

Scepticism and Platonic Inheritance: Did the Academic Sceptics Betray Plato?

Şüphencilik ve Platoncu Miras: Akademik Şüphenciler Platon'a İhanet Etti mi?

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Abstract: Academic skepticism plays a key role in the history of Platonism. Several attempts have been made to understand the skeptical turn of Academy and the philosophical merits of Academic skepticism. However, the legitimacy of Academic skepticism as a justifiable interpretation of Plato has yet to be understood. This paper explores the degree to which Academic skepticism can be considered as a reasonable reading of Plato. To this aim, Cicero's *Academica* will be used to explore the relationship between Academic skepticism and its critics. The findings show that the negligence of Academic skepticism as a valuable Platonic movement is partly because of the one-sided reading of Plato's works and partly because Antiochus' history of Platonism is biased and polemical. In conclusion, this paper implies that the New Academy's skeptical interpretation provides a unique and valuable guide to assist scholars in understanding Plato.

Keywords: Scepticism, academic skepticism, Platonism, Old Academy, *Academica*.



Introduction

The sceptical turn of Platonic Academy – more precisely from the Old (dogmatic) Academy to the New Academy – in 3rd century BC is one of the most ground-breaking events in the history of ancient Greek philosophy. However, this turn is regarded by many ancient philosophers, such as Antiochus, as an abomination to Plato's heritage. The primary aim of this paper is to trace the history of Academic Scepticism drawing heavily upon Cicero's '*On Academic Scepticism*'. I begin by underlining the place of sceptics in the history of Academy, then move to outline the philosophical views held by the Academic Sceptics. The remaining part of the paper proceeds by discussing Antiochus' criticism of Academic Scepticism and Cicero's defence of it. The last section draws together the key findings of the legitimacy of a sceptical reading of Plato.

1. The Weight of Sceptics in Platonic Societies

Traditionally, most Platonic readers and scholars almost unanimously have subscribed to the belief that Plato is not and cannot be a sceptic, as Plato neither defies durable knowledge nor defends universal suspension of judgment. Although extensive research has been carried out on the sceptical Academy, the Academic Sceptics are inspected for the sake their place in the history of ancient scepticism rather than their contribution to Platonic interpretations because they have been considered as a departure from Plato's philosophy. Their possible exegetical assets for reading Plato were thus neglected more often than not. Nevertheless, I surmise that the Academic Sceptics should have offered credible justifications for their views so that many ancient philosophers had paid heed to what they have to say. On this point, Long and Sedley reasonably ask: "If a consistently aporetic Plato seems a distortion now, is it any more so than the Neoplatonic focus upon a few selected passages as the heart of supposedly Platonic doctrine?" (Long & Sedley, 1987, p. 445).

One should admit that the Academic Sceptics present only a partial picture of Platonic philosophy. It is at least one-sided to emphasize a non-authoritative and dialectical side of Plato whilst omitting Plato's more confident and systematic views on epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. Be that as it may, several philosophers and biographers of antiqu-



ity had given extensive attention to the Sceptical Academy. For instance, Arcesilaus, the founder of sceptical Academy, had both critics and admirers: to some, like Numenius, “Arcesilaus was an Academic only nominally; in reality, he was a Pyrrhonist” (Long, 2006, p. 102), though others, such as Plutarch, respected him (Annas, 1992, p.43).

It would not be charitable to consider Academic Sceptics as if they presented a completely non-Platonic philosophy. To be fair, this is not a reasonable option, keeping in mind that the purpose of Academic Scepticism is presumably discovering the ‘original’ Plato - like any modern or ancient Platonist would do. It is itself unfair to discard a philosophical school dominating the Academy for a couple of centuries because a sceptical reading of Plato cannot offer any reliable interpretation.

We should also pay heed to the fact that Sextus Empiricus, a sceptic himself, felt an urge to criticize the sceptical reading of Plato. If Plato’s sceptical interpretation were too bizarre and irrational, why would Sextus Empiricus have bothered to criticize it at all? Sextus Empiricus admits that Plato uses “the argumentative and non-dogmatic style of discussion exhibited in certain dialogues”, yet this does not make Plato, or even Plato’s Socrates for that matter, sceptic because both offer positive doctrines and “skepticism, does not come in degrees” (Bett, 2006, p.301). With a view to eliminating the Academic Scepticism, Sextus Empiricus argued Plato was a dogmatic philosopher since Plato not only defended the possibility of knowledge but also offered pieces of knowledge in the fields of ethics, politics and theology (*PH*. I 221-3).

