JOHN M. COOPER

KNOWLEDGE, NATURE, AND THE GOOD

Essays on Ancient Philosophy

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CHAPTER 4

ARCESILAUS: SOCRATIC AND SKEPTIC

I

AT LEAST since the time of Cicero, the interpretation of what we call Academic skepticism has been uncertain and subject to dispute. For us today, the central disputed question, or related set of questions, concerns the relationship between the philosophical views of the Academics and their argumentative practices—from the time of Arcesilaus, when Plato's Academy first "went skeptical,"[1] down through his successors, Carneades and Clitomachus, in the late second century—to the self-styled Pyrrhonism inaugurated by Aenesidemus in the first half of the first century B.C. This is a question that Cicero never raises, and may not have been in a position to raise: he seems to have had no inkling of any such new Pyrrhoneans, though the first of them were his contemporaries.[2] But it was certainly raised by the new Pyrrhoneans themselves—by Aenesidemus, and by Sextus Empiricus, our principal exemplar, and

[1] This is Malcolm Schofield's phrase, in beginning "Academic Epistemology," his contribution to the *Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy,* ed. K. Algra et al., 323–51.

[2] In his surviving works and letters Cicero never names Aenesidemus, or shows any knowledge of skepticism in his own time beyond the teaching of Philo (Clitomachus's successor as head of the Academy)—his own boyhood teacher at Rome. Nor does Cicero seem to know of Pyrrho himself (c. 365–275 B.C.) as any sort of skeptic. He never refers to Pyrrho in connection with doubts about the possibility of knowledge, the propriety of suspending judgment, or related issues—the staples for him of the Academic philosophy. Indeed Cicero never associates any epistemological views at all with Pyrrho's name. He assigns him only views in ethics: Pyrrho held that virtue is the only good, and that any other thing (such as the "preferred" and "counterpreferred" indifferents of the Stoics—health, wealth, pleasure or pain, and so on) is not only neither good nor bad, but there is nothing about any such thing that gives a reason or even, for the right-thinking person, so much as an *incentive,* for or against them. For Pyrrho, the wise man is unmoved, unaffected one way or another, by any of them, or the prospect of them—he is "apathetic" (see *Academica* 2.130). Now a modern reader may perhaps see lying behind this "apathy" a Pyrrhonian skeptical "life without belief," in which, never believing that things are any one way rather than some other, you only move, if at all, randomly or capriciously (some later testimony, e.g., Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers,* 9.62, says this is the sort of life Pyrrho himself led); but Cicero clearly does not see that. For Cicero the apathy of Pyrrho's wise man rests specifically on the refusal to find any value in anything except virtue (and vice). Cicero associates Pyrrho repeatedly with Aristo and Herillus, early "unorthodox" Stoics who thought virtue the only good and refused to accept Zeno's distinction between preferred and counterpreferred indifferents. All three, he says, held long-exploded and disregardable theories about value (see *Tusc. Disp.* 2.15, 5.85; *de Off.* 1.6; *de Fin.* 2.35, 2.43, 3.11–12,

source of testimony, for the new school.[3] Recently a strong current of opinion (not unopposed, of course) has favored the view that these earlier and later ancient skeptical movements were in fact in agreement on all important matters of philosophical substance (relatively minor details aside). Thus, they should be treated as having put forward a single set of ideas, a single approach in philosophy, that we can call "ancient" or "classical" skepticism, and where necessary contrast with late Renaissance and modern skeptical thought—the skepticism developed by Montaigne and Descartes, presupposed by Locke and Berkeley and Hume and Kant, and made a standard topic in twentieth-century epistemology.[4]

4.43, 5.23). Thus, it appears, "Pyrrhonism" would not indicate to Cicero either a predecessor view or a successor view similar in any way to the Academics'.

[3] Aenesidemus notoriously said that the Academics of his own time held in a dogmatic way (as no proper skeptic should) that knowledge (i.e., knowledge as the Stoics defined it) was unattainable; they were no better than Stoics fighting Stoics (Photius, *Library,* 169b38–39, 170a14–17 Bekker). Sextus (*Pyrrhonian Sketches* [*PH*] 1.3) distinguishes his own Pyrrhonism from the Academic philosophy of "Clitomachus and Carneades and other Academics" by saying that the latter held that the matters investigated by philosophy are "ungraspable" or unknowable (ἀκατάληπτα), whereas the Pyrrhoneans keep on investigating so as to find out whether any such thing can be known (and do so without being convinced yet either that it can or that it cannot). It is noteworthy that Sextus does not name Arcesilaus here; on that, see below sect. V. He distinguishes (*PH* 1.220) between a "middle" Academy (Arcesilaus) and a "new" one (Carneades and Clitomachus) and makes only the "new" Academy just the sort of "negative dogmatists" that he describes in this passage of 1.3 (compare *PH* 1.232–33 vs. 226–30). I return to this distinction below, sect. V.

[4] See especially M. Frede, "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge," *Philosophy In History,* ed. R. Rorty et al.; also G. Striker, "On the Difference between the Pyrrhonists and the Academics," in her *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*. The differences that Striker does draw attention to are real and important, but as she says at pp. 147–48, the two schools "do not in fact seem very far apart from one another" and are "very close" "as far as skepticism itself is concerned." (She fails to see the very significant difference, precisely so far as skepticism itself goes, between Arcesilaus and Sextus that I develop below, sect. V: see her comments on "the skeptical Stoic," p. 141.) M. Burnyeat's "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" (*Doubt and Dogmatism,* ed. by M. Schofield et al., 20–53) begins with Hume's claim that the Pyrrhonian skeptic cannot live his skepticism, but proceeds to discuss ancient skepticism more generally (though with special reference to Pyrrhonism); he brings Academic "skeptics" frequently into his discussion, and applies to them the same analysis, concluding that ancient skeptics in general cannot live their skepticism. However, in "The Sceptic in His Place and Time" (in Burnyeat and Frede, eds., *The Original Sceptics,* 95 n. 7), Burnyeat registers the view, without explaining what he may have in mind, that there is a real and fundamental difference between Pyrrhonism and the "dialectical arguments for sceptical conclusions put forward by Arcesilaus and Carneades." In "Antipater and Self-Refutation" (in *Assent and Argument,* ed. B. Inwood and J. Mansfeld, n. 76), he suggests that there might be some difference between the way Academics and Pyrrhoneans understand the crucial idea of an "appearance"; if this is the basis for the real and fundamental difference he had in mind in the earlier article, it appears that Burnyeat too has not taken note of the crucial difference between Arcesilaus and Sextus that I develop below.

It is worth noting that it was apparently only the new Pyrrhoneans who called themselves skeptics—σκεπτικοί, lit. "searchers" or "inquirers"—and were so called by others in antiquity. Cicero, Sextus, and (so far as I know) all our other ancient sources never refer in that way to the Academic (as *we* say) "skeptics."[5] They always refer to the Academics only as Academics, and to their philosophy as the Academic one, not any sort of

