

**NEO-PYRRHONISM:  
A NEW READING OF PYRRHONIAN ACCEPTANCE  
IN THE LIGHT OF THE CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY OF MIND**

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**Abstract:** I argue for a new reading of Pyrrhonian beliefs inspired by representationalism (the content view) in recent philosophy of mind. I shall argue that there are two senses of *acceptance* or “acquiescence in something” (*eudokein tini pragmati*) rather than two senses of *belief* (*doxa*). For this reason, we can maintain along with Sextus that the Pyrrhonian skeptic behaves intentionally and can live his life in society *adoxastôs* without any proper beliefs whatsoever. However, the skeptical sense of acceptance is not the mere *avowal of a feeling* or a *mere report* or *register* of the way things appear to me. I want to suggest the following reading. Acceptance without belief is an anti-predicative passive and involuntary acceptance of content by means of an indicator function (*pathos* or *phainomenon*) in virtue of the past regular connection between the representational content and the indicator function. The *pathos* (as a present state of mind) or the *phainomenon* “means” (that is, indicates) passively and involuntarily a content in virtue of its regular connection with this content through time. For example, the Pyrrhonian’s acceptance of the content of the sentence “there is fire” is based on the fact that he here and now perceives smoke and that *pathos* passively and involuntarily *means* (represents) the content that there is fire. There is no judgment involved at all: even when the skeptic suspends his judgment (*epochê*) about whether there is fire, his *pathos* makes him involuntarily accept that there is fire. That is what Sextus, following the Stoic tradition, calls “commemorative signs” (*hupomnêstikon*) in opposition to the so-called “indicative signs” (*endeiktikon*), namely the “internal assertion” of the content as a belief (as a propositional attitude). As I do not believe that any reasonable reading of the skeptical acceptance may be defended only by means of philological analysis and by the research of the huge doxography, my arguments deliberately mix historical evidence with reasons of a systematic nature. In this way, the defense of my alternative reading is abductive, namely as the inference to the best explanation.

**Keywords:** inaction; the rustic reading; the urbane reading; passive acquiescence.

### 1 The Old Charge of Inaction

Hume was the philosopher who made the old charge of inaction (*apraxia*) popular. According to him, after the Pyrrhonian *epochê*:

A Pyrrhonian ... must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence. (*Enquiry* XII.23)

How could the old Pyrrhonians live their lives without any beliefs whatsoever (*adoxastôs*)? To be sure, according to Hume, we can live our lives without reasons and, mainly, without any knowledge whatsoever.<sup>1</sup> Still, a human life without any beliefs seems quite impossible to Hume; after all, he claims, without beliefs men remain in total lethargy, being incapacitated to fulfill the necessities of nature, which leads them to put an end to their miserable existence.

The charge of inaction is anything but new. Indeed, by all accounts it traces back to Stoa. The Stoic charge turned on the claim that the “assent” to a proposition was required for action. But, as the Stoics pointed out, men do act, therefore men believe. The Stoics contend that action requires the following trio: impression, impulse, and assent. In contrast, the Academics hold that only impression and impulse are required.<sup>2</sup> Their main disagreement revolves around “acceptance.”<sup>3</sup>

Arcesilaus’s picture is taken over by Sextus. Like Arcesilaus, he also protests against the old charge of inaction. Indeed, here Sextus is rather harsh with those who raise the charge. He bluntly says that one should scorn them.<sup>4</sup> Precisely, Sextus claims that the charge is due to the misunderstanding of the skeptic’s method of antinomies (see M 11.162-6). Still, it is far from clear what he had in mind.

Sextus’s problem of inaction gave rise to two opposing readings in the recent literature on Pyrrhonism in the twentieth century: the so-called “rustic” (Barnes 1982; Burnyeat, 2012) and the so-called “urbane” readings (see Frede 1979/1987b). Barnes followed Galen in using the term “rustic” for the skeptic who rejects every belief, and coined the term “urbane” for the kind of skeptic Frede describes, the one whose skepticism still allows him to have beliefs of some sort (see 1982: 61). We will discuss those readings in the following sections.

In this paper, I argue for a new reading of Pyrrhonian beliefs by representationalism in recent philosophy of mind. I shall argue that there are two senses of *acceptance* or “acquiescence in something” (*eudokein tini pragmati*) rather than two senses of *belief*(*doxa*). For this reason, we can maintain along with Sextus that the Pyrrhonian skeptic behaves intentionally and can live his life in society *adoxastôs* without any proper beliefs whatsoever. However, the skeptical sense of acceptance is not the mere *avowal of a feeling* or a *mere report* of the way things appears to me. I want to suggest the following reading. Acceptance without belief is an anti-predicative passive and involuntary acceptance of content by means of an indicator function (*pathos* or *phainomenon*) in virtue of the past regular connection between the content and the indicator function. The *pathos* (as a present state of mind) or the *phainomenon* “means” (that is, indicates or represents) passively and involuntarily a content in virtue of its regular connection with this content through time. Thus, for example, the Pyrrhonian’s acceptance of the propositional content of the sentence “there is fire” is based on the fact that he here and now perceives smoke and that *pathos* passively and involuntarily *means* the content that there is

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<sup>1</sup> Hume does not say it, but his naturalism seems to suggest that without reasons we can live a better life than a philosopher full of reasons.

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch summarizes the controversy as follows: “[What is most disputed between Chrysippus and the Academics] is that without assent there is neither action nor exercising impulse ... when an appropriate impression occurs, people exercise impulse at once without first having yielded or given their assent.” (quote from Inwood 1985:85)

<sup>3</sup> See Sextus M 7.154. However, there are two main issues behind the divergence between the Stoics and Arcesilaus (and the Academics in general). First, when they talk about assent, are they really speaking the same language? According to Striker they are not. See Striker 2001: 119. Second, when they talk about inaction, are they speaking the same language? I believe they are not: while Arcesilaus takes action to be any blind bodily movement, Stoa takes action to be something done for a reason, what we today call an intentional action.

