

In Defense of an Unpopular Interpretation of Ancient Skepticism

Thomas A. Blackson, Arizona State University

Es gibt eine Reihe von Texten in der Geschichte des antiken Skeptizismus, die bisher nicht ausreichend verstanden worden sind. Michael Frede hat viel getan, um diese Texte in den richtigen Kontext zu rücken, aber seine Arbeit hat noch nicht die ihr gebührende Anerkennung erfahren. Historiker neigten bisher zu der Annahme, dass der antike Skeptizismus in der klitomachisch-pyrrhonischen Tradition die völlige Enthaltung von allen Überzeugungen beinhaltet und dass Fredes Versuch, etwas anderes zu zeigen, verfehlt ist. Das mag sich vielleicht als richtig herausstellen, aber dennoch halte ich Fredes Interpretation – so wie sie meines Erachtens verstanden werden sollte – für plausibler und interessanter als üblicherweise angenommen wird. Frede hat es möglich gemacht, die Skeptiker der klitomachisch-pyrrhonischen Tradition als Pioniere derjenigen philosophischen Auffassung zu sehen, die die epistemische Rechtfertigung von Überzeugungen als das nachhaltige Ergebnis eines korrekten kognitiven Prozesses versteht. Korrektheit muss hierbei nicht, und sollte vielleicht auch nicht, auf der Grundlage von modaler Zuverlässigkeit verstanden werden.

There is a set of texts in the history of ancient skepticism that have not been widely understood. Michael Frede has given what looks to me to be a plausible interpretation of these texts, but his papers on the subject are confusing. His presentation has made this interpretation difficult to appreciate, and this has made it too easy for the more standard interpretation to remain the orthodox interpretation. This orthodox interpretation may turn out to be correct, but there is less to be said for it and against Frede's interpretation than is usually thought.

The issue in question involves Pyrrhonian skepticism and its connection to Academic skepticism. The Pyrrhonians were the ancient skeptics who thought that the late Academic skeptics took a step toward dogmatism when they followed Philo against Clitomachus on the convincing impression, and the problem for the historian is to understand this Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian tradition and to place it in the history of epistemology generally.

On the orthodox interpretation, a skeptic in Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian tradition withholds assent and lives without beliefs. Long and Sedley say that "there is good reason to believe that Aenesidemus, at any rate, meant 'appearances' in a sense which eliminated any epistemic component." "That is," they continue, "when a Pyrrhonist says 'It appears to me to be raining,' he is not expressing any kind of belief that it is raining, but is just describing from a neutral stance the impression currently affecting him."¹ They do not claim that Aenesidemus's position

¹ A.A. Long & D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers. Volume 1: Translations of the Principal Sources, with Philosophical Commentary* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 471.

defined the school's position, but others have endorsed this interpretation. Myles Burnyeat, e.g., as is well known among historians, has argued that "life without belief was a fundamental feature of Pyrrhonism from Aenesidemus onwards,"² and this seems to be the received understanding of Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian skepticism among philosophers generally.

In his work on reason in the ancients, Michael Frede has tried to develop an interpretation that allows the Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian skeptic to have beliefs. The skeptic, on this interpretation, does not give up believing things by following appearances. No one can do that because following appearances is a way of believing things. On Frede's interpretation, as I think it should be understood, the skeptic no longer attempts to regulate his assent and belief formation so that it is infallible. This is the position that defines ancient skepticism generally, and the ancient skeptics in the Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian tradition are the fallibilists who took the first pioneering steps in working out the philosophical view that epistemic justification is a matter of whether a belief is the outcome of a correct cognitive process and that correctness here need not and perhaps should not be understood in terms of modal reliability.

The interest among the ancient skeptics in assent and methods of belief formation seems to be part of a tradition that shows itself in the early Platonic dialogues in Socrates's discussion of the "power of appearance" in the *Protagoras*. The question, it seems to me, is about knowledge and whether it is strong in the wise. (352a8-d3.) Protagoras goes along with Socrates in proclaiming that it is strong, and Socrates leads Protagoras in an effort to show the many that they are wrong to think otherwise. As part of this argument, Socrates considers a counterfactual situation in which "well-being" depends not on the pious and the other things he uses his "What is it?" question to ask about in the early dialogues, but on "doing and choosing large things and avoiding and not doing the small ones." (356d1-3.) With respect to this situation, Protagoras admits that our "salvation in life" would not be the "power of appearance" but rather would be the body of knowledge that constitutes the "art of measurement." (d3-e4.) Belief formed in response to the impression of apparent size would be inadequate because the impression of apparent size would change with changes in location. In this situation, only those who possess the art of measurement can have "well-being" as they go through life. They realize that the more ordinary method of belief formation is not reliable, and they are able to preserve their knowledge in the face of their contrary and changing impressions of things.

