

Reason, Revelation, and Sceptical Argumentation in 12th- to 14th-Century Byzantium

Jonathan Greig

Austrian Academy of Sciences (IMAFÖ), Vienna

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Abstract:

In middle to late Byzantium, one finds dogmatic-style sceptical arguments employed against human reason in relation to divine revelation, where revelation becomes the sole criterion of certain truth in contrast to reason. This argumentative strategy originates in early Christian authors, especially Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215 CE) and Gregory Nazianzen (c. 329–390 CE), who maintain that revelation is the only domain of knowledge where certainty is possible. Given this, one finds two striking variations of this sceptical approach: a “mild” variant (represented by Clement), where knowledge derived from human reason admits partial access to truths manifested in revelation, if imperfect; and a “strict” variant (represented by Gregory), where knowledge derived from human reason does not admit any access to truths in revelation. This paper analyzes the three Byzantines, Nicholas of Methone (d. 1160/66 CE), Theodore Metochites (1270–1320 CE), and Gregory Palamas (1296–1357/59 CE), who each display certain tendencies toward these two “poles” in their respective epistemological positions on knowledge through reason and faith.

Introduction

While the attitude concerning philosophy varied among early Christians, a common theme among many was to cast doubt on the certainty attained in practicing philosophy explicitly outside the domain of divine enlightenment: without the revelation of the one true God, the philosophers contradict themselves, and any attempt to ascertain truth purely by reason is prone to contradiction and overturning. This should motivate one to strive toward the safe certainty of the true light itself: the direct manifestation of God through the person of Christ (i.e. the *Logos*). One can detect a parallel here to Pyrrhonian Sceptics, like Sextus Empiricus, who hold that philosophical argumentation only results in constant contradictory arguments that cannot be settled: the goal, then, for the Pyrrhonians is that one must suspend judgment, and in so doing attain the state of true *ataraxia*, or serene calmness.

Early (and as we will see, later Byzantine) Christians disagree with the idea that *all* claims of truth result in contradiction and the impossibility of judgment, yet they would concur that the end of one's skeptical response to dubious claims concerning reality should lead to a higher state: for Christians this would be reliance on divine revelation, rather than merely the Sceptic's “living with the appearances”, as leading to this state. Hence, the early and later Byzantine Christian version of

skepticism involves a unique combination of factors: generally (a) a form of negative dogmatism about knowledge through human reason and philosophy; yet (b) the maintenance that certainty of knowledge is still possible when obtained through divine revelation. Given these two factors, two questions face us, especially when we consider later Byzantines: for (a), just what is the exact feature of human reason and philosophy that makes it fail to attain its object of knowledge? And for (b), what is it about revelation that merits its certainty in a way not possessed by the former with (a)?

This paper will address these two questions by focusing on three late Byzantines—Nicholas of Methone (d. 1160/66 C.E.), Theodore Metochites (1270–1320 C.E.), and Gregory Palamas (1296–1357/1359 C.E.)—who come at a time of revived interests in the pagan philosophical traditions, especially the late Neoplatonist, Proclus (c. 412–485 C.E.), and Neoplatonism in general, in Byzantium. Their respective discussions on human reason and what it can know outside the realm of revelation—hence in pagan philosophy—in turn revives an old, perennial debate on reason and philosophy, and their relation to divine revelation, in 2nd–4th-century Christians: hence this paper will begin by focusing on Clement of Alexandria (140/150–220 A.D.) and Gregory Nazianzen (329–390 C.E.), representing two poles, as it were, of skepticism: one as a “mild” form, wherein philosophy has *partial* access to the full truth, revealed in revelation, yet incomplete; and a “stricter” form, wherein philosophy has *no* access to the full truth, revealed in revelation, thus implying the futility of reason in the domain of the natural world. As we will see developed in the rest of the paper, the later Byzantines, Nicholas of Methone, Theodore Metochites, and Gregory Palamas, generally inherit from both of these variants, with certain tendencies towards one pole or the other—and it is in this context that their forms of skepticism should be understood.¹

