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978-0-521-62207-3 - The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School

Voula Tsouna

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CYRENAIC SCHOOL

The Cyrenaic school was a fourth-century BC philosophical movement, related both to the Socratic tradition and to Greek scepticism. In ethics, Cyrenaic hedonism can be seen as one of many attempts made by the associates of Socrates and their followers to endorse his ethical outlook and to explore the implications of his method. In epistemology, there are close philosophical links between the Cyrenaics and the Sceptics, both Pyrrhonists and Academics. There are further links with modern philosophy as well, for the Cyrenaics introduce a form of subjectivism which in some ways pre-announces Cartesian views, endorsed by Malebranche and Hume and developed by Kant. This constitutes the philosophical underpinnings of Cyrenaic scepticism, summarised by the thesis that we can only know our own experiences but cannot know anything else, including objects in the world and other minds.

This book reconstructs Cyrenaic epistemology, explains how it depends on Cyrenaic hedonism, locates it in the context of ancient debates and discusses its connections with modern and contemporary epistemological positions.

VOULA TSOUNA is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of California at Santa Barbara. She is co-author, with Giovanni Indelli, of [*Philodemus*] [*On Choices and Avoidances*] (1995) and author of articles on Plato and on Hellenistic and Roman philosophy.

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Cyrenaic philosophy is related to two ancient traditions: the Socratic movement and Greek scepticism. It belongs to the former on historical grounds, since it is one of many attempts made by the intimate associates of Socrates and their followers to endorse his ethical outlook and to explore implications of the principles of his teachings. It fits into the latter by virtue of the close philosophical relations linking the Cyrenaic epistemological views with the two main varieties of scepticism encountered in Greek philosophy, the one reaching back to Pyrrho of Elis in the fourth century BC and the other associated with a particular phase in the history of Plato's Academy.

From the systematic point of view, the Cyrenaic doctrine introduced a form of subjectivism which in some ways appears to pre-announce the subjectivism of Descartes, as endorsed by Malebranche and Hume and developed by Kant. The Cyrenaic conception of subjective knowledge constitutes the philosophical underpinnings of the scepticism of the school, summarised by the thesis that we are unable to know anything at all about objects in the external world. In contrast to the moderns, the Cyrenaics assumed that empirical objects exist and that they act upon us in various ways. Nevertheless, their scepticism, more than any other epistemological position in antiquity, resembles what modern philosophy calls scepticism about the external world.

My main aim in this book is to reconstruct Cyrenaic epistemology in all its interrelated aspects, to locate it precisely in the context of ancient philosophical debate, and to explore its philosophical connections with modern and contemporary epistemological positions.

Before I sketch the main outlines of my argument, I should say perhaps some things about the evidence, which in fact is fairly complex. Since the original writings of the Cyrenaics have perished, we can only reconstruct their epistemological views from what other authors tell us. With few exceptions these are later authors who in most cases did not

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make use of the original writings of the Cyrenaic philosophers, but selected information from secondary sources and presented it in a context determined by their own philosophical agenda and from a point of view belonging to their own time. I do not here discuss in detail problems in the doxographical evidence; however, I provide references to scholarly treatments of such issues.

My examination of the Cyrenaic doctrine is organised under two headings, subjectivism and scepticism. A third section is devoted to discussing the relations between Cyrenaic epistemology and other ancient doctrines that present important similarities to it. These sections are preceded by an introductory chapter (chapter 1), in which I sketch out the connection between the epistemology and the ethics of the Cyrenaics and thus give a perspective from which we can make sense of their basic epistemological thesis.

The subjectivism of the school is centred on the notion of the *pathē*, undergoings produced on a subject by its contact with an object. Crucial to the analysis of the concept of the *pathē*, which I undertake in chapter 2, are their physiological and psychological characteristics, as well as their ontological status. Some of the topics I discuss are the physicalistic association of different kinds of *pathē* with different kinds of bodily alterations, their description as states which have no ethical value beyond the actual time of their occurrence, and the thesis that they are detected by the so-called internal touch – a notion that I attempt to clarify by referring to a late Epicurean discussion of the function of the senses. Regarding the ontological aspects of the *pathē*, I argue that the Cyrenaic emphasis on the subjective aspects of bodily changes does not presuppose or entail the mind–body problem as we know it from Descartes onwards; nevertheless, their conception of the *pathē* primarily as experiences constitutes a philosophically interesting alternative to modern conceptions of subjective states.