<sup>4</sup> See M 11.162-3.

fire. That is what Sextus, following the Stoic tradition, calls “commemorative signs” (*hupomnēstikon*) in opposition to the “indicative signs” (*endeiktikon*), namely the internal assertion of the content as a belief. As I do not believe that any reasonable reading may be defended only by means of philological analysis and by the research of the huge doxography, my arguments deliberately mix historical evidence with reasons of a systematic nature. In this way, the defense of my alternative reading is abductive, namely as the inference to the best explanation.

The remainder of this paper is conceived as follows. After this brief introduction, the next section is devoted to presenting an exposition and criticism of Frede’s urbane reading. The subsequent section is conceived as an exposition and criticism of the rustic reading. The section after that is devoted to explaining and defending my reading of the Pyrrhonian acceptance and how the skeptic addresses the charge of *apraxia*. In the last section, I make my closing remarks.

## 2 The Urbane Reading

Let me start with the so-called “urbane reading.” Frede phrases the old charge of inaction in terms of the dilemma for the scholarship:

If we, then, take seriously the skeptics' protestations... there seem to be basically two lines along which the skeptics could argue... one could argue against the objection by (i) trying to show that the skeptics denied that one could not avoid making judgments in practice... (They) could grant that it is extraordinarily difficult to bring oneself into such a state... but insist that it is, in principle, possible... Or, (ii) one could argue that the skeptics thought that even if one... suspended judgment in the sense in which they recommend, one would still have many beliefs and views, quite enough, at any rate, to lead a worthwhile life. (1987: 180-181)

And so is born the so-called “urbane reading” following the horn of the dilemma. Frede’s interpretation provides a neat way to sidestep the traditional charge of inaction originally levelled against Arcesilaus. After his *epochê*, the Pyrrhonist would still have quite enough ordinary commonsensical beliefs to lead a life in society just like everybody else’s. The key passages that support the urbane reading are:

When we say that Skeptics do not hold beliefs, we do not take ‘belief’ (*dogma*) in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing in something (*eudokein tini pragmati*); for Skeptics assent to the feelings (*pathê*) forced upon them by appearances—for example, they would not say, when heated or chilled, ‘I think I am not heated’ (or: chilled). Rather, we say that they do not hold beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences; for Pyrrhoneans do not assent to anything unclear (*adêlon*). (*PH* 1.13)

When we doubt whether the underlying object is such as it appears, we grant that it does so appear, while we doubt not about the appearance but about what is said about the appearance—and this is different from investigating what is apparent itself. For instance, honey appears to us to be sweet. We allow this, since we are perceptually sweetened. But we doubt if it is sweet as regards its definition (*hoson epi tōi logōi*); this is not the appearance, but something said about the appearance. (*PH* 1.19–20)

The first part of *PH* 1.13 clearly suggests the existence of two kinds of acceptance rather than two kinds of belief. Nevertheless, Frede remarks: “Sextus distinguishes

between a wider and a narrower sense of ‘belief’; and only beliefs in the narrower sense count as dogmatic” (1987a: 186). The Greek word *eudokein* is supposed to capture the putative wider sense of belief. In Frede’s words: “*Eudokein* and *eudokesthai* are used in the sense of ‘be content with’, ‘assent to’, ‘agree’, ‘consent to’, ‘recognize’, ‘accept’, or ‘suppose’” (1987a: 193). Given this, the Pyrrhonian skeptic suspends his “beliefs” in the narrow sense that he withdraws his judgments about a nonevident object. In contrast, he holds his “beliefs” in the wider sense that they are about what appears, the only object beyond dispute. In Frede’s words: “he (the Skeptic) accepts the judgment of *phantasia*; at least, he raises no objection against its verdict; if it says things are thus or thus, he does not challenge this” (1987b: 194).

Now, commenting on the second part of *PH* 1.13, Frede adds: “Sextus tells us the (narrow) sense in which the skeptic has no beliefs. The relevant sense of ‘belief’ seems surprisingly narrow at first, especially if one assumes that the skeptic has no beliefs about how things are” (1987a: 195). Thus, according to Frede, Sextus is not speaking about belief in terms of the usual sense of “doxa,” but rather in the alternative sense of “dogma.” The idea is that dogma is supposed to be a special type of doxa. What type? Sextus narrowly defines “dogma” as assent to something nonevident, that is, assent to something not given in appearance (*PH* 1.16). Given this, to “dogmatize” means to posit the real existence of something (*PH* 1.14–15).<sup>5</sup>

Frede’s urbane reading finds additional textual support in the key phrase “*hoson epi tōi logōi*” of *PH* 1.19–20. He translates it as “insofar as it is a matter of reason” and remarks that “the restriction...*is that the skeptic suspends judgment about how things are in a certain respect*” (1987a: 188, emphasis added). Accordingly, Sextus is stating that the skeptic does not dispute that honey *appears* sweet to him, but investigates whether it actually is sweet. Thus, Sextus only bans a dogmatic kind of belief.<sup>6</sup>

But as we all know, Sextus chose appearance as the Pyrrhonian criterion of action in *PH* 1.21–24. In his own words:

By nature’s guidance we are naturally capable of perceiving and thinking. By the necessitation of feelings, hunger conducts us to food and thirst to drink. By the handing down of customs and laws, we accept, from an everyday point of view, that piety is good and impiety bad. By teaching of kinds of expertise we are not inactive in those expertises, which we accept. (*PH*, 1.23–24)

Frede takes them to be the fourfold source of the skeptic’s beliefs in the wider sense of the term. In this regard, he suggested that according to the urbane reading, what is in question is not the content of a belief, but rather how the belief is formed.<sup>7</sup> Given this, the skeptic may believe (*doxa*), for example, in quite simple evident mathematical truths such as  $1+1=2$  while suspending his judgment relative to the same truths when they are based on calculations. Likewise, he may also hold the ordinary belief that God exists whenever this belief (*doxa*) comes from

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Frede’s idea is already present in several of Kant’s Lectures on Logic. See *Logik Blomberg*: AA: 213–14; *Logik Herder*, AA: 4; *Logik Philippi*, AA: 330.