[5] A potential exception is found in Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 11.5.6 (late 2nd c. A.D.). In reference to the much-discussed question whether Pyrrhoneans and Academics really differ at all and if so in what way, Gellius says (perhaps on the authority of the second-century Academic Favorinus, whose *Tropes of Pyrrhonism* he has just cited), that Academics, just like Pyrrhoneans, are called (*dicuntur*) σκεπτικοί, ἐφεκτικοί, ἀπορητικοί (skeptics, or people who inquire; ephectics, or people who suspend; and aporetics, or people who raise difficulties). H. Tarrant, *Scepticism or Platonism?* 22, claims that this passage is evidence that "those descriptions were regularly used of Academics" in discussions about whether Academics differed from Pyrrhoneans at least as far back as the first century A.D. Two points should be noted, however. First, we have here a whole list of terms, in fact three of the four with which Sextus characterizes the Pyrrhoneans in his chapter on the names used for his school and its members (*PH* 1.7: Aulus Gellius omits only ζητητικοί)—not just "skeptics." Second, we should expect Favorinus, as an Academic concerned with preserving and winning adherents for his Philonian heritage against the upsurge of the new Pyrrhonism, to want to appropriate for the Academics as much as he could of the more attractive aspects of the new Pyrrhonism, and there is a very solid basis from what we know of Arcesilaus and Carneades for claiming that Academics are ephectics and aporetics (on Arcesilaus in this regard, see the heavy emphasis laid in Cicero's evidence about Arcesilaus's Socratic heritage on withholding assent and on raising questions about views positively put forward by others: below, sects. II and III). When he throws in "skeptics" as well, then, we should take this not as evidence of general philosophical and scholarly usage at the time but as part of Favorinus's own—motivated—back-appropriation for the Academics of attractive Pyrrhonian self-characterizations. When Gellius says that Academics, like Pyrrhoneans, "are called" by these names, we should understand that merely as reflecting Favorinus's insistence that they are equally entitled to them all. In fact, Gellius himself elsewhere uses the term σκεπτικός as a name specifically for the Pyrrhoneans (11.5.1). I do not know of any other ancient text that unambiguously refers to Academics as σκεπτικοί. (Numenius, as reported in Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.* 14.6.4–5, said that some earlier authors, including Timon, declared that Arcesilaus [alone among the Academics] was really a Pyrrhonist in all but name, and therefore deserved to be called a skeptic [σκεπτικός], rather than an Academic. Even if we take Numenius at his word, and Timon and other early writers did call Arcesilaus a skeptic, on these grounds, that does not amount to calling an Academic a skeptic [or a kind of skeptic], much less calling Academics in general by this name.)

It is noteworthy that even as late as in the *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (ed. L. G. Westerink), which Westerink dates to the second half of the sixth century A.D., the author, in defending his characterization of Plato as a "dogmatic" philosopher and rejecting, for example, Arcesilaus's claim that in his dialogues Plato never advances any philosophical opinion as his own, five times uses the term ἐφεκτικός (never σκεπτικός) both to express the rejected alternative description of Plato and to characterize those skeptics who claim Plato as their model, whether these ἐφεκτικοί are to be distinguished from the Academics (7.10–14, 10.1–6) or the latter are to be included under the same heading (10.10, 11.20, 12.2). He felt quite comfortable describing Academics and Pyrrhoneans alike as ephectics; apparently not so for "skeptics."

"skeptical" philosophy. As Sextus makes clear,[6] to be a σκεπτικός philosopher (literally, one given to σκέψις, searching or inquiring) means to be one who constantly inquires about or considers questions of philosophy, and keeps on inquiring about and considering them. That is, a skeptic is one whose stock in trade is precisely that—taking philosophical questions up, inquiring into them, considering the matter at issue, without however ever coming to any conclusion, one way or the other—neither (1) by deciding that some given answer or theory is correct, nor even (2) by judging that one or more given proposed answers are definitely incorrect, nor, yet again, (3) by concluding that on the matter at hand there is no correct answer at all, either in the nature of things or anyhow available to us.[7] Of course, even though in antiquity the Academics were never called skeptics, it might still be that they were just as much entitled to this name—meaning by it, with Sextus, "ones who keep on inquiring, without reaching any conclusion"—as the official and self-proclaimed skeptics, the Pyrrhoneans, themselves were. In what follows I will pursue this question, so far simply as concerns Arcesilaus. I leave aside Carneades and other later Academics. My question, then, is whether Arcesilaus was a skeptic, where being a skeptic is understood Sextus's way: as one who keeps on inquiring into all sorts of philosophical matters, without reaching any conclusion of the sorts just specified on any of them.

II

Cicero in the *Academica* gives us by far the most extensive and detailed account of Arcesilaus as a philosopher that we have. In fact, each time through himself as speaker, Cicero presents two separate accounts of the

[6] See *PH* 1.7; see also Diogenes Laertius 9.70.

[7] One slender piece of possible evidence suggests that already Pyrrho might have been known during his lifetime or not long after for having given himself over to the activity of σκέψις. In his *Lampoons* (apparently in the second book, where he takes Xenophanes as his guide in pointing out the errors and arrogance of all other philosophers besides the modest, serene Pyrrho) Timon of Phlius, Pyrrho's pupil and publicist, has Xenophanes lament his own going off on treacherous dogmatizing ways, from age and lack of care for all σκεπτοσύνη (Sextus *PH* 1.224 = frg. 833, Lloyd-Jones/Parsons = 59 di Marco). Perhaps this archaic term indicates Xenophanes' own failure to philosophize in the way Pyrrho did. In that case, perhaps Aenesidemus, if he like Sextus called himself not only a Pyrrhonean but also a skeptic, affixed this name to his philosophical movement by way of reviving or anyhow drawing on a special emphasis on the importance of continued σκέψις in the reports about Pyrrho. However, Tarrant, *Scepticism or Platonism?* 23–24, points to Philo of Alexandria, writing in the first decades of the first century A.D., as the earliest author we know who used σκεπτικοί (sometimes) as a label specifically for Pyrrhoneans. From the fact that within his report of Aenesidemus's Ten Tropes, Philo uses this term in its broader meaning simply of

history of the Hellenistic Academy beginning with Arcesilaus but including its philosophical forebears. Cicero presents the first account in *Ac.* I upon the invitation of Varro, who has just completed an exposition (15–42) of Antiochus of Ascalon's view that the original Academic philosophy, beginning with Plato (but harking back to Socrates' discourses praising virtue and exhorting men to its zealous pursuit), was a single, complete, and comprehensive system, adhered to in all essentials by Aristotle, by Plato's immediate successors in the Academy down to Polemo and Crantor, and again by Zeno the Stoic, whose many innovations did not however make his Stoicism anything but the same "system" of philosophy as Plato introduced. It is then Cicero's turn, being as he and Varro say (see 1.13–14) a pupil and adherent of Philo of Larissa, a recent head of the Academy, to explain how and why, beginning with Arcesilaus, the Academy abandoned that philosophy for (what we call) skepticism. Cicero, of course, does not accept that Arcesilaus did abandon any prior Academic system of philosophy, since on the view he presents both Socrates and Plato were "skeptical" forerunners for Arcesilaus when he rejected that "system" in its Zenonian version. Cicero's account (1.43–46) starts with pre-Socratic alleged proto-skeptics, and proceeds to Socrates and Plato and then to Arcesilaus, before our manuscripts break off in the midst of a first mention of Carneades. Cicero's second account comes in the *Lucullus* (*Ac.* 2), 72–78. Lucullus, in beginning his exposition of Antiochus's detailed objections to Arcesilaus's and Carneades' new philosophical opinions and practices, had himself objected strenuously to the way the Academics, and Cicero in his first account (or rather its lost

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"inquirer" (including those who, after inquiring, reached definite conclusions), Tarrant infers that Aenesidemus must not in fact have used it himself as a label for himself and other Pyrrhoneans. On the other hand, as Tarrant notes, Diogenes Laertius in the introduction to his own exposition of the Ten Tropes, just after citing Aenesidemus's book as his source for the tropes, mentions (9.78) as the goal of Pyrrhonian argumentation to bring out "the oppositions inherent in inquiries" (τὰς ἐν ταῖς σκέψεσιν ἀντιθέσεις)—a conception of "inquiries" that reflects the more restricted, specifically skeptical, understanding of the term. So even if Aenesidemus himself did not appropriate the term σκεπτικός in the way that Sextus does as a label for his own school, he seems to have laid the ground for that appropriation by giving special emphasis to the centrality of ever-unfinished σκέψις in Pyrrhonian philosophizing. That may be one, perhaps the principal, reason why (see note 5 above), once the term σκεπτικός began to be used as a label for what we call skeptical philosophers, it was reserved for Pyrrhoneans and was not applied equally to Academics: the latter could easily be, and were, described as ephectics or aporetics (and even zetetics), but, it seems, the associations of "skeptic" were too strongly with specifically Pyrrhonian constant inquiry. (On the question when the term σκεπτικός came to be generally used as a label for Pyrrhoneans, see also G. Striker, "Skeptical Strategies," in *Doubt and Dogmatism,* ed. M. Schofield et al., n. 1.)

first-edition version), allegedly twist and misinterpret the views of various pre-Socratics, Socrates, and Plato in seeking to enlist respectable authorities to provide cover for Arcesilaus's sedition in departing from the "old system" so that his departure will look less vainglorious and less simply malicious (*Ac.* 2.13–15). Cicero's second account consists of his rebuttal of this charge of Lucullus.

