The Case of Ataraxia and Apraxia in the Development of Skeptic Thought

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The problem in setting out a reasonable and fair account of Skepticism often arises in the very complexities that give it its unique strengths. For every scholar who insists on one understanding or reading of the philosophy’s central sources, there are a myriad of opposing viewpoints. The lacunae in time and the textual record that stand between us and the skeptics certainly do not assist the eager student in any meaningful way. Consequently, any reconstructive efforts require a good deal of creativity and a delicate touch so as not to obliterate the nuances of this rather singular philosophy. Even some of the central tenets and problems of this philosophy require care and attention lest they be lost in the dustbin of history. Two such central problems in skeptic epistemology—or rather, which arise in the concerns of skeptic epistemology—are those of ataraxia (ἀταραξία) and apraxia (ἀπραξία). The former consists of the bliss asserted to arise in the final suspension of belief and the withholding of assent in epochē (ἐποχή). Meanwhile, the latter describes a central problem in skepticism, namely, that of how one is to act when all certainty is gone from life. As a mode of argumentation, Skepticism was and is strong, but when it came to the problem of apraxia, it took a level of philosophical systematization that would carry Skepticism away from its dialectical roots.

There are essentially two schools of skeptic thought attested during the Hellenistic era: those of the Pyrrhonists (or Pyrrhonians) and those of the Academics. The latter arose in
what had been Plato’s academy in the mid third century B.C. due to the innovations of the Academy’s leader, Arcesilaus, who, according to Diogenes Laertius, “was the first to suspend [making] assertions because of the contradiction among arguments. He was also the first to argue both sides of a question and the first to change the doctrine handed down by Plato....”¹ Arcesilaus, by all reports, was a controversial and infuriating figure, who took no small pleasure in the polemic aspect of philosophy, particularly when it came to agitating the Stoics. In this, he came equipped with a honed and updated dialectical method drawn from the earlier dialogues of Plato.² Indeed, Numenius said that “nobody knew about Arcesilaus’ stand any more than they knew about which side the son of Tydaeus was on, about whom Homer said that no one knew whether he sided with the Trojans or the Achaeans,” as well as that “[he] took precautions so that he would not have difficulties, never appearing to endorse a dogma, but rather emitting the suspension of judgment for his own protection, like the ink emitted by a squid.”³ Arcesilaus was leery of the validity of sense impressions, as all skeptics were to varying extents, but the specific cause of this caution is rather uncertain. For Thorsrud, Arcesilaus’s argument against knowledge built upon kataleptic sense impressions is not due to his own commitment to this view, but rather due to a dialectical strategy designed to “[lead] his dogmatic interlocutors to admit that they themselves are unwillingly committed to it.”⁴ Just as Arcesilaus never endorsed dogma, so he designed his argumentative strategy in order that it never allowed space for the unquestioned acceptance of dogma.

This view of the philosopher is premised upon a view of Arcesilaus deeply indebted to the Socratic method and particularly to the style of argumentation carried out in the earlier dialogues, where, in the end, no lasting conclusion is made either by Socrates or his interlocutor. Consequently Thorsrud views Arcesilaus as primarily teaching others to suspend their judgment, rather than rely upon dogmatic
Stoic beliefs regarding the nature of knowledge. A.A. Long shares a similar view, regarding any position Arcesilaus (and by extension, anyone following in his particular approach) might pick up as held entirely for the purposes of counter-argumentation, rather than for the purposes of forwarding a particular understanding of knowledge, and, in doing so, commit to any belief regarding the truth value of a given argument.⁵

In this regard, Arcesilaus is indebted to a revolution in the realm of epistemological inquiry that seems to have taken place around the start of the Hellenistic era. As Gisela Striker informs, “Towards the end of the fourth century B.C., Greek epistemology appears to undergo some dramatic changes. New technical terms are introduced, indicating a shift of interest from the question ‘what is knowledge?’—assuming that there is such a thing—to ‘is there any knowledge?’”⁶ This revolution serves as the grounds from which the Skeptic schools of thought would emerge. This question too serves as a one of the major indications of the alteration of the modes of inquiry that had served Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in good stead, a refinement of the philosophical language to reflect increasingly complicated and abstruse problems. From this re-centering of the central question of epistemology arose the potential for philosophers such as the skeptics to further challenge these central assumptions. For the skeptics, identifying self-evident truth could not lead to objective knowledge, as earlier philosophers had argued; without a foundation upon which truth can be established, this compositional work is impossible.⁷ While later skeptics would complicate this somewhat, an analysis of such will have to wait briefly for Pyrrho to have his turn first.

What Arcesilaus is to the Academic skeptics, Pyrrho is to the Pyrrhonists and more. By all accounts, Pyrrho was a formidable thinker and an even more sincere practitioner of the philosophy he preached, who apparently once issued a remark

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⁵ Long (2006), 110.
⁶ Striker (1996), 150.
to lament the seeming difficulties of divesting “oneself entirely of one’s humanity.”

