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Inaction (Apraxia) Objection, and Ancient Greek Skepticism

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Abstract:

In the history of ancient Greek philosophy mainly two skeptical traditions can be observed - Pyrrhonian and Academic Skepticism. The word 'skepticism' comes from the Greek word '*skepsis*', which means inquiry or investigation. Ancient Greek skeptics were known as '*skeptikoi*', which means inquirer or investigator. Pyrrhonian skeptics adopted their skeptical system as a way of life and recognised tranquillity or *ataraxia* as the goal of life. But for Academic skeptics, skepticism was a kind of dialectical argumentative strategy. The main characteristic of ancient Greek skeptics was suspension of judgment (*epoche*). The main objection raised against ancient Greek skeptics regarding this idea suspending judgment is the *Apraxia* Objection. This objection states that if a skeptic withholds his assent or suspends his judgement in all matters, then that skeptic will be unable to live a normal life because he is incapable of acting. This article will try to show how a Pyrrhonist or Academic skeptic can live an active life consistent with their skepticism. At the same time, it will explain the criteria for action presented by the Pyrrhonist or Academic skeptic in this context.

Keywords:

Academic, Pyrrhonism, *Apraxia*, *Kataleptic*, *Eulogon*, *Pithanon*, Appearance

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Introduction

Skepticism is one of the most significant epistemological doctrines in the history of Western philosophy. The word 'skepticism' or 'scepticism' comes from the Greek word '*skepsis*', which means inquiry. In the history of ancient Greek philosophy, two primary schools of skeptical thought are evident: Pyrrhonism and Academic Skepticism. Ancient Greek skeptics were known as '*skeptikoi*', which means 'inquirer' or 'investigator'. In the technical sense, skepticism is a type of doctrine that doubts or denies the possibility of knowledge. The primary feature of ancient Greek skeptics was their recommendation to suspend judgment (*epoche*). However, the context of suspension of judgment in both Academic skepticism and Pyrrhonism skepticism is entirely different. Academic skeptics withheld assent or suspended judgment to avoid any form of dogmatism. But Pyrrhonian skeptics considered '*epoche*' to be the best way to achieve tranquillity (*ataraxia*) or freedom from mental disturbance. The operative point therefore is, if skeptics suspend judgment or withhold assent on all matters, then it will be impossible for them to live a practical life. As a reason, the charge of inaction (*apraxia*) was the main objection raised against skeptics regarding their suspension of judgment in antiquity. The charge of *apraxia* states that if the skeptic suspends judgment or withholds assent in all matters, their skepticism is incompatible with action. This article aims to demonstrate how ancient skeptics devised methods to counter the charge of *apraxia* and to highlight the radical and moderate stances of ancient skepticism in light of skeptical defensive strategies against the charge of *apraxia*. The ancient skeptical debate over *apraxia* sheds light on the ongoing philosophical question of balancing the need for action in everyday life and the possibility of uncertainty about the world around us. However, the primary challenge in interpreting ancient skepticism is that Secondary literature is the only reliable source for learning about the two main streams of ancient skepticism, as the writings of the skeptics themselves or their contemporary philosophers, which are available, are written in Greek. As argued by various scholars and experts in the Greek language, such ancient texts used several technical terms whose meanings have not been correctly interpreted in English.

The first section of this article briefly discusses the two ancient Greek skeptical traditions and their core specialty, the concept of '*epoche*' or 'suspension of judgment'. In this context, this section also provides a detailed discussion of the background to the objection raised against the Greek skeptics, with a focus on their concept of '*epoche*'. The second section provides an explanatory framework for how ancient skeptics responded to the charge of *apraxia*. This section presents how ancient Greek skeptics while suspending their judgment on the possibility of specific knowledge, proposed standards of action for practical living that were consistent with their skepticism. The last section attempts to critically explain which skeptical response seems more acceptable through a comparative discussion between the Academic skeptics' and the Pyrrhonists' responses to the *apraxia* objection. Through this comparative discussion, an attempt will be made to shed light on the moderate and radical positions among ancient Greek skeptics.