The two accounts are in general, but not total, agreement.[8] In *Ac.* I, Cicero presents Arcesilaus as having been impressed, to begin with—just as Democritus, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and "almost all the old philosophers," *and Socrates as well,* had been—with the insuperable obstacles that stand in the way of anyone's ever coming to know any truth ("limited senses, feeble minds, short lifespan, truth sunk in an abyss, . . . all things wrapped in darkness," 1.44).[9] On these grounds, says Cicero, all these predecessors of Arcesilaus had denied all possibility of cognizing, grasping, knowing anything. Arcesilaus reached this same conclusion from the same considerations: *on these grounds,* he denied that anything can be known (*negabat esse quicquam quod sciri posset,* 1.45)—but, taking his denial one step further, he went on to say that even that which Socrates had exempted (his own knowledge of this universal ignorance) was itself not knowable.[10] Thus, Cicero tells us in *Ac.* I, Arcesilaus, following Socrates, became persuaded by certain pre-Socratic arguments to accept the conclusion that nothing is either known or knowable, not even the truth of this conclusion itself. But that is not all. Cicero adds: *for these reasons* (*quibus de causis*) Arcesilaus further concluded that no one ought ever assent to any proposition. If nothing can be known it would be the most disgraceful thing you could do (something than which nothing is *turpius*)—in fact a disgraceful misuse of the mind—to affirm or deny anything at all. (Why so, we are not told.) Armed with these convictions, according to Cicero, Arcesilaus practiced the old Socratic method of arguing against other people's opinions, with a view to making the reasons against them equally weighty as those advanced by their

[8] Charles Brittain (*Philo of Larissa,* 175–78) usefully reviews the contents of the two passages; his purposes do not lead him to address the differences in the two accounts, as I do below.

[9] *angustos sensus, imbecillos animos, brevia curricula vitae, et . . . in profundo veritatem esse demersam.*

[10] Cicero's purpose in the *Ac.* II history (to rebut Lucullus's objections to the claims of Academics to find authoritative predecessors among pre-Socratics, Socrates, and Plato) does not lead him to reiterate Arcesilaus's second-order skepticism about knowledge that one does not know anything. However, Cicero adds a reference there (2.73) to Metrodorus of Chios, the fourth-century Democritean, quoting him as denying such knowledge. So if Arcesilaus did say what Cicero says in 1.45 he did, he was not the first to introduce this refinement. On Metrodorus, see Brunschwig, "Le Fragment DK 70 B 1 de Métrodore de Chio," in *Polyhistor,* ed. K. A. Algra et al.

proponents, so that his hearers might be persuaded to follow his advice and suspend judgment.

On this account, it seems clear that Arcesilaus cannot deserve the title of skeptic (σκεπτικός), if that is understood as one who inquires about everything and keeps on inquiring without reaching a conclusion, one way or another, on any question inquired into. Arcesilaus *has* inquired into the possibility of knowledge, and he has concluded that none is possible for a human being. (So that question is settled; it is not something open that is still being inquired into.) Even if he has further concluded that he does not *know* that knowledge is impossible, nonetheless, he has assented to the proposition that it is impossible. And his yet further conclusion, that it is a disgrace to assent to any proposition, is itself based on assent to a proposition—the proposition that it *is* a disgrace to assent to anything in the absence of knowledge. We must presume that Arcesilaus has inquired into what is and is not disgraceful to do with your mind, and has reached the conclusion, after inquiry, that it is a disgrace to assent if you don't actually *know* the truth of what you are assenting to. So on Cicero's account in *Ac.* 1.43–46, Arcesilaus is no skeptic.[11]

Cicero's second account, in *Ac.* 2.72–78, is not so forthright. Here he does not say that either Socrates or Arcesilaus based their idea that nothing can be known on pre-Socratic arguments about the weakness of the mind, the narrowness of the senses, truth's being sunk in the abyss, and so forth. About Socrates, Cicero says only that after reading so many Socratic discourses of Plato and others it is impossible for him to doubt that it appeared (*visum sit*) to Socrates that nothing is known by anybody (2.74). About Arcesilaus he says only that it appeared to Arcesilaus that

[11] As Cicero presents him, he also grossly contradicts himself. First, Cicero says that Arcesilaus reached the conclusion that nothing can be known, i.e., that he accepted and assented to the proposition that nothing can be known (but without thinking that he *knew* that to be true). Hence, he did not assent to this as to an item of knowledge: the result of his assent would have to stand, according to the universally employed Stoic terminology of Cicero's time, as a mere "opinion," understood as such. Then, Cicero says that Arcesilaus further concluded that, therefore, no one ought ever to assent to any proposition. Thus he assents (more than once) while holding that no one should ever assent to anything. Perhaps Cicero means (he says nothing about this) that Arcesilaus exempted from his condemnation of assents, first, the proposition that nothing can be known and, second, the proposition that it is a disgrace to assent to any (other) proposition (than these two). That would preserve logical consistency. But what possible principled ground could Arcesilaus, on Cicero's account in *Ac.* I, have offered for these exemptions? His general principle, which does I think have its attractions (I come back to this below, sect. III) is that the only ground on which one should ever assent is if you *know* the proposition that you are assenting to. So it is impossible to see how Arcesilaus could provide any decent basis that would license even these exceptions: he certainly did not think that either of these could be *known.* (See note 16 below on one possible revision to Cicero's account that would restore logical consistency.)

it was true that the wise person would not assent to anything not actually *known* by him (as, it is implied, it appeared to Arcesilaus that nothing would be), and that it is worthy of the wise person not to do so (2.77). This might seem to leave open the possibility that Socrates, and Arcesilaus mimicking him, did not base their ideas that no one knows anything and that no one ought to assent to any proposition, on the pre-Socratic considerations mentioned in 1.44 (and expanded upon in 2.72–74, with the addition of Xenophanes and Parmenides to the previous trio of Anaxagoras, Democritus, and Empedocles), but perhaps on something else.[12] Furthermore, it might leave open the possibility that they may not be correctly interpreted as holding these "views" on the basis of *any* inquiry that yielded these results as their reasoned conclusions, but on some other sort of basis altogether. In that case, one might still perhaps hold open the possibility that Arcesilaus (and Socrates, too, for that matter) was a skeptic.

Those are possibilities I do wish to hold open, and indeed to argue positively for as actualities. But it does not seem promising to argue for them (at all) on the basis of Cicero's account of Arcesilaus in *Ac.* 2.72–78. As I mentioned, Cicero's second account is a rebuttal of Lucullus's attack on his first one—a rebuttal that certainly gives no indication that it incorporates any alteration of the view there presented. Cicero seems clearly to intend just to restate and reinforce that earlier account.[13] So we should not take Cicero in 2.72–78, with his language of "appearance" and his neglecting to link these appearances to the pre-Socratic arguments as their grounds, to be giving a different account of the historical facts from that in 1.44–46. In fact, in both places, but most explicitly in the first book, he claims to be speaking for Philo, to be presenting Philo's account of the history of the Academy.[14] So we should interpret Cicero as having in mind in both accounts that it was on the basis of the pre-Socratic arguments he alludes to in both contexts that Arcesilaus had concluded that nothing is knowable.

