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Two Kinds of Belief for Classical Academic Scepticism

No one knew about Arcesilaus any more than they knew about which side the son of Tydaeus was on, concerning whom Homer had said no one knew whether he sided with the Trojans or the Achaeans. For to keep to one argument and state one and the same position was not in him, nor indeed did he ever think this manner of speaking by any means worthy of a clever man.

Numenius in Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica*

Philosophical scepticism takes two basic forms in the ancient Greek tradition. Classical sceptics have the view that nothing can be known for certain and the view that one should withhold assent, even about the view that nothing can be known for certain. Dogmatic sceptics, on the other hand, take a position and argue for the view that nothing can be known and for the view that one should withhold assent. In spite of important differences within classical scepticism, Arcesilaus, Carneades, and the neo-Pyrrhonian Sextus Empiricus are classical sceptics. Dogmatic scepticism is a position that develops within the late phase of Academic scepticism according to which sceptics now feel secure in arguing for the view or belief that nothing can be known for certain.¹ In this paper, I focus almost exclusively on the early formative phase of ancient scepticism introduced in Plato's Academy by the philosopher Arcesilaus of Pitane (316/5–241/0 BCE) less than a century after Plato's death. In the course of defending Michael Frede's thesis, namely, that the philosophy of Arcesilaus is an instance of classical scepticism, I revise Frede's original formulation of the distinction between the two kinds of belief giving shape to Arcesilaus' classical Academic scepticism.

Before entering into an ongoing dispute about the original Academic sceptic, I begin with a brief and preliminary account of the term 'scepticism'. It derives from the ordinary Greek term σκέψις meaning 'search' or 'enquiry'. Accordingly, near the middle of the first century BCE, the Epicurean Philodemus (*Rhet.* I 191.4 Sudhaus) refers to philosophers in general as 'most enquiring' (σκεπτικωτάτους), and less than a century later, Philo of Alexandria (*De ebr.* 202 W) refers to philosophers in general

¹ Michael Frede, "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge," in *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, eds. Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997): 127–151 is a main source for the two basic forms of ancient Greek scepticism. Cf. Michael Frede, "Des Sceptikers Meinungen," *Neue Hefte für Philosophie* 15/16 (1979): 102–129; reprinted in idem, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 179–200. Frede has had his critics, but Tad Brennan, *Ethics and Epistemology in Sextus Empiricus* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999) responds to the critics with a lucid and compelling defence of Frede's account of Sextus Empiricus' classical scepticism.

as σκεπτικοί or δογματικοί without conveying any apparent contrast between the two terms.² For one to be labelled σκεπτικός, it could mean simply that one is a philosopher who has not discovered what knowledge is but continues to search for it; on the other hand, the term later takes on a technical meaning in the revival of classical scepticism around the middle or end of the second century CE by Sextus Empiricus,³ identifying a peculiar kind of philosopher with ‘an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which because of equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment and with it tranquility’ (*PH* 1.8). Classical Academic sceptics did not self-characterise as σκεπτικοί in the sense honed by Sextus (but cf. Aulus Gellius, *NA* 11.5.6), but this fact does not prohibit one from using σκεπτικός (‘sceptical’) in a non-technical sense, conforming more closely to the ordinary Greek sense of σκέψις, to describe the kind of ‘search’ or ‘enquiry’ broadly characteristic of philosophers who search for knowledge.

For philosophers today, the term ‘scepticism’ has narrowed to convey challenges for specialists working within the domain of epistemology: the possibility of validating the reliability of basic epistemic faculties or the evidence for the existence of an external world. In the tradition of ancient Greek philosophy, however, σκεπτικοί or ‘sceptics’ engaged in enquiry spanning a wider range of beliefs and claims defended by self-proclaimed experts or philosophers pertaining to theses, for example, concerning the nature of divinity, mortality, or the ethicality of pleasure. Ancient philosophers known as ‘sceptics’ or ‘enquirers’ were so-called because they found themselves unable to conclude philosophical investigation with beliefs underpinned by robust theories about the nature of knowledge and truth. In suspending judgment about everything, ancient sceptical philosophers kept on searching for the truth (*PH* I.1–3) or what approximates the truth (Cicero, *Ac.* 2.7).

For Sextus Empiricus’ revival of classical scepticism, sceptical philosophy has direct associations with a way of life, one which follows from a particular way of engaging in the search for knowledge and wisdom. Sextus specifies a way of life guided by an ability to generate opposing arguments about any topic of concern to philosophers who suppose that they have discovered knowledge and truth. In the Academy of Arcesilaus, however, sceptical enquiry does not lead the sceptic to take a position or make reports, either orally or in writing, about how one lives the kind of life an Academic might have called sceptical. Happiness or tranquility of the soul is not an explicit aim for Arcesilaus’ enquiries, as it had been for Pyrrho (Aristocles in Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 14.18, 758d) or as it

2 Cf. Karl Janáček, “Das Wort σκεπτικός in Philons Schriften,” *Listy Filologické* 101.2 (1979): 65–68.

3 Although there is good reason to think Philo of Alexandria read the writings of the neo-Pyrrhonian Aenesidemus, there is still no source antedating the later neo-Pyrrhonian Sextus Empiricus in employing the technical sense of σκεπτικός that Sextus assigns it throughout *PH*. See Fernanda Declava Caizzi, “Sesto e gli scettici,” *Elenchos* 13 (1992): 277–327. Evidently, Timon Fr. 59 (Diels 1901, 200) uses the term σκεπτοσυνή, but similar to the term σκεπτικωτάτους in Philodemus and σκεπτικοί in Philo of Alexandria, Timon’s term signifies ‘enquiry’ or ‘search’ without Sextus’ later technical connotation.