(1)

Philosophical skepticism is generally different from ordinary skepticism. It is, in fact, a type of doxastic attitude. A skeptical philosopher can question one of his own beliefs, or any belief, through logical analysis. First, he can disbelieve or deny that belief; Second, he can suspend judgment because there are equally strong arguments for accepting and denying that belief. Denying the truth of a belief or cognitive claim, or suspending judgment, is a form of second-order skepticism. Ancient Greek skepticism was essentially this second-order type of skepticism. In ancient Greece, two types of philosophical skepticism can be observed: Pyrrhonian skepticism and Academic skepticism. The Academic and Pyrrhonian skeptical movements began in the 3rd Century BCE and ended with Sextus Empiricus in the second century CE. Pyrrho (360-270/272 B.C.E) of Elis in Greece is considered the founder of skepticism. Later, Pyrrho's followers became known as Pyrrhonian skeptics. On the other hand, alongside Pyrrhonism, Academic skepticism emerged as a strong sect. Ancient Greek skepticism can be characterized by two main features: the argument 'that nothing can be known' and the recommendation 'that one should suspend judgment on all matters.' While the first feature is related to Academic skepticism, the second is related to Pyrrhonian skepticism (Lagerlund, 2020). Academic skeptics argue that nothing can be known because there is no criterion of knowledge, that is, a criterion by which we can distinguish between actual knowledge and false knowledge, valid knowledge and invalid knowledge. In contrast, Pyrrhonian skeptics suspend judgment on the possibility of knowledge, as there are equally strong opposing arguments for and against the possibility of knowledge. Pyrrhonians and Academic skeptics highlight the limitations of human knowledge, but their skeptical strategies for doing so differ.

The primary objection that the Stoics raised against ancient Greek skepticism was the inaction objection, also known as *apraxia*. The crux of this objection is that if a skeptic suspends judgment or withholds assent in all matters, then it will not be possible for him to determine what he should do and should not do in his daily life. As a result, instead of living an everyday life, they live passively, being unable to perform actions. The objection to inaction raised against ancient Greek skepticism can be presented in two ways. First, if the skeptic withholds assent in all matters, their action will be considered irrational. This is because, according to the Stoics, there is no such thing as rational action without assent. Second, the problem of determining action arises for a person who suspends judgment in all matters (Striker, 2010). However, this paper argues that the primary opponents of Academic skeptics were the Stoics, whereas the primary opponents of Pyrrhonian skepticism were the dogmatic philosophers. The operative question here is, why does a skeptic suspend judgment on all or some matters? This section first discusses the context of raising the charge of inaction against Academic skeptics and then discusses the context of raising the charge against Pyrrhonists.

The skeptical phase in the Academy, founded by Plato, arose primarily due to epistemological debates between the Academics and the Stoics, as well as a revival of

Socrates' dialectical style of argumentation. Particularly notable philosophers among the Academic skeptics were Arcesilaus (c. 315-240 B.C.E.) and Carneades (c. 214-129 B.C.E.). Although neither of these Academic skeptics wrote anything of their own, their views are known from Cicero's *Academica*, Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, and accounts by other writers (Thorsrud, 2010). To discuss the context of raising the charge of *apraxia* against academic skeptics, it is necessary to address the epistemological debate between the Stoics and academic skeptics.

Some changes can be observed in Greek epistemology towards the end of the fourth century. During this time, Epicurus and Zeno introduced new terminology, shifting the focus from the question 'What is knowledge?' to the question 'Is there any knowledge?', leading to a renaissance in the field of epistemology (Frede, 1983). The Stoics were the first to use the term 'criterion'. Zeno of Citium, the founder of the Stoic school, not only recognized the possibility of knowledge but also accepted the *kataleptic* impression, or cognitive impression, as the criterion of knowledge. While defining *kataleptic* impression, Zeno said that an impression is *kataleptic* if and only if –

- i) A real object causes it, or it accurately represents the object;
- ii) it has been stamped and imprinted by the real object itself; and
- iii) It is of such a type as could not come from something non-existent (DL 7.46; Thorsrud, 2010).