<sup>6</sup> In line with Frede’s reading, Brunschwig remarks, first, that the phrase “*hoson epi tōi logōi*” can be understood either adverbially, qualifying the manner in which something is done (“insofar as it is” or to the extent that), or ‘objectively,’ qualifying the proposition under discussion. However, it can also be understood ‘anaphorically,’ referring to a previous stretch of argument, rather than as how Frede and I take it. See Brunschwig 1995.

<sup>7</sup> See Morison 2011 and 2019. Yet, what Frede says does not fit with Morison’s claim: “Although there is a sense in which the skeptic has no beliefs about how things are—namely, *he has no beliefs about how things really are*—there is a perfectly good sense in which he does have beliefs about how things are—namely, to the extent that it seems to be the case that things are so or so” (1987b: 186).

acculturation, while suspending his judgment about the same belief (*dogma*) whenever that belief comes from proofs of God's existence. He may also believe (*doxa*) that a certain drug is able to cure some disease (whenever this belief comes from instructions of art) while suspending his judgment (*dogma*) about the same content when it comes from reason.

Now we come to the Achilles heel of Frede's urbane interpretation found in the literature. Frede's urbane reading crucially depends on the assumption that the skeptic is prepared to allow *appearances as epistemic evidence*. The idea is that when the truth of the content of the belief (*doxa*), say that the honey is sweet, is about the way the honey appears to him, the appearance constitutes epistemic evidence that supports the truth of the content in question. Independent of any textual analysis, Frede argues by means of analogy with the common lives of ordinary people:

Suppose, for example, that a particular wine seems quite sweet to me. Someone might explain, it only seems sweet, because I had eaten something sour just before tasting the wine [see PH 1 110]. If I accept this explanation (...) Nonetheless, such an explanation might seem rather puzzling, because it is not entirely clear how it is supposed to bear on my claim that the wine is quite sweet. *Even if I accept this explanation, the wine will still seem sweet, and I shall still think that it is.* (1987b: 189, emphasis added)

Frede's leading thought here is that no explanation whatsoever will derogate the fact that I believe (*doxa*) that the wine is sweet whenever the wine appears to me as sweet. Why is this so? Again, probably, because Frede assumes that the fact that the wine seems sweet to me (appearance) epistemically supports the truth of content that the wine is sweet. From this, Frede concludes that the contrast between how things *really* are and how they appear nonepistemically is insufficient.

To be sure, I believe that Frede is right when he calls attention to the key difference between *doxa* and *dogma*. Sextus's *epoché* is aimed at dogmas and not doxas. He also has a point when he claims that the contrast between how things *really* are and how they appear nonepistemically is insufficient.<sup>8</sup> Still, I cannot follow his argument. In many cases when I say that the wine appears sweet to me, it may be inferred from what I say that I believe (or at least that I am inclined to believe) that the wine is sweet. That is what Chisholm calls *epistemic appearance*.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, in several other cases, when I say that the wine *just* appears sweet to me, what I say does not imply that I believe (or at least that I am inclined to believe) that the wine is sweet in any way. This case is what Chisholm calls the *nonepistemic sense*.<sup>10</sup> Chisholm gives us an illustrative example of what a nonepistemic appearance looks like: "when I tell my oculist that the letters on his chart appear (to me) to run together, (it is just) because both of us know that they do not run together" (Chisholm 1957: 45).

Suppose that the stick appears curved in the water to me. To be sure, when someone explains to me that that appearance is only due to the refraction of light in water, the stick still continues to appear bent in the water to me. Why is this so? Well, according to modularity of mind, our perceptual system is *relatively* insulated from our doxastic system.<sup>11</sup> Yet, if the scientific explanation (in the contemporary sense of science) convinces me, even if the stick appears bent in the water to me, *I do not believe anymore that it is bent*. Thus, if I accept any explanation that the wine is not really sweet, but only appears to be so, I involuntarily refrain from believing

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<sup>8</sup> We will come back to this point in the next section.

<sup>9</sup> See Chisholm 1957: 45.

<sup>10</sup> See Chisholm 1957: 45.

<sup>11</sup> See Fodor 1983. Of course, we cannot deny the so-called "doxastic penetration" in several cases.

that the wine is sweet. After accepting any scientific explanation, the appearance *becomes nonepistemic*.

Now, let us suppose that Frede is right and appearance is always epistemic. That means precisely: the fact that the wine appears sweet to Frede is a *reason that epistemically supports the truth of the content of his belief that the wine is sweet*. You may think of the epistemic appearance either as a “reason” that S himself self-consciously invokes in support of his belief that the wine is sweet (internalism); or as just a “reliable condition” (externalism) that makes Frede’s belief that the wine is sweet epistemically reliable; or as what Burge has called “entitlement.”<sup>12</sup>

Be that as it may, Sextus’s urbane reading raises problems of systematic concern about the coherence of Pyrrhonism. The first problem is as follows. Under normal conditions, if Pyrrhonian appearances are nonepistemic, and if Frede believes that the wine is sweet, Frede also somehow *knows* that the honey is sweet. For one, regardless of your epistemology, the following counterfactual must be accepted by all epistemic accounts as true if the appearance is epistemic (under normal conditions):

*Frede would not believe that the wine is sweet if the wine did not appear sweet to Frede (p).* In this way, Frede’s belief tracks that p tracks its truth in all nearby possible worlds.

