

History of Philosophy

17 Greek and Roman Skepticism

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Abstract:

This text explores the historical development and philosophical impact of **Greek and Roman Skepticism**, particularly the teachings of **Pyrrho** and the later **Academic Sceptics**. The author highlights how these movements sought **peace of mind** by advocating for the **suspension of judgment** regarding the true nature of reality. Key arguments, such as the **relativity of perception** and the **lack of certain premises**, are presented as tools used to undermine dogmatism. The lecture further examines how these ancient ideas resurfaced to challenge authority during the **Renaissance** and influenced thinkers like **Descartes**. Finally, the source proposes a **multilinear view of history**, suggesting that various philosophical traditions, including **Christianity**, interact and evolve alongside shifting scientific and cultural models.

Briefing Document:

Greek and Roman Skepticism: Foundations, Methods, and Historical Impact

Executive Summary

Skepticism emerged during the Hellenistic period as the third major philosophical movement alongside Epicureanism and Stoicism. Unlike dogmatic systems that claim to uncover the essential nature of reality, skepticism is defined as a mental attitude or "ability" to oppose appearances to judgments. Its primary objective is not the attainment of truth, but the achievement of *ataraxia*—a state of unperturbed peace of mind—through the suspension of judgment (*epoche*).

Historically, skepticism recurs during periods of systemic transition, such as the Renaissance, where it filled the epistemological vacuum created by the Reformation and the rise of modern science. The movement is broadly divided into Pyrrhonism,

which advocates for total suspension of judgment, and Academic Skepticism, which allows for "probabilism" or fallible belief. The legacy of these movements fundamentally shaped Western philosophy, prompting the foundationalist responses of thinkers like St. Augustine and René Descartes.

The Nature and Definition of Skepticism

According to Sextus Empiricus, a primary source for Hellenistic skepticism, the movement is not a theoretical position but a mental ability.

- **Core Ability:** Skepticism is the capacity to oppose appearances to judgments in any way whatsoever.
- **The Mechanism of Equipollence:** By identifying "equipollent" arguments—cases of equal weight where the argument for a position is cancelled out by the argument against it—the skeptic reaches a state of mental suspense.
- **The Ultimate Goal:** This suspense of judgment leads naturally to *quietude* or peace of mind. The skeptic avoids the "bewildered confusion" of dogmatism in a world of conflicting views.

Pyrrhonism: The Three Foundational Questions

Tracing its roots to Pyrrho of Elis, this branch of skepticism addresses three central inquiries regarding human existence and reality:

Question	Answer	Philosophical Implication
What is the nature of things?	Unknown	Human knowledge is inadequate; senses yield only changeable opinion, and reasoning is often loaded with subjective prejudice.
What should be our attitude?	Suspend Judgment (<i>Epoche</i>)	It is better to search without knowing than to engage in "premature dogmatism."
What is the value of this attitude?	Peace of Mind (<i>Ataraxia</i>)	Freedom from the worry of making up one's mind; quietude in the soul and body.

Comparative Values in Hellenistic Thought

Skepticism shares a common goal with its contemporary rivals:

- **Skeptics:** Seek *ataraxia* (unperturbedness) or *quietude*.
- **Stoics:** Seek *apatheia* (freedom from passion/indifference).
- **Epicureans:** Seek *ataraxia* (freedom from pain in the body and trouble in the soul).

Academic Skepticism and the Concept of Probability

Associated with the Platonic Academy (specifically Carneades), Academic Skepticism evolved from the Socratic tradition of "knowing nothing." It differs from Pyrrhonism by admitting the possibility of "opinion" or "belief" while still denying the possibility of "indubitable knowledge."

- **Critique of Reasoning:** Carneades argued that reasoning requires first premises. If these premises are not self-evident, they lead to an infinite regress; if they are, they may be circular or subjective.
- **Probabilism:** While certain knowledge is impossible, Carneades introduced the notion of probability. This is not mathematical probability, but a "fallibilist" recognition that some opinions are more justifiable than others, even if they could be wrong.
- **Knowledge as Justified Belief:** In this view, knowledge is treated as a kind of justified true belief rather than a set of indubitable certainties.

