

The “Skeptical Academy” from the Pyrrhonist Perspective

Summary

The chapter examines the reception of the Skeptical Academy among the Pyrrhonian skeptics. While there are no references to Cicero’s *Academici Libri* in surviving writings by, or testimonies on, the Pyrrhonists, the work nonetheless serves as a central point of comparison. In general the Pyrrhonists are eager to distinguish themselves from the Academics. The reactions of the early Pyrrhonists to Arcesilaus, the first Academic to take the school in a skeptical direction, are briefly considered, as is Aenesidemus’ founding of a revived Pyrrhonist movement in opposition to the late skeptical Academy of Philo. The bulk of the chapter then considers the picture of the skeptical Academy offered by Sextus Empiricus; here comparisons with Cicero’s picture are particularly relevant. The two authors’ presentations of the Academy of Carneades and his successor Clitomachus have much in common, despite Sextus’ negative and Cicero’s positive verdict. But Cicero’s picture includes an important element that Sextus ignores, and that serves to weaken the force of his criticism. Sextus is less hostile to Arcesilaus, and here too his account is in many ways consistent with Cicero’s, although in this case, too, he cannot resist creating distance between himself and the Academic. The chapter ends by noting the possibility that Sextus’ insistence that Pyrrhonism and the Skeptical Academy are quite distinct is a rejoinder to Favorinus, who called himself an Academic though the school no longer existed.

Introduction

There is no evidence that the Pyrrhonian skeptics engaged directly with Cicero’s *Academici Libri*. Sextus Empiricus, the only Pyrrhonist of whom complete writings survive, probably lived in the late second and/or early third centuries CE – but certainly later than Cicero, since he mentions the emperor Tiberius (*PH* 1.84). Yet he never mentions Cicero; and indeed, he seems unaware of certain points about the Academic Carneades’ thinking that he might have learned from the *Academici Libri*. However, there was certainly an awareness on the part of the Pyrrhonists that the outlook of the Academy during what is today generally viewed as its skeptical phase (though the Academics did not themselves use the term “skepticism”) might be seen as similar or even identical to Pyrrhonism itself. Nor was it only the Pyrrhonists who sensed this: Aulus Gellius reports it as “an old question, dealt with by many Greek writers”, whether there is any significant difference between the two (11.5.6), and we know that Plutarch wrote a work called *On the Difference between Pyrrhonists and Academics*. This chapter will therefore discuss the reception of the Skeptical Academy in general within the Pyrrhonist tradition, with reference to the *Academici Libri* whenever this is relevant.

Sextus clearly sees the potential assimilation of the skeptical phase of the Academy to Pyrrhonism as a threat to his picture of the distinctiveness of Pyrrhonian skepticism, and takes some trouble to reject it. In the final part of the first book of his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, which gives a general overview of the Pyrrhonist outlook, he considers several philosophies that, he says, have been thought to have something in common with Pyrrhonian skepticism, and argues in every case that, on the contrary, they are importantly different from it. The chapter on the Academics is by far the longest and most fully developed of these (*PH* 1.220-235); while he spends a little time on Plato himself (1.221-225, including a digression on Xenophanes), the majority of the chapter is occupied with the Academies of Carneades and Clitomachus (1.226-231), Arcesilaus (1.232-234), and Philo of Larissa (1.235) – that is, all the major figures of the Skeptical Academy, as it tends to be called today.

The so-called Skeptical Academy, then, does not look skeptical to Sextus. One obvious difference is that the Academics have nothing to say about *ataraxia*, “freedom from worry”, which the

Pyrrhonian skeptics regard as the practical outcome of their skeptical suspension of judgment, and as the original goal of the intellectual explorations that generate skepticism in the first place (*PH* 1.12, 25-30). As it happens, however, Sextus mentions this point only in passing, and only in connection with Arcesilaus (*PH* 1.232). The main point of difference he stresses is that the Academics do not genuinely practice suspension of judgment, or even consistently pursue it. And this general attitude also seems to be traceable in earlier stages of the Pyrrhonist tradition, to the extent that we can reconstruct it. From the Pyrrhonist perspective, it is not an absurd attitude, even if it may neglect aspects of Academic thinking on which the *Academici Libri* shed considerable light.