One of the striking things about Socrates's discussion, and the thing that makes the discussion relevant to the history of ancient skepticism, is that the art of

² "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" (*The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, edited by Myles Burnyeat & Michael Frede (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 25-57), p. 34. Cf. Julia Annas, *Voices of Ancient Philosophy. An Introductory Reader* (Oxford University Press, 2001): "If we suspend judgment, we cease to have a belief on the matter. But we are not left with nothing or a mental blank; we are left with what Sextus calls an appearance, best understood as the content of the original belief, but now held in a way that is detached, rather than committed to its truth. Sextus thinks that far from disabling us for everyday life, this result endorses everyday life and frees us only from pretensions and illusions." (P.223.)

measurement can seem to be put forward as an example of an infallible method of belief formation. Socrates says that "(w)hile the power of appearances often makes us wander all over the place confused and regretting our actions and choices, both great and small, the art of measurement would make the appearances lose their power by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in truth, and would save our life." (d4-e2.) The point is not explicit, but the art of measurement can seem to stand to the method in terms of apparent size as the "love of wisdom" (φιλοσοφία) stands to the ordinary ways of forming beliefs involving piety and the other such things constituting the good that Socrates uses his "What is it?" question to ask about.

On this understanding of Socrates' life and work, the wisdom Socrates seeks is a form of infallibilism. The lover of wisdom tries to regulate his assent so that his knowledge is strong and sufficient for living a good life. This knowledge, according to Plato, is constituted by the beliefs that belong to reason. These beliefs cannot be removed, but the incarnate soul also has a host of incompatible beliefs because of its attachment to the body. To eliminate the confusion, Plato thought that the lover of wisdom does two things. He engages in the Socratic dialectic to eliminate inconsistency in his beliefs, and he takes control of the natural desires and the habits of assent he has in virtue of not understanding what he is and having wrongly identified with his body and its concerns. The completion of these tasks makes him wise. His non-rational desires conform to the ends of reason, and his knowledge makes his reason perfect.

Although the middle Platonic dialogues can suggest this understanding of the wisdom Socrates seeks, alternative interpretations are possible. Arcesilaus, much later in Academic history, tried to make a case for a more skeptical interpretation of Socrates' life and work. He tried to return the Academy to what he understood as the insight in Socrates' attempt to force into contradiction those who put themselves forward as experts, but a controversy arose within the Academy about just what this insight is. Carneades, Arcesilaus's most important successor, seems to have thought that the skeptic sometimes does assent because this is what naturally happens when one follows the "convincing" and the "probable," but this view did not immediately square with the apparently defining position of the skeptical Academy, the position going back to Arcesilaus, that one should always withhold assent. It thus became necessary to develop an understanding of what it is to follow the convincing and the probable that did not force the Academic into the dogmatism Arcesilaus had sought to avoid.

To understand the new skepticism within the Academy, it needs to be kept in mind that Arcesilaus developed the position primarily in opposition to the position of the Stoics. Arcesilaus, in emulation of Socrates, tried to get Zeno and the Stoics to conclude by their own standards that they themselves were committed to the proposition that they should withhold assent. Cicero, in 2.77-78 of his *Academica*, says that Arcesilaus would invite Zeno to draw the conclusion that they should withhold assent because they are never in a position to reject all possible future impressions that their initial assent was to an impression whose propositional content is false. Zeno, according to Cicero, would say that the wise man is in such a position because he assents only to cognitive impressions, but if the wise man

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cannot regulate his assent in this way, as Arcesilaus invites Zeno to conclude, then Zeno would be forced to accept the embarrassing conclusion that even the wise man should always withhold assent.

Arcesilaus himself need not be understood to assent, but there is no reason to insist on such a strong dialectical interpretation so long as a conception of skepticism could be worked out that would allow the Academic to assent. Moreover, there seems to have been an attempt in the Academy to do just that. In *Acad.* 2.78, Cicero indicates that it was controversial among Carneades's successors whether assent is permitted. According to Cicero, the proposition that the wise man "might grasp nothing and yet opine" is "a thesis Carneades is said to have accepted," and this created a problem. Carneades's successors had to understand how the skeptic can assent but not fall into the dogmatism that the school opposed, and Cicero indicates that Clitomachus and Philo were divided on the proper solution to this problem.

