

# The Scope and Type of Sceptical Assent

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## 1 Introduction

Pyrrhonian Sceptics are famous for their admonition to suspend judgment, for ἐποχή. Much debate in recent scholarship has centered on trying to determine what the admonition amounts to. It is clear that the admonition is to suspend *belief*.<sup>1</sup> But would the sceptic have us suspend belief on *all* matters, or only some? Does the admonition entail that the sceptic will have no beliefs, or will some beliefs survive the admonition?

In what follows, my aim will be primarily expository. In the first part of the paper I will lay out two approaches, the one-assent approach and the two-assent approach, that may be taken to deciding whether the Pyrrhonian sceptic has beliefs. In the second part of the paper, I will explore an interpretive issue regarding the difference between Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism, especially as this difference was understood by the Pyrrhonists. I will argue that sorting out this issue along the lines suggested by Michael Frede provides a reason to prefer the two-assent approach.

Sceptical method, such as it is<sup>2</sup>, Sextus tells us, is this. Sceptics cultivate

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<sup>1</sup>Sextus does not usually tell us what we ought to suspend. Typically, Sextus uses the verb ἐπόχω and its noun form ἐποχή, unaccompanied by an object. In other words, he typically admonishes us to *suspend*, and tells us how to achieve *suspension*. By way of definition, he says that ἐποχή is “a standstill of the intellect (διανοίας), owing to which we neither reject (ἄρομεν) nor posit (τίθεμεν) anything.” [PH, 1.10]

<sup>2</sup>I say “such as it is” because even in outlining the sceptical persuasion, Sextus warns the reader that he will not affirm that what he says about scepticism will hold completely, but that he is merely announcing how things appear to him at the moment. [PH, 1.4]

an ability to create equipollent oppositions. Take any claim, any proposition, and the sceptic will show you a conflicting claim or proposition. Whatever you have to say in favor of your first proposition, the sceptic will counter it with an equally strong consideration favoring the conflicting proposition [PH, 8-10]. This ability is so thoroughly cultivated that the sceptics have a catalog of arguments, the sceptical modes, which they claim will generate an equipollent consideration for any view. So when the sceptic is faced with a view, offered by someone else, or even a view the sceptic himself is entertaining, in the modes he finds a consideration to counter that view [PH, 1.31ff]. Faced with equipollence at every turn, the sceptic finds himself unable to assent to or deny any claim. He cannot find reasons sufficient to bring him down on one side of an issue or the other. So, as a consequence, he must suspend.

Why does the sceptic cultivate this ability? Ultimately, he seeks ἀταραξία, or tranquility. The sceptic has found that freeing himself of opinions also frees him from anxiety and perturbedness. So he applies his sceptical modes, is brought to suspension, and thereby attains tranquility.<sup>3</sup>

So one might wonder: will the sceptic's method render him an unbeliever; will the method leave him with no beliefs?<sup>4</sup> If it does, the ἐποχή of the sceptic is *global*, the scope of Pyrrhonian scepticism is *wide*. If not, if the method leaves some beliefs intact, the scope of the sceptic's ἐποχή is *narrow*; it does not extend to some beliefs. Call the problem of whether ἐποχή is wide or narrow the problem of *scope*. Barnes [2, p. 61] famously calls the believing sceptic *urbane* and the sceptic with no beliefs *rustic*. It will be convenient to use this terminology from time to time.

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<sup>3</sup>Much has been written about the sceptic's motivations [13, 14]. One might wonder, for example, what would motivate the sceptic to continue inquiry if he has achieved equipollence with respect to all views he has seen so far. Why not give up inquiry in order to remain tranquil? Sextus suggests [PH, 1.25-30] that tranquility was discovered by happy accident during the course of routine and sincere philosophical investigation, suggesting the sceptic also values inquiry for its own sake. But this raises the further question: does the sceptic inquire to attain tranquility, or to arrive at truth?

<sup>4</sup>The question is not whether the sceptic's method will be successful in doing what the sceptic claims it will do, but whether the sceptic himself thinks the method will eradicate belief.

## 2 Assenting to Appearances

What gives rise to the debate over whether the sceptic is rustic or urbane is the following passage from Sextus:

When we say that Sceptics do not hold beliefs ( $\mu\eta$  δογματίζειν), we do not take ‘belief’ (δόγμα) in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing in something; for Sceptics assent (συγκατατίθεται)<sup>5</sup> to the feelings 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 (συγκατάθεσιν) to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences; for Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear. [PH, 1.13]<sup>6</sup>

On the basis of this passage alone, we have reason to understand the sceptic’s admonition to withhold assent as an admonition to avoid believing certain things, namely those things that are the “unclear ” objects of investigation. Other things, things forced on us by appearances, we are free to believe.<sup>7</sup> On this view, investigation provides the opportunity to apply the modes. When we investigate, we employ various devices of justification: we give arguments, we make observations, and such like. But for any argument we give, or any observation we make, according to the modes, there is some equipollent consideration to counter it. In this way, we are unable to acquire sufficient justification for believing any matter of investigation and so we must suspend judgment. However, some things appear to us to be the case with a certain degree of force. We do not need to investigate these things for them to appear to us a certain way (unclear things, it would seem, do not appear in any way to us precisely because they are unclear – they require investigation). In fact, investigation would be required in order to overturn they way they appear, to counter the force of the appearance. Are we allowed

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<sup>5</sup>Singular in the Greek.

<sup>6</sup>I use the English of Barnes and Annas [1], rather than Bury, for PH unless otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup>The Greek here permits this interpretation. Sextus uses the same noun, δόγμα, and its related verb form δογματίζειν, to describe each kind of assent. He also uses συγκατατίθεσθαι for each token of ‘assent’.

to believe these things?

