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Late Neoplatonic Criticism of Ancient Sceptic Philosophy*

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ABSTRACT. Commentaries to treatises of Aristotle written by Alexandrian Neoplatonists of the 5–6th centuries CE contain a series of testimonies on ancient Scepticism. These testimonies provide a view on Pyrrhonism that is much narrower than that of Sextus Empiricus and even Diogenes Laërtius. However, the structure of Neoplatonic evidence and the set of propositions under criticism allow making some meaningful conclusions. Firstly, Alexandrian commentators have a clear motivation to acquit Plato from charges of Scepticism known since Middle Platonists. Secondly, Neoplatonic criticism objects to just some conceptions of Sceptics, which touch upon certain epistemological problems. The most important among them is the dualism of material objects and the rational soul of a human. Since Sceptics support a dualist metaphysics in a way quite similar to that of the Platonists, Alexandrians take effort to reveal the difference between the Sceptical and Platonist versions of dualism. At the level of universal truths, their argumentation is sound and doubtless, but the possibility of knowing particular material objects becomes a noticeable obstacle. As a possible solution, the authors suggest a comparison with theurgic symbolism of Athenian Neoplatonists who developed a coherent doctrine of divine knowledge of material objects which can be easily extended to a human rational soul as well. The juxtaposition of Scepticism with Alexandrian and Athenian branches of Neoplatonism renders a contrasting picture of Greek intellectual tradition in the 4–6th centuries CE.

KEYWORDS: Neoplatonism, Scepticism, commentators of Aristotle, epistemology, criticism, Pyrrho, Ammonius.

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Since the very foundation of Neoplatonic tradition by Plotinus, criticism of extraneous philosophical views remained an important part of its discourse.¹ Below, we are going to discuss the Neoplatonists' views on ancient Scepticism. The majority of relevant testimonies are found in the works of Alexandrian commentators of Aristotle, such as Ammonius, Elias, David, and John Philoponus. Their familiarity with Pyrrho, Arcesilaus and Carneades often seems superficial, while Aenesidemus or Sextus Empiricus are not mentioned at all. The evidence of late Neoplatonists has quite a low significance for the history of Scepticism (and therefore is rarely discussed);² however, it reveals important relations between Scepticism and Platonism, and also vividly depicts Neoplatonic views on some ontological problems, which they have not touched in any explicit way.

The following discussion is based on the writings of pagan Neoplatonists from the 3rd to late 6th centuries CE, starting with Porphyrius. All the fragments we are going to quote are selected as containing reliable and unequivocal mentions of certain Sceptic thinkers, distinctive Sceptic terms (ἐποχή, ἀκαταληψία), or explicit designations of the doctrine (σκεπτικοί, ἐφεκτικοί). In other words, we are going to discuss only the cases when a commentator is fully aware of the Sceptic origins of the matter he is concerned with.

Earliest Testimonies

The earliest testimonies are brief and do not touch upon major doctrinal issues. Porphyrius notes that, according to Carneades, every being which emerged according to nature eventually arrives at its completion (τέλους), and that is its benefit (ὠφελείται) and profit (εὐχρηστία).³

¹ See, for example, Plotinus' treatises "Against the Gnostics" (*Enn.* 2.9 (33)), "On Complete Blending" (*Enn.* 2.7 (37)), against the Stoic concept of κράσις, "On the Genera of Being 1–3" (*Enn.* 6.1–3 (42–44)), against ten categories of Aristotle, etc.

² Cf. the sources on Pyrrho collected by Caizzi 1981; also several mentions of Porphyry, Philoponus and Simplicius are provided in Polito 2004: 28–32, 117, 162–163; however, they give almost no evidence on Sceptics themselves.

³ Porph. *Abst.* 3.20.17–20.

However, the discussion on the ‘benefit’ (ὠφέλεια) is more characteristic to Stoics who understood it as a common good,⁴ and whose doctrine was well known by Porphyry.⁵ It is possible that Porphyry thought Carneades to be one of the Stoics, not a Sceptic at all.

