

## THE HELLENISTIC ACADEMY

After the classical period of Greek philosophy, Plato's Academy turns skeptical. This development is, first and foremost, a rediscovery of Socratic thought. For the Hellenistic philosophers, Socrates is associated with a life of investigation. Socrates' quest for knowledge is seen as a quest for a rationally guided, good life. Socratic investigation, however, is investigation that is not-yet-concluded. Answers have not yet been found, and one must keep searching, or otherwise one would give up on one's commitment to the acquisition of knowledge. The set of questions that, accordingly, occupies the philosophers in the Hellenistic Academy, is whether knowledge can be found, how one is to live while one has not yet found it, and how one is to avoid presumed knowledge, which is identified with belief and ignorance. These questions are central to the philosophies of Arcesilaus (316/5-241/0 BCE), the first Academic skeptic and head of the Academy from 266-268 BCE, and the second major Academic skeptic, Carneades (214-129/8 BCE).

Hellenistic philosophy is somewhat like philosophy today, a set of debates among a relatively large group of interlocutors, some of them contemporaries who actually engage in philosophical discussion with each other, some of them powerful sources of inspiration and points of reference from the past. An interpretation of Academic Skepticism must reconstruct these debates, and thus a conversation between quite a number of participants in them. Several of them did not write anything, so that we

draw on reports from third parties. When it comes to assessing the arguments of a particular philosopher, the sources are often inconclusive. But luckily, this does not take away from the philosophical richness of Academic skepticism. Hegel says about the numerous interlocutors and layers of report in Plato’s dialogues that, by introducing so many debaters and narrators, Plato removes the arguments from particular speakers (Hegel 1986: 25). He makes his readers focus on the philosophy, not on who-says-what. This is how we can view the study of Academic skepticism. While, as historians, we would obviously prefer to know more, as philosophers we can focus on the arguments and the philosophical sophistication of the relevant debates.

### **1. Reading Plato**

Strictly speaking, Arcesilaus should not be called the first Academic skeptic—the designation “skeptic” postdates Arcesilaus. Perhaps one should say that Arcesilaus is a Socratic. In the eyes of later skeptics, the history of Academic skepticism needs to be told as a history of different stages in the engagement with Plato, and that is, in part, with Socrates. Accordingly, a reconstruction of Academic skepticism must begin with some serious engagement with Plato. We need to be aware of the ways in which philosophers in the Academy engaged with Plato’s dialogues in order to comprehend their thought.

Consider how the development of Academic philosophy unfolds from the point of view of a rivaling skeptical school, Pyrrhonism:

“According to most people there have been three Academies—the first and most ancient that of Plato and his School, the second or middle Academy that of Arcesilaus, the pupil of Polemo, and his School, the third or New Academy that of the School of Carneades and Cleitomachus. Some, however, add as a fourth that of the School of Philo and Charmidas; and some even count that School of Antiochus as a fifth [...]

Plato has been described by some as dogmatic (*dogmatikon*), by others as ‘aporetic’ (*aporētikon*), and by others again as partly dogmatic and partly aporetic. For in his dialogues which are exercises (*gumnastikois logos*), where Socrates is introduced either as playing with people or as contesting with sophists, they say that his distinctive character is either ‘gymnastic’ or ‘aporetic’; but that he is dogmatic where he makes assertion seriously through Socrates or Timaeus or someone similar.”

Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism* [= SE, PH] 1.122 (tr. Annas/Barnes with changes)

In this excerpt, different phases of Platonism are seen as connected to different readings of Plato. Some read Plato as if he put forward substantive theories, and thus, in the terms of later skepticism, as a ‘dogmatist.’ This reading of Plato - the doctrinal or Platonist reading - can be ascribed to Academics before and after the skeptical phase of the Academy. On this reading, Plato holds a metaphysical doctrine, sometimes called the Two Worlds Theory [TWT]. According to TWT, the Forms are the only entities that truly *are*; perceptible particulars merely *become*. TWT has an epistemological side. Belief is inferior to knowledge. The world of Being is accessed by higher cognitive faculties than is the world of becoming. In particular, the world of Being can be known, whereas the world of becoming is the subject-matter of belief and perception. Further, the Platonist reading of Plato tends to ascribe a psychology to Plato according to which the soul has three motivational powers: reason, spirit, and the appetites (call this Tripartite Psychology [TP]). These powers can be in conflict. Accordingly, virtue can be explained in terms of the right state of

each power combined with the right relationships between the three powers.