In chapter 3 I examine the technical vocabulary that the Cyrenaics coined to refer to the *pathē*. I distinguish between two types of locutions: verbal expressions such as ‘I am whitened’ and ‘I am sweetened’, and adverbial phrases such as ‘I am affected whitely’. Both of these are autobiographical, i.e., they report the manner in which I am being affected at a given time, and both are central to the analysis that follows, since they constitute the only categories of sentences which, in the Cyrenaic view, are incorrigibly true.

In examining the epistemic status of such reports in chapter 4, I clarify the sense in which the *pathē* and the reports about them are

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attested as the only objects of apprehension and the sole criteria of truth. I compare these claims to the most important uses of the concepts of the criterion, of apprehension and of evidence in Hellenistic philosophy, and maintain that, although it may be anachronistic to attribute these concepts to the Cyrenaics, it is philosophically enlightening to do so. I next study the epistemic characteristics of the sentences describing *pathē*, and in particular the claim that privileged access to our own *pathē* guarantees the truth of sentences reporting them. Subsequently, I raise the question of why the Cyrenaics assumed the *pathē* to be self-evident and I attempt to answer it by interpreting the Cyrenaic position in terms of two twentieth-century foundationalist positions about self-evident propositions and self-evident states. I argue that, on the one hand, infallible awareness of the *pathē* does not amount to direct and immediate perception of distinct mental objects and thus does not conform to the perceptual model suggested by the sense-data theories; on the other hand, the Cyrenaic thesis is comparable in important ways to the analysis of perception proposed by other modern foundationalists known as adverbial analysis theorists. I go on to draw a comparison between the Cyrenaics and the Pyrrhonian Sceptics which aims to circumscribe the scope of the claim that only the *pathē* are apprehensible. I compare the position of the Cyrenaics with Sextus' observation that the *pathē*, among other things, constitute the Sceptics' criterion for practical life; my argument is that, while the Sceptics did not assign to the *pathē* a proper epistemic status, the Cyrenaics did. This is precisely what makes their position revolutionary in comparison with those of other ancient sceptics, and what brings them close to modern scepticism.

Chapter 5 completes the analysis of Cyrenaic subjectivism by examining a set of objections levelled against it by Aristocles of Messene, a Peripatetic philosopher who aimed to prove that the Cyrenaic redefinition of knowledge is too narrow to explain all the kinds of knowledge that we have, and also that our awareness of the *pathē* entails or presupposes that we possess knowledge which goes beyond the *pathē*. Aristocles' argument raises important philosophical issues, primarily the question whether the awareness of short-lived internal states is sufficient to explain the conception of oneself as a human being, and whether the possession of subjective knowledge may presuppose that one makes certain cognitive assumptions about objective reality. These points constitute important challenges not only for the Cyrenaics but for most forms of modern subjectivism.

The section on Cyrenaic scepticism examines two main issues, the attitude of the Cyrenaics towards the problem of the external world and their doubts about other minds. In chapter 6, I argue that the expressions used to refer to the external causes of the *pathē* strongly suggest that the Cyrenaics did not question the existence of a reality external to the perceiver. This basic assumption of objectivity corresponds to the limited scope of their scepticism: they did not attempt to explain away all empirical knowledge in terms of awareness of subjective experiences, but restricted their discussion to the perception of single empirical properties or qualities. They did not question the existence of concrete objects such as horses and people, but only denied that we can have cognitive access to their properties. Their position, I suggest, invites philosophers to re-examine the force of the fundamental assumption that there is an external world and to compare the circumscribed epistemological doubts of the Cyrenaics with the enlarged scepticism outlined by Descartes in the *Meditations*.

