Academic Scepticism, Imitation Mechanisms, and the Homogenization of Cultures Through Technology

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the philosophical foundations of Academic Skepticism and connects them to contemporary models of social imitation and cultural convergence. Drawing on primary texts from Cicero and Sextus Empiricus as well as modern secondary sources such as Frede, Vogt, and Girard, the analysis focuses on the Academic denial of epistemic certainty and the claim that value—especially moral or aesthetic value—is not inherent in nature but emerges from appearance, opinion, and consensus. The Skeptics' doctrine of suspension of judgment, particularly Carneades' notion of the *pithanon* or "convincing impression," anticipates present-day theories of mimetic desire and imitation-based equilibrium formation. These frameworks suggest that value is not discovered but circulated, not grounded in truth but reinforced by collective behavior. The paper argues that technological globalization and networked information flows have created a new mimetic field in which visibility and imitation drive cultural homogenization. Through this synthesis of ancient skepticism and modern theory, the work explores how the Academic method offers an interpretive lens for understanding the social construction—and dissolution—of pluralistic value systems in the digital age.

Introduction

The ancient Academic Skeptics, beginning with Arcesilaus in the third century BCE and later systematized by Carneades, offered a philosophical challenge that remains deeply relevant to contemporary thought. Their core claim is that certainty is unattainable, and therefore, one ought to suspend judgment, undermine knowledge claims in physics, logic, and any pretense of moral or ethical realism. If "good" cannot be known, they argued, then it cannot be affirmed as inherent in nature. What counts as good, just, or natural, therefore, must instead be grounded in consensus, appearance, or habit. As Cicero summarizes in the *Academica*, truth is "submerged in an abyss, with everything in the grip of opinions and conventions" (Long & Sedley, 68B). In this formulation, value becomes historically contingent and socially negotiated, not metaphysically discovered.

This ancient insight anticipates key strands of modern theory. Contemporary thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, and René Girard have each emphasized the instability and social contingency of knowledge and value. For Girard, in particular, desire is never original but always imitated; we want what others appear to want, and our sense of value emerges from a process of mimetic reinforcement. In a similar vein, imitation-based models in cultural evolution (Boyd and Richerson, 1985) and mathematical economics (Lasry and Lions, 2007) formalize the idea that individual agents make decisions based on the observed behavior of others, not on any direct access to underlying truths. In these models, value emerges from the distribution of behavior, not from first principles.

The convergence between ancient skepticism and these modern frameworks is more than thematic. Both deny that human beings possess a reliable criterion of truth, and both maintain that practical action must proceed on the basis of appearances or prob-

abilistic cues rather than metaphysical certainty. Carneades' concept of the *pithanon*: the convincing or persuasive impression, serves as an early analogue to Bayesian updating, mimetic convergence, or Nash equilibria in games of incomplete information. As Frede (1984) explains, the Academic Skeptic "assents to what is persuasive in a non-committal way," recognizing the necessity of acting while preserving epistemic humility.

This paper argues that the Academic Skeptics' rejection of inherent value provides a critical lens for interpreting how value is constructed, transmitted, and flattened in modern cultural environments. Drawing on theories of mimetic desire, Mean Field Game modeling, and global information flows, it explores how ancient skepticism can explain the homogenization of aesthetics, norms, and practices in an increasingly networked world. Where once cultures evolved in relative isolation, modern technologies have created a hyper-visible mimetic field in which belief, preference, and even identity are shaped less by locality or tradition than by algorithmically mediated exposure and social reinforcement.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section I reconstructs the epistemology and ethics of the Academic Skeptics, with particular focus on Arcesilaus and Carneades. Section II explores mimetic desire and distributed belief formation in modern theory. Section III considers the consequences of these frameworks for understanding contemporary cultural homogenization. The conclusion reflects on how Academic Skepticism illuminates both the construction and erosion of pluralistic value in the age of imitation.

Academic Skepticism: Belief, Knowledge, and Value

Academic Skepticism, as developed by Arcesilaus and later by Carneades, emerged from within the Platonic tradition but marked a significant departure from its metaphysical ambitions. Rather than advancing a positive account of knowledge, the Academics sought to dismantle the epistemic pretensions of their rivals, particularly the Stoics, by demonstrating the inadequacy of any criterion for certain knowledge. This shift did not constitute a new dogma but a methodological commitment to suspension of judgment (*epoché*). As Cicero records, Arcesilaus "drew a veil of darkness" over Zeno's doctrines, not by offering alternatives, but by showing that for every affirmative claim, an equally plausible counterclaim could be made (Long & Sedley, 68A, 68F). The result was a form of dialectical practice designed not to discover truth but to expose its unavailability.

