, each of the philosophers I mentioned above participated in his fair share of touching. Apuleius was even put on trial for over-touching. He was charged on eleven counts of forbidden touch, ranging from magical objects to a widowed matron. Apuleius, *Apologia; Florida; De deo Socratis*, trans. by Christopher P. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

enological sceptic, who is marked by a refusal to assent to anything, is most likely to respond to the touch of a stranger (at least for the sake of experimentation). Her refusal to commit to anything in particular allows her to be open to the equal consideration of everything that happens to come her way.

In theory, the sceptic practices openness and indifference. In practice, however, the sort of phenomenological or romantic polyamory that aims at attending equally to all involved parties is rarely sustainable. The fantasy of neutrality is frustrated by the emergence of asymmetrical relations and the demand to choose between competing commitments.

The ancient sceptics who adopted the life of Pyrrho as a model, aptly called the Pyrrhonists or Pyrrhonians, approached their dream of a (non)position with some irony. As they acknowledge, even committing oneself to remaining committed to nothing is itself a commitment.¹¹ They could only offer observations: experience seems to show us that it is exceedingly difficult to share oneself equally and unproblematically with all or none (without eventually needing to make a choice); yet it seems equally impossible to remain committed to one, especially for very long.

Phenomenological attention seeks to keep things light, by reducing all beliefs and experiences to the surface: treating everything that appears (to happen or to be true) equally as appearance. Yet by paying close attention, one may begin to notice cracks in the surface. The Pyrrhonists observed that phenomenological attention or description of our impressions often runs into inconsistencies, paradox, or contradiction.

In the context of twentieth-century phenomenology, Edmund Husserl develops 'the suspension of belief and disbelief' as a method that frees the phenomenologist to attend to the sensation of her experience. Husserl's *epochē* is a method or mode employed at the beginning of phenomenological reduction. Pyrrhonian phenomenology, in contrast, originally positioned *epochē* as an experience that happens at 'the end' when our impressions are disoriented. We experience *epochē*

11 On the paradox of 'the laying down of nothing': Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IX.74.

through deep attention to the surface, by fully immersing ourselves in the sensation of our impressions.¹²

Just as multiple impressions fall into contradiction with each other so does one impression fall into conflict with itself. When one divides into two, our relationship to another is disrupted. We reach an impasse, the experience of *aporia*, which equally challenges the dogmatist's fidelity to one and the sceptic's neutrality to all, because it is our own orientation in the world that is called into question.

The Pyrrhonists called the sensation of being split between two and into two *equipollence* (*isostheneia*). Equipollence is sometimes framed as two equally compelling but incompatible propositions. In itself, each dogmatic reduction is equally convincing. However, since they are irreducible and incompatible with each other, and since they appear equally true, neither can be true. We are split between two positive reductions. We are also split between double affirmation and double negation, between both/and and neither/nor [R++--]. Because both appear to be equally true, and they are incompatible, the validity of both sides must be doubted.

Experience reveals that equipollence is not a mere thought experiment belonging to the philosopher who indifferently gazes at the back of his hand. It can be found in sensuous experiences that fundamentally disorient us in the world. Equipollence is the experience of split sensation in response to a single stimulus: an increased sense of pleasure in the intensification of pain.¹³ Equipollence is a singular *haptic marvel* that calls everything I know to be true into question: the first kiss of a woman that throws my commitment to God and my religious community into chaos. It is the experience of violence at the hands of someone we love. It is in the way we long for healing from the same hands that harm. It is in the way someone who I long to care for and protect shrinks in distrust from my touch.

12 Dialectical questioning, commonly associated with Socrates, is a form of supporting an interlocutor's attention toward their own impressions. The question requests deeper attention to the surface in the phenomenological description of one's impressions. By questioning his companion, he coaxes them to look closer at their own impressions than they were willing. Reduction as immersion is a process of pushing limits and overstepping.

13 On sensation as subjective and situational: Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I.56, 80–87, 109, 210–11; II.52; on sensation as contradictory or paradoxical: I.91–94; III.194–97.

