

Skepticism in Rome

1. Main Traditions of Skepticism in the Greco-Roman World

There were two main traditions of skepticism in the ancient Greco-Roman world: the tradition in the Academy, the school founded by Plato, which turned skeptical under the leadership of Arcesilaus (316/315-214/240 BCE), the fifth head of the school after Plato himself, and maintained that orientation until its demise as an institution early in the first century BCE; and the Pyrrhonian tradition, claiming inspiration from Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360-270 BCE), but beginning as a continuous movement with Aenesidemus of Cnossos (early first century BCE). The Pyrrhonian tradition lasted until at least the early third century CE; Sextus Empiricus, the only Pyrrhonian of whom we have complete surviving works, is plausibly dated to the late second or early third century, and Diogenes Laertius (9.116) names a student of his, Saturninus. It was the Pyrrhonists who actually called themselves σκεπτικοί/*skeptikoi*, “inquirers”. But already in antiquity it was recognized that there was enough in common between them and the Academics to justify using the label of both schools; Aulus Gellius, in his *Attic Nights*, reports it as a longstanding issue whether there is any difference between them (11.5.6, in a passage to be further discussed below). The central shared feature is a practice of suspension of judgment, or an avoidance of definite views, about all theoretical questions; along with this goes an insistence that a life lived on the basis of our impressions of things, without any pretension to understand how things really are, is perfectly possible. A distinctive feature of the Pyrrhonian tradition, not shared by the Academics, is its claim that this attitude of suspension of judgment leads to ἀταραξία/*ataraxia*, “freedom from disturbance” – the same benefit claimed for their philosophy by the Epicureans.

2. Skepticism in Rome

In Rome itself, skepticism aroused a certain interest in intellectual circles, and at several different periods (both pre-Christian and within the Christian era), but there is no reason to think that it ever had a broad cultural influence. This is perhaps not surprising, seeing that the production of suspension of judgment, in both schools, depends largely on examining, criticizing, and bringing to a stalemate the competing positions of other philosophers on a variety of topics in the three standard philosophical areas: logic, physics, and ethics. Even to take an interest in skepticism, therefore, requires some familiarity with a range of theoretical debates and a considerable appetite for philosophical argument. In this it differs from Epicureanism and Stoicism, both of which could be boiled down to a series of practical maxims that could be understood with little or no background knowledge; Epicurus’ *Principal Doctrines* and Epictetus’ *Handbook* are excellent examples of this kind of technique – but there is no equivalent in either of the two skeptical traditions.

Of the two traditions, Academic skepticism seems to have had much more impact in Rome than Pyrrhonian skepticism. The starting point seems to have been a visit to Rome in 155 BCE by three philosophers, one of whom was Carneades (214-129/8 BCE), the head of the Academy at the time and, along with Arcesilaus, the most important of the Academic skeptics.

The philosophers were sent by Athens to plead a case on its behalf. Athens had been fined, on Roman authority, in compensation for their raid on the town of Oropus; the philosophers' job was to appeal the fine in the Roman Senate – and they were largely successful (Pausanias 7.11.4-8). But we are told that they also gave some public lectures, which attracted much interest, especially those of Carneades (Aulus Gellius 6.14.8-10; Plutarch, *Cato the Elder*, 22). The reaction was not uniformly positive; Plutarch (*loc. cit.*) also tells us that the statesman Cato the Elder urged the Senate to decide the case as soon as possible, so that the philosophers would leave. Plutarch adds (23.1) that Cato's concerns applied to philosophy in general, not Carneades in particular. But Carneades would have especially outraged him if a story often cited in the scholarship was true: That he gave two lectures on successive days, one in favor of justice and one against it. This would be a fine example of skeptical practice. However, there are good reasons to suspect the truth of this story; the most obvious is that such a performance would hardly help the philosophers' case that the fine on Athens was unjust. The evidence is a lost portion of Cicero's *Republic*, as summarized by the Christian author Lactantius (*Divine Institutes* 5.14.3-5); but Cicero's dialogues do not purport to represent actual historical facts, and the story may well be his invention.¹ Nonetheless, it seems clear enough that during his stay, Carneades did introduce some Romans to the methods and approach of Academic skepticism.