However, the Philonian origin of this history should alert us to the need to tread carefully here. During the time when Cicero heard him at

[12] It is noteworthy that even in expanding the list of pre-Socratic proto-skeptics in 2.72–74 Cicero only claims to be arguing that Arcesilaus was perfectly entitled to point to these distinguished philosophers as predecessors in holding that nothing is or can be known. He does not repeat the earlier claim that either Socrates or Arcesilaus reached their own conclusion to this effect *through* the same considerations as led these predecessors to it.

[13] I think Brittain, *Philo of Larissa,* 175–78, is absolutely right about this.

[14] See *Ac.* 1.13–14, and the implications of 2.7–8, 2.17 (*Philo vester*), 2.66, 2.69, 2.73 (*atque hic [Democritus] non dicit quod nos [viz., Cicero and Philo], qui veri esse aliquid non negamus, percipi posse negamus*).

Rome, before the radical change of view recorded in his "Roman books" that gave rise to such outrage among Antiochus and others associated then with the Academy in Athens, Philo held that it was perfectly acceptable to conclude inquiries into philosophical matters with definite assertions—provided that one did not hold that such conclusions had been definitely, once for all, established as the truth, and that one only assented to them as opinions, not knowledge.[15] On such a view, it would be perfectly acceptable for Arcesilaus, and Socrates too for that matter, as a hero and presumed precursor of the later Academics, to have investigated along with the pre-Socratics into the possibility of knowledge (for humans) and to have concluded that it was not possible and also for Arcesilaus to have considered what a mind should do so far as assenting to propositions goes, if it could not reach knowledge, and to have concluded that it would be disgraceful to assent.[16] Thus, on Philo's and Cicero's views, it would make perfectly good sense to present both Socrates and Arcesilaus in the way that Cicero does present them: they inquired into the possibility of knowledge and concluded that it was not possible, and then Arcesilaus inquired into what a mind ought to do if it could not attain knowledge and concluded that then it would be a disgrace to assent to anything. Arcesilaus would not be a skeptic (on my understanding, derived from Sextus, of what that means), but he would be a bona fide Academic nonetheless, in Cicero's and Philo's view of the Academic philosophy. Cicero and Philo, then, are interpreting the origin, as well as the character, of Arcesilaus's "skepticism" through the lens of their own philosophical views.

Hence, it is reasonable to doubt the accuracy of Cicero's account in the *Academica*. It may quite well derive from back-reading intended to lend authority to Philo's own version of Academic skepticism. It may be, for all we can know, that in some way or other Arcesilaus himself did refer to pre-Socratic antecedents for his own skeptical doubts about knowledge in seeking validation, beyond his devotion to Socrates and Socratic methods of philosophizing, for his own position—thus giving Philo and

[15] See *Ac.* 2.18, and Brittain, *Philo*, 11–17.

[16] That Philo and Cicero themselves thought you *could* reasonably and not disgracefully assent without knowledge does not affect this point, except insofar as it might permit Arcesilaus as presented by Cicero to evade the obvious objection (see note 10 above) that on Cicero's own account he must be (disgracefully) assenting to the claim that it is disgraceful to assent to anything. This could now be interpreted as the thought that it is disgraceful to assent to anything *as known,* whereas a weaker and more tentative assent is rationally and morally acceptable. Thus on Philo's and Cicero's own philosophical principles there is a way of interpreting what Cicero says about Arcesilaus so that Arcesilaus comes out not self-contradictory after all. (That does not mean, of course, that it is at all a reasonable interpretation of Arcesilaus' views or of how he arrived at them.)

Cicero some basis in tradition for their self-serving story.[17] What one must question is that Arcesilaus ever suggested that his own doubts about knowledge were derived even in part from pre-Socratic considerations about the limitations of our senses, the feebleness of our minds, truth being sunk in the abyss, and so on.

III

But why should anyone think that Socrates, whatever might be true of Arcesilaus, reached the conclusion that no one knows or can know anything, in whatever sense and with whatever force (or qualifications) he did reach it, by arguing from those pre-Socratic considerations? The suggestion is perfectly fantastic, and no one nowadays would give it any credence at all.[18] If we formed our ideas about Socrates from Plato's and others' dialogues, as Cicero at *Ac.* 2.74 suggests Arcesilaus did, we would never think that Socrates held that nothing can be known on *that* sort of basis. Rather, we would think, his ground was his own experience of examining others who claimed or were reputed to have knowledge, who however always failed to stand up satisfactorily to his questioning of them on the subjects on which they were supposed to have it. The allegedly wise could not explain their allegedly knowledgeable views, when questioned for the grounds of those views and about their consequences, without contradicting themselves or else having to assert quite implausible things—without, again, being able to argue away the appearance of implausibility. And these were failings that, Socrates assumed, knowledge itself, if anyone actually possessed it, would necessarily preclude. If we go by the Socratic dialogues, these experiences, not the limitations of the senses or the feebleness of the mind (in some other respect) or the truth

[17] Having arrived at his doubts about knowledge by some other route (see sect. III below) he may then have pointed out that even other distinguished philosophers before Socrates had expressed, in some way or other, "skeptical" doubts. See C. Brittain and J. Palmer's interesting but speculative account, "The New Academy's Appeals to the Presocratics."

[18] Richard Bett (basing himself on the passage of Aristocles of Messene's work *On Philosophy* preserved in Eusebius *Praeparatio Evangelica* 14.18.1–5, which presents itself as reporting what Timon of Phlius said about him) has argued that Pyrrho came to the conclusion that we cannot know anything, from considerations about how things themselves are, viz., "equally indifferent and unstable and indeterminate" (*Pyrrho: His Antecedents and His Legacy,* chap. 1). This looks very close to the sort of thing Cicero reports as having convinced various pre-Socratics (and Socrates) of the same conclusion. If this is right, one might suspect that Philo simply transferred to Socrates, as Arcesilaus's model for his own "skepticism," this basis for the early "skepticism" of Pyrrho. Or, conceivably, if indeed Philo had read, remembered, and took seriously as historical truth, what Plato says at *Phaedo* 96a ff. about Socrates' early interest in pre-Socratic investigations into nature, and

being buried in the abyss, were Socrates' grounds for thinking that no one knows anything, and perhaps that no one can know. You might think, then, that if, as Cicero in *Academica* II says he did, Arcesilaus took up his stance as a philosophical questioner by following Socrates, with some sort of conviction of the impossibility of knowledge, and aiming at inducing in his hearers suspension of judgment, he would have done so on this sort of basis, not the one Cicero in fact attributes to him in *Ac.* I.

Now in fact in other works, where he is not bound to Philo's account of Arcesilaus's philosophical views or practices, Cicero does suggest just such a view. I have in mind particularly a passage of *On Ends* II, and one of *On Oratory* III. As he begins his criticism of Epicurean ethics in *On Ends* II, Cicero explains why he is not going to proceed as Torquatus had done in book I. Torquatus expounded and defended Epicurus through a single, long philosophical set piece, which, as Cicero says, even in the Academy of his own day (viz., that of Philo) would be the accepted way to proceed (*On Ends* 2.2). Cicero however wishes to preserve some of the virtues of Socrates' (and Arcesilaus') procedures by pausing at each juncture to see what in his counterargument an Epicurean would or would not be prepared to grant, and to argue accordingly. Socrates' way, Cicero says, was to

> use thorough inquiry and questioning to draw out their opinions from those with whom he was conversing, so that he could say anything that he thought in response to the answers they gave. This way was not held to by his successors, but Arcesilaus revived it, and made it a practice that those who wished to be his pupils should not inquire from him but should themselves say what they thought; when they had done so, he would argue against them. But his pupils defended their own opinion so far as they could,

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in particular in pre-Socratic theories about the causes of things, Philo might have thought he had some basis therein for attributing the allegedly Pyrrhonian and pre-Socratic sort of view about the possibility of knowledge to Socrates too. However, the *Phaedo* passage only attests Socrates' early interest in the natural philosophy of the pre-Socratics, not at all anything to do with their only tenuously related epistemological views. The suggestion that Socrates reached his "skeptical" views by this route remains fantastic, and totally unsupported by our evidence from Plato and elsewhere about Socrates.