2. A History of Sceptical Academy

2.1. Origins and Developments

The scholarly consensus is that Academic Scepticism has gone through four phases of development, as it is reported by Sextus Empiricus (*PH* I. 220). Arcesilaus is the one who inaugurated a period of scepticism in the Platonic Academy. The second phase is marked by Carneades, the third by Clitomachus and Metrodorus, and the fourth by Philo. Each of these four phases had offered a relatively novel sceptical method, and each phase had been born out of surviving intra-Academic conflicts and external attacks from Stoics. The sceptical period of the Academy ended



with the departure of Philo and the succession of Antiochus (Polito, 2012, pp.35-37). On this matter, Sextus Empiricus says “Antiochus transplanted the Stoa into the Academy, so that it was even said of him that he practised Stoic philosophy within the Academy, for he used to show that the Stoics' doctrines are present in Plato” (*PH.* 1.235).

Turning now to the birth of the sceptical Academy, Arcesilaus became the head of Platonic Academy, modelling his philosophical system after Socratic (or early) dialogues of Plato and leaving behind “Doctrinal Platonism, stemming from Plato’s later work” (Long & Sedley, 1987, p. 5). It is even reported by Diogenes Laertius that Arcesilaus adopted a Socratic persona (Long, 2006, p.112). In a similar vein, Cicero informed that Arcesilaus reawakened the Socratic practice of questioning and answering, which was abandoned by his immediate successors, yet he also criticised Socrates for ‘negative dogmatism’, i.e., the claim that ‘I know that I do know nothing’ (*Ci. Fin.* 2.2). Putting aside the difficult question whether Arcesilaus interpreted Plato’s dialogues accurately, it is probably true that “Arcesilaus’ skeptical approach was in large part inspired by the figure of the Platonic Socrates” (Bett, 2006, p. 305).

Regarding Arcesilaus, I would not go for the extreme claim that Arcesilaus had become a sceptic once he read Plato’s dialogues. Before reading Plato, he should have tended toward scepticism, though we could not be certain about the driving force behind his inclination (Annas, 1992, p. 47). Indeed, there are only several reports about Arcesilaus’ philosophy written by philosophers and biographers in antiquity, and none of them is first-hand so we just have “tantalizingly brief glimpses of Arcesilaus’ dialectical virtuosity” (Long, 2006, p. 96). Even worse, these reports express inconsistent views with regards to Arcesilaus’ ideas on knowledge. It is thus debated whether Arcesilaus held any doctrine at all or his method were purely dialectical, we cannot be entirely sure about whether Arcesilaus claimed that all sorts of judgement should be suspended or he said nothing can be known (Brittain, 2006, p. xxiv; Cooper, 2004, 85-87).

The Academic Sceptics were of course not homogeneous in terms of their philosophical views. In the course of its dominance in the Academy from 3rd century to 1st century BC, Academic Scepticism had been evolving and the struggle for philosophical domination over the school was



constant. Naturally, owing to the criticisms emerging from inside and outside the Academy, the Academic Sceptics had to modify their opinions to find more credible and persuasive reasons. For instance, Carneades' views were modified by his students Clitomachus (who thinks that Carneades allowed us to have opinions only for the sake of argument) and Metrodorus (who claims that for Carneades wise man may have opinions but cannot know) (Striker, 1980, pp. 55-56). Philo also had to change his position due to the criticisms of his two pupils, namely Aenesidemus and Antiochus (Brittain, 2006, pp. xiii-xv).

As Thorsrud (2010, pp. 62-63) and Brittain (2006, pp. xix-xxi) show, the Academic Sceptics have been initially - and then for the most time - either argued against the Stoic epistemology or defended their position against Stoics' counterarguments. This constant attack on Stoic epistemology has thus led most scholars to the view that Arcesilaus was "a pure dialectician" and "a wholly negative thinker" aiming to find "inadequacies and self-contradictions in others' positions", especially that of Stoics (Hankinson, 1995, pp.71-72). Besides their irreconcilable views about knowledge, the Stoics and the Academic Sceptics saw themselves as heirs of Socrates: both Zeno of Citium, the founder of the Stoic school, and Arcesilaus were only too happy to declare themselves as the true heir of Socrates (Hankinson, 1995, p.76).

