
It is a very difficult task to write a comprehensive account of ancient Scepticism. On the one hand, this is because there is in fact no such thing as ancient Scepticism as a unified philosophical movement. The term “ancient Scepticism” refers to the period of several centuries, during which the ideas of two sceptical schools—Pyrrhonism and Academic Scepticism—underwent modifications and developments that are not easily traceable. Moreover, the differences and mutual influence between the Pyrrhonists and the Academics are very complicated and in some important respects obscure. On the other hand, the ancient Sceptics’ views on what Scepticism is and to what it commits its adherents differ profoundly from modern understanding of philosophical scepticism, and any scholar of ancient Scepticism must try not to succumb to the temptation of viewing the ancient Sceptics exclusively in terms of our contemporary preoccupations.

Harald Thorsrud has successfully resisted such a temptation: “To see our predecessors’ views too narrowly in terms of our own … ultimately limits our current array of choices” (p. 15). There are two general considerations that motivate his interest in ancient Scepticism. The first concerns the deep and pervasive disagreement that persists among philosophers about almost every important issue, and the ancient Sceptics offer some important insights into the nature of philosophical disagreements.

Second, they have interesting things to say about our rationality. For instance, if Thorsrud’s account is right, the Pyrrhonian way of life does not include beliefs of any kind, and while such a life might not be acceptable to us, the Pyrrhonists' justification for it may tell us something insightful about what it means to live a normal human life.

As for the historical problems surrounding the ancient Sceptical schools and their similarities and differences, Thorsrud is duly cautious. Instead of trying to provide a unified account, he points to some family resemblances, which recur as central themes throughout the book. They include the common argumentative strategies (the practice of opposing arguments leading to the suspension of judgement), the use of dialectical method (relying on the proponent’s own views instead of arguing in propria persona), and the practicality of Scepticism (viewing Scepticism as a way of life and not as a theoretical construct). A proper understanding of the nature and scope of dialectical method is particularly important,
since the Sceptics' insistence on it might suggest an easy solution to two persistent objections to ancient Scepticism: the inconsistency charge (it is inconsistent to claim to know that knowledge is impossible or to believe that one should have no beliefs) and the inactivity (*apraxia*) charge (a human life devoid of beliefs would involve no action). For, if the Sceptics do not propound their own views but are simply drawing consequences from their opponents' positions, they are not subject to these charges. Thorsrud convincingly shows that such a solution will not do and that the use of dialectical method is not a necessary feature of ancient Scepticism, given the persistence with which the inconsistency and inactivity objections are brought forward against the Sceptics.

Thorsrud's account of the main protagonists, from Pyrrho to Sextus Empiricus, is balanced, philosophically astute, and historically accurate. It will provide a reader who is not an expert in ancient philosophy a clear picture of the main positions and arguments. On the other hand, specialists in ancient Scepticism will benefit from Thorsrud's discussions of issues that are in the center of current scholarly debates. Thus, in the chapter on Pyrrho and Timon (ch. 2), he discusses, among other things, the main dilemma that arises from the report on Pyrrho found in Eusebius's *Preparation for the Gospel* (or, to be precise, from Eusebius's quotation from Aristocles who reports what Timon says about Pyrrho): does Pyrrho hold the metaphysical thesis that things are indeterminate or the epistemological thesis that, due to our cognitive limitations, they are indeterminable? Thorsrud considers the epistemological reading "slightly more plausible" (p. 25) and shows how such a reading fits in with other central themes of Pyrrho's thought, such as his moral conventionalism, his taking a sceptical attitude, and tranquility.

Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to Arcesilaus and Carneades, the central figures of Academic Scepticism. Thorsrud argues, among other things, that there is a powerful objection against the dialectical interpretation of Arcesilaus: "It is odd for Arcesilaus to have bothered responding to the *apraxia* objections if he were only drawing consequences from the Stoic position" and concludes that "his response suggests that he is defending his own view: Arcesilaus himself thinks that we should suspend judgement" (p. 55). What about the consistency objection? To be consistent, Arcesilaus should suspend judgement about the very assumption that underlies his sceptical endeavour, that is, the Socratic project of following reason in searching for truth. Thorsrud argues that Arcesilaus's denial of the possibility of knowledge is best seen as a habitual rather than a fully rational attitude: having repeatedly shown that his interlocutors cannot claim that they have achieved knowledge, he simply feels inclined to expect that this will continue to be so in the future. Hence, Arcesilaus's assumptions are neither in conflict nor in accordance with reason; they are a-rational (p. 56). Even though such an account of Arcesilaus's position is not explicitly supported by the sources, it is attractive and promising. Thorsrud rejects the dialectical interpretation of Carneades as well. Moreover, as opposed to the majority of scholars, he argues for the probabilist or fallibilist interpretation of the notion of assent: "... Carneades does not completely sever the connection between persuasive impressions and the truth. He merely points out that persuasive impressions are fallible and that as far as we know they are all we have" (p. 78).