Surprisingly, Schofield, "Academic Epistemology," does however give it credence. He accepts Cicero's testimony in *Ac.* I as accurate for Arcesilaus. But since that evidence presents Arcesilaus as having followed Socrates in accepting the pre-Socratic arguments for the conclusion that nothing is known (while having gone further than Socrates did, in that Arcesilaus held that it was also not *known* that nothing is known), Schofield presumably accepts at least that *Arcesilaus* accepted the same story for Socrates. In fact, as I show below, as soon as one notices, as Schofield does not, and takes seriously, the fact that Cicero's history of the skeptical Academy in *Ac.* is a report of what he had heard from Philo, it becomes quite plain that this aspect of it is a fabrication, of no evidentiary value whatever, both as a report on Arcesilaus and as one on Socrates.

> whereas with the rest of the philosophers the person who has asked something then keeps silent.[19]

In *de Or.* 3.67 Cicero reiterates that Arcesilaus made it his practice (a peculiarly Socratic one) not to put on show any opinions of his own but to argue against what each person had said that *they* thought.[20] But before that he adds the very important information, or suggestion, that Arcesilaus was the first to "absorb from various books of Plato and the Socratic discourses this point above all others: there is nothing certain that can be grasped either by the senses or by the mind."[21]

Here Cicero presents Arcesilaus as having reached his conviction that no certain knowledge can be attained (in whatever way it was a conviction) through his reading of Plato's and others' Socratic dialogues.[22] On this view, it had nothing to do with pre-Socratic worries about our sensory limitations, etc., but rather was the cumulative effect of full exposure to Socrates' practice of elenctic dialectic. It is easy to see how this might have happened. Socrates is such a skillful and resourceful dialectician that you could easily get the impression that no matter what opinion anyone put forward on any matter of ethical theory or any other theoretical question, even if it *were* quite true, Socrates could find something quite persuasive and unsettling to ask on the other side, which moreover the other person would not be quick or good enough at argument to find any means of disarming—or, if he was, Socrates could always find something else relevant and unsettling to ask that *would* stymie the interlocutor in his effort to explain and defend it adequately, even to his own satisfaction. In displaying his talent, however, Socrates also holds up a certain ideal of what knowledge is and what it accomplishes for anyone who has it. It consists in the ability to stand up successfully to the most searching examination of the Socratic kind that the best dialectician (Socrates, in fact) could dish out—so that your announced opinion sur-

[19] *Is enim percontando atque interrogando elicere solebat eorum opiniones quibuscum diserebat, ut ad ea quae ii respondissent si quid videretur diceret. qui mos cum a posterioribus non esset retentus, Arcesilas eum revocavit instituitque ut ii qui se audire vellent non de se quaererent sed ipsi dicerent quid sentirent; quod cum dixissent, ille contra. sed eum qui audiebant quoad poterant defendebant sententiam suam; apud ceteros autem philosophos qui quaesivit aliquid tacet.*

[20] See also *de Or.* 3.80; *Nature of the Gods* 1.11; *On Laws* 1.39.

[21] *Arcesilas primum . . . ex variis Platonis libris sermonibusque Socraticis hoc maxime arripuit, nihil esse certi quod aut sensibus aut animo percipi possit.*

[22] I do not mean to suggest here that Arcesilaus made any distinction (of the sort that modern scholars do) between "Socratic" dialogues of Plato (the "early" ones) and the rest (or, at any rate, the rest in which Socrates is the principal speaker). Still, it is reasonable to interpret Cicero in these passages as presumably having in mind principally such Platonic works as *Apology, Protagoras, Euthyphro, Laches, Charmides,* etc.

vives ultimately unscathed. If that is what knowledge really is, then what we see displayed in the Socratic discourses of Plato and others leaves the reader with a vivid and persuasive impression that no one has it, even that no mere human could possibly get it, so demanding are its standards.[23]

Now, if this is how Arcesilaus was affected by his reading of the Socratic discourses, then of course he did not arrive at a conviction of the impossibility of knowledge on the basis of any arguments at all to such a conclusion. After all, Socrates himself nowhere argues at all for any such conclusion.[24] Arcesilaus just got a deep foreboding and suspicion that no one has ever turned up, or will ever, who can pass Socrates' test: certainly not Socrates, as presented in the dialogues. Through his profession of ignorance, Socrates denies having the ability himself to stand up to the sort of searching examination on any question that he so expertly subjected others to. So it would be quite wrong to say that Arcesilaus learned or drew from the discourses any philosophical doctrine or opinion to that effect. Here it is important to recall the other main claim that Cicero makes in the passages from *On Ends* and *On Oratory* that we are examining. This is that Arcesilaus never taught, never argued for, anything at all on his own behalf: like Socrates, he listened to others and questioned

[23] Here we need to pay close attention to Socrates' exegesis of the poem of Simonides in the *Protagoras*. There Socrates argues (344b–c; cf. 341e) that when Simonides said that "God alone can have this privilege," viz., that of *being* good, he meant that the "best" human being there can be is one who at most sometimes "becomes" good by acting the way a being that *is* good would act (by default, this being would have to be a god), whereas inevitably such a one, like everyone else, will thereafter sometimes fail to do what is morally required and so, later, "become" bad again. It seems clear that this is just another case, of which there are several, where in interpreting the poem the character Socrates insinuates views of his own. Further, he himself has just before insisted (342a–343b) that the Dorians in general and the Spartans in particular were the greatest repository of ancient wisdom, and that this wisdom was in fact what lay behind their valorous and more generally all their virtuous actions. Socrates' moral, then, is that what the gods have, which makes them *be* good is wisdom (i.e., knowledge); that wisdom is denied to human beings, who even at their best (namely, according to Socrates' account, the Spartans) only can "become" good from time to time, by somehow or other doing good actions, i.e., the acts that wisdom, if you had it, would lead you to perform.

[24] The *Protagoras* passage cited in the previous note is perhaps the closest Socrates comes to arguing for this thesis. In reading that passage, one must bear in mind that if "wisdom" is unattainable except by a god, as Socrates proposes and more or less argues there, it follows that (Socratic) knowledge is also unattainable, since he treats those as the same thing. However, by formally attributing these views only to Simonides, Socrates preserves his stance of one who inquires only, and does not reach conclusions which he is then prepared and obligated to defend, if pressed. So Socrates does not put forward these views as his own philosophical conclusions, conclusions reached through philosophical argumentation, or ones that he is obligated to defend by argument if they are challenged.

them or their opinions, exclusively, and never entered the philosophical arena on the answerer's side on *any* point.[25] This means that in whatever way Arcesilaus did hold that knowledge is never attainable by human beings, this is nothing he would ever conceivably have enunciated as an opinion of his own. Indeed, if some pupil or opponent turned up who was clever enough to begin his conversation with Arcesilaus by announcing: "You know, I am convinced that no human being has ever known anything for certain," fully prepared to back this up with various reasons for so thinking—and surely that ploy must have occurred to *someone* during all the years that Arcesilaus was before the public—Arcesilaus would surely have argued against it. Cicero says that Arcesilaus always argued against *any* opinion that was announced to him. And it is not in the least difficult to think up lots of counterarguments he might have rolled out. After all, even in *Ac.* 1.44–46 Cicero says Arcesilaus did not think he *knew* it to be true that no one knew anything. Thus the view that no one knows or can know anything is with Arcesilaus a sort of heuristic

