Hellenistic skeptics developed arguments for the suspension of all judgments [epochê], with all of these arguments showing the uncertainty of philosophical and common beliefs. Discussion with other schools caused skeptics to develop some defensive arguments: against the apraxia charge, against inconsistency in skeptical philosophy, and concerning the self-refutation charge. The first type of argument (for epochê) was common to all ancient skeptics; however, the defensive strategies were divided: radical in the case of Pyrrhonians and moderate in the case of Academic skeptics. Presenting the defensive strategies, I will focus on the inconsistency and self-refutation issues. The apraxia issues are discussed in detail in a later chapter.

Skeptical Arguments for the Suspension of All Judgments

The first declared skeptic known in the European tradition was Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 360–270 BC). He was an enthusiast of Socrates, trained in dialectics, who took part in Alexander the Great’s expedition to India. After returning to Greece he settled in Elis and led his own school of philosophy. His student Timon wrote Pyrrho’s ideas and transferred them to Athens (Hankinson 1995: 52; Bett 2003: 1).

Pyrrho constructed an ontological argument for skepticism, showing the discrepancy between the world and the human mind: things in the world are indifferent, unstable, and indeterminate; therefore, our opinions are neither true nor false, and we should be without opinions [adoxastoi] (LS, 1F; Bett 2003:16). In other words, phenomena are fluent and complicated (the ontology of process), and human concepts are too simple to capture them. This discrepancy renders hopeless the successful predication of any property to things/phenomena. According to Pyrrho, a wise person lives without beliefs, says of every single thing that it “no more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not” (LS, 1F) and achieves peace of mind [ataraxia]. Inspired by his travel to India, Pyrrho applied the Buddhist logic of the quadrilemma: “Everything is real and is not real, both real and not real, neither real nor not real” (Kuzminski 2008: 56). If this is so, then no simple assertion is reasonable, and all judgments should be suspended.

Arcesilaus of Pitane (ca. 315–241 BC) and Carneades of Cirene (ca. 214–128 BC) are two skeptics from Plato’s Academy. Arcesilaus was the scholarch of Plato’s Academy when
Timon resided in Athens. Timon accused him of repeating Pyrrho’s ideas without mentioning his name. Arcesilaus referred to skeptical elements in Socrates’ and Plato’s teaching. Carneades was also scholarch of Plato’s Academy and a famous orator who delivered in Rome (155 BC) two speeches about justice. On the first day he praised justice, but the next day he refuted all his own arguments. It was a rhetorical show of using arguments pro and contra (Thorsrud 2009: 60).

During their argumentative disputes with the Stoics, Arcesilaus and Carneades formulated arguments against certainty (we can call them epistemological arguments for skepticism). Arcesilaus argued with Zeno of Citium against the criterion of truth as cataleptic sense perception (self-evident, certain, grasping reality in the same way a hand grasps things; Acad. 1.41), which is strikingly clear and “draws us into assent” (M 7.257). According to Arcesilaus, this kind of perception could not provide a guarantee of truth and could easily be mistaken for a false appearance (Acad. 2.40; M 7.154). Therefore, we cannot trust our perceptions, even our cataleptic perceptions, and “the wise person suspends judgment about everything” (M 7.155). The suspension of judgment, or epoche, was recommended by the Stoics themselves with regard to noncataleptic perceptions. The term epoche was coined in the heat of Arcesilaus’ dispute with the Stoics (later it will be a technical term and a sign of recognition for ancient skeptics). Arcesilaus invokes this term to say that epoche should be applied to all judgments (PH 1.232) and “thought that we shouldn’t assert or affirm anything, or approve it with assent: we should always curb our rashness and restrain ourselves from any slip” (Acad. 1.45).

Carneades continued to argue against the Stoic criterion of truth as cataleptic perception (during his dispute with Chrysippus). He pointed to objects that are difficult to distinguish (eggs, twins, pillars), dreams and madness. Cicero reports, “I recognize, after all, that my impressions misrepresent the oar and show several colours on the pigeon’s neck, though there isn’t more than one” (Acad. 2.79). The sun seems to be smaller than Earth, and a large ship seems very little when viewed from a distance (Acad. 2.82). Later, Sextus Empiricus gave a similar report:

The same boat appears from a distance small and stationary, but close at hand large and in motion. […] The same oar appears bent in water but straight when out of it. […] Doves’ necks appear different in colour depending on the different ways they turn them.

