J. A. BARSBY ESSAY

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ACADEMIC AND PYRRHONIAN SCEPTICISM:
SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

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There has been much debate about the Academic Sceptics and the Pyrrhonists since the writings of Sextus Empiricus (ca. AD 160-210) were discovered. Sextus clearly illustrates the conflict that existed between these two schools. The Pyrrhonists, especially through Sextus, sought to distinguish themselves as ‘true’ sceptics from what they saw as the ‘negative dogmatist’ Academics. But what key similarities and differences really existed between these two schools? This discussion will examine whether the schools had a common starting point, common methods, common results, and whether important differences distinguished each school from the other in antiquity. Sextus’ writings, in particular, provide the impetus for this investigation.

Historians commonly differentiate between the Pyrrhonian Sceptics and the Academic Sceptics as the two major branches of Greek scepticism. They were distinct and separate schools in antiquity. Aenesidemus was the founder, or at the very least the reviver, of the Pyrrhonian approach, which claimed Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 365-275 BC) as its originator. On the other hand, the Academic Sceptics belonged to the

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1 I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance and inspiration of Dr Dougal Blyth of the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Auckland.
2 Sextus Empiricus lived sometime between AD 150 and 250. Without Sextus we would have many gaps in our understanding of both the Pyrrhonian and Academic sceptics. He is therefore an important source for this paper, especially his works: Against the Learned (Math.) and Outlines of Pyrrhonism (Pyr.).
3 C. L. Stough, Greek Skepticism: A Study in Epistemology (Berkeley 1969) 2f.
4 Aenesidemus was probably a renegade Academic. The Academy after Carneades was perhaps a more mitigated form of scepticism (there was some sense of knowing), and
Middle Academy (of Arcesilaus of Pitane, 315-240 BC) and the New Academy (following Carneades, 214-129 BC). They claimed Plato as their originator. It will become clear that it is important to distinguish between the Middle and New Academies at various junctures since they have their own points of similarity and difference. Sextus himself seems to treat Carneades’ stance as separate and different from Arcesilaus’ (Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1.3, 226).\(^5\)

The Academics and Pyrrhonists shared a starting point that sensory experience—as the source of our beliefs—cannot ensure or guarantee the truth of beliefs.\(^6\) Accordingly, neither school saw the abandonment of desire for knowledge (or certainty) or the suspension of judgment as defined by Sextus Empiricus (Pyr. 1.10) as a bleak prospect.\(^7\) This view contrasts with the dogmatic schools of antiquity.\(^8\) Greek Hellenistic scepticism, both Academic and Pyrrhonian, ‘renounced[d] the typical Greek philosopher’s ideal of knowledge as the basis for a well-lived human life’.\(^9\) Nevertheless, the two schools responded differently to this starting point.\(^10\) The Pyrrhonists saw it as sufficient reason to suspend judgment about all perceptual statements. Thus all perceptions were prefaced with ‘it appears’ (Sext. Emp. Math. 11.18f.; Pyr. 1.135, 195, 202).\(^11\) This approach produced ‘sense statements descriptive of experience and no more’ (that is, they are descriptions not to be trusted as reflecting what really is).\(^12\) This therefore favours an interpretation that the Pyrrhonists practised complete (or radical) epochē.


\(^5\) See also Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1.232-34 for Arcesilaus and Pyr. 1.220-35 for Carneades and his followers.

\(^6\) Stough [3] 64.


\(^12\) Stough [3] 64.
The aforementioned interpretation, however, should be questioned. Indeed, some have seen this mainstream interpretation as ‘fundamentally mistaken’ because ‘[n]o matter how ingenious [the Pyrrhonian sceptic] may be, the sceptic cannot avoid knowing things’.\(^\text{13}\) The rub is that we cannot avoid beliefs about evident things: when we act, it seems that we must assume that which we sense is true. In order to walk through the door in the wall, for example, some say that we really must believe—at the instant we go to walk through the door—that there is a door in the wall that we can walk through and we will not simply walk into a solid wall. Furthermore, Sextus distinguishes wider from narrower senses of belief, and states that only beliefs in the narrower sense are dogmatic (Diog. Laert. 7, 9f.).\(^\text{14}\) Thus, Sextus does think that a Pyrrhonian sceptic can have beliefs in everyday life (Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1.22). There is the suggestion that Pyrrhonian philosophical arguments (which lead from premises to conclusions, and thus seem to imply judgment and assent) against other schools’ doctrines are insincere (Cic. Acad. 2.78). This would be consistent with their approach to life, which entails no assent to the claim that reason has any intrinsic validity.\(^\text{15}\) But what it does not explain is how the Pyrrhonist argues about non-evident things, for that also involves premises leading to conclusions, which in turn entails inferences, assumptions, and belief (Diog. Laert. 9.102-04). Yet, while the Pyrrhonian position may have its problems in this respect, one can say at least that Pyrrhonism was a more stringent attempt at \textit{epochē} and to that extent was a more radical scepticism than that of the Academics.