would be again for Sextus Empiricus (*PH* 1.10); nor is there a value, either negative or positive, explicitly assigned to the correlation between philosophical enquiry and the alleviating or exacerbating effects of a soul inclined to search for truth. One might contend that for the Academic sceptic such a correlation is taken for granted, at least for Academic sceptics early in the Hellenistic period. Even if a correspondence between philosophical enquiry and happiness or tranquility is tacitly assumed, it is anachronistic nonetheless to think of Academic scepticism as heralding the modern confinement of ‘scepticism’ to a specialised field of research such as epistemology. An unrestricted range of questions is also a feature of Academic scepticism; enquiry for Arcesilaus, though, is distinctive for evincing a specific form of examining the beliefs or claims asserted by an interlocutor in a dialectical cross-examination. It is the application of an oral method of cross-examination (Cicero, *De fin.* 2.2–3; *De orat.* 3.67; *Tusc.* 5.11) that makes Arcesilaus’ sceptical enquiries even more dissimilar from modern or contemporary notions of scepticism than the neo-Pyrrhonian variety epitomised in the monological reportage of Sextus Empiricus.

To put it mildly, it has been difficult to resolve the complexities of the ancient evidence about Arcesilaus’ scepticism. In reviving a form of Socratic cross-examination as head of Plato’s Academy, Arcesilaus made it nearly impossible for his contemporaries and subsequent thinkers to know whether he held or could have consistently held any beliefs of his own. According to the lurid remarks of the second century CE Platonist Numenius, preserved by Eusebius, Arcesilaus tended to present himself in argument like a many-headed Hydra decapitating his own beliefs and severing himself into contrary positions (*Praep. ev.* 14.6) within the very same disputation; Ariston of Chios famously parodied Arcesilaus, his contemporary, as a philosophical chimaera (*PH* 1.234; Augustine, *Contra Ac.* 3.17.38, Diogenes Laertius [hereafter D.L.], *Life of Arcesilaus* 4.32). Due to the complex method of his oral cross-examination, a dispute about Arcesilaus’ beliefs continues to embroil interpreters of his brand of Academic scepticism, dating back to contemporary critics like Ariston through posthumous admirers or sympathisers like Cicero and Plutarch, and on again through modern historians of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. The dispute cannot be settled by interpreting with greater sophistication either what Cicero, Sextus, or other ancient authors wrote about Arcesilaus or what Arcesilaus wrote himself, since his method was entirely oral, writing no philosophical works of his own. And yet, the intractability of the evidence or source material has not restrained three modern interpretations of Arcesilaus’ scepticism from vying to set the record straight. Each interpretation offers solutions to the dispute on the basis of one or more pieces of source material from antiquity that describe second-hand Arcesilaus’ dialectical arguments. But to resolve the dispute about Arcesilaus’ beliefs, and to gain insight into the kind of classical scepticism his philosophy undertakes, one must first distinguish one relevant notion of belief, which the early formative phase of Academic scepticism abandoned in suspending belief about all things, from a second and equally relevant notion of belief to which Arcesilaus’ cross-examining method conformed in believing that one should suspend belief about all things.

According to the original dogmatic interpretation, Arcesilaus held and championed a number of beliefs.⁴ He is thought to have openly argued for the belief that nothing can be known for certain (*akatalēpsia*, *De orat.* 3.67; Sextus, *M* 7.145), a negative conclusion or conflicting claim that emerged from an attempt to refute the Stoic criterion of truth and wisdom. According to Zeno's Stoic philosophy, human beings are able to receive and give assent to perceptual impressions with propositional content specifying that *p*, that is, that something is so and so. Knowledge and wisdom require assenting to the right kind of impression, what Stoics called a 'cognitive impression' (*katalēptikē phantasia*, D.L. 7.47; *SVF* 2.130). A person advances to knowledge in the primary sense, a systematic body of knowledge of human and divine matters, by means of a stable disposition that in receiving cognitive impressions cannot be shaken by reason (Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 2.73.19–4.3; *SVF* 3.112). The cognitive grasp of such impressions is possible on the basis of the stability involved in the sage's disposition. Thus it is not possible to refute the sage, or what the sage has assented to, given that one who so regularly and securely assents to cognitive impressions in accordance with a stable disposition cannot be shaken by another's argument. In encountering the kind of impression or proposition that lacks the security of the cognitive impression, the Stoic sage withholds assent to that which appears false (D.L. 7.121).

According to the original dogmatic interpretation, Arcesilaus strove to refute the Stoic doctrine of knowledge and wisdom and champion a second belief, a corollary to *akatalēpsia*: that one should suspend assent or belief about everything (*epochē peri pantôn*, *PH* 1.232; *M* 7.158; Augustine, *Contra Ac.* 3.5.12; 3.10.22; D.L. 4.32).⁵ Proponents of a dogmatic interpretation attribute a third belief, namely, that Arcesilaus argued for, or believed in, the criterion of the 'reasonable' for the guidance of action.⁶ The criterion would explain how a sceptic, who presumably argues for *akatalēpsia* or *epochē peri pantôn*, is still able to choose certain courses of action over others despite the uncertainty and the suspension of assent. With one or more of these beliefs assigned to Arcesilaus, the dogmatic interpretation can explain Arcesilaus' revival of Socrates' dialectical method. The dialectical method was useful in refuting the confident claims or assertions of knowledge and wisdom, human or divine, and in putting forth conflicting claims.