Early Pyrrhonism

The Pyrrhonist tradition owes its inspiration to Pyrrho of Elis (c.360-270 BCE). Pyrrho wrote nothing, but his ideas and lifestyle were recorded and celebrated by his disciple Timon of Phlius (c.320-230 BCE), some of whose work survives in later Greek and Roman authors in the form of quoted fragments and second-hand reports. It is a highly controversial question how close the philosophy of Pyrrho was to that of the tradition that later took his name (for a recent survey of the issues, see Perin 2018). But it seems clear that, whatever his exact rationale, he gave up on, and was highly suspicious of, any positive philosophical enterprise, and claimed to find tranquility as a result of that renunciation; we thus have at least an analogue of the suspension of judgment, together with its practical effect, that we find in Sextus (and the same word for the latter, *ataraxia*, is also used of Pyrrho's attitude). Much of the surviving material from Timon consists of satirical verse portraits of other philosophers whose ideas were, in Pyrrho's and Timon's view, hopelessly misguided, together with a few who at least approximated the position they themselves espoused. Among the figures Timon sketches is Arcesilaus (316/15-241/40 BCE), who was his contemporary, and the picture is anything but complimentary. A sequence of four lines, quoted by Diogenes Laertius (4.42), reads as follows (I quote the translation of Long and Sedley 1987, passage 3E): "Having spoken thus, he [Arcesilaus] plunged into the crowd of bystanders,/And they like chaffinches round an owl gawped at him,/Showing up his vanity because he pandered to the mob./There's nothing big in this, you miserable fellow. Why do you give yourself airs like a fool?" The word for "give yourself airs", *platuneai*, is clearly a dig at Plato and suggests an uncritical imitation of him by Arcesilaus.

It has often been thought that Arcesilaus, who was the first to turn the Academy in a skeptical direction, received some inspiration from Pyrrho in doing so (see especially Sedley 1983). And Timon himself seems to accept this. Another of his lines, also quoted by Diogenes (4.33), has Arcesilaus saying "I will swim to Pyrrho and to tortuous Diodorus" and a further line quoted just before also cites Arcesilaus as having Pyrrho and Diodorus (together with Menedemus) as companions. (I follow the Greek text and translation of Clayman 2009, 109-110.) But if Timon acknowledges Arcesilaus' indebtedness to Pyrrho, by also associating him with other thoroughly non-Pyrrhonian philosophers – the logicians Diodorus and Menedemus, as well as Plato – he makes clear that he is very far from being an authentic follower of Pyrrho; rather than cultivating a withdrawal from philosophical discussion like Pyrrho, and reaping the benefit of tranquility, Arcesilaus engages in intellectual grandstanding, as suggested by the four-line fragment. Even if he learned something from Pyrrho, in Timon's view, he failed to put it to any good use.

The Revival of Pyrrhonism

The original Pyrrhonism did not last beyond Pyrrho himself and his immediate successors. But in the first century BCE a new movement began that claimed inspiration from Pyrrho. This movement was led by a certain Aenesidemus – variously reported as from Cnossos and from

Aigae, and probably active in the early or mid-first century BCE – and grew into the Pyrrhonist tradition to which Sextus later belonged. (To what extent Aenesidemus' version of Pyrrhonism differed from Sextus' is another controversial question; see Bett 2000, chapter 4, Schofield 2007. The evidence for Aenesidemus is collected in Polito 2014.) Two works are ascribed to him, *Pyrrhonist Discourses* and *Outline to Pyrrhonism*, but neither has survived. However, several later authors provide information about them, the fullest being a book-by-book outline of *Pyrrhonist Discourses*, with a somewhat more extensive summary of the first book, describing Aenesidemus' general position, by Photius, the ninth-century Patriarch of Constantinople (*Bibliotheca* 169b18-171a4). It is here that Aenesidemus' attitude towards the Academics comes most clearly to light.