Academic skepticism had a rather more sustained presence in Rome in the person of Philo of Larissa (159/8-84/3 BCE), the last head of the Academy, who spent a few years there at the end of his life. (Whether he died in Rome or returned to Athens first is unclear.) The circumstances of his departure from Athens, the Academy's location since Plato, are obscure; but the year, 88 BCE, saw major political turmoil there, as well as military threat, and he was by no means the only prominent figure in Athens to leave.² Not that things were any more settled at Rome: this was the final phase of the extended contest for dominance between Marius and Sulla. But Philo found Rome a place where he could live and lecture, and the evidence suggests that he had an enthusiastic audience. His best-known listener was the young Cicero (106-43 BCE); but Plutarch remarks in general that the Romans greatly admired him (*Cicero* 3.1) and Cicero, in his *Academica*, has the character Lucullus refer in passing to several friends of his who heard Philo (*Acad.* 2.11). It also seems clear that during his time in Rome Philo modified his views; in the same passage of the *Academica* we hear of some books he wrote while in Rome that outraged his former pupil Antiochus (who had since formed a rival, non-skeptical movement billed as the true Academy), because the ideas expressed were clearly different from anything he had heard from Philo before – despite the books' claim that this had been the Academy's position all along (*Acad.* 1.13).³ Philo's skepticism had for some time been milder than that of Carneades, allowing for the holding of opinions – that is, the acceptance of things as true, albeit with the recognition that one might be wrong; the new position allowed even for

¹ For detailed examination of the evidence, and doubts about Cicero's story, see J.G.F. Powell, "The Embassy of the Three Philosophers to Rome in 155 BC", in *Hellenistic Oratory: Continuity and Change*, ed. C. Kremmydas and K. Tempest (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 219-248.

² See Charles Brittain, *Philo of Larissa: The last of the Academic Sceptics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 58-64.

³ On this dispute, see Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, translated with introduction and notes by Charles Brittain (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), xxx-xxxi and Brittain's notes to the translation at 2.11, 2.18 and 1.13.

a kind of knowledge – just not knowledge of the infallible kind claimed by the Stoics. This hardly seems to count as a form of skepticism at all.

3. Cicero as Representative of Academic Skepticism in Rome

Despite having been exposed to Philo's ideas in his youth, Cicero himself does not espouse either of these positions. Cicero is undoubtedly the most important representative of Academic skepticism in Rome, and skepticism in his hands appears to be the more rigorous variety associated with Carneades. The matter is complicated by the fact that Cicero admits that he sometimes slides into holding opinions (*Acad.* 2.66). But this is clearly represented as a failure on his part, and the true skeptical approach, from his point of view, is to avoid opinions and suspend judgment. This does not prevent him (or Carneades) from finding some ideas more persuasive than others; but this is just an attitude of provisional approval, which falls short of declaring their truth, even tentatively.⁴

Cicero's philosophical works were mostly written long after his encounter with Philo – indeed, almost at the end of his life – in a period (46-44 BCE) of withdrawal from politics occasioned by the dictatorship of Julius Caesar and also by grief at the death in childbirth of his daughter Tullia. The *Academica* (which survives only in part) is his most explicit declaration of Academic skepticism. But Cicero has a much broader aim, which is to introduce the Romans to philosophy in Latin. He frequently talks about this goal, defending it both against those who think philosophy can best be studied in Greek, and against those who are suspicious of philosophy in general (e.g., *Acad.* 1.9-12, *Fin.* 1.1-11). Though his audience is clearly an elite – this is no exception to the general rule noted earlier – his intention is clearly to make philosophy more accessible to the Roman public. Several works, such as *De Finibus (On Ends)* and *Tusculan Disputations*, allow him both to fulfil this educational goal and to advance his skeptical project. A variety of characters, often including Cicero himself, expound and advocate different philosophical positions. The reader thus gets introduced to Epicureanism, Stoicism, and other philosophies; at the same time, by presenting these views against one another, he sets up precisely the kind of opposition used by Academic skeptics to generate suspension of judgment. If one of these views nonetheless comes out looking stronger than the others, that, again, is to be understood merely in terms of its persuasiveness, which stops short of any judgment on its truth.