The Stoics distinguished between cognitive and non-cognitive impressions by using cognitive impression as criteria of truth. In this context, a crucial aspect of Stoic philosophy is the concept of assent (*sunkatathesis*). Assent is a voluntary act of the mind. By assenting to something, we make judgments and hold beliefs. Assent is the active component of knowledge because the kind of impression we give assent to is entirely under the control of our will. According to the Stoics, there are three ways to assent to an impression: a) as an opinion, which is weak and fallible; b) *katalepsis* or cognition, which generates an infallible belief; and c) *episteme* or knowledge (SE, M VII.151; Bett, 2005). Assenting to a *kataleptic* impression occurs in either a wise man or a base man. If it occurs in a wise man, it is knowledge, and if in a base man, it is opinion. Only the Stoic Sage can achieve knowledge by assenting to the *kataleptic* impression, and such knowledge is essential for happiness. Cognition is the assent to or approval of a particular impression. However, cognition differs from knowledge because it considers a particular impression as knowledge; an appropriate kind of assent or firm assent is required towards that particular impression, i.e., cognitive impression. All instances of cognition are cases of knowledge or opinion. However, whether a cognitive impression is a matter of opinion or knowledge depends entirely on whether an appropriate assent is associated with it. Knowledge is not just assent to any impression but rather a firm assent to cognitive impressions. In contrast to cognitive impression, the Stoics define opinion or belief as weak or false assent. In the field of knowledge, since the concept of cognitive impression is linked to firm assent, this assent cannot be rejected in any way, even by presenting counterarguments. For this reason, according to the Stoics, the sage can only attain wisdom by giving firm assent to cognitive impressions. Sage never assents to non-

cognitive impressions. Assenting to non-cognitive impressions means holding an opinion. A sage can never make a mistake by holding an opinion. A sage can achieve wisdom and lead a virtuous life by firmly assenting to cognitive impressions. He makes judgments and performs actions based on such impressions. Unlike a sage, a fool, or ordinary people, can assent to cognitive and non-cognitive impressions (SE, M VII.151; Bett, 2005). However, assenting to cognitive impressions is not an example of knowledge for a fool because his opinion can be true or false without firm belief.

The core issue of the epistemological debate between the Stoics and the Academic skeptics is about the existence of a cataleptic impression. The doctrines of Arcesilaus and Carneades can be considered a critical consequence of Stoic epistemology. This is because Arcesilaus and Carneades were harsh critics of the criterion of knowledge accepted by the Stoics, specifically the *kataleptic* impression. Academic skeptics, especially Arcesilaus, have argued that there is no criterion to distinguish between '*kataleptic* impression' and '*non-kataleptic* impression' (Frede, 1983). Consequently, since there is no such thing as a *kataleptic* impression, there is no criterion of knowledge, and since there is no criterion of knowledge, nothing can be known. Consequently, since there is nothing worthy of the Sage's assent, the Sage should suspend judgment or withhold assent in all matters. The Academic skeptics have mainly attacked the third condition of Zeno's definition of cognitive impression, pointing out that non-cognitive impressions can exist alongside cognitive impressions, which cannot be distinguished in any way. In various cases, it can be observed that there is no accurate impression that cannot be false. If the Stoics were forced to admit that an accurate impression could be exactly false, then academic skeptics could establish the non-existence of the Stoic criterion. If two objects are identical, such as twins or eggs, in these cases, one cannot be distinguished from the other (SE, M VII.151; Bett, 2005). Again, by presenting various examples, such as illusions, people who are sick, insane, or drunk, dreamers, etc., the Academics raised questions about the criteria for distinguishing non-erroneous cognition from erroneous cognition (Cic. Acad, II 56, 57; Brittain, 2006). They have attempted to present this issue through various examples, utilizing the indistinguishability argument to demonstrate that cognitive impressions cannot be distinguished from non-cognitive impressions. The Academic argument suggests that one can never be certain of grasping the truth in any given case. The Academic skeptics might argue that accepting an impression as clear and distinct is perfectly reasonable as long as one does not claim certainty. Thus, the central position of Academic skepticism against Stoic epistemology is the non-existence of *kataleptic* impression (*akatalepsia*) and the universal suspension of assent.