One of the general themes that comes out of our authors, as we will see, is that the kind of skepticism they subscribe to, and employ, is couched within a broader methodological discussion on natural reason’s relation to revelation and divine illumination—particularly where all agree that revelation is the only domain of knowledge, even if held by belief (or also direct divine apprehension, as in Palamas), where certainty is maintained. Hence what we see is, as Börje Bydén has rightly called it, a kind of a dogmatic skepticism, rather than Pyrrhonian (which implicitly denies *all* possibility of

¹ Hence this paper does not directly focus on direct influences of ancient Skeptics, as especially Sextus Empiricus, though we will discuss some of these potential influences. On the reception of ancient Skepticism in Byzantines, including Pyrrhonianism, see the excellent Bydén (2002), Demetracopoulos (1999), and Lagerlund (2020) 74–76.

certain truth), insofar as they still designate a domain of knowledge where certainty is maintained.² This would then reflect (as we will see toward the end) more of a kind of Platonic conception of skepticism, where principles of certainty explaining the material world, which exists in flux and instability, cannot derive from the latter, but must come from a separate, transcendent cause—for Plato, the Forms and intellect (νοῦς). Our Christian figures, it would turn out, switch the tables and put philosophy and natural reason in the position of Plato’s “material world”: its stability and certainty can only be grounded in transcendent truths beyond reason, i.e. divine revelation and illumination.

1. Background: Early Christian Skepticism and Anti-Skepticism

The skeptical background in Nicholas and later Byzantines is to be found in early Christian and Byzantine figures like Clement of Alexandria and the Cappadocian Fathers (especially Gregory Nazianzen, as we will see), where the latter, in turn, borrow their argumentative strategies from pagan Skeptical sources like Sextus Empiricus—at the same time that they also explicitly *oppose* the Sceptics (both, it would seem, Academic and Pyrrhonian). We should briefly look over Clement and the Cappadocians, inasmuch as they provide a majority of the skeptical context we find in our later Byzantines, along with the way in which they borrow from and transform the arguments of ancient Sceptics, especially ones found in Sextus Empiricus.

We find Clement’s arguments laid out in the *Stromateis*,³ a loose collection of arguments that defend against Gnostic doctrines, like those of Valentinus and Basilides, alongside false pagan conceptions of true philosophy.⁴ Clement’s general attitude to previous pagan philosophical schools is notably, in his own phrasing, eclectic (τὸ ἐκλεκτικόν): he does not reject the previous tradition of philosophy wholesale, nor any one school directly (citing Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, and Epicureans), but he maintains that, “whatever has been well said by each of those schools, which teaches justice along with a science pervaded by piety—this eclectic whole is what I call philosophy”.⁵ This goes with Clement’s statement earlier that pagan Greek philosophy and education is sent by God

² Also what Bydén refers to as a kind of “confirmist fideism”, though with significant qualification: see Bydén (2002) 189–190 and 198 n. 54.

³ Translated literally, “Miscellanies”.

⁴ On the *Stromateis* and context, see Karamanolis (2013) 244, Ferguson in Clement of Alexandria (1991) 10–19, and Lilla (1971).

⁵ *Strom.* I.7.37.6: ἀλλ’ ὅσα εἴρηται παρ’ ἐκάστη τῶν αἰρέσεων τούτων καλῶς, δικαιοσύνην μετὰ εὐσεβοῦς ἐπιστήμης ἐκδιδάσκοντα, τοῦτο σύμπαν τὸ ἐκλεκτικὸν φιλοσοφίαν φημί. (Translations my own unless otherwise noted.)

to humanity as a preparation for the full revelation of the *Logos*—correlating with what Clement takes to be “well-said”.⁶ On the flip side, Clement’s emphasis on what is “well-said” constituting “philosophy” implies its inverse: the remainder leftover from what has been “cut away from human reasonings and re-branded [as divine]” Clement would not claim as “divine”⁷—and implicitly not true “philosophy”. In this, Clement attempts to strike a *via media*: on the one hand, he follows those like his near-contemporary, Justin Martyr (c. 100–165 C.E.), in maintaining the harmony of philosophy with Christian revelation;⁸ on the other hand, Clement also tries avoiding the destructive pessimism of philosophy’s relation to Christian revelation, cemented in Tertullian’s famous quip, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”⁹ Yet still, in maintaining that the divine person of the *Logos*, manifested in the Incarnation, reveals truth in a way philosophy before the *Logos* could not, Clement is necessitated to show in what regard previous philosophical schools could not manifest the truth in a way the *Logos* could.

