

## ON THE SCEPTIC PERIOD OF THE PLATONIC ACADEMY\*

My hereafter remarks deal with a word entitled *El enigma de la Academia de Platón: escépticos contra dogmáticos en la Grecia Clásica* (Córdoba [Spain], Berenice editorial, 2007), and its author is Ramón Román Alcalá, professor of the University of Córdoba since 1996. In the Spanish history of the historiography of the western philosophical ideas, such a book like Román Alcalá's is, in my opinion, a landmark. *El enigma de la Academia de Platón* bridges a historical-philosophical gap that, for more than four centuries, had been only overcome with books of Italian, French or German authors. The other landmark in such matter is the treatise *Academica sive de iudicio erga verum ex ipsis primis fontibus* (*Opera Petri Valentiae Zafrensis in Extrema Baetica* (Antwerp, 1596), by the Spanish humanist Pedro de Valencia (1555-1620)<sup>1</sup>. Apart from these two books, I do not know any other Spanish author, or Hispano-American, who has devoted so exhaustively to such a thematic like the hellenistic period of the platonic-academic philosophy, a period comprehended between the distant scholars Arcesilaus from Pitane and Antíochos from Ascalón (this opinion does not imply that I discard the possibility that there could have been others whom I have omitted). The title of Román's book imitates, to some extent, the book by Harold Cherniss entitled *The Riddle of the Early Academy* (1944), and, in fact, mentions it in its Italian version (*L'enigma dell'Accademia antica* [Florence, 1974]), in the note 70, page 43. Compared to the former title, Román's book *El enigma de la Academia de Platón* is not as determined as Cherniss' *The Riddle of the Early Academy*<sup>2</sup>, it could seem that the book would cover the whole

---

\* Prof. Rubén Soto Rivera is a world-known specialist of Arcesilaus and of the philosophy of *kairos*. The present version in English of his article is due to Prof. Manuel Bermúdez Vasquez, of the University of Córdoba (Spain) [Notice of the Editor who has reviewed the English text].

1. Spanish translation of this play by Pedro de Valencia is *Academica sive de iudicio erga verum ex ipsis primis fontibus*, ed. José Oroz Reta, Badajoz, 1987. Before this one there was another one *La Académica o del criterio de verdad*, in *Obras completas de Menéndez Pelayo*, vol. 43, ed. Enrique Sánchez Reyes, Santander, 1948. Nowadays, Juan Luis SUÁREZ SÁNCHEZ DE LEÓN is a scholar dedicated to study this Spanish humanist and between his publications on this topic we emphasize *El pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia: escepticismo y modernidad en el humanismo español*, Badajoz, 1997.

2. There is a Spanish version edited by the Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Harold CHERNISS, *El enigma de la primera Academia*, trad. Susana Marín Delgado, Mexico, 1993.





philosophical history of the Platonic Academy, but its subtitle: *Sceptics against dogmatics in Classical Greece*, serves as a *chronotopic* specification. There is another parallelism between Román and Cherniss: both of them have devoted themselves to study the *agrapha dogmata*, the un-written or oral doctrines of Plato<sup>3</sup>. As well as Cherniss in his book is sceptic about the hypothesis that Plato has taught more important esoteric doctrines than the exoteric ones of his *Dialogues*, in the same way Román authenticates the opinion on the matter of Juan de Dios Bares in his article «La φαντασία καταληπτική y la academia escéptica». «Between the most exotic is the one that displays Arcesilaus as having practiced a certain esotericism in his philosophy, that concentrated in a secret dogmaticism with his surpassed students. I agree with Juan de Dios Bares when he observes that there is no reason to suspect that there were secret Platonic dogmas under Arcesilaus' arguments, arguing that the necessity to appeal to secret doctrines is more just in the case of Plato, since he doubted that the writing could translate faithfully or transmit the knowledge, reason why he demanded the free conversation in his circle of students as the unique formula of true knowledge»<sup>4</sup>. That is to say, there was no platonic «esotericism» or dogmatism in the intimate circle of the disciples of Arcesilaus of Pitane, first scolarch in the Middle Academy, nor in the circle of Carneade of Cyrene, first scolarch in the New Academy, far from it that both academic scolarchs had professed, driven and transmitted such platonic esotericism to their successors. Although in *El enigma ...*, the other academics are studied, however, I will limit my review to these two figures of the academic scepticism.