In contrast, a comprehensive account of Pyrrhonian skepticism can be found in Sextus Empiricus' famous work *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (2000). According to Sextus, Pyrrhonists suspend judgment when faced with multiple conflicting but equally powerful opinions, which leads them to *ataraxia* or tranquillity (PH I.8; Translations Annas & Barnes, 2000). In the case of Pyrrhonian skeptics, when one finds both a thesis and an anti-thesis well-grounded, one is not in a position to accept one of the two views and reject the other; one

does not have to refrain from judgment because one is not even inclined to judge in any way. In such a situation, the only option for the Pyrrhonist is suspension of judgment. However, whether Pyrrhonists suspend belief in all cases or some cases is a matter of controversy. Some interpreters of Sextus Empiricus' views on Pyrrhonian skepticism suggest that the skeptics hold no belief at all, including beliefs about daily life. However, other interpreters of his views on Pyrrhonian skepticism argue that skeptics can hold ordinary beliefs (Schwab, 2020). The key concept of *epoche* is central to both interpretations, but the moderate interpretation suggests that it applies more to theoretical or dogmatic beliefs. By avoiding dogmatic beliefs, one can achieve a state of tranquillity (*ataraxia*).

(2)

The first part of this section presents the responses of two academic skeptics, Arcesilaus and Carneades, to the inaction objection, followed by the responses of Pyrrhonists. In response to the objection of inaction, academic skeptics and Pyrrhonists have demonstrated how a skeptic can actively live their daily life consistent with their skepticism, despite suspending judgment or withholding assent.

First, there are two reports of the Academic skeptic Arcesilaus' response to the inaction objection. The first report, quoted from Plutarch's article, states that Arcesilaus considered the suspension of judgment in the case of assent to be related to the three movements of the Stoic soul, namely, impression, impulse, and assent. This is because for a person who suspends judgment in all matters, it is impossible to deny impression and impulse, and one cannot reject the impression received by the senses and the impulse for that impression, even if one wishes. The Stoics claim that the notion of belief or assent is essential to any intentional act. According to the Stoics, withholding assent means refraining from action. Arcesilaus criticizes the Stoic view that the idea of assent is not essential to the performance of an action, as it is naturally driven by the object (Plutarch, Col. 1122 B-C; Striker, 2010, p. 198). For example, when someone feels thirsty, it seems to him 'appropriate to drink water in such a situation'. This type of impression creates an impulse to drink water in the person, and due to this impulse, the person is inclined to drink water. In performing such an impulsive action, it can be said that assent to the impression that 'drinking water when thirsty is appropriate' is not necessary. Moreover, Arcesilaus believes that there is a possibility of error and deception by giving assent to something. For this reason, Arcesilaus eliminates the idea of assent and speaks of universal suspension of judgment.

The second report of Arcesilaus' response is found in Sextus Empiricus' work *Against the Logicians* (2005). Sextus says that the objection that may be raised against Arcesilaus is: what would be the criterion of a person's practical life and happiness if he were to suspend judgment in all matters (Striker, 2010)? Sextus believes that Arcesilaus proposed a criterion of conduct for life called reasonable or *eulogon*, despite expressing the opinion that sages should suspend judgment in all matters. According to Arcesilaus, one who suspends judgement about everything will regulate choice, avoidance, and

actions in general by the reasonable (to *eulogon*). That happiness is acquired through prudence, and prudence resides in right actions, and right action is whatever, once it has been done, has a reasonable justification; therefore, one who attends to the reasonable will act rightly and be happy (Thorsrud, 2010). In this context, it is important to note that the Stoics distinguished between appropriate action (*kathekon*) and right action (*katorthoma*) (Burnyeat, 1983). The Stoics referred to virtuous action as right action. According to the Stoics, appropriate action is an action that can be reasonably justified. So, according to the Stoics, there are two species of *kathekon*, one performed by the Sage and the other by fools. In Stoic philosophy, "*kathekon*" refers to actions that are appropriate or suitable. *Kathekonta* are not necessarily virtuous in themselves, but these are steps towards living a virtuous life. "*Katorthoma*" refers to right action or a virtuous action. What Arcesilaus defines as "*katorthoma*" or right action has been defined differently by the Stoics as the notion of '*kathekon*'. As a result, the same action that is the right action for a sage is the appropriate action for a fool. Paying off a debt is a *kathekon*, but paying off a debt is a moral duty. It is a right action, because only a sage is ethical. Arcesilaus has argued that even without specific knowledge and holding firm beliefs, the Sage can still perform appropriate actions by acting on what is reasonably justified (Burnyeat, 1983).