Cicero's philosophical works have an importance to us that is far greater than he could possibly have imagined. Since most of the original works promoting the philosophies he explains have been lost, he is often a central source of evidence – sometimes the only source – for the details of these philosophies. But his works have also been widely read in many periods for their intrinsic interest, including in the early Christian period of late antiquity. Lactantius' interest in Cicero's *Republic* has already been mentioned. A clear indication that Cicero's specifically skeptical side continued to be noticed is Augustine's *Against the Academicians* (written in 386), which draws very heavily on Cicero's *Academica*, while of course arguing for an anti-skeptical point of view.

⁴ On this distinction, see James Allen, "Radicalism and Moderation in the New Academy", *Phronesis* 67 (2022), 133-160; Richard Bett, "The Stoics and Carneades: Dialectic and the Holding of Views", in *The Oxford Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Nathan Powers and Jacob Klein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

4. Favorinus

Since the Academy, as an institution, ceased to exist when Cicero was still young, it may seem surprising that someone in the second century CE should have been a self-professed Academic. That person was the orator and philosopher Favorinus of Arles, who spent much of his time in Rome. As a leading figure of the Second Sophistic, Favorinus was naturally interested in rhetorical showmanship; and this included the ability to argue effectively on both sides of a case. Academic skepticism, with its practice of developing or accumulating opposing arguments on any topic, was thus naturally suited to his rhetorical goals. But there is good reason to think that his interest in Academic skepticism extended beyond this. Galen takes him seriously enough as a philosopher to devote a whole work (*De Optima Doctrina, On the Best Method of Teaching*) to arguing against skeptical Academic ideas, which he explicitly says is directed against Favorinus. At the start of this work (I.41, 4-8 Kühn), Galen tells us that Favorinus wrote a work called *On the Academic Disposition*, also entitled *Plutarch* (who was Favorinus' teacher and himself shows a clear interest in the skeptical Academy). In the same place he says that Favorinus also wrote a work *Against Epictetus*, consisting of a dialogue between Epictetus and a slave of Plutarch. That Epictetus was aware of, and discomfited by, this work is strongly suggested by the fact that he twice engages in polemic against Academics who claim to disrupt our knowledge of everything (*Discourses* 1.5, 2.20.1-5). Favorinus' interest in targeting Stoicism (always the favorite doctrinal target of both Academic and Pyrrhonian skeptics) is further evident from yet another work attributed to him in Galen's critique, *On the Grasp-apt Appearance* (Περὶ τῆς καταληπτικῆς φαντασίας/*Peri tês katalêptikês phantasias*), directed against a type of impression that, according to the Stoics, was guaranteed to be true. Thus we have evidence of spirited debate, at least partially in Rome, about the merits of Academic skepticism and various alternatives to it, with Favorinus as the center of attention. How widely this debate was known about – including, how far it was reflected in Favorinus' public rhetorical activities – is less clear.⁵

Another interesting point about Favorinus is that his skeptical interests were not limited to the Academic tradition. He also wrote a work in ten books called *Pyrrhonian Modes*, as we learn from Aulus Gellius in the same chapter where he discusses whether the Academic and the Pyrrhonian philosophies are the same (11.5.5). It is very likely that Favorinus is Gellius' source in this passage; he knew and admired Favorinus and refers to him frequently in the *Attic Nights*, both as a source and as a speaking character, and otherwise, while references to philosophy are not unusual in his work, he seems to have little knowledge of or interest in skepticism (of either variety). The chapter includes the observation that the Academic and Pyrrhonian varieties of skepticism "have been thought" (*existimati sunt*, 11.5.8) to differ in that the former endorsed the definite conclusion that nothing could be known, whereas the Pyrrhonists left open even that question. And it is true that some people did think that: Sextus Empiricus says precisely this in the very first sentences of his best-known work, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (PH 1.1-4), and this understanding of Academic skepticism seems to be supported by Cicero's picture of it in his *Academica* (though Cicero makes no mention of Pyrrhonism). Whether Favorinus agreed with