Equipollence is in my conflicting ethical convictions concerning how to touch and how not to touch. During a period of mandated lockdown, I was fully convinced of my responsibility to withhold my touch, isolating myself during pandemic. Yet I was equally convinced — in the same moment — of my responsibility to join thousands of strangers on the streets to protest against police brutality against Black lives. Each of my convictions concerning the rightness of touch is found guilty according the logic of another ethical conviction. The question of touch splits me in two.

Suspension can be pleasurable like floating in a saltwater pool. But the disorientation of how we grasp ourselves and the world can also be uncomfortable and exhausting. The necessity to make decisions, to move forward, without clear answers can be excruciating.

Pyrrhonism, according to Sextus Empiricus, recommends finding release from the personal crisis of undecidability, by ‘going along with’ societal laws and norms.¹⁴ As I have mentioned, there are many modes of avoidance that shield one from being called into question when reduction bites the hand that first employed it on another. Withdrawal immerses itself in doubt to protect itself at the beginning before things can get messy. Immersion pushes its luck, taking a calculated risk, before withdrawing in the last moment.

Modes of avoidance allow us to carry on as usual during periods of crisis, to insist on normalcy, to justify one’s desires without acknowledging the risk of these desires for others. The ancient sceptic, for example, calls everything into question but withdraws when the crisis of uncertainty threatens to call the sceptic himself into question. This moment in scepticism is a kind of dogmatism. Reduction as a one-directional touch does not allow itself to be touched back by its method.

I search for a kind of sceptical comportment that allows itself to be touched by doubt, vulnerability, uncertainty, and the unknown.

14 By following societal norms, one may feel momentarily released from the burden of choice and personal responsibility. However, when a society’s customs and values prove to be inconsistent or in conflict with themselves, the individual is once again split by equipollence (as we see through the tragedy of *Antigone*). On conforming to norms in the absence of ethical judgement: Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 1.21–41.

Equipollence	Two movements in one: leaning in/pulling back.
Paralysis	I stand on my toes with closed eyes. Keeping my hips stationary, I lean my heart slightly forward and back and then
Oscillation	from side to side, finding balance in instability.
Vacillation	With movement so slow and so subtle, I may not appear to be moving at all.
	A caress that questions. I move my fingers across her skin. A transgression. A hesitation. A risk. A request.

Table 3. Suspension / *Epochē* [R++--].

Rather than finding relief by backing away from the discomfort of having oneself called into question, I search for a practice of pausing with the crisis of suspension, allowing oneself to be disrupted by both phenomenological fullness and deprivation.

EXPERIENTIAL REDUCTION: OSCILLATION-IN-SUSPENSION

Epochē, as an event that happens to us, also demands a response. The end leads us back to a moment of deciding how to begin again.¹⁵ Borrowing the sceptical slogan ‘no more’, we may say: *epochē* is no more a beginning than an end, no more a way forward than paralysis, no more method than an experience.¹⁶ What is to be done in response to the disorientation of being suspended?

I initially describe two different models of the sceptic as representing different kinds of methodological reductions: one based in subtraction and provisional denial, one in accumulation and immersion.¹⁷ I draw on these models to offer a phenomenological description of two poles of experience that have become intensified during the pandemic:

15 Husserl’s *epochē* leads us to Pyrrho’s *epochē*, which leads us to Husserl’s *epochē*. We oscillate indefinitely between two kinds of *epochē*, that are found in the same moment. Hegel’s sceptical phenomenology explicitly struggles with beginning/ends.

16 On the slogan ‘no more’: Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, ix.75–76; Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, i.188–90

17 On the refutation of subtraction and addition: Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, iii.85–95.

the experience of reduced engagement and isolation, on one side, and the experience of exposure and being-together again, on the other. I now imagine the contrary impulses of withdrawal-and-immersion as the oscillating movement of an individual in suspension, whether suspension is itself experienced in isolation or being-together.

Many of us have had the experience over the last few years of being pulled back and forth between two extremes. In periods of quarantine during the shortest days of winter, I have had the experience of withdrawing from the 'outside world'. Suddenly, summer arrives, infection numbers dwindle, I'm sitting in the middle of a sunny park surrounded by, what feels like, swarms of bodies. Oscillating between these extremes of being-in-isolation and being-together is itself disorienting: withdrawing into a reduced social existence, immersing myself amongst others, withdrawing into reduction, re-immersion.