On this picture, since the arguments of Arcesilaus against the early Stoa had a doctrinal agenda, it would seem that the arguments were devised in order to establish the conflicting claim that there is no criterion of truth or knowledge, and that

⁴ David Sedley, "Three Platonist Interpretations of *Theaetetus*," in *Form and Argument in Late Plato*, eds. Christopher Gill and Mary M. McCabe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996): 79–103.

⁵ Idem, "The Motivation of Greek Scepticism," in *The Sceptical Tradition*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1983): 9–29.

⁶ Robert J. Hankinson, *The Sceptics: Arguments of the Philosophers* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Malcolm Schofield, "Academic Epistemology," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, eds. Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfeld, and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 323–351.

one should suspend assent about everything. But the original dogmatic interpretation raises an obvious difficulty for a sceptic with beliefs: if the sceptic believes in and argues for the suspension of belief, how can the sceptic take a position with respect to any of his beliefs without being inconsistent? Scholars who think that the dogmatic interpretation is a plausible reconstruction often try to determine, on the basis of the ancient sources, whether Arcesilaus violated his own scepticism or believed in something he should not have believed in, given his belief in the universal scope of the suspension of belief. One might try to explain Arcesilaus' adherence to *akatalēpsia* and *epochē peri pantôn* not in terms of his believing in them, but in terms of hypothetical or 'reasonable' views (Sextus, *M* 7.158).⁷ The revision rids Arcesilaus of beliefs and strands him with views to which he could appeal in explaining action or choice and defending the negative conclusions of his method against the charge of inactivity. A revised version of the dogmatic interpretation insists that Arcesilaus did not believe anything at all, for his appeal to the 'reasonable' is merely an attempt to explain how we naturally act without belief. Nature, therefore, leads us to act even without belief and those actions considered 'reasonable' are those in which rational creatures can explain how the deeds accord with our nature. Again, the revision grants that such explanations are not beliefs but merely what Arcesilaus was naturally led to say having already acted in accordance with nature. While suspending belief about all things, Arcesilaus is thus capable of acting because nature simply impels him to act one way rather than another.

Similarly, a dialectical interpretation asserts that Arcesilaus argued against his Stoic interlocutors without holding any beliefs of his own. Arcesilaus is sceptical because of his method of refutation not the possession of certain beliefs or the acceptance of tentative views. Again, Arcesilaus is cast as arguing negatively for the sake of generating conclusions contrary to the claims advanced by the interlocutor. But this interpretation restricts Academic dialectic to an adversarial exercise of refutation,

7 Anna M. Ioppolo, "Il concetto di *eulogon* nella filosofia di Arcesilao," in *Lo Scetticismo Antico*, ed. G. Giannantoni (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1981): 143–161; eadem, *Opinione e Scienza: il dibattito tra Stoici e Accademici nel III e nel II secolo a.C.* (Naples: Elenchos, 1986): 120–134, 157–158; eadem, "Appendix 1 'Cicerone *Luc.* 32,'" in eadem, *La testimonianza di Sesto Empirico sull'Accademia scettica* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2009): 193–208; Harald Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009): 53–58, tries to explain Arcesilaus' scepticism in terms of *a-rational* commitments. By this Thorsrud contends that Arcesilaus' commitments are 'neither in accordance with, nor violations of, *any* rational standard [my italics].' Thorsrud's contention unwittingly assumes that a dogmatic standard of rationality is in fact the overriding standard. Recall that Arcesilaus thinks that the dogmatic claims made and reasoning offered to establish the dogmatist's rational standard are not compelling. Evidently, Arcesilaus has reasons not to believe in the rational standard of the dogmatist, despite his tentative or weak commitment to those reasons; we should not assume that Arcesilaus lacked some kind of non-dogmatic belief in rationality. It might be more accurate to characterise Arcesilaus' commitments as *a-rational* if he had given his assent to the Stoic standard of rationality even though he thought the Stoic failed to establish the truth of that standard. Arcesilaus' commitments to *akatalēpsia* and *epochē peri pantôn* only seem *a-rational* according to a dogmatic standard of rationality, but this need not make them *a-rational*.

such that Arcesilaus had no any standing commitment to the premises or conclusions of the arguments against Stoic philosophy.⁸ The dialectical interpretation acknowledges the influence of Plato's so-called early dialogues on the formation of the Academy's sceptical method. Arcesilaus revived Socrates' dialectical style of argument and used it to show how the contrary claims that result from the argumentation belongs to the interlocutor, just as the arguments which generate those conclusions also belong to the interlocutor. This interpretation concurs with the revised dogmatic interpretation on two points. First, it presents Arcesilaus' scepticism without philosophical beliefs (though the premises and conclusions are accepted by Arcesilaus as either hypothetical or 'reasonable' views in the revised version of the dogmatic interpretation). Second, the method of argument is construed once again in terms of aiming at the refutation of the Stoic theory of knowledge and wisdom.