There is ‘no evidence’ that the Academics ‘advocated any linguistic reformulation of [the Pyrrhonian] sort’ in their response to the starting point.\(^\text{16}\) Instead, they turned to justifying claims in terms of how likely it is that they represent the truth. It was a matter of acting on what was plausible, probable or believable for the New Academy following Carneades (Cic. Acad. 2.108), or reasonable for the Middle Academy of Arcesilaus (Sext. Emp. Pyr. 3.158).\(^\text{17}\) In the New Academy, the idea was that, depending on the available time, the circumstances, and the importance of the matter, one could act simply on the basis that the impression is credible; or that it is credible and consistent; or that it is credible, consistent and tested.\(^\text{18}\) The result was that, while the impression may be wrong (Diog. Laert. 9.94) and thus not \textit{kataleptic} (a ‘grasping’ of the truth)—in contrast to what the Stoics maintained—it was a justified assertion. Carneades treats this as a criterion: the impression may be

\(^{14}\) See also Frede [4] 8f.  
\(^{15}\) See Cooper [8] 187.  
\(^{16}\) Stough [3] 64.  
\(^{17}\) Arcesilaus is similar in this respect to the Pyrrhonists, who likewise do not accept anything like Carneades’ criterion which relates to the likelihood of truth (as opposed to how to live practically).  
false, but one should not distrust it because for the most part (a measure of assessment which goes back to Aristotle) it will be true and successful in life (Sext. Emp. Pyr. 7.175). This is like giving qualified assent or granting something as true with qualification (Cic. Acad. 2.59, 104; Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1.230; Math. 7.177f.), since drawing inferences seems to require assent; Philo held that this position entailed holding some opinion of what is plausible (Cic. Acad. 2.148). Therefore, the Academic sceptic assumes that we do more or less have access to the truth of the world, it is just that we cannot be absolutely sure (in contrast to the Stoics). This plausibility/probability criterion was explicitly rejected by the Pyrrhonists, for they did not want a criterion of how things are actually likely to be. This all suggests that the Academics were less rigorous in their application of epochē than the Pyrrhonists.19

Sextus maintains that a difference between the Pyrrhonists and Academics follows in that the New Academics brought enquiry to a definite conclusion.20 The accusation was that the Pyrrhonists held philosophical matters to be ungraspable or unknowable (Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1.226). This would amount to negative dogmatism, that nothing is knowable (Pyr. 1.2f., 226). At the very beginning of his Outlines of Pyrrhonism, Sextus decisively separates this approach from what he sees as the Pyrrhonian approach, which is to keep enquiry open (Pyr. 1.1, 4). The Pyrrhonists have not decided that nothing is knowable; their slogans are apparently not statements of dogma, because that would undermine their scepticism (Diog. Laert. 9.72-76; Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1.30, 200).21 The Pyrrhonists were concerned to avoid the conclusion that their attack on dogma is itself dogmatic (Pyr. 1.13-15).22 Sextus explains the sense in which Pyrrhonists are not dogmatic (Pyr. 1.33f): they hold no specific doctrines or dogmas,23 and no views that define them. According to Sextus (Pyr. 1.8), scepticism is an ability; and this ability is not descriptive of a philosophical position, or that certain behaviour is good. The method of procedure is not dogmatic; rather, it is neutral and in conformity with appearances (Pyr. 1.9, 17).24 The Pyrrhonists simply received the impression that assent was bad and suspension good in any given context; it was just the way it appeared to them and seemed more likely than the opposite at the time (Pyr. 1, 7). Sextus continues that in order to be a sceptical philosopher you must constantly enquire and consider questions and philosophy, and continue to do so as the Pyrrhonists do (Diog. Laert. 9.70; Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1.7).

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19 One should distinguish between the different responses to Carneades. First, it seems that Clitomachus (and Cicero) would argue that the criterion of plausibility is entirely consistent with complete epochē. Secondly, one should recall that Arcesilaus suggested that we act on what is reasonable (as opposed to plausible), which is closer to the Pyrrhonist’s impression in that it does not suggest that what is reasonable is more likely to be true.


