

APPEARANCES AND ASSENT: SKEPTICAL BELIEF RECONSIDERED¹

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Contrary to what the last three decades of interpretation suggest, Sextus' account of Pyrrhonism does not rely on a distinction between two notions of belief.² Almost everything Sextus says about the role of belief in the skeptic's life is negative: the skeptic lives without belief (*adoxastôs*), assents without forming beliefs (*adoxastôs*), experiences no turmoil in matters of belief (*kata doxan*), and adds no beliefs (*prosdoxazein*) to her affections. Where Sextus offers a positive account of the skeptic's life, he speaks in terms of appearances: the skeptic grants what appears to her, adheres to appearances, records in speech what appears to her now, and so on. Sextus must explain Pyrrhonism with respect to a topic inherited from earlier versions of skepticism, namely the topic of whether any beliefs figure in the sceptic's life.³ But in Pyrrhonian as opposed to Academic skepticism, the notion of appearances is of the greatest importance. Accordingly, Sextus moves away from the focus on belief that characterizes Academic skepticism. Pyrrhonism is, right

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² The papers by M. Frede, J. Barnes, and M. F. Burnyeat that initiated discussion of these issues are collected in Frede and Burnyeat (edd.), *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, Hackett 1998. [M. Frede, 'Des Skeptikers Meinungen,' *Neue Hefte für Philosophie* 15/16 (1979), 102-29; M. Burnyeat, 'Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?' in M. Schofield, M. Burnyeat, and J. Barnes (edd.), *Doubt and Dogmatism: Essays in Hellenistic Epistemology* (Oxford, 1980), 117-48; J. Barnes, 'The beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,' *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 28 (1982), 1-29. M. Burnyeat, 'The sceptic in his place and time,' in R. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Q. Skinner (edd.), *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge, 1982), 225-254. M. Frede, 'The sceptic's two kinds of assent and the question of the possibility of knowledge,' in R. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Q. Skinner (edd.), *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge, 1982), 255-78. I refer to these papers by the years in which they were originally published.]

³ This is the guiding question in Cicero's characterization of the different versions of Academic skepticism in his *Academica*.

from the start, concerned with the question of how the sceptic relates to appearances.⁴ I thus propose that we give up much from the long-standing trend in interpretations of Pyrrhonism. Discussion of the role of belief in the skeptic's life can tell us what the skeptic *does not do*. This negative side of Sextus' account is important; but it can not, by itself, explain how the skeptic lives, speaks, and investigates. Insofar as Sextus' positive account of Pyrrhonism is largely formulated in terms of appearances, we must reconstruct the skeptic's relationship to appearances.

I begin with a discussion of the notion of belief that Sextus dialectically inherits from his Hellenistic interlocutors. Within this framework, there are only three doxastic attitudes: acceptance, rejection, and suspension. The attitude that Frede, whose work greatly influenced scholarship on skepticism, envisages—an attitude in which one finds oneself with a lingering thought, which Frede suggests we should classify as some kind of belief—does not count as a fourth option (section 1). Further, the locus classicus for a presumed distinction between two kinds of beliefs—*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.13—is concerned with a different issue, namely the way in which skepticism is a philosophy

⁴ As Gisela Striker observes, in the beginnings of contemporary scholarship on ancient skepticism, interpreters tended to look at Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism in conjunction ('Academics versus Pyrrhonists, reconsidered,' in R. Bett (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism* (Cambridge, 2010), 195-207). Pyrrhonism involves two notions that are absent in Academic skepticism: tranquillity and appearances. Striker argues that the most important difference between Pyrrhonian and Academic skepticism might lie in the Pyrrhonian conception of tranquillity. As I argue in this paper, Pyrrhonian focus on the skeptic's relationship to appearances is equally important. Cf. R. Bett, *Pyrrho, his Antecedents, and his Legacy* (Oxford, 2000), 84-93; cf. DL 9.106.

(section 2).⁵ Scholarly search for a skeptical mode of belief responds to the assumption that Sextus faces a dilemma that we can call the Belief Charge: if the skeptic disavows all belief, this is either (albeit *per impossibile*) an accurate self-description, in which case the skeptic's life is impossible; or it is an inaccurate self-description. But Sextus never directly cites the Belief Charge. Instead, he addresses the charge that the skeptic rejects appearances. I argue that this objection, which I call the Appearances Charge, has been neglected, or misinterpreted as a mere version of the Belief Charge (section 3). I end with a discussion of Sextus' account of Pyrrhonian life in terms of assent to appearances. Importantly, Pyrrhonian assent to appearances is non-doxastic: it does not figure in belief-formation of any kind. Rather, it figures in skeptical action (section 4).

1. HELLENISTIC NOTIONS OF BELIEF

Michael Frede argues in two influential papers that a distinction between two kinds of belief is at the heart of Sextus' Pyrrhonism.⁶ The skeptic's beliefs are, as he describes it, thoughts that linger in the skeptic's mind. While the skeptic does not endorse her thoughts as true, she still finds herself left with these thoughts. For example, careful consideration leads her, again and again, to the thought that things are inapprehensible. The skeptic does not add the further thought that this is how things are in actual fact; and thus, according to Frede, she does not have a belief in the sense in which Stoics and

⁵ R. Barney, 'Impressions and Appearances' (*Phronesis* 37/3 (1992), 283-313) is an important exception to a general trend, initiated by M. Frede (1979), of focusing on *PH* 1.13 (Burnyeat (1980) also does not focus on *PH* 1.13, though Burnyeat (1984) does).

⁶ Sextus Empiricus' writings, the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and *Against the Theoreticians*, shall be referenced as *PH* and *M*.

Epicureans understand the notion of belief. But she has a weaker version of it.⁷

In response to Frede's views, even scholars who disagree with the details of his analysis have embraced Frede's starting-point: a certain passage in Sextus, namely *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.13, must be scrutinized, because here Sextus seems to offer something like a distinction between a kind of belief the skeptic has, and another kind of belief that the skeptic does not have.⁸

When we say that the Sceptic does not have *dogmata* we are not using 'dogma' in the more general sense in which some say that *dogma* is acquiescing in something. For the Sceptic assents to the conditions forced on her in accordance with an appearance. For example, the Sceptic when warmed or cooled would not say 'I think I am not heated (or cooled).' Rather, we say that the Sceptic does not have *dogmata* in the sense in which some say that *dogma* is assent to some non-evident matter investigated by the sciences. For the Sceptic does not assent to anything non-evident (*PH* 1.13).

