

Following Alexander the Great’s death in 323 BC and Aristotle’s death a year later, four post-Aristotelian traditions of thought arose in Athens: (1) Epicureanism (307 BC), (2) Stoicism (c. 300 BC), (3), Skepticism (1st Century BC), & Neo-Platonism (5th century BC). Greek word, *“skeptis”* means “investigation” and *“skeptikos”* means “inquirer.” They radicalized the Socratic Dictum: *“All I know is that I know nothing.”*

| Pre-Socratic Roots:   | 2 Types of Ancient Skepticism:   | Academic Skepticism: Knowledge is Impossible   | Pyrrhonian Skepticism: Knowledge is Unknown  | Various Types of Skepticism:  |
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| <p><b>Xenophanes (c. 570-480 BC):</b><br/><i>“Even if truth were stated, it could not be known.”</i></p> <p><b>Heraclitus (c. 535-475 BC):</b><br/>Since everything is in flux, it is impossible to discover any certain, fixed, &amp; transcendent truth beyond this truth itself.</p> <p><b>Cratylus (469-399 BC):</b><br/>You cannot even step even once into the same river because both you &amp; the river are constantly in flux. Since everything is in flux, including language/meaning, communication is impossible.</p> <p><b>Sophist Tradition (5th Century BC):</b><br/>Any position is as valid as the next.</p> <p><b>Protagoras (c. 490-421 BC):</b><br/>Best known Sophist claimed that <i>“man is the measure of all things.”</i></p>   | <p><b>I. Academic Skepticism:</b><br/>Key figures:</p> <p>(1) Arcesilaus (ca. 316-242 BC)</p> <p>(2) Carneades (ca 213-129 BC)</p> <p><b>II. Pyrrhonian Skepticism:</b><br/>Key figures:</p> <p>(1) Pyrrho (ca 365-230 BC)</p> <p>(2) Aenesidemus (1st century BC or AD)</p> <p>(3) Sextus Empiricus (ca AD 150 and AD 250)</p> <p><b>Similarities:</b></p> <p>(1) Both deny the possibility of knowledge or certainty;</p> <p>(2) Both contend for a particular way of living life.</p> <p><b>Differences:</b></p> <p>(1) Arose from very distinct sources;</p> <p>(2) Differ from one another with particular details of doctrine/teachings.</p> | <p>Arose by certain heirs of Plato’s Academy who challenged the dogmatic claims of Platonism and Stoicism. They claimed: <i>“all things are inapprehensible.”</i></p> <p>In other words, nothing can be known or grasped. Why? Sensory impressions do not actually enable you to know anything. They can mislead you. Whether this claim is actually historically true, it is associated with them. They emphasized a radical form of skepticism that claimed for a suspension of belief in both philosophy &amp; even everyday topics. They sought to show through argumentation that there are no infallible positions. Therefore, inquire only &amp; suspend all beliefs.</p> <p><b>Problems:</b></p> <p>1. To claim that nothing can be known is in itself logically incoherent.</p> <p>2. Any argument used to justify this position can’t be known either.</p> | <p><b>Origins to Pyrrho of Elis:</b></p> <p>(1) Skepticism as a particular way of life; keep all questions open.</p> <p>(2) Suspend Judgment on all Issues;</p> <p>(3) Why? Human happiness, our end or goal, is found in quietude or tranquility (<i>ataraxia</i>). In other words, happiness can only be achieved by the suspension of judgment (<i>epoche</i>). In other words, no longer allow yourself to be troubled or disturbed by philosophical disputes, judgments, &amp; competitive positions of equal persuasive force.</p> <p>(4) Philosophy can bring about this way of life so that tranquility can be achieved.</p> <p>(5) Live in accordance with things as they appear to be but do not take a position, point of conviction, or a stand on the reality or truth behind them.</p> | <p>(1) Total Skepticism:<br/>Nothing can known; suspend judgments in all matters whether the possibility of knowledge and opinion.</p> <p>(2) Modified Skepticism:<br/>While not doubting some things are knowable, MS seek to suspend judgment on matters like external reality &amp; God, history &amp; metaphysics, &amp; knowledge from a particular source like reason.</p> <p>(3) Pyrrhonian Skepticism:<br/>Simply follow things as they appear to be but withhold judgment as to whether reality is as it appears.</p> <p>(4) Carneades’ Skepticism:<br/>Reject the possibility of knowledge, but accept the position that a wise person can legitimately hold mere belief.</p> |
| <p><b>Common Criticisms Made Against Skepticism:</b></p> <p><b>A. Logically Self-Defeating:</b> (1) To claim we cannot know reality is a statement that presupposes knowledge about reality; (2) One cannot consistently separate the two realms (reality &amp; knowledge/appearances &amp; personal belief) without some knowledge of both.</p> <p><b>B. Workability Problem:</b> (1) Suspension of belief is unworkable in living life; (2) If one suspends belief about God, truth, and even miracles, one cannot claim that God does not exist, truth is unknowable, and miracles cannot occur.</p> <p><b>C. Contrary to Personal Experience:</b> (1) One cannot live a life of suspended judgment on all metaphysical &amp; moral matters; (2) Life demands certain commitments that goes beyond appearances and beliefs; (3) Problem of assent to reality as it is and true truth in everyday living</p> <p><b>D. Existential Relevance:</b> We have an inherent need for ultimate intelligibility, to identify things as they actually are, &amp; <i>true truth</i>.” If these are real needs, then then there are objects to meet those real needs (not merely desire or wishful thinking).</p> |  |  |  | <p>Whereas Pyrrhonist skepticism sought to overcome our human desire for certainty and embrace uncertainty, Rene Descartes (1596-1650), the father of modern philosophy, used skepticism as a tool to discover certainty, clear and distinct ideas, and the possibility of real knowledge &amp; indubitable truths which can resist doubt.</p>  |

The question remains: Can ancient skeptics contend for their position, relevance, or meaningfulness about their worldview without making claims about the way things actually are? How can they keep from being self-refuting & logically incoherent? Can this suspension of judgment, acceptance of only beliefs irregardless of what is actually real or true really be workable as we live life? What about existential relevance? Is this truly worthwhile? Can we actually live without “true truth”? Why does the formation of cognitive beliefs appear to be a central aspect to our humanity? Is it even healthy to deny the need for correspondence to reality? Are we diminishing an aspect of our humanity by holding such a position? If their a real need to know what is real & true, then perhaps we can know reality & truth? If that is the case, then perhaps our denial of reality & truth is a choice of willful ignorance?