(PH 1.118–1.120)

Carneades concluded that infallible cataleptic perception is impossible to find. Even under the best conditions for observation, we have no guarantee that we assent to appearance “that cannot be false” (Acad. 2.58). Thus, a wise person suspends judgment about everything.

Aenesidemus of Knossos (1st century BC), probably a member of the skeptical Academy who founded the Neo-Pyrrhonian school at Alexandria, is likely the author of the Ten Modes, the list of skeptical arguments against the credibility of perceptual beliefs (M 7.345; DL 9.78). These arguments were presented by Sextus Empiricus (PH 1.36–1.163), Diogenes Laertius (DL 9.78–88), Philo of Alexandria (On Drunkenness 169–202) and others. Aenesidemus assumes that the same thing cannot both have and not have the same property at the same time. The argumentative strategy is simple: to show many examples of conflicting impressions (a situation when the same thing appears to have a property and appears to not have the property, for instance, in different circumstances). Two contradictory impressions cannot be veridical; at least one is false, but we have the problem of judging them.
The first mode, following Sextus’ *Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes (Outlines of Pyrrhonism)* concerns the problem of how to judge between human and animal impressions. The second mode is related to similar differences among humans. The third mode notes the differences between particular senses (an example: the same painting can present recesses to the eye while presenting smoothness to touch; Bailey 2002: 132). The problem also arises that objects can have qualities that are inaccessible to any of our senses. The fourth mode indicates that our perception depends on circumstances; for instance, “the same honey appears sweet to me, but bitter to people with jaundice” (*PH* 1.101), or

the same wine appears sour to people who have just eaten dates or figs, but it seems to be sweet to people who have consumed nuts or chickpeas. And the bathhouse vestibule warms people entering from outside but chills people leaving if they spend any time there.

(*PH* 1.110)

The fifth mode is related to distance, which influences the way we see objects. “The same tower appears from a distance round, but from close at hand square” (*PH* 1.118). The sixth mode concerns different “admixtures” that impact the reception of stimuli (“the same sound appears different in open places and in narrow winding places”; *PH* 1.126). The seventh mode notes the dependence of the qualities of things on their quantities; for example, “grains of sand scattered apart from one another appear rough, but when combined in a heap affect our senses smoothly” (*PH* 1.130). These modes show that conflicting impressions exist and that we have no criterion by which to judge between them when we try to fix our beliefs about external objects.

The eighth mode is slightly more general and is concerned with the relativity of observed objects to the subject judging and to other objects. The ninth mode refers to the notion that values are dependent on the frequency of objects. The tenth mode shows that laws and religious beliefs are also dependent on time and place. The plurality of laws and religions supports the thesis that the world appears in many different ways but that we have no criterion by which to isolate true impressions. Therefore, Aenesidemus concludes that one cannot say how external objects are and that one should suspend all judgments about them (*PH* 1.163). For more on the Ten Modes, see Annas and Barnes (1985).

Agrippa’s Five Modes was another list of skeptical arguments (*PH* 1.164–177; DL 9.88–89). Agrippa, a mysterious figure from the first century, living between Aenesidemus and Sextus, listed five arguments for skepticism: the disagreement among ordinary people and philosophers (the problem of which opinion is true), the regression *ad infinitum* in the process of justification (any reason needs a further proof), the relativity of sense perceptions (the problem of which appearance is true), the groundlessness of assumptions (dogmatism is unacceptable), and the circularity in the process of justification (*M* 7.341; *PH* 1.164). Aenesidemus’ Ten Modes are summarized in the third Agrippean mode. The third and first modes are the starting point: the relativity of perceptual beliefs and the disagreement between people require starting the process of justification if we wish to assent to anything as true.

The second mode is original compared to previous skeptical modes. It is related to Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* (Barnes 1990: 121) and introduces the concept of infinite regress: “what is brought forward as a source of conviction for the matter proposed itself needs another such source, which itself needs another, and so *ad infinitum*, so that we have no point from which to begin to establish anything” (*PH* 1.166). This mode points to an impossibility of success in any process of justification: every demonstration depends
on various assumptions; therefore, the validity of each assumption must be demonstrated
(as must the validity of the inference). These demonstrations would require further
demonstrations; thus, the demonstration process would stretch to infinity. The fourth and
fifth modes show that this regress allows no escape. An assumption taken for granted
without demonstration is unworthy of credence, and circular reasoning cannot establish a
connection with reality.