There are further prominent ideas that could be listed as ‘Platonic doctrines.’ But for present purposes, TWT and TP are particularly important. In these theories, Plato is perceived as diverging importantly from Socratic legacy. Socrates presumably did not think that there were Forms. His “what is X?” questions (for example, “what is virtue?”) aim for the account of X, but they do not envisage X as a theoretical entity. Also, while Socrates is associated with the view that beliefs are, as compared to knowledge, inferior and a deficient kind of judgment, he does not seem to have argued that belief and knowledge have different objects.

TP is thought to differ from so-called Socratic Intellectualism, according to which an account of virtue need not appeal to any other motivational faculties than reason: virtue is knowledge, or, in other words, the excellent state of reason. That is, the Platonist reading of Plato has two important features: it ascribes substantive theories to Plato, and it sees Plato as moving away from Socrates. Where Socrates qua speaker in Plato’s dialogues proposes the substantive ideas that are seen as Plato’s mature theories, he is considered a mere place-holder, rather than representative of the historical Socrates.

However, there is also a reading of Plato that emphasizes a commonality between Socrates and Plato, namely commitment to investigation. According to this reading, which I shall call the Socratic reading, even dialogues that appear to put forward

positive doctrines in fact do not. While theories are scrutinized, there are open-ended lines of investigation, and on the whole, central questions remain unresolved. The *Phaedo* may serve as an example. To many, this dialogue puts forward some central Platonic doctrines about the immortality of the soul. But from the point of view of those who focus on difficulties rather than solutions, it may appear that none of the arguments for the immortality of the soul is presented as ultimately compelling. To them, the dialogue might express the hope that a proof can be found, and the admission that up to now this has not been achieved. This kind of investigation is a blue-print for skeptical investigation: a question is raised, and elaborate theories are available for consideration; each theory is to be scrutinized, but quite possibly none of them shall be sufficiently convincing, and in the end, we must keep investigating.

Arcesilaus was supposedly the first Academic who 'meddled with' Platonic theory (*logos*) (Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 4.28). That is, he was the first to call into question the reading of Plato that focuses on substantive theories. Instead, he emphasizes the Socratic side of the texts (on the point that Arcesilaus had copies of Plato's dialogues, cf. Diog. Laert. 4.31). The Socratic reading of Plato did not fare well within the history of thought. Platonism shapes, in many ways, how we read Plato until this day. Most scholars of ancient philosophy find it natural to ascribe a set of positive views to Plato. However, from the point of view of the Hellenistic Academy, Plato is first and foremost an investigator. Socrates too is identified with a commitment to reason. Socrates is a forefather of skepticism insofar as *skepsis* literally means investigation: skepticism is a philosophy devoted to investigation.

The life of investigation comes with certain convictions: knowledge is good; knowledge is integral to a good life; knowledge and virtue are intimately connected; vice is ignorance. That is, and it is important to emphasize this point, Socrates is identified with positive ideas and a philosophy of his own.

The standard historical account of early Greek philosophy does not adopt this Hellenistic perspective on Socrates. It is shaped by a distinction that Aristotle draws, between an aporetic historical Socrates, who presumably figures in Plato's early dialogues, where he asks definitional questions that he himself does not have answers to, and a doctrinal Platonic Socrates, main speaker in middle and later dialogues, who no longer represents the historical Socrates (*Soph. Ref.* 183b7). This distinction has been formative for the predominant narrative in the history of philosophy. But it clearly is insufficient. The problem is not that it privileges an Aristotelian reading of Plato over a later inner-Academic reading, for which there could arguably be reasons. Rather, it picks up only one strand of Aristotle's references to Socrates. For in fact, Aristotle ascribes precisely those ideas about virtue and knowledge to Socrates that the Hellenistic philosophers ascribe to him, as for example *Nicomachean Ethics* VII shows.

What follows from this for the present purposes? Importantly, it means that Socrates can plausibly be seen as a thinker who is associated with certain philosophical ideas. To invoke Socrates is not only to invoke someone who is good at asking questions and interrogating others. It is also to invoke someone who finds continued

philosophical investigation valuable. This is, in itself, a substantive claim. It is closely connected to the views about virtue and knowledge that are ascribed to Socrates. If the good life is the life of the knower, then surely one should aim for knowledge as much as one can. One should call into question one’s beliefs as well as the beliefs of others, aiming to weed out falsehoods. These are important starting-points of Academic skepticism (Cicero, *Acad.* 2.74, 1.46)

## **2. A Socratic Attitude to Belief**

A central preoccupation of Academic Skepticism grows out of this way of seeing Socrates: the idea that, in pursuing knowledge, one aims to get rid of belief (*doxa*). This thought needs to be explained, in particular because it is hard to comprehend from today’s perspective. According to a standard notion of belief in contemporary philosophy, beliefs are acceptances of something as true (either in the sense of the cognitive act of judgment, or in the sense of the doxastic attitude of holding to be true). This contemporary notion of belief is value-neutral. It does not suggest that beliefs are deficient. Rather, the most successful beliefs might be cases of knowledge: where a belief is true and justified (or meets some other standards), it qualifies as knowledge. Importantly, this is not the notion of belief we find either in Socrates, or Plato, or in Stoic or Academic philosophy. For these philosophers, beliefs are deficient judgments and cases of ignorance. What does this mean? In answering this question, Plato’s *Apology*, *Meno*, and *Republic* are helpful texts to consider.