Julian the Emperor mentions Sceptics merely in moral contexts. The first instance is located in the discussion of the proper way to offer gifts: it should not be demonstrated to many people, and Arcesilaus, Julian says, tried his best to stay unrecognised even by the person who received the present.⁶

Another evidence is related to the Sceptic school in general: Julian says that one should keep away both from Scepticism and from Epicureanism. Moreover, for Julian, it is the good providence of gods that most Sceptic and Epicurean writings became extinct.⁷

The only comment of Proclus Lycaeus concerning Scepticism also compares their doctrine with that of Epicure:

the Sceptics would do away with all knowledge, like enemy troops destroying the crops of a foreign country, in this case a country that has produced philosophy, whereas others, like the Epicureans, propose only to discredit the principles of geometry.⁸

Similarly to Proclus, Damascius provides very scant evidence on Scepticism: he just notes that Arcesilaus admitted neither the conceivable (τὸ ἐπιστητόν) nor the inconceivability (ἀνεπιστημοσύνη) to be the reason of scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήμη).⁹

Later Testimonies: Theory of Flux

Much more evidence is provided by those Neoplatonists who commented upon Aristotle’s treatises. Almost all of them belong to the Alexandrian tradition and either lived in Alexandria or have studied

⁴ S.E. *M.* 11.22–27 = SVF 3.75.

⁵ On various Stoic conceptions in the works of Plotinus see Johnson 2013: 74–75, 166–170, 214–215, 263–264, etc.

⁶ Jul. *Or.* 2 (Εὐσεβίας τῆς βασιλίδος ἐγκώμιον) 1.42–48 Bidez.

⁷ Jul. *Ep.* 89b.354–357 Bidez.

⁸ Proc. *In Euc.* 199.6–11 Friedlein. English translation: Morrow 1992: 156.

⁹ Dam. *In Phd.* (versio 1) 275.1–2 Westerink.

there for a significant time. Texts that we are going to discuss below have much in common and, probably, stem from Ammonius, and more precisely, from the beginning of his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*. There is a common set of testimonies, arguments and their disproof; therefore we are going to collate them according to their logical coherence.

At the first step, Ammonius discusses seven ways of how philosophical schools get their names. Among others, the fifth mode is provided with the example of Sceptics, or ἐφεκτικοί, as Ammonius writes, i.e. “the undecided” philosophers, or those who “suspend judgement”.¹⁰ It should be emphasised that all Alexandrian commentators of Aristotle prefer using the word ἐφεκτικοί instead of σκεπτικοί or ἀπορητικοί, probably because both latter terms are more ambiguous.¹¹

Ammonius speaks of the Sceptics as the school which “is named after their manner of philosophising (ἀπὸ τοῦ τρόπου τῆς ἐν τῷ φιλοσοφεῖν διακρίσεως)”, however, “they thought themselves quite unworthy of the name of philosophers, since they sought the nature of things, but did not succeed”.¹²

The same division into seven ways of naming is reproduced by Simplicius (who adds that ἐφεκτικοί is the common name for the followers of Pyrrho),¹³ by John Philoponus (who introduces the term ἀκαταληψία),¹⁴ and by Olympiodorus, who summarises the evidence of his predecessors.¹⁵

The second logical step is expressed very briefly; nevertheless, it is essential: according to Ammonius, Sceptics argued that “if there is to be knowledge, the knower must conform to what is known”,¹⁶ exactly

¹⁰ On possible English translations of Greek ἐφεκτικοί see Sirkel et al. 2015: 120, n. 6.

¹¹ The term ἐφεκτικός also does not have a strictly philosophical sense only. For example, it is widely used in medical treatises of Galen and his successors.

¹² Ammon. *In Cat.* 2.8–11 Busse. English translation: Cohen, Matthews 2014: 10.

¹³ Simp. *In Cat.* 4.4–5 Kalbfleisch.

¹⁴ Phlp. *In Cat.* 2.7–9 Busse.

¹⁵ Olymp. *Proll.* 3.32 Busse.