The second, fourth and fifth modes constitute a trilemma. In seeking to justify a thesis,
we are left with three options, none of which is acceptable: proceeding *ad infinitum*,
adopting groundless assumptions or falling into circular reasoning. The trilemma is a
specific kind of argumentation for the impossibility of efficient justification. When we
combine it with the relativity of perception and the disagreement between people, the
reasonable acceptance of any opinion appears to be impossible. *Epochê* is the only rea-
sonable recommendation.

Presenting the Ten Modes and the Five Modes, Sextus Empiricus suggests an inability
to see any reason for preferring any beliefs and that the “mind is paralysed because it is
being pulled equally strongly in two opposite directions at the same time” (Bailey 2002:
129). One option may usually appear more persuasive than the other. However, for
Sextus, only absolute certainty could decide in favor of one side. For him, more or less
uncertainty is unimportant.

Sextus Empiricus (ca. 160–210 CE) was a Greek physician, a member of the empirical
school of medicine, living probably in Rome or Alexandria (Nerczuk 2010: 8). His pre-
served numerous works are the main source of information about ancient skepticism. He
adds to the earlier modes the argument against any criterion of truth and the argument
against any valid demonstration. These arguments are based on the structure of Agrippa’s
trilemma, which makes the rational justification of any criterion of truth impossible. “If
there is a criterion, either it has been judged or it is unjudged, and we reach one of two
conclusions—either infinite regress or that something is said, absurdly, to be its own cri-
terion” (M 7.441).

Additionally, Sextus formulates his own argument against any valid demonstration
(*Argument Against Demonstration, AAD*). The first reason is that “the premises of the
demonstration, whichever side they belong to, are untrustworthy and insecure” (M 8.356).
The second reason is that conclusiveness is controversial (the connection between premises
and a conclusion; *PH* 2.146). The third reason is that demonstration does not reveal any-
thing new about the world and is based on empirically observed correlations (*PH* 2.196).
Thus, no valid demonstration can resolve uncertainty.

After presenting these general arguments, Sextus discusses the main fields of human
knowledge (*Against the Logicians, Against the Ethicists, and Against the Physicists*) and
the specialized sciences (*Against the Grammarians, Against the Rhetoricians, Against the
Geometers, Against the Arithmeticians, Against the Astrologers, and Against the Musi-
cians*), arguing in a similar manner for no certainty and no rational basis to prefer one thesis
over another.

The skeptical conclusion and the recommendation of *epochê* are problematic to everyone
who believes in human cognitive capacities, desires to know the truth and is ready to con-
continue putting forth the effort to pursue the cognitive exploration of the world. Both the
Epicureans and the Stoics developed the *apraxia* charge against the skeptics (see Chapter
15), arguing that skepticism, even if irresistible, leads to an impossibility of action and life;
thus, this philosophy is falsified by everyday life.

In response, the Academic skeptics developed a defensive argumentative strategy: skep-
ticism is a theory, and action is possible without any theory. According to Arcesilaus,
skeptics can guide their actions by the reasonable [eulogon] (M 7.158); according to Carneades, action can be based on credible [pithanon] appearances (M 7.166). Credibility has a hierarchy: 1) credibility that consists only in the fact that something appears to be true in an evident manner; 2) credibility based on obviousness and the coherence between different appearances; and 3) credibility based on obviousness, coherence, and confirmation through scrutiny and further examination (M 7.184).

Neo-Pyrrhonian skeptics developed a more radical answer to the apraxia charge, without reference to reasons or credibility. Sextus writes that to act in the skeptical manner is to passively receive stimuli and react to them, to follow appearances, and to rely on “guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings [hunger conducts us to food and thirst to drink], handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise” (PH 1.23–24). According to Sextus, a skeptic lives in an animal-like manner; the action of skeptics is based on habit. Let us observe how this strategy works in the case of a sophisticated activity such as doing philosophy.