How do these two opposed experiences mirror each other? We can question how they are similar even in their opposition. But we may also question how they are incompatible, both equally valid and necessary, while demanding contrary courses of action. What happens to our subjectivity and relations when we are caught in-between isolation and immersion? Can the experience of being suspended — whether in isolation and or in a crowd — teach us a new kind of movement?

Reduction as modes of withdrawal is the creation of a negative space. This negative space becomes the very shape of desire, subjectivity, and relationality. Reduction as modes of immersion is the experience of overwhelming fullness, which leads us into the experience of *too many* impressions (beliefs, desires, and sensations).

Epochē is the sensation of shapelessness when my life is slowed to a standstill. *Epochē* is equally the experience of being suspended within a phenomenal bath. In withdrawal, my suspicion of the other led me to doubt myself. In immersion, I affirm myself with each new encounter. With every 'yes' to otherness, I say, 'this too is self.' But where do I stand in all this? What is my stance? To be suspended in fullness. To be suspended in nothingness. Through these two modes of sceptical reduction, we witness the mirroring of Being and Nothingness, of affirmation and negation, of self-definition and self-doubt.

How does one navigate embodied relations from a space of uncertainty and disorientation? I am split between opposing impulses and

desires. During the pandemic, I've had to teach myself to withdraw: to treat others as a potential contagion, to hold the other at an arm's length, to draw boundaries, to avoid 'unnecessary' touching. And yet, at the same time, I long to pull my loved ones near, to dance with strangers, to expose myself to risk, to risk exposing others to my risk.

Against the backdrop of global disruption, each instance of coming-in-touch is thrown into question. Two awkward bodies fumble as they negotiate how to greet one another. Each one leans in to embrace, pulling away, hesitating, leaning in, pulling away. The brief moment of hesitation — of bodies oscillating between proximity and withdrawal — is the embodied practice of suspension, of holding open a question: the question of another's uncertain desire, of my own undetermined desire, of uncertain risk and reward.

Is the suspension of touch merely paralysis? Or can we find movement in suspension? Is suspension itself a kind of movement that generates new kinds of haptic desires, pleasures, and relations?

The disruption of everyday touch is an event that knocks us off our feet, disorienting our grasp on the world. Yet as Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, allowing ourselves to fully experience the shock of crisis is the condition for ethical responsiveness to the unique demands of our present moment.¹⁸ Pyrrhonian scepticism ultimately seeks tranquillity by relieving us from the responsibility of decision in the face of uncertainty. In contrast, de Beauvoir locates the call for responsibility and risk in the sceptical crisis of undecidability. In the experience of crisis, we are split by two equally powerful realizations: the uncertainty of the situation in which we find ourselves and the urgent imperative to respond to this moment.

The paralysis of uncertainty combined with a sense of urgency allows us to recognize our responsibility to the historical moment that constitutes our individual experience. Although we are free to respond as we please, every response or refusal to respond involves risk. Despite our good intentions, careful reasoning, or commitments to remaining neutral, we are nevertheless fully responsible for inevitable good and harm that results from our action and inaction.

18 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (Los Angeles: Open Road, 2015), p. 83.

The transformative potential of disruption depends on our response to having our way of life called into question. Although the Pyrrhonists withdrew from ethical commitments, I find ethical value in their slogan ‘perhaps’, which challenges us to dwell with the crisis of uncertainty regarding the rightness of our action.¹⁹ ‘Perhaps’ holds open the space of a question, demanding ongoing self-reflection. Can we dwell with the discomfort and vulnerability of being held responsible for others? Can we resist the temptation of shutting down the question with new forms of dogmatism? As de Beauvoir argues, ‘[M]orality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning.’²⁰

HAPTIC SCEPTICISM FOR AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

Locating an embodied ethical responsiveness in scepticism may seem counterintuitive in face of the international rise of conspiracy theories and science denialism during the pandemic. But the danger of this popular variety of cultural scepticism is that it tends to betray itself, collapsing into radical dogmatism. The activity of doubting or questioning what is presented as truth, gives rise to a theory, which itself becomes the new dogma that cannot be questioned.²¹

There is value in allowing oneself to question the most fundamental beliefs of one’s society: How do we know the Earth is round? Are vaccines dangerous? Can we trust the government? Conspiracy theories often begin with a moment of genuine critical enquiry that almost immediately collapses into a new dogma: the earth is flat; vaccines in all forms are unnatural and toxic; every government regulation is an infringement on my freedom. The question is how to hold open an initial space of questioning. How do we dwell in a space of ambiguity without becoming totally paralysed by self-doubt?