An important counterpart in this is Clement’s claim in *Strom.* VI.7.54.1 that true philosophy, which is concerned with wisdom (σοφία), is a “stable and unchanging apprehension” (κατάληψίν τινα βεβαίαν οὔσαν καὶ ἀμετάπτωτον). Clement’s language directly recalls the Stoic description of apprehension, which is also “stable and unchanging” in its character.¹⁰ Clement in this respect borrows from the Stoic criterion of certainty in knowledge by attaching it directly to his definition of “philosophy”, which is only comprehended in the *Logos*. Thus, it is only in light of this strong notion of knowledge attached to true “philosophy” that one can adjudicate the truths and falsehoods implicit in other, previous philosophical frameworks.¹¹ The flip side of this is that one cannot obtain certainty solely within the

⁶ *Strom.* I.7.37.1–5; the idea, in turn, is an implicit reference back to Plato, *Timaeus* 47b1–2, who *as well* says that philosophy is a gift from God to humanity.

⁷ *Strom.* I.7.37.6: ὅσα δὲ ἀνθρωπίνων λογισμῶν ἀποτεμόμενοι παρεχάραξαν, ταῦτα οὐκ ἂν ποτε θεῖα εἴποιμ’ ἂν. See also Golitsis (2019) 19–20; it is not as clear to me, as Golitsis claims, that Clement cuts off *all* human reasoning and philosophy from “what is divine”.

⁸ See e.g. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 8.1; cf. Karamanolis (2013) 2–3.

⁹ See e.g. *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7,3–4, where Tertullian ascribes various heresies to the positions of different philosophical schools—a reason to reject previous philosophical schools, like the Stoics and Platonists. See however Karamanolis (2013) 31–33, who argues (I think convincingly) that Tertullian still maintains goodness in human reasoning and philosophy—however almost exclusively identified with Christianity.

¹⁰ See Zeno, *SVF* I.20, I.50.

¹¹ See e.g. Clement, *Strom.* I.9.44.1. Cf. Karamanolis (2013) 43; see 121–122 for an elaboration on Clement’s criteria for the specific domains of knowledge in which certainty is possible.

periphery of one or another of these philosophical frameworks, inasmuch as they do not fully possess complete truth correlating with the *Logos*:¹² the latter can be the only criterion by which truths may be judged and acknowledged in others like the Platonists, Stoics, and so on.¹³

Two consequences result from this: first a concern to defend against critiques of any criterion for truth, as found in the Skeptics; and second, ironically, the use of the Skeptics in critiquing other philosophical frameworks, and hence human reason without the revelation of the divine *Logos*.

With the first, because of the concern for safeguarding the certainty obtained in true “philosophy”, Clement is motivated to critique those who maintain that a contrarian goal of philosophy as found in the Pyrrhonian Skeptics: that it should lead to the suspension all judgment. Whereas Academic Skeptics attack the criterion of judgment for the Stoics as leading to certain truth, the Pyrrhonians go one step further and attack *any* criterion of judgment:¹⁴ the acknowledgement of ignorance must eventually rule out even one’s claim to know that there is no truth with certainty, and hence any criterion, even of one’s own.¹⁵ Thus for someone like Clement who maintains that “philosophy” through the *Logos* gives one a clear, certain criterion of truth, the Skeptics would be a threat, especially in the form of the Pyrrhonians. This provides context for Clement’s attack on the Pyrrhonians near the end of the *Stromateis* (Book VIII), where he critiques the suspension of judgment (ἐποχή) as a form of assent, and hence a judgment: even if the Pyrrhonian follows his goal of giving assent to the images, for Clement this would mark a judgment—the thing the Pyrrhonian attempts to avoid.¹⁶

¹² Clement, *Strom.* I.13.57, esp. 1–2.