In the *Apology*, Socrates goes around talking to various groups of people in Athens (politicians, poets, craftsmen) who claim to have knowledge about important matters (20e-22e). After some interrogation, Socrates' interlocutors get caught up in inconsistencies. Apparently, they do not know what they take themselves to know. Socrates is better off than these other people because, though he too does not know about important matters, he at least knows that he does not have this knowledge. The ignorance of his interlocutors is presented as presumed knowledge. This is an important idea. In the discussions that interest us here, ignorance is not understood as the absence of an attitude toward a certain content (as in, for example, my being ignorant about something in biology that I have never even heard of). Rather, ignorance is a state of holding-to-be-true. In endorsing something, one commits oneself as if one had knowledge. Accordingly, ignorance is a truth-claim that misunderstands itself as a piece of knowledge. Plato does not discuss beliefs (*doxai*) in the *Apology*. But it seems safe to say that Socrates' interlocutors have mere beliefs, and that these beliefs are cases of ignorance (i.e., presumed knowledge).

Consider next the *Meno*. After several attempts at answering the question "what is virtue?" Meno formulates the so-called Debater's Argument. One cannot investigate, neither what one knows nor what one does not know. In the former case, there is no need to investigate: one already knows the matter. In the latter case, one would not know what to look for and would not recognize it if one found it (80d-e). But do not Meno and Socrates investigate jointly throughout their conversation? While they do not know what virtue is, they have some views on the issue, and thus they can begin

to investigate.

Should we, accordingly, say that beliefs are the starting-point of investigation? In discussing the Debater's Argument, Socrates introduces the notion of belief (*doxa*). He describes how the boy who does a geometrical exercise for the first time in his life can come up with replies to questions: he says what seems to him (*dokein*, 83d4), or, in other words, he comes up with his beliefs (*doxai*, 85b12, c4, e7, 86a7). With more exercises, the boy's beliefs shall become knowledge (85c9-d1). But Plato does not dismiss the dichotomy between knowing and not-knowing that figures as a premise in the Debater's Argument (one either knows something or one does not know it). Beliefs are a kind of ignorance: while it seems that something is so-and-so, one does not know it (85c6-7).

After the Debater's Argument has been set aside, or perhaps even refuted, Socrates develops and employs the so-called hypothetical method (86c-96c). One can formulate a thought, set it up as a hypothesis, thus explicitly acknowledging that one does not know how things are, and proceed to test the hypothesis. In seeking knowledge, we must begin with the thoughts we have on a given issue. But we should not endorse them, thereby making them into beliefs. Rather, we should hypothesize them, and thus launch our investigations.

In a famous passage in Plato's *Republic*, right before conversation turns to the Form of the Good, Socrates says that beliefs without knowledge are crooked and shameful

(506c-d; on beliefs with knowledge, cf. Vogt 2009). Throughout Plato’s dialogues, Socrates is presented as carefully stepping back from belief. Things seem to him to be a certain way. But he is aware that he does not have knowledge, and he does not endorse his thoughts as true accounts of how things are. Rather, he always inserts a proviso, thus holding back from forming beliefs. In the *Republic*, he refuses to utter any beliefs about the Good. The most he is willing to do is speak in metaphors, the similes of the Sun, Line, and Cave. In the *Meno*, core intuitions about virtue are not endorsed, but merely used as hypotheses (even such ideas as “virtue is good,” which Socrates surely does not expect to turn out to be false, are considered as hypotheses, 87d2-3).

This line of thought provides one way of describing the core concern of Academic Skepticism: the Academic Sceptics buy into the project of a Socratic life *without belief*. That is, they are motivated by the Socratic intuition that beliefs are cases of presumed knowledge that are in fact ignorance, and thus bad states and attitudes. The only way to free oneself of these states and attitudes is to investigate. The aim of investigation is knowledge. As long as knowledge has not been attained, it is better to be in the process of investigation, rather than have mere beliefs.

### **3. Pyrrho, Epicurus, and the Stoics: Criteria of Truth**

This set of concerns gets sharpened once word is out that, according to an enigmatic figure called Pyrrho (365/60-275/70 BCE) things are indeterminate, so that we cannot claim that they are this-or-that way. Construed in this fashion, early

Pyrrhonism is a metaphysical position: the nature of things is indeterminate (Bett 2000, 2002 [2006]). This has the stark consequence that *none* of our beliefs are true or false. There is no determinate reality that can be captured truly or falsely.