### Defensive Arguments Against the Inconsistency Charge

The inconsistency charge was embedded into skepticism as a philosophy since its beginning. Pyrrho faced the allegation that he did not want to judge anything while at the same time claiming to know how to find peace and happiness. He responded by narrating the story of Apelles of Kos, a court painter of Alexander the Great. Apelles could not paint a horse’s foam and was so upset that he flung at the picture a sponge; to his astonishment, the mark of the sponge produced the effect of foam on the horse’s muzzle (PH 1.28). Therefore, his answer was that his skepticism was a lucky discovery that happened to him and that he wished to share with others. It was not a sufficient answer if, after the lucky discovery, he believed that living without beliefs was a good way of life. In addition, if he did not believe, the status of his recommendation of this way of life was unclear.

Academic skeptics continued to argue against the inconsistency charge. Cicero reports that “Arcesilaus used to deny that anything could be known, not even the residual claim Socrates had allowed himself, i.e., the knowledge that he didn’t know anything...he thought that we shouldn’t assert or affirm anything, or approve it with assent” (Acad. 1.45). However, this passage contains two theses: nothing can be known and all judgments should be suspended. If they express Arcesilaus’ view, then how could they be reconciled with the principle of epoché?

The simplest way of avoiding the allegation of inconsistency is the dialectical interpretation, according to which skepticism is not a philosophical doctrine but a method of argumentation, leading to the suspension of judgment. In this interpretation, Arcesilaus adopts the hypothetical assumptions of Stoicism (its conception of knowledge, beliefs, and logical principles), then shows a contradiction within it and recommends the suspension of judgment. However, he does not accept either assumptions or conclusions. In addition, as he does not accept any theses, they a fortiori cannot be inconsistent. Additionally, the theory of rational action [eulogon] can be taken as a pure possibility of acting without any beliefs.

Arguments against the dialectical interpretation exist. Arcesilaus begins with the assumptions of Stoicism but only to refine them: he rejects the criterion of truth, he elevates the standards for rational beliefs, he adjusts them to the requirements of skepticism, and he creates his own norms for rationality and assent, with his standards of assent being higher than those of Stoicism. Additionally, if Arcesilaus does not hold any views, it is unclear why, and in what sense, he recommends epoché.
Also problematic is in what sense Carneades’ words concerning epochê and credibility [pithanon] represent his own view. Defending the consistency of his own skepticism, Carneades spoke about two kinds of assent [synkatathesis]. Cicero expressed them as proper assent and approval (Acad. 2.104). Proper assent is the acceptance of something as true, while approval is an action based on information that is regarded as though it is true while not accepted as true (Bett 1990: 14; Brittan 2006: xxvii). Such a reading of Carneades was made by his pupil Clitomachus. Plato’s Academy had also an alternative reading. According to Philo of Larissa, approval is a kind of acceptance of something as true, an assent without certainty (Acad. 2.78). The approval in Philo’s reading can be described as weaker assent or weak assertion, rational but uncertain (in Clitomachus’ reading, approval is involuntary and irrational). Regardless, the information that is pithanon deserves approval only.

Clitomachus’ reading fits the dialectical interpretation, which denies holding any beliefs to Carneades. Philo’s reading fits the nondialectical interpretation and attributes to Carneades his own, even if uncertain, beliefs. Importantly, if Carneades’ skepticism is merely a method, it relies on certain theoretical assumptions: standards of assent, rules of inference, empirical data, etc. These hidden assumptions are inconsistent with the principle of epochê.

When we observe the weaknesses of the dialectical interpretation, Philo’s interpretation seems to be the only one that avoids inconsistency. From Philo’s perspective, Carneades’ philosophy (as reported by Clitomachus, Cicero or Sextus Empiricus) becomes internally consistent. Carneades can hold beliefs with weak assent and his philosophy consists of rational beliefs without certainty. Thus, suspending strong assertion can be combined with weak assertion in life and in philosophy (on the grounds of rational credibility), and this kind of skepticism can be applied to the rational conduct of action and fits the philosophical practice in the skeptical Academy, as described in the sources. Philo seems to make the original distinction between certainty and truth and to invent the assent without certainty. Philo’s interpretation can be described as nondialectical and quasi-fallibilist (Thorsrud 2009: 83); I develop this kind of interpretation in Ziemińska (2015).