¹⁶ Ammon. *In Cat.* 2.18: εἰ μέλλοι εἶναι κατάληψις, δεῖ τὸ γινώσκον ἐφαρμόζειν τῷ γινωσκομένῳ. English translation: Cohen, Matthews 2014: 10.

the same wording is given by Olympiodorus,¹⁷ and in slightly different words by David of Alexandria.¹⁸

This conception of “conformity” of a “knower” to “what is known” is necessary for the next, third step. According to Ammonius, Sceptics posit that all knowable material objects are in constant flux; they change and never stay the same. Sceptics probably were aware of their dependence on Heraclitus;¹⁹ anyway, they reproduced the well-known passage²⁰ that “all things move and nothing remains still (πάντα χωρεῖ καὶ οὐδὲν μένει)” and “you cannot step twice into the same stream²¹ (δὶς ἐς τὸν αὐτὸν ποταμὸν οὐκ ἄν ἐμβαίης)”²², which is reliably attributed to Heraclitus.²³ Moreover, this is expanded further with the thought of Cratylus²⁴ that one cannot step into the same river “even once. For

¹⁷ Olymp. *Proll.* 4.21–22: ἔλεγον γὰρ ὡς δεῖ τὸ γινώσκον ἐφαρμόζειν τῷ γινώσκομένῳ.

¹⁸ Dav. (Elias) *Proll.* 4.11–12 Busse: ἵνα γένηται κατάληψις, θέλει τὸ γινώσκον ἐφαρμόζεσθαι τῷ γνωστῷ.

¹⁹ A clear connection between Scepticism and Heraclitus is given by Olympiodorus in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Meteorologica*, 118.21–30 Stüve.

²⁰ Pl. *Cra.* 402a8–10; Heraclitus frs. B 12, B 91 DK). See further below, notes 23–24.

²¹ Or ‘flux,’ ‘flow,’ ‘river(s)’.

²² Ammon. *In Cat.* 2.25–3.1; Phlp. *In Cat.* 2.15–16; Olymp. *Proll.* 4.33–34; Dav. *Proll.* 4.2–3.

²³ A corresponding quotation from Heraclitus is preserved *verbatim* in Eusebius of Caesarea (*PE* 15.20), who quotes the doxograph Arius Didymus; this quotation runs as follows: “While we step twice into the same rivers, the waters that every time flow over us are different”. According to Arius Didymus, Cleanthes affirmed that Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, called “the soul an exhalation (from the blood) endowed with sensation, just as Heraclitus does. For wishing to make it clear that ‘there is a perpetual production of the souls being exhaled moist’, he (Heraclitus) compared them to rivers” (B 12 DK). A paraphrase from Heraclitus that is close to the literal citation also survived in Plutarchus’ *De E apud Delphos* (M. 18.392B): “One can not enter the same river twice” (= B 91 DK). — The question of whether Heraclitus himself proposed the so-called “universal flux theory” or whether it is a “doxological aberration” going back to Plato, who interpreted the Heraclitean metaphor of “flux” (“stream”, “river(s)”, etc.) as a symbol of the universal change of all things, is still a subject of debate (cf., e.g., Lebedev 2014: 72–75).

²⁴ Arist. *Metaph.* 1010a11–15: Cratylus “criticized Heraclitus for saying that one cannot enter the same river twice, for he himself held that it cannot be done even once”.

at the same time one puts one's foot in, water flows over it, before the rest of the body goes in".²⁵

From this premise, Sceptics deduced the following alternatives: to know any material object, either an object should become stable and unchangeable for a human soul (which is also immutable) to cognise it, or the soul should start to change and move in the same way as an object remains in universal flux. However, both are impossible: neither can we stabilise the perishable nature of material things, nor can an immortal and immaterial soul move into becoming and changing. Therefore, according to Ammonius, "if things are not fixed but always change, and our soul cannot follow along and change with them, the result will necessarily be ignorance (ἀκαταληψία)".²⁶ The same conclusion is also provided by David²⁷ and by John Philoponus.²⁸

Ammonius and most of his followers reproached this Sceptical deduction in the following way:

Now, as I said, they were right in asserting this, but they were wrong to suppose that our soul cannot follow along. For Plato proved that good souls not only do not come upon things afterwards, but actually anticipate them and meet them first with the speed of their own movement, and in this way they apprehend them.²⁹

In what way a soul may "anticipate" things is explained by Olympiodorus with examples of "prophecies and the predictions of solar eclipses",³⁰ and David explicates the quotation of Plato, which Ammonius' statement is based on:

Again, often the soul knows things before they change, as Plato shows when he says that "the souls of the wise do not only arrive at reality

²⁵ Ammon. *In Cat.* 3.1–3; Cohen, Matthews 2014: 10.

²⁶ Ammon. *In Cat.* 2.20–23.

²⁷ Dav. *Proll.* 4.3–7.

²⁸ Phlp. *In Cat.* 2.16–20. However, Philoponus confuses Pyrrho with Heraclitus and Heraclitus with Cratylus, cf. Sirkel et al. 2015: 120n7.

²⁹ Ammon. *In Cat.* 3.3–8; Cohen, Matthews 2014: 10.

³⁰ Olymp. *Proll.* 5.4–5: ὡς δηλοῦσιν αἱ μαντεῖαι καὶ αἱ προρρήσεις τῶν ἡλιακῶν, εἰ τύχοι, ἐκλείψεων. English translation: Gertz 2018: 199.

after the fact, but they anticipate it and have foreknowledge that precedes change”.³¹

Here we face the first significant discrepancy between Platonic and Sceptic ontologies. For the latter, a soul cannot experience any change or movement and therefore cannot perceive or know changeable and moving objects. On the opposite, Platonists admit the soul’s capacity to know changeable material objects (which is obvious from the standpoint of our everyday life³²); however, they do not state that the soul itself is changeable. Below we will discuss how this position could be maintained.

“Plato’s” Disproof of Scepticism

Another significant criticism of Sceptic epistemology, namely the refutation of Pyrrho, is ascribed directly to Plato, which is an apparent anachronism. Expectedly, the following text, cited by Ammonius, that pretends to be a direct quotation is not found in any of surviving Plato’s writings:³³

Although Plato refutes them with other strong arguments, he also uses this sort of refutation, which is drawn from their own doctrine: “Do you claim,” he says, “that you know there to be total ignorance, or that you do not know? If you do not know this, we will surely not believe you, since your claim is just talk. But if you do know it, then there is cognition (κατάληψις)”.³⁴

This objection is quite straightforward and probably could have been given many times at the very beginning of the history of Scepticism. Naturally, when Sceptics posit that there is no possibility for

³¹ Dav. *Proll.* 4.31–35; cf. quoted passage with Plato’s *Meno* 81c5–9.

³² Olympiodorus quotes Galen, who “refuted the Sceptics by drawing on the obvious, when he says: ‘Unless there is knowledge and the nature of reality is defined, why on earth are we not going to step into a furnace when looking for water, or, in the same way, step into the sea when looking for food’” (*Proll.* 4.15–18; Gertz 2018: 199).

³³ For more reliable historical evidence on relationships between Platonic tradition and Scepticism see Svetlov, Shevtsov 2019.

³⁴ Ammon. *In Cat.* 2.12–17; Cohen, Matthews 2014: 10.

certain knowledge, this statement itself can be taken as some kind of knowledge. However, the famous words of Democritus and Socrates “I know that I do not know anything”³⁵ provide an example of such a “negative” knowledge. Of course, ancient Sceptics were aware of this type of criticism, and could repel it. Below, we will add some more details on this subject.