It is tempting to think that we are, on the basis of 1.13. But there is a consideration that ought to give us pause. Some of the more infamous modes make much of the fact that things appear differently to people in different conditions or with different constitutions, or to different animals. So surely the modes apply to appearances as much as they do to matters of investigation. But consider this near relation of 1.13:

Those who say the Sceptics reject what is apparent have not, I think, listened to what we say. As we said before, we do not overturn anything which leads us, without our willing it, to assent (συγκατάθεσιν) in accordance with a passive appearance (φαντασίαν παθητικήν) – and these things are precisely what is apparent. When we investigate whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant (δίδομεν) that they appear (φαίνεται), and what we investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about the apparent – and this is different from investigating what is apparent itself. For example, it appears to us that honey sweetens (we concede this inasmuch as we are sweetened in a perceptual way); but whether (as far as the argument goes)<sup>8</sup> it is actually sweet is something we investigate – and this is not what is apparent but something said about what is apparent. [PH, 1.19-20]

Here the distinction between appearances and the objects of investigation is made clearer. Things appear a certain way, and it is natural to wonder whether they *are in fact* the way they appear. But to find out we must undertake investigation. And when we investigate, it is not an appearance we investigate, but what lies behind it.<sup>9</sup> In fact, it is hard to understand what it would mean to investigate an appearance. You could not investigate whether something really appeared – *that* it appears settles the question. But you can investigate whether the thing causing the appearance resembles the appearance, or whether *there is* something causing the appearance, or whether the underlying thing appears similarly to others; i.e., you can investigate things said *about* the appearance.<sup>10</sup> And this is where the modes come in: is it

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<sup>8</sup>See note 12 on page 6.

<sup>9</sup>(τὸ ὑποκείμενον as Sextus calls it. Literally, an ‘underlying thing.’)

<sup>10</sup>When Sextus says we investigate things said about an appearance, I think he must mean things about the relation of the appearances to other things—the world, the mind, the

true that honey is sweet? Well, it appears sweet to me, but to  $x$  it does not appear sweet. If honey's appearing sweet to me is reason to think it really is sweet, then that reason is countered by the fact that it does not appear sweet to  $x$ . So when I investigate something said about the appearance, the content of the appearance itself is not sufficient to settle questions *about* the appearance. But it is hard to see how the modes will have much bearing on the appearance itself. How does considering how honey appears to  $x$  have any bearing on how honey appears to me? The modes seem only to have force when the matter is escalated to a question *about* an appearance.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.1 Non-Dogmatic Belief

Even if the modes are not brought to bear on the appearances Sextus describes here, the question is still intact: is acquiescing to appearances an epistemic act? Does the sceptic have beliefs about what appears insofar as he does not overturn these appearances? Frede [9] has suggested these grantings of appearance statements are beliefs. He suggests we understand the sceptic's distinction between the two senses of δόγμα in the following way.

Consider a typical appearance statement: honey appears sweet. In non-philosophical contexts, people would scarcely notice a difference between this statement and the statement 'honey is sweet'. Were one to vacillate between the two in an ordinary conversation (with non-philosophers) no one would notice the vacillation. Sextus remarks on the tendency, even for the sceptic, to make such vacillations. Even the sceptic sometimes says 'is' when he means 'appears' [PH, 1.135, 1.198, 1.200]; [M, xi.19]. Sometimes, though, when we say 'is', we use it in a special strong sense; we mean to contrast what *is* the case with what *merely appears* to be the case.

Frede suggests that when we use 'is' in the weaker sense, it is still a perfectly good sense of 'is': we do in fact mean *is*; we do in fact mean to

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object which appears. I think he cannot mean to include descriptions of the content of the appearance, e.g., sweetness, redness, warmth, even though to say "This is an appearance of red" is in some sense to say something about an appearance.

<sup>11</sup>This makes Sextus' remarks at PH 1.8ff puzzling. Here he claims that the ability of the sceptic is to oppose appearances and judgments: "Ἔστι δὲ ἡ σκεπτικὴ δύναμις ἀντιθετικὴ φαινόμενων τε καὶ νοουμένων..."

suggest that things *are* a certain way. But we do not mean that things *really are* that way, as we might have discovered after some kind of investigation, and that they *are* that way as opposed to *merely appearing* that way. So if ‘honey appears sweet’ can be used equivalently to ‘honey is sweet’, where ‘is’ is used in the weaker sense, then ‘x appears y’ is a way of claiming that something is the case. [9, p. 9]

Now let us return to PH 1.20. Frede encourages us to pay close attention to what Sextus tells us about assent to appearance statements:

Sextus does indeed say that the sceptic suspends judgment on how things are. Yet, it is important to note how he qualifies this claim – insofar as it is a matter of reason.<sup>12</sup> The qualification or restriction is not that the sceptic suspends judgment about how things are but not about how they appear; the restriction, rather, is that the sceptic suspends judgment about how things are in certain respect. That, however, implies that there is another respect in which the sceptic does not suspend judgment about how things are. Once we have noticed this curious restriction here, we can see that such restrictions, “ὅσον ἐπὶ + dative”, occur again and again. . . This construction also occurs in the gloss on the one sense of ‘is’ which we considered above. There we had, “if [honey] also is sweet, to the extent that this is a matter of reason [ὅσον ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ], we call into question.” We may, thus, assume that the import of this restriction is that the sceptic suspends judgment on how things really are; but that is not the same as claiming that the sceptic suspends judgment on how things are without any restriction. [9, p. 11]

So the picture Frede paints is like this: the sceptic assents to statements about how things appear, which are statements about how things are. But when a statement about things are is qualified in a certain way, when it is

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<sup>12</sup>It is a matter of some debate whether the phrase ὅσον ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ and similar qualifications in Sextus should be translated, as Frede translates, “as far as this is a matter of reason.” The problem in rendering the expression centers on λόγος, which has a wide variety of meanings in Greek, ranging from *word* and *story* to *argument*, *reason* and *logic*. As Brunschwig [3] points out, how we understand λόγος will depend largely on what the expression qualifies and what kind of qualification it is. But Frede is right that Sextus often uses the expression to qualify the kind of assent the sceptic should withhold. Brunschwig counts four strict occurrences (PH 1.20, 1.227, 3.48, 3.72); variations abound (PH 2.26, 2.104, 3.65, 3.81, et al.).

linked to justification, reason, and investigation, the sceptic will suspend, because, as we have noted, any reason or justification will be balanced by an equipollent one.

One might still reasonably inquire, though, whether assent to unqualified appearance statements is epistemic. Frede's response is to shift the burden of proof to the inquirer: why are these assents *not* beliefs? He says:

Suppose, for example, that a particular wine seems quite sweet to me... [Someone] might say that there is, in reality, no such thing as sweetness, no such thing as sweetness in the wine; the wine, rather, has certain chemical properties which, in normal circumstances, make it taste such that we call it sweet... Even if I accept this explanation, the wine will still seem sweet, and I shall still think that it is. Thus, in a sense, it will still be true that it does not merely seem as if the wine is sweet, even if I believe that, in reality, there is no such thing as sweetness. [9, p. 13]

Frede contrasts this kind of epistemic seeming with a non-epistemic case. Suppose I see an oar partially submerged in water. The oar will look bent. If I am told the oar is not bent, and it is explained to me why it appears so, Frede claims, though the oar will still seem bent, this seeming is non-epistemic [9, p.12].