The point is as follows. If Frede knows that the wine is sweet, then the believed proposition that the wine is sweet *must be true*; after all, knowledge that p entails that p is true. And if the believed proposition turns out to be true, this is because the wine is sweet in Frede’s independent reality. The urbane skeptic ends up with skeptical beliefs, skeptical knowledge, and skeptical truths.<sup>13</sup>

But let us assume for the sake of argument that there is no difference in the propositional content of skeptic and dogmatic beliefs so that the skeptic’s assent to a proposition or his suspension depends on the way that the proposition was formed.<sup>14</sup> A further objection of a systematic nature is that there is no *principled way* of drawing a divide between ordinary and dogmatic assents. Let us take one of Morison’s examples and assume, for example, that Frede believes (p) that  $1+1=2$ , just because it strikes Frede’s brain that  $1+1=2$  is true. Note that since this appearance is supposed to be epistemic, the fact that  $1+1=2$  is true strikes Frede’s brain as true epistemic support of the truth of his belief that  $1+1=2$ .

Now, let us assume that Frede comes to the same belief (p) that  $1+1=2$ , but now because he has run through the Russellian proof in *Principia Mathematica*. Accordingly, the belief turns out to be dogmatic. But why is this so? Morison’s urbane answer must follow a pattern: in this case Frede has reached the right result because he has done the right calculation. And hence the Pyrrhonian skeptic will suspend his judgement not because of its content, but rather because of the way that Frede acquires this belief, namely by means of *reasons or calculations*.

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<sup>12</sup> See Burge 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Now, where there is belief, truth, knowledge, do we still have skepticism in any possible sense of the word? Not really. It looks like Kantian empirical realism is nothing but the other side of the coin of Kant’s transcendental idealism. That should not come as a surprise since Frede was a German scholar deeply embedded in the Kantian atmosphere of his country.

This is also Porchat’s position (his neo-Pyrrhonism). According to him: “This paper aims to show how it is possible, in full agreement with the original inspiration of Pyrrhonism and despite the silence of Sextus Empiricus on these points, to develop a *skeptical conception of truth* and to elaborate a *notion of skeptical realism*, which do justice to basic intuitions and common sense.” (1995: 7, emphasis added; my translation).

<sup>14</sup> See Morison 2019: 17.

But suppose that Frede's brain works just like a savant's brain. In those cases it makes no difference if Frede believes that  $1+1=2$  *because*  $1+1=2$  strikes his brain as true or because he runs Russell's proof in *Principia Mathematica*. If Frede is a mathematician savant, his brain works in the same way in both cases: no reason is needed. Let me change the example. Frede can only believe that the number 2346 times  $7=16422$  after doing the math. However, the belief that 2346 times  $7=16422$  strikes Frede the mathematician savant as true in the same way that the belief that  $1+1=2$  strikes Frede as true. Where does the difference lie? It is pointless to insist that in the first case the assent is involuntary, while in the second it is active and voluntary because for Frede the savant his belief that 2346 times  $7=16422$  is just as passive and involuntary as his belief if he was not a savant. Thus, there is no *principled distinction* between doxa and dogma according to the urbane reading.

However, that argument might reinforce the reasonable suspicion that the ordinary and the doxastic and dogmatic beliefs have different contents: while the dogmatic belief is about nonevident things, the skeptic's is about evident things. Suppose that two Europeans (Frede and some rustic reader) are sent to Africa to confirm the existence of a great mountain (say Kilimanjaro). In Frede's urbane framework, we face the following situation. As ordinary people, they come to the ordinary belief (doxa) that there is in fact such a mountain at a certain location (or to the opposite conclusion; it does not matter for the sake of the argument). There is no reason for disagreement (*diaphonia*) between them, unless one of them is not in normal health conditions: has vision problems, and so on.<sup>15</sup>

Again, the fact that something appears to Morison as a mountain is what supports the truth of his belief that p, namely his knowledge that the mountain exists. Now, let us suppose that Morison makes the following simple inference: if I know that the mountain exists (p), then I must also know that the mountain is *real*, i.e. mind-independently (q). Now, if the rustic reader knows that p on the basis of his epistemic appearance (a reason), and moreover infers his knowledge that q from his previous knowledge that p, his reasons (epistemic appearance) that support his knowledge that p must also support the truth of his "dogmatic" belief that q. Why is this so? For one thing, if knowledge is closed under known entailment (the closure principle of knowledge), reasons (epistemic appearances) are transmitted from the ordinary belief (*doxa*) to the putative dogmatic belief (*dogma*). Thus, if I know that p, if I know that p entails q, and I infer the belief that q from the belief that p, and retain the initial belief that p, all reasons (epistemic appearances) that I have that support the truth that p also support the truth that q. Again, the point is there are no principled boundaries between ordinary (*doxa*) and dogmatic beliefs (*dogma*).

The urbane skeptic might attempt to avoid this quite unbearable conclusion by blocking Morison's inference from his ordinary belief that p to his dogmatic belief that q. He would reiterate that Sextus says that the belief that q is about something nonevident and, hence, dogmatic by definition.<sup>16</sup> But the question reemerges: given that Morison knows that the belief that p entails the belief that q, and he also infers one from the other, how can anyone tell them apart non-arbitrarily? What is the urbane criterion to distinguish one belief from the other?

Carnap and his positivist colleagues have demarcated the ordinary from the dogmatic beliefs invoking their *infamous* principle of verification. Since the belief of nonevident things has no confirmation or infirmation from what appears to us, it is meaningless. Yet, I know nothing more dogmatic in the whole history of philosophy than verificationism of the old positivism. It is needless to say why this

<sup>15</sup> That is a famous example of Carnap's, though a little modified. See Carnap 1928.

<sup>16</sup> That is the rustic definition of what a belief is for Pyrrhonism.

is so. There are only two ways of blocking the inference in question. The first is to reject the principle of closure of knowledge. The second is to deny that appearances are epistemic. As no one longer dares to deny closure, the only way out to hold onto Sextus's opposition between doxa and dogma is by rejecting the urbane reading: there are no epistemic appearances as reasons in support of beliefs. The moral is that, if the philological textual evidence is inconclusive against the urbane reading, there are good systematic reasons to suspend our acceptance of it.