David extends the Sceptic problem of knowledge: he considers any argumentative expression that depends on proofs of any kind, and particularly the apodictic philosophy:

For these people who lead lives of contention (they are the Pyrrhonists, who try to overturn everything), wanted to overturn the mother of proofs (τὴν μητέρα τῶν ἀποδείξεων), I mean philosophy, using proofs, and, so to speak, overturn (ἀνέτρεπον) philosophy using philosophy. <...> if someone says that philosophy does not exist, he uses proofs to deny [the existence of] philosophy. But if he uses proofs, it is clear that he is doing philosophy, since philosophy is the mother of proofs. If he says that philosophy exists, he is again doing philosophy, since he uses proofs to show that philosophy exists. Therefore anyone who denies the existence of philosophy and anyone who does not is in either case doing philosophy, because each of them uses proofs to give credibility to what he says.³⁶

Here it is evident, that David is speaking about speculative philosophy with logical proofs and conclusions. On the other hand, Sceptical ἀκαταληψία is first of all related to material objects, not the logical, mathematical or pure intelligible matters. Also, what is considered by Platonists as an object of knowledge, is not necessarily such for the Sceptics, who could have taken it not as an object, but as a method of knowing. In other words, “knowing” that there is no knowledge, could be not a different kind of knowledge, but an epistemological method. Taking into account this possible difference, we can better distinguish between positions of Platonists and Sceptics.

³⁵ Pl. *Ap.* 21d4–6; Democritus, fr. B 304 DK.

³⁶ Dav. *Proll.* 8.24–28, 9.5–11; Gertz 2018: 90–91.

The discussed principle of knowing the impossibility to know is not the only one Sceptical principle. For instance, Olympiodorus gives evidence of “Apollo’s tripod” metaphor:

Their [school] was like that of the so-called tripod of Apollo. It was called Apollo’s tripod, because when asked about any subject they would give a threefold answer: either both things are true, or neither, or one of the two. In the case of the soul, for example, when asked “what is the soul, mortal or immortal?”, they would reply that it is either both (i.e. mortal and immortal), or neither (neither mortal nor immortal), or one of the two, and this could be in two ways, the soul being either mortal or immortal.³⁷

This “tripod” style³⁸ of discussion could be attacked with the same objections as those ascribed to Plato: if nothing is knowable, one cannot know whether three or any other number of alternatives can be given as an answer. However, this approach was not criticised by Platonists, as it is almost obvious that “Apollo’s tripod” is not a fact or a rule to be known, but a method of ἀπόδειξις (though a negative one) to be employed.³⁹

“Aristotelian” Disproof of Scepticism

Finally, David (Elias) introduces two important theses against Sceptic doctrine, which are absent in the writings of his predecessors. The first objection is related to the theory of universal flux and the problem of conceiving things, which do not form part of our experience:

What is not apparent can be discerned most readily from what is apparent. Since everything in motion is moved by something else, and we see that the heavens are a body and that they are in motion, they are moved by something else. Therefore there is someone who moves the heavens. And since the same movement moves it continuously, it

³⁷ Olymp. *Proll.* 3.35–4.3; Gertz 2018: 198.

³⁸ For more details on the origins of the “tripod” see Hadot 1989: 59–60.

³⁹ In the same way as Olympiodorus avoids such criticism, so does Elias (David) in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Categories*, 109.24–110.3.

is clear that a single mover moves the heavens, as Aristotle says. If there were many movers that move the heavens, one would move it in one way, another in another, and its movement would not be one and the same. And since the heavens are always moving without stop, it is clear that some incorporeal mover always moves them. If the mover of heaven had a body, he would be limited. But a limited body also has a limited power and would not be able to move the heavens continuously and without stop. From this it is clear that what moves the heavens does not have a body. Nor indeed will it perish, since if what moves the heavens perished, the heavens would perish with it. But in fact the heavens do not perish; therefore it is clear that what moves the heavens does not perish either. So what has the argument proved? That what moves the heavens is single, incorporeal, unlimited, and imperishable. And this is precisely the divine. In this way then we have attained a conception of what is not apparent from what is apparent.⁴⁰

Obviously, the central premise of this passage is directed at those who deny the possibility of knowing intelligibles, or the “divine”, as David says. However, there is another necessary consequence if Sceptics state that due to universal natural flux things are inconceivable by a soul as long as this flux remains irrational and incomprehensible for pure intellect. David argues that the universal flux is not chaotic or irrational but is caused by the prime mover and therefore is an essential part of the universal harmony. Consequently, there should not be any discrepancy between the order of material moving objects and a human soul as long as they participate in one and the same divine structure of the cosmos. Naturally, this Aristotelian cosmology is quite far from the Heraclitean intuition adopted by Sceptics. However, this example illustrates the way how late Neoplatonists could understand the teaching of Sceptics.