Here is what I think he is getting at. Consider the oar. It appears bent. But we learn, upon investigation, after being informed of various abstruse matters of physics, that the oar is not bent. In other words, we learn, upon investigation, that a property we *thought* the oar had, it does not in fact have: it is not bent. So now when we say the oar appears bent, we say this while also believing the oar is not bent.

Now consider the wine. It appears at first sweet. But upon investigation, we learn that 'sweet' is not the best way to describe the characteristics of the wine – the wine *does in fact* have some properties that cause us to call it sweet. It just turns out that calling the wine sweet is less precise than it could be. So when we now claim that the wine appears sweet, we do so recognizing that there is something true of the wine that causes us to say it

is sweet – it has some set of properties that explain why we call the wine sweet. The oar, by contrast, has no properties that cause us to call it bent. It is an illusion that it appears bent, but it is not an illusion that the wine appears sweet.

There is a suggestion here that assent to some  $\sigma\epsilon\tau\lambda$  proposition determines whether the assent to the appearance is epistemic or not. In some way, the investigation confirms or disconfirms the veridicality of the appearance. But the sceptic will not grant assent to any  $\sigma\epsilon\tau\lambda$  matter. So all seemings are epistemic unless overturned by investigation. But they will never be overturned for the Pyrrhonist, so all his seemings are epistemic. In this way we can understand Frede to be drawing a distinction between dogmatic and non-dogmatic *belief*. If the sceptic assents at all, he believes, unless there is some good reason to think this assent is not belief. And Frede does not think there is.

## 2.2 Widening the Scope

There are still some good reasons, however, to reject this distinction between dogmatic and non-dogmatic beliefs. First, there is the purely historical reason that critics of Pyrrhonian scepticism commonly took the Pyrrhonian view to be that the sceptic has no beliefs [M, xi.162-163]. They claimed that a life without beliefs is impossible, and so the Pyrrhonian ideal of ἀταραξία, understood as a life without beliefs, is unattainable.<sup>13</sup> Second, one may simply reject Frede’s contention that assenting to appearances is epistemic. The way Frede construes such assent, there is little connection between non-dogmatic belief and justification. In the example Frede gives, one simply carries on believing wine is sweet *despite* accepting some reason for thinking it is not sweet. By the lights of most, it is hard to see how this could be a belief of

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<sup>13</sup>Of course, it is possible to read 1.19 as a direct response to this. When Sextus says, “Those who say the Sceptics reject what is apparent have not, I think, listened to what we say,” he may be attempting to correct an interpretive mistake made by his critics. “I know you think we have no beliefs, o critics, and accordingly you say we cannot live; but you have not listened to what we say.” And then he proceeds to explain in exactly what sense the sceptic has beliefs. In fact, this seems to be exactly what Sextus does at M xi.165, when he discusses the criticism.

any sort, since what it means to be epistemic is to be sensitive to justification (cf. Burnyeat, p. 53 [6]).

The third, and most significant, reason to reject Frede's view is clear evidence that Sextus himself took the scope of ἐποχή to be wide; Sextus himself thought that when the modes had been properly applied, the sceptic would have no beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Burnyeat [6] outlines such a case. Frede argues that appearance statements implicitly make claims that something is the case: 'honey appears sweet' means 'honey is sweet', using the unqualified sense of 'is', the 'is' unlinked to any investigation. And so to assent to 'honey appears sweet' is to take it to be the case that honey is sweet, independently of any investigation. Burnyeat argues that in order to for an appearance statement to involve a claim that something is the case, descriptions of appearances would need to implicitly make reference to both a mental and a physical component of the appearance, i.e., to the qualia involved in the appearance as well as to some cause of the appearance itself. But there is no reason to think this is the case, given the language Sextus uses to describe appearance statements.

The Greek verbs for 'sweeten', 'chill' and 'warm' that we see in PH 1.13 and 1.20 are all passive forms:

The sceptic, for example, being warmed (θερμαινόμενος) or being chilled (ψυχόμενος) would not say I seem not to be warmed (θερμαίνεσθαι) or to be chilled (ψύχεσθαι). [PH, 1.13]

For example, it appears to us that honey sweetens (γλυκάζειν, an active form).<sup>15</sup> This we will grant. For we are sweetened (γλυκαζόμεθα) perceptibly. [PH, 1.20]

The only safe conclusion we can draw from these descriptions of appearances is that they are affections, they are things that *happen* to us. In 1.19, Sextus claims that when we are led to assent by appearances, we are led (unwillingly) in accordance with a φαντασίαν παθητικήν, a passive appearance.

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<sup>14</sup>It is a separate issue whether, given his views, it is coherent for the Sextus to think this

<sup>15</sup>Alternatively, "For example, honey appears to us to sweeten." The use of the neuter τὸ μέλι and the infinitive γλυκάζειν make it possible for 'honey' to be either the nominative subject of the sentence or the accusative subject of an indirect statement.

Παθητικός derives from πάσχω, to suffer or undergo. So we know that to have an appearance is to suffer or undergo something. We cannot however conclude that implicit in these appearances is a notion that there is something causing us to suffer or undergo. The appearance tells us only that we are being affected in some way, and contains no information about what might be affecting us, including whether or not there *is* something affecting us [6, p. 49]. So there is some reason to think, contra Frede, that appearance statements are not epistemic, because they lack a necessary condition for being epistemic, namely an implicit reference to something beyond the qualia involved in the affection. So we cannot conclude that they claim that anything is the case.

### 2.3 Type

Burnyeat leaves us with the view that Sextus himself at least does not think the sceptic has beliefs, and thus that the scope of ἐποχή is wide. But if the sceptic is rustic, we must offer some alternative explanation for what Sextus says in PH 1.13 and 1.20 – for it is clear that the sceptic assents, but this assent, if Burnyeat is right, is not belief.

