

Ancient Skepticism: The Skeptical Academy

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Abstract

Ancient philosophy knew two main skeptical traditions: the Pyrrhonian and the Academic. In this final paper of the three-part series devoted to ancient skepticism, I present some of the topics about Academic skepticism which have recently been much debated in the specialist literature. I will be concerned with the outlooks of Arcesilaus, Carneades, and Philo of Larissa.

While the first article devoted to ancient skepticism provided an overview of the skeptical traditions and the second discussed certain vexed issues regarding Pyrrhonism, this third and final article will focus on some interpretative controversies concerning the thought of the main figures of the skeptical Academy: Arcesilaus, Carneades, and Philo of Larissa.

1. Arcesilaus

Arcesilaus of Pitane (316/5–241/0 BC) was the scholar who inaugurated the skeptical phase in the Academy. It is important to bear in mind that he did not regard his skepticism as a break from the philosophy of his predecessors, since he considered Socrates and Plato to be authentic skeptics. In this connection, note that Cicero presents Socrates as recognizing his almost total ignorance, and declares that in Plato's dialogues there are arguments on both sides of an issue and nothing is affirmed to be certain but everything is under investigation (*Academica* I 44–6, II 74). Although Diogenes Laertius says that Arcesilaus argued both sides of a case (DL IV 28), it seems that the latter's standard argumentative procedure was to argue against the theses stated by his interlocutors, a practice which accords well with Socrates' elenctic method as depicted in Plato's early dialogues.¹ In any case, both argumentative practices result in a state of equipollence or equal force (*isostheneia*), thereby inducing suspension of judgment (*epochē*).

When discussing the previous philosophers' positions on the criterion of truth in the first surviving book of *Against the Dogmatists* (*AD*), Sextus Empiricus points out that 'Arcesilaus and his followers, to begin with, defined no criterion, and those who are thought to have defined one provided this by way of a counterattack against the Stoics' (*AD* I 150). Sextus reports the Arcesilean argument against the Stoic criterion of truth, whose conclusion is that 'If apprehension does not exist, all things will be inapprehensible. And if all things are inapprehensible, it will follow, even according to the Stoics, that the wise person suspends judgment' (*AD* I 155), and that 'the wise person will suspend judgment about everything' (*AD* I 157). Sextus adds that, given that it was also necessary to investigate the conduct of life, which cannot be determined without a criterion (upon which happiness as the end of life also depends for its assurance), Arcesilaus said that 'the person who suspends judgment about everything will regulate his choices and avoidances, and his actions in general, by the reasonable (*to eulogon*), and by going forward in

accordance with this criterion he will act rightly' (*AD* I 158). Although in this text suspension of judgment is presented as a state into which the Stoics are forced by their own position, different sources report that Arcesilaus himself suspended judgment universally or refrained from making any assertion or assenting to anything.² We can therefore affirm that for Arcesilaus suspension of judgment was not merely the conclusion of a dialectical argument. Rather, it seems to have been the necessary result of his commitment to rational investigation of the truth, since reason requires us to suspend judgment when we are confronted with incompatible positions and have no epistemic criterion that allows us to adjudicate the dispute.³ In this commitment to the canons of rationality, Arcesilaus differs from the Sextan Pyrrhonist as I have depicted him in the article on Pyrrhonian skepticism.⁴

Now, there has been and there still is a fierce controversy concerning whether Arcesilaus proposes the reasonable as a criterion of action in *propria persona*. On one interpretation, it seems natural to infer that at *AD* I 158 Sextus continues to speak about the person who should suspend judgment about everything according to the Stoics' own doctrine. Also, at the beginning of the exposition of Arcesilaus' outlook on the criterion, it is said that he and his circle defined *no* criterion and that those who did, did so as a dialectical response against the Stoics. Finally, it would be strange if Sextus alluded, at *AD* I 150, to a criterion put forward as a dialectical move against the Stoics without mentioning it in the rest of the passage. The dialectical interpretation of the reasonable was first defended by Pierre Couissin and has been favored by several scholars since then.⁵ Other interpreters, by contrast, have pointed out some problems concerning the allegedly *ad hominem* character of the argument at *AD* I 158: the vocabulary used is not proper to the Stoics, its premises are not Stoic, the argument blurs the Stoic distinction between the notions of right action (*kathekon*) and success (*katorthoma*), and this latter word was not part of the technical vocabulary of the Stoics contemporary with Arcesilaus. It must therefore be concluded that Arcesilaus put forward the reasonable as a practical criterion in *propria persona*, the reason being that he felt the need to show that skepticism not only is livable (thus responding to the inactivity (*apraxia*) objection) but also makes possible the attainment of happiness. This non-dialectical interpretation has been championed particularly by Anna Maria Ioppolo.⁶