The epistemological core of Academic Skepticism rests on the critique of the *phantasia kataleptikē*, the so-called "cognitive impression" that the Stoics claimed could reliably distinguish true from false perceptions. Carneades attacked this notion with his famous argument that for any supposedly clear and distinct impression, a deceptive but indistinguishable one could be conceived. Thus, the skeptic denies that any impression can serve as a secure foundation for knowledge. In its place, Carneades introduced the concept of the *pithanon*, the persuasive or convincing impression, as a practical guide to action in the absence of epistemic certainty (Long & Sedley, 69A–C). This model shifts the focus from truth to plausibility: action proceeds not because one knows, but because something seems sufficiently reliable.

Frede (1984) clarifies that the skeptic does not assent in the ordinary sense; rather, he engages in what might be called "weak assent," a form of cognitive orientation that allows for decision-making without belief. In other words, the skeptic "assents to

what is persuasive in a non-committal way," operating in a space where knowledge is suspended but appearances remain. This position is echoed by Vogt (2010), who emphasizes that for Academic Skeptics, living according to appearances—*kata phainomena*—does not entail affirming those appearances as true, but simply responding to them as they seem. The result is a posture of practical rationality without epistemic commitment.

This rejection of knowledge extends naturally to ethics. If no impression can be known to correspond to reality, then no moral judgment, whether about justice, virtue, or the good, can be grounded in anything more than social custom, rhetorical persuasion, or habitual response. As Burnyeat (1983) observes, the Academic position does not undermine ethical life but reorients it: values are no longer justified by nature or reason, but by their coherence within a given social context. Carneades' famous speeches on justice (as reported by Cicero) illustrate this strategy: he defends and then critiques justice in successive arguments, showing that even our most sacred values are subject to dispute when viewed without dogmatic lenses.

This ethical model, grounded in plausibility rather than truth, offers an early account of normativity as emergent and local rather than universal and metaphysical. The skeptic neither affirms nor denies moral claims but treats them as functional products of particular historical and rhetorical conditions. In this way, Academic Skepticism avoids both relativism and realism: it neither asserts that all values are equal nor that some are inherently true, but instead holds that values appear persuasive within a given matrix of appearances, habits, and expectations. As Frede and Vogt both note, this enables a fully human form of life guided by coherence, probability, and reflection rather than by metaphysical authority. In addition to undermining the Stoic criterion of cognitive impressions, the Academic Skeptics emphasized the socially mediated nature of judgment. As Cicero records in his portrayal of Carneades, judgment arises not merely from internal conviction, but from a process of deliberation and mutual corroboration. The Academics liken this epistemic process to judicial inquiry or public examination: "we meticulously examine each impression in the concurrence, in the way that happens at government assemblies, when the people cross-examine every candidate for political office or the judiciary" (Long & Sedley, 69C). This analogy is no mere rhetorical flourish; it reveals a fundamental philosophical commitment to the idea that plausibility is not self-evident but emerges through collective vetting and context-sensitive reasoning.

Carneades held that impressions must be evaluated not in isolation, but as part of a matrix of appearances, witnesses, and conditions. As Cicero continues, "in everyday life when we are investigating a small matter we question a single witness, but in the case of a larger one several, and in a still more crucial matter we cross-question each of the witnesses from the mutual corroboration provided by the others" (Long & Sedley, 69C). This practice anticipates modern theories of distributed consensus, suggesting that value emerges not from a solitary rational agent but from a process of intersubjective validation. The pithanon, then, is not just what seems convincing to the individual, but what appears persuasive within a wider epistemic community.

Even in matters of ethical judgment or happiness, Carneades maintained that impressions must be "thoroughly explored," which entails not only introspection but an awareness of the limitations of perception and the benefits of mutual correction. As Cicero explains, "we make judgments about the properties of each of the items pertaining to the place of the judgment... the medium of the judgement, in case the atmosphere is murky... the time, in case it is too short" (Long & Sedley, 69C). In this way, the Academics recognize the role of environmental and perceptual contingencies

in shaping belief, reinforcing their rejection of any singular or absolute standard of value.