The second amendment introduced by David is also targeted at the question of what can be known by a soul:

firstly, philosophy is not concerned with particular things (τὰ μερικὰ), which are in flux and flow (ἐν ῥοῇ καὶ ἀπορροῇ), but rather with universals (τὰ καθόλου), which do not change, but always remain the same.

⁴⁰ Dav. *Proll.* 6.4–19; Gertz 2018: 88.

Second, even if we grant that philosophy is concerned with particulars, someone will not be incapable of comprehending just because the knower, i.e. the soul, does not change along with what is knowledge, i.e. the object. For according to this argument neither would the divine know any of the things that come to be, since it does not change along with things, but always remains the same. And again, according to this argument a doctor in a natural state would be unable to know what is contrary to nature, i.e. when he is healthy, he would be unable to distinguish diseases, but he would have to become sick in order to distinguish them.⁴¹

Here David likely faces a difficulty: when speaking about knowledge of universals, there is no problem in thinking of an agreement between immutable soul and unchangeable truth. However, the possibility of knowing the changeable and movable is simply asserted on the basis of experience without explicit theoretical ground. For instance, how a divine intellect can conceive material objects is not explained; it is just given as something obvious.

It should be emphasised that this problem is not alien to mainstream Neoplatonic philosophy. The “correspondence” between Porphyry (*Letter to Anebo*) and Iamblichus (*On the Mysteries of Egypt*) initially posed the question of how immaterial and bodiless gods can perceive prayers with spoken words or sacrifices of material objects from the standpoint of Neoplatonic metaphysics and theurgy. Probably, the clearest answer was given by Proclus in his commentary on Plato’s *Cratylus*: neither visible nor intelligible gods have mouth or ears; they do not speak and do not perceive speech. However, gods “have in themselves prior to the world as a whole the roots and the causes of all beings”,⁴² thus they do not perceive, but preknow all things before they come to be: “Both the gods and the daemons hear our prayers not from without, but anticipating our purpose (προαίρεσις) and knowing our activities (ἐνεργείας)”.⁴³ If we accept the language of David, Proclus’ answer may be interpreted as follows: gods do not know things

⁴¹ Dav. *Proll.* 4.21–31; Gertz 2018: 86.

⁴² Procl. *In Cra.* 78.5–6 Pasquali; English translation: Duvick, Tarrant 2014: 44.

⁴³ *Ibid.*: 73.5–7; Duvick, Tarrant 2014: 43.

in their particular existence, either stable or fluid, but they know the universe as a whole, and every object is conceived by them as a part of a single cosmical order. It is significant that the Proclean solution to the question is not taken into account by David: his general approach to Aristotle is quite far from Athenian tradition.

Alexandrian and Athenian Neoplatonists vs. Scepticism

The fragments cited above cover almost all mentions of Sceptics in the Neoplatonic writings in our scope. It is almost obvious that the resultant picture is very scant; there is more information on Sceptics even in Diogenes Laërtius and of course much more in Sextus Empiricus. It is difficult to believe that Alexandrian commentators of Aristotle were not aware of relevant sources on Scepticism. It is more probable that Scepticism was considered the most fallacious form of philosophy or even not a philosophy at all, as one may conclude from Ammonius' evidence.⁴⁴ According to Ilsetraut Hadot, even cynics and Epicureans were more tolerable from the Neoplatonic standpoint than Sceptics.⁴⁵ Therefore, their doctrine was worthy of discussion only in those cases in which it outraged Neoplatonists the most.