The assessment of their attitude regarding the problem of the external world is important for understanding the nature of the position that the Cyrenaics take with regard to other minds and for distinguishing it from what came to be called in modern philosophy the problem of Other Minds. Chapter 7 maintains that, ontologically, the Cyrenaics assumed that people other than the perceiver experience *pathē* similar in structure to the perceiver's *pathē*, while, epistemologically, they denied that we can gain cognitive access to the content of other people's *pathē*. I argue that their position is weaker than modern versions of the problem of Other Minds, precisely because it is not dominated by the claims and assumptions related to the mind-body problem. Although they posit that we have no access to the *pathē* of our neighbour because they are private, they do not consider privacy the exclusive mark of the mental; and although they contrast our incorrigible access to our own *pathē* with our inability to gain access to our neighbour's *pathē*, they do not apply the concepts of incorrigibility and privileged access to a distinct non-physical realm. These distinctions help isolate what is really distinctive and valuable about the Cyrenaic position and also contribute to understanding the theoretical assumptions behind modern formulations of the problem of Other Minds.

In connection with their position on other minds, the Cyrenaics make some remarks on language. In particular, they draw a contrast between the privacy and incommunicability of our *pathē* on the one hand, and the use of words which we all share on the other hand. In chapter 8, I specify

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the nature of that contrast and I examine whether it implies that the Cyrenaics find the semantic relationship between words and what they signify inherently problematic. I attempt to clarify the Cyrenaic remarks further by comparing them to the empiricist account of language offered by John Locke.

What is distinctive about Cyrenaic epistemology becomes clearer once it is set against two other epistemological positions that might appear almost identical with it: the Epicurean thesis that all sensations or sense-impressions are true, and the doctrine of the so-called 'subtler' philosophers deployed in the first part of Plato's *Theaetetus*. The third part of the book is centred on these issues.

In chapter 9, I examine the merits of Plutarch's claim that the positions of both the Cyrenaics and the Epicureans entail that infallible awareness of our internal states does not enable us to draw reliable inferences about external objects. I refute this claim primarily by arguing that, while the Epicureans considered the knowledge of sense-impressions knowledge of something physical (an atomic structure with which the perceiver is in contact), the Cyrenaics defined knowledge of the *pathē* exclusively in terms of the awareness of internal states. Thus, in the former case the gap between the sense-impressions and objects is the gap between the films of atoms and the objects emitting them, while in the latter case the gap is defined in terms of the transition from experience to reality. The main philosophical interest of this chapter lies in the fact that the problems raised about the Epicurean theory of perception are found in many representational theories, ancient and modern.

The next parallel which I examine is between Cyrenaic subjectivism and the relativism ascribed to the 'subtler' philosophers in the first part of Plato's *Theaetetus*. This parallel was drawn both by ancient and by modern authors to the effect that the two doctrines amount to practically the same philosophical position. My task in chapter 10 is to clarify the relation between these two doctrines by spelling out their similarities as well as their differences. One philosophically important result is that we can see that the difference between relativism and scepticism is conditioned by the different concepts of truth and knowledge involved in the two approaches.

The autonomy and uniqueness of Cyrenaic epistemology raises questions about its Socratic pedigree. Chapter 11 explores on what grounds the doctrine could have reasonably been considered an offshoot of Socrates' teachings. Following up the interpretation outlined in chapter 1, I argue that the Cyrenaics could present their epistemic analysis of the

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pathē as an effort to obey, like Socrates, the Delphic command ‘Know yourself’ and to pursue the Socratic example of self-knowledge; they could look to Socrates’ avowals of ignorance as legitimating sources of their own scepticism about the knowledge of external objects; and they could inscribe their epistemology in the context of an attempt to ground moral behaviour in some kind of knowledge or understanding, thus appearing to investigate further the implications of Socrates’ intellectualism. Such arguments may serve as an example of the ways in which the philosophers and the schools associated with the Socratic movement could have looked to Socrates as a source of inspiration and legitimation. They can be taken to illustrate both how pliable and fluid are the ideas habitually attributed to the historical Socrates and how resourceful the schools who bid for the mantle of Socrates could be in manipulating these ideas, each on its own account.

I append a collection of source materials in translation, parts of which are cited in the main body of my text. It is based on the editions of G. Giannantoni (*I Cirenaici*, Florence 1958), E. Mannebach (*Aristippi et Cyrenaicorum fragmenta*, Leiden/Cologne 1961), and G. Giannantoni’s edition of the fragments and testimonies on Socrates and the Socratics (*Socratis et Socraticorum reliquiae*, Naples 1990). However, it differs from previous collections in two ways. I include passages which, although not directly addressing the epistemology of the school, assist in reconstructing and assessing the theory; and I also give more context for the testimonies than previous collections have done, wherever it seems historically or philosophically informative to do so.