The interpretation of *PH* 1.13 is fraught with difficulties, and I shall suggest that it is misleading to read it in isolation (Section 2). For the time being, we should note that Sextus does not speak about beliefs, but about *dogmata*; and even if *dogmata* simply were beliefs (which they are not), it is hard to extract an example for a skeptic *dogma*

⁷ I am here summarizing Frede's later position. Frede's papers from 1979 and 1984 each have their own focus. In 1979, Frede looks at cognitive attitudes that figure in action but do not involve truth-claims. In 1984, he is interested in the way in which such pronouncements as 'nothing is known' might be thoughts the skeptic finds herself with.

⁸ There are two main ways of drawing the relevant distinction. Kinds of belief could be differentiated depending on the subject matter, or by the kind of attitude that is involved.

from *PH* 1.13.⁹ Sextus leaves open so much that interpreters have supplied various conceptions of belief, in the hopes of making sense of *PH* 1.13. Gisela Striker observes, in my view rightly, that this kind of discussion can be fatiguing: it is no surprise that interpreters disagree—they stipulate different notions of belief.¹⁰ If we pick and choose among all conceptions of belief we can think of, then surely, there are notions of belief according to which the skeptic has beliefs, and there are other notions according to which she does not.¹¹ But as I see it, it is not up to us which notion of belief we should invoke in this particular context. Interpreters (and Sextus) must employ a notion of belief that the Hellenistic epistemologists would recognize.

Scholars have long noted that skeptical philosophy is dialectical.¹² There are different ways of construing this claim. I shall adopt the following interpretive premises: (i)

Pyrrhonian skepticism develops within a set of philosophical exchanges between

⁹ Scholars have examined uses of *dogma* in Hellenistic and earlier writings. J. Barnes (1982); D. Sedley, 'The Motivation of Greek Skepticism,' in M. Burnyeat (ed.), *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley, 1983), 9-29. *Dogma* and *doxa* can at times be used almost interchangeably. But in Hellenistic times *dogma* mostly refers to somewhat weightier claims. Further, we should consider the contexts in which Sextus speaks about *dogmata*, and the contexts in which he speaks about *doxai*. Sextus keeps the two apart. He uses *dogmatikôs* when he refers to dogmatic teachings, and *adoxastôs* when he describes the skeptic's life.

¹⁰ G. Striker, 'Scepticism as a Kind of Philosophy,' *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 83 (2001), 113-129, 119.

¹¹ In particular, the skeptic has beliefs from the point of view of an epistemology that does not analyze mental attitudes, but our practices of belief-ascription. If one adopted this perspective, the skeptic might appear to have beliefs because she performs complex activities. Insofar as the Apraxia-Charge is an inconsistency charge, the dogmatists take this kind of perspective. But in their own theories of belief, they do not take the perspective of belief-ascription, and neither does Sextus in his responses to their objections.

¹² This view was first formulated by P. Couissin, in an interpretation of Academic skepticism: 'The Stoicism of the New Academy,' in M. F. Burnyeat (ed.), *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley 1983), 31-63; translation of 'Le stoicisme de la nouvelle Academie,' *Revue d'histoire de la philosophie* 3 (1929), 241-76.

skeptical and non-skeptical philosophers. (ii) Key aspects of Sextus' skepticism are shaped by repeated attempts of the skeptics to respond to anti-skeptical objections. (iii) In explaining skeptical philosophy, Sextus employs premises and terminology of thinkers who have raised objections against it. (iv) While some skeptical arguments are shaped by Pre-Hellenistic philosophical discussions, the Stoics and Epicureans are the main interlocutors of the skeptics.¹³ (v) The basic framework of Hellenistic philosophy of mind —that we accept and reject impressions— is particularly relevant to the way in which Sextus invokes dogmatic assumptions; without it, the notion of suspension of judgment is hardly comprehensible. (vi) Equally important, Stoic and Epicurean philosophy conceive of the mind and cognitive activities as physiological. Perceptions, impressions, assents, and so on, are physiological movements of the mind. Let me explain how these premises matter to the question at hand.

For the Stoics, it is a hallmark of human rationality that reason passes judgment on impressions, rejecting some and accepting others.¹⁴ For example, in sense perception, the leading part of the soul passes judgment on the reports of the senses.¹⁵ These judgments

¹³ When Epicureans explain the details of their epistemology, it is clear that they talk with skeptical arguments and examples in mind. M. Schofield suggests that there is an exchange of arguments between Epicurean epistemology and a type of skepticism that is associated with Aenesidemus ('Aenesidemus: Pyrrhonist and 'Heraclitean', in A. M. Ioppolo and D. Sedley (edd.), *Pyrrhonist, Patricians, Platonizers. Hellenistic Philosophy in the Period 155-86 BC. Tenth Symposium Hellenisticum* (Napoli, 2007), 269-338). While I cannot argue for this view here, I think that Pyrrhonian engagement with Epicurean epistemology is much underrated, and runs through several strands of Pyrrhonism, not just the variant of Aenesidemus.

¹⁴ Origen, *On principles* 3.1.2-3 = SVF 2.988, part = A. A. Long, and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1987) [= LS] 53A.

¹⁵ Calcidius 220 = SVF 2.879, part = LS 53G.

are assents or rejections, and those which do not qualify as knowledge are beliefs.¹⁶ The impressions that are accepted or rejected are true or false, cognitive or non-cognitive, convincing or non-convincing, and so on. Both in belief and in knowledge, the cognizer takes something to be the case; she takes the impression that she accepts to be true.