Such cases probably are connected with the charge of Plato being philosophically sympathetic to Scepticism.⁴⁶ For instance, the anonymous author of *Introduction to Platonic philosophy* makes significant effort to acquit Plato showing that his ignorance was relative (when compared to the gods), and that his doubt as a method was not universal.⁴⁷ Therefore, the Neoplatonic commentators expectedly discuss only those Sceptic views which are related to Plato's epistemology and may provide grounds for associating him with Scepticism.

From this standpoint, we can return to the problem of which objects are knowable by a soul. Recalling the abovementioned arguments, we see that conformity of a knower and what is known can take on two

⁴⁴ See quotation above at note 12.

⁴⁵ Hadot 1989: 60.

⁴⁶ Chase 2003: 98, n. 44

⁴⁷ *Proleg.* 10.43–11.13 Westerink.

alternative forms: either the knowable object is stable and immutable in the same way as the soul is, or the soul should be movable and mutable in the same way as material objects are. However, both ways are impossible for Sceptics, neither can a soul become mutable, nor can things step out of the universal flux. This position reflects a fundamental dualism of an immaterial soul and material world. This exact thought is expressed by Sextus: the Sceptic capability (δύναμις) is the one which opposes all phenomena to noumena (ἀντιθετική φαινομένων τε καὶ νοουμένων).⁴⁸

Naturally, a similar dualism is inherent to Platonic metaphysics; thus, there is a great temptation to derive both Platonism and Scepticism from a single ground. However, as the commentaries above state, Platonists disagree with the insuperable gap between sensible and intelligible. However, if we recall their arguments, they do not explain *how* a soul overcomes this gap. They only speak about its capability to know the regularities of objects' changes in advance, probably in a way similar to that described by Proclus when discussing on gods' knowledge of causes that precede things themselves.

In other words, thanks to the challenge of Sceptics, late Neoplatonists find a consistent way to overcome the epistemological (and therefore metaphysical) dualism between sensible and intelligible, demonstrating at least a commitment to the universally monistic ground for knowing things even if they are never identical to themselves like Heraclitus' river.

What is totally ignored by Neoplatonists is the pure material reality of objects, their irrational nature, and the impossibility of grasping them in a single act of cognition. As we have seen, a soul does not perceive an object in its particular, unique and unstable being. By contrast, it perceives its rational reason either regarding its individual being from the standpoint of universals, or regarding its changes or movement from the standpoint of global cosmical movement caused by the unmoved mover. The irrational, inconceivable nature of Plato's

⁴⁸ S.E. P. 1.8.1–3 Mutschmann.

χώρα, which can be “apprehended by a kind of bastard reasoning”,⁴⁹ is almost lost in the scope of Aristotelian commentaries and is the main problem emphasized by the Sceptics. Their method of doubt and uncertainty gives a weighty counterpart to Alexandrian Neoplatonic rational monism and reveals the problem of matter and irrationality.

If we consider the Athenian branch of late Neoplatonism, we will notice that neither Proclus nor Simplicius paid much attention to Sceptic doctrines. In the same way, Iamblichus or Julian did not touch upon Sceptic epistemology. One possible explanation of this phenomenon can be discovered in the conception of a theurgic symbol (σύμβολον and σύνθημα).⁵⁰ The concept of symbol provides a fundamental possibility to connect rational and irrational layers in one material object. From the formal standpoint, each symbolic object contains a “footprint” of its ideal prototype, an εἶδος in Plato’s sense. However, from the material standpoint, a symbol is fundamentally different from its ideal base; it contains an inconceivable and unpredictable element, which corresponds to the apophatic nature of the highest ontological levels.⁵¹

On the contrary, Alexandrian Neoplatonists speak very little on theurgic and theurgic symbols. Thus, the problem of conceiving the irrational impelled them to scrutinise Sceptic philosophy and disprove it from the Platonic standpoint as they understood it.

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⁴⁹ Pl. *Ti.* 52b2; Cooper, Hutchinson 1997: 1255.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Shaw 1995; Struck 2004: 210–226, 234–250; Trouillard 1981; Cardullo 1985.

⁵¹ Chlup 2012: 86–92, 163–184. On possible Sceptic sources of Plotinian apophaticism see Wallis 1987: 952–954.

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