### 3 The Rustic Reading

Barnes and Burnyeat reject Frede's urbane reading. Burnyeat claims that the distinguishing feature of the old Pyrrhonism, something that differentiates it from all modern forms of skepticism, is exactly the key idea that we could (and should) live without any beliefs (*adoxastôs*). In this regard, Burnyeat holds, for example, that "Pyrrhonism is the only serious attempt in Western thought to carry skepticism to its furthest limits and to live by the result" (2012: 206).

In support of his rustic reading, Burnyeat claims that "the doxographical account that we possess from the philosophy of Pyrrho himself corroborates the skeptical ideal of living (*adoxastôs*)" (2012: 214). A quotation in Eusebius from Aristocles, a Peripatetic writer of the second century A.D, gives what purports to be a summary of the views attributed to Pyrrho by his follower Timon. Burnyeat's rustic reading follows the idea that there is continuity from the early Pyrrhonism until Sextus's *Purhônēioi Hupotupôseis* (*PH*). It is needless to say that Frede claims that quite the opposite view is the case: "The ancient doxographers already failed in their attempts to construct a continuous tradition linking Aenesidemus and Sextus with Pyrrho" (Frede 1987: 182).

Barnes (1982) presents a reading that consubstantiates Burnyeat's reading, the so-called "rustic" reading. Barnes's reading is explicitly inspired by Wittgenstein's famous theory of psychological first-person utterances as avowals (*Äußerungen*). These, we are told, are not utterances of assertions of genuine propositions, but rather avowals (*Äußerungen*) of feelings (*pathê*) in the form of structured sentences (which come in replacement of natural unstructured feelings like moaning, screaming, etc.). Given this, it makes little sense to wonder about the truth of what the skeptic expresses. E.g. whenever the skeptic utters "the tower seems round":

(...) he thereby expresses his *πάθος*, but he does not *state* that he is experiencing a certain *πάθος* (he does not state anything at all). (1982: 5; his emphases)

The skeptic's utterances are Wittgenstein's *Äußerungen* and are not propositional attitudes. They are like saying "ouch," which does not express the proposition *that one is in pain*, but rather one simply avowaling one's pain.<sup>17</sup>

It is hard to follow Barnes in this regard. Suppose again that Barnes and Burnyeat are sent to Pisa to confirm whether "there is a leaning tower over there." Insofar as the sentence "there is a leaning tower over there" seems to revolve around the existence of a *real* leaning tower, they suspend their judgment. Yet, when the same sentence revolves around what appears to them, they cannot help but assent to their *pathos*. Now, according to Barnes, whenever they utter "there seems to be a leaning tower over there," they do not state any proposition, but only avowal their *pathos*. The problem is as follows: both persons are supposed to agree

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<sup>17</sup> See Barnes 1982: 5.



with each other; otherwise they could not coordinate their actions and live in society.

Let us assume for the sake of argument that Wittgenstein's analysis is right (which nobody longer accepts nowadays for several reasons). What avowals guarantee at the end of the day is the mere communication of a person's feeling to another; say the patient avowals to his doctor that he has pain in his thigh and the doctor performs a clinical examination. However, according to Barnes's example the skeptical *pathos* is not a feeling of pain, of joy etc.; that is, something that concerns only one person. Instead, the feeling arises from the contemplation of a leaning tower (Sextus's example). Now what guarantees that by expressing the same articulated sentence "there seems to be a leaning tower over there" they avowal the same feeling? Barnes could mean something like "Wow! There seems to be a leaning tower over there," while Burnyeat could mean "Yes, there seems to be a leaning tower over there." The point is: if they are not feeling the same there is nothing more than an exchange of feelings, without any epistemic agreement whatsoever. Regarding this, we cannot expect them to be able to coordinate their actions in a cooperative way. Barnes's reading leads us to a dead end. If the skeptical acceptance is nothing more than an avowal of a subjective feeling, there is no way that the skeptic could live his life *adoxastôs!*

Burnyeat provides us with what appears to be a superior account. He claims that by assenting to their *pathos*, the skeptics are merely "reporting" their experience:

If he means 'appear' in its non-epistemic sense, *PH* 1.13 implies that the skeptic's assent is restricted to *experiential reports* like 'It feels warm to me here,' 'This argument strikes me as persuasive.' He may say 'It is warm,' 'It is a sound argument,' but what he means is 'I have the experience of its appearing so.' (2012: 321, emphasis added)<sup>18</sup>

"Impression" is a term that the Pyrrhonean takes from Timon. However, precisely because the Pyrrhonist wants to distance himself from Stoa, he will progressively replace the Stoic word *phantasia* with his new word *phainomenon*. Be that as it may, if we assume that impressions are nothing but subjective mental events, Burnyeat's proposal collapses into Barnes's idea. Rather than expressing (avowal) their own feeling (*pathos*), according to Burnyeat the Pyrrhonian skeptics are now "reporting" or "registering" how things appear to them.

Let us assume that Barnes and Burnyeat are watching a soccer game. And behold, from Barnes's perspective, the defender, when jumping to head, misses the header and the ball hits his arm, which leads the referee to award a penalty. However, from Burnyeat's perspective, when jumping, the defender heads the ball before it hits his arm. Therefore, there is no penalty. Both report how things appear to them, albeit differently, from their own perspective. The same problem recurs. Can they achieve an agreement if there is no objective perspective available? And if

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<sup>18</sup> Porchat holds the same idea: "Sticking thoroughly to phenomena, it is important for us to distinguish clearly between the phenomenon and 'what is said about the phenomenon' (cf. Sextus Empiricus, *PH* 1.19-20), i.e., the (philosophical) interpretation one makes of phenomena or of the discourse that expresses it. We say, for example, that honey is sweet, or that this event was simultaneous with another, or that ingratitude is a serious defect. Thus, *we report how things appear to us*, we describe the phenomena, trivially using common language. We understand 'is' as 'appears', or, more precisely, it is as if we said: 'It appears to us that honey is sweet', 'It appears to us that this event was simultaneous with that other'. Not that we have such formulations in mind in the common circumstances of daily life; we are simply apt to reformulate our discourse, if one tries to make a metaphysical interpretation of it, so that there is no risk of such interpretation." (1995/2015: 10, emphasis added)

they cannot agree on what is going on outside their perspectives, how can they coordinate their actions and live *adoxastôs* without any beliefs whatsoever?<sup>19</sup>