[25] If Cicero is right about this, and Arcesilaus never argued for, or presented as something that he would even consider arguing for, either his view that knowledge is not attainable by human beings or his view (see below) that it was a disgrace to assent to any proposition in the absence of knowledge, or indeed any other proposition, then G. Striker must be right in her analysis of Arcesilaus's "argumentative strategies" as always involving "dialectical" argument only. In philosophical argument he never reached conclusions to which he was himself committed on the basis of any commitment to the premises he used to reach them. (See her "Skeptical Strategies.") Striker does not refer to these passages of Cicero in support of her interpretation, so the success of her direct and independent account of Arcesilaus's reported arguments against the Stoics on how the wise man is rationally obligated to suspend on all questions (Cic. *Ac.* 2.77, Sextus Empiricus *M.* 7.155–57) and on how it is possible for a person to act even without assenting to anything (Sextus *M.* 7.158) can serve as strong confirmation of the correctness of Cicero's view (pp. 97, 100-101, respectively, in the reprint). In his account of Arcesilaus's views, Schofield pays no heed to these passages of Cicero (he does not refer at all to the relevant part of *de Or.* 3.67, and refers to *On Ends* 2.2 and *Nature of the Gods* 1.11 only in a grudging footnote, 325 n. 8). He also does not accept Striker's analysis of these Arcesilean arguments as wholly dialectical (but why not?—unfortunately the format of the *Cambridge History* does not allow authors to go into such details). As a result, Schofield gives a weakly defended and (in the light of *all* the evidence) entirely unacceptable account of Arcesilaus, as having been committed to accepting on his own behalf the proposition that the wise man will refuse assent to everything (326), and apparently also the proposition that one can act even without assenting to anything (333–34; Schofield's account of this argument is too filled with qualifications to allow the reader to be sure what his final position on this second "commitment" is)—as well as the proposition that no one knows anything (327). As I argue below, there *is* in fact a way that Arcesilaus is committed to the righteousness of suspension (but not to unknowability), but that way turns on implications of Arcesilaus's Socraticism, of which Schofield, like Striker, seems oblivious. So, ironically, Schofield's conclusions are half-right—not entirely mistaken, as you would have to conclude if you simply followed his own analysis and the grounds he actually gives in support of it.

principle, governing his practice, but laying no claim of its own to objective truth. It stands inaccessible to critical evaluation because Arcesilaus never asserted it, and would indeed at any time have argued against it if anyone else had asserted it to him.

If, then, we remove from Cicero's account in the *Academica* all suggestion that Arcesilaus's (and Socrates') attitude to the unattainability of knowledge amounted to an opinion based on reasoned argument of any sort, it might begin to seem that, after all, Arcesilaus did deserve the title of skeptic—meaning by this term, an inquirer who keeps on inquiring and never reaches any conclusions *in* or *to* his inquiries. Cicero says in the *Academica* that Arcesilaus spent all his philosophical time presenting equally weighty considerations on the opposed side of any question, so as to induce suspension in his interlocutor. Is that not, essentially, to say, now that we have made that removal, that Arcesilaus constantly inquired into various questions on which others had opinions, always reaching a balance of reasons on both sides, and as a result suspending his own thought, while encouraging others to do the same? Does that not amount to inquiring and keeping on inquiring, without ever reaching any conclusion of whatever sort, on any question? So Arcesilaus would be a skeptic, according to Sextus's understanding of what being a skeptic means.

IV

Before we can accept that verdict we must attend to the second step in Cicero's argument in the *Academica*. Cicero argues that, from the premise that knowledge is unattainable by human beings, Arcesilaus used the further premise that it would be a great disgrace to assent to any proposition in the absence of knowledge of its truth to conclude that one ought never assent to anything. Where did this further premise come from? Cicero does not say. But now that we see the source of his first premise (the unattainability of knowledge), it should strike us that the same source, his reading of the Socratic discourses, must have provided him with the second as well. I mentioned above that in those discourses Socrates puts forward a certain ideal of knowledge. But no one who reads them could fail to see that Socrates also endorses this ideal, in that he passionately aspires to achieve knowledge, believes that human beings can only live their lives really well if they possess it, and holds that, by questioning and refuting others in reasoned argument, he comes progressively closer to that goal—even if he has not yet reached it, and presumably never will. His refusal to announce anything as his own opinion is plausibly thought to reflect his feeling that to do that is to betray your commitment to this goal and to settle for something less than knowledge

as your guide in life—mere opinion. Right-thinking, morally serious persons will withhold assent until they have attained knowledge—knowledge being understood in Socrates' ideal way as the ability to undergo with success the most strenuous, most extended examination of whatever it is that you have asserted as your view. In short, Socrates shows himself to be a committed devotee of the life led according to reason: he withholds assent because reason itself demands him to withhold.

If these ideas of Socrates are the source of Arcesilaus's second premise, then we have to attribute to Arcesilaus a second idea derived from his devoted attention to Socratic discourses, besides the suspicion that knowledge is unattainable by human beings. Inspired by Socrates' fervor for reason's ideal of knowledge, he too accepts that reason should be our guide in life, and its perfection in knowledge our goal. When he always suspends, and thinks one *ought* to suspend, and encourages others to suspend, because considerations on the two sides of a given question are equally weighty, he thinks of himself simply as following reason where it leads. *It* leads to suspension, so *he* suspends—because reason says one *ought* to—and that is why he encourages others to do the same. It is, he thinks, a very great disgrace to assent without knowledge, because he follows Socrates' fervent example of a life devoted to reason. Socrates refused to assent to anything, that is to put anything forward as his own view, because he thought you should not do that unless you could back it up by the ability to withstand the most resourceful and unrelenting Socratic examination of it. And he had no assurance at all that *he* could withstand that test on any matter whatsoever. What, then, is the status in Arcesilaus's thought of this second idea—that you should never assent except with knowledge?[26]

[26] It is worth emphasizing that for Arcesilaus the ban on assent without knowledge has much stronger implications than the similar-sounding ban contained in Stoic doctrine about wise people. For the Stoics, wise persons' minds are so disposed that they will never assent except to an (allegedly) "cognitive impression" (καταληπτικὴ φαντασία), i.e., to one that is true and could not be false; "weak" assents, assents to impressions other than cognitive ones, yield only "opinions," and the wise never have any mere opinions. Whenever they do assent, the result is a "cognitive grasp" (κατάληψις) of the fact that is its content or object. According to a not unreasonable conception of knowledge, such a "grasp" would actually amount to knowledge; on such a view, the Stoics would be restricting the wise person's assents to impressions that when assented to do yield knowledge. However, in fact the Stoics (as part of their own Socratic heritage) agree with Arcesilaus in reserving the name "knowledge" (ἐπιστήμη) for a mental state that achieves the very demanding Socratic ideal I have been discussing: e.g., Sextus tells us that for the Stoics "knowledge is a cognitive grasp that is secure and firm and unalterable by (further) reasoning" (*Against the Theoreticians, M* 7.151). Thus when they permit and indeed insist on the propriety of assents to (mere) cognitive impressions, yielding true, 100 percent reliable "grasps" that, however, might or might not be thus "irreversible," they are permitting assents that might very well not con-

I suggested that the first idea is best regarded as a sort of heuristic principle, and certainly not a philosophical opinion for which Arcesilaus would ever agree to argue (or to accept examination on before he acted upon it). Likewise, it might seem, with this second one. It is not something which Arcesilaus arrived at as the conclusion of any arguments; he came to it through his fascination with Socratic discourses and by admiring Socrates and accepting him as his model. If some pupil or clever but malicious opponent came to him and announced, "It is my opinion that no one should ever assent to anything without being in the position to explain and defend his view successfully in the face of a Socratic examination—to do so would be the greatest disgrace for any rational being," Arcesilaus would surely argue on the other side, as he always did, seeking to balance whatever reasons the pupil or opponent could muster in support of their view with equally weighty ones against it. And again, it would not be difficult to think up arguments that Arcesilaus could roll out for this purpose. So Arcesilaus does not put this forward as a philosophical view of his own, for which he has to or intends to claim that there are good and sufficient, completely irreversible arguments to support it. Thus it might seem that it is just an idea (an inspiring one) that he has and follows in doing philosophy, as he just has the suspicion that no one knows anything or, it would seem, ever could—but does not *maintain* that that is so. If so, then, it continues to look as if Arcesilaus can legitimately be counted a skeptic in Sextus Empiricus's usage of that term: on any and all questions of philosophy he is an inquirer who keeps on inquiring and never reaches a conclusion in which he assents in any way on any side of those questions. Neither as to the nonexistence of knowledge nor as to the disgrace involved in assenting without it does Arcesilaus make any philosophical claim.