Regarding the scepticism of Plato himself, one can think that if we remove Socrates and his philosophy from the dialogues, a doctrinal Plato would be left behind, who developed political, psychological, epistemological *etc.* theories.¹ Sextus Empiricus (*PH* 1.221), in this respect, makes a distinction between Plato's use of Socrates' method of cross-examination in the dialogues and Plato's use of Socrates to transmit his own views (Tarrant, 2000, p. 19). Some sceptics indeed based their philosophy on Socrates and his practice of philosophy, for example, his disavowal of knowledge and dialectical method, yet others made use of more advanced ideas about knowledge, which were attributed to Plato himself (Annas, 1992, p.44).

¹ On the issue of the difference between Socratic and Platonic philosophies, see Woodruff, 1997, pp. 90-93; Vlastos, 1991, pp. 55-58 and 1994, pp. 50-54; Taylor, 2006, pp. 167-68; Rowe, 2007, p. 13.



2.2. The Old and New Academy

To understand philosophical dynamics in the ancient Platonist movements, we need to ask whether any of these have distinguished between the philosophy of Plato and that of Socrates. For instance, in *Academica*, Cicero reports that Antiochus had often been held responsible for the turn of events in the Academy, namely the fall of New (Sceptical) Academy and the rebirth of the views held in the Old (dogmatic) Academy that was once flourished under the scholarship of Speusippus and Xenocrates just after Plato's death (Annas, 1992, p.58; Polito, 2012, 38-39). In the part 'Varro's Speech' of *Academica*, Varro reports that Antiochus resists the argument that Plato is a sceptic and highlights that Socrates "makes no affirmation of his own" except that "he knows nothing". Regarding the philosophy of Plato, Antiochus is reported to have said:

Following Plato's complex and eloquent lead, a single and concordant system of philosophy developed under two names: the philosophy of the Academics and the Peripatetics. Despite their difference in name, they agreed in their doctrine...since both were raised on Plato's riches, they drew up a fixed system of teaching - a remarkably full and detailed system- and abandoned that Socratic habit of arguing in doubt about everything and without making any affirmation. The result was something Socrates was far from approving: a systematic art of philosophy, an ordering of subjects, and a framework for teaching (*Ci. Ac. 1.17 tr. Brittain*).

As the text shows, Antiochus distinguishes between Socratic and Platonic philosophy based on their approval or disapproval of a systematic investigation. That said, Antiochus' comment on Plato's philosophical style is ambiguous to some extent. Had the later schools just followed Plato as an authority and a leader through whose ideas a single and concordant philosophy was developed? Otherwise, did Plato have a detailed system of philosophy too? Indeed, nowhere in the rest of his speech, Varro directly attributes the doctrines of Old Academy to Plato, although a couple of references are made to Plato's theory and authority (*Ci. Ac. 1.34.8*) and the original system of philosophy delivered to later schools by Plato (*Ci. Ac. 1.33.1*).

This is not to say that Plato did not hold certain beliefs, yet even Antiochus, the reviver of dogmatic Academy, thought that Plato is a



prime figure thanks to whom later philosophers have built robust systems on Plato's ideas. Plato might thus be seen as an originator of the systematic way of doing philosophy rather than as a system builder himself. Thanks to Plato's categorization of philosophy and his rich ideas his followers were able to create a single and concordant system of philosophy under two names, the Academics and the Peripatetics.

2.3. Cicero on the Birth of Sceptical Academy

Once Varro finished his report on Antiochus' views on Plato, the Old Academy, the Peripatetics and the Stoics, he has invited Cicero to explain his defection from "the theory of ancients" - namely the Old Academy - and his approval of Arcesilaus' "innovations" (Ci. *Ac.* 1.43.7-9). For Cicero, the disagreement between Arcesilaus and Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school, did not stem from "a spirit of intransigence or rivalry", but because of "the obscurity of things that had previously led Socrates to his confession of ignorance" (Ci. *Ac.* 1.44.1-5). Cicero traces this idea of obscurity even further back to the Pre-Socratic philosophers, such as Democritus and Empedocles, for the purpose of placing Academic Scepticism into a tradition with obvious historical roots.

