

# Richard Bett, ed., The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism

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**Richard Bett**, ed.

*The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism.*

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‘Ancient scepticism’ is a term that standardly encompasses two philosophical traditions stretching from the third century BCE to approximately the second century CE: Pyrrhonism, named after its eponymous founder Pyrrho of Elis (360–270 BCE), and Academic scepticism, a sceptical movement which arose in the Platonic Academy around 268 BCE, when Arcesilaus of Pitane (316/5–241/0) became its head. The positions and arguments of these two traditions were widely discussed and criticized in antiquity, and historians of philosophy sometimes argue that it was the rediscovery of ancient scepticism in the sixteenth century that shaped the course of modern philosophy. Some of their argumentative strategies still occupy an important place in contemporary debates in epistemology (a typical example are the Agrippan modes). This volume is designed to provide a comprehensive view on the main protagonists, the central issues of contention in recent scholarship, and the transformation of sceptical traditions beyond antiquity.

The *Companion* is divided in three parts. Six essays in the first part (‘Origins and Development’) discuss the main figures and periods. Mi-Kyoung Lee addresses the problem of the antecedents of scepticism prior to Pyrrho. She shows that, while many ideas and arguments characteristic of Hellenistic scepticism are found in earlier sources (most notably in Xenophanes, Democritus, Protagoras, Plato and Aristotle), they do not constitute a full-blown scepticism, and that it is only in the Hellenistic period that scepticism came to be seen as a viable position. Svavar Hrafn Svavarsson discusses the views of Pyrrho, an obscure founding father of Pyrrhonism, who is notoriously difficult to interpret, due to the scarcity and conflicting nature of testimonies. Svavarsson pays a special attention to the central piece of evidence for Pyrrho’s views, a passage from the Peripatetic philosopher Aristocles of Messene, which is usually read in two opposing ways, presenting Pyrrho either as an advocate of the metaphysical thesis of the indeterminacy of things, or as a sceptic who insists that we cannot decide how things really are. Svavarsson opts for a qualified version of the latter interpretation.

The contributions by Harald Thorsrud and Carlos Lévy deal with Academic scepticism. The development of the sceptical position in the Academy was prompted by Arcesilaus’ innovative reading of Plato—especially his Socratic dialogues—in which Socrates’ practice is presented as eliciting his interlocutor’s beliefs, in order to show that they are inconsistent and hence do not constitute knowledge. Thorsrud argues for a dialectical interpretation of Arcesilaus, insisting that Arcesilaus’ central theses, namely that nothing can be known and that we should suspend judgement, are modelled on

Socratic dialectic and do not represent his own position. The same can be said, with some qualifications, of Carneades of Cyrene (214–129/8), the other leading sceptical Academic.

After the period of the domination of Academic scepticism, Pyrrhonism is revived by Aenesidemus of Cnossos (probably in the first century BCE). Some scholars have recently argued that Aenesidemean scepticism is markedly different from later Pyrrhonism, represented by Sextus Empiricus (probably in the second century CE), inasmuch as the former aims at establishing negative conclusions of the form ‘ $x$  is not by nature  $F$ ’, while the latter insists that one should suspend judgment about whether  $x$  is by nature  $F$ . However, in his contribution R. J. Hankinson suggests that ‘Aenesidemus was not espousing an earlier, less consistently sceptical scepticism, even if he was perhaps less capable, at his earlier stage of terminological development, of expressing this clearly’ (113). Sextus’ works also abound in negative conclusions, so that it seems that they present two fundamentally different versions of scepticism. Pierre Pellegrin argues that while in some cases this can be explained as Sextus’ adherence to an earlier, allegedly Aenesidemean type of scepticism (e.g. when he insists that there is nothing that is by nature good, bad or indifferent), in other cases negative conclusions need not be seen as deviations from Sextus’ more usual practice of suspending judgment (e.g. when he discusses liberal arts).