On one hand, we might identify cultural scepticism as the problem. On the other hand, I’m interested in how a deepening of scepti-

19 The slogan ‘perhaps’: Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I.194.

20 Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 144.

21 On dogmatic-scepticism in response to the pandemic: Bara Kolenc, ‘Scepticism’s Cure for the Plague of Mind’, *Women in Philosophy, Blog of the American Philosophical Association* (9 September 2020) <<https://blog.apaonline.org/2020/09/09/skepticisms-cure-for-the-plague-of-mind/>> [accessed 11 June 2022].

cism can disrupt a kind of contemporary dogmatic-scepticism that is itself a pandemic.

Everyone has had different experiences of the pandemic and different responses toward pandemic restrictions. But one thing most of us have had to face is the experience of radical uncertainty. An experiential *epochē* of global proportions disrupts our being in a fundamental way. What are different responses to this disruption? How do our individual and collective responses make all the difference?

Uncertainty toward our personal and global situation gives rise to different kinds of self-doubt. Doubt expresses itself in very real anxieties about one's purpose. What am I doing with my life? How do I persist in my existence when everything has been suspended? Uncertainty is also the inability to envision one's future, whether that future is in the next few months, years, or that belongs to the next generations. Self-doubt is a temporary falling out of relationship to time both in relation to the present and future.

There are those who flee the experience of self-doubt by carrying on as if nothing has happened, clinging to their specific habits and traditions. Business-as-usual holds self-doubt at a distance.

Yet I would argue that living ethically-with-others demands a *touch of self-doubt*. Ethics demands a moment of suspension in which one questions, 'Is this action or choice right?' 'Is this responsible and caring?' It's precisely a lack of ethical clarity that prompts us to continue to question ourselves. The recognition of the inability to know if our choices are truly ethical, in some ways, is what makes us ethical. Ethics has a sceptical drive in this way. It drives forward in its unfulfillment. To be ethical is to continually question what it means to be ethical in each instance without arriving at any definite certainty.

The crisis of pandemic specially requires us to question the way we touch and the way we come into touch. The opportunity to doubt our touch in each instance ('Is this safe, responsible, caring') is also an opportunity for new ethical relations of touch. We learn that touching is not just a personal or private matter. The ethical imperative to question the way we touch has global reach.

There are unconscious and conscious layers to belief. We might associate dogma with our professed convictions that make up our identities (for example, our religious, political, or sexual orientations).

But the unconscious layer of belief is on the surface, impressed into our skin. I use the term 'haptic dogmatism' to highlight the way beliefs belong to our body. Every instance of touch, even touching that takes place in private and in solitude, is inherently social. Touch is shaped by a social and cultural backdrop. At infancy, our personality and belief structure are already being shaped by the touch of our caregivers. Our very sense of self is formed by touch before we are even aware of ourselves and others.

Haptic dogma is found in the way one's body is accustomed to come into touch with itself, with others, and with the world. The way I grasp myself (as self) through my grasp of the world. Haptic dogmatism is belief in the form of personal and cultural habits and practices involving touching and not touching. Dogma is not in itself destructive, but necessary. It's the possibility of stability through the orientation of a world view. But what happens when belief does not allow itself to be questioned?

Because beliefs are inscribed in our everyday movements and sensations, they are often invisible to us. We only become aware of them when our embodied orientation is disrupted. Disruption requires us to take a conscious stance in response to something that was formerly unconscious.