As might be imagined from such a statement, Pyrrho’s reputation to the skeptic community was formidable; as Groarke argues, it is perhaps due to Pyrrho’s strength and conviction that he was such a valuable thinker to the Pyrrhonist tradition: he promises a certainty that finds its origin in the ability to reject unsubstantiated and unverifiable claims. The differences between the Pyrrhonist school and


the Academic school are several, but in practice are difficult if not impossible to parse out, because, as the magisterial Jacques Brunschwig posits, “the two traditions were [mutually] contaminated from the start.”¹⁰ Arising in the same culture in similar philosophical climates, and sharing a fundamental principle (albeit one interpreted in several different ways), the two skeptic schools were indebted to each other where they did not draw upon the same sources. Indeed, in some accounts, Aenesidemus founded the Pyrrhonist school centuries after Pyrrho, inspired by his predecessor’s resolute example, who “split off from the dogmatism of the Academy of his time.”¹¹ Furthermore, it is very difficult to establish the differences between two philosophical schools that, as Striker points out somewhat dramatically, “advocate no theories at all.”¹² For the sake of time and space, however, I shall avoid discussing the overall differences between the schools much further. Suffice it to say that the differences arise primarily in methodology, where the Academics were always more interested in controverting philosophical positions, whereas Pyrrhonists did not engage with the dogmatist Stoics or Epicureans on the same level, rather arguing by opposing the “sense impressions or unreflective ordinary beliefs.”¹³

Pyrrho envisioned skepticism as having a significant moral component or moral promise, whereby aporia (ἀπορία, the state of being at a loss, having withheld all assent to sense impressions) is one of total tranquility.¹⁴ In contrast, Arcesilaus, following in the tradition of Socrates, believed quite the opposite, since for Socrates “aporia is a spur to further inquiry, not a welcome state of calm….”¹⁵ The state of realizing one’s total inability to know anything, for Pyrrho, was one of perfect bliss, where you can be disturbed in no way by no one. There can be no fear or other negative emotions in a state of epochē (ἐποχή—suspension). Burnyeat clarifies, saying, “Remove belief, and the emotions will disappear; as fear, for example fades when one is dissuaded of one’s belief that the thing one was afraid of is dangerous.

At least to the extent that emotions derive from reason and thought, they must disappear when judgment is suspended on every question of fact or value.”¹⁶

Yet here the problem of apraxia enters. If one is in a state of ataraxia, where is the instigation to act? Are we not for intents and purposes mere vegetables should we neglect this faculty? This is the area where the Stoics and Epicureans found the most ammunition to hurl against the Skeptics, in arguing that Skepticism is essentially a passive mode of argumentation and when it comes to promoting action is entirely inadequate. In such a way Arcesilaus offered an argument against the problem of apraxia by controverting the Stoic preoccupation with the issue of assent and arguing that assent was not an integral component of action.¹⁷ Instead, he argues that to act reasonably would be to act correctly, and that thereby one can lead a happy life even without ever committing oneself to a sense impression.¹⁸ However, the dogmatists reaction to this would clearly be that without assent, this would be to reduce the actions of the wise to the instinctual reflexes of animals. This method of argumentation is also an area where the skeptics would always face significant trouble because, as Gisela Striker points on in a later addendum to her work comparing the Pyrrhonists and Academics, “the problem is that in order to get rid of philosophy, the Skeptic himself has to engage in philosophy.”¹⁹ Carneades, faced with the problems of Arcesilaus’s skepticism, emerged to challenge the dogmatists by doing exactly that. Far more of a philosopher in the Hellenistic mold than his predecessor in Arcesilaus,²⁰ Carneades was more willing to engage in active philosophizing, rather than simply rebutting opponents.²¹

While this makes Carneades particularly valuable, it simultaneously made the Skeptics vulnerable in the future.²² He held that it was “possible to adhere to a persuasive impression without assenting to it.” By that, he means that the Skeptic could assent to the proposition that something appeared

to be so, without ever committing oneself to it.²³ In doing this, Carneades forwarded a different notion of assent than that which the Stoics believed. In doing so, it seems likely he primarily intended just to argue against the Stoics, but he wound up so producing the “official epistemological position of [the skeptic] school.”²⁴ The result of this would be a state of affairs such that Aenesidemus could accuse the disputations between the later skeptics and Stoics as being “Stoics fighting Stoics,”²⁵ due to the way that, arguing against Chrysippus, Carneades wound up suffusing the language of skepticism with Stoic terminology.

The end result of Carneades’ answer to the problem of apraxia was that he accidentally caused a systematization of Academic

²³ Striker (2010), 201.
skepticism that would result, ultimately, in the conversion of Antiochus of Ascalon. The decline of the pure skepticism was imminent, but the traditions of uncompromising anti-dogmatism that originated with Pyrrho and Arcesilaus would remain strong in the Pyrrhonist school of skeptic thought, and would go on to shape modern philosophy when the nascent Descartes was exposed to them many centuries later.

**Works Cited**