However, this way of reading Carneades was accused of betraying skepticism. Sextus Empiricus classifies Carneades not as a skeptic but as a negative dogmatic who assents to the thesis that truth is unknowable (PH 1.3, 1.226). According to Cicero and Clitomachus, Carneades said that a skeptic cannot accept the thesis that “nothing is apprehensible” because such a statement implies a contradiction or an unjustified exception (Acad. 2.28). However, Sextus’ accusation fits Philo’s reading. Additionally, Aenesidemus attacked the Academics for allowing weak assent and rational credibility (LS, 71C).

To avoid such an accusation, Sextus Empiricus developed a radical Pyrrhonian answer to the inconsistency charge. According to him, skepticism is not a theory but a way of life, specifically, the disposition to/habit of suspending judgments. According to Sextus, as a cure for the disease of dogmatism, skeptical arguments and conclusions have only an instrumental value. Even the principle of the suspension of judgment [epochê] is not a belief. According to Hankinson (1995), the principle of the suspension of judgment is a state of mind causally produced by equipollent arguments and described as a lack of judgment. Additionally, the education of skeptical apprentices consists of promoting the skeptical attitude, not a set of beliefs. Hankinson reconstructs skeptical practice as a causal chain independent of will, described from the perspective of an external observer. Appearances are impulses, and a series of impulses produces habits and dispositions.

Indeed, at the beginning of the Outlines of Skepticism, Sextus writes that he, as the author, would not consider any sentence in the book as true (PH 1.4). These statements
serve only to express what appears to the author, reporting his sensations and feelings (PH 1.15). Skeptics are like babies who cry to express the feeling of pain. Their speech acts are expressive (in which the illocutionary force expresses the speaker’s feelings), not assertive (in which the illocutionary force asserts the truth). For instance, when Sextus argues against the possibility of any criterion of truth and presents the conclusion that a criterion of truth is impossible to establish, he does not take this conclusion as true but takes the conclusion as an expression of his personal feeling, suspending any judgment about it (PH 2.79).

Importantly, however—insofar as skepticism is only an expression, a habit, a disposition or a therapy—it ceases to be a rational project. Here, consistency is achieved at the price of rationality. The causal or therapeutic reading is a good argumentative strategy to effectively avoid inconsistency. The lack of beliefs makes it impossible to accuse the skeptic of inconsistency because such an accusation would be a categorical error: if one has no beliefs, then one cannot be inconsistent (Thorsrud 2009).

However, when we think about skepticism as a philosophy with strict rational norms supported by strict arguments, such a reading is puzzling. Sextus suggests that skeptical arguments can be used instrumentally as therapeutic means or treated as appearances in an expressive mode. However, such arguments are effective only for people in a rational mood. They are not rhetorical tricks or propaganda techniques but “unadorned chains of thought” (Bailey 1990: 38). However, when skeptical arguments are interpreted as rationalistic arguments (“in accordance with the dogmatist’s rationalistic code”; Bailey 1990: 38), they lead to self-refutation.

**Defensive Arguments Concerning the Self-Refutation Charge**

The reading of Sextan skepticism as a two-stage process better clarifies matters. According to Bailey (1990; 2002), we should distinguish the developing from the mature Pyrrhonian skeptic. A developing skeptic holds beliefs, considers skeptical arguments to be persuasive, searches for truth in a rational manner, and suspends judgments for rational reasons. Later, however, a developing skeptic notes that skeptical arguments are also uncertain and that global skepticism is self-refuting. This acknowledgment is the final stage of skeptical development, after which the skeptic is mature.

A mature skeptic does not hold any beliefs and has no rational norms but suspends judgment out of habit. This habit is the source of the skeptic’s activity and applied methods. At this stage, arguments are used instrumentally as an effective means of anti-dogmatic therapy.

Arguments play a dual role in the two-stage process. A developing skeptic “is firmly committed to the objective validity of the principles of reasoning that underlie the tropes devised by Agrippa and Aenesidemus” (Bailey 1990: 42), which can explain their suspension of judgment. Mature skeptics do not believe in the rational force of their arguments but use them instrumentally to evoke the suspension of judgments in other people.