My overall interpretation is, by some lights, conservative. On the one hand, I maintain that Cyrenaic epistemology introduces the idea that some kind of truth can be achieved within the limits of subjective experiences, lays claim to knowledge of these experiences, and emphasises the gap between our sense-contents and the things they purport to represent. On the other hand, I resist radical conclusions such as that the Cyrenaics held a Cartesian view of the mind and that they defended a form of anti-realism, and I maintain that their doubts about external objects, about other minds and about the use of ordinary language are less ambitious than they might appear.

The reasons for this restraint are set out in some detail in chapter 1. Here, it suffices to say that my line of interpretation has, I think, considerable historical and textual support. Philosophically, I hope to convince the reader that the study of Cyrenaic scepticism is well worth getting into, both for its own intrinsic interest and for the light it can cast

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on the presuppositions that we habitually have about subjectivity, objectivity and the nature of sceptical doubts. To give an example, my discussion of the Cyrenaic theory suggests ways in which the privacy of internal states, as well as the infallibility of first-person reports and the accessibility of other minds can be problematised independently of the Cartesian mind–body distinction. And thus it may call for a re-examination of the weight usually assigned to this distinction in formulating epistemological problems.

I shall now come to practical details. Regarding the notes, some are historical, others exegetic, others draw parallels and comparisons between the Cyrenaics and modern philosophers, many of which inform the discussion in the main text without being explicitly mentioned. There is nothing exclusive or normative about these comparisons: they are not the only ones that can or should be drawn. They merely reflect my own interests and train of thought. Regarding the bibliographical references, as well as the bibliography, I have not thought it necessary, or indeed possible, to make them exhaustive. There are several excellent bibliographies on Hellenistic philosophy, and also on the theories of knowledge and on problems in metaphysics and philosophy of mind, with which the readers whom this book primarily addresses are familiar. I cite mainly the scholarly literature to which my argument is indebted, as well as the modern works that have influenced my discussion most.

I have tried to make each chapter as autonomous as possible, and yet to thread each section to the argument in other chapters. This has resulted in numerous cross-references, which I hope will not be too cumbersome.

The book should be accessible to readers with no Greek or Latin. All the texts discussed are given in English translation. I have transliterated individual words and short phrases that readers with no Greek or Latin need to pronounce and use, whereas longer phrases or sentences are cited in the original languages. This is merely a rule of thumb, which I have occasionally abandoned when it seemed appropriate.

Readers will, I trust, forgive me a few words about how this book came into being and what its relation is to my past work on the Cyrenaics. I have been thinking about its subject since working on my doctorate, part of which treated the epistemology of the Cyrenaics. The references to my doctoral thesis, which was completed in July 1988, witness the extent to which I have drawn on it. But this book is another and a very different piece of work. I do not undertake here to spell out

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and justify the historical and philological assumptions that I make about the Cyrenaic school and doctrine, as I did in my thesis and previous publications. What I am interested in is to raise exegetic and systematic issues and to assess the epistemological views of the Cyrenaics philosophically. I hope I can convince my readers as to the merits of these views.

Relatively few people have seen this work in unpublished form. To those who have, I owe a large debt of gratitude for the gift of their time, for their comments and criticisms no less than for their patience and support. David Blank guided me through intricacies of text, grammar and semantics to help me make sense of the Cyrenaic remarks on language. Richard McKirahan often pointed out what the text says as opposed to what I had wished it to say, and corrected infelicities of language and style throughout the manuscript. From David Sedley's generosity I benefited not once but many times. As an editor for *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, he made me see how to pull loose strings together in my articles on the Cyrenaics and on the Socratic schools and this paid off, I think, in several chapters of the book. Also, he kindly offered to read the entire manuscript and gave me extensive written comments which led me to make, in many places, substantial alterations to my text. It is difficult to thank Myles Burnyeat adequately, partly because my debts to him are so many, and partly because the ways in which he helped me are so very much his own and I cannot readily pin them down. The least I can do is to acknowledge his detailed criticisms on the penultimate draft of the manuscript, which forced me to rethink once again my overall interpretation and, in some cases, to argue my ideas afresh. A debt of another kind is owed to the National Endowment for the Humanities which supported my project with a one-year Research Fellowship in 1994–5.