This introduces the problem of *type*: does the sceptic allow a single, epistemic notion of assent, or does he embrace two kinds of assent, one of them non-epistemic? As it easy to see by now, what one thinks about this problem will bear significantly on what one thinks about the problem of scope, and vice versa.<sup>16</sup> The main point in favor of a two-assent view is that it avoids all of the problems associated with thinking that assent to appearances is epistemic. The main difficulty of a two-assent view is making

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<sup>16</sup>It is worth noting that while one needs non-epistemic assent to account for the passages if one accepts wide ἐποχή, the converse is not true; just because we accept multiple kinds of assent does not mean that we must endorse wide ἐποχή. One might claim a three-tiered position for the sceptic: there are some things the sceptic never assents to, some he believes, and still others he non-epistemically grants. Barnes [2] suggests an interpretation along these lines. He argues that the sceptic withholds all assent from the esoteric doctrines of the dogmatists, he avows (in the Wittgensteinian sense) or expresses what he suffers or undergoes, but he believes the “sentences of breakfast time,” non-dogmatic propositions about ordinary matters. Of course, it is questionable whether avowals could count as assent (see Barnes’ notes 26, 29, 30).

out exactly what assent could be that is not epistemic; what could it mean to assent to a proposition if not to take it to be true? Thus, whether we approach the issue from the angle of scope or from the angle of type, in PH 1.13 and 1.19-20 Sextus forces us to face this problem: what is sceptical assent?

Let us put both types of assent on the table. Let us call epistemic assent  $\alpha$ -assent, and the non-epistemic kind  $\beta$ -assent. Let us further call those matters concerning which the sceptic withholds assents Type 1 matters; these are matters qualified by ὁσον ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ. Type 2 matters will be those concerning which the sceptic is allowed assent; these are matters expressed by appearance statements, unqualified by appeals to reason and justification.<sup>17</sup> We can then represent the problem of type with the following figure:

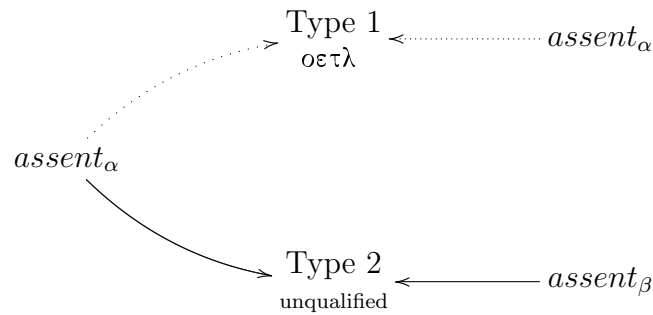


Figure 1: Two Ways to Understand Sceptical Assent

The left side represents the single-assent view, the right side the two-assent view. The broken arrows mark a forbidden assent, the solid ones a permitted assent.

If the Pyrrhonian sceptic has a notion of a non-epistemic kind of assent, what can we say about it? If it is characteristic of epistemic assent that, when one assents to  $p$ , one takes  $p$  to be true, then non-epistemic will somehow involve assent to  $p$  without taking  $p$  to be true. This makes the notion difficult to grasp; after all, what is assent if not taking to be true? Though much can be said on this topic, let it suffice for our purposes here to summarize an

<sup>17</sup>I call them ‘matters’, for now, to avoid engaging the sticky issue of ‘impressions’, cf. Frede [9, p. 15].

account of non-epistemic assent given by Frede [10].<sup>18</sup>

Non-epistemic assent can be understood as a kind of *acquiescence* to how things appear. It is involuntary; it does not involve any weighing of evidence that results in a *decision* to take  $p$  to be true. This acquiescence to  $p$  is often characterized by an action that presupposes  $p$  – if I sit in a chair, I have, without thinking about it, or making a decision to believe that there is a chair before me, acquiesced in the view that there is a chair before me.

An expert craftsman is still acting on his expert [views], even though he is not actually thinking of what he is doing when he is acting on them. Indeed thinking of them might interfere with his activity. But having finished his work he might well explain to us which views guided his activity. And for some of these views it might be true that this would be the first time he ever formulated them, either to himself or to somebody else. Nevertheless he could properly claim to have acted on them. [10, p. 136]

So non-epistemic assent is simply a failure to resist how something appears, which involves no investigation, and no explicit avowal of the truth of what one assents to. This seems to give the sceptic everything he needs to assent to an appearance along the lines Sextus suggests, but avoids some of the problems of taking sceptical assent to be epistemic.

### 3 Two Kinds of Scepticism

If Frede's account of how to assent without taking to be true is plausible, and especially if it is more plausible than his account of how we can have non-dogmatic beliefs, we have a good reason to attribute to Sextus a two-assent view: such a view avoids the troubles of the one-assent view, and seems to be in keeping with the general spirit of the *Outlines*.

I suggest, additionally, that attributing to Sextus a two-assent view helps make sense of an interpretive puzzle about the difference between Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism.

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<sup>18</sup>For how what Frede says here connects with the views of Frede I have already discussed, see note 28 on page 19 below.

### 3.1 A Little History

Though Academic scepticism has its roots in Pyrrho, who was said to have suspended judgment and lived without opinions [DL, 9.61-62], most count Arcesilaus (head of the Academy from 273 to 242 B.C.E.) as the first philosophically significant sceptic of the Hellenistic period. Arcesilaus, unhappy with the arcane doctrines of the Academy, doctrines largely in keeping with the speculative metaphysics of Plato's late work, decided to take the Academy in a new direction. This gave birth to the New Academy,<sup>19</sup> whose approach became entirely critical. Arcesilaus took himself to be returning the Academy to its Platonic roots, but he understood Platonism along the lines of the aporetic approach found in the early Socratic dialogues. His main activity was to adopt the assumptions of his rivals and show that their views led to contradictions, or that given their assumptions, there was an equipollent argument for an opposing view. In the face of these equipollences, Arcesilaus advocated ἐποχή. [Acad, 1.43-46]; [DL, 4.28]

The chief rivals of the Academy, the chief targets of their aporetic method, were the Stoics. Several centuries of antagonism led to various refinements in the views of the Stoics, and in the arguments the Academics used against them. There has been much debate about how to understand these refinements.<sup>20</sup> One thing, however, emerges fairly clearly. Academic sceptics argued that, given certain Stoic assumptions about the conditions under which granting assent is appropriate, the Stoic wise man will always withhold assent, because the relevant condition for giving assent will never be met. This condition was that when the wise man assents, he will only assent to a certain kind of impression, a cognitive impression (φαντασία καταληπτική). A cognitive impression is one bearing a mark of truth, which would be readily apparent to the wise man. Any other kind of assent, assent to a non-cognitive impression, will not count as knowledge (but mere opinion), and will not be granted by the wise man. [Acad, 2.66-7].