Another academic skeptic, Carneades, responded to the accusation somewhat differently from Arcesilaus. According to Carneades, a person cannot suspend judgment on all matters. In this context, he distinguished between the ungraspable and the non-evident. According to him, since there is no such thing as a *kataleptic* impression, everything is ungraspable. However, that does not mean that everything is non-evident (Striker, 2010). A skeptic will suspend judgment if and only if the matter is non-evident. In response to the Stoic charge that there is no such thing as rational action without assent, Carneades distinguishes between two types of assents: assent in the strong sense and approval in the weak sense. Strong assent is the acceptance of an impression or its verbal component as accurate and reliable. In contrast, weak assent is the approval or favorable attitude toward an utterance without committing to its truth. In this sense, a Sage can withhold assent in two ways. First, he will not assent to anything. Second, the Sage will not express any response that approves or disapproves of something (Acad.. 2.104; Translations Brittain, 2006). In the first sense, the Sage can be said to withhold assent.

Carneades again proposes a criterion of action called the plausible impression, also known as the persuasive impression or *pithanon*, for living a practical and happy life. He does not acknowledge the existence of the Stoic accepted *kataleptic* impression but speaks of 'plausible impression' as an alternative. Therefore, according to Carneades, a plausible impression is a type of impression that must be plausible, undiverted, and thoroughly tested. Carneades suggested a three-stage criterion for determining the plausibility or persuasiveness of an impression. These stages involve - i) a plausible impression, ii) a plausible and undiverted impression, and iii) a plausible, undiverted and cross-examined impression (Thorsrud, 2010).

In trivial matters, skeptics should adhere to plausible impressions. In matters of greater importance, they should adhere to plausible and undiverted impressions. Moreover, finally, in critical and significant matters that contribute to happiness, skeptics should adhere to plausible, undiverted, and thoroughly tested impressions. In ordinary life, the investigation of a minor matter typically involves interrogating one witness. In contrast, the investigation of a more urgent matter thoroughly examines each witness based on their consistency with others. According to Carneades, impressions may be plausible or persuasive, depending on how convincing they are and how thoroughly they have been tested. No matter how reliable and consistent with other impressions or beliefs, such an impression can never ensure authenticity. For instance, when a rope is lying coiled up in a dark room, a man who enters the room suddenly gets a simply plausible impression that it is a snake. However, to a person who has carefully examined the surroundings and considered the circumstances, like its movement or colour, it appears to be a rope, by the impression that is plausible and tested (PH I.227-8; Translations Annas & Barnes, 1994). This example suggests that one should be cautious and avoid rash judgments based solely on impressions. If two objects are identical, such as twins or eggs, in these cases, one cannot be distinguished from the other.

In the inaction objection, Pyrrhonists, like the Academic Skeptics, suspended judgment on all matters, but did not accept the *eulogon* or *pithanon* proposed by the Academics as the criterion for action. Instead, Pyrrhonists presented appearance as the criterion of action. According to Pyrrhonists, appearance lies in passive and involuntary affection. They did not speak of living life guided by any theory, but instead of living life by simply following appearance, in harmony with daily activities. This daily activity is divided into four parts. Sextus Empiricus described the fourfold of life, which is the key concept in Pyrrhonian philosophy. It refers to a practical guide for living based on appearances, not any dogmatic beliefs or absolute truths. This consists of four elements - a) Nature's guidance, b) Necessitation by feelings, c) the tradition of laws and customs, and d) teaching of the arts.

a) **"Nature's guidance"** refers to living by our natural abilities and instincts, such as sensation and thought. This indicates the natural capacity of humans to perceive and think.

b) **"Necessitation by feelings"** refers to the involuntary, natural inclinations or urge to act following one's feelings, such as hunger or thirst, rather than relying on reason or belief. For example, the feeling of hunger necessitates the skeptic to seek food, even without a belief in the objective reality of hunger.

c) There is diversity in **laws and customs** across different cultures. These are subjective, but not universal. So, Pyrrhonists suspend judgment on all matters but still follow societal customs and laws in practical matters without imposing judgments about right or wrong.

d) **"Teaching of the crafts"** refers to how, while suspending judgement on beliefs, a Pyrrhonian skeptic might still engage in crafts, without necessarily clinging to any specific

beliefs about the nature or value of the crafts (PH I.23-4; Translations Annas & Barnes, 1994).