A Socratic interpretation attempts to harmonise core features of the dialectical and original dogmatic interpretations, and it is the first interpretation to make use of a distinction between two kinds of belief for Academic scepticism. Accordingly, Arcesilaus argued *ad hominem* and he had beliefs. To bring these two features together, the Socratic interpretation contends that Arcesilaus argued against his opponents without the further intention of taking a position or establishing his beliefs and claims according to a logically demonstrable criterion of truth. While upholding a core tenet of the dialectical interpretation, namely, that Arcesilaus argued against the beliefs of interlocutors, a Socratic interpretation contends that Arcesilaus nevertheless believed in *akatalēpsia* and *epochē peri pantôn*, and yet such beliefs were not held in a manner that motivated Arcesilaus to take a position or make a claim for his beliefs in the way that a dogmatic philosopher typically feels stable and secure in taking a position or making a claim. Following Socrates, Arcesilaus engaged in a search for knowledge and truth, and he found that the arguments in favor of any position were always inadequate, including any arguments he might bring forth.

A Socratic interpretation relies on the notion of a non-theoretical or rationally unwarranted belief. Non-theoretical beliefs underpin Arcesilaus' dialectical activity; his belief that philosophical knowledge is important and worthy of attaining motivates a pursuit for wisdom.⁹ As the negative conclusions of his Socratic investigations keep recurring, Arcesilaus' enquiries force upon him the suspicion that even his beliefs about philosophy are rationally unwarranted. Yet he continues the search for knowledge on the same assumption that discovering it would be a worthy goal to attain. But as he continually fails to discover what truth and knowledge is, a growing suspicion that truth and knowledge will forever elude the effort presses upon him and it begins to strike him that perhaps such goals are not that worthy after all—that perhaps non-theoretical beliefs are all mortals require. It doesn't follow, though,

⁸ Pierre Couissin, "Le Stoïcisme de la Nouvelle Académie," *Revue d'histoire de la philosophie* 3 (1929): 241–276.

⁹ John Cooper, "Arcesilaus: Socratic and Sceptic," in idem, *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good: Essays on Ancient Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004): 81–103.

that he should then have given up his non-theoretical belief that it is irrational to have beliefs without knowledge, since one should only give that up if one can demonstrate that it would be irrational to hold beliefs. This too is a thought that his arguments cannot demonstrate any more than his arguments can successfully demonstrate the opposite conclusion or conflicting claim.

Arcesilaus thus assumed the importance of knowledge, and the general inadequacy of his beliefs are non-theoretical in the sense that he remained unpersuaded that he could demonstrate his beliefs according to some canon of argument or theory. He continued to believe that he failed to discover knowledge, and that it would be irrational and shameful to assent to anything without knowledge, but again in light of his experience in oral argument, he considered it still possible for there to be reasons against the belief that it is irrational or shameful to assent without knowledge. Thus he was not in a position to give his rational assent to the proposition that it is irrational to hold beliefs—he just found that that is how things strike him, i.e. that's just what he believes. An Academic sceptic, on this view, is someone whose sustained but non-theoretical commitment to rational investigation weakens confidence in rationality, but only partially. The result is not a negative claim or belief, for example, a claim or belief that we can't acquire knowledge owing to the limitations of our rational faculties, but a pervasive lack of theory sustained by the ongoing continuation of dialectical enquiry. Arcesilaus' scepticism shows us, according to this interpretation, that it is possible to believe in or be committed to rationality in some attenuated way, and yet remain sufficiently detached from rational demonstration to recognise that, whatever it may be, it may just lead us nowhere.

Both the dialectical and dogmatic interpretations presume that Arcesilaus revived an adversarial form of refutation. The dialectical interpretation takes this element very seriously in the sense that it assumes that Arcesilaus' sceptical philosophy sought to refute Stoic wisdom. The revised and the original dogmatic interpretation also ascribes the intent of refutation to Arcesilaus. For Arcesilaus must have relied on refutation to establish in argument what appear to be his own contrary claims. A Socratic interpretation, however, parts ways with all three interpretations. Frede writes that 'the sceptic never tries to argue for a position, he never argues against a claim in the sense that he tries to establish a conflicting claim, and thereby try to show the falsehood of the original claim.'¹⁰ On this view, we are to suppose that Arcesilaus in the image of Socrates sought to learn from the alleged expertise of those who claim to know by questioning the experts. The expert interlocutor supplied the premises and beliefs, while Arcesilaus or Socrates remained without any standing commitment about whether the premises, conclusions, or the mode of reasoning were true or false. The questioning inevitably went badly for the confident expert in appearing not to know what he claimed to know. In following this model of Socrates and meeting the same negative results, Arcesilaus was led to the belief that he

¹⁰ Frede, "Two Kinds of Assent," 129.

should withhold belief. But in acquiring this belief at the end of cross-examination it does not follow that Arcesilaus was ready to make the claim or defend the belief that one should withhold belief.