It is difficult to form a clear view of what Carneades thought about the "convincing impression" (πιθανή φαντασία), but Cicero's discussion provides some indication of what Carneades seems to have had in mind. Carneades himself wrote nothing, presumably in emulation of Socrates, but Cicero, on the basis of Clitomachus's books on Carneades, which themselves have been lost, indicates that Carneades allowed the skeptic to follow what Cicero himself uses the Latin word that transliterates as "probable" to describe. He writes that "it is contrary to nature for nothing to be probable (*probabile*), and this would entail the entire subversion of life ..., and so many impressions must be deemed probable (*probanda*) ..." (*Acad.* 2.99). In this and other reports of Carneades's discussion of the "convincing impression," Cicero seems to have tried to reproduce the logical and etymological connection in Greek between the adjective πιθανός and the verb πείθεσθαι by the using the Latin adjective *probabilis* and verb *probare* to describe Carneades's position. The basic senses of these words are "persuasive," "be persuaded," "worthy of approval," and "approve" respectively, and so just as the convincing impression invites one to be persuaded by it and to rely on its content in thought and action, the probable impression invites one to approve of it and to rely on its content.³

Later in the tradition, Sextus Empiricus, in some of his remarks on Carneades, provides an example from medicine that confirms Cicero's suggestion that Carneades thought of following the convincing impression as the natural way people in ordinary life form their beliefs. Sextus says that "just as some doctors do not deduce that it is a true case of fever from one symptom only – but from a concurrence, such as that of a high temperature with a rapid pulse and ulcerous joints and flushing and thirst and analogous symptoms, so also the Academic forms his judgment of truth by the concurrence of impressions, and when none of the impressions in the concurrence provokes in him a suspicion of its falsity he asserts that the impression is true." (*M* VII.179–180.) The doctor, like the ordinary person, depending on how much is at stake in the circumstances, tests his

³ Michael Frede, "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge" (*The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*), p. 142.

impression before relying on it. He looks again, checks with other people, and so on, and if the impression still seems right after having been given the appropriate consideration, he assents to it because he has found it to be convincing.

This way of understanding what it is to follow the convincing impression admits of different interpretations. Clitomachus, in his attempt to understand Carneades, thought that to follow the convincing or the probable is a matter of saying 'yes' and 'no' to certain impressions:

After expounding this, he added that the wise person is said to suspend assent in two senses: in one sense, when it is understood that he will assent to nothing at all; in another, when he restrains himself from replying in order to approve or disapprove of something, so that he says neither 'yes' nor 'no' to anything. Given this distinction, the wise person accepts the former, with the result that he never assents; but keeps control over the latter, with the result that, by following what is persuasive wherever that is present or deficient, he is able to reply 'yes' or 'no.' Further, Clitomachus said, since the person who keeps himself from assenting to anything nevertheless wants to move and act, there remain impressions of the kind by which we are excited to action; and, in the same way, there remain responses which we can use when questioned on either side, by just following the appropriate impression, provided we do so without assent. Yet not all impressions of this kind are approved, but only those which are not impeded by anything. (*Acad.* 2.104.)

Philo, on the other hand, had a different interpretation. Cicero uses Catulus to represent the position of the Philonian Academy, and the character invokes this opposing interpretation of Carneades's convincing impression in his remarks in the following passage:

Then Catulus said: 'What do I think? I return to my father's position – which he at least used to say was Carneadian – so that I take it that nothing can be known, although I think that the sage will assent to a non-cateleptic impression, i.e., he will opine, but in such a way that he understands that he is opining and realizes that there is nothing which can be apprehended or known. Hence, while I † ... †⁴ approve this suspension of judgment over all things, I vehemently assent to that other position, that there is nothing which can be perceived.'⁵ (2.148.)

Philo seems to have thought that Carneades allows the skeptic to assent as long as such belief formation is accompanied by the clear awareness and realization that nothing can be known and therefore, presumably, that the wise man should withhold assent.