According to Epicurean epistemology, all sense impressions are true, but falsity enters the picture immediately thereafter.¹⁷ We make judgments based on our sense impressions: '[...] we judge some things correctly, but others incorrectly, either by adding and appending something to our impressions or by subtracting something from them, and in general falsifying arational sensation.' (*M* 7.210) That is, our judgment is the source of falsity. True beliefs are those that are attested (and that means, attested by what is evident), and those that are uncontested by self-evidence. False beliefs are those that are contested and those that are unattested by self-evidence.¹⁸ That is, insofar as the skeptics are talking to Epicureans, the relevant notion of belief is that of true or false judgments.

¹⁶ The Stoics define *doxa* as weak and false assent (SE, *M* 7.151-2 = LS 41C; cf. Stobaeus 2.111,18-112,8 = LS 41G = SVF 3.548, part; cf. Stobaeus 2.73,16-74,3 = LS 41H = SVF 3.112, part). Importantly, this definition does not name an alternative, according to which some beliefs are weak assents and others are false assents. All belief is weak assent. Cf. Constance Meinwald, 'Ignorance and Opinion in Stoic Epistemology,' *Phronesis* 50 (2005), 215-231. Accordingly, the skeptics would be ill-advised to admit a *weak* kind of assent into their life. In the ears of their Stoic interlocutors, weak assents simply are beliefs, and weakness is precisely what is bad about belief.

¹⁷ I shall not attempt to comment here on the notoriously difficult claim that all sense perceptions are true (cf. *M* 7.210, 8.9). Epicurus' own formulations of this idea are somewhat less straightforward (cf. *Letter to Herodotus* 50-2).

¹⁸ *M* 7.211 = LS 18A.

Both Stoic and Epicurean philosophy thus construe belief as a kind of judgment or acceptance.¹⁹ This is a complicated and deep feature of Hellenistic epistemology. It matters in at least three ways to how we approach Sextus' discussions of belief. First, Sextus does not aim to explain whether the skeptic *holds* beliefs. Rather, he aims to explain whether the skeptic *forms* beliefs. Sextus does not address such vexing questions as whether, say, dormant or non-occurrent beliefs figure in the skeptic's mind.²⁰ These questions would lead into a host of difficulties—it is surely easier to claim that one never *forms* a belief, than to argue that no latent beliefs (formed perhaps prior to conversion to skepticism) figure in the skeptic's mental life.

Focus on belief-formation is prominent, for example, in Sextus' discussions of skeptical speech. When Sextus describes skeptical utterances, he implies that speech portrays one's state of mind. The skeptic's utterances would betray beliefs if the skeptic had any. Sextus argues that the skeptic does not affirm anything (*PH* 1.4). She makes no assertions or negations (*kataphasis* and *apophasis*). This corresponds to mental states of not accepting (*tithenai*) or rejecting (*anairain*) anything (*PH* 1.192). Cognates of *doxa* figure also in Sextus' account of the skeptic's end (*telos*); again, Sextus' point is that the skeptic does

¹⁹ This is, for example, in contrast to a view according to which looking at my laptop under good viewing conditions *causes* me to believe that this is my laptop. For a different notion of acceptance, cf. G. Fine, 'Descartes and Ancient Skepticism: Reheated Cabbage?', *Philosophical Review* 109 (2000) 195-234, at 216.

²⁰ The skeptic is a rational human being. She perceives the world conceptually and thinks conceptual thoughts. She acquired the respective abilities prior to turning into a skeptic. Whatever these abilities involve, it is not lost through conversion to skepticism. Furthermore, beliefs that the skeptic formed as an adult, but prior to turning into a skeptic, shape the configuration of her mind. It is impossible for the skeptic to reverse all such aspects of her 'rational constitution,' and it is not a goal of the skeptic to do so.

not form beliefs. The end is tranquility in matters of belief (*kata doxan; tois doxastois*) and moderate affection in matters that are forced upon us. In this latter domain, the skeptic is better off than the non-skeptic because she does not *add* beliefs (*prosdoxazein*) to what she experiences (*PH* 1.25-30).²¹ The qualification *adoxastôs* should, accordingly, be read as referring to belief-formation. In giving an account of skepticism, the skeptic speaks *adoxastôs* (*PH* 1.24; cf. 1.15); the skeptic lives *adoxastôs*, and adheres to ordinary life *adoxastôs* (*PH* 1.23, 226-7). That is, the skeptic speaks without asserting anything, and lives without forming beliefs.

Second, the idea that beliefs crucially involve judgments leads to the question of whether Sextus dialectically engages with theories according to which belief is voluntary. I do not think that there is a clear answer to this question, posed in these terms. The issue of voluntarism about belief arises in the framework of later philosophical theories.²² However, a variant of the relevant claim is true: both Stoics and Epicureans think that it is *up to us* to form a particular belief.²³ It is central to Stoic philosophy that assent is in our power. Acceptance or rejection is not caused by the convincingness or unconvincingness of the impression (nor by the fact that the impression is cognitive or non-cognitive). It is

²¹ The relevant verb—*prosdoxazein*—figures importantly in Epicurus' epistemology. Epicurus writes that falsehood and error always lie in that which is additionally believed (*prosdoxazein*) (*Letter to Herodotus* 50-2).

²² Cicero says that, according to Zeno, the mind's assent is located 'in us' and voluntary (*Acad.* 1.40). However, Cicero's Latin terminology might already go beyond the Greek expressions used by Zeno and his immediate successors.

²³ For a different view, see G. Fine, 'Sceptical *Dogmata: Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I 13,' *Methexis* 12 (2000) 81-105, at 99.

up to us to accept and reject impressions. This does not mean that we would be able to adopt beliefs ‘at will.’ Rather, it means that, in belief-formation, we are able to adhere to epistemic norms—even though this may be a difficult task.²⁴

Third, we should ask how Sextus’ interlocutors conceive of the relationship between declarative thoughts on the one hand, and beliefs on the other. Recall the famous passage in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, where Socrates compares the inner speech of consideration or examination (*skopê*) with belief-formation (*doxazein*) (189e6-190a6). While one is thinking, one is having a conversation with oneself, asking questions and responding, saying ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ Only when one arrives at a determinate claim, no longer going back and forth about the matter, do we speak of belief (*doxa*). Frede’s interpretation of skepticism suggests that there is something in between: having considered a matter carefully, one finds oneself left with a thought, where this thought is already a kind of belief; but since one does not think that this thought is true, one does not hold a belief in the strong sense of the dogmatists.²⁵ The passage in the *Theaetetus* is a useful point of reference—it is likely that the Hellenistic epistemologists engage with it.