Epicurus (341-271 BCE) and Zeno (334/3–262/1 BCE), the founder of Stoicism, arguably respond to Pyrrho (Long 2006, 59). Of course, Pyrrho is not their main or even predominant philosophical influence; their philosophies are rooted in a number of debates among their predecessors and contemporaries. But Pyrrho’s challenge is extreme, and calls for a response. Epicurus and Zeno try to explain what can play the role of decider, in cases where something could be this-or-that way. That is, they formulate criteria of truth. The question of whether, absent knowledge, one should abstain from belief, gets a companion: the question of whether there is any way in which truth can be recognized—whether there is something about true impressions that flags them as true, so that one can safely assent to them.

This issue is also important to the Socratic concerns we considered a moment ago: part of the reason why the Debater’s Argument arises is that one does not recognize a truth if one happens to encounter it. In searching for an answer to a question, one might come across the true answer; but truth is not a property that announces itself. In every judgment, something appears true to the cognizer, otherwise she would not make the judgment; but whether it really is true is a different matter. Truth is at once the central epistemic value or end, and normatively insufficient: the epistemic norm “assent to truths” does not provide enough guidance, because truths are not

recognizable as such.

For Epicurus, all sense-perceptions are true. Arguably, this claim is a direct response to Pyrrho’s claim that sense-perceptions are neither true nor false (Long 2006: 59). While Pyrrho means to express that there is no determinate reality that they would capture truly or falsely, Epicurus seems to be saying that sense-perceptions are physical events, taking place between the cognitive faculties of the perceiver and external physical reality; insofar as they are these events (and insofar as the perceiver is affected the way she is), they are true. All sense impressions are true, but falsity enters the picture immediately thereafter. We make judgments based on our sense impressions: “[...] we judge some things correctly, but some incorrectly, either by adding and appending something to our impressions or by subtracting something from them, and in general falsifying arational sensation.” (Epicurus, *Key Doctrines* 23, = Long and Sedley (1987) [= LS], 16E, tr. LS with changes) That is, our judgment is the source of falsity. Epicurus’ normative epistemology is then concerned with the question of how we can avoid false judgment, and accordingly, with the question of which kinds of norms or standards we are to apply in forming beliefs. Epicurus coins the notion of a yardstick (*kanōn*) or criterion (*kritērion*), thus introducing a core conception of Hellenistic epistemology. Sense-perceptions, affections, and preconceptions are criteria of truth (Diog. Laert. 10.31): they are *evident* (*Ep. Hdt.* 82). And they are true in the sense that, *de facto*, the cognizer is affected in such-and-such a way by a physical reality. Our judgments are to be measured against these realities. True beliefs are those that are attested and those that

are uncontested by the evident (*enargeia*). False beliefs are those that are contested and those that are unattested by the evident (SE *M* 7.211-16).

Zeno too engages with knowledge within this newly developed conceptual framework. That is, in asking how one can make sure to accept only truths, he formulates a criterion of truth: the cognitive impression (*phantasia katalēptikē*). Cognitive impressions, he argues, arise from what is, and are stamped and impressed exactly in accordance with what is, thus being clear and distinct (Diog. Laert. 7.46). Not all true impressions are like this; but a sub-class of truths is cognitive, and thus identifies itself as true. If we accept only cognitive impressions, we do not accept all truths. But we make sure that, whenever we accept an impression as true, it in fact is true. This kind of proposal, as well as Epicurus’ notion of the evident, clearly invite skeptical responses.

#### **4. Arcesilaus**

It is time to turn specifically to the philosophy of Arcesilaus. Like Socrates, Arcesilaus did not write anything. His philosophy must be reconstructed from Sextus’ comparisons between Pyrrhonian and Academic skepticism, Cicero’s *Academica*, and a number of shorter reports.

Arcesilaus embraces a method that scholars call dialectical (Couissin 1929 [1983]). This method develops further a tradition that goes back to early Greek sophistic argument, and was adapted by Socrates. Philosophy, according to this method, is

engaged in as an exchange between a questioner and an answerer, rather than by one thinker who lays out his or her arguments. The questioner gets the answerer to commit to a certain position, and then proceeds, through further questions, to examine this view. Doing so, the questioner employs the answers already given as premises. However, these premises thereby do not become the questioner’s views. From the Socratic point of view, this method has a great advantage: it allows one to investigate without endorsing any premises of one’s own. Not unlike the *Meno*’s hypothetical method, the dialectical method aims to make sure that the questioner need not accept anything as true in order to be able to investigate. The skeptical investigator, who takes on the role of questioner, need not begin from beliefs of her own. She can rely on the fact that her respondent has some beliefs. Investigation begins with someone else’s theory, and proceeds via the premises that the other person commits herself to.