As I understand the central point in Frede's interpretation of this dispute within the Academy, these two interpretations turn on their different understandings

⁴ The text here is corrupt. It can be read as asserting either the rejection or the affirmation of the commitment to the suspension of judgment. (For the various emendations, see n. 13 on p. 80 of Charles Brittain's *Philo of Larissa. The Last of the Academic Sceptics* (Oxford University Press, 2001). Frede affirms the commitment in his translation. ("The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent," p. 140.) About Frede's decision to retain the commitment, Burnyeat says "I doubt the translation and have difficulty understanding the result." ("Antipater and Self-Refutation" (*Assent and Argument. Studies in Cicero's Academic Books*. (Proceedings of the 7th Symposium Hellenisticum (Utrecht, August 21–25, 1995)), edited by Brad Inwood & Jaap Mansfeld (Brill, 1997), 277–310), n. 81 on pp. 306–307.)

⁵ Brittain provides these translations in *Philo of Larissa*. (N. 3 on p. 75 and p. 80.)

of what the convincing or probable impression is. According to the stronger interpretation, the interpretation Philo holds against Clitomachus, the analysis of convincingness is in terms of modal reliability and the counterfactual connection to truth. On this interpretation, an impression is convincing and probable in a given circumstance just in case

- (P) In the circumstance it is likely that the propositional content of the impression is true.

Following the convincing and the probable is not a dogmatic method and does not issue in infallible beliefs, but it does issue in modally reliable beliefs. According to the weaker interpretation, the interpretation Clitomachus holds, an impression is convincing and probable in a given circumstance just in case

- (C) In the circumstance the epistemic norms permit one to assent to the impression and to rely on its propositional content.

As Frede himself puts the point in setting out and contrasting the two interpretations, on the weaker interpretation "(t)he probable is just the plausible":

Now there are two different interpretations of, and attitudes toward, the probable. These correspond to two different interpretations of Carneades' so-called practical criterion. Asked how the sceptic will know what to do if he universally withholds assent, Carneades points out that he will just follow the probable, what seems to be the case, and depending on the importance of the matter he will go through certain procedures to make sure that his impression is relatively reliable. It is clear that Carneades' account, first of all, is a dialectical move against a dogmatic objection and thus does not commit him to any view at all. But I also think that it does reflect Carneades' view of how people actually go about gaining an impression they are willing to rely on. And taken this way, it admits of two interpretations. It may be taken in just the sense that this is how human beings in general seem to proceed, or it may be taken in the sense that this is how one ought to proceed if one wants to get a reliable impression, one which if not true, at least has a good chance to be true. Whereas on the first interpretation it is just noted that human beings, as a matter of fact, go about considering matters in a certain way when in doubt, on the second interpretation proper consideration is regarded as conferring some epistemological status on the impression thus arrived at: it at least has a good chance to be true. And thus, though it is agreed on all sides that the probable is that which seems to be the case, this is interpreted in two different ways. On one interpretation what on due consideration appears to be the case offers us some guidance about what is actually true. Though we are in no position to say it is true, we may expect it to have a good chance of being true, to be like the truth (*versimilis*), or else to be the truth itself (Cic., *Acad.* II.7; 32; 66; 99; 107). On the other interpretation, the fact that something appears to be the case goes no way to show that it is true; however much it appears to be the case, this does not itself make it any more likely to be true. The probable is just the plausible, and there is no reason to assume that plausibility and truth, or even evidence and truth, go hand in hand.⁶

⁶ "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent," pp. 141-142.

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The propositional content of a convincing and probable impression is "reliable," on the weaker Clitomachian interpretation, but this reliability is just permission to rely on. It is not the modal claim that more often than not in counterfactual circumstances assent to the convincing and probable impression is assent to an impression whose propositional content is true.

This reading of the two passages in Cicero makes good sense of Catulus's vehement assent. On the Philonian interpretation, the skeptic supposes that following the convincing and the probable is a modally reliable way of having true beliefs and that the more carefully he considers his impressions the more reliable his beliefs become. For this reason, because he takes himself to have very carefully and thoroughly considered whether anything can be known, Catulus says that he "vehemently assents" to the impression that nothing can be known. In this way, by permitting vehement assent, the Philonian skeptic has taken a step toward dogmatism. As Frede himself puts the point, "(t)hese remarks reveal their dogmatism in the vehemence with which Catulus assents to the impression that nothing can be known, in the strong attachment which he has to this view, attachment of a kind which is quite alien to the classical skeptic ... (, the skeptic who assents according to the Clitomachian interpretation)." ⁷

Given this understanding of the Philonian interpretation and Catulus's vehement assent, one way to bring Clitomachus into the debate is to take him to suppose that Carneades thought that there is an Academic conception of wisdom that permits the skeptic to assent to an impression not because his method of assent regulation and belief formation is reliable in the modal sense, but because in the circumstances the norms of following the convincing and the probable permit him to assent to the impression and to rely on its propositional content as a basis for decision and action. Carneades, as Clitomachus seems to have understood him, thought that people in ordinary everyday life internalize epistemic norms for belief formation, that following these norms is a matter of gaining convincing and probable impressions, and that to say an impression is convincing and probable is just to say that these norms permit one to assent to the impression and to rely on its propositional content. Such a method of assent regulation and belief formation may be said to produce "reliable" beliefs, but this reliability is not the modal reliability that Philo seems to have had in mind in his interpretation.