This emphasis on corroboration, context, and the communal filtering of appearances strengthens the Academic position against both dogmatic realism and naïve relativism. While they suspended judgment regarding the existence of inherent truths, they nonetheless constructed a model of practical reasoning that relies on socially negotiated plausibility. This idea resonates deeply with contemporary models of mimetic convergence and imitation-based epistemology.

In this sense, the Academics foreshadow contemporary models of belief and behavior in uncertain environments. Their emphasis on appearances, coherence, and adaptive judgment parallels modern theories in behavioral economics, bounded rationality, and imitation-based modeling. Like agents in such models, the Academic Skeptic navigates a world where truth is inaccessible and value is not found, but followed, an idea that will be developed in the next section through the lens of mimetic theory and Mean Field Games.

Modern Echoes: Mimetic Desire and Distributed Consensus

The central claim of Academic Skepticism, that knowledge, and by extension value, is not inherent in nature but is instead mediated by perception and convention, finds renewed relevance in contemporary theories of imitation, belief formation, and social convergence. In particular, the idea that human beings act on what appears convincing, without ever accessing truth, parallels recent models in cultural evolution, game theory, and behavioral psychology. These frameworks suggest that the very structure of desire, belief, and action is grounded in social imitation, not epistemic realism, a view that echoes Carneades' *pithanon* as a functional rather than truthful basis for judgment.

René Girard's theory of *mimetic desire* provides a conceptual bridge between ancient skepticism and modern social theory. According to Girard, humans do not desire objects because of their intrinsic properties; rather, they desire what others seem to desire. Desire is triangular, arising between the subject, a mediating model, and an object. This process creates a feedback loop in which value is conferred not by essence but by imitation. In such a framework, value is constructed socially and reinforced mimetically. The "good" is not discovered but designated by its visibility within a system of mirrored desires. As Girard writes, "Human beings fight not because they are different, but because they are the same in their desires" (Girard, 1977). This dynamic illustrates how value formation can occur in a world where belief is suspended and only plausibility (measured through imitation) remains operative.

This vision is further formalized in the theory of cultural evolution developed by Boyd and Richerson (1985), who argue that imitation is a primary mechanism of human learning and coordination. Their work shows that cultural norms evolve through biased transmission: individuals preferentially adopt behaviors that appear more successful, popular, or prestigious. These dynamics are structurally identical to the Academic reliance on persuasive appearances: agents in a population do not choose based on truth, but based on what seems most credible or functional within their epistemic environment. The result is not a convergence on truth, but on apparent plausibility, much like the Academic Skeptic's practical reliance on the *pithanon*.

Mathematical and economic formalizations of this principle are found in the theory of *Mean Field Games*, developed by Lasry and Lions (2007). In these models, each agent in a large population makes decisions based on the statistical distribution of

others' behaviors. No agent has privileged access to an objective best strategy; instead, equilibrium behavior arises through mutual observation and adaptation. As agents continuously update their beliefs and strategies in response to others, value emerges from the collective rather than from any intrinsic feature of the world. This is a direct analog to the Academic epistemology: behavior is grounded in collective plausibility, not individual certainty.

The convergence of these theories (Girard's mimetic desire, Boyd and Richerson's cultural transmission, and Lasry and Lions' Mean Field dynamics) reinforces the insight that value is not a metaphysical constant but a social construct. Just as the Academic Skeptic suspends belief while acting on what seems persuasive, so too do agents in these models navigate the world by imitating credible signals and adjusting behavior in light of visible trends. What the Academic tradition offers, then, is not merely an ancient curiosity but a deeply relevant heuristic for understanding how people continue to act, desire, and value in the absence of foundations.

Moreover, this modern recapitulation of skepticism provides a powerful framework for interpreting social phenomena that otherwise appear irrational or unstable: financial bubbles, viral trends, identity politics, or cultural fads. In each case, behavior spreads not because it is rationally justified, but because it is mimetically reinforced. The same was true for the Academic Skeptic, who trusted no foundation but navigated by plausibility alone. Thus, the suspension of belief does not entail passivity; it entails participation in a system where appearance replaces essence and imitation replaces truth.