Photius tells us that Aenesidemus dedicated the work to a member of the Academy called Lucius Tubero (169b33); Cicero had a friend by that name and it is usually assumed that this is the same person. It is also widely assumed that Aenesidemus was himself at first a member of the Academy; the text refers to Lucius Tubero as Aenesidemus' "fellow sect-member" (*sunairesiôtêi*). But the interpretation of this word is difficult and it may depend on what the "sect" is to which Photius is referring (see Bett 2000, 193; Polito 2014, 41-44). Be that as it may, Aenesidemus clearly takes a very dim view of the Academy, especially that of his own day (170a14-15), and presents Pyrrhonism as a superior alternative to it. The Pyrrhonist is said to "determine nothing" (170a11) – that is, make no definitive assertions – to have no firm cognitive "grasp" (*katalêpsis*) of anything (169b19-20), and to be in a state of impasse (*aporía*) about every issue placed before them (170a26-7); Sextus uses the very same language, and in these formulations we clearly have something at least akin to suspension of judgment as Sextus expresses it. By contrast, the Academics are said to "dogmatize" about many things (170a17-21) and to make "unambiguous" assertions and denials about things (170a28-29). Indeed, the Academics are described as "Stoics fighting Stoics" (170a16-17), Stoicism being the most prominent anti-skeptical school, and the one that was perhaps the most confident about the possibility of genuine knowledge.

Aenesidemus, then, is concerned to show that the Academics fail to avoid holding definite views, while promoting his new Pyrrhonist movement as doing much better in this respect; the implication, at least – which is consistent with the other evidence – is that avoidance of definite views was the Academics' reputed position and that Aenesidemus wants to show up this reputation as unfounded. The suggestion that the Academy of Aenesidemus' own time is especially guilty of dogmatism fits with the picture we get from both Sextus (*PH* 1.235) and Cicero's *Academici Libri* (2.18, 2.78) of a weakening of the skeptical position in the latest phase of the Academy as an institution, under the headship of Philo of Larissa (159/8-84/3 BCE). Philo seems to have allowed the holding of opinions, albeit with the acknowledgment that they were opinions rather than a decisive grasp of the truth; in earlier phases of the skeptical Academy, opinions – that is, views endorsed without decisive support for them – were rigorously avoided. (The details are controversial – see Brittain 2006, xix-xxxi; Reinhardt 2023, xxxvii-1 – but this much would be generally agreed.) There is also the figure of Antiochus (c.130-c.68 BCE), who broke away from the skeptical Academy and founded his own rival Academy; both Sextus (*PH* 1.235) and Cicero (*Acad.* 2.132) refer to his ideas as indistinguishable from Stoicism, and modern scholarship has generally agreed (see Brittain 2012).

Thus Aenesidemus' complaint that the Academics failed to practice a genuine skepticism (to use, again, a term that had not yet been adopted) seems to have some merit as applied to his contemporaries, whatever we might think of it as a charge against the skeptical Academy as a whole. What is surprising in this whole scenario, however, is that Cicero makes no mention whatever, in the *Academici Libri* or anywhere else, of Aenesidemus or of the challenge he had issued to the Academy; he seems to know nothing about this. He was personally acquainted with both Philo and Antiochus, whose lectures he attended in Rome and Athens respectively; he can therefore be considered a student in the Academy during its latest phase. His ignorance of Aenesidemus is perhaps especially surprising if Aenesidemus was himself a member of the Academy and then broke away from it. But this really makes little difference. Assuming the

Lucius Tubero to whom Photius refers was indeed Cicero's friend, it is difficult to imagine that he would not have talked with Cicero about the book Aenesidemus dedicated to him. More generally, it is hard to imagine that at least Philo, who still maintained some version of a skeptical outlook, would not have had something to say about the kind of critique Aenesidemus was making of the Academy. Perhaps it was a matter of timing. We do not know exactly when Aenesidemus launched his critique; it may have come after Cicero's youthful Academic studies, and it may have been forgotten in Rome when, near the end of his life, he returned to detailed thinking about the Academy and its history. In any case, while Cicero occasionally mentions Pyrrho, it is only as a largely forgotten ethical thinker (e.g., *Acad.* 2.130); he has no inkling of Pyrrho as a key figure in the history of skepticism, nor of a skeptical revival under Pyrrho's name in his own lifetime.