Philo won out over Clitomachus within the Academy, but Aenesidemus seems to have thought that this was a serious mistake. He complained that the Academy had become dogmatic,⁸ founded a breakaway movement under the name of 'Pyrrhonism,' and this movement seems to have been an attempt to establish something like the Clitomachian interpretation as the correct account of skepticism. The evidence for this connection between Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism depends in large part on Sextus Empiricus. In his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism (PH)*, he shows himself to be part of a skeptical tradition that was keenly aware

⁷ "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent," p. 140.

⁸ Photius, *Bibliotheca* 212.170a14-22. For some discussion of this passage, see Jonathan Barnes's "Antiochus of Ascalon" (*Philosophia Togata. Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society*, edited by Miriam Griffin and Jonathan Barnes (Oxford University Press, 1989), 51-96), pp. 93-94.)

of the need to explain why the skeptic in his school who follows appearances is not guilty of the charge that Aenesidemus leveled against his colleagues in the Academy:

We say that the sceptic does not dogmatize, not in the sense of 'belief' in which some say, speaking quite generally, a belief ($\delta\acute{o}\gamma\mu\alpha$) consists in consenting to a thing; for the sceptic does assent to such affections which necessarily result when things appear to him in certain ways; he would not, for example, say when he is hot or cold, say, 'I believe that I am not hot (cold)'; we rather say, he does not dogmatize, in the sense of 'belief,' in which some say a belief consists in assenting to one of the non-evident things which the sciences have as their objects of inquiry; for the Pyrrhonian assents to nothing that is non-evident.⁹ (I.13.)

Like Clitomachus and Philo before him, Sextus seems to think that dogmatizing is a certain method of assent that he and the Pyrrhonians avoid. It is not clear how exactly Sextus understood the difference between the dogmatic and non-dogmatic methods, but given the facts about Aenesidemus and his succession from the Academy to reestablish skepticism under the name of "Pyrrhonism," Frede thinks that it is a "possibility" that the orthodoxy in ancient skepticism runs through Clitomachus to the Pyrrhonians and that Philo's victory over Clitomachus marked the beginning of a renewed interest in less skeptical varieties of Platonism.¹⁰ In this case, the orthodoxy in ancient skepticism is not that the skeptic retreats from believing and somehow just follows appearances; rather, it is that the skeptic retreats to the method of belief formation that Carneades talked about and Clitomachus struggled to clarify.

The more standard interpretation of ancient skepticism is the one Burnyeat has defended. He agrees with Frede's general picture of the history of Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism, but he understands Clitomachus very differently. With respect to the report in Cicero's *Academica*, Burnyeat maintains "that the text twice describes saying 'Yes' to *probabilia* as a way of not assenting to anything ..."¹¹

⁹ Frede gives this translation. ("The Sceptic's Beliefs," pp. 16-17.)