Without purporting to resolve this scholarly dispute, let me note, first, that even though the argument at *AD* I 158 does not work exclusively with Stoic doctrines, it may still be dialectical in the more general sense of making use of premises which Arcesilaus does not endorse but which are nonetheless functional for polemical purposes. Second, even if Arcesilaus, being himself someone who suspends judgment about everything, is responding to the objection that the conduct of life requires a criterion, this by itself does not entail that he offers *to eulogon* as a criterion in *propria persona*. For he may just intend to show that action does not require the holding of beliefs, since one might come up with different plausible criteria which are compatible with universal *epochē* and which may even be based, at least partially, on Stoic doctrines. Whereas the Sextan passage says that one can act by following *to eulogon*, a passage from Plutarch's *Against Colotes* (1122b–d) bearing upon Arcesilaus' response to the inactivity charge does not mention *to eulogon*. It rather states that action does not require sensation, impulse, and assent (as the Stoics claim), but only the former two and that these are compatible with suspension of judgment. Perhaps the two different criteria of action found in Sextus and Plutarch are to be explained as the results of a dialectical maneuver designed to show that the Stoic criterion is not the only available one, since there are other equally plausible explanations of how we act.

There is a point regarding the Sextan testimony on Arcesilaus which might be considered minor but which I would like to briefly discuss here because there is still some confusion among scholars. In the chapter of the *Pyrrhonian Outlines* (*PH*) in which he examines how Pyrrhonism differs from the philosophy of the Academy, Sextus explicitly recognizes the almost complete affinity between the Pyrrhonian and the Arcesilean stances. The reason is that Arcesilaus did not make assertions about the reality or unreality of things or prefer any one thing as being more credible than another, but suspended judgment about everything (*PH* I 232). Despite what some interpreters persistently affirm,⁷ nowhere does Sextus maintain *in propria persona* that Arcesilaus did assert that partial suspensions of judgment are good and partial assents bad, or that Arcesilaus was a Dogmatist in disguise who tested his companions by his aporetic skill so as to determine who among them were naturally fitted to receive the Platonic doctrines. Regarding the first point, Sextus merely remarks that ‘someone might say’ that a difference between the Pyrrhonist and Arcesilaus is that the former says that partial suspensions of judgment are good and partial assents bad in accordance with the way things appear to him, whereas the latter says so in reference to the nature of things (*PH* I 233) – a claim incompatible with Sextus’ ascription of universal *epochē* to Arcesilaus (*PH* I 232). In the case of the alleged esoterism of Arcesilaus, Sextus makes it entirely clear that he is simply reporting what others have said about the founder of the skeptical Academy (*PH* I 234).⁸ In this connection, it is suggestive that, when at the beginning of *PH* Sextus distinguishes the Pyrrhonian philosophy from both that of the Dogmatists in the proper sense of the term and that of the Academics, he does not mention Arcesilaus among the latter. These points are worth making because Sextus is usually depicted as a source that purposely misrepresents the thought of the Academics or denies the label ‘skeptic’ to them or ignores their influence on Pyrrhonism with the sole aim of showing the absolute originality of his own brand of skepticism.⁹ None of these attitudes toward the Academics is found in the case of Sextus’ treatment of Arcesilaus’ stance.

2. Carneades

According to Cicero (*Acad.* I 46), Carneades of Cyrene (214–129/8 BC) was the fourth scholar in line after Arcesilaus. What we know about his outlook comes primarily from his student Clitomachus (187–10 BC), whose works were used by Cicero and Sextus.¹⁰ Like Arcesilaus, Carneades attacked Stoic epistemology and dialectically argued against the theses put forward by his interlocutors. However, it must first be noted that the targets of Carneades’ arguments against the criterion of truth were not only the Stoics, but all philosophers (*AD* I 159). And second, we know that he also followed the practice of arguing on both sides of a question.

The main locus of scholarly controversy regarding Carneades’ skepticism concerns his distinction between assenting to impressions or appearances (*phantasiai*) and ‘following’ or ‘approving of’, without assent (*sugkatathesis*), those which are persuasive or probable (*pithanai*)¹¹ (*Acad.* II 59, 99, 104, 108). The passage *Acad.* II 104 also suggests that this distinction amounts to a difference between two kinds of assent, so that approving of a persuasive appearance is to be considered a weak or qualified form of assent. There are two debates over both the sense and the status of this distinction, which is made in Carneades’ response to the *apraxia* argument, according to which action is impossible if one withholds assent or denies that anything can be apprehended (*Acad.* II 24–5, 31, 39, 61–2). The first debate concerns whether approving of a persuasive appearance involves some kind of commitment to its truth. On one interpretation, which goes back to