Sextus' Perspective on Carneades and Clitomachus

As we have now seen, Sextus' view that what we generally think of as the skeptical Academy was not skeptical at all is not original with him; it was present, in some sense, from the very beginning of Pyrrhonism. However, it is with Sextus that we have by far the clearest and most fully recorded expression of this view.

The very first thing Sextus says in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is that claiming that things *cannot* be known is just as far removed from skepticism as claiming to have discovered the truth. A true skeptic suspends judgment and keeps an open mind, including on the question whether the truth ever can be or will be discovered. And he associates the view that the truth cannot be discovered with the Academics, particularly Carneades and his immediate successor Clitomachus (*PH* 1.1-3). He repeats the same point at the start of the discussion of Carneades and Clitomachus later in the book (*PH* 1.226), the purpose of which is, as noted above, to demonstrate the distinctness of skepticism and the Academic position.

But the rest of that discussion is on another point: Carneades' use of "persuasive appearances" (*pithanai phantasiai*) as a guide to decision-making. Sextus concedes that there is a sense in which he himself follows the appearances that seem to him persuasive; he lives his life according to the way things appear (*PH* 1.21-4), and the appearances that he goes along with in choosing what to do can be called persuasive (*PH* 1.230). But the Academics, he says, regard some appearances as persuasive "with a strong pro-attitude" (*meta proskliseôs sphodras*, *PH* 1.230), and this too is inconsistent with skepticism. What exactly he means by this is not entirely clear from *Outlines*. But Carneades' "persuasive appearances" are discussed in more detail in another work of Sextus, *Against the Logicians*. Although his treatment of Carneades here is not directly polemical – Carneades appears in a long survey of previous philosophers' views on the criterion of truth – the additional information provided in this passage sheds light on why Sextus would want to distance himself from Carneades on this point.

A persuasive appearance, according to Carneades, is one that strikes the person having it as true, and does so to a significant degree (*M* 7.169-73). Sextus is clear that Carneades never goes beyond speaking of such appearances as *apparently* true; there is never any decisive verdict that they *are* true. But one can take steps to increase the strength of their appearance as true, and Carneades is reported as laying out different levels of persuasiveness: appearances that are fully consistent with the other appearances bearing on the same subject are more persuasive than those that are not, and appearances that have been carefully checked are more persuasive than those that are simply followed on the spur of the moment (*M* 7.176-83). These two points would seem to be closely connected and the *Outlines* discussion mentions them in the reverse order (*PH* 1.227-9); but the general idea one gets from both passages is of an active attempt to maximize the persuasiveness of the appearances on which one bases one's decisions – that is, their impression of being true. And this would seem to be a good explanation of the "strong pro-

attitude” referred to in the *Outlines* passage; an appearance that strikes one as highly persuasive – even if one always stops short of committing oneself to its truth – might well be described this way.

In Sextus’ telling, then, Carneades has an orientation towards the truth; he aims to base his decisions on the appearances that are most likely to be true. And this is not acceptable to Sextus, whose approach is *simply* to go along with the way things appear. He does not declare the appearances that present themselves to him as true, but nor does he even get into the business of assessing their likelihood of being true; that, for him, is already to venture too much into the project of expressing oneself about how things really are, which is what Sextus calls dogmatism. (It is evident that the conception of truth presupposed here is strongly realist, as is standard in antiquity.) Sextus’ picture of Carneades, then, has two parts that might seem to be in tension, or even in contradiction, with one another. On the one hand, he accuses him of what contemporary scholarship calls “negative dogmatism” – that is, of stating the definite view that nothing can be known; on the other, he accuses him of being involved in a search for the truth that, although it does not reach any definite conclusions, is not consistent with suspension of judgment as Sextus understands it. Now, it turns out that both of these points have counterparts in Cicero’s portrait of Carneades and Clitomachus. But Cicero includes a crucial extra element that Sextus has either neglected or is unaware of, and that shows how these Academics can consistently hold on to versions of both points.