So a famous debate arose between Stoics and Academics concerning the possibility of a cognitive impression. Academics argued that there could

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<sup>19</sup>Also sometimes called the 'Middle Academy', reserving 'New' for the Academy under Carneades.

<sup>20</sup>A seminal paper on this topic is Couissin [8].

not be such a thing, since for any alleged cognitive impression, there will, or could, be an identical but false impression.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the Stoic sage would never grant assent, since there would never be a proper target of assent for him.

A common Stoic objection to the Academic position was that assent is required for action, so how could the wise man live if he never granted assent? Arcesilaus was said to have given a response to this objection, again drawn from Stoic assumptions (or so argue Long and Sedley, [11, pp. 455-456]). The Stoics distinguished between *impression*, *impulse*, and *assent*. An impression is what is presented to us by the mind, typically as a result of suffering an affection. Sometimes impressions give rise to impulses, which are movements of the soul that can lead to action. But assent need never enter the picture. Plutarch reports:

For action requires two things: an impression of something appropriate, and an impulse towards the appropriate object that has appeared; neither of these is in conflict with suspension of judgment. For the argument keeps us away from opinion (δόξα), not from impulse or impression. So whenever something appropriate has appeared, no opinion is needed to get us moving and proceeding towards it... (Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1122a-f, in [11], p. 450)

Under Carneades, a well-respected head of the Academy (circa 159 to 137 B.C.E.), the notion of the *persuasive* (πιθανόν),<sup>22</sup> or the convincing, became central to Academic thought. It is possible to take the πιθανόν to be a refinement on Arcesilaus' response to the Stoics inactivity objection, as a way of explaining to the Stoic how he may act without assent: the Stoic may be led to act by what is persuasive, where the persuasive is understood as a cause of impulse.

The πιθανόν has some curious features, however. Sextus, commenting on Carneades, tells us a convincing impression, in addition to appearing to be true with a certain intensity (M vii.166-75), will, in matters of importance, be “undiverted” (ἀπερίσπαστος) and “thoroughly explored” (διεξωδευμένη).

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<sup>21</sup>See Perin [12].

<sup>22</sup>From πείθω, to persuade. So τὸ πιθανόν is literally, “a persuasive thing.”

An undiverted impression is one whose apparent truth is not challenged by other relevant impressions; it coheres with other apparently true impressions. A thoroughly explored impression is one in which we

...meticulously examine each impression in the occurrence, in the way that happens at government assemblies, when the people cross-examine every candidate for political office or the judiciary, to see whether he is worthy to be entrusted with the office or the position of judge. (M vii.182, from [11] p. 453)

Sextus also says, still summarizing Carneades:

And once again, as I said before, when we see a thing very plainly we [are persuaded by it]<sup>23</sup> when we have previously proved by testing that we have our senses in good order, and that we see it when wide awake and not asleep, and that there exists at the same time a clear atmosphere... so that because of these conditions the presentation is trustworthy, we having had sufficient time for the scrutiny of the facts observed at the seat of the presentation. [M, vii.188-189]

The *πιθανόν*, if Sextus' characterizations are accurate, has become much more epistemically robust than its predecessor. And most significantly, the *πιθανόν* now appears to be connected to investigation: one must "meticulously examine" impressions, "prove them by testing", and "scrutinize" them. It appears that the persuasiveness of an impression can be increased or diminished by subjecting it to investigation, and this suggests that the *πιθανόν* is linked to justification in a way that its predecessor notion advanced by Arceilaus was not. This is not to say that the *πιθανόν* was supposed to link to truth. Carneades (or Sextus on behalf of Carneades) is clear that persuasive impressions can equally well be true or false (M vii.175); that something is convincing is not a reason to think it is true. But it is clear that investigation now has some role to play in determining what will persuade the wise man to do one thing rather than another thing.

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<sup>23</sup>Sextus actually says "we assent to it as true" (*συγκατατιθέμεθα ὅτι τοῦτο ἀληθές ἐστι*). This is possibly tendentious on Sextus' behalf, since he takes Carneades to be dogmatic, as we will see below.

That the *πιθανόν* is connected with justification is further suggested by this fact: Cicero sometimes claims Carneades said the Stoic wise man, though refraining from giving properly justified assent, would opine. This might be appropriate, if the *πιθανόν* is Carneades' response to the Stoic inactivity objection. Since there is no cognitive impression, the wise man will withhold assent, understood as assent to a cognitive impression. However, in order to act, he will follow the persuasive. But the persuasive, now linked to justification, seems to lead to a kind of assent, only the kind that the wise man is not supposed to give, opinion. Of course, if this is Carneades' view, it is unclear why it is a *response* to the Stoics, i.e., it is unclear why the Stoics would now accept that the wise man must opine in order to act, when in their original objection the refusal to allow the wise man to opine was the *basis* for the claim that the wise man could not act (if there are no cognitive impressions).

At this point in the story, the picture loses some of its focus. It becomes unclear to what degree Carneades adopted assent to the *πιθανόν* as an official Academy position, not merely as a dialectical device in his debates against the Stoics. In general, it is possible to understand the pronouncements of the Academics in two ways. First, and the way we have been understanding them here for the most part, the Academics claim that, given a Stoic epistemological framework, one should always withhold assent, since there is no cognitive impression. This is what they come to when Arcesilaus, in his Socratic fashion, debates with the Stoics. And since the primary rivals of the Academy are the Stoics, this particular pronouncement gets a lot of attention, and appears in many second-hand accounts of the Academics. When, in these same debates, the Stoics object “but then how does one act?”, the Academics claim he does not need assent, or at least not assent to a cognitive impression, in order to act. One only needs impulse, or the *πιθανόν*. Thinking of things this way is natural, because the Academics are careful to use Stoic technical notions, and draw their conclusions from Stoic assumptions.