Cultural Homogenization in the Information Age

The Academic Skeptics' denial of epistemic and moral certainty offers a strikingly prescient framework for interpreting the current trajectory of cultural convergence. In the absence of inherent value or truth, beliefs and norms do not disappear; they are redistributed according to what appears most convincing, visible, or imitable. As mimetic and imitation-based models show, this process does not require truth or rational consensus, only a sufficient degree of exposure and reinforcement. In the modern world, this mechanism has accelerated dramatically due to the collapse of spatial and temporal boundaries brought about by digital technologies and global media systems.

Historically, distinct cultures evolved their own value systems, aesthetics, and moral frameworks under conditions of local autonomy. Chinese, West African, Andean, Persian, and Indigenous North American societies all developed richly textured norms of dress, cuisine, music, architecture, kinship, and ethics, not because they had access to different truths, but because their epistemic horizons were bounded by geography, language, and tradition. As Appadurai (1996) notes, such "ethnoscapes" were internally diverse but externally autonomous, allowing values to be reproduced and ritualized over generations. Each culture had its own *field of appearances*, within which certain practices appeared "natural" or "good" based on communal consensus and inherited structures.

In the information age, these fields have converged. The internet, satellite television, and algorithmically curated media environments expose individuals not only to distant beliefs and practices, but to real-time updates about what others see, value, and desire. As Foucault (1980) observed, the modern subject is no longer embedded in a stable regime of truth, but subjected to constantly shifting networks of visibility, surveillance,

and discursive circulation. Cultural practices are no longer confined by their origins but instead circulate through what Appadurai calls "mediascapes" and "ideoscapes," in which values, aesthetics, and moral scripts are detached from their original contexts and recombined into globally consumable forms.

The result is a dynamic akin to a Mean Field Game: each agent updates their behavior not based on universal standards, but on what others appear to be doing. Architectural styles in Seoul, Berlin, and São Paulo increasingly resemble one another not because of shared environmental constraints or metaphysical principles, but because they circulate in the same visual economies, social media feeds, design blogs, branding templates. Likewise, clothing trends, musical genres, and even political gestures are replicated not because they are rationally justified, but because they are seen, shared, and imitated. In this environment, visibility becomes the new plausibility; virality becomes the new validity.

This global homogenization does not entail the extinction of cultural difference, but its flattening into globally resonant fragments. As traditional epistemes break down and are replaced by algorithmic filters and mimetic loops, the cultural "good" becomes whatever persists within the attention economy. Just as Carneades refused to assert that any one value was true, modern individuals are increasingly agnostic about meaning but responsive to social reinforcement. They do not believe in the good so much as follow what appears to be good, precisely the attitude modeled by the Academic Skeptics.

Moreover, this mimetic flattening carries ethical risks. Girard warns that mimetic systems tend toward rivalry and scapegoating when desires converge too narrowly. In cultural terms, this manifests as performative authenticity, identity anxiety, and cultural burnout. As difference collapses into sameness, the friction that once generated creativity and resilience may give way to conformity and fatigue. The Academic method of suspended judgment offers both a diagnosis and a defense: it reveals the constructedness of value, while also suggesting that liberation lies not in dogma but in a reflective, pluralistic engagement with appearances.

Thus, the modern condition of cultural homogenization is not merely the result of globalization or technology; it is the realization of a world already envisioned by the Skeptics, one in which truth has been replaced by convention and belief by visibility.

Mimetic Feedback and the Risk of Cultural Stagnation

While the mimetic and imitation-based frameworks discussed thus far explain the construction and convergence of value in the absence of foundations, they also expose a critical vulnerability in modern cultural production: the tendency toward stagnation. The same mechanisms that enable coordination and visibility, especially algorithmic curation and mimetic reinforcement, can also entrench the past and inhibit novelty. In a world where value is measured by replication and reinforcement, the emergence of new aesthetic, ethical, or intellectual paradigms becomes increasingly difficult.

This risk is explored in the recent book *Boom: Bubbles and the End of Stagnation*, which argues that algorithmic systems trained on existing data are structurally conservative. Because these systems rely on patterns drawn from historical user behavior, they tend to recommend and amplify what has already been successful. As the authors put it, "algorithms are not designed to predict what is new, only what is most like

the old."[1] This has a profound effect on cultural dynamics. Rather than encouraging divergence or experimentation, algorithmic environments reward conformity to existing trends. The result is a feedback loop in which the past dominates the present, not because it is better, but because it has worked in the past and therefore is better according to the system, as the system can only see what has worked in the past and cannot create on its own.