Román agrees with the following thesis that Victor Brochard defended in his book. *Les sceptiques grecs* (Paris, 1887; repr., Paris, Vrin, 1932): «Brochard says that perhaps in Metrodorus began the tradition which Augustine of Hippo gathers later, and according to which the academics also defended as a doctrine certain hidden esoteric dogmaticism, in their eagerness of dialectic fight against the Stoics. This Augustinian testimony has been already discussed, reaching the conclusion that this idea was a personal conjecture of the Saint, insufficiently or erroneously based on confused texts of Cicero. In addition, the main idea of Augustine's critic to scepticism identifies the doubt with the *desperatio veri*, and

3. R. RÓMAN, Son los 'ágrapha dógmata' las lecciones no escritas de Platón?, *Anales del seminario de Historia de la Filosofía*, 16, 1999, pp. 85-108. Román assures that «Nobody denies that oral explanations of Plato were a real fact, the question is not in the acceptance of those non-written lessons, but in determining to what that doctrine corresponds» (*El enigma...*, p. 42).

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81. «An article by Juan DIOS DE BARES, La φαντασία καταληπτική y la academia escéptica, *XIII Congrès Valencian de Filosofia, Peníscola, 2-4 novembre de 2000*, pp. 296 ff., remarks this idea and «he [Juan de Dios Bares] says that Arcesilaus resigned to follow the line of this predecessors and against a dogmatic Plato he defended a sceptical reading of Plato», pp. 297-298 extend this interpretation» (*El enigma...*, p. 22, n. 7).



even the idea of suspension of judgment is considered like a state of the soul, impoverished and lowered by the negative presence of error»<sup>5</sup>. In the opinion of Román, Arcesilaus and Carneades were sceptic, but in a Socratic-Platonic way<sup>6</sup>. Both scholars, successors or disciples of this modality, were academic insofar as they remained faithful to the socratic-platonic maieutic<sup>7</sup>, or dialectic, irony, and the *docta ignorantia*. This academic scepticism differs from the one of Pyrrho of Elis and his disciples, and Román adduces as a proof of this assertion the fact that Cicero does not have included in the philosophical antecedents of Arcesilaus' scepticism the scepticism of Pyrrho. Román declares that «going back to Cicero, he is placed in an essentially academic tradition, i.e. for him the unique known scepticism is the academic one with all its defects, that is to say, *he does not unite Pyrrho's doctrine to the one of the creators of the scepticism of the Academy*»<sup>8</sup>. More radical on the matter, Pyrrho's philosophy would have been classified as sceptic since the restoration of the academic scepticism by Aenesidemus of Cnossos and his eight books of *Pyrrhonian arguments*<sup>9</sup>, as a reac-

---

5. *El enigma...*, p. 151: «According to Cicero, Clitomachus disagreed with the probabilistic criterion of Carneades and thought that he had carried out a Herculean work when extracting the assent of our souls; nevertheless, for Carneades, this attitude was not valid for all the opinions of the every day life. This last admission already carried a frankly different attitude from the radical scepticism of Pyrrho or Arcesilaus, concentrating in the probability of things. From now on, the academic scepticism will be less rigorous, mainly with Philo, and it will take Augustine of Hippone to the interpretative hypothesis that the scepticism of the Academy is not ruled by a theoretical attitude, about the incomprehensibility of things, but rather by methodological needs in order to fight the Stoics. According to this, the Cartesian scepticism, much later, doubts of things, but only to fight a hard dialectic battle against the Stoics and not because things truly make doubt» (*op. cit.*, pp. 148-149).