Frede's Socratic interpretation posits a 'substantial difference' between having a belief (i.e., weak assent) and taking a position or defending a belief by means of a form of reasoning that sets out to establish the truth of the belief and the reasoning according to a criterion (i.e., strong assent). Here is how Frede clarifies this 'difference'. Merely having a belief is just to find oneself with an impression after having enquired into a given subject (though enquiry is not necessary for this kind of impression or belief to set in). Weak belief may apply either to ordinary statements in everyday experience or statements that employ notions of wisdom, virtue, or knowledge. According to this formulation, it does not follow for the one who has the impression or belief that one must also have the 'further thought' that the impression is true. I will return to this key formulation below. By contrast, to take a position and defend a claim or belief is to subject oneself to specifiable criteria and canons of argumentation about what counts as truth or knowledge. This is strong belief or assent. In taking a position or defending a claim, one feels stable and secure in the truth of the impression or belief as satisfying certain criteria and canons of argumentation that purport to establish what it is for a belief to be true.¹¹

Frede's 'difference' has been criticised on the basis of what has come to be known as the standard conception of belief.¹² The standard conception of belief stipulates that in A's belief that *p* A also takes *p* to be true. Now, on Frede's account of weak belief, one can have a belief that *p* or be left with an impression that *p* without having the 'further thought' that *p* is true. Scholars have taken this account of weak belief to imply a rejection of the standard conception of belief. Following Fine's claim that 'Frede rejects the standard view of belief,' Perin contends that Frede's

¹¹ Weak and strong belief should also be distinguished according to two different kinds of dispositions or states in which one might be said to 'have' or 'hold' beliefs. One can believe that *p* and thus 'have' a given item of belief yet not 'have' the kind of disposition over it such as to exercise a claim or defence of the belief that *p*. Plato's *Theaetetus* illustrates this difference in disposition (197b9–12). Socrates differentiates two dispositions of 'having' with the example of a person who 'has' a cloak in the sense of owning it yet 'does not have' a cloak in the sense of 'having' it firmly and immediately at hand. If a person purchases a cloak and thus owns or possesses the cloak, but is it not wearing the cloak at a given moment, we ought to say that he does not 'have' it (though indeed he does in another sense 'possess' or 'have' it). Socrates explains the difference between 'possessing' an item (*ktesis*), or the mere 'having' it, and possessing an item such that one 'has' it at one's immediate disposal (*hexis*). Accordingly, the latter disposition refers to a kind of firm and immediate disposition of belief such that one is compelled to make a claim on that belief; the former refers to a kind of weak 'having' such that one detaches oneself from what one 'has'.

¹² For a criticism of Frede according to the standard conception of belief, see Gail Fine, "Sceptical *Dogmata: Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I 13," *Methexis* 13 (2000): 81–105. Fine takes Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973): 136–151, to be an original formulation of the standard conception.

grounds for rejecting the standard conception are obscure.¹³ But Fine and Perin are mistaken to think that Frede's clarification of weak belief rejects or implies any rejection of the standard conception. Frede elaborates a weak notion of belief in which 'the sceptic does not think that his impressions [beliefs] are such that they will come out true on the true theory of things.' He states that one can have the belief that *p* without having the 'further thought' that *p* is true, let alone the 'further thought' that *p* is true according to a true theory of things, but there is no reason to infer that weak belief rejects a conception of belief stipulating that believing that *p* consists in taking *p* to be true; taking *p* to be true is built into the belief that *p* such that there is no requirement for the one in possession of the belief that *p* to think, in addition to the belief that *p*, that *p* is true. In explaining and defending the standard conception, Fine assigns exactly this lack of any extraneous thought to the standard conception. That is, the standard conception does not mean that for A to believe *p* A must have an explicit or implicit 'further thought' that *p* is true. Rather, according to Fine, believing that *p* 'consists in, or essentially involves, taking *p* to be true' without any additional thought.¹⁴ Again, taking *p* to be true is internally built into what it means to believe. Frede's account of weak belief rejects the idea that believing *p* consists in, or essentially involves, taking any canon or criterion for what counts as true on the true theory of things. This is what dogmatic philosophy lays claim to in raising the conditions beyond ordinary usage for what counts as knowledge and what counts as true. And in compliance with the classical Academic scepticism considered here, the standard conception of belief avoids any posit of a canon or criterion for what counts as true, nor does it require for the one who believes that *p* to be in possession of an additional thought about what is true or counts as true in general.

The lack of any developed theory for what the true might be in the standard conception of belief is an important part of what makes the conception 'standard', and almost trivial. That is, the notion of the true in formulations of the standard conception is just as non-dogmatic as the notion of weak belief—for they both accommodate an ordinary sense of what counts as true, namely, that something is or seems to be the case. Indeed, Frede states that the classical sceptic may follow ordinary usage, and in perfect consistency with his scepticism, the sceptic may be moved to say 'that he knows this or that.' Frede construes the sceptic as following 'common custom to mark the fact that he is saying what he is saying having given the matter appropriate consideration in the way one ordinarily goes about doing this, by using the verb "to know".' For ordinary usage does not require that someone who says that he knows that *p* should have in possession the kind of demonstrable criteria or canons from which to justify his belief that *p* so as to eliminate incompatible beliefs or es-

¹³ Casey Perin, "Making Sense of Arcesilaus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 45 (2013): 313–340.

¹⁴ Fine, "Sceptical Dogmata," 84.

tablish his belief that p as a state of knowing that p with the unshakeable certainty of a philosophical sage.

