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978-0-521-19025-1 - Aenesidemus of Cnossus: Testimonia

Edited with Introduction and Commentary by Roberto Polito

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Scepticism is one of the most important ancient philosophies, and very influential throughout modern and contemporary thought. The largely legendary fourth-century BC guru Pyrrho of Elis was said to be its initiator, but very little is known of what he thought. We know far more about Sextus Empiricus, the last eminent ancient Sceptic, who lived in the late second century AD, and whose output has partially come down to us. However, Sextus is hardly a creative and independent mind. Some commentators go so far as to consider him a mere copyist.¹ Thus the shaping of Scepticism is to be placed somewhere between Pyrrho and Sextus. Pyrrho's pupil Timon of Phlius appears to have made an important contribution,² but his legacy languished soon after his death.³ It is only with Aenesidemus, in the first century BC, that a Pyrrhonist tradition came to life.⁴ Thus a more adequate understanding of Aenesidemus is an obvious desideratum, and, since none of his works has survived, collecting the extant evidence is a first and necessary step.

In what follows I shall give some information concerning Aenesidemus as well as take a closer look at his contribution to Scepticism, with the purpose of demonstrating my initial claim that he played a central role in the Pyrrhonist tradition.

Aenesidemus' acme can be conjecturally dated to the early or mid first century BC.⁵ His birthplace is a matter of controversy.⁶

¹ See below, 'The sources', n. 11.

² Brunschwig (1994) emphasises the role of Timon, suggesting that it went well beyond that of a bare spokesman of Pyrrho.

³ Diog. Laert. 9. 115–16 (= A 5) and comm.

⁴ A 5 (see previous note) and Aristocl. *ap. Euseb. Praep. evang.* 14.18.29 (= A 4) and comm.

⁵ The dating is arrived at by combining different reports; the most relevant are Phot. *Bibl.* 212 169b 32–5 (= A 1); 170a 14–22 (= A 3); Aristocl. *ap. Euseb. Praep. evang.* 14.18.29 (= A 4). See comm. *ad loc.*

⁶ Phot. *Bibl.* 212 170a 39–41 (= A 2) speaks of Aigai; Diog. Laert. 9.115–16 (= A 5) of Cnossus. See comm. *ad loc.*

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But at least we know that he spent a part of his life in Alexandria.⁷ This is important information, because it suggests that we should interpret his thought in the light of the cultural climate there. Furthermore, we know that he dedicated one of his works to a member of the Roman élite, Lucius Tubero, who, we are told, was affiliated to the sceptical Academy.⁸

According to an ancient source Aenesidemus was the pupil of one Heraclides.⁹ In view of echoes of Empiricist themes found in Aenesidemus' works, it is tempting to identify his teacher Heraclides with the Empiricist namesake of Tarentum. The chronologies of both Heraclides of Tarentum and Aenesidemus agree with this hypothesis, and so does their shared location in Alexandria. However, in the absence of any additional information concerning the Heraclides whose pupil Aenesidemus is said to be, the identification is only speculative.

We have an extensive report on one of Aenesidemus' treatises, the *Arguments of the Pyrrhonists* in ten books. There he expounded the nature of his philosophy by comparison with Academic scepticism,¹⁰ and went on to review and argue against all philosophical ('dogmatic') concepts. The invariable conclusion is that we have no understanding of each concept under discussion.¹¹ In the absence of any such understanding, he suggests that we should yield to the ways things manifest themselves to us ('appearances'), without attempting to conceptualise them.¹²

Thus the main feature of this work is to offer a systematic refutation of 'dogmatism', in the form of a sceptical encyclopaedia arranged according to the conventional threefold division of philosophy. There is no parallel for this in sceptical Academic literature. Leading Academics such as Arcesilaus and Carneades

⁷ Aristocl. *ap.* Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 14.18.29 (= A 4).

⁸ Phot. *Bibl.* 212 169b 32–5 (= A 1).

⁹ Menodotus *ap.* Diog. Laert. 9. 115–16 (= A 5).

¹⁰ Phot. *Bibl.* 212 169b 36–170b 3 (= B 2–4).

¹¹ Phot. *Bibl.* 212 170b 3–171a 4 (= B 8–9). In certain cases he seems to tie our inability to understand these concepts to the lack of a corresponding object in nature.

¹² Diog. Laert. 9.104–6 (= B 5).

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left no written works. They favoured live disputes with their opponents. Those who did leave written works, such as Clitomachus, devoted themselves to self-contained subjects. Thus, although inapprehensibility is a distinctive Academic theme, the actual arrangement of Aenesidemus' work sets it in contrast with the Academic tradition.