But there is a complication that leads to a second way of understanding Academic pronouncements. Arcesilaus was well-known for advocating *ἐποχή*, *generally speaking*, as a consequence of having engaged in Socratic inquiry with many schools of thought, not just the Stoics (see [11], topic 68, A-

L). He was often said to be inspired by Pyrrho, whose views predate the Stoics, and who also advocated ἐποχή generally speaking. This suggests that Academic ἐποχή was not merely a consequence of Stoic assumptions, a dialectical artifact. And if the Academic in some way accepted ἐποχή, then he must face the very question the Stoics dialectically posed to him: how can one act without beliefs? Then it becomes plausible to think that Arcesilaus was not merely responding to the Stoics, but giving an explanation for how *anyone* who suspended judgment could act. Hence Sextus:

... Arcesilaus says that one who suspends judgment about everything will regulate choice and avoidance and actions in general by the reasonable (τῷ εὐλόγῳ); and that by proceeding in accordance with this criterion he will act rightly... [M, vii.158]

And if this is what Arcesilaus was doing, why would Carneades not be doing the same thing? Why would it be inappropriate to take the πιθανόν to be a practical criterion that the Academic himself used to get things done? The πιθανόν, after all, still allows the sceptic to withhold assent, when that assent is thinking that something is true as a result of investigation. But one can assent to the πιθανόν while admitting the possibility of the falsity of what one assents to, so assenting to the πιθανόν will not be dogmatic in the eyes of the Academic.

It seems fairly certain that by the time of Philo, head of the Academy from 110 to 79 B.C.E., Academics *had* adopted the πιθανόν as an official doctrine. Moreover, Philo adopted Stoic epistemology as the official epistemology of the Academy, together with the view that there are no cognitive impressions. This led the Academy to endorse the position that nothing could be known, also as an official position. Because of this lapse into overt dogmatism, Aenesidemus broke with the Academy circa 90 B.C.E. Aenesidemus took himself to be turning his back on Academic dogmatism and returning to true scepticism. Accordingly these “new” sceptics were styled ‘Pyrrhonian.’ It is to this school, or more correctly, persuasion,<sup>24</sup> that Sextus belonged, and whose views, such as they are, he takes himself to be outlining.

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<sup>24</sup>Sextus would have us say ἀγογή rather than ἀρεσις (PH 1.4, 1. 16-17).

### 3.2 Dogmatic Scepticism and $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{o}\nu$

Having laid out the basic views associated with Pyrrhonian scepticism earlier, we see a striking similarity between those views and the views attributed to the Academy, at least the Academy before its latest years. We see in both cases a method of generating equipollent arguments that lead one to suspend; we see the admonition to suspend regarding all matters; and we see the call for some kind of non-suspension, consistent with the call to suspend, in order to meet the needs of everyday life. Yet in spite of these similarities, it is clear the Pyrrhonists took the Academic sceptics, even those prior to Philo, to be dogmatic – the Academics granted some kind of assent, or engaged in some kind of epistemic act, that Pyrrhonists thought was forbidden to a true sceptic. How can we understand this charge?

Sextus devotes considerable space to explaining the differences between Pyrrhonism and the Academic philosophy (PH 1.220-235). Here Carneades is taken to task for assenting to the  $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{o}\nu$ :<sup>25</sup>

Even if both Academics and Sceptics say that they go along<sup>26</sup> with certain things, the difference even here between the two philosophies is clear. For ‘go along with’ is used in different senses. It means not resisting but simply following without strong inclination or adherence (as a boy is said to go along with his chaperon); and it sometimes means assenting to something by choice and, as it were, sympathy (as a dissolute man goes along with someone who urges extravagant living). Hence, Carneades and Clitomachus say that they go along with things and that some things are plausible in the sense of having a strong wish with a strong inclination, whereas we say so in the sense of simply yielding without adherence; in this respect too we differ from them. [PH, 1.229-230]

Sextus seems to be suggesting that the assent the Academic grants to the  $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{o}\nu$  is stronger than the assent the Pyrrhonist grants to appearances. The Academic assents by choice and with sympathy, a choice he makes, I think the implication is, on the basis of the strength of a persuasive impression.

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<sup>25</sup>Sextus clearly takes Carneades to be endorsing the  $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{o}\nu$  as a practical criterion *for the sceptic himself*, not merely on behalf of the Stoic.

<sup>26</sup>The Greek word here is  $\pi\acute{\epsilon}\iota\theta\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$ . This would most often have the sense of ‘to obey.’

Investigation creates sympathy in the Academic, and leads him to grant assent willingly to what is convincing. What is interesting here is that Sextus takes the fact that the Academic grants a stronger assent, an assent perhaps connected to justification, to make the Academic dogmatic.

And even the great progenitor of ancient scepticism, Arcesilaus, is not immune to similar criticism from Sextus. Here Sextus notes how similar early views of the Academy were to Pyrrhonian views, but also points out the key difference between the two:

Arcesilaus, who we said was champion and founder of the Middle Academy, certainly seems to me to have something in common with what the Pyrrhonists say – indeed, his persuasion and ours are virtually the same. For he is not found making assertions about the reality or unreality of anything, nor does he prefer one thing to another in point of convincingness or lack of convincingness, but he suspends judgment about everything. And he says that the aim is suspension of judgment, which we said, is accompanied by tranquility. He also says that particular suspensions of judgment are good and particular assents bad. Yet some might say that we say these things in accordance with what is apparent to us, not affirmatively (οὐ διαβεβαιωτικῶς), whereas he says them with reference to the nature of things (πρὸς τὴν φύσιν) – so he says that suspension of judgment is a good thing and assent a bad thing.<sup>27</sup> And if one is to be convinced by what is said about him, they say that he appeared superficially to be a Pyrrhonist but in truth was a Dogmatist. [PH, 232-234]

So how does it arise that the “new” sceptics denounce Academic sceptics, whose views are so similar to their own, as dogmatic? What is the basis of Sextus’ charge that Carneades assents with sympathy and choice, and that Arcesilaus makes claims about how things are in nature?

According to Frede,<sup>28</sup> the key to understanding this lies in the notion of the *πιθανόν*. The central role it played, and the appearance that the Aca-

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<sup>27</sup>Sextus often takes claims about whether something is good or bad to be claims about how things are in nature, hence not proper material for a Pyrrhonist’s assent. What makes this curious here is that Sextus often speaks as though how things are in nature *is* how things are in reality (ὕπαρχος)(PH ...); but he claims Arcesilaus makes claims about one but not the other.

<sup>28</sup>The views of Frede I invoke in what follows come from his 1984 paper “The Sceptic’s Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge” [10]. There are

demics endorsed it as a kind of practical criterion leads the later Pyrrhonists to see Academic scepticism as a dogmatic scepticism.