In ordinary language, the verb ‘to know’ is as common as the adjectival use of ‘true’ to describe what is or seems to be the case. Adherents of the standard conception of belief often invoke ordinary usage in precisely this way to elucidate how the standard conception stipulates that beliefs have a built-in component fixed to aim at what is true.¹⁵ Fine appeals to an ordinary situation to shine light on the internal purport within the ordinary statement ‘I believe it’s raining.’ Fine makes the point that it would be unusual or odd for that same person to clarify the statement in terms of the ‘further thought’—‘I believe that it’s true that it’s raining.’ With a weak notion of belief, Frede leaves the internal purport of the true in the standard conception unchallenged, though he clearly rejects the requirement that one with a belief that p must also have the additional thought that p is true. Let’s extend Fine’s ordinary situation. Assume a bystander is within earshot of the statement ‘I believe it’s raining,’ and agrees with the initial statement by saying, ‘yes, that’s true; it’s raining.’ Note that this agreement need not imply that the additional thought ‘it’s true that it’s raining’ occurred to the original reporter, even though the second statement may be equivalent to the original. The one in agreement may not have had any ‘further thought’ about what counts as true according to a theory which raises the requirements for what counts as true. Again, the standard conception of belief denies that one must have a separate thought that ‘ p is true’ in believing that p , nor does it require one to possess in addition a criterion of the true according to which a theory of things might be justified or demonstrated. The standard conception of belief and the notion of weak belief are perfectly compatible, and it is the lack of this ‘further thought’ that can help us identify the way in which Arcesilaus held beliefs.

In fact, the ‘difference’ between weak and strong belief is quite helpful in specifying two varying modalities of belief within the standard conception. In the case of weak belief, the sceptic has the kind of belief which has built into it an ordinary sense of what is or seems to be true. Just as there is no requirement, according to the standard conception, for having some extraneous or ‘further thought’ about what counts as true over and above the ordinary expression ‘it’s true that p .’ That is, the sceptic with a weak belief that p does not see himself in a position to defend

¹⁵ Interpreters of Sextus, like Myles Burnyeat, “Can the Sceptic Live his Scepticism?,” in *The Original Sceptics*, 25–57, are mistaken to think that the classical sceptic’s use of non-epistemic appearance-statements (‘it appears’) rules out the attribution of ordinary epistemic beliefs (‘it is raining’), citing in support *PH* I.135, 198, 200 and *M* 7.18–19. However, Brennan, *Ethics and Epistemology*, 36–46, argues decisively that the context surrounding these passages does not warrant the generalisation Burnyeat wants, namely, from Sextus’ use of the language of appearance in his discussion of dogmatic beliefs to the beliefs that a sceptic ordinarily employs in his daily life. As Brennan notes, the non-epistemic appearance-statements are restricted to registering the sceptic’s experience in investigating the claims made by dogmatic philosophers; appearance-statements have no special function in registering the sceptic’s experience with things ordinarily.

the belief that *p*, for the sceptic is irresolute in so far as the sceptic does not have or acquiesce in any separate or ‘further thought’ about a canon of truth or knowledge according to which one might defend that *p* is true in a strong or robust mode. For one to engage in the practice of establishing the belief that *p* in the sense that might make that *p* a knowledge-claim or truth-claim according to a criterion of knowledge and truth, one would need to make the transition from a weak to a strong disposition of belief. This is just what Arcesilaus, in remaining a sceptical philosopher, takes himself to be unable to do.

But Frede’s formulation of the ‘difference’ is inadequate as it applies to Arcesilaus, for it does not account for the dialectical context in which claims or beliefs are examined and withheld by classical Academic scepticism. There is precedent in Socrates’ dialectical method for integrating the disposition or possession of weak belief with a ‘complex manner of searching or enquiring’ (*multiplex ratio disputandi*, *Tusc.* 5.11) that allows the dialectician to abstain from taking a position even while arguing *pro* and *contra* the positions taken and defended by interlocutors. Dialectical cross-examination allows the Academic sceptic to continue investigating without ever taking a position, or trying to demonstrate strongly held beliefs, while holding an assortment of beliefs himself. Plato’s *Theaetetus* presents Socrates as an empty or infertile maieutician: withholding strong beliefs in the dialectical investigation and eliciting from his interlocutors what he himself does not proclaim and defend (*Tht.* 157c7-d3). The three modern interpretations sketched above unwittingly replicate our best ancient sources on the philosophy of Arcesilaus—Sextus Empiricus (*M* 7.150–158, *PH* 1.232–34), Augustine (*Contra Ac.* 3.9.18–22), and Plutarch (*adv. Col.* 1121e-1122d)—in overlooking the full significance of maieutic method for Arcesilaus’ Academic scepticism. Cicero adheres, and claims that the sceptical Academy also adheres, to the restraint of Socrates’ dialectical midwifery. Cicero states ‘that those who openly admit teaching obstruct those who desire to learn’ (*ND* 1.10, cf. *Ac.* 2.60), but the restraint of scepticism is hardly ever traced back to its archetype in the method of Socrates in *Theaetetus*. While Frede’s Socratic interpretation discerns two relevant notions of belief for Arcesilaus’ scepticism, it mischaracterises the ‘difference’ and how the difference gives shape to what came to be known as classical Academic scepticism. The cut between two kinds of belief should be made, in my view, in strict conformity with the method of dialectical cross-examination in *Theaetetus*.