Clitomachus, Carneades rejects all epistemic assent and hence any commitment to the truth of our appearances, while accepting that one can go along with or acquiesce in those which happen to strike one as persuasive. On the other interpretation, which goes back to Metrodorus and Philo of Larissa, Carneades only rejects confident assent to a proposition associated with an appearance which is (taken to be) unmistakably true, but accepts provisional assent to a proposition associated with an appearance which is probably true but may turn out to be false.¹² This leaves room for fallible beliefs, including the persuasive belief that nothing can be known (*Acad.* II 110, 148). Most interpreters have favored the first, skeptical interpretation,¹³ but recently some began, on the basis of strong arguments, to favor the second, fallibilist interpretation.¹⁴

The second debate refers to whether Carneades endorses *in propria persona* both the distinction between two kinds of assent and the view that the persuasive appearance is the criterion for both the conduct of life and philosophical inquiry (*Acad.* II 32). On the non-dialectical interpretation, he advances the distinction *in propria persona*, showing that the adoption of a skeptical stance is not at variance with the possibility of action and philosophical inquiry.¹⁵ On the dialectical interpretation, by contrast, Carneades' only purpose is to show to the Stoics that there is an alternative theory which is at least as plausible as theirs in explaining how action and inquiry are possible. The fact that some elements of the theory devised by Carneades are not taken from the Stoics, but belong to a wider epistemological framework, may give the wrong impression that he is advancing it *in propria persona*.¹⁶ Now, if Carneades' notion of approval does refer to provisional assent to a proposition associated with an appearance which is likely to be true but may turn out to be false, then I think that the dialectical interpretation is to be preferred. The reason is that it depicts his outlook as a stronger and more consistent form of skepticism which rejects any assertion about matters of objective fact, thus preserving universal suspension of judgment.

3. Philo of Larissa

The last important topic of recent discussion on Academic skepticism to be mentioned concerns the successive outlooks adopted by Philo of Larissa (159/8–84/3 BC), who succeeded Clitomachus as scholarch of the Academy. It is unanimously agreed that he first adopted the radical skepticism of Carneades as interpreted by Clitomachus, which, as we saw, consists in universal suspension of assent. Interpreters have disagreed, however, about Philo's later philosophical development, for which we have meager evidence. According to one view, he defended an out-and-out skepticism until he abandoned it for some form of moderate skepticism in his so-called 'Roman books'¹⁷ – although it has also been suggested that he later returned to his radical skeptical stance (Glucker 1978). We know that those books were written in 88/7, during Philo's exile in Rome, and that they introduced certain innovations which were fiercely criticized by Antiochus and other Academics (*Acad.* II 18). A passage from Sextus is taken to be our prime source for the view advocated in that work: 'Philo and his followers declare that, as far as the Stoic criterion is concerned (i.e. the apprehensive appearance), things are inapprehensible, but that as far as the nature of things is concerned, they are apprehensible' (*PH* I 235). Philo would be adopting here a type of skepticism according to which in theory there is a truth in the sphere of sense-perception, but one that we cannot discover in practice (Glucker 1978). On a second interpretation, Philo's adoption of radical skepticism was followed by a phase of Metrodorian skepticism which is different from the mitigated skeptical position of the Roman books. What Philo would be saying in these books is that things are

apprehensible only to God but not to us due to our human cognitive limitations (Sedley 1981).¹⁸ According to a third view, in the Roman books Philo rejected his previous Clitomachian skepticism and defended a form of Platonism (Tarrant 1985), a thesis which appears far-fetched. On yet another interpretation, based on what seems a plausible reading of the evidence, Philo adopted in that work a fallibilist position on knowledge, according to which apprehension (*katalēpsis*) is possible, but only insofar as one drops the third clause of the Stoic definition of the apprehensive or cognitive appearance – namely, that it is of a kind such that it could not come from something unreal (Striker 1997). That is, one can assent to claims to knowledge, but only with the awareness that they may nonetheless be false. Although she is not explicit on this, Striker seems to think that there were three stages in Philo's philosophical career, since she claims that the position expounded in the Roman books was preceded by a mitigated form of skepticism (Striker 1997: 260), and everyone agrees that Philo was first a radical skeptic.