This phenomenon is an unintended consequence of the mimetic logic described by Girard and formalized in Mean Field models. As more agents imitate what others appear to value, cultural visibility becomes dominated by what is already visible. Popularity is rewarded with more exposure, leading to further imitation, and eventually to saturation. Music platforms recommend familiar songs; fashion trends cycle through retro revivals; social media platforms prioritize content that performs within known parameters. In each case, novelty is not selected against explicitly, it simply fails to survive in an environment optimized for the known.

For the Academic Skeptics, this would not be a surprising outcome. A system that lacks epistemic foundations cannot escape its own appearances. The persuasive impression—the *pithanon*—does not evolve independently; it is reinforced by repetition. As Carneades suggested, plausibility is a function not of truth but of coherence and rhetorical force. In a digital context, that rhetorical force is often reduced to engagement metrics, view counts, and algorithmic momentum. What appears good is what is already known to work.

The danger, then, is not only homogenization but inertia. Just as cultural difference is flattened by mimetic convergence, cultural innovation is suppressed by predictive conservatism. The mechanisms that govern belief and behavior (formerly plural, local, and contingent) are now globally scaled, data-driven, and optimized for what has already succeeded. The mimetic loop closes in on itself. Academic Skepticism offers a model for diagnosing this condition: a world governed by appearances, unanchored from truth, is vulnerable not only to convergence but to stasis.

In this context, skepticism itself may become a form of resistance. To suspend belief, to refuse to assent to what appears plausible merely because it is popular, is to make room for the new. If the algorithm favors the familiar, then the skeptical stance becomes an ethical imperative: to question the plausibility of the familiar, to doubt the algorithmic reinforcement of the past, and to cultivate spaces for the improbable and untrained.

Conclusion

Academic Skepticism, long marginalized in the history of philosophy for its refusal to construct a positive metaphysics, now appears strikingly prescient. In denying that knowledge of the good, the true, or the just is possible, Arcesilaus and Carneades did not abandon the project of philosophy; they redefined it. For them, the task was not to discover eternal truths but to learn how to live under conditions of uncertainty: how to act when nothing can be known with certainty, and yet choices must still be made. Their strategy of weak assent, or orientation toward the plausible rather than the true, has become a defining feature of our own time.

This paper has argued that the core insights of Academic Skepticism, especially the view that value is not discovered but constructed, find concrete expression in modern

[1] See *Boom: Bubbles and the End of Stagnation*, chapter 1, section on cultural innovation and algorithmic reinforcement.

theories of mimetic desire, imitation-based evolution, and distributed decision-making. In Girard's account, value emerges through the triangulation of desire; in Mean Field models, it emerges through behavioral convergence. In both cases, the value arises not from the object, but from the system's dynamics, a dynamic the Academics foresaw and theorized in their suspension of judgment and reliance on the *pithanon*.

In our present moment, the mechanisms that the Academics diagnosed have been magnified by technology. Social media platforms, recommendation algorithms, and global media systems have created a mimetic field of unprecedented scale. Cultural signals are amplified not because they are meaningful, but because they are visible. Norms, aesthetics, and even ethical postures are increasingly determined by virality, imitation, and surface resonance. The distinction between good and mimetically reinforced in such an environment has begun to collapse.

The result is a cultural condition marked by homogenization and repetition—what the Skeptics would call a field of mere appearances. Yet in this very condition lies the relevance of their method. The Academic tradition does not merely diagnose the erosion of foundations; it models a way of living without them. To be skeptical, in this sense, is not to be paralyzed, but to be freed from the need for epistemic or moral certainty. It is to act with awareness that what appears plausible today may not hold tomorrow, and to navigate the world with both epistemic humility and ethical seriousness.

In a time when belief is often tribal, values algorithmically enforced, and certainty manufactured, the Skeptics offer a counter-model: one that resists the seduction of foundations and embraces the fragility, contingency, and relationality of all human meaning. In doing so, they offer not just a philosophy for antiquity, but a survival strategy for the present.

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