Some scholars contend that Socrates in *Theaetetus*, according to the procedure of midwifery, professes his total abstention from giving birth or reporting his beliefs in the course of cross-examining interlocutors. But there is no such profession in the dialogue. Thus we read of Socrates openly announcing a number of his beliefs, which he holds without any separate or ‘further thought’ about the exact nature of truth or knowledge. For example, Socrates believes that his interlocutor is experiencing the ‘labor pains’ (148e6) of intellectual pregnancy; or, that he believes a popular reproach against him is ‘true’ (*alēthes*, 150c6–7); Socrates believes that the reproach is ‘true’ despite the fact that those who disseminate it have no grasp of the cause,

or reason for, his dialectical method. The reproach alleges that 'he questions others but makes no claim or assertion of his own about anything on account of not having wisdom' (150c5–6). Those who disseminate the reproach are unaware that they are identifying a feature of Socrates' maieutic method. In openly announcing his beliefs regarding Theaetetus' pregnancy and the veracity of the reproach, it is important to note the ways in which the reproach and his expressed beliefs generally remain 'true' to the maieutic method.

First, Socrates stipulates that his method proscribes him from taking a position in direct response to the main philosophical question that elicits the interlocutor's beliefs. The reproach is 'true' in the qualified sense that maieutic Socrates does not make a claim or take a position in response to the main question, the 'what is F?' question, that serves to deliver or elicit through midwifery the beliefs of interlocutors. Thus Socrates does not say that he refrains from invoking any of his beliefs, both strong and weak beliefs. Nor does he refrain from issuing statements of the kind purporting that he believes that *p*. As a midwife, he merely refrains from generating and defending strong beliefs to the 'what is F?' question in the context of a dialectical examination. The abstention follows from his maieutic technique: not taking a position with respect to the question of knowledge helps in delivering the reasoning of his interlocutors. For Socrates there is nothing inconsistent in expressing weak beliefs either about Theaetetus or the popular reproach, since expressions of this kind do not consist in making a claim for which one strives to establish as true according to a criterion of truth or knowledge one takes oneself to securely possess. His manner of invoking these beliefs complies with the ordinary usage of taking to be true, or believing that *p*, while eschewing the activity of advancing claims and taking positions in the cross-examination.

Moreover, maieutic Socrates openly announces his agreement with the premises articulated by an interlocutor as a means of further eliciting a reasoned defence of the beliefs the interlocutor sees himself in a position to affirm and defend. In addition to the beliefs noted above, we read of Socrates openly announcing his belief that a god assists him with his maieutic method (150d5), and that no god can do evil to humans (151d1), in a sincere attempt to prevail on Theaetetus the benefit of submitting one's strong beliefs to cross-examination. Here again Socrates presumes and asserts, without justification or argument, that philosophical cross-examination with an old man such as himself, who confesses that he does not know what knowledge is, may have beneficial effects for the interlocutor. In examining Theaetetus' second definition of knowledge—that knowledge is true belief—Socrates even invokes his belief on the very nature of 'belief' (*doxa*), appending the crucial proviso that he cannot defend this view since he is 'not making a claim on a matter that he knows' (189e7). Socrates says that it seems to him that 'belief' consists in the activity of accepting or rejecting a *logos* ('assertion') that can be asserted 'silently to oneself' rather than asserted aloud. According to this tentative view, belief consists in at least a weak or deficient epistemic disposition in which one settles on an inner assertion and comes to a decision in the mode of an inner or silent that *p*. By invoking his be-

liefs in the dialogue, including his weak belief about what a ‘belief’ seems to him to be, Socrates is not making a claim for which he feels compelled to defend according to a criterion of knowledge. Nor can it be said, in the terminology of midwifery, that Socrates gave birth to beliefs in direct response to the main question under dialectical investigation. Instead, his method elicits the interlocutor’s claims and examines the interlocutor’s reasoning for those claims. It follows that weak beliefs, according to Socrates, can either be expressed aloud without taking a position or remain silent assertions. Either way, weak beliefs do not amount to making a claim or taking a position about anything in the dialectical examination.

At Ac. 2.66, Cicero suggests that Arcesilaus appealed to beliefs he considered ‘true’ at the outset of his cross-examinations. In reconstructing his interrogation of the Stoic doctrine of wisdom, Cicero invokes Arcesilaus’ agreement with Zeno: ‘For the sage, however, Arcesilaus agrees with Zeno that the greatest strength is to make sure that he isn’t tricked and to see to it that he isn’t deceived.’ Again, at Ac. 2.77, Cicero returns to Arcesilaus’ examination of Zeno’s doctrine, saying: ‘None of Zeno’s predecessors had ever explicitly formulated, or even suggested, the view that a person could hold no beliefs—and not just that they could, but that doing so was necessary for the sage. Arcesilaus thought that this belief was both true and honorable, as well as right for the sage’ (*visa est Arcesilae cum vera sententia tum honesta et digna sapienti*). Finally, at Ac. 1.45, Cicero says in his own voice that Arcesilaus believed that ‘nothing is more shameful (*neque hoc quicquam esse turpius*) than for one’s assent or approval to overtake knowledge and apprehension.’ Arcesilaus’ agreement with Stoicism at the beginning of the discussion complies with the procedure of maieutic method, for such agreement with an interlocutor is not a claim with respect to the main philosophical question posed that elicits the interlocutor’s theory of knowledge. Arcesilaus held beliefs, but he did not articulate those views in the mode of defence according to a criterion of truth or knowledge.

