REATIONS TO ARISTOTLE IN THE GREEK SCEPTICAL TRADITIONS

RICHARD BETT

I

Aristotle’s own attitude towards sceptical lines of thought is a complicated matter. The Academic and Pyrrhonian traditions that we think of as constituting Greek scepticism did not, of course, begin until after his time; but it is not hard to identify sceptical tendencies in a variety of philosophers as early as the Presocratic period.\(^1\) Clearly Aristotle himself is no sceptic. But to what extent, or in what areas of his philosophy, is he motivated by a perceived need to respond to actual or potential sceptical challenges? On this question scholars have differed widely in recent years.\(^2\)

My topic, however, is not Aristotle’s attitude towards scepticism, but the sceptics’ attitudes towards Aristotle. Whether or not some form of scepticism was ever an explicit and pressing concern for Aristotle, his philosophy is evidently a prime example of the kind of thing the sceptics, both Academic and Pyrrhonian, were eager to tear apart. Though by no means wholly dogmatic, in the contemporary sense of the term — for sifting through the (often conflicting) opinions of others is an important aspect of his method, and his conclusions are frequently tentative or highly nuanced or both — he nonetheless qualifies preeminently as a dogmatist (\textit{dogmatikos}) in the Pyrrhonists’ sense.\(^3\) It is obvious that his writings

\(^{1}\) For a recent discussion of this topic see R.J. Hankinson, \textit{The Sceptics} (London, 1995), ch.III, “Precurors”.

\(^{2}\) T.H. Irwin, \textit{Aristotle’s First Principles} (Oxford, 1988) argues that much of Aristotle’s philosophical strategy is dictated by concern over how to ward off sceptical worries. At the opposite extreme is Iakovos Vasilou, “Perception, Knowledge and the Sceptic in Aristotle”, \textit{Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy} XIV (1996), 83-131, who is disinclined to see scepticism as having anything to do with Aristotle’s approach. Occupying an intermediate position is Jonathan Barnes, “An Aristotelian Way with Scepticism”, in M. Matthen, ed., \textit{Aristotle Today} (Edmonton, 1987), 51-76. Barnes states that “it is reasonably clear that Aristotle was aware of the possibility of a sceptical challenge to knowledge, and that he had given some consideration to producing a Dogmatic answer to the challenge” (53); but he concedes that certain detailed responses to various forms of scepticism, which he constructs out of materials at the center of Aristotle’s philosophy, may never have been explicitly formulated by Aristotle himself. See also A.A. Long, “Aristotle and the History of Greek Scepticism”, in D.J. O’Meara, ed., \textit{Studies in Aristotle} (Washington, DC, 1981), 79-106, esp. sec.5.

\(^{3}\) The term \textit{dogmatikos} and the related verb \textit{dogmatizein} belong to the Pyrrhonian tradition rather than to the sceptical Academy. (They are pervasive in Sextus; for Aenesidemus’ use of them, see Photius \textit{Bibl.} 169b39, 170a17.) But the term nonetheless seems just as appropriate in discussing the sceptical Academics (as does the word “scepticism” itself, also strictly speaking a Pyrrhonian rather than an Academic term). Whatever differences there may have been between Academic and Pyrrhonian varieties of scepticism, both clearly set themselves in opposition to those philosophers
constantly evince beliefs about how things are; understanding the nature of the world we live in (including ourselves) is his aim, and he takes himself to have proceeded at least some distance in that direction. So one would think that anyone in the sceptics' very different business of avoiding beliefs about the way things are, and attacking the pretensions of those who profess them, would have found in Aristotle a thoroughly deserving target.

This expectation is not disappointed in the case of Sextus Empiricus, the only Greek sceptic of whom we have substantial surviving writings. Sextus refers to ideas of Aristotle, or of the Peripatetics in general, on logic, on perception, on physical matters, on the types of good, and on other subjects. Though Aristotle does not loom nearly as large, for Sextus, as do the Stoics, it is clear that Aristotle qualifies in his eyes as one of the major purveyors of dogmatic views whose difficulties are to be exposed, and about whose truth judgement is to be suspended. On the other hand, his treatment of Aristotle's ideas in these areas is often sketchy and superficial; and in some cases, at least, it looks as if his knowledge of Aristotle is not derived from Aristotle's own writings at all, but rather from handbooks containing summaries of Peripatetic doctrine. Although Aristotle is among those he feels the need to address, he was apparently either unable or unwilling to make any exhaustive study of Aristotle's views. This may seem surprising in view of the fact that a revived Aristotelianism, including a tradition of learned commentary on Aristotle's own works, flourished from the late first century until the early third century AD — that is, throughout the period within which Sextus can reasonably be thought to have lived; in these circumstances, it might have been expected both that Sextus would have considered it important to get Aristotle right (to avoid charges of misrepresentation from professed who claim to have discovered truths about the nature of things; and "dogmatists" is a convenient label for such philosophers.

4 As Sextus uses the term, "Peripatetic" generally includes Aristotle himself — though occasionally Sextus does single out other Peripatetics besides Aristotle. See Julia Annas, "Sextus Empiricus and the Peripatetics", *Elenchos* 13 (1992), 203-231, at 204.

5 This is documented by Julia Annas, "Sextus Empiricus and the Peripatetics". Annas does, however, argue that in some cases Sextus is using Aristotle's "exoteric" writings (of which we have only fragments and reports), and that occasionally — most notably in his treatment of place — it is plausible to suppose that he is using the "esoteric" works that are familiar to us (in the case of place, *Physics* IV.1-5).

6 On Sextus' dates see n.7 below. On Aristotelianism in this period see Paul Moraux, *Der Aristotelismus bei den Griechen*, 2 vol.s (Berlin, 1973, 1984); also H.B. Gottschalk, "Aristotelian philosophy in the Roman world from the time of Cicero to the end of the second century AD", *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II 36.2 (Berlin, 1987), 1079-1174, and R.W. Sharples, "Alexander of Aphrodisias: Scholasticism and Innovation", 1176-1243 in the same volume. Interest in Aristotle of course continued after this period; however, after Alexander of Aphrodisias (whose dates are roughly fixed by his appointment as a teacher of Aristotelian philosophy some time between 198 and 209) Aristotelianism becomes largely absorbed into neo-Platonism. But this development almost certainly postdates Sextus.