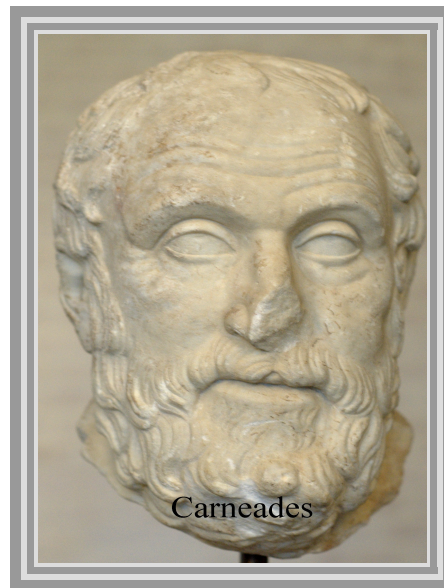


*Agri non omnes fugiferi sunt.*¹
Classical Thought²



The Roman Empire and Classical Thought: Scepticism³ in the Roman Empire

Scepticism after the death of Aristotle.

Look back at Term 2 Week 1 Day four to ensure you remember what Scepticism was.

There is a problem within scepticism itself which makes finding out the details of sceptic teaching difficult. Sceptics says no one knows anything for sure. They think that there may not be any objective reality out there at all. If there is, they say, no one could know anything about it for sure and even if you could know about it you could not communicate it to anybody. Since this was what sceptics thought, they did not bother writing books – there was no point! This means that they left little behind for us to study to find out what they thought in any detail. Since they held that there was no absolute truth they simply did not write.

Sextus Empiricus (c. 160AD -c. 210AD)

Given the problem outlined above, we have to rely on information from Sextus Empiricus who records what the sceptics said. He begins with Pyrrho⁴ who lived about 500 years earlier.⁵

According to Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrho did not actually say that truth cannot be discovered. Rather he said that men must always be *searching for* the truth. It is out there, in other words, but no one has a full, certain grasp of it. He denied that whatever we sense of objects will lead us validly to

1 All fields are not fruitful. Cicero.

2 These lessons are derived from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnow.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

3 See Term 2 Week 1 Day 4

4 See Term 2 Week 1 Day 4

5 In passing we can note that this is a very long while after Pyrrho's time. Far longer that the distance that separates the writers of the New Testament from the life of Jesus Christ for instance. Yet, the words of the Gospel writers are routinely and regularly doubted whereas Sextus Empiricus is usually taken as having accurately described the teachings of Pyrrho!

know their true nature. We only know the appearance of things. What Pyrrho wanted men to do was to suspend judgement. He said for every affirmation that men can make you can find another man who denies it. In other words, people disagree! This is not a good argument for saying that we cannot know the truth. Imagine a maths teacher taking this approach. Children bring various answers to a maths problem and so the teacher says well, since you have different answers I suppose no one can know for sure! This is clearly not a helpful approach.

Pyrrho also said (according to Sextus Empiricus) that we need to find a criterion or absolute standard. He said if we are to distinguish between truth and error we need a standard to judge by. But, he said, the problem is we have different standards to distinguish between truth and error so now you need a standard to distinguish between the standards! But, he continued, these standards also differ so a higher standard is needed to distinguish between the standards. This leads to what is called an “infinite regress” of standards of standards of standards going back into infinity. This means we cannot exactly distinguish truth from error. In addition Pyrrho taught that everything we perceive we perceive through the use of sense organs that function differently in different circumstances and that vary from person to person and from species to species. Different species do have different sense organs: some animals do not distinguish colours the same way as we do for instance. We know a sick person can see different colours or shapes and perspectives can give different effects to the viewer. So, said Pyrrho, everything is relative and we cannot know the objective state of the world based on our sense perception and we only have our senses to perceive by. Therefore we cannot know anything for sure.

Carneades (214/3–129/8 BC)

Carneades was a leading teacher in Plato's academy yet he was a sceptic. By the time he died he was head of Plato's Academy. Plato had stood for the objective unchanging nature of the “forms” which he said could be known by human reason. Plato believed in certainty. He would not have been happy with Carneades' ideas. Plato died in 347BC. So we see that his ideas had not lasted 220 years. By the end of the Roman period scepticism had gained such ground that even the academy of Plato was sceptical.

Acts 17

Re-read this chapter in which Paul encounters the philosophers. Notice that Platonists are not mentioned nor are Aristotelians or Peripatetics. Scepticism had infected both Plato and Aristotle's schools. The leading philosophies by the time of the *Acts* were philosophies of life – they were lifestyle philosophies not philosophies of metaphysics and epistemology. By this time Athens was dominated by the ethical philosophies of the Stoics and the Epicureans.

In this survey of philosophy we have seen how the non-Christian philosophers could give no consistent answers to the questions of how we know what we know and how we should live our lives. We now come to the advent of Christ and Christianity has answers to these questions.