But why would the *πιθανόν* disturb the Pyrrhonist? After all, the Pyrrhonist himself claims he must assent, in some way, to appearances. Why is assenting to the *πιθανόν* not just the Academic analogue to Pyrrhonian assent to appearances? Why is the persuasive force of an impression not the same as the force of the *φαντασίαν παθετική* Sextus speaks of at PH 1.20?

In order to understand this, Frede claims we must assume the Pyrrhonian sceptic has a two-assent view: when the Pyrrhonist grants assent, his assent is non-epistemic, it is not a taking to be true. In conjunction with this, we must take stock of the Pyrrhonist's attitude toward the *πιθανόν*. In a passage from PH that closely resembles the one we saw above (M vii.182), after explaining the several layers of the *πιθανόν*, Sextus proceeds:

Further, we say that appearances are equal in trustworthiness or lack of trustworthiness ὅσον ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ, while they say that

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a number of peculiarities in this paper that deserve comment. Most significantly, Frede here argues that the Pyrrhonian sceptic does not assent epistemically when he assents to appearances. Not only does this conflict with what Frede argued in his 1979 paper [9], but Frede offers no explanation for the change in his view. In fact, Frede writes in 1984 as though his 1979 paper had never been written. The only trace of acknowledgment of the earlier paper comes on page 133, where he references the *οετλ* qualification on assent (though he makes different use of it here). So to avoid confusion, the reader should not attempt to synthesize the views of Frede I described earlier with those I describe here. In fact, it is tempting, when referring to Frede's later views, to use the denomination 'Frede<sub>84</sub>' or some such device, as though we were referring to a different author (though I will not do this).

Another curiosity in the 1984 paper is Frede's use of the labels 'classical' and 'dogmatic' to differentiate two types of scepticism. He takes Pyrrhonian scepticism to be classical, and the Academy at some stages to be dogmatic. He then offers an explanation of how classical scepticism came to be taken to be dogmatic. However, Frede sometimes seems to suggest that some kind of classical scepticism existed in the early stages of the Academy as well, and evolved into a dogmatic scepticism. This is plausible. But his pitting of dogmatic sceptics against classical sceptics, especially when so-called classical sceptics are scattered across the history of the Academy, and when the most famous of classical sceptics, Sextus, explicitly renounces *all* earlier forms of Academic scepticism as dogmatic, leads to confusion. Consequently I shall make the simplifying assumption that what Frede says about classical sceptics is true only of Pyrrhonian sceptics.

some are persuasive and others unpersuasive.<sup>29</sup> Even among the persuasive ones they say there are differences: some they think really are just persuasive, others persuasive and examined, and others persuasive and examined and undiverted. . . The members of the Academy then prefer persuasive and examined appearances to those which are merely persuasive, and to both they prefer appearances which are plausible and examined and undiverted. [PH, 1.227; 1.229]

Here Sextus criticizes Carneades for claiming that there are degrees of persuasiveness, and note, some of those degrees are connected to justification and matters of reason – Sextus uses ὅσον ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ to explain the respect in which the Pyrrhonist finds appearances equally trustworthy or untrustworthy. Carneades by contrast, I think the implication is again, will allow some appearances to be more persuasive or unpersuasive οετλ; investigation will reveal whether an impression is to be trusted or not. And Sextus clearly wants to distance himself from this view.

But we noted earlier that, despite the connection between πιθανόν and justification, the Academic does not think that because an impression is persuasive that it is true. The results of the investigation do not determine that the impression is true, only that it has much in its favor. So when the Academic Sceptic assents to the πιθανόν, in his own eyes, he is not being dogmatic. He does not claim, “The investigation has led me to think this proposition is true;” but “The investigation has led me to think this proposition is plausible.” So he is still able to draw a distinction between assenting to the πιθανόν and dogmatic assent, even though his own assent is now connected with justification, and given to οετλ matters.

Frede claims that, despite the distinction the Academic makes between taking to be true on the basis of reasons, and taking to be plausible or likely to be true, the Academic is still committing an epistemic act:

But to take something to be probable<sup>30</sup> is, on this interpretation of the probable, to take it to be either true or at least sufficiently

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<sup>29</sup>‘Trustworthiness’ = πίστις; ‘persuasive’ = πιθανός. This seems like a permissible slide for Sextus to make. It is on the basis of establishing the trustworthiness of an impression that one will find it persuasive. An impression will be trustworthy when it survives thorough examination (cf. M vii.189).

<sup>30</sup>πιθανόν is often translated as ‘probable’, at least in part because Cicero uses *probabile*

like what is true. Thus somebody who does give assent in this sense does have beliefs about how things are, i.e., mere opinions. [10, p. 143]

I think what Frede must mean here is that the kind of assent the Academic gives to the  $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{\omicron}\nu$  is like the kind of assent Frede claimed the Pyrrhonist gives to appearances in his earlier paper. The Academic does not think his investigations provide a reason to think something true, only that the matter is persuasive. But in assenting to the view, he *takes it* to be true. This taking to be true, however, is non-dogmatic in the same way that Frede earlier claimed the Pyrrhonist had non-dogmatic beliefs. The Academic acts as though the view is true, but does not think that his investigation determined that the view is true.

But it is this very taking to be true, the epistemic force of the assent to the  $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{\omicron}\nu$ , that makes the Pyrrhonist think the Academic is dogmatic. The Pyrrhonist, on Frede's later view, distinguishes between two kinds of assent, an epistemic kind, and a non-epistemic kind. He recognizes that were it ever appropriate to grant epistemic assent, it would be to  $\sigma\epsilon\tau\lambda$  matters. But since no justification will be uncountered by an equipollent consideration, the Pyrrhonist withholds this assent. He grants non-epistemic assent only to matters independent of justificatory considerations.

But when the Pyrrhonist looks at the Academic, he sees two disturbing things happening: (i) the Academic is assenting to  $\sigma\epsilon\tau\lambda$  matters. Perhaps forgivable, as long as the assent is non-epistemic. But (ii), if Frede is right, the assent *is* epistemic. So the Pyrrhonist is angry, because by his lights, epistemic assent should not be granted (at all), and certainly not to  $\sigma\epsilon\tau\lambda$  matters. So he denounces the Academic as dogmatic, since dogmatists epistemically assent to matters as a result of justificatory considerations.