The fact that this is a prominent feature of Arcesilaus’ philosophy has long been noted (cf. Cicero *Fin.* 2.2.). However, focus on this feature can lead to a simplifying interpretation of Arcesilaus’ thought. When we think of *one* questioner and *one* answerer, it is tempting to put just one person into the place of the dogmatist (that is, the person who commits herself to a position). In the history of interpreting Greek Skepticism, there has been widespread agreement that the Stoics are the central opponents of the skeptics. In particular, Zeno has been placed at the other end of the conversation that we need to envisage in order to understand Arcesilaus’ philosophy. But Arcesilaus is roughly 20-30 years younger than Zeno. We can assume that he

grows up in the Academy during a time in which Zeno must have been one of its most impressive members. Zeno seems to have formulated his views between 300 to 275, while still being, at least for many years, a member of the Academy. Arcesilaus then argued against Zeno’s views c. 275 to 240, when Zeno was already retired (Zeno dies c. 263) (cf. Brittain 2006: xiii; Alesse 2000: 115 f.; Long 2006: ch. 5). The received wisdom, that Arcesilaus’ skepticism develops through actual back-and-forth between him and Zeno, needs to be modified.

With a view to the criterion of truth, it is tempting to think that skeptical thought develops almost exclusively in response to and engagement with Stoic philosophy. The relevant framework in the philosophy of mind – that we have sensory and non-sensory impressions to which we take attitudes of acceptance, rejection, or suspension – is, while in some respects shared by Epicureans, distinctively Stoic. Absent this framework, the central skeptical notion of suspension (in not forming a belief, the skeptic suspends judgment) is incomprehensible. This notion, however, is crucial to Arcesilaus’ philosophy. Lacking a criterion of truth, Arcesilaus’ skeptic suspends judgment about everything (*PH* 1.232).

Many of Arcesilaus’ arguments are immediately concerned with the Stoic conception of cognitive impressions. Arcesilaus argues that there might be a non-cognitive impression (that is, an impression that misrepresents things) that is indistinguishable from a cognitive impression. The Stoics seem to have responded to this objection by adding a clause to their definition of the cognitive impression: “of such a kind as

could not arise from what is not” (Diog. Laert. 7.46, 54; Cicero *Acad.* 1.40–1, 2.77–8; *SE M* 7.247–52).

But what about the skeptic’s own life? Arcesilaus’ skeptic lives without belief and without knowledge. But our ordinary lives involve belief-formation. Otherwise, we arguably cannot even eat or avoid danger, let alone perform more complex and sophisticated activities, including investigation. The argument that the skeptic cannot act or go about her daily life in a manner consistent with her skepticism is often called the Apraxia Challenge. In line with the Socratic commitment to reason, Arcesilaus aims to present the skeptic’s life as a life guided by reason and lived by the standards that reason puts up (Cooper 2004b). Accordingly, he addresses versions of the Apraxia Charge that do not focus on brute survival. Rather, he thinks he must reply to versions that call into question whether the skeptic’s life is the life of a rational agent, and whether it is a life that is plausibly seen as an attempt at living well. We can call these objections the Animal Charge (is the skeptic reduced to the activity of non-rational animals?) and the Eudaimonist Charge (does the skeptic plausibly aim to lead a good life?) (Vogt 2010).

Consider a passage from Plutarch:

(1) For those who attend and listen, the argument runs thus [i.e., Arcesilaus’ argument against the Stoics]. The soul has three movements—impression, impulse, and assent. The movement of impression we could not remove, even if we wanted to; rather, as soon as we encounter things, we get an impression and are affected by them. The movement of impulse, when aroused by that of

impression, moves a person actively towards appropriate objects, since a kind of turn of the scale and inclination occur in the commanding-faculty. So those who suspend judgment about everything do not remove this movement either, but make use of the impulse which leads them naturally towards what appears appropriate. What, then, is the only thing they avoid? That only in which falsehood and deception are engendered - belief-formation (*to doxazein*) and precipitately assenting, which is yielding to the appearance out of weakness and involves nothing useful. 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 belief (*doxa*), not from impulse or impression. So whenever something appropriate has appeared, no belief is needed to get us moving and proceeding towards it; the impulse arrives immediately, since it is the soul's process and movement [...]

(2) ‘But how is it that someone who suspends judgment does not rush away to a mountain instead of to the bath, or stands up and walks to the door rather than the wall when he wants to go out to the market-place?’ Do you [the Epicurean Colotes] ask this, when you claim that the sense-organs are accurate and impressions true? Because, of course, it is not the mountain but the bath that appears a bath to him, not a wall but the door that appears a door, and likewise with everything else. For the rationale of suspending judgment does not deflect sensation or implant a change in the irrational affections and movements themselves, which disturbs the occurrence of impressions; it merely removes our beliefs, but makes natural use of all the rest.