For Cicero, Arcesilaus accepted a theory of universal inapprehensibility and denied "even the residual claim Socrates had allowed himself, i.e. the knowledge that he didn't know anything" (Ci. *Ac.* 1.45.1-3). Arcesilaus thus suggested us to suspend any judgement. Before manuscripts break off abruptly and hence failing to give a comprehensive analysis, Cicero explains his adoption of the philosophy of the New Academy and defends himself against the accusation that he abandoned the philosophy of Antiochus (Brittain, 2006, p. 91 fn.10):

They call this the 'New Academy', though I think it's old, assuming we count Plato as part of the Old Academy. In his books nothing is affirmed, there are many arguments on either side, everything is under investigation, and nothing is claimed to be certain.⁶³ Still, let's call the position you expounded the Old and this the New Academy. It stuck with Arcesilaus' position right down to Carneades, the fourth in line after Arcesilaus (Ci. *Ac.* 1.46. 1-9 *tr.* Brittain).

Cicero disliked Antiochus' idea that Plato was a doctrinal philosop-



her and a system builder, whose ideas had inspired the later generations of philosophers. Plato's immediate followers, the dogmatic Academy flourished under Speusippus and Xenocrates, distorted Plato's teachings and the New Academy was a revival of original Plato. However, the reason Cicero put forward to justify Plato's scepticism does not seem sufficient to satisfy the requirements of scepticism. Plato argued for the theory of Forms in some of his books such as the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*, even though he criticizes this theory elsewhere, namely in the *Parmenides* (Hankinson, 1999, p.77).

Sextus Empiricus finely pointed that Plato "appears either as making assertions about the existence of unclear objects or as giving preference to what is unclear in respect of conviction (*PH*, 225)", and this seems to be "the correct conclusion" about Plato's scepticism (Annas & Barnes, 1985, pp.14-15). However, it should not be surprising to see that he re-evaluates some of his views throughout his philosophical career. From a synoptic point of view, considering that we have his works under scrutiny all at once, it is reasonable to claim that Plato did not lay down unchanging principles since he had renewed his doctrines. In the large majority of Plato's works, it is difficult to find written doctrines, and more often than not, we only have doctrines to find later that they are criticized and modified (Long & Sedley, 1987, pp. 445-446).

With regards to arguing for and against something, Cicero reported that "when arguments of equal weight were found for the opposite sides of the same subject, it was easier to withhold assent from either side" for Arcesilaus (Ci. *Ac.* 1.45.15-46.1.1). With this point in mind, if we look at Plato's works, we might find equally strong arguments. The very first item that comes to mind is surely the arguments for and against the theory of Forms, respectively in the *Republic* Books V-VII and the *Parmenides*, especially where Parmenides questions Socrates' acceptance of the Theory of Forms. It is thus not unreasonable to think that Plato's ideas for and against the same topic might have sparked an interesting debate among Platonists.

2.4. Antiochus' History of Philosophy

In Book 2 of *Academica* (called *Lucullus* in first edition), Lucullus gives an outline of Antiochus' views and criticism of Academic scepticism:



We must anyhow remove both Plato and Socrates from that group [the Physicists denied that anything could be known or apprehended (see *Ac.* 2.13-14): the former, because he left a complete philosophical system inherited by the Peripatetics and Academics, who differ in name but concur in fact (and even the Stoics disagree with them more in their terminology than in their views). As for Socrates, he used to ascribe the larger part in arguments to the people he was trying to refute by depreciating his own contribution. So, since he said one thing and thought another, it was his practice to use the kind of dissimulation the Greeks called *eironeia* ['irony'] (Ci. *Ac.* 2.15.10-19 *tr.* Britain).