24 Hankinson [22] 27.
Indeed, the word ‘sceptic’ seems to have originated with the Pyrrhonists not the Academics—although subsequently the term was applied to the Academics with increasing frequency. Moreover, its etymology or original meaning was simply ‘enquirer’, which accords with Sextus’ expounding of the open-ended Pyrrhonian approach. One needs to question, however, whether the Academics really were negative dogmatists. First, Sextus notes that Arcesilaus decided as a matter of definitive fact that assent is bad in the nature of things, and that suspension is by nature good (Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1.233). But importantly Sextus does not include Arcesilaus amongst the ‘negative dogmatist’ Academics. Indeed, Arcesilaus is said by Sextus to have seemingly very much in common with Pyrrhonism, for he suspends judgment about everything as well (Pyr. 1.232). The two approaches are even said to be ‘practically one and the same’ (Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1.232; see also Cic. Acad. 2.59).

Turning to Carneades, Cicero suggests that perhaps he was a radical sceptic and that Carneades said that he does not even know whether he does not know (Cic. Acad. 2.28). On the other hand, Carneades concedes that the wise man sometimes holds opinions, that is, assents to impressions (2.59). There is a question, however, whether this was simply a hypothetical admission to advance the dialectical argument. In any case, while Sextus’ submission certainly suggests a difference between the Pyrrhonists and New Academics, one should question also whether or not the Pyrrhonists really were open-minded, continuing in their enquiries, especially given that ataraxia (‘tranquillity’, ‘freedom from disturbance’) meant that the Pyrrhonists maintained psychic quietude and no longer tried to know the unknown.

This leads one to consider a difference that relates to the end point of each school’s enquiries or ability. On the one hand, the Pyrrhonists saw the end point (not goal) as ataraxia (Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1, 12). Perhaps one could suggest that this really is doctrinal. Sextus tries to reject this interpretation by submitting that it is not a judgment, conclusion, causation argument, or doctrine. Rather, he explains that it is like the shadow following the body or the foam occurring on the horse’s mouth in a painting by a painter who throws the sponge at the painting out of frustration (Pyr. 1.26–29). The Pyrrhonists have the impression that giving up the search is what is needed, and ataraxia will fortuitously follow or result when you stop actively trying to get it. In contrast, there is no evidence that Arcesilaus or Carneades thought ataraxia was the ultimate end. There is no talk of ataraxia being the end point for any

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26 Antiochus was anti-sceptic, so this is more likely the truth of Carneades’ position.
27 See the dispute between Clitomachus and Philo/Metrodorus on this point (Cic. Acad. 2.78).
28 There is debate in the scholarship as to the extent of a Pyrrhonist’s epoche. For example, see J. Barnes, ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist’, in Burnyeat and Frede [4] 58–91.
29 This can be contrasted with the dogmatists, who think that answers to philosophical questions will free them from disturbance.
of the Academic sceptics even though ataraxia apparently follows suspension. It seems that Arcesilaus and Carneades saw suspension as the end point.\footnote{Hankinson [22] 29. Possible motives for this may be that the Academics were so committed to finding the truth that they would not be willing to believe anything less, and thus practised epoche until the truth was certain. This is reminiscent of Socrates, who found it shameful to think that you do know what you do not know (that is, culpable ignorance).}

In seeking this suspension, both schools used the same method of arguing both sides of an issue. To demonstrate that no final and conclusive decision could be made on any philosophical matter, all arguments for a doctrine given by an interlocutor or dogmatic school were ‘counter-balanced’ with arguments advocating the opposite view (Cic. Acad. 1.45).\footnote{W. Gorler, ‘Cicero’s Philosophical Stance in the Lucullus’, in Inwood and Mansfeld [11] 50; A. Bailey, Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonean Scepticism (Oxford 2002) 62.} Arcesilaus practised this (Cic. Fin. 2.2, 5.10) by using the technique of refutation that Socrates initiated; Carneades was known for it (Cic. Rep. 3); and the Pyrrhonists also employed this since they saw it as their ability to set appearances and ideas in opposition (Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1.8). There is perhaps, however, a difference underlying this. On the one hand, the Academics were most concerned to attack Stoics.\footnote{For Arcesilaus’ attack on the Stoic doctrine of the kriterion (‘standard’), see Cic. Acad. 2.40-42, 2.76-78; Sext. Emp. Math. 7.150-65, 7.248-60, 7.401-35.} As Stough points out, it would be ‘hard to overestimate’ the importance of Stoic philosophy as an impetus for the Academic sceptics. The contest between the two, especially when Carneades was the head of the Academy, ‘encouraged elaboration and refinement’ of the Academic position.\footnote{Stough [3] 8.} The Academics were pleased to counter or dispose of the Stoic criterion of katalēpsis. On the other hand, the Pyrrhonists did not appear to focus on one school more than any others. The target of the Pyrrhonists was any dogma. They were concerned to rally against any school—Peripatetic, Epicurean, Stoic and so on—which claimed that they had discovered truth or knowledge (Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1); and they attacked all those doctrines—as well as their roots, that is, the underlying theories of knowledge—with intensity and equal dedication.\footnote{For lists of doctrines attacked, see e.g. Diog. Laert. 9.90-101 (detailed); Phot. Bibl. 170b.}