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stitute knowledge. Cicero tells us (and all our other sources are in agreement with this, or anyhow in no way contradict it) that "it was against Zeno that Arcesilaus began his whole struggle" in (as Schofield puts it) "going skeptical" (*Ac.* 1.44). In the light of Arcesilaus's Socraticism as I explain it here, it seems right to understand his all-out attack on the very existence of cognitive impressions and cognitive grasps as motivated by a wish to defend the full-strength Socratic ideal. If there *are* no cognitive impressions then there can be no temptation (of the sort Zeno gave in to) to think that any lower standard for assent can be accepted than the original Socratic one—to assent only to propositions that are irreversible, because you could give a full and successful dialectical account of them. What must have outraged and offended Arcesilaus most in Zeno's proposals was the very idea that one could responsibly and respectably assent on the basis of anything less than full Socratic knowledge. In any event, when we read accounts in Cicero, or Sextus, or Plutarch, of Arcesilaus's insistence, in arguing against Stoics, that *on Stoic principles* one must never assent but must always suspend, it will follow a fortiori that on his own much stronger principles one must do the same. (Of course, as I am arguing, with Arcesilaus, this insistence is no philosophical doctrine, as it would be with Zeno, for which one might give philosophical arguments.)

But this second view functions for Arcesilaus as more than the mere suspicion that the first one is. He does not just have the idea (or suspicion) that when you do not know you should not assent; if Cicero's report is right he thinks it is a disgrace (indeed the greatest disgrace) to do that. So he is committed to a certain idea and ideal of reason—Socrates'—to violate which, he thinks, would be something really awful. In fact, his commitment to follow reason where it leads seems to be absolute, as it was with Socrates: he will suspend for just so long as reason does demand it (because there are equally weighty considerations on both sides of the question), but as soon as someone comes along to show, or he himself sees, that they are not equally weighty, and that every consideration on one side can be adequately dealt with and no longer stands against the opposed conclusion, he will follow reason in declaring that that is how things actually do stand. (He will then be in a position to *know* it, so he won't violate his principle about not assenting except with knowledge). In fact, he only suspends because reason, to which he adheres, keeps on indicating, inquiry after inquiry, that that is what he ought to do. And, it would seem, he recommends suspension to others on the same ground—as what reason, which should be the supreme guide in all our lives, tells them they ought to do.[27] The existence, and apparent depth, of this Socratic commitment to reason and to following wherever it leads must be taken into account when answering my guiding question: whether Arcesilaus should be counted a skeptic at all, in Sextus's sense of that term. This commitment is also a crucial distinguishing feature of Arcesilaus's philosophy as compared with Sextus's Pyrrhonism.

V

In fact, Sextus's comments on Arcesilaus's philosophy support in a very precise way the interpretation that I have been developing. As is well known, at the very beginning of the *Pyrrhonian Sketches,* Sextus decisively separates the "Academic" philosophy from any skeptical one, on the ground that the Academics have declared, after investigating philosophical questions for some time, that the answers to them are not graspable (by us). They have, in other words, brought their inquiries to a definite conclusion, rather than keeping them ongoing and open, as skeptics do. Although here the simple term "Academic" would surely be taken by any reader to include all the Academics, beginning with Arcesi-

[27] Or does he? Cicero cagily suggests in *Ac.* 1.45 that he thought it would simply be "easier" for people to suspend if they thought the considerations on each side were equally balanced—not that they would then be led by reason or reasoning to do so.

laus and going on down at least to Philo, it is noteworthy, though so far as I know scholars have not taken special notice of this, that in indicating whom he has in mind Sextus says simply "Clitomachus and Carneades and other [not: *the* other] Academics" (οἱ περὶ Κλειτόμαχον καὶ Καρνεάδην καὶ ἄλλοι ᾽Ακαδημάϊκοι), thus leaving open the question whether, in his opinion, this classification applies in fact to Arcesilaus and other Academics before Carneades. The possibility that it does not is confirmed when we read his treatment later in book I, first of Carneades' philosophy, and then of Arcesilaus's. The first thing he says (1.226) about what he calls the "new" Academy (that of Carneades and Clitomachus) is that, unlike the skeptics, its adherents firmly state as an established fact (διαβεβαιοῦνται) that all things are ungraspable. With Arcesilaus (the "middle" Academy, cf. 1.220), however, he says no such thing; indeed, the *first* thing he says (1.232) is that Arcesilaus does very much seem to have things in common with Pyrrhonian ways of arguing (πάνυ μοι δοκεῖ τοῖς Πυρρωνείοις κοινωνεῖν λόγοις). In fact, he adds, Arcesilaus does not make *any* assertions, but "suspends about everything," and even makes "the ultimate end" of his philosophizing to be suspension. This last point aligns Arcesilaus closely with what Sextus himself has said (1.25) about the Pyrrhonist's ultimate end.[28] Thus Sextus takes Arcesilaus,

[28] Sextus says the "end" for skeptics is "unperturbedness" (ἀταραξία)—not, as he reports for Arcesilaus, suspension. But he also says that on suspension, unperturbedness follows like a shadow on its body. David Sedley, "The Motivation of Greek Skepticism," in *The Skeptical Tradition,* ed. M. Burnyeat, 11–14, draws on Sextus's remark about Arcesilaus's "ultimate end" in weaving his account of the importance of the ideal of unperturbedness (through suspension) to Greek skepticism, allegedly including Arcesilaus. However, as I just noted, Sextus explicitly says that Arcesilaus made suspension itself, not unperturbedness, the "ultimate end." The Pyrrhoneans are firmly decided that unperturbedness is the end, and we have no evidence at all that Arcesilaus might have agreed—as if he was hinting that unperturbedness is the end while saying only that suspension is. I agree with Striker, "On the Difference," 148 n. 11, that for a Socratic the importance of not presuming to have knowledge when one does not have it is sufficient motivation for making suspension the ultimate end of one's philosophy (if one strongly suspects that no one can attain knowledge). In fact, it is quite easy to see how a report like Cicero's in *Ac.* 1.44–45, if corrected in the way I have corrected it in sect. IV above, could lead a later figure like Sextus to conclude that, in fact, the avoidance of assent, i.e., suspension, was the ultimate goal of all Arcesilaus's efforts in philosophy, both for himself and his interlocutors—not unperturbedness. I also agree with Sedley that Sextus's basis for attributing suspension to Arcesilaus as an ultimate end was not the mere fact (if this was a fact—we have no indication of any such thing) that somewhere or other in the reports of Arcesilaus's arguments he was found to have argued (perhaps from Stoic assumptions about ends; see Sedley, "Motivation of Greek Skepticism," 13) that suspension *is* the end. Suspension as the end was a further expression of his deep Socraticism. He did not need to come upon it through dialectical encounters with Stoics, and surely he did not do so: he got it from reading and reflecting on Plato's and other Socratic discourses.

as I have argued Arcesilaus in fact did, not to have adopted any philosophical views (views for which you are obliged, and prepared, to argue—views that you roundly assert as true, as things you believe), not even the views that nothing can be known or that it is a disgrace to assent when you do not know. As to unknowability, Sextus does not indicate how it is that he thinks (as presumably he does think) that Arcesilaus nonetheless maintains it. But it is noteworthy that he says that *Carneades* says that all things are nongraspable in a way that differs from the way skeptics say the same thing (1.226). So perhaps Sextus thinks Arcesilaus says all things are nongraspable in just the same way as Pyrrhonian skeptics do (i.e., as things they are inclined to think, that they have the impression may well be true, see 1.200). If so, I think Sextus has Arcesilaus exactly right on this point.