Such a reading is easy for a mature skeptic (it takes flight from any rational charge; Ziemińska 2013; 71), but it does not cancel the problem in the position of a developing skeptic. During the development process, a skeptic accepts some rational norms and even makes the existing norms stronger. A developing skeptic must undergo the process of accepting the self-refutation of his own position to become a mature skeptic. Let us observe how the process is described at the end of Against the Logicians in the case of the argument against all demonstrations (Argument Against Demonstrations, AAD).

Arguing against demonstrations, Sextus points to the lack of reliable assumptions (as we have no criterion of truth), the circularity between premises and conclusions, and the
infinite regress in justifying the correctness of demonstration (M 8.424–452). This series of arguments can be treated as the AAD.

The Stoics formulated a counterargument against the AAD that is important to the question of the consistency of Sextus’ position.

The argument against demonstration either is a demonstration or is not a demonstration; and if it is not a demonstration, it is untrustworthy, while if it is a demonstration, there is demonstration.

(M 8.465)

Sextus typically refuses to accept the conclusion of his own argument by limiting his statements to the reporting of appearances (“that the argument against demonstration is merely persuasive, and that for the moment it persuades them and induces assent”; M 8.473). Mark McPherran (1987: 301) thinks this step is futile, while Luca Castagnoli (2010: 285) believes this step is effective (for more, see Ziemińska 2013).

In the final step of the defense, Sextus refers to the metaphors of purgative herbs and the ladder. McPherran believes this final stage is an acceptance of self-refutation, while Castagnoli considers it to be the final defense against the charge of self-refutation, as self-refutation concerns only the dogmatic interpretation of skeptical theses.

Just as purgatives after driving the fluids out of bodies eliminate themselves as well, so too the argument against demonstration, after doing away with all demonstration, can cancel itself as well. And again, just as it is not impossible for the person who has climbed to a high place by a ladder to knock over the ladder with his foot after his climb, so it is not unlikely that the skeptic too, having got to the accomplishment of his task by a sort of step-ladder—the argument showing that there is not demonstration—should do away with this argument.

(M 8.480–481)

This metaphor is supposed to show that the demonstration against demonstrations is natural. Proponents of the acceptance of self-refutation argue that mature skeptics can accept self-refutation because they have no reason to treat self-refutation as an error. McPherran (1987: 290) writes that Sextan skepticism tends to “accept—and even embrace—the charge of self-refutation.” Additionally, according to Hankinson, Pyrrhonists happily embraced self-refutation (Hankinson 1995: 18); Sextus was “perfectly happy about the self-refuting (or as Sextus prefers to say, self-cancelling) nature of his expressions” (Hankinson 1995: 299).

Indeed, Sextus writes that the skeptic’s words cancel themselves out and that this is not a problem but simply a consequence of the skeptical position. Skeptical utterances resemble statements such as “Everything is false” or “Nothing is true” (PH 1.14; M 7.399; M 8.55), which are models of self-refutation in Plato’s Theaetetus. Sextus repeatedly compares words uttered by skeptics to purgatives that eliminate themselves. Skeptical utterances “can be destroyed by themselves, being cancelled along with what they are applied to, just as purgative drugs” (PH 1.126; cf. DL 9.76).

Let us focus on the metaphor of the ladder. The metaphor is of the development of a skeptic apprentice. A developing skeptic climbs the rungs of the ladder by accepting increasingly more skeletal arguments. At the top of the ladder, the skeptic performs the act of self-reflection and notices that his own skeptical arguments are no better than others. A real crisis arrives when the developing skeptic reaches the argument against all
rational arguments. Skeptical rational philosophy considers arguments to be the crown of philosophy, and skeptics instantly notice that this skeptical argument is self-refuting. When they realize it, they have no other choice but to cast off the entire set of skeptical arguments. This moment of crisis marks the final stage of the skeptical maturation process: only after rejecting their own arguments can they become a consistent skeptic who no longer hold any beliefs.

Even if the charge of inconsistency fails to reach the mature skeptic, it cannot be avoided with respect to the maturation process insofar as it is rationally construed. To climb the rungs of the skeptical ladder, one must accept arguments and their assumptions, inferential rules and conclusions. During the maturation process of the skeptic, the entire series of arguments was employed.