²⁴ This is an important point, especially since contemporary discussions of doxastic voluntarism often assume that belief is ‘voluntary’ in the relevant sense if one can form a belief ‘at will’ (for example, because one is offered a million dollars). This idea would appear absurd to the Stoics and Epicureans. That judgment is ‘up to us’ means that we are able to adhere to epistemic norms, such as, for example, that one should think carefully about the available information, try not to make mistakes in the logic of one’s reasoning, attend closely to the evidence, and so on.

²⁵ “To be left with the impression or thought that p [...] does not involve the further thought that p is true” (1984, 206).

The Stoic version of Socrates' distinction is the following: all rational impressions are thoughts. Assents are acceptances of these thoughts as true. For example, to have the impression that there is a monster under my bed is to think the thought that there is a monster under my bed.²⁶ Suppose I think this thought because I had a bad dream, and I know full well that I have to shake it off, because there is of course no monster under my bed. In this case, I think the thought 'there is a monster under my bed,' but I do not believe that there is a monster under my bed. The Epicurean analysis is similar, at least in the respects that matter to the present purpose.²⁷ If I find myself with the thought that there is a monster under my bed, it is my job as a student of physics to remind myself of the various causal processes going on in the human mind, thus keeping myself from forming the judgment that there is a monster under my bed. Thus both major Hellenistic epistemologies adopt something like Plato's twofold distinction. They do not envisage Frede's threefold distinction.

But they can still account for Frede's phenomenon, in part because they hold that thoughts are physiological movements of the mind. Frede's proposal is appealing precisely because it seems right that, sometimes, we find ourselves left with a thought even though we do not endorse it. Suppose one suspends judgment on whether there is a monster under one's bed right now. The thought can still linger in one's mind. Because

²⁶ I owe the monster example to *, who formulated it, however, in a context unrelated to Hellenistic epistemology.

²⁷ Dream-images are caused by processes on the atomic level. Cf. Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 50-2. However, it does not matter to my example whether the thought is caused by a dream or in some other way.

thoughts are physiological processes, they have a kind of inertia, and a kind of momentum. They can exert power over the cognizer, even though she suspended. There is a literal sense in which one might ‘shake off’ a thought. For example, I may turn on the light or jump out of bed, hoping that this will make the thought go away. Neither rejection nor suspension simply annihilates the impression. As a physiological movement, the thought can stay in one’s mind, even though one did not accept it. This applies not only to thoughts that arise in dreams—indeed, such thoughts are an extreme example. Perceptual thoughts as well as theoretical thoughts are arrived at in all kinds of ways. Importantly, they all are physiological occurrences in the mind, and they have properties (inertia, momentum, etc.) that come with the physiology of thought.

Through its focus on acceptance, Hellenistic epistemology might miss out on ideas that we find interesting. For example, we might insist that one can believe things in different modes and degrees—being more or less committed to, convinced of, and confident in the truth of what we believe.²⁸ We also take attitudes to our beliefs. We are more or less attached to our beliefs, have strong feelings tied to some of them, or we believe something and at the same time do not really care whether it is true. A uniform notion of belief according to which one either has a belief (accepts a rational impression as true) or not may seem misguided. Why not assume that the skeptic’s beliefs are at one end of this

²⁸ It is important to Sextus that the thoughts which figure—unendorsed—in the skeptic’s life do not have different degrees of credibility. In his account of suspension of judgment, Sextus speaks about several positions being equal as far as credibility (*pistis*) and lack thereof (*apistia*) are concerned. Neither of several views is more credible (*pistoteron*) than the other (*PH* 1.10).

spectrum, the end where the believer is least committed, or where she entertains it, looking at it, as it were, from a distance, and not buying into it? Is not this the way in which the skeptic finds herself with the view that ‘nothing is known’?²⁹ However, while this proposal, which may capture part of the spirit of Frede’s interpretation, is appealing, it is not compelling as a reconstruction of Sextus’ explanations. The dialectical nature of Pyrrhonism commits Sextus to the conceptual framework of his interlocutors. Accordingly, Sextus does not call such thoughts beliefs.

2. PH 1.13-15: DOES THE SKEPTIC DOGMATIZE?

Here is *PH* 1.13, in conjunction with the adjacent paragraphs, as well as the chapter heading: ‘Does the skeptic dogmatize (*dogmatizein*)?’

When we say that the Skeptic does not have *dogmata* we are not using ‘*dogma*’ in the more general sense in which some say that *dogma* is acquiescing in something. For the Skeptic assents to the conditions forced on her in accordance with an appearance. For example, the Skeptic when warmed or cooled would not say ‘I think I am not heated (or cooled).’ Rather, we say that the Skeptic does not have *dogmata* in the sense in which some say that *dogma* is assent to some non-evident matter investigated by the sciences. For the Skeptic does not assent to anything non-evident.

Not even in uttering the skeptical phrases about unclear matters—for example, ‘In no way more,’ or ‘I determine nothing,’ or one of the other phrases which we shall later discuss—do they dogmatize (*dogmatizein*). For if you dogmatize, then you posit as real the things that you are said to dogmatize about; but skeptics posit these phrases not as necessarily being real. For they suppose that, just as the phrase ‘Everything is false’ says that it too, along with everything else, is false (and similarly for ‘Nothing is true’), so also ‘In no way more’ says that it too, along with everything else, is no more so than not so, and hence cancels itself along with everything else. And we say the same of the other skeptical phrases. Thus, if people who dogmatize posit as real the things they dogmatize about, while skeptics utter their own phrases in such a way that they are implicitly

²⁹ This is Frede’s example in (1984).

cancelled by themselves, then they cannot be said to dogmatize in uttering them. But the main point is this: in uttering these phrases they say what appears to themselves and report their own feelings without any belief (*adoxastôs*), affirming nothing about external objects. (trans. Annas-Barnes with changes; *PH* 1.13-15)

