ACADEMICS FIGHTING ACADEMICS

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I

When I read Cicero’s *Lucullus* for the first time many years ago, I read it as a straightforward account of the epistemological controversy between the Stoics and the Academic sceptics. That is, after all, what Cicero promises, although he makes it clear that his own information comes from a late stage in the debate, when the positions of both schools had presumably evolved and shifted in response to objections of the other side. But Cicero explicitly distinguishes between several different positions within the sceptical Academy, and in the *Lucullus* he sets aside the most recent among them, that of Philo’s ‘Roman books’, in order to concentrate on the arguments of Arcesilaus and Carneades (*Luc. 12*). Antiochus, on the other hand, is introduced as an orthodox representative of the Stoic view, which he apparently adopted lock, stock and barrel as a ‘correction’ of the doctrines of the early Academy (*Ac. 1.35*). The somewhat petty dispute about Academic pedigrees reported in the *Varro* looked like a less important side issue that could be safely ignored if one was mainly interested in the philosophical arguments.

Over the last twenty years, however—thanks above all to the books by Glucke (1978) and Tarrant (1985)—the figures of Antiochus of Ascalon and Philo of Larissa began to take on more definite features, and I also realized that the doctrine of Philo’s Roman books—*pace* Cicero—was of great interest not just historically (which has been doubted), but also from a twentieth-century point of view. It appears that Philo was the first to formulate a modest conception of knowledge that can be compared to contemporary versions of fallibilism, dropping the requirement of certainty that has bedeviled so many epistemological debates both before and after his time. It is a great pity that the Roman books did not survive, not even in the summary version of the report that Cicero apparently gave in the lost *Catulus*. 
We cannot hope to recover Philo’s own arguments, but I think that the indications offered by Cicero about the main epistemological issue in the dispute with Antiochus, and about Philo’s previous position, allow us at least to make an educated guess at the reasoning behind Philo’s revolutionaly move. One factor that has so far received less attention than it deserves seems to me to be the fact that the Sosus- affair was a dispute among Academics—not just with respect to the tradition of their school, but also, I think, in terms of the epistemological arguments of both sides. Given Cicero’s emphasis on the novelty of the views expressed in Philo’s Roman books, all commentators have of course been careful to distinguish Philo’s Roman views from earlier versions of Academic scepticism. But most have also followed Cicero in taking Antiochus’ version of Stoic epistemology at face value—and this may actually be rather imprudent. Antiochus never became a member of the Stoa, and while he probably did get first hand information from his Stoic contemporaries in Athens (Mnesarchus and Dardanus, according to Cicero, Luc. 69), it is likely that his understanding of Stoicism was strongly influenced by his education as a member of the sceptical Academy. We may therefore expect him to rely on an Academic interpretation of Stoic doctrine, whether he realized it or not; and we should not assume without further ado that this was exactly the interpretation the Stoics themselves would have wished to defend.

Having raised some suspicions about Antiochus’ Stoic credentials, let me begin by listing the information Cicero provides in the Lucullus about the main point at issue between Philo and Antiochus.

1) In Luc. 18, the speaker for Antiochus briefly refers to Philo’s innovations. He mentions two objections: first, Philo is said to tell ‘manifest lies’, for which he had been taken to task by Catulus the father (i.e., in the lost first book); second, Antiochus showed that he (Philo) found himself in exactly the position that he feared: ‘... et aperte mentitur ut est reprehensus a patre Catulo, et ut docuit Antiochus in id ipsum se induit quod timebat’. The ‘manifest lie’ had been mentioned before (12): it consisted in denying that the Academias had ever held the view that was defended by Catulus the day before, namely (as we can safely assume) the claim that nothing can be known (ἀκατάληψια).

1 A note on translation: in this paper, I translate the Greek verb καταλαμφ-