Where Arcesilaus differs from the Pyrrhoneans, however, according to Sextus, is in the *way* he suspended—the thoughts with which he suspended, and the motivations he had for doing so.[29] According to Sextus, Arcesilaus said that each act of suspension is really good in the nature of things, and each act of assent is really bad in the nature of things (1.233). For Pyrrhoneans, however, suspensions and assents are accepted as good and bad (things that you ought and ought not to do), respectively, only insofar as they appear that way to themselves (κατὰ τὸ φαινόμενον ἡμῖν)—Pyrrhoneans do not say firmly, as a matter of established fact (διαβεβαιωτικῶς), as Arcesilaus does, that suspensions are good and assents bad; they only have some impression of that sort. Now, as I will show, for this too we can find a solid basis in Arcesilaus's Socraticism as I have interpreted it. So, if my interpretation is correct, Sextus has Arcesilaus exactly right on this point too.

On my account, Arcesilaus is a Socratic in that like Socrates he is passionately devoted to reason; reason, he thinks, is our highest faculty, the one and only thing in us with which we should in the strongest and deepest sense identify ourselves.[30] This is not a philosophical doctrine for

[29] I leave aside the further and final point in Sextus's account of Arcesilaus (1.234), which in any event he introduces cautiously ("if we should trust the things that are said about him"; in the rest of his account he stands personally behind what he says, reporting straight out that Arcesilaus said or did this or that). This is that really Arcesilaus was a Platonic dogmatist all along, who merely used his method of arguing on the other side of his pupils' opinions in order to test their mettle, and if they seemed philosophically adept and capable enough, then he would drop the pretense and start teaching them the dogmas of Plato. Lucullus in Cicero, *Ac.* 2.60, makes what seems to be the same bizarre suggestion. See the same idea in Anonymous, *Comm. on Plato's Theaetetus* 54.14; Numenius *apud* Eusebius, *Praep. Evan.* 14.6.6; and Augustine, *Against the Academics* 3.38.

[30] This seems to me a much more central and important aspect of Arcesilaus's indebtedness to, and revival of, Socratic thought than (what is uniformly appealed to by scholars) his

Arcesilaus, in that he will never announce it as his opinion, and he does not hold it in a way that places a burden on him to defend it with arguments of his own or with rebuttals against its denial by anyone. Nonetheless this is a very deep conviction of his. His deep identification with reason is the ground for his thinking it the extreme of turpitude to assent when we don't have actual Socratic knowledge—to do so would abuse the very essence of our being. Hence it is a morally good act of the highest order not to assent but to suspend, just so long as we do *not* have that knowledge—suspending preserves and strengthens our very being. It is with that thought, and out of that motivation, that Arcesilaus suspends whenever he does, and stays away from assent. And, probably, that is why he recommends the same practice to others. In other words, his suspensions are themselves acts of reason, expressions of his passionate acceptance of reason as a guide to life and of reason's inherent standards, one of which (he thinks) is expressed in the principle that one should always suspend when one does not actually *know*. So, he supports suspension, as Sextus says he does, διαβεβαιωτικῶς—firmly, assertively, as something one *really* ought to do.

For Sextus, as he implies in distinguishing the Pyrrhonean's suspensions from the Arcesilean's, this is anathema. There is not room here to explain fully why that should be so for him. Briefly, however: almost the very goal of skepticism, for the Sextan Pyrrhonist, is to rid us totally of any such ideal, of the thought that reason, as a critical faculty with standards for judging truth and falsehood, and with self-recommending procedures for deciding what to think and what to do, has any authority whatsoever for our thought or for any of our actions. Getting rid of that ideal is the essential—both necessary and sufficient—condition for living an unperturbed life. For him, the fully fledged skeptic regularly suspends and thus lives an unperturbed life, simply by going by how things appear to him, not by following reason at all.[31] Such a person keeps on suspending each

adoption of Socrates' method of elenctic cross-questioning as the basis for his own philosophizing.

[31] I speak advisedly here only of the fully fledged Pyrrhonian skeptic: as Sextus explains (*PH* 1.12, 1.26 ff.), the skeptic starts out in philosophy with a committed belief in the power and value of reason as a faculty for critically deciding what to believe and how to act. His hope is to use rational scrutiny to discover what is true and what is false, so that he can then live his life on the basis of what reason decides. Hence, when during that phase he suspends (as, according to Sextus, he inevitably must—so equally balanced are considerations on both sides of all questions), those suspensions are undertaken through reason itself, because reason and its standards dictate them. It is only once he has unexpectedly found that unperturbedness follows on his regular and constant reason-directed suspensions, and he has formed the habit of expecting and welcoming suspension when he next inquires into something, that he is what I call a fully fledged skeptic. From then on he has (lightly, easily, unperturbedly) renounced reason and does not follow it any longer, even in his acts of

time, in recognition, to be sure, of the fact that critical reason, if it were to be followed, would demand this: after all, he suspends always after applying critical standards in evaluating the evidence on both sides, and so, after reaching the conclusion that, as it appears to him on that occasion, critical reason is incapable of deciding the question one way or the other. But he does not suspend *because* reason, if followed fully and correctly, does demand this. His suspensions are not faithful, devoted *acts* of critical reason. He suspends only (by now) because, happily, that is what he feels like doing.

So we can conclude that Arcesilaus does indeed deserve the title of skeptic, meaning by that a philosopher who inquires, and keeps on inquiring, into philosophical questions, but without ever reaching a reasoned conclusion of any sort on any of them. Every time he inquires into anything, he suspends. However, there is a very great difference between the skepticism of Arcesilaus and that of Sextus, precisely in regard to the role of reason in the acts of suspension that are common to the two. Both promote a life without assent, a life that renounces the typical Greek philosopher's ideal of knowledge as the basis for a well-lived human life. Arcesilaus, like Sextus, lives without knowledge and does so with satisfaction. As David Sedley has said, "What above all characterizes Hellenistic skepticism is . . . its abandonment of [the] desire [for knowledge]—its radical conviction that to suspend assent and to resign oneself to ignorance is not a bleak expedient but, on the contrary, a highly desirable intellectual achievement."[32] But for Arcesilaus this stems from a deep and abiding commitment to another ideal, one shared not with Sextus but rather with the mainstream of Greek philosophy—that of reason itself as our guide. Arcesilaus is satisfied, and feels fulfilled, by always suspending, just because reason, his guide, keeps on telling him to suspend. Sextus suspends because in his life he follows not reason but appearances—the way things strike him. So Arcesilaus suspends, while thinking διαβεβαιωτικῶς that suspension is good (that is the source of his self-satisfaction), while Sextus suspends expressing thereby no opinion at all about whether what he is doing is good or bad. *He* claims self-satisfaction from the fact that he has no such opinion, but only suspends because that is what he feels is appropriate, given his experiences. That difference seems to me more fundamental than anything the two skeptics have in common. So it is a mistake, I think, to speak of "ancient skepticism" as a single thing—as if

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suspension. His suspensions from then on simply express how things appear to him. It then just keeps on appearing to him that suspension is the thing to do in the face of the balance of reasons, and he suspends following that appearance.

[32] "Motivation of Greek Skepticism," 10.

Pyrrhonian skepticism was in all major ways simply a revival and continuation of Academic skepticism under another name. Arcesilaus's skepticism is the expression of his Socratic commitment to living according to reason as our life's guide; Sextus's is the expression of a complete renunciation of reason altogether.