Carneades as Portrayed in the *Academici Libri*

On the first point, in both Lucullus’ and Cicero’s speeches in the *Lucullus*, the view is attributed to Carneades that nothing can be “perceived” (*percipi*) or “grasped” (*comprehendi*) (*Acad.* 2.28, 109). Cicero uses both these words to render the Greek *katalêpsis* (see *Acad.* 2.17); the Stoics had introduced this term into epistemology to refer to a kind of cognitive grasp that cannot be mistaken, and Sextus uses the same term (or rather, the equivalent verbs and adjectives) when he says that Carneades denied that anything can be known (*PH* 1.1-3, 226). In both places Cicero also makes clear that, in response to his opponents’ challenge, Carneades had insisted that his statement applied to itself: he did not claim to “perceive” or “grasp” even that nothing can be “perceived” or “grasped”. This was not to deny that he *said* it, but he did not refute himself by treating the claim itself as something known. This immediately raises the question, what was the status of his assertion.

That this was a view of his, however, fits with other points that are made about Carneades elsewhere in the book – or at least, about Carneades as interpreted by Clitomachus, an interpretation of which the speaking character Cicero approves. Cicero says that, according to Clitomachus, Carneades had removed assent – “that is, opinion and rashness” – from our minds, comparing assent to a wild and savage monster (*Acad.* 2.108). Assent to an impression (*adsensio*, which is Cicero’s translation of the Greek *sunkatathesis* (*Acad.* 2.37)) is the endorsement of it as true; and the accompanying claim that this would be equivalent to opinion – that is, accepting something as true on the basis of something less than knowledge – fits nicely with the denial of the possibility of knowledge that we elsewhere see ascribed to Carneades. Elsewhere in the work the question arises whether the wise person will hold opinions, and we are told that Carneades sometimes answered this question in the affirmative. However, Cicero says, on Clitomachus’ authority, that this was a position he argued for rather than personally approved (*Acad.* 2.78). Carneades, like any skeptical Academic, would habitually argue on both sides of a question, so this is not hard to imagine. For Cicero – as for Carneades, on his interpretation – the only true options are a full “perceiving” or “grasping” of things or the withdrawal of all assent; and since he intends to argue that nothing can be “perceived” or “grasped”, the latter is the only one left (*Acad.* 2.78).

The other interpretation, which in the same place Cicero ascribes to Philo, is that Carneades held that opinions are permissible, so long as one acknowledges that they are only opinions (cf. *Acad.* 2.148). As already noted, a position of this kind is elsewhere attributed to Philo himself; on both sides, a debate about what Carneades meant doubles as a debate about which is the correct position. Cicero has sometimes been associated with the Philonian position, and this would not be surprising given his actual acquaintance with Philo. But the consensus today is that, both as author and as character, Cicero aligns himself with the more radical, Clitomachean interpretation (see Allen 2022; Reinhardt 2023, cxlii-clvii; Bett forthcoming, section IV). The matter is complicated by Cicero's admission that he does sometimes fall into the holding of opinions (*Acad.* 2.66). But this is clearly represented as a lapse from the ideal of wisdom to which he aspires.

On the denial of the possibility of knowledge in the skeptical Academy of Carneades, the *Academici Libri* and Sextus are thus in broad agreement. And the same is true of Carneades' pursuit of appearances that are as persuasive as possible – with Cicero, again, casting himself as a follower of Carneades. Cicero says that, as an Academic, his aim is to get as close as possible to the truth, and that, without ever definitely affirming the truth, he and his colleagues regard many things as persuasive (*Acad.* 2.7-8). He also attributes the same approach to Carneades and Clitomachus (*Acad.* 2.99-105). The term Cicero uses is *probabile*, which one may translate by “probable”, provided this is not understood in any statistical sense. A “probable” impression in this usage is simply one that strikes one as likely to be true; and indeed, Cicero sometimes uses the phrase “truth-like” (*veri simile*) interchangeably with *probabile* (*Acad.* 2.32, 99). Other current translations are “persuasive” (Brittain 2006) and “plausible” (Reinhardt 2023). Cicero does not go into as much detail about Carneades' notion of persuasiveness as Sextus does. But there is at least a hint of the levels of persuasiveness described by Sextus, including the check for consistency with other impressions, when Cicero reports Carneades and Clitomachus saying that one can approve persuasive impressions, and especially those that are “not impeded by anything” (*Acad.* 2.104-5). Moreover, the idea that this approach is oriented towards the truth, which was clearly implied by Sextus' treatment of persuasive appearances, is in Cicero fully explicit.