In these paragraphs, Sextus is concerned with a specific problem, which is central to ancient skepticism: that, on the one hand, the skeptics are associated with a set of formulae ('no more,' 'non-assertion' (*aphasia*), 'maybe,' 'I suspend,' 'I determine nothing,' 'all things are indeterminate,' 'all things are inapprehensible,' 'I do not apprehend,' and 'to every argument an equal argument is opposed.'³⁰), and that, on the other hand, it is dogmatic and potentially self-refuting to put these expressions forward as theses.³¹ Aside from the modes, Sextus' discussions of these formulae take up the largest part of *PH* 1: §§ 187-209. They have a long history, going back to formulations like 'nothing is known.' In part this means that the formulae are a kind of baggage that Pyrrhonism comes with. They capture much of the core of Pyrrhonism, but in an almost historical fashion: these are ideas that earlier skeptics and Pyrrhonists formulated, aiming to express several aspects of the skeptical stance and activity. That is, Sextus has to account for them as central elements of Pyrrhonism whether he likes it or not, and whether or not he himself would formulate them in quite the same way.

I submit that, when Sextus asks whether the skeptic has any *dogmata*, he is addressing

³⁰ Cf. L. Castagnoli, *The Logic of Ancient Self-Refutation* (forthcoming from Cambridge, 2010) on the issue of self-refutation.

³¹ The same goes for the parallel passage in Diogenes Laertius (9.102-4), which addresses the question of whether the skeptics are dogmatizing in their claims that 'they determine nothing,' that 'every argument has an opposite argument,' and so on.

the problem that the formulae look like teachings. And that is, he is *not* addressing the question that interpreters since Frede (1979) generally take him to discuss—whether the skeptic has any beliefs.³² Frede thinks that one cannot come away from reading *PH* 1.13 without concluding that the skeptic has quite a few beliefs.³³ But that does not seem right. One cannot come away from reading *PH* 1.13 *in context* without concluding that skepticism consists of some core ideas, and that it is a philosophy—a kind of *logos*. This is what Sextus goes on to explain (*PH* 1.16-17): skepticism is a kind of ‘school,’ albeit one without a body of teachings. Skepticism is a philosophy insofar as it is a line of reasoning—there is a way in which the skeptic thinks.

As we saw in Section 1, the formulae may very well linger in the skeptic’s mind, without her having accepted them as true. The formulae are, as it were, stock thoughts of the skeptic. They have a more-or-less continuous presence in the skeptic’s mind. This is, in the context of Hellenistic epistemology, unproblematic: we have impressions, and even if we take no attitude to them, they figure as thoughts in our mental lives. When something strikes one regularly and repeatedly in a certain way, one would have to engage in rather extreme measures to purge oneself of the respective thought—otherwise, it just will continue to be present in one’s mind. The skeptic allows the thought to stay (she

³² Burnyeat notes already in (1982) that we should be careful in how we draw on *PH* 1.13 (in 1998, 51).

³³ Frede writes ‘[w]hichever way we choose to interpret the text, there will be a large number of beliefs about things which are not dogmatic beliefs.’ (1979, in 1998, 19).

‘acquiesces’ in it), rather than actively purging herself of it.³⁴ But this kind of ‘giving in’ is quite different from acceptance. It is the path of least resistance: the skeptic would have to be more active in order to get rid of these thoughts, than she is active in letting them linger in her mind.

However, *PH* 1.13 is not exclusively concerned with the formulae. After an initial note on whether the skeptic has *dogmata*, Sextus jumps to a seemingly disconnected topic—the skeptic’s attitude to particularly forceful bodily affections.

For the Sceptic assents to the conditions (*pathê*) forced on her in accordance with an appearance. For example, the Sceptic when warmed or cooled would not say ‘I think I am not warmed (or cooled).’

According to *PH* 1.23-24, *pathê* that are forced on the skeptic are affections like hunger and thirst. These affections have a certain kind of necessity and they compel the skeptic to assent, thus leading her to food and drink. Presumably heat and cold are like this.

When freezing, we cover up; when we feel too warm, we open the window. But *PH* 1.13 is rather cryptic. The double negation in Sextus’ example means that, in effect, we do not get an example. Sextus reports what the skeptic would not say: she would not say that she is not warm if she was warmed. But what would she say? We cannot conclude that, if warmed, the skeptic would say ‘I am warmed.’ When Sextus turns to forced assent in *PH* 1.23-24, he says that ‘thirst leads the skeptic to drink.’ That is, in his positive description

³⁴ In (1984), Frede explores the verb *eudokein*, ‘to acquiesce.’ *Eudokein* has no particular philosophical ancestry, and no determinate uses in philosophy.

of what the skeptic does in forced assent, Sextus does not cite an utterance, or a kind of belief. He cites an *action*. The skeptic drinks, rather than saying ‘I am thirsty.’

Analogously, we might assume that she puts on a coat when cold, rather than saying ‘I am cold.’ This is an important point: insofar as the skeptic assents, her assent does not figure in belief-formation; it figures in action.

PH 1.13 is an overly dense paragraph. Once Sextus unpacks his arguments (that is, throughout the rest of *PH* 1), he keeps separate several spheres of skeptical action on the one hand, and the skeptical formulae on the other. Each needs to be accounted for in its own way. *PH* 1.13 acknowledges that, in explaining whether the skeptic has any teachings, the skeptic will also have to think of the way in which this account affects her reply to the Apraxia Charge—the charge that, without accepting impressions as true, the skeptic cannot act. Accordingly, Sextus briefly invokes the most pressing aspect of the Apraxia Charge: that the skeptic will soon be dead if she does not respond to such affections as hunger, thirst, freezing or getting warm. But his considered reply to the Apraxia Charge goes significantly beyond the suggestions of *PH* 1.13 (see section 4).