¹⁰ "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent," p. 141. Another important piece of evidence that helps to confirm this possibility is Sextus's use of the phrases $\delta\sigma\omicron\nu$ $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota$ $\tau\tilde{\omega}$ $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omega$ and $\delta\sigma\omicron\nu$ $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota$ $\tau\tilde{\omega}$ $\phi\iota\lambda\omicron\sigma\phi\omega$ $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omega$ to qualify the way in which the skeptic withholds assent. He says, e.g., that "(H)oney appears to us to be sweet (and this we grant, for we perceive sweetness through the senses), but whether it is also sweet $\delta\sigma\omicron\nu$ $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota$ $\tau\tilde{\omega}$ $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omega$ is for us a matter of doubt ..." (*PH* I 20; cf. I 215) and that "(S)o far as the evidence of phenomena goes it seems that motion exists, whereas $\delta\sigma\omicron\nu$ $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota$ $\tau\tilde{\omega}$ $\phi\iota\lambda\omicron\sigma\phi\omega$ $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omega$ it would seem not to exist" (*PH* III.65; cf. II.26). Frede discusses these passages in "The Sceptic's Beliefs" on pp. 10-11 and in "The Sceptics Two Kinds of Assent" on p. 133. Burnyeat is not convinced. He takes the contrast so that it favors his interpretation. He says that "(j)ust how restrictive these qualifications are depends on what they are contrasted with, and in every case the contrast is with how things appear, where this, as we have seen, is to be taken non-epistemically." He goes on to say that "(a)ll we are left with, then, is a passive impression (*phantasia*) or experience (*pathos*), expressed in a statement which makes no truth-claim about what is the case." ("Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?," p. 51.) For another discussion of the import of these phrases in Sextus, see "The $\delta\sigma\omicron\nu$ $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota$ $\tau\tilde{\omega}$ $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omega$ formula in Sextus Empiricus" (*Papers in Hellenistic philosophy, Jacques Brunschwig* in *Review of the Metaphysics*, 52 (1998), 132-134.

¹¹ "Antipater and Self-Refutation," pp. 303-304. Cf. n. 66 on p. 302: "... the distinction just made is between two kinds of *non*-assent, two ways of understanding what it means to withhold assent."

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than Clitomachus (or Antiochus) to claim the heritage of both Socrates and Plato."¹⁷

Moreover, aside from the difficulty of the notion of "qualified non-assent," it is hard not to be stunned by the idea of living without beliefs. This is an extremely radical idea, and Sextus Empiricus seems to portray the Pyrrhonian skeptic as an enlightened man of common sense. In the passage in which he explains that the skeptic can assent but that such assent is not what the dogmatic philosophers have in mind when they talk about science, Sextus would seem to mean that the skeptic is content with, and forms his beliefs in, the ordinary ways that people generally employ to determine whether what appears to them to be the case actually is the case. This would also seem to be his point in *PH* I.23-24 when he says that "(a)ttending to the appearances, we live undogmatically in accordance with the ordinary ways life ..." He explains that the Pyrrhonian skeptic, in following appearances, lives his life just like an ordinary person except that he does it undogmatically. He does not explain what he means by "undogmatically," but given that the dogmatic philosophers tried to regulate their assent so that it is infallible and their beliefs are immune to revision, it is natural to conclude that Sextus's point is that the skeptic is not worried by, and has come to terms with, the fact that the impressions to which he assents are such that he may not be able to steer his way past all future impressions that the propositional content of his initial impression may have been false.

There is confirmation for this interpretation in *PH* I.12 and 26 where Sextus explains how someone gets started in Pyrrhonian skepticism. He says that the person would start out "to philosophize," i.e., "to love wisdom," but would be unable to sustain his various positions and to hold them against all impressions and arguments for contrary conclusions. Thus, after having tried and failed to become wise by loving wisdom, the person comes to terms with and makes peace with the fact that his method of assent and belief formation is not dogmatic. He acquiesces in and is content with the ordinary ways of forming beliefs. This acquiescence, to his surprise, brings him the "tranquillity in believing" he had sought in philosophy in the first place.

Not only does Sextus Empiricus align the skeptic with enlightened common sense, it is difficult to see what could motivate him to suppose that a person must take the drastic step of giving up on belief entirely if he is to become a skeptic. Such a person would not be dogmatic, if indeed it really is humanly possible to actually rid oneself of all beliefs and give up on believing altogether, but a much less drastic solution seems possible. If skepticism is opposed to dogmatism, then a person can become a skeptic by becoming a fallibilist.

Since in these ways the more standard interpretation of ancient skepticism looks implausible, one would think that there must be good arguments against Frede's interpretation. Otherwise, the more standard interpretation would seem to have acquired its stature as the orthodox interpretation of Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian skepticism through a false dilemma. Despite its problems, this interpretation

¹⁷ "Antipater and Self-Refutation," p. 309.

would have come to seem like the only real option because it was not appreciated, perhaps not even altogether in the Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian tradition itself, that non-dogmatism or fallibilism comes in two forms. It can take a stronger external form, as it does in the Philonian interpretation of what it is to follow the convincing and probable, or it can take a weaker internal form, as it does in the Clitomachian interpretation.