6. «Certain dialectic germ seems undeniable, and therefore sceptical, in Plato's thought. In the same way, we must talk about a model that conceives philosophy like *shared search* (συζήτης), oriented towards the goal of knowledge of the true reality» (*El enigma...*, p. 38).

7. There is therefore not only a spontaneous development, as Robin observes, of the germs of scepticism stimulated by a supposed sceptical pyrrhonism, but also a maturity of the own sceptical germs of Platonism, very needed as anti-stoic dialectic in the philosophical discussions. Robin's hypothesis saves Platonism, but at the cost of turning into heretical the whole sceptical exposition of Arcesilaus. From this perspective the academic movement loses its originality, but the Platonic dogmatic purities are out of danger» (*ibid.*, pp. 49-50).

8. *Ibid.*, p. 27. «Scepticism as a movement appeals belatedly a singular figure like Pyrrho of Elis. This means that, in spite of the indications of scepticism that we can find in many pre-Socratic thinkers, the unique viable scepticism at Pyrrho's time (a contemporary of Arcesilaus, let us not forget) was the scepticism of the Academy, a scepticism that was modifying until it got lost with the Stoic influences of Antiochus, the great apostatized of the Platonic Academy» (*ibid.*, pp. 16-17).

9. «According to Enesidemus, it is possible to make the distinction between *pyrrhonian*, referred to Pyrrho's thought, and *pyrrhonic*, a term that would include the followers of Pyrrho that are conscious of being included in a unitary and original tradition, claiming Pyrrho of Elis as the figure that initiates, in a strict sense, the sceptic movement» (*ibid.*, p. 29).



tion against the Stoic dogmatism of the neo-academic scolarch Antiochus, whom Román describes as «great apostatized» (pp. 163-164, n. 370; p. 165), and «insincere» (p. 166). This is the last one of the neo-academics that is studied in *El enigma de la Academia de Platón*.

The claimed dogmatic-platonic “esotericism” of Arcesilaus is described as “legend” in Román’s book, who, based on another scholar, adduces the following reasons for such qualification: Of course we can accept that the statements of Arcesilaus have some confused, contradictory or lacking of clarity aspects that clash with the classical Platonic tradition. Carlos Lévy attributes the appearance of that “legend” as a secret dogmatism, and a possible “esotericism” of Arcesilaus, to some verses of Timon who recognizes an eclectic tone in the philosophy of the academic consisting out of three components: one Platonic, one Pyrrhonian and third one Megaric. According to these verses, Arcesilaus would be declared specifically Platonic, but sustaining his philosophy through sceptical and ethical elements. Since this mixture was dark for Timon, who was not a philosopher and did not understand the sceptical assumptions of the socratic-platonic origin, he solved the dilemma appealing to the mystery of the “esotericism” of the academic. In addition, we should not forget that Arcesilaus was the rival of Pyrrho and that it is normal that Timon, the latter’s disciple, shows more what separates them than what unites them. Therefore, all the difficulties raised up to here and all this accumulation of vacillating interpretations, seem to make clear the conflicts that were produced in reference to the Academy, and the complexities which we must face in order to understand the evolution of the Platonic school on the ground of some sceptical positions. The philosophical mind of Arcesilaus attracts, fascinates, and demonstrates a thought which, having Platonic roots, developed ethical attitudes that made of doubt a method and an aim for human behaviour”<sup>10</sup>.