PH 1.13-15 ends with what Sextus considers his best account of the formulae:

And, most important of all, in his utterance of these formulae he says what appears to himself and announces his own affection without any belief being involved (*adoxastôsis*), without making any assertion about the way the external things are. (*PH* 1.15)

The formulae involve legacy issues: there is a long history of formulations and

reformulations. Sextus is aware of a wide range of things that could be said, and he has many things to say (cf. PH 1.187-209). However, his simplest reply, and the one that is most economical in referencing only ideas that are key elements of his own version of Pyrrhonism, is this last point: that something appears to the skeptic, and that this appearance can be reported in speech. I think that we should consider this as Sextus' final word on the way in which the skeptic thinks her skeptical thoughts. Notably, this description does not involve a conception of belief. Rather, Sextus says that this mode of thought is *adoxastôs*: non-doxastic, or 'not involving belief-formation.'

3. THE APPEARANCES CHARGE

Up to now I argued mostly *against* the premises of recent interpretations: the premise that Sextus conceives of some kind of skeptical belief, and the premise that, in order to see what he has in mind, we must interpret PH 1.13. In the course of my argument, I made some positive proposals—most importantly, that Sextus dialectically uses a notion of belief according to which belief involves acceptance-as-true; that Sextus engages with epistemological theories according to which thoughts are physiological movements of the mind; and that, for the skeptic to think the thoughts that are central to her philosophy, she need not have any beliefs (accept anything as true). But we must turn to the positive side of Sextus' account of the skeptic's life, and accordingly, to Sextus' construal of the skeptic's relationship to appearances.

In PH 1.19-20, Sextus discusses the charge that the skeptics reject appearances. In order

to emphasize that we should take this charge seriously as an objection Sextus responds to, I shall assign it a label: the Appearance Charge.

Those who say that the skeptics reject appearances have not, I think, listened to what we say. As we said before, we do not overturn that which leads us, as a passively experienced impression (*kata phantasian pathêtikên*) without our willing (*aboulêtos*) to assent; but these are the appearances (*phainomena*). When we investigate whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear, and we do not investigate what appears, but what is said about what appears. And that is different from investigating the appearance itself. For example, it appears to us that honey sweetens (that we concede, insofar we are sweetened in a perceptual way). But we investigate whether, as far as arguments are concerned, it is sweet. And this is not the appearance, but what is said about the appearance.³⁵ (*PH* 1.19-20)³⁶

In the paragraphs that immediately follow, Sextus refers back the Appearances Charge: that the skeptic *adheres* to appearances is clear, he says, from what skeptics say about their criterion (*PH* 1.21). Appearances are the skeptic's practical criterion (1.21-23).

The Appearance Charge was not raised against the Academics, and scholars have not paid sufficient attention to this objection. Scholars tend to read *PH* 1.19-20 as if the Belief Charge (that the skeptic disavows all belief, but forms beliefs nevertheless) had been raised in *PH* 1.13, and as if the Appearances Charge was not a self-standing objection, but a mere version of the Belief Charge. From this point of view, *PH* 1.19-20 appears to

³⁵ Cf. *PH* 1.22: the skeptic investigates whether things are really as they appear; *that* they appear, the skeptic grants.

³⁶ I am drawing on Annas' and Barnes' translation, albeit less so than in the other passages I cite. Annas-Barnes translate *phainomenon* as 'what is apparent' and *phantasia* as 'appearance.' While there are some disadvantages to my own rendering (*phainomenon* as 'appearance' and *phantasia* as 'impression'), I think that, on the whole, closer to the way in which Sextus uses the terms. The expression I am translating as 'as far as arguments are concerned' is controversial; I argue for this translation in [author paper 1].

be a continuation of Sextus' reply to the Belief Charge.³⁷ But the Belief Charge was *not* raised in *PH* 1.13, and indeed, it is not cited explicitly anywhere in *PH* 1. As one of the oldest elements in Greek skepticism, it certainly figures importantly in Sextus' account of Pyrrhonism. As I noted above, it is vital to its negative side. Where Sextus says what the skeptic does not do, he uses *adoxastôs* and related expressions. But Sextus considers the Appearances Charge as the core charge that is specifically raised against *his* version of skepticism. His positive description of skeptic speech and action is formulated in terms of the skeptic's relationship to appearances.

When interpreters consider the Belief Charge and the Appearances Charge as if they were at heart *one* objection, the core issue seems to be whether appearances have a judgment-component. Presumably, if 'X appears A to me' involves some kind of judgment, then it is a kind of belief.³⁸ However, this approach is not only questionable because it interprets Pyrrhonism through the lens of Academic skepticism—as if an account of the skeptic's relationship to appearances was at the same time a response to the question of whether the skeptic has any beliefs. It also neglects what I consider an important feature

³⁷ *PH* 1.19-20 is often cited as a mere supplement to *PH* 1.13. It is true that, in *PH* 1.19, where Sextus mentions for the second time skeptical assent, he refers back to the first time he mentioned skeptical assent. But otherwise, the passages are quite different from each other.

³⁸ Cf. Barney (1992). Barney's premise is that, given that Sextus does not want to put forward any specific account of appearances, his notion of appearances is close to the ordinary sense of 'appearances.' As she sees it, the ordinary sense is ambiguous, in ways that have been characterized by the terms 'phenomenological' and 'judgmental.' By exploring everyday uses, as well as some relevant discussions in Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics, Barney argues that there is no purely phenomenological sense. Accordingly, she ends up arguing for a judgmental interpretation of skeptical appearances (that is, the view that the skeptic's relationship to appearances involves beliefs).

of Sextus' notion of appearances: in all contexts that matter to our purposes, Sextus' likens the notion of appearances to the Stoic notion of impression (*phantasia*). Doing so, Sextus intends to use 'appearance' in a sense that does *not* include any judgment-component.³⁹

Sextus' conception of appearances is not dialectically borrowed from dogmatic theories (*PH* 1.9).⁴⁰ Neither the Stoics nor the Epicureans make the notion of appearances central to their epistemologies. While they use the term, none of their core claims are explained through a terminological conception of appearances. When Sextus speaks of the skeptic's adherence to appearances, he employs one of the oldest elements of Pyrrhonism, and thus, in a sense, a conception that is genuinely Pyrrhonian. But as a skeptic, Sextus need not use the term consistently (as if there was a skeptic theory of what appearances are), and he does not.⁴¹

For the most part, Sextus uses a broad notion of appearances, according to which both thoughts and sense-perceptions count as appearances. Appearances in this broad sense are

³⁹ Scholars use different vocabularies to discuss these matters. Sometimes a purely phenomenal use of 'to appear' is distinguished from an epistemic use. I suggest we stick to the dialectical context of Sextus' arguments: in this context, the relevant distinction is between thoughts (rational impressions) on the one hand, and acceptances on the other.