But the systematic grounds that undermine the rustic reading do not stop there. According to Burnyeat's reading of *PH* 1.21-24, the leading idea is that appearance, considered nonepistemically (in opposition to the urbane reading), is what the skeptic has chosen as a criterion for action under the fourfold key heads that Sextus mentions. First, under the guidance of nature, the skeptic exercises his cognitive capacities for perception and thought. Second, under the constraints of bodily drives, hunger leads him to eat, thirst to drink, and so on. Third, under the guidance of tradition, the skeptic keeps to the rules and observes the conduct of life of his society. Finally, under the guidance of art, the skeptic exercises a profession.<sup>20</sup>

In the same vein, the fourfold observances of everyday life do not commit the skeptic to any beliefs whatsoever according to Banes: hunger and thirst "alone suffice to drive the Skeptic—like any other man or animal—to food and drink" (1982: 82). Burnyeat repeats almost the same idea. He claims that: "Sextus meets this old complaint, first by acknowledging the role of bodily drives like hunger and thirst and by the rest of the fourfold scheme of activity" (2012: 223). He adds: "hunger leads the skeptic to eat, thirst to drink" (2012: 233). Therefore, whenever the skeptic feels thirsty, he drinks; whenever he feels hungry, he eats.

Nonetheless, for all we have seen it is quite hard to understand how the skeptic can exercise his *cognitive capacities for perception* and thought under the guidance of nature, if appearances are nonepistemic. Likewise, it is quite hard to make sense of how the skeptic can *keep to the rules and observe the conduct of life of his society*, if appearances are nonepistemic. But what can we say about the possibility of *exercising a profession* under the guidance of art, if appearances are nonepistemic? Burnyeat attempts to provide an answer to this question in the following passage:

He (the skeptic) has a *practical concern*. His skepticism is a solution to uncertainty about how to act in the world; or better, a dissolution of that uncertainty. Such being his prime concern, he cannot doubt in a completely general way his ability to act in the world. (2012: 267, emphasis added)

The bottom line here is some view close to Ryle's behaviorism or Wittgenstein's operational behaviorism according to which know-how does not entail any form of know-that.<sup>21</sup> However, Stanley and Williamson have dismantled the behaviorist creed with one of the finest semantic analyses of knowing-wh (-who, -where, etc., as well as -how).<sup>22</sup> Stanley's analysis suggests that knowing-how is indeed a kind of knowing-wh and that *knowing-wh* in general is knowing-that: what you know when you know-wh is an answer to a wh-question, that is, a proposition that answers the question. So knowing-how is just a case of knowing-that.

Let us suppose that Burnyeat knows how to ride a bike. The behaviorist idea is that knowing how is just a practical matter. However, not only does this fail to come to grips with the linguistic data standardly adduced in defense of the standard

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<sup>19</sup> The only way out here is to assume that Burnyeat's registering is at least something intersubjectively valid as the surrogate for real world lost (a new flirt with Kant's transcendental idealism). Again, that seems to be Porchat's suggestion (1995/2015). However, what guarantees the agreement (in the skeptical predicament that there is no VAR)?

<sup>20</sup> In Sextus's case, medicine. See Frede 1987b: 225-42; 1987: 243-60; 1990: 225-50. See also Allen 2010.

<sup>21</sup> See Ryle 1949. The main examples are to know how to ride a bike or to know how to speak a language. If to know how to ride a bicycle is to know a certain set of propositions about how to move, then one way to test the truth of this account might be to see if people who know how to ride bicycles know the relevant propositions. It does not, however, seem that such a result is in the offing.

<sup>22</sup> See Stanley 2011; Stanley & Williamson 2001.

semantics for constructions with embedded questions, but it is also open to obvious counterexamples. Suppose that Burnyeat succumbed to Parkinson's disease. His uncontrollable twitching now makes it impossible for him to ride a bike without falling off. Yet, *he certainly still knows how to ride one*. After all, if he no longer did, it would not make any sense for him to think sadly to himself: "If only I could still ride a bike." He cannot do what he still knows how to do.

Be that as it may. The key question is: is that answer satisfactory? Well, that crucially depends on what we consider as an *action*. There are two views (or two readings) regarding action in the old Stoicism.<sup>23</sup> According to the first, what is in question is a "rational action," i.e. intentional action. This comes from the idea that belief is necessary for action and from the Stoic attempt to separate a human from an animal action, assuming the first is morally responsible. According to Origen, the old Stoics held that "a rational animal ... has a reason which passes judgment on impressions, rejecting some of these and accepting others in order that it may be guided accordingly" (Long & Sedley 1987: 53A).

According to the second view, action is merely non-intentional bodily movement. When Zeno claimed that assent was needed for action, he meant to use human action only to press Arcesilaus. On reflection, he supposedly concedes that action is in fact possible without beliefs, as Plutarch reported:

For action requires two things, a presentation of what is appropriate and an impulse to the appropriate which is presented. Neither of these clashes with suspension of judgement. . . . There is no need of a judgement (*doxa*) in order to generate this movement to what is appropriate; rather, the impulse occurs automatically. (Long & Sedley 1987: i 456)