This tendency of systematisation is a feature of his other major work, the *Outline Introduction to the Philosophy of Pyrrho*. Here, after expounding what Pyrrhonist reasoning is about,¹³ Aenesidemus went through ten 'ways' of proving that we have no understanding of things, and should therefore suspend judgement about them. The argumentation considers all the factors, ordered under ten headings, that supposedly alter our perception or understanding of external objects.¹⁴

We know of two other Sceptical works he composed, *Against Wisdom* and *On Investigation*, but the only information we have is that there he defended the same view as in his *Arguments of the Pyrrhonists*, that we should yield to appearances.¹⁵

Another work, entitled *First Introduction*, is mentioned in connection with his explanation of Heraclitus' theory of time.¹⁶ This is one of several doxographical reports tying him to Heraclitus. We are told that he suggested a similarity of some sort between Heracliteanism and Pyrrhonism.¹⁷ This is the aspect of his philosophy that has most intrigued scholars. Rather than speculations of a dogmatic, Heraclitean phase in his thought, it is the mainstream view these days that he was merely offering an interpretation of Heraclitus fitting his Sceptical agenda, either in order to claim Heraclitus' legacy, or to challenge Stoic Heracliteanism, or for both reasons at once.

Like Sextus, Aenesidemus made no claim to originality. He spoke on behalf of a putatively uninterrupted tradition stemming

¹³ Diog. Laert. 9.78–9 (= B 16).

¹⁴ Aristocl. *ap.* Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 14.18.11–13 (= B 18).

¹⁵ Diog. Laert. 9.104–6 (= B 5); see above, n. 12.

¹⁶ Sext. Emp. *Math.* 10.216–17 (= B 28A).

¹⁷ Sext. Emp. *Pyrr.* 1.210–12 (= B 22).

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from Pyrrho.¹⁸ However, his self-representation as an unoriginal and faithful reteller of what his predecessors had said is false. There was no on-going Pyrrhonist tradition in his day – he restarted it – nor is his philosophy a replica of early Pyrrhonism: it is a brand new philosophy. In what follows I shall discuss in more detail these two points, which make him both historically and doctrinally crucial to the development of ancient Scepticism.

First the background to Aenesidemus' revival of 'Pyrrhonism'. Cicero, a contemporary of Aenesidemus, writes that no one was any longer advocating the position of Pyrrho, whom Cicero sees merely as an upholder of the claim that we should be indifferent to bodily and external goods.¹⁹ The first-century AD philosopher Aristocles gives a more elaborate picture of Pyrrho's position, tracing back his claim of indifference to the thesis that things are undifferentiated, or, at any rate, that we are not equipped to differentiate them. For this purpose he quotes Timon, with whom Cicero appears not to be acquainted. Yet Aristocles agrees with Cicero that early Pyrrhonism had a short life, languishing soon after Timon died, until Aenesidemus revived it.²⁰

If we are to trust the second-century BC historians Sotio and Hippobotus, however, Timon did have a circle of pupils, and therefore early Pyrrhonism did not languish with Timon's death.²¹ Yet according to Menodotus these other people failed to give rise to a properly philosophical tradition (ἀγωγή) developing Timon's intellectual legacy, which, therefore, faded ('Timon had no successor') until a certain Ptolemy, perhaps an Empiricist doctor, rescued it. According to Menodotus, Aenesidemus was merely an heir of this Ptolemy.²² Menodotus is probably

¹⁸ This is clear from Phot. *Bibl.* 212 169b 36–170a 17 (= B 2). Diog. Laert. 9.115–16 (= A 5) draws up a list of school heads from Timon down to Aenesidemus and beyond. The list itself hardly goes back to Aenesidemus.

¹⁹ See Pyrrho, test. 69A–M DC.

²⁰ Aristocl. *ap.* Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 14.18.29 (= A 4).

²¹ Diog. Laert. 9.115 (= A 5 *init.*). ²² *Ibid.*

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right in pointing to medical Empiricism as a source of inspiration for Aenesidemus. However, his claim that Ptolemy is the inaugurator of the second phase of Pyrrhonism finds no support elsewhere. Perhaps he told this story in order to appropriate Timon's legacy for the Empiricists.

Although our sources do not agree in every detail, the evidence indicates that an uninterrupted tradition of the kind the Sceptics want us to believe in simply did not exist, and that, therefore, Aenesidemus was not just a leading figure of this tradition, but the one who restarted it in the first century BC. While this qualifies him as a crucial figure in the external history of ancient Scepticism, it still remains to be assessed whether he had a comparably crucial role in the development of Sceptical theory. Did he repeat what Pyrrho, or Timon, had already said, or did he add something new? Was this new thing his own invention, or did he borrow it from other philosophical traditions of his day?