This book is for Jacques Brunschwig. His work has been a model for me of what scholarly rigour and philosophical strength together can achieve in the study of ancient texts. I have had the gift of his advice and scrutiny of my arguments in this monograph as in much else. And, for many years past, I have cherished his friendship.

Abbreviations

Anonymous	Anonymous in <i>Theaetetus</i>
Aristotle	
<i>De an.</i>	<i>De anima</i>
<i>De int.</i>	<i>De interpretatione</i>
<i>EN</i>	<i>Ethica Nicomachea</i>
<i>Metaph.</i>	<i>Metaphysica</i>
<i>Phys.</i>	<i>Physica</i>
Athenaeus	
Athenaeus	<i>Deipnosophistai</i>
<i>Deipn.</i>	<i>Deipnosophistai</i>
Augustine (St)	
<i>Contr.Acad.</i>	<i>Contra Academicos</i>
<i>De civ.dei</i>	<i>De civitate dei</i>
Cicero	
<i>Acad.</i>	<i>Academica</i>
<i>De fin.</i>	<i>De finibus</i>
<i>De or.</i>	<i>De oratore</i>
<i>Luc.</i>	<i>Lucullus</i>
<i>Tusc.</i>	<i>Tusculanae disputationes</i>
Clement of Alexandria	
Clement of Alexandria	<i>Stromateis</i>
<i>Strom.</i>	<i>Stromateis</i>
Diogenes Laertius	
D.L.	Diogenes Laertius, <i>Vitae philosophorum</i>
DK	H. Diels and W. Kranz, <i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i> , Berlin 1951
Epictetus	
<i>Epict.diatr.</i>	<i>Epicteti dissertationes ab Arriano digestae</i>

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Epicurus	
<i>KD</i>	<i>Ratae sententiae (Kyriae doxai)</i>
Epiphanius	
<i>Adv.haer.</i>	<i>Adversus haeresias</i>
Eusebius	
Eusebius	Eusebius Caesariensis, <i>Praeparatio evangelica</i>
<i>Praep.ev.</i>	<i>Praeparatio evangelica</i>
Galen (ps.)	
<i>Hist.phil.</i>	<i>Historia philosopha</i>
Hesychius	
<i>Onom.</i>	<i>Onomatologos</i>
HR	<i>The Philosophical Works of Descartes</i> , translated by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, Cambridge 1911, vols. I and II
Jerome (St)	
<i>Epist.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
Lactantius	
<i>Divin.inst.</i>	<i>Divinae institutiones</i>
LSJ	<i>Greek–English Lexicon</i> , compiled by H. S. Liddell and R. Scott, revised and augmented by H. S. Jones, Oxford
Lucretius	
<i>DNR</i>	<i>De natura rerum</i>
PHerc.	Papyrus Herculanensis
Plato	
<i>Apol.</i>	<i>Apologia</i>
<i>Charm.</i>	<i>Charmides</i>
<i>Phd.</i>	<i>Phaedo</i>
<i>Phil.</i>	<i>Philebus</i>
<i>Rep.</i>	<i>Respublica</i>
<i>Symp.</i>	<i>Symposium</i>
<i>Theaet.</i>	<i>Theaetetus</i>
<i>Tim.</i>	<i>Timaeus</i>
Plutarch	
Plutarch	Plutarch, <i>Adversus Colotem</i>
<i>Adv.Col.</i>	<i>Adversus Colotem</i>
Seneca	
<i>Epist.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>

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Sextus Empiricus	Sextus Empiricus
Sextus	
<i>PH</i>	<i>Pyrrhoniae hypotyposes</i> (<i>Outlines of Pyrrhonism</i>)
<i>M</i>	<i>Adversus mathematicos</i> (<i>Against the Professors</i>)
Strabo	
Strabo	<i>Geographia</i>
SSR	<i>Socratis et Socraticorum reliquiae</i> , ed. G. Giannantoni, Rome 1990
SVF	<i>Stoicorum veterum fragmenta</i> , ed. H. von Arnim, Leipzig 1903–24
Themistius	
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orationes</i>
Xenophon	
<i>Mem.</i>	<i>Memorabilia</i>

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