Arcesilaus and rustic skeptics seem to assume that what is in question in the charge of inaction is merely bodily movement.<sup>24</sup> According to Arcesilaus's testimony, the Stoic is claiming that after his *epochê* the Academic could not behave in any way whatsoever. The Academic is condemned to perish. Here inaction seems to mean "total lethargy." The point is: is that what is really in question? Be that as it may, this trivializes the charge of inaction because not only beasts act in the sense that they move their bodies (whenever they are thirsty, they drink; whenever they are hungry, they eat). Indeed, even plants show bodily movement e.g. when they grow in the direction of sunlight (tropism). Every living thing moves in some way or other.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, action or behavior can also be understood in the non-trivial sense of rational action. In this case, they are *processes* rather than *events* that begin with some external stimulus causing some internal event C, and end with causing a bodily movement M. The external stimulus causes the internal event C, which in turn causes the bodily movement M, but only by virtue of the fact that C was recruited by natural selection to represent the instantiation of some external property F when properly stimulated under normal circumstances. *But the reason why C causes M lies in the fact that C represents the instantiation of the external property F.*

Let me give a well-known example. The Kennedy assassination is a process that begins with Oswald pulling the trigger at 12:30 pm CST on November 23 in

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<sup>23</sup> Reed supports a similar idea in relation to the problem of inaction in general. See 2018: 66-67. However, regarding this, I suspend my judgment about Stoa.

<sup>24</sup> Maconi correctly emphasizes that according to Arcesilaus action is triggered by 'purely mechanical' impulses, expressly eschewing any rational reflection. See 1985: 251.

<sup>25</sup> Actually, even inanimate bodies are moved "from the outside." While plants and other natural things grow "from themselves," animals are moved "by themselves" (Origen, *Princ.* 3.1.2). Quoted from Meyer 2018: 112-113.

1963 in Dallas, Texas, but only ends half an hour later when Kennedy is pronounced dead at 1 pm CST. Oswald pulling the trigger accounts for the event of Kennedy's exploding head. But the reason why Kennedy was murdered (a process) is whatever is going on inside Oswald's head happens to represent: this means (represents) that, as a threat to the U.S., he represents Kennedy as weak with the communists, etc. etc. (you may choose your favorite conspiracy theory!).

Here goes another example. I withdraw my hand from a hot surface because the activation of nociceptive specific neurons in my parietal lobe (together with the activation of neuronal patterns in my motor cortices) was recruited by natural selection to represent the tissue damage in my hand. The point is that the activation of nociceptive specific neurons in my parietal lobe causes my hand to withdraw *but for the reason that it represents tissue data at the time that I felt pain in my hand.*

When the rustic skeptic deprives the causes of human action of any cognitive element whatsoever, he cannot show how the skeptic acts intentionally. He cannot provide a reason for why the person did what he did at the moment he did. In Burnyeat's own words: "hunger leads the skeptic to eat, thirst to drink." So, whenever he feels thirsty, he drinks; whenever he feels hungry, he eats. The rustic skeptic drinks just like a conditioned dog salivates when he hears the bell ringing. Moreover, if we consider that our actions take into account the actions of other members of our community, the rustic picture of human society collapses.<sup>26</sup> Definitely, without any beliefs whatsoever, the skeptic cannot live a human life in community.

I would like to end this section by noting that the rustic reader faces a dilemma. On the one hand, he might assume that what is in question is bodily movement and, hence, that the charge of inaction can be easily addressed by showing that even non-rational animals act under the guidance of bodily drives. But then the question of inactivity becomes quite trivial. It is hard to even imagine why the Stoics would raise the charge against the Academics. Moreover, it is even harder to understand how such a question could have concerned philosophers for centuries. On the other hand, the rustic reader might assume that what is in question is the rational (intentional) action. In this case, he has no means whatsoever to address the question.

#### 4 The Proposal

Let us turn back to the main question of this paper: what is the difference between doxa and dogmatic forms of acceptance? We are told that in the first case assent is passive and involuntary. In the second case, we "take a position in relation to the truth of a proposition." But what does that mean?<sup>27</sup>

Let us take stock. Frede's urbane reading aims to interpret the skeptic acceptance as similar to a propositional attitude that "internally asserts" a specific propositional content, namely the one that contains evident things. What seems to me to be wrong with this? First, as we saw, Frede misread *PH* 1.13. On a closer

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<sup>26</sup> Remember the famous case of the prisoner's dilemma.

<sup>27</sup> What we find in the literature are usually rhetorical answers that do nothing more than reiterate the problem in other words. Burnyeat says, for example:

The sceptic ... divides questions into questions about how something appears and questions about how it really and truly is, and both types of question may be asked about anything whatever. (2012: 209)

Those answers are nothing but different ways of rephrasing the very question at issue. Thus, we must ask again and again: what is the difference between positing something as true (belief) or stating "how things really are" and assenting to how things appear to us?

inspection, Sextus does not talk about two kinds of belief, but rather about two kinds of acceptance. Second, according to a systematic viewpoint, there is no principled way of distinguishing contents that contain evident from those that contain nonevident things. Given this, we cannot tell apart the propositions that the skeptic actively and voluntarily denies acceptance from those that he voluntarily and passively accepts.

What is wrong about the rustic reading? Barnes aims to interpret the skeptic acceptance as a mere avowal of a feeling (*pathos*), while Burnyeat aims to interpret the skeptic acceptance as a mere report or registering of what appears. However, in one way or the other, what appears is nonepistemic. Given this, it is quite impossible to understand how appearance could be the criterion for action. Thus, it is quite impossible to understand how, under the guidance of nature, nonepistemic appearance could improve our *cognitive capacities for perception*, could make us *observe the conduct of life and rules of society*, could enable us to *exercise a profession*. Finally, it is impossible to understand how, under the guidance of nature, nonepistemic appearance could be a criterion for our *actions when these are properly understood as processes*.