There is much in common, therefore, between Cicero's and Sextus' presentations of the Carneadean Academy. Yet Cicero is an enthusiastic supporter of this Academic outlook, while Sextus is strongly critical of it. Now, as suggested earlier, the two main elements of the position as Sextus presents them seem to sit somewhat uneasily with one another; indeed, there is one point at which they seem to be in active conflict. According to Sextus, in his pursuit of persuasive appearances, Carneades refrains from definitely asserting the truth of anything (even though he is more interested in truth than Sextus himself would like). Yet he also accuses Carneades of definitely asserting that nothing can be known (*PH* 1.226; the verb is *diabebaioussthai*, always used in Sextus of making a firm statement or insisting on something. Either Sextus is misrepresenting Carneades, or Carneades is contradicting himself. Now, we also saw that on Cicero's telling, Carneades treated the statement that nothing can be known – a statement that he was willing to make – as itself something not known (*Acad.* 2.28, 109). At this point the way to avoid contradiction is perhaps plain enough: Carneades can treat the claim that nothing can be known as itself persuasive rather than something to be asserted as true; and Cicero does indeed resolve the matter in this way (*Acad.* 2.110). But even if Carneades did not explicitly commit himself to its truth, it does sound from Cicero as if he asserted it – which brings us back to the question, what was the status of his assertion? There is a puzzle as to how one can put forward a view – such as the view that nothing can be known – without giving it one's *assent*, which Cicero tells us Carneades rigorously avoided. Hence Sextus' complaint may still seem to have some merit. However, there is an additional element in the position as reported by Cicero that finds no echo in Sextus; this not only saves Carneades' consistency on this last point – at least, if it can be made sense of – but also does much to blunt the force of Sextus' other criticism, that Carneades' attitude towards the appearances he finds persuasive is overly enthusiastic.

Cicero puts into the mouth of Clitomachus – expounding, as always, the views of Carneades – a series of remarks concerning two ways one might understand the notion of assent (*Acad.* 2.104). (He says that Clitomachus used “virtually these words” (*his fere verbis, Acad.* 2.102), suggesting that he is offering something close to a translation of Clitomachus’ Greek.) On the one hand, Clitomachus says, one can think of assent as a full-fledged endorsement, or commitment to the truth of, the point under discussion. On the other hand, one can think of it as approval or acceptance of the point, a willingness to follow it for the purposes of deciding what to do – including, what to say in a debate or discussion – that falls short of that definite commitment. The passage makes clear that the Academics prefer to reserve the term “assent” itself for the first, stronger attitude; and this is Cicero’s own consistent practice elsewhere (as was presupposed in our earlier discussion of assent). But it also makes clear that there is another way of making use of the impressions with which we are presented. Cicero uses several terms for this weaker and more non-committal attitude: “approval” (*probari* or *adprobari*), “following” (*sequi*), and “using” (*uti*). The suggestion, in every case, is that one goes along with these impressions for practical (or, for that matter, theoretical) purposes, while nonetheless withholding one’s endorsement of them.

Whether this is ultimately a coherent position is debatable. Many philosophers today would say that one’s beliefs – that is, what one takes as true – are revealed in one’s actions, and hence that there is no room for an attitude of “using for practical purposes” that does not include endorsement. The common *apraxia* or “inaction” objection, raised in antiquity against both Academics and Pyrrhonists – that a true skeptic would be incapable of action – is a version of the same idea. The issue may turn in part on what conception of truth one is assuming. In any case, if we put aside these concerns, it is clear enough how this distinction between full-scale assent and the lesser attitude of “approval” can permit a response to Sextus’ objections. Not only does Carneades not claim to *know* that nothing can be known (instead, he finds it persuasive); he also does not assent to it, but only approves it. And in general, finding one’s impressions persuasive (when one does) is expressed by approving them rather than assenting to them. One finds them apparently true and, as noted earlier, one can take steps to increase the strength with which they appear true; on the basis of such impressions, one can even put forward views of one’s own – as we hear that Carneades did with the view that nothing can be known, and as we can surmise that he and his followers regularly did with views about how to act in given situations. But all of this is consistent with suspension of judgment, because these views are only approved, not assented to.

