

PHIL 321

Lecture 25: Academic Criticisms of Stoic Epistemology

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Origins of Academic skepticism

When Arcesilaus was scholarch of Plato's Academy (appx. 268–241 BCE) the Academy “went skeptical” (NB: they did not call themselves “skeptics,” rather they probably called themselves “academics”)

The story goes that, as scholarch, Arcesilaus encouraged “arguing both sides of a question”:

- [1] They would pick some topic for debate, whether *P*? (e.g. does motion exist, is the skin made of pores?)
- [2] A pupil would propound an argument for *P*; they would consider it as a group, see if any refinements needed to/could be made
- [3] Arcesilaus would come back and propound an argument for not-*P*.
- [4] They would consider both arguments side-by-side, seeing if one was stronger than the other, and ultimately suspend judgment whether *P* on that basis

This kind of skepticism, whereby no affirmative declarations are made about the world one way or another, seems to have changed after Arcesilaus' death to a form of negative dogmatism—i.e. the claim that nothing can be known

The early kind of skepticism was re-invigorated by Aenesidemus in the 1st Century BCE, who claimed “Pyrrho” as his figurehead (and the skepticism is called “Pyrrhonism”)

The Stoic criterion of truth

According to the Stoics, the criterion of truth is the cataleptic impression, i.e. an impression which

- [1] Comes from what is
- [2] Is stamped and impressed in accordance with what is
- [3] Is such as could not come about from what is not

Academic “master argument” (from *HP* 267-70, 276-77)

- [P1] Some impressions are true, some are false
[P2] False impressions can't lead to knowledge
[P3] True impressions that can be matched by false impressions of the same kind cannot lead to knowledge
[P4] All true impressions are such that they can be matched by false impressions of the same kind
[C] Nothing can be known (no impression can lead to knowledge)

In essence, the Academics are willing to grant that it is possible to have impressions that meet conditions [1] and [2] for a cataleptic impression but insist that it is *impossible* to have an impression that meets condition [3] (i.e. this is what [P4] rejects)

For support, the Stoics point to cases such as: twins, eggs, bees, grains of sand etc.

Further Academic moves

The Academics actually went further and advanced an argument about the cognitive life of the wise person, using the Stoics' own conception of wisdom

[P1] Assent to an impression yields either: knowledge (i.e. *katalêpsis*) if the impression is cataleptic, or opinion, if the impression is non-cataleptic

[P2] There are no cataleptic impressions

[P3] If the wise person ever assents to an impression, he or she will have an opinion

[P4] The wise person will never have opinions

[C] The wise person will never assent to an impression (and, thus, will have no beliefs)

[P4] is part of the Stoic conception of wisdom; i.e. to be wise is to be such that you hold all your beliefs as a matter of knowledge (*katalêpsis*) and *never* as a matter of opinion (*doxa*)

Thus, the Academics claim, *by the Stoics' own lights*, wisdom must consist in holding no beliefs whatsoever

The Stoic counter: the “inactivity” (*apraxia*) argument (HP 272-73)

The Stoics attempt to argue that the wise person will assent with the following argument:

[P1] Actions are caused by agent's impulse

[P2] Impulses are caused by assenting to (a certain kind of) impression

[C] Hence, if one does not assent, one cannot act

This is meant to be a *reductio*: life is supposed to be impossible without action

Academic responses to the Stoic counter

The Academics responded in two main ways:

[1] On the Stoic view, action is possible without assent—recall the mechanisms involved in animal “action” from the Freedom discussion

So, even on the Stoic view, assent isn't necessary for action

The Stoics might respond that *human* action (i.e. in the full-blown Stoic sense of human action) is impossible, to which the Academics would likely respond, “so what?”

[2] “Life without assent”: picked up by the Pyrrhonian Skeptics