While it was possible to say something definite about Aenesidemus' role within the external history of the tradition, it is less easy to do so with regard to his role in the development of the theory. One difficulty is that we know too little about his formulation of Scepticism. But even if, by way of hypothesis, we take this to be roughly the same as Sextus', there are unsettled, and perhaps unsettleable, questions about the philosophical outlook of early Pyrrhonism too. Thus our problem concerning Aenesidemus is but a part of the general problem of whether Pyrrhonian Scepticism is a continuation of early Pyrrhonism, or essentially different from it. To discuss that problem lies outside the scope of this introduction, but I shall touch on a few points that are relevant to our assessment of Aenesidemus.

If we consider early Pyrrhonism as it was understood in the Hellenistic age by historians, competing philosophers and at least some of Pyrrho's pupils themselves, the difference from neo-Pyrrhonism is clear. Early Pyrrhonism is centred on admiration and imitation of Pyrrho's conduct, and pays little or no

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attention to theory.²³ By contrast, the Sceptics, starting with Aenesidemus, show no interest in anecdotes about Pyrrho, and are mainly concerned with theory. Thus, to start with, early Pyrrhonists and Sceptics disagree on whether theory or conduct comes first.

The second and more substantial difference between them concerns what kind of conduct we should adopt and what kind of theory we should follow. Anecdotes about Pyrrho convey the idea that we should get rid of our human nature, should put no trust in sensation, should resist physical affections. This idea is foreign to the Sceptics, who dismiss the anecdotes as mere gossip, and distance themselves from Pyrrho's claim of indifference. According to them we should not resist physical affections and appearances quite generally, but only refrain from asking how they come about. Viewed from this perspective early Pyrrhonism and Scepticism look like two very different philosophies.

Yet quotations of Pyrrho's pupil Timon found in Sceptical literature not only provide evidence that Timon did address theoretical issues, but also seem to suggest that he anticipated the view that we should yield to appearances. This at least is how the Sceptics interpreted him. We face a dilemma. We can trust the Sceptics and believe that at least Timon was engaged in developing pretty much the same theory as them. On this story, Aenesidemus' self-representation as the continuator of a pre-existing tradition is essentially correct. Alternatively, we can reconcile evidence on Timon with the mainstream Hellenistic reception of Pyrrho, and believe that, although Timon did give a kind of theoretical justification for Pyrrho's conduct, and one which, if considered selectively and submitted to thorough reinterpretation, anticipates Scepticism, early Pyrrhonism and Scepticism remain two different things. Aenesidemus would then be creating a new philosophy.

Although commentators understandably tend to pursue a mid-way interpretation between these two extremes, it is

²³ For this and what follows see Polito (2007).

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important that we have clearly in mind what the terms of the dilemma are.

Even if we were to adopt the interpretation least generous to Aenesidemus, that he borrowed his ideas from Timon and merely incorporated them into a structured system, still the very fact that these ideas in Timon's formulation left no trace in the Hellenistic age would grant Aenesidemus an important role in the development of Sceptical theory. Yet the very fact that before Aenesidemus no one appears to have been acquainted with a theory of appearances attributable to Timon, as well as the fact that this theory does not fit well with the idea, shared by all early Pyrrhonists including Timon, that we should pay no attention to external things, licenses the suspicion that Timon did not put forward any such theory, and that this was Aenesidemus' contribution.

If at least some aspects of Aenesidemus' philosophy do not belong to early Pyrrhonism, we may wonder what other origin they have, and, more generally, which pre-existing philosophical traditions influenced him. One of these traditions appears to be the sceptical Academy. Aenesidemus hardly derived his theory of appearances from them. The only Academic author who talks comparably of appearances is Plutarch in his defence of Arcesilaus.²⁴ However, since neither Arcesilaus nor any other Academic appears to have used this kind of terminology, the most economical explanation is that Plutarch borrowed it from the Sceptics themselves.

We cannot rule out the possibility of Academic influence in other areas of Aenesidemus' philosophy. He was closely acquainted with the Academy, and perhaps attached to it before turning to Pyrrho – at least this has been inferred from what he writes in his dedication of the *Arguments* to Tubero.²⁵ The question of whether he was an Academic renegade is not just a

²⁴ Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1122B–D. Similar terminology is used by Plutarch in his defence of Socrates; cf. 1118A–B.

²⁵ Phot. *Bibl.* 212 169b 32–5 (= A 1).

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biographical curiosity. According to one line of interpretation, his ‘Pyrrhonism’ was actually a reformed version of Academic scepticism. If we could prove that he belonged to the Academy, this interpretation would gain support. However, the evidence is controversial, and not only is his method of refutation – systematic and not *ad hominem* – different from the Academic one, but he is also found rejecting – here lies the genuinely Pyrrhonist core of his position – a cornerstone of Academic philosophy, the idea that we should make a distinction between different degrees of persuasiveness in things. These differences suggest that the Academy was not a source of inspiration, but a competing philosophy that provided him with a term of critical comparison.