Every “legend” has some historical base around which what is scientifically unverifiable and common as a “myth” in its wider meaning is built. Let us ask ourselves for the historical foundation of the legend of the esotericism of the Middle Academy of Arcesilaus and let us answer such a question according to Román’s judgments. Firstly, there is the fact that Arcesilaus did exist *in historicis*; although he was compared with the Homeric Chimera, he was not a *chimera* in the history of the Western ideas. Page 36 and 40-41 of *El enigma de la Academia de Platón* are dedicated to such historical confirmation. Secondly, Román judges that Arcesilaus was a genuine Platonic, although he adapted himself in a original way to the new intellectual preoccupations of his times. Let’s quote Román twice: «Arcesilaus, as far as he is concerned, followed his teacher Plato and was always a true interpreter and a follower of his philosophy, because he tried to discover the truth, but always having the intention to accustom

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.



his interlocutors and disciples more to the reflection than to the authority of someone»<sup>11</sup>. «And later on: We cannot recognize in Arcesilaus a heretical or a revolutionary that forgets Plato's doctrines rigorously collected by his successors»<sup>12</sup>. In the chapter entitled «Arcesilao: el triunfo de la dialéctica infinitista y abierta» (pp. 35-82), we especially find some lines that deserve to stand out, just because they subtly oppose Plato *vis-à-vis* with Arcesilaus, to display the two main interpretative alternatives that the historical-philosophical tradition from the hellenistic period onward has transmitted about the thought of the philosopher from Pitane. Let's quote them: «Certainly, the Platonic project is usually characterized in its origin as a "finitist" and closed dialectic. This was at least Plato's intention. Nevertheless, that project was unaccomplished. If Plato had concluded it, as it happened with the system of the Neoplatonic Plotinus, the later developments of the Academy would have been more homogeneous and less ambiguous. The obvious verification of this hypothesis is noticed in the different direction that the school followed with the successors of Plato. Arcesilaus will be the key figure in this tangle, since he is, for some, a traitor to the Platonic system and, for others, the true interpreter of the philosophy of the teacher»<sup>13</sup>. The real dilemma resides in choosing between "traitor to the Platonic system" or "true interpreter of the philosophy of the teacher". Thus, for example, Román informs us that Antiochus bet from the beginning to defend a "finitist" dialectic of Plato, a perfect, finite, determined and safe system that had been inherited by the Peripatetics and the Academics and that, in his opinion, Antiochus noticed only a mere difference in the nomenclature, against a substantial coincidence in their philosophical positions<sup>14</sup>. Whereas Román himself, explaining the criterion of the degrees of perceptual certainty in the epistemology of Carneades, assigns the Academic from Cyrene to the "infinitist" and open dialectic of Arcesilaus: «If we do not have a single moment, determined and singular, of certainty, but several, their specific circumstances, we will accept diverse criteria or, at least, diverse degrees of certainty of the same criterion. In other words, sometimes the group of circumstances will not be sufficient to justify my beliefs or my representations of the things, whereas in other occasions they will. For that reason, Sextus says that the Academics, in the same way that they followed different "representations" for different things in different circumstances, did not apply the same "representation" in every circumstance, but changing "representations" according to each circumstance, thus approaching to an "infinitist" and open dialectic which was typical of an endless dialogue»<sup>15</sup>.

Therefore, for Román, Arcesilaus was not a *traitor to the platonic system*, but

11. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 111.



a true interpreter of the philosophy of the teacher. We already know the identity of the *novoacademic* Ephialtes. Román is so convinced of the directive (or tendency) of the philosophy of Arcesilaus, that he univocally explains the cause by which this period is known like the “New Academy”. «Therefore, to qualify Arcesilaus’ Academy as “New”, indicating by this some kind of rupture with classic Platonism, is erroneous. It seems reasonable to admit that the designation of *new Academic* for Arcesilaus and his followers comes from their adversaries and the late Platonists like Numenius, since they needed some controversy in their confrontation with the sceptic Arcesilaus. We tend to think that the label of “new” was assigned by those who considered as an excellent strategy to denounce the modification of the Platonic thought like a treason to their philosophy»<sup>16</sup>. We should remember that, for Román, the scepticism of the Middle New Academy or displays socratic-platonic root, and that, if Pyrrho and his disciples have been considered as “sceptic”, this has been possible from the retroactive comparison of these made by, at least, Enesidemus and Sextus Empiricus with the philosophical model of the Platonic Academy, from Arcesilaus to Philo of Larissa. Román remarks that «Diogenes Laertius (III, 51) already observed that a great controversy existed between those who affirmed that Plato was a dogmatic and those who denied this assertion; he himself said that this controversy had been discussed much as a problem»<sup>17</sup>. According to Román, this “*novoacademic*”, Philo, was so sceptical that Philo’s Plato is linked more to the problematic and sceptical Plato than to the dogmatic one to whom we are accustomed»<sup>18</sup>. Román justifies the reasons of Philo’s sceptical ideas by saying that «he wanted to reduce the differences and the distance between the teacher and the later scepticism of Arcesilaus and Carneades, by proposing a gradual return to the nuclear Platonism, but without resigning to the Academic scepticism. According to Philo, the Academy had not moved away from the attitude defended by Plato. Arcesilaus and Carneades would have developed the philosophical approaches of Plato which were more prone to scepticism. In this way Philo seemed to realize the unity that underlaid both developments, united by the declaration of ignorance and incapacity to secure the truth, which was deep buried and with difficult access to the majority»<sup>19</sup>.