Not surprisingly, Antiochus readily removes Plato from the Pre-Socratic philosophers (such as Democritus and Empedocles), who deny knowledge and apprehension for Antiochus. Surprisingly, however, Antiochus also rejects Socrates' disavowal of knowledge because Socrates was ironical.² Antiochus' position is in contrast with Arcesilaus' view of Socrates, with Cicero's view too for that matter, who takes Socrates' disavowal as the ground for a sceptical reading. Today, I believe that scholars would not deny at least that Socrates portrayed in Plato's so-called early dialogues, such as the *Lysis*, *Euthydemus* and *Protagoras*, might be considered as having sceptical tendencies, though perhaps not as a sceptic *per se*.

Regarding Plato himself and many arguments found in his so-called middle dialogues, such as the *Republic V-VII*, *Symposium*, *Sophist* and *Timaeus*, Plato does not seem to have sceptical tendencies, at least not as much as a sceptic want him to have. However, what should we exactly understand by leaving a complete philosophical system inherited by the Old Academy, by Peripatetics and even by Stoics? We should remember Antiochus' motivation: the rejection of Academic Scepticism. Antiochus thus aimed to trace the above-mentioned movements back to Plato, as all of them were doctrinal, besides the Stoic school was the archenemy of Academic Sceptics'.

That said, the agreement between the Old Academy, Stoics and Pe-

² The scholarship on Socratic irony is vast. Vlastos (1991) offers a seminal view on the issue. Plutarch of Chaeronea emphasizes the sceptical element in some of the Plato's dialogues whilst maintaining doctrinal aspects of other dialogues, such as the *Timaeus* and claims that Socrates uses irony only in the inquisitive (*zetetic*) dialogues (Tarrant, 2002, p. 110).



ripatetics can only go so far and we cannot identify the scope of their agreement. Even in Antiochus' works, there are signs of significant divergences of views between these movements in ethics, psychology, and metaphysics. Moreover, as we have already seen in Varro's report on Antiochus' views, Socrates is separated from the Plato, the Old Academics and Peripatetics (Bonazzi, 2012, p. 308).

On this point, Sedley argues that "Antiochus did not operate throughout with a single historical model" (Sedley, 2012, p.84). Antiochus modified his views on the unbroken epistemological continuity between Socrates, Plato, Peripatetics and Stoics, once he had confronted Philo's Roman books where it was claimed that the entire Academic epistemological tradition was unified (Sedley, 2012, p. 88). After this pressure arising from Philo's thesis, Antiochus "seems no longer motivated to impose artificial unity upon the tradition", and hence emphasized diversity (Sedley, 2012, p.103). As Bett points, "Antiochus shows some tendency to accept the conception of Socrates that started with Arcesilaus" (Bett, 2006, pp.308-309). It, therefore, seems that Antiochus had produced different histories of philosophy intending to refute his designated target's views; against the Academic Sceptics, he advocated unity but against Philo he defended diversity.

3. Cicero's Defence of Sceptical Academy

Antiochus appears to write two histories of philosophy: one of them defended syncretism and considered Plato's philosophy as a complete system, and the other left room for diversity and allowed "that Plato's work was complex, and hence did not automatically lead to the 'Platonic system' his successors devised" (Brittain, 2000, p. xxxvii). In light of this thesis, I now return to analyse Cicero's defence of the philosophical position of the Sceptical Academy and to check to see whether it tallies with Antiochus' less doctrinal reading of Plato. On the search of truth, Cicero writes:

But our case is straightforward, because we want to discover truth without any contention, and we search for it conscientiously and enthusiastically. To be sure, knowledge is always surrounded with difficulties, and the obscurity of the things themselves and weakness of our judgments is such that one can



see why the earliest and most learned philosophers lost confidence in their ability to discover what they desired. Still, they didn't give up, and we won't abandon our enthusiasm for investigation owing to exhaustion (Ci. *Ac.* 2.7.11-19 *tr.* Brittain).

As noted earlier, the exact epistemological position of sceptical Academy has changed because of each of its leader's view on apprehension and knowledge (Brittain, 2006, p. xxiv). For my purposes, it is not necessary to decide which position is defended by whom. It seems clear that the view presented by Cicero does not defy the possibility of knowledge categorically; however hard it is, we *may* still have it. Next, Cicero moves to explain the difference between sceptics and those who claim to know:

The only difference between us and philosophers who think that they have knowledge is that they have no doubt that the views they defend are true, whereas we hold many views to be persuasive, i.e., ones that we can readily follow but scarcely affirm. But we are freer and less constrained because our power of judgement is intact and we aren't compelled by any obligation to defend a set of views prescribed and practically imposed on us by someone else (Ci. *Ac.* 2.8.1-9 *tr.* Brittain).