Burnyeat seems to have put forward three main arguments against Frede's interpretation. The first is that Frede's interpretation is obscure or open to quick refutation. The alleged obscurity lies in the concept of belief that the Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian tradition allows itself on Frede's interpretation. Burnyeat admits that there is a "philosophical question of considerable interest, the question whether and in what terms a distinction between nondogmatic and dogmatic belief can be made out," but he leaves his readers to conclude that the question must be answered in the negative. He seems to say that the most plausible alternative supposes "that nondogmatic belief is belief not grounded in or responsive to reasons and reasoning – but that will bring with it a breaking of the connection between belief and truth." He says, however, that he does not think that "there is a notion of belief which lacks this connection with truth, and, in a more complicated way, with reason." He does not argue for this understanding of belief, other to say that on this point he is in agreement with David Hume, but he does "contend" that "Sextus has no other notion of belief than the accepting of something as true."¹⁸ Thus, as Burnyeat sees it, Frede is caught in a dilemma. If assent is understood in terms of truth, it is a form of dogmatism. If assent is not understood in terms of truth, it is not easily recognizable as belief. So, either way, Frede's interpretation of the Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian tradition is unacceptable.

Frede does present his interpretation confusingly,¹⁹ and the method he attributes to the Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian tradition does raise some philosophical questions, but I do not think that Burnyeat's dilemma shows that Frede is mistaken. Burnyeat suggests that the skeptic will have beliefs that are "not grounded in or responsive to reasons and reasoning," but this seems wrong to me. In giving assent in terms of the convincing and the probable, the skeptic in the Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian tradition is not adopting beliefs that are insensitive to justification. He is not irrational. The skeptic in this tradition follows the ordinary methods of justification. He assents to an impression after it has been given due consideration in terms of the epistemic norms of the convincing and the probable, whatever they are. He comes to believe in the truth of various propositions by assenting to his impressions in terms of these norms, and so his assent to the convincing and probable impression is understood in terms of truth.

¹⁸ "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" p. 53. Cf. "Antipater and Self-Refutation," n. 81 on pp. 306–307.

¹⁹ In "The Sceptic's Beliefs," Frede says that "although there is a sense in which the sceptic 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 ..." (p. 9). In "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent," Frede draws the distinction this way. "To have a view is to find oneself being left with an impression, to find oneself having an impression after having considered the matter, maybe even for a long time, carefully, diligently, the way one considers matters depending on the importance

Burnyeat suggests that this understanding of assent will "count as dogmatizing" because assent issues in belief and belief is belief in the truth of a proposition, but this also seems wrong to me. The point is not that believing is not believing in the truth of a proposition. Nor is it that belief formation is divorced from justification; rather, it is that epistemic justification is not analyzed in terms of truth. The Philonian skeptic can apparently give a persuasive answer to the question of why he regulates his assent in terms of the convincing and the probable. He can say that he assents to such impressions because it is likely that the propositional content of such impressions is true. The Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian skeptic, by contrast, cannot say this. He can only say that he relies on the convincing and the probable impressions because they seem to be the impressions he should rely on in living his life. He cannot make the modal claim about what would happen in counterfactual circumstances, but I do not see that this difference shows that his attempt to regulate his assent in terms of the convincing and the probable cannot be a matter of having the attitude of belief toward the content of the impressions he relies on.

The second of Burnyeat's three arguments is that Frede's interpretation must be mistaken because the Pyrrhonian skeptic cannot permit any beliefs, even beliefs that are held fallibly, without directly contradicting his prescription for tranquility and peace of mind. "Sextus," he says, "connects dogmatism with the claims that something is (simply) true, and he needs to do so if he is to undercut the ordinary man's hopes and fears."²⁰ If the Pyrrhonian skeptic could hold beliefs, then, like the ordinary man, he could be agitated because, say, he was not famous but believed that fame was the good in life, and so Burnyeat concludes that Pyrrhonian skepticism, as Frede understands it, would clearly not lead to the tranquility that is its end.

one attaches to them. But however carefully one has considered a matter it does not follow that the impression one is left with is true, nor that one thinks that it is true, let alone that one thinks that it meets the standards which the dogmatic philosophers claim it has to meet if one is to think of it as true. To make a claim, on the other hand, is to subject oneself to certain canons. It does, e.g., require that one should think that one's impression is true and that one has the appropriate kind of reason for thinking it to be true. To be left with an impression or thought that *p*, on the other hand, does not involve the further thought that it is true that *p*, let alone the yet further thought that one has reason to think that *p*, that it is reasonable that *p*." (p. 133.) "The dogmatic sceptic seems to take the view that the only kind of assent which is illegitimate is assent of the kind where one takes something to be true, i.e., commits oneself to a belief about what will come out as true on the true theory of things, about what would turn out to be true if one really knew what things are like. And since it is one thing to take something to be true and quite another to take it to be probable, he thinks it is quite legitimate to give the kind of assent to an impression which would consist in taking it to be probable. And though we may not be able to ascertain what is to count as true, we can consider the matter with appropriate care and thus arrive at an impression which is probable and then assent to it as probable. But to take something to be probable is, on this interpretation of the probable, to take it to be either true or at least sufficiently like what is true." (Pp. 142-143.)