The treason of Antiochus, the great apostat and insincere “*novoacademic*” with “a twisted interpretation of the *Timeus*” (p. 166), would have been a reaction against the sceptical enhancement carried out by his teacher Philo, to the Platonism from the Swan of Apollo to himself, because, as Román alleges, «the

16. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 156, n. 346.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 154.



traitor that kills is always the one who is closest» (p. 165). Antiochus would have been the antithesis, or the antipodes, of Arcesilaus. «Sextus says that Antiochus introduced Stoicism into the Academy, accusing him of teaching stoicism in the Academy, besides demonstrating, erroneously, that the stoic doctrines were already present in Plato and Aristotle»<sup>20</sup>. Antiochus would have been the reactivation and, as well, the renewal of the Stoic appropriation of philosophical propositions of the Old Academy made by Zeno of Citium and his disciples, in order to get integrated in the frame of the Athenian philosophy. Indeed Arcesilaus rebelled against this Stoic strategy defending the Platonic patrimony, mainly with the argument of reduction to the absurd, to denounce publicly the mutual incompatibility of both ways of philosophy and the real motivations on this attempt of appropriation of a prestigious Greek philosophical tradition. In order not to digress from our topic, i.e. the “legend” of the platonic-academic esoterism, we refer to the political aspect of the issue in the corresponding footnote<sup>21</sup>. According to Román, Arcesilaus was simultaneously Platonic and sceptical, but only to some extent. Román detects «at least an incoherence» in the Socratic-Platonic scepticism of the philosopher of Pitane. According to Román, Arcesilaus would have been a sceptic almost consequent with the priority of the ἐποχή, or suspension of judgment or assent, but, in the matter of ethics, he would have affected totally in dogmatism. In *El enigma de la Academia de Platón*, we read that, according to one of both summaries of Sextus Empiricus about the philosophy of Arcesilaus, his author argues, jointly with the Pyrrhonian physician, that «for that reason, with respect to Arcesilaus, he says that turning the *epoche* into an «absolute and objective good» (having always to suspend the judgment) he abandons the sceptical attitude turning it into dogmatic; «and he says that the aim is the suspension of judgment [καὶ τέλος μὲν εἶναι τὴν ἐποχὴν], which goes accompanied by the ἀταραξία» (H.P., I, 233)<sup>22</sup>. This inco-

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.

21. «In other words, when Brochard criticizes Carneades' moral, he recognizes its validity without noticing it. A validity that only makes sense in a democratic and tolerant system, where every action must consider the actions of the others» (*ibid.*, p. 142). These circumstances are as important for the perceiver as for the object perceived and the means of the perception. The Academics tested their preceeding certainty and these tests were compared by Sextus trying to check (δοκιμάζει) the Athenian democracy, i.e., the examination made by the authority of the merits of the candidates to a magistrature and the decision that followed that examination (*ibid.*, p. 116). AULUS GELLIUS in his *Noctes Atticae*, says that Cicero affirmed that the Stoics, with Chrysippus at the top, had to make a big effort in order to defend and justify the freedom of existence. But Carneades was clear on this because he concluded that it is impossible to admit destiny without denying freedom. If necessity is what produces everything, we can do nothing, but experience that this assertion is wrong, therefore, destiny does not limit out life. We save freedom, but we must sacrifice destiny for it (*ibid.*, p. 136).