Viewed, therefore, in light of the full picture revealed in the *Academici Libri*, Sextus’ objections to Carneades neglect an important component. Carneades does not, as Sextus suggests, give his full-scale assent to the view that nothing can be known; and his adoption of whatever other views he finds persuasive are tempered, in the same way, by their being merely approved rather than given assent. Of course, Sextus might have raised questions about this distinction between assent and approval; as we saw, it is by no means self-evident that we should accept it. And even if he allowed it, he might still have objected to the orientation towards the truth that is at the heart of Carneades’ account of persuasive impressions. However, by ignoring the distinction altogether, he can be accused of missing the point. And in this respect, it is unfortunate that (as far as we can tell) he was not acquainted with the *Academici Libri*.

Sextus and Cicero on Arcesilaus

Sextus also devotes a section of his chapter on the Academics in *Outlines to Arcesilaus* (*PH* 1.232-4). One surprising thing about this is that it is out of chronological order; it comes after the section on Carneades and Clitomachus but before the brief closing remarks on Philo and Antiochus. But the greater surprise is that the first part of his discussion of Arcesilaus is entirely conciliatory. While the general aim of this entire part of the book is to show that Pyrrhonian

skepticism is quite different from the positions to which people have sometimes assimilated it, Sextus tells us that Arcesilaus' approach and his own are virtually the same: Arcesilaus does not make definite assertions about anything's reality or unreality, and he does not talk about relative trustworthiness or untrustworthiness (*pistis/apistia* – this seems to be something close to Carneades' levels of persuasiveness), but he suspends judgment about everything (*PH* 1.232). Again, Sextus might have had a different reaction if he had known Cicero's *Academici Libri*; in this case, Cicero's testimony might have led him to be more critical. Although Cicero also speaks of Arcesilaus' avoidance of definite assertions, he speaks of this policy as deriving from the claim that nothing can be known (*Acad.* 1.45). Admittedly, this is said to be self-applicable, as was Carneades' equivalent claim: he did not claim to know even that nothing can be known. But it is nonetheless a claim advanced by him, and if this was enough for Sextus to accuse Carneades (rightly or wrongly) of holding a definite view, one might think he would have regarded Arcesilaus in the same light. Another point that one might have expected to make him disenchanted with Arcesilaus appears in Sextus' own *Against the Logicians*. As with the discussion of Carneades in that book that we touched on earlier, this belongs in Sextus' review of positions concerning the criterion of truth (*M* 7.150-158) and is not presented as criticism. But Sextus here attributes to Arcesilaus a use of "the reasonable" (*eulogon*) as a practical criterion (*M* 7.158). Although this receives no elaboration (and there is no discussion of this notion in the surviving portions of the *Academici Libri*), it sounds like a precursor of Carneades' use of persuasive impressions; again, if that was a basis for objecting to Carneades, one might have expected that he would have gone the same way on this point with Arcesilaus.

How to extract a consistent position from the various things attributed to Arcesilaus is far from clear (see Perin 2013, Brittain and Osorio 2021). Another point that seems hard to reconcile with his purported suspension of judgment about everything is his apparent level of enthusiasm about suspension of judgment itself. And this is the point on which Sextus' so far surprisingly positive verdict turns to criticism. Sextus says that Arcesilaus describes acts of suspension of judgment as good and acts of assent as bad (*PH* 1.233). He adds that while he himself might say this as an expression of how things appear, Arcesilaus speaks of suspension of judgment as good and assent as bad *in the nature of things*, which is itself, of course, a violation of suspension of judgment. And for this point, Cicero's evidence seems to offer at least some qualified support. While Cicero does not ascribe to Arcesilaus exactly this, and he does not find fault with him, he does say that Arcesilaus held that the view that the wise person should hold no opinions was "true and honorable and worthy of the wise person" (*Acad.* 2.77). As we saw earlier, for someone who thinks that knowledge is not available, the rejection of opinions is equivalent to suspension of judgment; and Sextus in *Against the Logicians* attributes to Arcesilaus an argument for the conclusion that the wise person suspends judgment (*M* 7.151-5). It is an argument that, according to Sextus, he said the *Stoics* were forced to accept; and Cicero too speaks of the issue as arising in the context of a debate with the *Stoics*. But Cicero also clearly treats it as something Arcesilaus himself eagerly accepted (*Acad.* 2.77, cf. 1.45), and this would explain Sextus' criticism, whether or not it was entirely fair.