⁴⁰ At the same time, Sextus does not side with ordinary life here (where he sides with the usages of *bios*, he makes this explicit). For a different view, cf. Barney (1992).

⁴¹ At *PH* 1.8-9 and 1.31-33, Sextus uses *phainomena* more narrowly for sense-perceptions. Arguably, some of the contrasts envisaged in Sextus' commentary on the Ten Modes are contrasts between sense-perceptions and thoughts. Note that sense-perceptions are here understood as one kind of *phantasia*, and as not involving assent.

like Stoic impressions (which are either sensory or non-sensory). Sextus explicitly invokes the closeness of *phainomena* and *phantasia* at crucial points in his argument: when he explains the skeptic's relationship to appearances in *PH* 1.19-20, and when he describes skeptical adherence to appearances as a practical criterion in *PH* 1.21-24. In both contexts, Sextus aims to emphasize the passivity of appearances. But he exploits the Stoic conception of rational impressions (and that is, the impressions that adult human beings have) in many more ways: appearances, as he uses the term, are linguistic and conceptual; they are thoughts; they are the object of acceptance, rejection, or suspension of judgment; and they are physiological events in the skeptic's mind that have motivational power. As physiological processes, impressions are part of a causal chain of movements in the mind. This opens the path to the idea that, even without acceptance of appearances, the skeptic has a complex cognitive life. One thought leads to the next. A thought evokes the memory of something else, of a pain, or a person, or a theory. Thoughts have inertia, and stay around even if one has suspended judgment on them. Also, thoughts have motivational power relevant to physical motion and action. In all these respects, Sextus' appearances are like his interlocutors' rational impressions, and Sextus can invoke the relevant dogmatic assumptions in order to make his points.

4. APPEARANCES AND ASSENT

Appearances figure as thoughts in the skeptic's mind. But more than that, they are the skeptic's criterion. What does this mean? Sextus emphasizes that appearances are the skeptic's *practical* criterion; they are *not* her criterion in matters of assessing what is and

what is not the case (1.21-24). That is, appearances play a role in action that they do not play in thought, and importantly, a role that they do not play in investigation. For example, if honey appears sweet to the skeptic outside of the context of action, this appearance does not offer epistemic guidance to the skeptic. The skeptic does not consider it likely that the honey is sweet; she is not inclined to believe that it is sweet. Rather, the skeptic shall apply her skeptical modes of investigation. She shall remind herself that things appear differently to different cognizers (under different conditions, and so on), thus leading herself to suspension of judgment on whether honey really is sweet. But in a practical context, say, when looking for some food for breakfast, the appearance plays a criterial role: when tasting honey from different jars, the skeptic allows herself to be guided by appearances. She eats the honey that tastes sweet.

As we saw, the dogmatic theories of thought are such that persistent thoughts can be accounted for without any role given to assent. But Sextus' Hellenistic interlocutors would not grant that a mere thought can do as much as move us to action.⁴² It can incline us toward an action, or move us toward performing it; but assent needs to be given if an action is to be conducted. The skeptic, however, lives an active life, being active in spheres that we might call Survival (drinking when thirsty), Custom (going along with the customs of her community), and Skill (doing things she was trained to do) (PH

⁴² Plutarch's report of Stoic-Academic and Epicurean-Academic discussions about *apraxia* shows that the Stoics and Epicureans agree on this point, even though they disagree on the details of how agency should be analyzed (Col. 1122a = LS 69A).

1.21-24).⁴³ In order to explain skeptic activity, Sextus needs to allow for some kind of qualified acceptance—some act of the mind that allows the appearance to be effective as a guide and motivator of the action.

Sextus characterizes skeptical assent in three ways, all of which play a role in skeptical action: forced assent, which figures in actions like drinking when thirsty (*PH* 1.13, 23-24, 193); involuntary (*aboulêtôs*) assent, which is illustrated through the example of honey tasting sweet (*PH* 1.19-20); and non-doxastic (*adoxastôs*) assent, which is mentioned in the context of the skeptic's reliance on commemorative signs (e.g., fire and smoke, wound and medication—these signs guide action) (*PH* 2.102).

Does Sextus, in speaking of forced, involuntary, and non-doxastic assent, use three names for the same thing? My proposal is that he does not: forced assents are a sub-class of involuntary and non-doxastic assents. They figure in a specific domain of action, Survival. Sextus' example is drinking when thirsty and eating when hungry (see also *PH* 1.238). Based on *PH* 1.13, immediate responses to feeling cold or warm might be added as another example.⁴⁴ Such appearances force the sceptic to assent. In terms of impressions as physiological movements of the mind, this means that some of these movements are particularly strong. If the cognizer does not counteract their force, they

⁴³ I am here skipping the first of four domains of skeptical activity: thought and perception, abilities which Sextus says the skeptic has through the guidance of nature. For this point, Sextus can rely on dogmatic theories about the acquisition of reason, which takes place without rational assent [author paper 2]. For the present purposes, I shall assume that this domain of activity is unproblematic.

⁴⁴ If we take the notion of necessitation seriously, these actions look almost like reflex action.

directly generate action. Presumably, there are activities like covering up when freezing for which this is plausible.

But the sphere of Survival is quite limited. When cold, we usually consider what to wear: a ski-suit when skiing in the mountains, or a coat in the city. When thirsty, we usually consider when and what to drink, and at times also how to prepare the drink. That is, even activities that respond to thirst or feeling cold involve custom and skill. Accordingly, Sextus must admit a kind of assent into the skeptic's life that is not necessitated, but still sufficiently passive in order to differ from assent or judgment as the dogmatists envisage it. Involuntary and non-doxastic assent play this role.