What is right in the urban reading is the key idea that appearances are epistemic. Likewise, what is right in the rustic reading is the key idea that the skeptic acceptance is not any kind of propositional attitude towards a proposition, but rather an anti-predicative involuntary and passive acquiescence to contents. The intriguing question now is how to combine those features in one account? The answer is to be found in what Sextus, following Stoa, calls “commemorative signs” (*hupomnēstikon*) in opposition to the “indicative signs” (*endeiktikon*):<sup>28</sup>

It is not uttered speech but internal speech by which man differs from irrational animals; for crows and parrots and jays utter articulate sounds. Nor is it by the mere fact of having impressions, as such; for they too receive impressions. The difference is that man has impressions arising from inference and combination. This amounts to his possessing the idea of consequence and directly thereby grasping *the concept of sign*. For sign is itself of the sort ‘If this, then that’. Therefore, the existence of signs follows from the nature and construction of man. (M 7.275–6. Emphasis added)

But what is a commemorative sign? In *PH* 2.100–102 Sextus presents the Stoic distinction between commemorative and indicative signs:

According to them [the Dogmatists], [one category] of signs is the [commemorative] sign (*sêmeion hypomnēstikon*) and the other is the indicative sign (*sêmeion endeiktikon*). They call commemorative sign one which is observed together with the signified when that [i.e. the signified] was clearly occurring, and even when that [i.e. the signified] is not visible, this [i.e. the commemorative sign] leads us to recall that which was earlier observed together with it, albeit now that [i.e. the signified] is not occurring clearly, just as in the case of the fire and the smoke. (*PH* 2.100)

An indicative sign, they say, is that which is not clearly associated with the thing signified but signifies that whereof it is a sign by its own particular nature and constitution, just as, for instance, the bodily motions are signs of the soul... (*PH* 2.101)

Seeing, then, that there are, as we have said, two different kinds of signs, we do not argue against every sign but only against the indicative kind as

<sup>28</sup> See M 1.37-8; 8.134, 8.289-90.

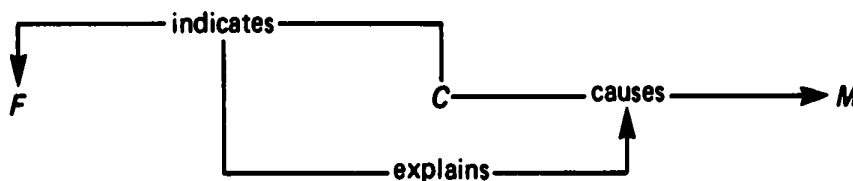
it seems to be invented by the Dogmatists. For the [commemorative] sign is relied on by living experience, since when a man sees smoke, fire is signified, and when he beholds a scar he says that there has been a wound. Hence, not only do we not fight against living experience, but we even lend it our support by assenting undogmatically to what it relies on, while opposing the private inventions of the Dogmatists. (*PH* 2.102)

The commemorative sign is something observed in conjunction with what it means. As usual, Sextus has taken over the Stoic distinction.<sup>29</sup> According to him, Pyrrhonian skeptics suspend their judgment about the existence of the “indicative” sign, because the indicative sign is not something observed in conjunction with what it signifies, but the reason for this is that what it signifies is unobservable (M 8.154), and they fully recognize commemorative signs, based on the constant conjunction between “*phainomenon*” of which one has experience.<sup>30</sup>

Now to the question: how does acceptance as acquiescence in something take place? The answer is in the quote above. First, Sextus claims that it is not by having an impression that human beings are different from non-rational animals; after all, “they too receive impressions” (M 8.275–6), in opposition to the Academics. Given this, the skeptic acceptance is in line with his view of the commemorative sign. In the skeptic’s mind an unaware inference is running. E.g. whenever he saw smoke, he also saw fire. Now when he visualizes or smells something as smoke, his mental state/impression forces him to accept that something is on fire.

Here is the place where an interpretation is required. To start with, the Pyrrhonian doctrine of the commemorative sign is extraordinarily close to the Humean doctrine of causality as a constant conjunction between events/phenomena. Even the examples and explanations are quite similar: while rejecting the dogmatic conception of cause, the Pyrrhonist does not hesitate to use the usual vocabulary of causality in connection with the constant connection between events.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, my alternative reading is a different one. I resume Dretske’s naturalistic account of beliefs as structuring causes of actions of the last section when they are properly understood as processes rather than events. Consider the figure below:



(Dretske 1988: 84).

What we have is the following. C can only explain what triggers the bodily movement M (an event). In contrast, the fact that C *means* (indicates or represents) F provides the *reason* for why the action as a *process* takes place from C to M. Dretske calls C the *triggering cause* of M, while calling the fact that C indicates F the *structuring cause* for why (for which reason) the internal event C causes the event M. But the most important point for our purposes here is the following. C was recruited passively and involuntarily by natural selection to trigger M only because C already

<sup>29</sup> See *PH* 1.97-133 and M 8.141-299.

<sup>30</sup> See *PH* 1.100-2; M 8.151-8.

<sup>31</sup> See M 5.103-4.

means F. But why is this so? For one thing, C and F were regularly correlated in the past. In Sextus's words, C is a commemorative sign of F that causally structurally accounts for why C triggers M. In this sense, whenever I perceive (*pathos*) C, as an internal event C means or represents F, which makes me involuntarily and passively accept F. Two remarks: (i) C is not merely the *pathos*, but it is an epistemic appearance, and (ii) the acceptance that C means or represents F is not a belief or any similar propositional attitude.

## 5 Conclusion

I would like to finish this paper with the following concluding remarks. First, in the face of the doxagraphy, I believe that we cannot choose one interpretation over the rivals, however important it is. I suspend my judgement. Is it that there was an unbroken chain of transmission from Pyrrho to Sextus as Burnyeat claims and Frede denies? Given this, I would like to remark that the defense of my reading is a further case of inference to the best explanation: all things considered, my reading has both the advantages and none of the disadvantages of its rivals.

From a strict textual viewpoint, my reading can accommodate the key passages better than both rival views. First, my view can easily explain the core of the hard passage of *PH* 1.13, making room for Pyrrhonian acceptance. Second, my reading can rescue Sextus's claim that the skeptic can live *adoxastôs* in society. Third, my reading is the best one that does justice to Sextus's claim that appearance is the skeptic criterion of action: appearance or the *pathos* guide us naturally to passively and involuntarily accept the content that they mean or represent.

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