Plutarch *Adv. Col.* 1122A-F (trans. Long and Sedley, with changes)

In interpreting this passage, scholars tend to focus on (1). There, Plutarch explains how Arcesilaus responds to Stoic critics. According to the Stoics, there are three movements of the mind – impression, assent, and impulse to action. Impulse cannot

occur without assent. Arcesilaus argues that one can avoid assent, but not the other two movements. Sensation (or impression), he argues, brings forth impulse, and that is all that is needed for action. The trouble with this line of argument, as Plutarch presents it, is that it looks dogmatic. Arcesilaus seems to put forward his own account of action, stating against the Stoics that assent is not needed for action. Another problem is that, if the skeptic's actions occur without her own rational endorsement, it would seem that Arcesilaus ascribes the activities of non-rational animals to the skeptic, rather than the rational action of the human being. If this was Arcesilaus' strategy, he would rob the skeptics of their rationality, and he would be unable to explain how the skeptic, by choosing one course of action over another, aims to lead a good life (Cic. *Acad.* 2.37-9).

In order to see how Arcesilaus responds to these concerns, we need to consult a further piece of evidence. Apparently in response to the Eudaimonist Charge, Arcesilaus proposes that the skeptic adheres to the reasonable (*eulogon*) (SE *M* 7.158; 7.150). The precise interpretation of this notion is controversial (cf. Striker 2010; Vogt 2010). But the main point seems to be this: the skeptics discriminate between impressions, and are rationally guided by whether a given course of action seems reasonable to them, without thereby accepting anything as true.

Turn now to the second half of Plutarch's report, (2). Arcesilaus responds to Epicurean critics. By using an Epicurean example, Arcesilaus explains how the skeptic can leave the room without running into the wall, but also without forming a

belief as to where the door is located. He exploits the Epicurean view that belief or judgment introduces falsehood, while sense-perception by itself is free from falsity and a-rational. Like the Epicurean, the skeptic can keep apart sense-perception and judgment. The sense-perception of the door can guide the skeptic, so that she walks through the door rather than into the wall, without any judgment being involved.

## 5. Carneades

Like Arcesilaus, Carneades does not write anything, and accordingly, we again depend on Cicero, Sextus Empiricus, and other authors when we reconstruct his philosophy. A famous incident highlights that his dialectical method is not only indebted to Socrates, but also to earlier sophistic practices of arguing for both sides of an issue. On an embassy to Rome in 156/5 BCE, Carneades apparently argued for justice one day, and against justice the next. Carneades did not aim to convince his audience of either of these positions. Most immediately, he wanted to show that the theories that Plato, Aristotle, and others put forward are not compelling (Lactantius, *Epitome* 55.8). But we can speculate that his performance had a disconcerting effect. If a gifted speaker can convince his audience of  $p$  one day, and of  $\text{not-}p$  the next, one should be warned. Apparently, one needs to think ever more carefully. Carneades' method invites his listeners to investigate as skeptics: to scrutinize their own thinking continually, not accepting anything in a precipitate fashion.

Carneades pursues further skeptical criticism of the dogmatists' criteria of truth. The first in a series of arguments he puts forward (SE *M* 7.402-10) concerns the link

between mental states and actions; it is part of a line of thought that is targeted at Stoic philosophy. Even if there were cognitive impressions, Carneades argues, people who act on them are not guided by their impressions in any other way than people in states of madness. Carneades here takes a perspective that is, in other contexts, detrimental to skeptical positions: the perspective of inferring from exhibited behavior to mental states. Generally speaking, we might think that this approach (shared by some contemporary philosophers of mind) is fatal to skepticism. If the skeptic indeed lives a more or less ordinary life, as the skeptics claim that they do, then the observer shall ascribe ordinary mental states to them, including beliefs. Carneades' first argument is typical for those variants of Greek skepticism that engage with several dogmatic approaches (as is also the case in Sextus' Pyrrhonism). Skeptics of that type may well employ an argument against one opponent that, in another context, they would not resort to. Carneades' first move – to infer from external behavior to mental – strikes me as this kind of argument: it should better be employed only in a well-defined context, otherwise it would harm rather than help the skeptic.