⁵ On Favorinus, see LeoFranc Holford-Strevens, "Favorinus: The Man of Paradoxes", in *Philosophia Togata II: Plato and Aristotle at Rome*, ed. Jonathan Barnes and Miriam Griffin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 188-217.

this assessment is another question; Gellius' chapter does not give an opinion on it, nor does it allow us to infer what opinion, if any, Favorinus himself took. However, for a self-identified Academic to write at such length on Pyrrhonism would most easily be explained by the hypothesis that he rejected it – that is, that he considered the two forms of skepticism to be largely similar and capable of reinforcing one another; ten books of polemic are not impossible, but ten books mining the resources of Pyrrhonism for his own Academic purposes seem more likely.

5. Lack of Interest in Pyrrhonism in Rome

Besides Favorinus' interest in, and probable sympathy for, Pyrrhonian skepticism, there is very little evidence that this tradition of skepticism attracted much interest in Rome. It is striking that Cicero, with whom Aenesidemus, the founder of the revived Pyrrhonian tradition, must have been more or less contemporary, shows no awareness of him whatever. He remarks in passing that the views of Pyrrho himself (along with a few others) have simply faded away (*Tusculan Disputations* 5.85); and on the rare occasions when he mentions Pyrrho elsewhere, he seems to associate him exclusively with an ethical position that gives no value to anything other than virtue (*Fin.* 2.43, 4.43, *Acad.* 2.130). This seems to be a misunderstanding; all these passages also refer to certain extremist Stoics who did hold such a view, but no other evidence connects it with Pyrrho.⁶ In any case, Cicero appears to be quite oblivious of the fact that a new Pyrrhonist movement was taking shape in his own lifetime.

This is all the more surprising if, as is usually accepted, Aenesidemus was himself a member of the Academy, the skeptical school with which Cicero identifies, before seceding and founding his rival Pyrrhonist movement. The evidence comes from Photius, the ninth-century patriarch of Constantinople, who gives us a crucial summary of Aenesidemus' *Pyrrhonist Discourses*, a work of which we otherwise know almost nothing (*Bibliotheca* 169b18-170b35). At the start of this passage Photius tells us that Aenesidemus dedicated the work to a Roman, Lucius Tubero, who was a συναίρεισιώτης/*sunairesiôtês* in the Academy. This word is generally translated "fellow-member" and taken to mean that Lucius Tubero and Aenesidemus both belonged to the Academy.⁷ Of course, if Photius' report is true, at least one Roman did know of Aenesidemus' revived Pyrrhonism. But this information did not apparently reach Cicero (or, as far as we know, any other Roman), even though Lucius Tubero is generally taken to be Lucius Aelius Tubero, Cicero's friend and younger contemporary.

The notion of Pyrrho as a forgotten figure with no successors is repeated by the younger Seneca (c.4 BCE-65 CE) in his *Natural Questions* (7.32.2), written near the end of his life; by this

⁶ On this issue, see Richard Bett, *Pyrrho, his Antecedents, and his Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 102-105.

⁷ This was challenged by Fernanda Decleva Caizzi, "Aenesidemus and the Academy", *Classical Quarterly* 42 (1992), 176-189, who argued that the word might simply mean "member", not "fellow-member". This was refuted by Jaap Mansfeld, "Aenesidemus and the Academics", in *The Passionate Intellect: Essays on the Transformation of Classical Traditions*, ed. L. Ayres (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 235-248. It has since been argued that the sect of which Photius calls Aenesidemus and Tubero "fellow-members" was not the Academy itself, but dissenters from the true philosophy of Plato; see *Aenesidemus of Cnossos: Testimonia*, edited with introduction and commentary by Roberto Polito (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 43-44.

