
Ancient Scepticism by Harald Thorsrud

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Harald Thorsrud's introduction to ancient scepticism is written for an audience of undergraduate students and non-specialists who want a knowledgeable, trustworthy, detailed, and nevertheless accessible introduction. Thorsrud is so successful at this that, in effect, his book will also be valuable for graduate students and scholars.

An introduction to ancient scepticism is no easy task—one must explain the arguments of a wide range of thinkers, whose names often mean next-to-nothing even to educated readers. First, there are the sceptical philosophers, among whom are Pyrrho, Arcesilaus, Carneades, Philo, Cicero, Aenesidemus, Agrippa, and Sextus Empiricus. Next, there are their contemporary interlocutors and opponents: various Stoics, Epicureans, Platonists, Peripatetics, and so on. Finally, there are the doxographers and commentators through whose writings we have much of our information about ancient scepticism. Accordingly, an introduction to ancient scepticism must be informed by a nuanced understanding of large parts of classical philosophy, of the goals and idiosyncrasies of various lesser known authors, as well as of the longstanding history of some of the basic intuitions, often reaching back to Presocratic philosophy.

A good introduction to ancient scepticism is, thus, a considerable achievement. Every chapter in Thorsrud's book displays the kind of nuance and judgment that can only come from detailed study of more than the immediately relevant writings of ancient sceptics. At the same time, the book is utterly readable and engaging—it has the potential to steer students towards an otherwise seemingly inaccessible field, and capture their philosophical imagination. Thorsrud's discussions involve detailed acquaintance with and exposition of the scholarly literature. Thus, they do not only introduce

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the ancient material. They are also an excellent starting-point for further study. At many points, Thorsrud does more than explain the controversies among interpreters; he makes suggestions that constitute interesting contributions to these debates.

The book divides up into a plausible sequence of nine chapters:

1. Introduction
2. Pyrrho and Timon
3. Arcesilaus
4. Carneades
5. Cicero
6. Aenesidemus
- 7.–9. Sextus Empiricus

and comes with very useful additional material (chronological tables, indices, extensive bibliographies for further study).

There are two ways in which I think a new introduction to ancient scepticism might have done more, drawing on the surge of research on Hellenistic philosophy in recent years. First, there could have been even more attention to the different concepts employed in ancient as compared to modern scepticism; second, there could have been greater engagement with the Epicurean camp of anti-sceptics. I shall explain both of these points briefly.

Study of ancient scepticism has long been impeded by the fact that scholars were much better acquainted with early modern scepticism than with the more inaccessible ancient versions. From this perspective, it seemed obvious that scepticism must be about doubt, certainty, and knowledge—the key conceptions of modern scepticism. Who else is the sceptic but someone who doubts things? And what else is she calling into question if not knowledge, or certainty? As surprising as it may seem, none of these terms is central to ancient scepticism. The ancient sceptics have an intuition that is mostly absent from modern discussions: if one sees that one should not claim to know something (say, because there are countervailing considerations), then one should also not believe it. In every belief, we make a truth-claim. But why should one claim that p is true, if it might be false? Accordingly, ancient discussions quickly turn from the concept of knowledge to the concept of a criterion of truth, and thus to the question of whether there are impressions (perceptions, appearances, or thoughts) that can be recognized as true. If it is hard to establish

a criterion of truth, then perhaps we should hold back from forming beliefs. In this line of thought, certainty and doubt play no role. Indeed, neither are there words for these ideas nor is there conceptual space for them. Ancient scepticism is importantly motivated by the question of whether and how one can identify truths as truths. This question is different from how one can find something that is certain so as to build on it.

To his credit, Thorsrud speaks of doubt only in his introduction [10], employing more precise vocabulary once he explains particular sceptical philosophies (at the end of the book, he points out that suspension of judgment should not be mistaken for doubt [182]). Things are somewhat more complicated when it comes to knowledge and certainty. Thorsrud describes matters as if the notions of the ‘absolutely certain’ and of ‘knowing with certainty’ figured in ancient discussions [47, 43]. However, it is not clear that any of the participants in ancient epistemological debates would see a plausible distinction between knowledge and certain knowledge. Thorsrud also speaks of ‘isolated bits of knowledge’ and ‘isolated bits of certainty’ when describing the debates between Arcesilaus (the first Academic sceptic) and Zeno (founder of the Stoa) [47–48]. It is a particularly intriguing and difficult aspect of Stoic epistemology (one of the dogmatic theories that the sceptics engage with in great detail) that such a thing is impossible. One does not have knowledge until one has a whole system of knowledge. Knowledge is ‘unchangeable by argument’ [Sextus, *Adv math.* 7.151]; that is, to know something means to hold it to be true in such a fashion that one shall not change one’s mind. But no single truth-claim is unchangeable if it is not part of a body of unchangeable truth-claims. Thorsrud’s choices could be considered harmless glosses, justified by the aim to provide an accessible introduction. However, in so far as he aims to explain the distinctiveness of ancient (as opposed to later) scepticism, they are not always helpful. Perhaps as a consequence of explaining matters in terms of certainty, Thorsrud devotes somewhat less attention to a central concept in Hellenistic epistemology, the criterion of truth, than one might expect.