Second, Carneades cites examples in which objects are highly similar to each other, as, say, two eggs or two grains of sand are. Do the Stoics claim that we are able to distinguish any two such items? The Stoics admit that, in certain situations, the wise person may, absent an impression of how things are, assent to the reasonable (*eulogon*) (Diog. Laert. 1.177). The wise person may also suspend judgment. But generally speaking, it is part of wisdom to have trained oneself so as to be able to

perceive the smallest features and differences in things (Cic. *Acad.* 2.57), at least where it may be important to do so. This qualifier is important. The Stoics think that wisdom consists of knowledge in logic, ethics, and physics. Roughly speaking, we may say that wisdom consists of knowing the things that are relevant to leading a good life (Vogt 2008: ch. 3). Whether a certain grain of sand is the same grain of sand one saw yesterday may be irrelevant. On the contrary, someone who would aim to keep apart each grain of sand from the others might be like the proverbial irrational agent in contemporary philosophy of action – the agent who counts the blades of grass in her garden because to her, this is what truly matters.

But in principle, two grains of sand are distinguishable. This is a thesis in Stoic physics: no two items in nature are identical, and their features are perceptible. Accordingly, should it become important to the leading of a good life to distinguish between grains of sand, the wise person would train herself to do so (Cic. *Acad.* 2.57). Today, we may think of a different example. It is important to the leading of our lives that we can distinguish minute features of cells; accordingly, scientists train themselves to be able to perceive these features.

Carneades insists that the claim in physics – that no two items in the universe are identical – is irrelevant to the contested issue. Whether or not that is the case, two different items could still be indistinguishable for all perceivers (Cic. *Acad.* 2.83–5). In response, the Stoics might have insisted on their distinction between expert impressions and non-expert impressions (Diog. Laert. 7.51). It is quite implausible

that similar items are equally indistinguishable for the trained and the untrained.

Where it matters that one makes distinctions, scientists are inventive in improving the conditions of observation. This kind of rejoinder would be consistent with Stoic philosophy, but it is unclear to what extent the Stoics elaborated on it. Another response is well attested. The Stoics add a further component to their definition of the cognitive impression: "one that has no impediment"; sometimes an impression is unconvincing due to external circumstances (SE *M* 7.253). This addition is the last move in this particular strand of the debate.

Do the Stoics or the skeptics win the argument? The original Stoic account of the cognitive impression relies heavily on the idea that a cognitive impression makes it clear through *itself* that it is cognitive (Cic. *Acad.* 1.40-1). If it is admitted that an impression could phenomenologically appear to be cognitive, while external circumstances call this into question, the Stoics may abandon their strongest intuition.

However, perhaps it is misguided to assume that cognitive impressions make themselves recognizable through their phenomenology. Perhaps they are, at least in part, to be identified as cognitive due to their causal history. For example, I might be able to identify the impression that this (what I look at while typing) is the screen of my laptop because the causal history of this impression is immediately accessible to me. If this is the idea, then the additional clause might help (Frede 1983). It might exclude cases where we are aware that there are impediments. For example, I might

have what looks like a cognitive impression that it is raining when I look out of my window. The grass is full of drops of water and more drops are floating through the air. But I refrain from assenting: the wall around the window constitutes an obstacle that I am aware of. I remove the obstacle by walking outside. Now I see that someone is watering the garden. However, the causal version of the Stoic proposal might not be much stronger than the phenomenological version. Are the Stoics committed to the view that only impressions the causal histories of which are fully transparent to us are cognitive? This is a strong claim, and one that would call for a number of specifications. The evidence does not suggest that the Stoics pursued this in detail.

In order to see how Carneades engages not only with Stoic arguments, we need to turn to his own conception of the criterion. Carneades argues that the skeptic adheres to the rationally persuasive (or the convincing or compelling), the *pithanon*. Carneades puts forward a three-stage account: (1) In matters of importance, skeptics adhere to the persuasive. (2) In matters of greater importance, they adhere to persuasive impressions that are undiverted by surrounding impressions. (3) In matters that contribute to happiness, they adhere to persuasive, undiverted, and thoroughly explored impressions. In order to thoroughly explore an impression, one must carefully examine the surrounding impressions, asking whether they in any way harm the persuasiveness of the impression one is centrally concerned with (SE *M* 7.166–84).

In formulating this criterion, Carneades responds, like Arcesilaus, to ambitious versions of the Apraxia Charge, the Animal Charge and the Eudaimonist Charge. He aims to show that skeptical action is the agency of a rational being, and that the skeptic is committed to leading a good life. Carneades explains his criterion with an example (SE *M* 7.187). A skeptic is looking for a rope, but the room is dark. Snakes can look like ropes, and accordingly, it is important to get things right. The skeptic shall poke at the object that looks like a rope, making sure that it does not move – movement would be a surrounding impression that takes away from the persuasiveness of the impression that the object is a rope.