There is currently a global phenomenon of people who dogmatically cling to their right to come into contact as they please. This dogmatic certainty is an insistence on one's rights and on one's rightness. More specifically, it is an insistence on one's right to touch and on the rightness of one's touch.²² Often this conscious haptic dogmatism is entangled with cultural scepticism, directed at science and the government. Many people have very good reasons to distrust their governments and 'the science' that they receive through the lens of economic interest. But this combination of dogmatism and scepticism also gives rise to conspiracy theories, reckless activity, and violence.

22 Initially, the resistance toward pandemic regulations or vaccination recommendations appeared to belong to a politically right leaning orientation, especially in countries like the United States that are political and socially structured by a two-party system. But the crisis of touch also throws the categories of 'left' and 'right' into question, as the dogmatic resistance to altered practices expresses itself across many cultural and political orientations.

The more extreme forms of cultural scepticism seem to correlate with more extreme forms of dogmatism.

Because belief exists in the body, the disruption of belief also takes place in the body and between bodies. Sceptical disruption through different kinds of reduction occurs beneath our fingertips and on the surface of our skin. Haptic scepticism attends to the embodied experience of *epochē*.

Haptic scepticism is the disruption of encounters and experiences that destabilize our bodily orientations and relationships. On a personal level, for example, an experience of illness, injury, or violation can shake our way of moving through the world. An experience of unexpected pleasure — a new kind of sexual encounter — might shake our basic understanding of who we are and what we desire.

The crisis of pandemic reveals the experience of haptic scepticism on a register that is extremely personal and global. As the disruption of the way we come into touch shakes our political and economic structures, we see how thoroughly our lives are structured by haptic dogma.

Haptic scepticism refers to experiences that disrupt our habituation. In this sense both dogmatism and scepticism are passive experiences. But our active and conscious response to being disrupted can also be dogmatic or sceptical. A dogmatic response to disruption clings tighter to one's way of being, one's way of being-with-others. A sceptical response pauses and questions and even experiments with new forms of coming-into-touch and withdrawal. Both hesitation and experimentation are not only ethically necessary, but can result in new kinds of enjoyment and intimacies. Whereas the dogmatic response to the crisis of touch closes the possibility for transformed relations, desire, and pleasure, the sceptical practice of dwelling with the experience of uncertainty is where both the ethics and the enjoyment of touch begins.

CONCLUSION: TOUCH AND REDUCTION

The structure of touch teaches us something about the structure of reduction, which methodology conceals. Both are reciprocal relations that do not allow for objectivity or ethical neutrality.

Touch shows us that we are always already immersed in complex affective relationships. We are already in touch with more bodies than

we can recognize. Touch throws us into a space of contradiction. And this contradiction is a tactile sensation, which exposes us to the tension between epistemology and ethics. On one hand, we can never know the reach of our touch. On the other hand, we are nevertheless responsible for our touching.

Unlike the other senses, touching offers us no rest from touch. We can close our eyes, plug our nose, cover our ears, refuse to open our mouths. But we can't turn off touch. Not only are we always on duty, but touch demands that we play two roles at once. With each touch, I am subject and object, both the toucher and the touched. Touch is reciprocal. The reciprocity of touch is a contradiction that can't fully be grasped at once, but nevertheless informs our existence. Whenever I touch another to convey a message or leave my mark, I am also touched back by this other who is touched by me.²³

There is no such thing as a one-directional touch; there is no such thing as a one-directional reduction, although the history of philosophy is plagued by the fantasy of both. The two fantasies are not unrelated. Both reflect the desire for demonstration, for domination, for being beyond accountability and vulnerability. Theoretical reductions of the other enable violent touch. Violence further reduces the other to an extension of one's desire for power.

By bringing together haptic experience and sceptical reductions, I demonstrate how every touch, like every reduction, is a matter of relationality and thus ethics. Here, I make an even stronger claim. The qualities that make touch distinct — sensation as relationality and reciprocity — guide us toward more ethical relations, heightening our sensation and responsiveness toward the knowable and unknowable relations that comprise our existence.

23 Husserl's emphasis on the reciprocity and relationality of touch (the subject's dual role as the toucher-touched) drives debates in twentieth-century phenomenology of touch: see for example, Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968); Jacques Derrida, *On Touching — Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. by Christine Irizarry (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere: On the Raising of the Body*, trans. by Sarah Clift, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

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