Cicero's defence of sceptics fundamentally based on the idea of freedom. Using Stoic terminology, Cicero points out that the sceptics scarcely affirm but readily follow persuasive views. Sceptics follow persuasive views, though they are fallible, and to live according to them (Burnyeat, 1980, p.29). This saves the Academic Sceptics from the trouble that stems from the Stoic's inactivity objection: action requires assent, thus without assent action is impossible (Brittain, 2006, p. xxv). According to Cicero, the Academic Sceptics reject that action requires assent and allow a less strict version of assent: either giving assent to a thesis hypothetically or acting from a habit like animals (Brittain, 2006, p. xxvi).

Cicero makes another interesting claim: the sceptics affirmed albeit scarcely. Unfortunately, Cicero does not give an example of this scarce case, yet theoretically there were and would be rare moments when a sceptic admitted a persuasive view. A sceptic would probably try to refute that plausible view later since they would believe that "common to all of them [impressions], even the clearest and most convincing, is the possibility of falsehood" (Hankinson, 1995, p.99). Because of this reluctance to



admit, as Cicero argues, the sceptics are more advantageous, though presumably not superior, to those who follow a set of beliefs or a person they see as an authority (Ci. Ac. 2. 9.5-8).

If we accept the thesis that Antiochus had written histories of philosophy to serve his polemical interest and that a sceptical reading is still at the margins of acceptability according to his non-syncretic history of philosophy, the sceptical Academy's strength seems to lie in foregrounding the philosophy of Socrates and the dialogical structure of Plato's dialogues. Cicero adopted Antiochus' less syncretic view and defended the Academic Sceptics by emphasizing the Socratic features in Plato's philosophy. A full discussion of these Socratic elements lies beyond the scope of this paper, yet it is now established that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and method of cross-examination might lead to sceptical interpretations (Thorsrud 2010 p.59-61).

Conclusion

Returning to the question on the sceptical reading of Plato, it is now possible to state that the Academic Sceptics should not be ignored because Plato is a dogmatic philosopher. Looking from a synoptic point of view, Plato's philosophy is open to sceptical interpretations. Even Antiochus – an ardent and eloquent opponent of the sceptical reading – leaves room for a sceptical reading in his non-syncretic history of philosophy by distinguishing Socratic from Platonic. The present study thus adds to the growing body of research that indicates the dogmatic reading of Plato, which is defended by Old Academy, Antiochus and Neoplatonists, is not the only legitimate interpretation of Plato developed in antiquity. It would be interesting to analyse Plato's dialogues from the epistemic perspective offered by the Academic Sceptics – such as the defiance of authority, the significance of persuasion in philosophical argument and the merits of openness, although their sceptical interpretation may not apply to all dialogues.

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Öz: Akademik Őphecilik Platonculuk tarihinde önemli bir rol oynar. Akademi'nin Őphecisi dönüŐünü ve Akademik Őpheciliđin felsefi deđerini anlamak için çeŐitli giriŐimlerde bulunulmuŐtur. Ancak, Platon'un haklı bir yorumu olarak Akademik Őpheciliđin meŐruiyeti henüz anlaŐılamamıŐtır. Bu makale, akademik Őpheciliđin Platon'un ne derecede makul bir okuması olarak deđerlendirilebileceđini incelemektedir. Bu amala Cicero'nun *Academica'sı* Akademik Őphecilik ile muhalifleri arasındaki iliŐkiyi araŐtırmak için kullanılacaktır. Bulgular, Akademik Őpheciliđin deđerli bir Platonik hareket olarak ihmalinin kısmen Platon'un eserlerinin tek taraflı okunmasından, kısmen de Antiokhus'un Platonculuk tarihinin önyargılı ve polemiki olmasından kaynaklandđını göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu makale, Yeni Akademi'nin Őphecisi okumasının Platon'u anlamada akademisyenlere yardımcı olmak için eŐsiz ve deđerli bir rehber olabileceđini belirtir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Őphecilik, akademik Őphecilik, Platonculuk, Eski Akademi, *Academica*.