The Five Modes of Skepticism (Agrippa)

Skeptics utilized specific "modes" or "tropes" (categories of argument) to undermine the possibility of certain knowledge. Agrippa categorized these into five types:

1. **Conflicting Views:** The existence of equipolent, contradictory arguments.
2. **Infinite Regress:** The requirement for premises to have further premises *ad infinitum*.
3. **Relativity:** The fact that appearances change based on the observer and the context.
4. **Over-dogmatism:** The tendency of people to be dogmatic about unproven hypotheses.

5. **Circularity:** Arguments that "beg the question" by assuming what they intend to prove.

Historical Recurring and Responses

Skepticism tends to emerge at historical junctures where systematic methods of philosophy collapse, such as the end of the classic Greek period, the end of the medieval period, and the conclusion of the Enlightenment.

The Renaissance Influence

In the 16th century, the works of Sextus Empiricus were printed (1560), providing a framework for thinkers like Montaigne and Pascal. Skepticism became the primary challenge that early modern philosophers sought to overcome.

Foundationalist Responses

- **St. Augustine:** In *Against the Academicians*, Augustine argued that even if a skeptic is wrong, they must exist to be wrong (*Si fallor, sum*—"If I am wrong, I exist"). He also argued that skeptics implicitly accept logical truths like the law of non-contradiction (A or not A).
- **René Descartes:** Attempted to find a "first premise" similar to mathematical axioms. He adapted Augustine's argument into his famous *Cogito ergo sum* as a foundation to defeat skeptical doubt.
- **20th Century Shift:** Modern epistemology has largely rejected both radical skepticism and "hard" foundationalism, moving toward a fallibilist understanding of justified true belief.

The History of Ideas: A Multilinear Model

An analysis of the history of philosophy suggests that ideas do not develop in a simple, linear fashion (where one system simply replaces another) nor an atomistic fashion (where history is just a series of mistakes). Instead, history exhibits "multilinear development."

- **Three Main Traditions:** Idealism, Materialism/Naturalism, and Theism.
- **The Role of Science:** These traditions are influenced by changing scientific models (e.g., the transition from Aristotelian form/matter to the Renaissance mechanistic model, to 19th-century organic process models).

- **The Wheat and the Tares:** Utilizing a theological analogy, the history of ideas involves the intermingling of truth ("wheat") and error ("tares"). The task of the philosopher is to "regather the fragments of truth" found across various traditions and unite them, recognizing that "all truth is God's truth," regardless of its source in Plato, Aristotle, or others.

Study Guide:

Greek and Roman Skepticism: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide examines the development, core tenets, and historical impact of skepticism during the Hellenistic period and its later influence on Western thought. Based on the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes, it explores the primary figures of the movement, the logical arguments used to undermine certainty, and the philosophical responses to these challenges.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. What historical conditions typically lead to the emergence of skepticism according to the text?
2. How did the "epistemological vacuum" of the Renaissance contribute to the resurgence of skepticism?
3. What are the three fundamental questions posed by Pyrrho of Elis?
4. Define the term *epoche* and its role in skeptical practice.
5. How do the goals of skepticism, such as *ataraxia*, relate to Stoicism and Epicureanism?

6. What is the primary distinction between Pyrrhonic skepticism and Academic skepticism?
7. Briefly describe the concept of "equipollence" in the context of skeptical argument.
8. What was St. Augustine's "si fallor, sum" argument, and who did it target?
9. According to Nicholas Wolterstorff, what are "control beliefs"?
10. Explain Dr. Holmes' "wheat and tares" analogy regarding the history of ideas.

Part II: Answer Key

1. **Skeptical emergence:** Skepticism historically emerges at junctures where systematic philosophical methods or traditional authorities are breaking down. Examples include the end of the classic Greek period, the end of the medieval period, and the conclusion of the Enlightenment.
2. **Renaissance resurgence:** The Protestant Reformation and the rise of modern science created a vacuum by challenging church authority in non-religious matters. During this time, the recovery of Sextus Empiricus's writings provided a framework for challenging all claims to certain knowledge, forcing thinkers like Descartes to find ways to overcome skepticism.
3. **Pyrrho's three questions:** Pyrrho asked: 1) What is the nature of things? 2) What should be our attitude toward reality? and 3) What is the value of that attitude? He concluded that the nature of things is unknown, our attitude should be to suspend judgment, and the value of this is peace of mind.
4. **Epoche:** *Epoche* refers to the "suspension of judgment." Skeptics used this term to describe the act of withholding assent to any dogmatic claim, arguing that searching without claiming to know is superior to "premature dogmatism."
5. **Ataraxia and Quietude:** All three Hellenistic movements sought freedom from disturbance. While Stoics sought *apatheia* (freedom from passion) and Epicureans sought *ataraxia* (freedom from pain and trouble), skeptics sought

"quietude" or peace of mind by realizing that the less one claims to know, the less one has to worry about.