In addition to the charge of apraxia, the charge of inconsistency has also been raised against ancient skeptics. This skeptical position is criticized as self-defeating; it cannot be asserted without a claim to knowledge (about the impossibility of knowledge). Ancient skeptics often object to such skepticism as being inconsistent. In the case of such an objection, it is said that skeptical claims are self-contradictory (Schwab, 2020). If a skeptic argues that nothing can be known or that suspension of judgment is the only justified attitude concerning any proposition, 'p', they must know they cannot prove their skeptical position. As a result, their position can be accused of being inconsistent, as the skeptics who refuse the possibility of knowledge must implicitly know something about the nature of knowledge to avoid the charge of inconsistency (Zieminska, 2020). The ancient skeptics could speak of their dialectical interpretation, according to which skepticism is not a philosophical doctrine or theory, but a method of argumentation that leads to the suspension of judgment. Pyrrhonian 'suspension of judgment' is grounded on reason (rational consideration of equality regarding adversity/disadversity of a thesis 'p' and its opposite 'not-p') (Schwab, 2020). Still, once a Pyrrhonian skeptic attains that state of indifference, which is psychological, it does not matter to her/him whether suspension of judgment itself is a judgment or whether a Pyrrhonian should commit herself to suspension of judgment. For the Academic skeptics, their skepticism was a method of argumentation. The Academics criticized the Stoics' epistemology by applying their dialectical strategy, leading to the suspension of judgment.

Objections such as *apraxia* and inconsistency have been raised against the ancient skeptics based on a misunderstanding of their actual skeptical position. This misunderstanding is that they live according to philosophical logos, or that their skeptical perspective is a philosophical doctrine. However, Ancient skeptics did not put forward any philosophical theories. They refuse to describe their actions in terms of beliefs or assent. 'Cognitive impression,' 'reasonable,' 'plausible impression,' 'appearance,'... and similar concepts should not be understood as per the literal translation of the English words used to express those concepts.

(3)

Finally, it can be said that the difference between these two types of skepticism is evident in the views of the two ancient so-called Greek skeptical schools, namely the Academic skeptics and Pyrrhonists, in response to the inaction objection against ancient skepticism. While ancient skeptics suspended judgment on questions of knowledge or the criteria of knowledge, they proposed criteria of action in practical living. This outlook was contemporary and relevant, as it emphasized the practical aspects of skepticism, allowing for action without requiring specific knowledge. Although both Pyrrhonists and Academic skeptics supported the suspension of judgment, the main difference between them is that, while, for Pyrrhonists, skepticism was a way of life whose primary goal was to achieve tranquility; academic skeptics never projected their skepticism as a way to reach

a state of bliss, but rather as a form of dialectical argument. The arguments of the Pyrrhonists differed significantly from those of the academics. According to Pyrrhonists, the same object appears differently to different people. For example, the same air feels cold to one person and warm to another; the taste of honey is sweet to a healthy person but bitter to a sick person, and so on. As a result, it is difficult to determine which of the conflicting views is correct. Again, since there are equally strong arguments for and against the given thesis, neither side is considered acceptable. We can only say how things appear to us, but not how things are. It is evident that Pyrrhonism, a more radical form, advocates suspending judgment on all beliefs, questioning even the possibility of truth. Academic skepticism, on the other hand, while also challenging certainty, acknowledges the possibility of probable beliefs and criteria, suggesting a more moderate position. The dialectical method employed by the Academic skeptic Arcesilaus is characterized by first allowing the interlocutor to present their theory; the interlocutor then finds themselves in aporia, presenting a theory against their theory and facing two contradictory theories. In such a situation, the only way out is to suspend judgment, neither admitting nor denying anything.

Competing interest

Authors declare that they have no competing interest

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