Sextus presents Aenesidemus’ Ten Modes as a rational means of suspending all judgments. However, if we treat these arguments as rational, we must accept their premises and conclusions. At the same time, the act of accepting the _epoche_ thesis is incompatible with its content. When Agrippa’s five tropes are employed to justify the thesis that no thesis can be rationally justified, a pragmatic inconsistency occurs between the content of this thesis and the act of accepting it by a developing skeptic. Similarly, when a developing skeptic is persuaded by Sextus’ argument that no criterion of truth can be rationally justified, the act of accepting this argument as rational contradicts its very conclusion.

The casting off of the ladder is a symbol of transition in the skeptical position—at this moment, developing skeptics cease to respect their own beliefs and deliver a dramatic farewell to the pursuit of the truth. Afterward, they become mature skeptics, who achieve consistency but only at the expense of losing the rational grounds of their positions.

Mature skeptics, who have cast off the skeptical ladder and no longer hold any beliefs, need not develop a defensive response to the self-refutation of their theses, and developing skeptics have no means of avoiding self-refutation. Self-refutation happens to developing skeptics and is not a danger for mature skeptics. The latter avoid it by asserting nothing (but a problem arises as to whether someone can assert nothing and do philosophy).

Self-refutation is neither falsification nor a contradiction between two explicit statements. Rather, it is a situation in which “the person who states that _p_ ends up admitting that not-_p_ in the act, or as a consequence of, stating that _p_” (Castagnoli 2010: 173). It happens in a speech act in which the content contradicts the act’s own implicit assumptions. Every act of assertion implies that the asserted content is taken as true. When I say that nothing is true, this act of assertion contradicts its own content: I take as true that nothing is true. The statement is a contradiction between the explicit and implicit content, hidden in the act of assertion. However, we do not know which content is false; thus, no content is falsified. The contradiction compels only the speaker to distance themselves from the act of assertion. Sextus backs the assertion based on his conclusions, leaving readers confused. Certainty is destroyed, but nothing is asserted. The problem is skeptical identity.

As expressed in his arguments, Sextan radical skepticism can be verbalized as “No thesis is rationally preferable to its own negation.” (Bailey 2002: 135) Nobody can assert it without falling into self-refutation, as pragmatic inconsistency. In this sense, the skeptically expressed “thesis” is inconsistent, and perhaps to avoid this inconsistency, ancient Pyrrhonians withdrew all assertions. Through this action, they withdrew from rational discussion. However, the set of arguments used with conviction as an intellectual obligation for every rational subject by developing skeptics and used instrumentally as therapy by mature skeptics remains as the treasure of rational philosophy.
Pyrrhonian and Academic Strategies—What Is the Difference?

The difference between Pyrrhonian and Academic strategies concerns the defensive strategy. The main problem for ancient skepticism was the apraxia charge. Academic skeptics found a resolution to the problem in the distinction between theory and practice, assuming that skepticism was a theory and that practice was possible without theory. They developed the theory of credibility and the idea of weak assent as a theoretical description of our human practice without certainty. However, this resolution exposed them to the accusation of either inconsistency (Clitomachus’ reading) or betraying skepticism (Philo’s reading).

The Neo-Pyrrhonists rejected the Academic strategy of weak assertion and developed the radical strategy of no assertion: the strategy of action and philosophy without belief. Skepticism is no longer a theory different from action; rather, skepticism is a way of life. This radical strategy of no assertion was incompatible with rational norms. The only rescue was to leave rational philosophy and to declare that all speech acts by skeptics are expressive. Some of our beliefs may be based on animal faith, and in local contexts, we can act instrumentally, such as an attorney who develops arguments for the innocence of his client (such local activity is based on many other beliefs accepted as true). However, the Pyrrhonian strategy involved the entirety of life, including philosophy without any assertion. After its implementation, Pyrrhonism split into two stages: developing and mature. The first ends with self-refutation; the second lacks rational norms. This taking flight from rationality seems to be a pure argumentative strategy to avoid inconsistency. The strategy stands in contrast to skeptical arguments that seem to be the best product of rational thinking.

Presently, the most acceptable version of ancient skepticism, with the best defensive strategy, seems to be the Carneadean skepticism in Philo’s reading, which is moderate and rational, a kind of quasi-fallibilism.

References


Further Reading