This collection’s second part (‘Topics and Problems’) contains seven essays dealing with some of the central interpretive issues involved in ancient scepticism. Perhaps the most widely discussed problem in recent scholarship is the problem of belief. By insisting that we must suspend judgment about everything, the ancient sceptics seem to be more radical than their modern counterparts, who are focused mainly on knowledge. There are two questions that propose themselves in this connection: 1) Do the ancient sceptics want to claim that we should abandon all beliefs, or only beliefs of a certain kind? 2) Given that human action presupposes belief, how can ancient sceptics explain normal human action? Casey Perin discusses the first question, focusing on Arcesilaus and Sextus Empiricus. As for Arcesilaus, the problem is how he can claim that a person ought not to assent to anything, i.e. one ought to suspend judgment about everything, *and* at the same time assent to that very proposition. A possible solution is to distinguish between, on the one hand, assenting to (and so believing) a proposition, and on the other hand approving of it or just treating it as true; and then to insist that Arcesilaus approves of the proposal of universal suspension, and does not assent to it. As for Sextus, he claims that the sceptic does not have belief if it is taken as assent to some non-evident matter investigated by sciences, but that he does have belief if it is taken as mere acquiescence in something, and the problem is how to understand the latter. Perin offers a simple solution: ‘a non-dogmatic belief—the kind of belief that is compatible with scepticism—is simply a belief about how things appear to one to be’ (161). The problem of the sceptic’s action usually takes the form of the so-called inactivity (*apraxia*) objection, which says, roughly, that the sceptic, lacking beliefs, is either unable to perform recognizably human actions, or, if he does perform such actions, then he can be charged with inconsistency.

Katja Vogt shows that the sceptics' opponents might formulate six versions of the objection, and she discusses various sceptical strategies to meet them.

A further group of problems concerns the practical dimension of scepticism. Unlike modern scepticism, which is mainly a theoretical construction, ancient scepticism is first and foremost a practical stance—this applies especially to the Pyrrhonists—and this aspect of it is discussed in Richard Bett's contribution. Among other things, he discusses Sextus' conception of the goal of scepticism. According to Sextus, the goal is 'tranquillity in things involving opinion and moderate feeling in things that are inevitable'. An obvious question is how can the sceptics even want to pursue some goal if they suspend judgment about everything. According to Bett, there is nothing contradictory here: 'All we need understand Sextus as saying is that tranquility and moderate feeling are what the sceptics in fact seek; there is no suggestion that they or anyone else *ought* to seek these things, or that there is any justification in human nature for their doing so' (188). The remaining essays in this part discuss the difference between Pyrrhonian and Academic scepticism (Gisela Striker), the Pyrrhonian modes of suspension (Paul Woodruff), the relationship between Pyrrhonism and Hellenistic medical schools (James Allen), and the Pyrrhonists' attitude towards specialized sciences (Emidio Spinelli).

The third part ('Beyond Antiquity') contains two essays. Luciano Floridi surveys the reception of sceptical ideas since late antiquity to the sixteenth century, while Michael Williams discusses what is involved in Descartes' transformation of the sceptical tradition. He shows that, while Descartes' arguments in the first of his *Meditations* are exemplary of what he calls the standard model of sceptical stance, Pyrrhonian scepticism does not conform to this model. More importantly, Descartes' transformation of ancient scepticism concerns primarily his new conception of perceptual experience, presented in his dreaming argument, which is unconnected with commitment to the existence of the external world.

Ancient scepticism is a prolific area of research, especially in the last several decades, and this book will serve as a reliable introduction for all those who want to turn to original sources and study the ideas and arguments of ancient sceptics more carefully. As is usual with collections of this kind, care was taken to ensure that the essays are accessible to non-specialists. But they will also be very useful for specialists. For, while some contributions strengthen interpretations that have already been proposed, others offer fresh views which will probably become a focus of attention and controversy in future research. (Woodruff's analysis of the ten Aenesidemean modes or Williams's comparison of Sextus and Descartes may serve as clear examples.) In this respect, the editor's aim to provide 'a comprehensive picture of the field as it stands today' (9) is modest in comparison to what the *Companion* actually achieves.

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