However, Thorsrud is impressively subtle in many other respects that concern precisely such matters. For example, when considering whether the Pyrrhonian sceptic has beliefs, Thorsrud makes it clear that, whatever our answer to this question, it cannot invoke mental

states, understood as something genuinely different from facts about the world [175–180]. Thorsrud explains that Sextus' sceptic confines herself to appearances. For example, the sceptic does not deny that the honey appears sweet, but does not claim that the honey is sweet [*Pyrr. hyp.* 1.20]. If the sceptic has any beliefs, then these will have to be explained in terms of what appears to her. Appearances are something like affections of the mind, and so they might be described as mental states. Does this mean that the sceptic has beliefs in so far as she has beliefs *about* her mental states? Thorsrud does not make the point that I think we should mention first in this context: that the idea of a reflective turn of the mind upon itself does not figure in Greek scepticism. But he explains in a very clear fashion why the 'mental states interpretation' cannot be convincing. First, the sceptics do not claim that there is such a thing as mental states (which would be a dogmatic thesis). Second, if there were mental states, they would count as part of how the world is. Accordingly, this move does not provide the sceptic with beliefs that would differ from the beliefs she does not have—beliefs about how things are in the world. An important difference between ancient and modern scepticism is implicit in Thorsrud's argument: from the point of view of Hellenistic discussions, there is no difference between the mind and the world such that the mind would not be part of the world.

Consider next the role of Epicurean philosophy. Thorsrud's introduction, as nuanced as it is in other respects, is perhaps somewhat conventional here. Scholars usually see the Stoics as the main philosophical interlocutors and opponents of the sceptics. There are many respects in which the sceptics seem to engage Stoic premises directly or to respond to Stoic objections. This observation has been central to the so-called dialectical interpretation of scepticism, according to which sceptics, rather than putting forward any views of their own, argue from the premises of their interlocutors, leading them to conclusions based on their own assumptions. Perhaps it seems easier to explain this mode of argument if there is one prime interlocutor. However, the dialectical approach ultimately works just as well if there are several philosophers for the sceptic to talk to.

Pyrrho and Epicurus apparently knew of each other: from the very beginning, scepticism and Epicurean epistemology are antagonists. Some of the more extreme Epicurean theses such as 'all perceptions are true' are perhaps formulated in such radical fashion

because they engage with scepticism. Where the sceptics see conflicting appearances, the Epicureans only see difference. They display the mind-set of natural scientists: every perception has its causal history and is, therefore, explicable. In so far as the physics and physiology of perception account for it, it is a fact; and in that sense, it is true. There are different perceptions, but no conflicting perceptions.

The relationship between scepticism and Epicureanism is an under-explored topic, and it is probably not the task of an introduction to ancient scepticism to remedy this. However, some of Thorsrud's own arguments would have been helped by supplying the missing link that, as I would suggest, can be found in sceptical engagement with Epicureanism. Here are three examples. First, Thorsrud analyzes Arcesilaus' response to the question of whether the sceptic finds the bath when wanting to go to the bath, as if Arcesilaus were responding to a Stoic [51]. But this is not a compelling interpretation. In the relevant text, Plutarch moves from sceptic engagement with Stoic premises to an exchange between the sceptics and Colotes, an Epicurean [*Adv. Col.* 1122a–d]. Colotes asks the sceptics how they find the bath, and how they find the door when they leave a room. In response, the sceptics employ Epicurean, not Stoic, premises: that it is one thing to have one's perception of the door available to one, and another to form a belief based on it.

Second, Thorsrud notes that the Stoics are not the obvious interlocutors (or not obviously the sole interlocutors) for Carneades, the second major Academic sceptic [81]. Carneades develops a criterion by which his sceptic is guided in her actions, the convincing ($\tau\delta$ $\pi\iota\theta\alpha\nu\acute{o}\nu$). In matters of greater importance, the sceptic adheres to a stricter criterion, the convincing and undiverted. In matters of the greatest importance, she adheres to her strictest criterion, the convincing, undiverted, and thoroughly examined. This approach is structurally analogous to Epicurean methods for examining perceptions [cf. Sextus, *Adv. math.* 7.211–216]. Thorsrud's observation, that we need to think of a different interlocutor here than the Stoics, or of an additional interlocutor, seems right. We should think of Epicurus.

Third, consider the assumption that arguably figures in Aenesidemus' scepticism: if x is by nature F , then it affects everyone as F [111–116]. Thorsrud [197–199] mentions that Sextus also employs this premise in his discussions of ethics [*Pyrr. hyp.* 3.179–187,

Adv math. 11.110–166: cf. *Adv math.* 8.189]. He reconstructs Sextus' arguments as if they were directed at Stoic ethics, based on what I think is a somewhat forced account of a Stoic position instead. A more straightforward account, however, can be given if we think of Epicurus as the sceptic's opponent. Epicurus argues that pleasure is the good because it affects everyone as good, just as fire affects everyone as hot, snow as white, and honey as sweet [Cicero, *De fin.* 1.29–32]. That is, he provides precisely the kinds of argument and examples that the sceptics engage.

But these are points of detail. In sum, *Ancient Scepticism* is to be highly recommended. Thorsrud's interpretations are based on subtle analyses both of the ancient texts and their modern interpretations. The book is a joy to read as well as philosophically engaging and broad in scope. With very few exceptions, Thorsrud does not simplify things in any problematic ways, which is a rare achievement in a book that genuinely functions as a lively and accessible introduction.