Continuing this scholarly debate, Charles Brittain has recently provided the most thorough interpretation of Philo's thought (Brittain 2001, 2006). He has defended, on the basis of ingenious arguments but fully aware of the meagerness of the evidence, the view that there were three phases in Philo's philosophical development. These were the radical skepticism of Clitomachus, the mitigated skepticism based on Metrodorus' interpretation of Carneades (*Acad.* II 78) which Brittain labels 'Philonian/Metrodorian', and the fallibilism of the Roman books. The type of skepticism of the second phase allows for provisional and tentative assent to those appearances which strike one as persuasive – i.e. does not accept universal suspension of judgment – but still rejects the possibility of apprehension or knowledge (*Acad.* II 148). According to Brittain, this seems to have been the official position of the skeptical Academy from around 95 to 88/7 BC and the view attacked by the neo-Pyrrhonian Aenesidemus for being a form of Stoicism (Photius, *Library* 170a 14–22). Regarding the third phase, Brittain claims that for Philo knowledge or apprehension did not include claims on philosophical matters but was instead limited to the sphere of ordinary experience. The hypothesis about the Philonian/Metrodorian second stage and the claim that it is this view, and not the position defended in the Roman books, which was targeted by Aenesidemus have been forcefully criticized by John Glucker (2004) and others.¹⁹

As often noticed, fierce interpretive controversies are a common occurrence when dealing with ancient philosophers and schools. However, even though it is not always easy or even possible to get an entirely clear picture of the history of the ancient skeptical traditions, their relations, and the thought of their members, the study of the usually scanty surviving evidence may at least provide us with sophisticated arguments and original perspectives which we can take into account when addressing some of our present-day philosophical concerns.

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Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ See Long (2006: 109–10).

² See *Acad.* I 45, II 59; DL IV 28, 32; Sextus, *Pyrrhonian Outlines* I 232; Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1120c, 1121f–1122a; Augustine, *Against the Academics* II vi 14. It must be noted that the passage at *AD* I 155 just quoted can also be translated thus: 'And if all things are inapprehensible, it will follow, according to the Stoics *too* (*kai*), that the wise person suspends judgment'. From this translation, it follows that Arcesilaus advocated suspension *in propria persona* (see Ioppolo 2009, ch. 2).

³ We know from Cicero that the Academic skeptics conceived of their practice of arguing both sides of a case as a way to search for or discover the truth (*Acad.* II 7, 60, *On the Nature of the Gods* I 11; cf. *Acad.* II 65–6, 76). On the relation between suspension of judgment and the quest for truth in Arcesilaus, see Ioppolo (1986: 159–61).

⁴ On Arcesilaus' commitment to the canons of rationality, see Cooper (2004).

⁵ Couissin (1929, 1983), Striker (1996b, 2010), Barnes (1983), Brennan (2000), Bailey (2002), and Brittain (2005). It must be noted that, according to Couissin's dialectical interpretation, Arcesilaus did not even advocate suspension of judgment.

⁶ Ioppolo (1981, 1986, 2000, 2009). Other supporters of this interpretation are Annas (1988), Barnes (1988), Bett (1989), Hankinson (1998), Schofield (1999), and more recently Thorsrud (2002, 2009, 2010) and Román Alcalá (2007).

⁷ Sedley (1983: 13), Hankinson (1998: 85), Palmer (2000: 371), Spinelli (2000: 51, n. 4), Thorsrud (2002: 4, n. 12; 2009: 10, 44, 134), Cooper (2004: 100–1), and Lévy (2008: 26).

⁸ See Ioppolo (1992: 179–85; 2002: 68–70 with n. 127; 2009, ch. 1) and Machuca (2006: 128; 2008: 40).

⁹ See e.g. Ioppolo (1994: 89–90, 102–3).

¹⁰ On Clitomachus' skepticism, see Ioppolo (2007).

¹¹ As we will see in what follows, there is dispute about whether in Carneades *to pithanon* refers merely to what appears persuasive to someone or to what is probably true, i.e. likely to be true (see Obdrzalek 2006: 243 n. 1; cf. Thorsrud 2002: 9, n. 27).

¹² Scholars usually claim that, in presenting the Carneadean notion of the persuasive or probable (*pithanon*) as epistemic (*PH* I 226–31), Sextus is deliberately misrepresenting Carneades' outlook with the aim of showing the complete originality of Pyrrhonism (see e.g. Ioppolo 2009, ch. 1). Sextus' interpretation is, however, in agreement with that of Metrodorus and Philo.

¹³ Couissin (1983), Striker (1996a,b), Frede (1997), Bett (1989, 1990), Hankinson (1998), Allen (1997), and Schofield (1999).

¹⁴ Thorsrud (2002, 2009, 2010) and Obdrzalek (2006).

¹⁵ Frede (1997), Bett (1989), and Thorsrud (2002, 2009, 2010).

¹⁶ Couissin (1983), Striker (1996b, 2010), Sedley (1983), and Allen (1994, 2004).

¹⁷ Brochard (2002) and Glucker (1978, 2004). Cf. Lévy (2009).

¹⁸ Brittain (2006) wrongly claims that Sedley only distinguishes two phases in Philo's thought.

¹⁹ Lévy (2003, 2010: 85–7), Bénatouil (2004), and Thorsrud (2009: 208 n. 5).

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