Note that Sextus is in an almost impossible dialectical situation. The notions of necessitated assent, involuntary assent, and non-doxastic assent are contradictions in terms from the point of view of his opponents. They are contradictions in terms for two reasons. First, for the Stoics and Epicureans assent simply *is* acceptance as true, and thus doxastic; accordingly, the notion of non-doxastic assent makes no sense. Second, assent is up to us, and thus the notion of forced or involuntary assent is incoherent. How can Sextus possibly try to put forward such conceptions, if the aim is to succeed in his arguments against the dogmatists? I think he can, because the Stoics and Epicureans are notoriously torn about these issues. Philosophers from both schools aim to reconcile a deterministic natural philosophy, and responsibility for good and bad action: on the one hand, they explore how everything is *caused*, and on the other hand, they argue that every

action is generated by a *rational* act of the mind, judgment.⁴⁵ A version of this problem arises for belief-formation. Again, our minds undergo causal processes on the one hand, but its cognitive acts are nevertheless ‘up to us.’ The Hellenistic philosophers thus aim to formulate a compelling position on what today would be called the question of doxastic voluntarism. In the terms of Hellenistic epistemology, the difficulty lies in explaining how we are able to adhere to epistemic norms, even though we are ‘moved’ by impressions. In which sense is it in our power to accept or reject impressions?

The Stoics think that assent is up to us, a tenet that is central to their account of virtue and knowledge: it is in our power to become virtuous and knowledgeable.⁴⁶ But since the Stoics conceive of impressions as physiological processes, they also describe the causal powers they have over our minds. For example, they think that cognitive impressions almost pull us by the hair toward assent.⁴⁷ Impressions are more or less convincing, which means that they generate a more or less smooth movement of the mind, toward assent.⁴⁸ If we are not very careful in controlling our assent, we have given it before we even know it. We need the virtue of non-precipitancy to avoid this.⁴⁹ Assent is up to us,

⁴⁵ My arguments here do not depend on any particular interpretation of Stoic or Epicurean thought on these issues. Cf. Tim O’Keefe, *Epicurus on Freedom* (Cambridge, 2005), and Susanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (New York/Oxford, 1998).

⁴⁶ Cf. Cicero, *De Fato* 39-42 = SVF 2.974 = LS 62C.

⁴⁷ Cf. B. Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford, 1985), 76.

⁴⁸ M 7.242.

⁴⁹ The Stoics warn against the ways in which things are convincing (*pragmateiôn pithanotêtas*), which can lead astray the person who is not wise (DL 7.89).

but this is a *normative* idea, not simply a fact. We are able to adhere to epistemic norms. However, these norms are not easy to follow. If we are not cautious, our mind gives assent without us having considered the matter.

The Epicureans are in a similar predicament. Like the world of the Stoics, their world is explained by natural science. For the Epicureans, atomic events are caused by other atomic events. Praise and blame need to be left intact, and thus responsibility is located in our judgments: we act based on judgments. But atoms and compounds of atoms, flying in and out of our souls, affect us in myriad ways, setting physiological processes in motion.⁵⁰ While all sense-perception is true, and error is introduced by judgment, it is by no means easy to steer clear of error. We are prone to judge. The mind is such that it likes to add and subtract things—we remember something, and already we have added an element from the past to a current perception; we love something, and already we have changed the mode of a perception. Judgment is in our power, but this is again a normative idea. Where we do not train this power so that we achieve the relevant kind of restraint, judgment runs away with us.

Sextus presents skeptical assent against the backdrop of these conceptions. Actively granted acceptance is in our power, if we work hard at it. But if we allow ourselves to go along with things, acceptance really is something else. Sextus treads a subtle balance between activity and passivity. Forced assent is entirely passive. But involuntary assent

⁵⁰ Epicurus, *On nature* 34.26-30.

involves a degree of activity, namely, not setting anything against a movement in the mind. The appearance sets the skeptic's mind in motion, and the skeptic allows herself to be guided or persuaded by it.⁵¹ Sextus' argument depends on exploiting two intuitions that, for the dogmatists, must be explained in sophisticated ways in order to not be in conflict with each other: that judgments are active, and that the mind is causally moved by impressions. Sextus invokes these two assumptions in order to say: our mind is pushed and pulled by appearances, and we let this happen, so that we end up passively accepting things; this passivity means that we do not make judgments. The dogmatists of course balk at this: from their perspective, one either accepts an appearance and thus makes a judgment, or one does not. However, their own theories aim to account for intuitions which might seem to be in tension. Whether they succeed in resolving these tensions is not immediately relevant for the skeptic. The skeptic has no interest in a charitable interpretation of a theory as a whole; she can invoke particular premises, taken out of context. Doing so, Sextus is able to exploit one of the most delicate areas in the theories of his interlocutors—an area where, if one does not get things precisely right, the question of whether acceptance is active or passive looks sufficiently muddled for the skeptic to have a promising point of departure.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that Sextus dialectically employs premises of Stoic and Epicurean

⁵¹ This is where Sextus' metaphor of the pupil being guided by a teacher comes in (*PH* 1.229-30). The pupil follows the teacher. He is not dragged by his hairs, but he also does not make his own decisions.

philosophy which allow him to conceive of non-doxastic assent to practically relevant appearances—assent that leads to activity, but does not involve and is not identical with belief-formation. Sextus develops this conception as a reply to what I call the Appearances Charge, the charge that the skeptic rejects appearances. Sextus repudiates this charge as a misunderstanding of skepticism: the skeptic is far from rejecting appearances; she lets herself be guided by appearances. But there is an important difference between the domains of thought and the domain of action. It is by no means the case that, in investigation, the skeptic ‘goes with’ what seems to her; instead, she puts what seems to her into opposition with some other appearance, thus inducing suspension of judgment. Appearances are allowed to exert their guiding force only in action. They are no ‘epistemic guides,’ only ‘practical guides.’ And accordingly, the skeptic’s assent to them is genuinely non-doxastic—it is practical. Skeptical assent does not involve any kind of belief.