Consistent with this method of arguing both sides of an issue, Aenesidemus developed Ten Tropes or Modes, constructed around the idea of relativity of judgment (Diog. Laert. 9.79f.; Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1.36f.), which were meant to apply to all doctrines. The Five Modes of Agrippa aimed to be more comprehensive, showing that there could be no opinions on anything (Diog. Laert. 9.88f.; Sext. Emp. Pyr. 1.164-77); these were subsequently reduced to two Modes. This systematic analysis of sceptical argument was meant to be a comprehensive attack on dogmatism. It was the ‘first instance of a highly developed practice of argumentative enquiry, formalized
according to a number of modes or patterns of argument’.\textsuperscript{35} In this sense, it was a development: it was a more systematic system than that of the Academic Sceptics; perhaps it is the only point of difference between Arcesilaus and the Pyrrhonists.

One final similarity prevailed between the two schools, which is their effort at a practical orientation, albeit by different means. Both schools faced the argument that one could not live their respective versions of scepticism (Cic. \textit{Acad.} 2.24f.; 2.37f.), and both were concerned to combat it by showing workable solutions to the problems unearthed by their own epistemological criticism.\textsuperscript{36}

The Pyrrhonists consistently referred to their ability as a way of life,\textsuperscript{37} capable of supporting an active existence (Sext. Emp. \textit{Math.} 7.30). The idea was to move away from philosophical speculation, and to follow social convention without belief, and (current, superior) appearances with no judgment as to what really is the case (Diog. Laert. 9.104-07; cf. Sext. Emp. \textit{Pyr.} 1.121-24): they saw this as consistent with \textit{ataraxia} (\textit{Pyr.} 1.25-31).\textsuperscript{38} Appearance was the criterion for action.\textsuperscript{39} One thinks of the Clitomachean Academics and of the defensive argument that ‘involuntary assent to appearances, is compatible with suspending judgment about everything’ (\textit{Pyr.} 1.12, 1.192f., 196).\textsuperscript{40} Again, however, one has to ask whether one can follow social convention without belief, or follow appearances without making an assumption that they really are, in each instance, the case.

The Academics also sought to set their philosophical enquiries in a practical context; however, they responded with the criterion of probability—or reasonableness, for Arcesilaus (Sext. Emp. \textit{Pyr.} 3.158; \textit{Math.} 7.158). While an impression may be false, it is said that one should not distrust it because on the whole it will be true and successful in life; it is ‘truth-like’ (Sext. Emp. \textit{Pyr.} 7.175). Whether one can draw inferences without assenting has already been queried above. Maybe one should agree with Sextus’ portrayal that they were in fact assenting to what really is the case and did not just stick to appearances (Cic. \textit{Acad.} 2.98-105; Sext. Emp. \textit{Pyr.} 1.231). This would accord with Philo’s position on Carneades that the wise man would assent to appearances, that is, hold opinions about what is plausible (Cic. \textit{Acad.} 2.148). In any case, the New Academics adopted a different method, from that of the Pyrrhonists, of showing that their scepticism was liveable. In the end, however, both face questions over the success of their respective methods.

The Greeks took their scepticism very seriously. In antiquity there were two sceptical schools in particular: the Pyrrhonists and the Academic Sceptics. These are

\textsuperscript{35} Burnyeat [18] 28.
\textsuperscript{38} It is unclear whether the Pyrrhonian sceptics attacked our ability to make inferences from both suggestive and indicative signs.
\textsuperscript{39} For guides to practical life, see Sext. Emp. \textit{Pyr.} 8, 11.
sometimes grouped together under the label of ‘Ancient Sceptics’, following the logic that although there are differences between the two schools, those differences are minor when compared to the difference between Ancient dogmatism and Ancient Scepticism overall. In antiquity, though, the Pyrrhonists were at pains to counter-balance any such logic with arguments that there are important differences that divide these two schools. The extent to which they did differ has been debated ever since. This paper has outlined the major similarities and differences between the two schools. It seems that the two schools departed from a common starting point, used the same method of suggesting the rival arguments, and were both concerned to show—though in different ways—that their scepticism could translate into an active way of life. Of the differences discerned, perhaps the most important is their fundamental divergence from their common starting point. It is exciting that it is their differences and individual intricacies that are being explored in the scholarship. It is an acknowledgement that they each at some point deserve attention for their own sake.

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42 For example, Aulus Gellius claims that this issue was ‘an old question, treated by many Greek writers’ before him: see Bailey [31] 81.