Though this is an example of an action (to pick up what looks like a rope), Carneades’ criterion is said to be a criterion of truth, not a criterion of action (SE *M* 7.173). Sextus, whose report we are drawing on here, is well aware of the distinction. When he explains Pyrrhonian skepticism, he explicitly differentiates between a criterion of truth and a criterion of action, emphasizing that the Pyrrhonians claim to have merely a criterion of action (SE *PH* 1.21). From his point of view, this means that the Pyrrhonians do not put forward their own epistemology; rather, they merely explain what guides their activities. Sextus’ report may be right. Carneades might aim for more than an explanation of skeptical life. He might be putting forward his own epistemology. This is a highly contentious claim, for, generally speaking, it is assumed that the skeptics do not formulate theories of their own (which would make them, in their terms, dogmatists). Does Carneades advance an epistemology of his own?

Scholars tend to see two options, neither of which is completely convincing (Couissin 1929 [1983], Striker 1980, Bett 1989 and 1990, Allen 1994 and 2004 [2006], Brittain 2001, Obdrzalek 2004). Qua skeptic, one might argue, Carneades simply cannot formulate his own theory of the criterion of truth; the texts that ascribe to him a criterion of truth must be misleading. This interpretation, however, is too simple; it neglects relevant portions of the evidence. Or one ascribes an epistemology to Carneades. However, in this case one in effect argues that one of the major Greek skeptics is not a skeptic, but a dogmatist. A third reading, and one that I find more compelling, is as of yet under-explored. Carneades might advance his three-stage criterion in a dialectical exchange with Epicurean interlocutors.

What is the evidence for this proposal? Epicurean epistemology is, in many ways, a kind of methodology for the testing and examining of sense-perceptions and theoretical claims. In aiming to judge correctly, we ought to assess our perceptions and theories in the context of the evident, examining closely whether they are attested or contested by it (SE *M* 7.211-216).

Suppose that Carneades is speaking to proponents of Epicurean methodology. In order to keep oneself from judging falsely, they say, one must thoroughly examine a perception or thought, testing the non-evident through appeals to the evident. Carneades would call into question the Epicurean notion of the evident. But he might nevertheless draw on the premises of his Epicurean interlocutors. He could argue

that, *as they say*, impressions occur in the context of other impressions, and that, while the skeptics have not yet found anything evident, they can proceed by employing the Epicurean premise that some impressions are comparably easier to assess than others. For example, that it is dark may not be evident in the strong, dogmatic sense. But it may be highly persuasive. Similarly, the non-sensory impression that ropes and snakes look similar when coiled up may not be evident, but still be highly persuasive. Compared with these persuasive impressions, the blurred vision of an object in the dark room might have a low degree of persuasiveness. It thus needs to be assessed in the light of those impressions that come with a high degree of persuasiveness.

However, there is another complicated issue in the interpretation of Carneades’ philosophy: the question of whether the skeptic forms beliefs. In adhering to persuasive impressions, Carneades says, the skeptic approves them (*Cic. Acad.* 2.99). Approval is not assent in the sense in which the dogmatists conceive of assent. But still, it is a kind of assent (*Cic. Acad.* 2.104). This distinction is famously elusive. Carneades’ successors and students are unable to agree amongst each other on how to interpret it. Clitomachus (head of the Academy from 127 to 110 BCE) thinks that Carneades’ approval does not amount to belief (*Acad.* 2.78, see also 2.59, 2.67; Levy 2010). Philo of Larissa (159/8–84/3 BCE) argues that, in approval, one forms some kind of belief (on the difficulties of interpreting Philo, cf. Brittain 2001, 2006).

A belief in the sense of the dogmatists is a truth-claim, and truth-claims are

incompatible with skepticism. But what other sense of belief is available? One idea that we encountered at the beginning of this chapter might be relevant here. Recall that Socrates, when asked what he thinks, refuses to advance any beliefs. However, Socrates is willing to set up his thoughts as hypotheses, so as to have starting-points in investigation. Perhaps Carneades invokes a version of this idea. According to Cicero, he says that the wise person (and this is, the skeptic) can hold beliefs if she fully understands them to be beliefs, and that is, we can add, *merely* beliefs, rather than knowledge (*Acad.* 2.148; cf. Striker 1980 [1996,112]; Vogt 2010b).

In conclusion, we should note that Greek skepticism has much to offer philosophically, in particular insofar as it is rather different from the kinds of philosophy that are later called skepticism. Greek Academic skepticism is, centrally, a philosophy that focuses on the quest for knowledge, a life of investigation, and the rejection of presumed knowledge.

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Reading Plato, Philosophical Method: inquiry and definition (Plato), Epistemology (Plato), The Stoic System: logic and knowledge, Epicurus' Garden: physics and epistemology, Early Pyrrhonism: Pyrrho to Aenesidemus, Philosophy comes to Rome.