6. **Pyrrhonism vs. Academic Skepticism:** Pyrrhonists claim to know nothing, not even that they know nothing, and suspend judgment entirely. Academic skeptics, like Carneades, argue that while indubitable knowledge is impossible, one can still hold "opinions" or "beliefs" based on probability and fallibilism.
7. **Equipollence:** This term describes a situation where arguments for and against a position have equal weight or cancel each other out. Skeptics use the equipollence of reasons to demonstrate that no single side of a debate can be definitively proven, necessitating a state of mental suspense.
8. **Si fallor, sum:** Directed at the Academic skeptics, Augustine argued that even if a person is wrong about everything else, they must exist in order to be wrong ("If I am wrong, I exist"). This argument was later adapted by Descartes as "I doubt, therefore I exist."
9. **Control beliefs:** Control beliefs are a network of concepts or a "perspective" that exercise influence over which theories a person will accept. They act as a filter, ensuring that new theories are compatible with the person's existing fundamental worldviews.
10. **Wheat and tares:** This analogy suggests that the history of philosophy is not a series of total mistakes, but a "multilinear development" where truth (wheat) and error (tares) grow together. Holmes argues that Christians should "regather the fragments of truth" found in various traditions rather than dismissing the history of intellect as purely pessimistic.

Part III: Essay Questions

1. **The Evolution of the "Ability":** Sextus Empiricus defines skepticism as a "mental attitude" or "ability" rather than a theoretical position. Discuss the implications of this definition for the skeptic's life and how it shields the skeptic from the charge of self-contradiction.

2. **The Five Tropes of Agrippa:** Analyze the five modes of argument (conflicting views, infinite regress, relativity, over-dogmatism, and circularity). How do these logical challenges specifically undermine the "Foundationalism" later championed by Descartes?
3. **Probability and Fallibilism:** Examine Carneades' contribution to the Platonic Academy. How does his move from "certainty" to "justified belief" bridge the gap between ancient skepticism and modern epistemological views?
4. **The Psychology of Doubt:** Dr. Holmes suggests skepticism has a "psychological appeal" in times of cultural fragmentation. Explore how the quest for *ataraxia* functions as a coping mechanism in a "cafeteria line" of competing worldviews.
5. **The Christian Perspective on Intellectual History:** Compare the "atomistic/pessimistic" view of history (as a series of mistakes) with the "multilinear/providential" view. How does the concept of "common grace" support the idea that "all truth is God's truth" regardless of its source?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Academic Skepticism	A branch of skepticism associated with Plato's Academy (notably Carneades) that permits the holding of opinions based on probability and fallibility.
Agrippa's Five Tropes	A classification of arguments used to undermine certainty: conflicting views, infinite regress, relativity, over-dogmatism, and circularity.
Apatheia	A Stoic term meaning freedom from passion or indifference; often compared to the skeptic's peace of mind.
Ataraxia	Freedom from pain in the body and trouble in the soul; the Epicurean and Skeptical goal of undisturbedness.

Control Beliefs	Fundamental beliefs (often religious or philosophical) that govern the formation and acceptance of theories in other disciplines.
Epoche	The Greek term for "suspension of judgment," a core practice of the skeptical movement.
Equipollence	The state of having arguments of equal weight on both sides of a question, leading to a mental stalemate.
Fallibilism	The philosophical principle that human beings could be wrong about their beliefs and that knowledge does not require indubitable certainty.
Foundationalism	The epistemological approach that seeks to build knowledge upon a first premise or self-evident axiom that is immune to doubt.
Pyrrhonism	An extreme form of skepticism named after Pyrrho of Elis, characterized by the total suspension of judgment on the nature of reality.
Quietude	A state of peace of mind or "unperturbedness" that skeptics believe results from the suspension of judgment.
Sextus Empiricus	A Roman skeptic whose writings (printed in 1560) became the primary source for ancient skepticism during the Renaissance.

Source Note: *This document is derived entirely from the lecture excerpts provided in the Source Context.*