Moreover, the contrary claims or conclusions that result from Arcesilaus’ examination of the Stoic cataleptic impression are Arcesilaus’ beliefs (for instance, the belief in *akatalēpsia* and *epochē peri pantôn*). One might insist that such conclusions result from a *reductio ad absurdum*, exposing the incoherence of Stoic arguments. But to see these claims as more than the mere absurd claims of Stoicism gone wrong, recall Socrates’ dialectical method in *Theaetetus*. There Socrates brings Theaetetus’ claim that knowledge is perception just shy of a contrary claim; but later we find Theaetetus responding to Socrates with the assertion that a number of common properties (being and not-being, sameness and difference, etc.) are properly grasped by the soul, not the organs of perception. Theaetetus asserts the contrary claim or negative conclusion himself—that knowledge is not perception—to which Socrates the midwife adds (185e8): ‘For this was my belief, but I wanted this to be your belief too.’ Indeed, maieutic Socrates held beliefs but he remained reluctant

to proclaim and defend them.¹⁶ The reluctance is consistent with the observation that Socrates' beliefs emerge in *Theaetetus* in an oblique way, as the midwife 'never clearly formulates these beliefs (or their relationships in any authoritative way).'¹⁷ The very same status ought to be given not only to Arcesilaus' agreement with the Stoic premises noted above, but also to *akatalēpsia*, *epochē*, and the 'reasonable' criterion of action. Arcesilaus' beliefs arise indirectly in the cross-examination but not as part of an articulated defence according to an indisputable criterion of truth.

As a sceptic, Arcesilaus thus observed the dialectical method of *Theaetetus* in arguing *ad hominem* by not taking a position or defending his beliefs even when he found himself in agreement with the premises of Stoic doctrine.¹⁸ Arcesilaus held beliefs about the main philosophical question under investigation, but he remained reluctant to voice or overtly claim and defend his beliefs in the interest of acquiring or discovering what knowledge or wisdom may really be. It should be said that Arcesilaus held his beliefs with respect to the main philosophical question in the manner that Socrates specifies in *Theaetetus*—a disposition of belief that involves a deficient epistemic state in which one settles on a *logos* or assertion 'silently to oneself.' Since Arcesilaus was also aware that he did not know, he withheld making any claim about knowledge in the dialectical cross-examination and refrained from taking an outspoken position. In so far as Arcesilaus displayed a lack of conviction by not defending or seeking to establish any of his beliefs in an authoritative way, namely, as beliefs to be taught and learned as true doctrines in conformity with a theory of truth, one can truly say that he consistently suspended all dogmatic claims or beliefs that purport to respond to the main question under investigation in the cross-examination. That is, Arcesilaus, the first Academic sceptic, suspended making claims about anything whatever in the dialectical cross-examination.

In one sense, the Socratic interpretation is correct in saying that Arcesilaus did not make a claim or take an outspoken position about knowledge (or the lack of knowledge) in the way that his interlocutors did, or in the way that other philosophers who are non-maieutic or non-sceptical typically make claims, that is, by taking an outspoken position, either in writing or in a dialectical examination, and seeking to defend and establish particular claims as true. On the other hand, Socrates the midwife, or Arcesilaus the sceptic, brought their respective dialectical investigations of an interlocutor's claims to negative conclusions; both philosophers should be construed as having held beliefs throughout the examination, perhaps even beliefs about the main question of the discussion, though each suppressed any defence of those beliefs in the dialectical examination.

According to the maieutic interpretation developed here, Socratic and dialectical interpretations are mistaken in saying that Arcesilaus came to the oral examination with-

¹⁶ Zina Giannopoulou, "Socratic Midwifery; A Second Apology?," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 33 (2007): 55–87.

¹⁷ Annas, "Plato the Sceptic," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* Suppl. Vol. (1992): 43–72.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 54–57.

out any beliefs of his own. Rather, in announcing his agreement with Stoic premises, and keeping other weak beliefs that seem in conflict with the premises almost entirely to himself, Arcesilaus came to the search absent the stability and security of a disposition fit for defending the beliefs that strike him as true in the weak sense. The mere fact that he came to the cross-examination with beliefs does not mean, as both the original and revised dogmatic interpretations espouse, that Arcesilaus strove to establish and defend what he believed. Nor is it correct to say, as all three interpretations unanimously contend, that he set out determined to refute his dogmatic interlocutors. One may reasonably insist that Arcesilaus had some inclination to refute his Stoic interlocutors because of his long tenure as leader of a school notorious for challenging empirical claims to knowledge. Attributing such an inclination to Arcesilaus may be accurate, but it fails to account for the kind of beliefs he held and the reluctance built into the dialectical method he revived in Socrates' midwifery. Let's remember that *Theaetetus* is Plato's most sustained examination of knowledge and perception in the Platonic corpus, and yet it's not Socrates who refutes Theaetetus' empirical claim with a conflicting claim. Socrates the midwife takes himself to be empty of claims to make and defend, and yet it still may be accurate to say that Socrates had been inclined to believe that nothing can be known for certain through perception alone. On the maieutic interpretation, Arcesilaus set out in genuine search for truth, knowledge and wisdom like Socrates the midwife, finding himself reluctant to take a position in the fashion of dogmatic philosophers in the Hellenistic period. The discovery of truth would have furnished a radical transformation from the deficient epistemic state of weak belief to one in which he would be ready and disposed to argue for his beliefs. But the transformation into a dogmatic philosopher is not one that ever took place for the classical scepticism of Arcesilaus, who for the first time in the history of Plato's Academy revived the method of Socrates' midwifery.