While the relation of Scepticism with Academic philosophy has been the object of several discussions, its relation to medical Empiricism is largely neglected. Empiricist physicians of the post-Hellenistic age claimed allegiance to Scepticism, which they regarded as offering a theoretical justification for their medical practice. Thus it is uncontroversial that Pyrrhonism, as Aenesidemus reshaped it, had a major impact on them. However, medical Empiricism predates Aenesidemus, and we may wonder whether influence also went in the other direction, with Empiricist physicians of the Hellenistic age influencing him. Such a hypothesis might in fact explain important aspects of his philosophy, including, perhaps, his theory of appearances. One reason why this hypothesis has been of little interest to scholars is that evidence for the Empiricist theory of the Hellenistic age is too scanty to enable us to arrive at any safe conclusion. But there is also another reason.

Empiricist physicians of the Hellenistic age were very much concerned with theory, and yet, like the other learned doctors of the time, refrained from taking part in contemporary philosophical debate. The different localisations of philosophy and medicine in Athens and Alexandria respectively might explain this lack of interaction. Aenesidemus’ agenda, by contrast, was centred on the question of whether we have apprehension of

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things, and at least in this respect he is more at home in Athens. Yet while it is a matter of speculation whether he visited Athens, we know for sure that Alexandria was his chosen place of activity. During the first century BC, philosophy, including Academic philosophy, was making its way to Alexandria. This enables us to account not only for his close acquaintance with Academic scepticism without postulating a stay in Athens, but also, more generally, for the increasing 'philosophisation' of medicine, which starts in this period (e.g. Asclepiades of Bithynia, the Pneumatists) and continues in later times.

Thus although the question whether we have apprehension of things was foreign to the Empiricist agenda of the Hellenistic age, its standing at the top of Aenesidemus' agenda provides no evidence against the hypothesis of substantial Empiricist influence. It is quite possible that first-century BC members of this medical school had already become familiar with the Athenian way of framing the epistemological problem.

Aenesidemus appropriated material from different traditions, combining it into a new and original whole. This accomplishment qualifies him as the initiator of a new philosophical tradition, and hence a worthwhile subject of study. A word next about the impact of his work.

Cicero is apparently not acquainted with Aenesidemus, and the pupils of his mentioned by Diogenes Laertius at 9.115 (= A 5) are no more than names for us. Aristocles in the first century AD does acknowledge his role in reviving Pyrrhonism, and yet at Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 14.18.29 (= A 4) describes him as 'a certain Aenesidemus', a description that some regard as evidence of lack of popular recognition. We have to wait more than a century to come across other big names of Scepticism, such as Agrippa and still later Menodotus. Thus we might be misled into thinking that Aenesidemus' enterprise bore little or no fruit in his day.

But as early as the second half of the first century BC Arius Didymus at Stob. *Ecl.* 2.1.17 refers to Pyrrho as someone who keeps investigating the truth, in contrast with both Stoics and Epicureans, who claim that they have already found it. This

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representation of Pyrrho is hardly conceivable before Aenesidemus, and indeed the language of ‘investigation’ (ζητεῖν) is a trademark. Thus Aenesidemus’ reinterpretation of Pyrrho is known shortly after his death, so much so that Cassius, an Empiricist doctor who lived in Tiberius’ day, described himself as a ‘Pyrrhonist’ (Gal. *Subf. emp.* 4, p. 49.31 Deichgräber).²⁶

While Arius provides evidence of knowledge of Aenesidemus’ reinterpretation of Pyrrho, Philo of Alexandria, who appropriates material from Aenesidemus (*De ebr.* 171–94), provides evidence of awareness of his sceptical arguments, and so does Plutarch, who devoted a work, now lost, to the ten tropes (Lamprias’ catalogue, no. 158). Aristocles’ ‘a certain Aenesidemus’ clearly provides no evidence that Aenesidemus was little known. Rather, dogmatic opponents already identified him as a dangerous threat needing denigration.

THE PRESENT EDITION

The next chapter (‘The sources’) offers a basic introduction to the sources. There I anticipate some of the conclusions for which I argue in the commentary on individual testimonia, concerning both their style of quoting, or reporting on, Aenesidemus, and their purpose in doing so. Next I present the actual body of testimonia. The first group (A) comprises evidence for Aenesidemus’ life. The second and far more substantial group (B) comprises evidence for his doctrines, ordered by book title when known, or else by theme. There is no separate section for mere testimonia – indirect, or doxographical, reports – as distinct from fragments. Quite apart from the difficulty of establishing which is which, to have two sections would not contribute to a better understanding and discussion of the texts.

The criterion of inclusion is that Aenesidemus be named. The unwelcome consequence is that a large part of the

²⁶ Assuming Cassius the Pyrrhonist is the same person as the doctor-namesake; but see von Staden (1997).