²⁰ "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" p. 52. Cf. pp. 45-46, "The Sceptic in His Place and Time" (*The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*), pp. 112-113, and "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed" (*Idealism, Past and Present*, edited by G. Vesey (Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures 13, Cambridge 1982), 19-50), p. 37.

This argument, however, is not one that Frede should find persuasive because it overlooks a central point in his work on reason in the ancients. The skeptic's prescription for tranquillity, as Frede understands it, is a prescription for the tranquillity that dogmatic philosophy promises but fails to deliver. The dogmatic schools of philosophy promise to eliminate the agitation that results from the worry that one's life has inadvertently been ruined by false beliefs. It is this worry that drives the search for an infallible method of assent and belief formation, and it is this worry that Frede supposes that skepticism promises to relieve:

What fundamentally distinguishes the sceptic from other people are not the beliefs he has but his attitude toward them. He no longer has the more or less naive and partially dogmatic attitude of the 'ordinary' man; his relation to his beliefs is permeated by the awareness that things are quite possibly different in reality, but this possibility no longer worries him. This distinguishes him from the dogmatist who is so worried by the question, how are things in reality, that he succumbs to the illusion that reason could guarantee the truth of his beliefs, could give him the knowledge which would be secure because of his awareness that things could not, in reality, be different from the way reason says they are.²¹

The skeptic no longer thinks that infallibilism is within his reach, and so although he realizes that "things are quite possibly different in reality," this possibility about his beliefs is no longer a source of anxiety. The skeptic acquiesces in the ordinary methods of assent.

Burnyeat's final argument is that Frede's interpretation is anachronistic. Burnyeat argues that Frede wrongly makes Pyrrhonian skepticism "something very like transcendental scepticism" and thus post-Kantian in outlook.²² The problem, according to Burnyeat, is that Sextus would not have thought that "empirical" reasons justify assent to an impression in the face of the "transcendental" and "philosophical" reasons for doubt and for not assenting to the impression. Sextus, says Burnyeat, because he has no Kant in his background, is incapable of such insulation. Burnyeat says that Sextus would have felt the force of the "philosophical" arguments and would have employed "the standard sceptic retreat to a statement which makes no truth-claim, for which, consequently, reasons and legitimacy cannot be demanded."²³

Burnyeat is certainly correct to resist interpretations that read modern philosophical views back into the ancient philosophers, but it seems to me that Kantian insulation is not essential to Frede's interpretation. As I have understood Frede's interpretation of the skepticism in the Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian tradition, it is not the case that the skeptic's methods of assent regulation and belief formation permit assent no matter what alternatives are salient in the circumstance. The skeptic in the Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian tradition might be in a situation in which "philosophical" reasons for doubt are salient and impede assent. Indeed, the same is true of the skeptic in the Philonian tradition. Since fallibilism is consistent with this possibility, both in its stronger Philonian form and in its weaker Clitomachian

²¹ "The Sceptic's Beliefs," p. 23. Cf. "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent," p. 151.

²² "The Sceptic in His Place and Time," p. 123.

²³ "The Sceptic in His Place and Time," p. 113.

form, it does not appear to me that Frede's interpretation is anachronistic in the way that Burnyeat maintains.

Thus, it seems to me that Burnyeat arguments against Frede's interpretation are inconclusive. I do not take this to show that Frede's interpretation is correct, but I think that it does show that the more standard interpretation of ancient skepticism should no longer be seen as the only reasonable interpretation of the history. If Frede, as I have understood him, is correct about ancient skepticism, then the ancient skeptics are much more interesting than is usually thought. As I have understood Frede's interpretation, the skeptics in the Clitomachian-Pyrrhonian tradition make an important contribution to the history of epistemology. They took some of the first pioneering steps in working out the philosophical view that epistemic justification is a matter of whether a belief is the outcome of a correct cognitive process and that correctness here need not and perhaps should not be understood in terms of modal reliability.