time the revived Pyrrhonist tradition must have been underway for a few generations. Some have maintained that Sextus Empiricus lived and taught in Rome, but there is no clear evidence of this.⁸ He refers a number of times to Roman customs, but this is no different from his references to many different locations and cultural practices. Beyond this, we hear of a certain Cassius; Diogenes Laertius calls him “Cassius the Skeptic” (7.32-34), and Galen refers to a Cassius, who is presumably the same person, as “Cassius the Pyrrhonian” (*Outline of Empiricism* 4). The context in Galen suggests that Cassius was also an Empiricist doctor (as were other Pyrrhonists, including Sextus); and some have identified him with a celebrated doctor named Cassius at Rome in the time of Tiberius (Pliny, *Natural History* 29.7; Scribonius Largus 120). But Cassius is a common name, and the identification is quite speculative.

To repeat, then: In general, the impact of skepticism in Rome was limited and, to the extent that it aroused interest, this was very largely confined to the Academic tradition.

6. Reactions to Skepticism by Roman Christians

This verdict remains largely, but perhaps not entirely, the same when we consider the reactions to skepticism by Christians in Rome. Augustine’s debt to Cicero’s *Academica* has already been mentioned. Two other Roman Christians who engage with skepticism are the author of the *Refutation of all Heresies* (often thought to be Hippolytus (c.170-c.235 CE), but this is controversial) and Minucius Felix (dates uncertain, but probably late 2nd and/or 3rd century CE). A central tactic of the *Refutation* is to argue that the heretics are drawing upon the work of pagan philosophers; and for this purpose (as noted in its conclusion, 1.26.4) the first book consists of a doxographical survey of Greek philosophy, in which the skeptics receive a brief chapter (1.23). The account is garbled at best; the chapter bills itself as being about the Academics, but the founder of the school is named as Pyrrho (1.23.1), and the specific ideas summarized are closer to those elsewhere attributed to Pyrrho than to the Academics (compare especially the opening section of Diogenes Laertius’ life of Pyrrho, 9.61). In an earlier chapter there is also a mention of the early Greek philosopher Xenophanes as the originator of the notion of ἀκαταληψία/*akatalêpsia* – that is, the notion that nothing can be cognitively “grasped”; this term is regularly used by other authors to describe both Academic and Pyrrhonian forms of skepticism, and the idea of Xenophanes as a forerunner of skepticism is not unusual. These references to skepticism may be thought of as at best neutral, but (since they are part of the author’s material for refuting heresies) potentially hostile. However, elsewhere in the work skeptical material is put to positive use. In his attack on astrology the author includes wording that is very close to parts of Sextus Empiricus’ *Against the Astrologers* (M 5); either he is copying from Sextus with insignificant changes, or the two authors are drawing on the same earlier Pyrrhonian skeptical text, now lost.

Minucius Felix’s work *Octavius* is a dialogue between Caecilius, a pagan, and the Christian Octavius. Caecilius is identified as an Academic skeptic. He opens his speech by expressing the uncertainty of everything, including the nature of God, and cautioning against coming to any definite conclusions (5.2-5.6); he ends it with the same outlook (12.7), which he

⁸ For the arguments in favor of this and references to their proponents, along with good reasons for considering them indecisive, see D.K. House, “The Life of Sextus Empiricus”, *Classical Quarterly* 30 (1980), 227-238.

associates with Socrates' confession of ignorance and with the skepticism of Arcesilaus and Carneades that was its natural successor (13.1-3). Octavius' reply, advocating the Christian position, ends with a repudiation of the endless and fruitless argument of Socrates and his Academic successors (with Pyrrho, again, being thrown in for good measure, 38.5). Skepticism is thus presented as something to be overcome by Christianity. Yet the implied attitude towards skepticism is not entirely negative, in the sense that Caecilius' lack of certainty, and his adherence to paganism as a matter of conventional practice rather than doctrine, makes him an easier target for conversion than someone with fixed and definite views.

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