Sextus, then, does not maintain his initial approval of Arcesilaus in *Outlines*. Having accused him of inconsistency, he ends the passage by reporting, though not explicitly accepting, a story that Arcesilaus was really a secret Platonist and that his activity of skeptical argument was just a way of testing his pupils to see if they were ready to receive the true doctrines of Plato (*PH* 1.234). Sextus, then, reverts to the picture of Arcesilaus that was already expressed by Timon: Arcesilaus is too close to the founder of the school, who (on this view) was anything but a skeptic. He does not necessarily believe this, but he wants to keep his distance from all non-Pyrrhonist philosophers, and his expression of common ground with Arcesilaus cannot be allowed to be the last word.

Sextus Against Favorinus?

Although the Academy, as an institution, ceased to exist in the early first century BCE, the thought of the skeptical Academy continued to be regarded as a serious option as late as the second century CE. Epictetus (*Discourses* 1.5, 2.20,1-5) and Galen (*On the Best Method of Teaching*) both take the trouble to argue against skeptical Academic positions. Galen is explicit that the target of his polemic is Favorinus, the second-century rhetorician who styled himself as a skeptical Academic, and it is likely that Epictetus also has Favorinus in mind (see Bett 2017, 551-2). Favorinus no doubt acquired his knowledge of the skeptical Academy from his teacher Plutarch, who shows a clear interest in it, while also adhering to some of the more doctrinal sides of Plato. For Favorinus, it became his own philosophical stance, and this fit nicely with his activity, as a rhetorician, of arguing on different sides of the same issue.

It has been suggested that when Sextus argues at some length against the idea that Pyrrhonism and (what we call) the skeptical Academy are the same, he too is arguing against Favorinus (see Holford-Strevens 1997, 207-17). If so, Sextus would be engaging not only with the skeptical Academy of the Hellenistic period – that is, the Academy of which Cicero presents himself as an adherent – but also with a self-styled representative of the skeptical Academy much closer to his own time. The case is made plausible by the fact that Favorinus is known to have written a work in ten books on the Pyrrhonian Modes (Aulus Gellius XI.5.5). While we know nothing directly about the contents of this work, we do know, as mentioned at the outset, that the question of the similarity, or lack of it, between Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism was actively considered in the period. The sheer length of Favorinus' work would tend to suggest that his answer to the question leaned towards similarity: that he saw Pyrrhonism as akin to his own Academic outlook and as offering resources that he could use for his own purposes, rather than as a movement from which he should keep his distance. If so, his position on the question would indeed be diametrically opposed to Sextus'.

However, if the “some people” (*PH* 1.220) who, according to Sextus, wish to equate Pyrrhonian and Academic skepticism are indeed Favorinus and colleagues, this would be a very unusual case of Sextus intervening in a, for him, more or less contemporary debate. Otherwise, except for Pyrrhonism itself, he makes no clear reference to the history of philosophy later than the early first century BCE. In discussing whether Plato was a skeptic, he probably mentioned the opinion of Menodotus, a doctor of the Empiric school who seems to have lived in the early second century CE (*PH* 1.222 – the text is garbled, but plausible reconstructions include his name); Menodotus is named in Diogenes Laertius' list of Pyrrhonists (9.116), and Sextus cites his opinion alongside Aenesidemus', so this presumably reflects discussion internal to the Pyrrhonist school. Besides this, the latest definitely datable person Sextus refers to is Tiberius, who died in 37, and is mentioned simply as an example of someone with unusual visual powers (*PH* 1.84). In general Sextus seems oddly cut off from the intellectual movements of his own day; the reasons for this are obscure, as is almost everything else about his life (see Bett 2017).

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