Frede further argues that Academic assent to the  $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{\omicron}\nu$  leads the dogmatism of the late Academy under Philo. In his ceaseless debates with the Stoic, the Academic again and again encounters arguments in support of the view that knowledge must be certain, that proper cognition is only of a

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to render the Greek into Latin. Some, like Frede, argue that the doctrine of the  $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{\omicron}\nu$  is a probabilistic doctrine: an impression that survives examination is likely to be true, and that is a reason to assent to it. Such an interpretation of the  $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{\omicron}\nu$  would certainly add to Sextus' reasons for thinking Carneades dogmatic.

cognitive impression. He also often reiterates his own arguments against the possibility of a cognitive impression. The result is that Stoic views on knowledge, and his own views on the impossibility of a cognitive impression become highly persuasive. Since the  $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{o}\nu$  is connected to matters of reason, the more a view is examined by reason and emerges from the examination intact, the more persuasive it will become. Moreover, the Academic in assenting to persuasive views is taking them to be true. So the Academic gradually comes to accept the Stoic epistemological framework as his own, because it is highly persuasive, but remains convinced that cognitive impressions are impossible. The obvious conclusion of these two views conjoined is that knowledge is impossible. So the late Academy, dogmatically by the Pyrrhonist's lights, begins to claim that knowledge is impossible [10, pp. 145-146].

What this suggests is that we can make sense of why Sextus takes the Academics to be dogmatists and of his criticisms at PH 1.220ff by attributing to the Pyrrhonists a two-assent view. The two-assent view helps us understand why the Pyrrhonist thinks the Academic is giving an illicit kind of assent. But I would like to go a step further, and claim that we should also attribute to the Academics a one-assent view along the lines of the one Frede outlines in his earlier paper. Then we can understand the disagreement between the Academic sceptic and the Pyrrhonian sceptic as in Figure 2 on page 24.

We can take Stage 1 to be the Academy under Arcesilaus. Here the Academic non-dogmatically believes what appears to him, and withholds assent from  $\sigma\epsilon\tau\lambda$  matters. This is represented by the left-hand side of the figure. The right-hand side is how the Pyrrhonist understands assent, when there are only Type 1 and Type 2 matters for assent on the table. And as you can see, this stage looks exactly like Figure 1, a simple illustration of the two models in question.

Stage 2 is what things look like in the Academy when  $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{o}\nu$  comes to the fore. I count the  $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{o}\nu$  as a Type 1 concern, associated with justificatory concerns and under the qualification of  $\sigma\epsilon\tau\lambda$ . At this stage, we see the Academic assenting, in the only way he can (by supposition) to what is persuasive. Again, he takes himself to avoid dogmatism in doing this because he has not assented to anything as true on the basis of justification. On the

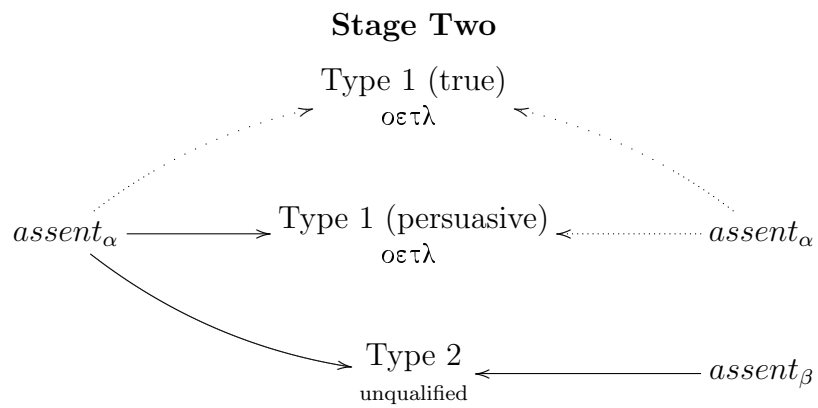
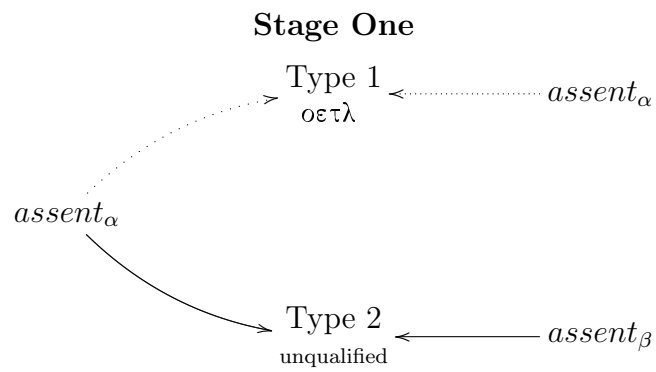


Figure 2: Academic and Pyrrhonian Scepticisms

left, we see the attitude the Pyrrhonist thinks one ought to take toward each type of matter.

So we can understand why the Pyrrhonist sees the Academic as dogmatic this way. The Pyrrhonist, acknowledging two kinds of assent, sees the Academic epistemically assenting to some  $\sigma\epsilon\tau\lambda$  matters. Since the Pyrrhonist (a) thinks these matters should never be assented to, and (b) even if one were to assent to them, one should not assent epistemically, he takes the Academic to be a dogmatist, since dogmatists grant epistemic assent to matters they should not. The Academic, on the other hand, since he takes assent just to be epistemic assent, has no choice but to assent epistemically to the  $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{o}\nu$ , if he grants assent to it at all. But because he claims the basis of his assent does not tell him the things he assents to are true, only plausible, he does not see himself as dogmatic. A nice advantage of this picture is that it allows us to see why Sextus thought not only Carneades, but also Arcesilaus, to be dogmatic. Arcesilaus, in granting epistemic assent to appearances (which I take to be not yet linked with justification at Stage 1), still grants a kind of assent that is in the Pyrrhonist's eyes impermissible.

This interpretation of the disagreement between Academics and Pyrrhonists raises further questions, however. For example, if the Academics held a one-assent view, in some way inherited from the Stoics, how do we explain the break between Aenesidemus and the Academy? Since the difference in opinion over available kinds of assent explains why Pyrrhonists took Academics to be dogmatic, they would, it seem, had to have come to a two-assent view as a prerequisite for breaking away. So how did Aenesidemus, or later Pyrrhonists, come to have the view that there are two kinds of assent in the first place?

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