22. *Ibid.*, p. 72.



herence would be based on the priority of the ἐποχή that would make me firstly suspend the assent, and then suspend the assent in the opinion of which the *epoche* is an objective and absolute good united with the *ataraxia* or freedom from worry. The use of such a dogma (the doctrine of *epoche*<sup>23</sup> which is a theoretical matter) especially in ethics<sup>24</sup> (which is practical a especially matter) is incongruent: «And when Sextus says: ‘Arcesilaus did not determine, primarily, a criterion’, he is talking about a strong criterion of truth, incompatible with the ἐποχή, but he leaves the possibility of a criterion of action, a conduct rule»<sup>25</sup>. Arcesilaus proposed “the reasonable” (τὸ εὐλογον) as a criterion of action in ethics. In the following words of Román we find in its context his judgment of perception that seems that Arcesilaus was “in error or, at least, in an incoherence”): «The starting point of Sextus’ text is the suspension of judgment, in order to assert immediately that coming with the εὐλογον it will act well, appealing to the prudence which is exerted in the upright action. It is evident that here we find a problem: if someone appeals to the suspension of judgment on all things, how is it possible to progress a philosophical position? When asserting that the εὐλογον is the criterion of the action and that the assent is not necessary for the action, it seems that Arcesilaus is in error or, at least, in an incoherence, since the production of the criterion as a rule is in contradiction with the attitude of universal suspension»<sup>26</sup>.

Román explains that, although in the philosophy of Arcesilaus, according to some pertaining anecdote, there is some kind of divorce between theory and praxis, detected even by his contemporaries, it is not less true that the theory of εὐλογον seems closer to a moral theory that tries to solve the inactivity of life, a situation to which the strict interpretation of ἐποχή would lead us, than to a gnoseological affirmation of a criterion of truth<sup>27</sup>. Perhaps it is convenient to mention again Román’s study when, in previous pages of his book, he declared:

---

23. We have the expression of a strong epistemological declaration for the Academic case: the lack of capacity to know anything that leads us to a universal pessimism and to the suspension of every assent» (*ibid.*, p. 73).

24. «For that reason, from now on, Arcesilaus tries to show that *epoche* is not a synonym of inactivity» (*ibid.*, p. 73).

25. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 76. «Therefore, it seems that there was a big difference between using a criterion in practical life and finding a criterion of truth. For that reason, we could say with some certainty that Sextus was right when he asserted that Arcesilaus did not define, *stricto sensu*, any criterion, and that the one which was defined had been so only with the intention of solving the Stoic challenge of inaction and inactivity derived from the suspension of judgment. And I say he is right because such assertions seem to refer more to some epistemological criteria, of which Arcesilaus did not define any, rather than to a criterion of action. Arcesilaus, then, locates himself between a mild scepticism with positive proposals and a meager or insufficient dogmatism that does not stop surprising» (*ibid.*, p. 80).

27. *Ibid.*, p. 79.



«This starting point would lead us to postulate a single philosophical line in the Academy that would privilege not an abrupt transformation of the dogmatic philosophy into sceptical, but a development of suppositions “almost sceptical” thereof<sup>28</sup>. Perhaps *El enigma de la Academia de Platón* will constitute the display of the historical-philosophical development of the almost sceptical assumptions of the Academy of Plato carried out by Arcesilaus, to the sceptical interpretation of it by Philo.

R. SOTO RIVERA  
(Puerto Rico)

---

28. *Ibid.*, p. 38. Cf. *supra*, and note 6.