¹³ Clement, *Strom.* I.20.97, esp. 2–4.

¹⁴ Karamanolis (2013) 36. On Academic Skeptics, see e.g. Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 7,166–75, esp. where Sextus claims that Carneades, while attempting to prove the “non-existence of the criterion [of truth]” (implicitly for positive dogmatists like the Stoics), himself possesses “a certain criterion”: “both the ‘convincing’ impression (φάντασιν) and the one which is simultaneously convincing, undiverted and thoroughly explored”. [cf. others?] On Pyrrhonian Skeptics, see e.g. Diogenes Laertius 9,78; 9,106–107; Photius, *Bibliotheca* 169b18–170b3; and Sextus Empiricus, *Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes* 1,31–39.

¹⁵ Photius, *Bibliotheca* [169b18–170b3]: “Nor indeed, do they [i.e. Pyrrhonian Skeptics] say there is true or false, convincing or unconvincing, existent or non-existent. But the same thing is, it might be said, no more true than false, convincing than unconvincing, or existent than non-existent” (trans. Long/Sedley).

¹⁶ Clement, *Strom.* VIII.5.15–16. As Karamanolis (2013) 127–129 points out, the remaining sections after Clement’s initial attack on the Pyrrhonians (VIII.6–9) seem setup as an implicit response to the Skeptics (Book VIII does not have a complete end) by outlining Clement’s theory of demonstration: although he does not explicitly state his purpose for discussing demonstration in these remaining sections, Clement seems to be showing how knowledge of universals in relation to particulars, as the content of demonstration, does make possible scientific knowledge—a positive counter-message to the Pyrrhonian claim he has just critiqued.

This background is important to contextualize in what way Skeptical arguments become used by Clement’s Christian contemporaries and successors, especially the Cappadocians who are more influential for the later Byzantines—even when both Clement and other Christians are concerned to defend against the Skeptical project as a whole. As it turns out, the Skeptics become useful for the Christian to indicate the insufficiency of the philosophers outside the criterion of the *Logos*. This brings back Clement’s judgment about the parts “cut away” by the philosophers which cannot be so divine and thus connected to true “philosophy”. Clement does not employ Skeptical arguments to show exactly how the other philosophers fail to attain to the truth, yet we find at least a couple indications that might lead one this way: first, he concedes at the end of his attack on the Pyrrhonians that even some in dogmatic schools, or those inclined towards dogmatism, are inclined to suspend judgment (ἐποχή) in matters either involving lack of clarity in one’s mind or in the subject matter, or also in arguments themselves.¹⁷ In other words the methods of the Pyrrhonians are still valid, especially where balancing arguments of equal force, for example, whenever the situation obtains, inevitably leads one to suspending judgment. The admission of the frailty of the mind and the potential unclarity in things is mirrored earlier in the *Stromateis* when Clement assesses the philosophical schools as imperfectly attaining to the *Logos* in varying degrees: “Those among the Greeks with the most precise grasp of philosophy discern God both through a reflection (ἐμφασιν) and transparent medium (διάφασιν). Such are the images (φαντασῖαι) of truth our weakness admits, just as you would perceive the things in water—alongside things through transparent and translucent bodies—as an image.”¹⁸ On the one hand, the thrust of Clement’s statement is supposed to show in a positive way how the philosophers can be a way to lead one to the full truth found in the *Logos*. On the other hand, Clement’s language of perceiving “things in water” in the manner of an “image” (φαντασῖαι) is a striking juxtaposition to the earlier language of the “stable and unchanging apprehension (κατάληψιν)” —often spoken in the context of an “image” or “impression” communicated to the mind: what is associated with the *Logos*.

The lack of stability and unchangeable character found in previous philosophies, although to some degree underscored in Clement, becomes a more significant theme in other, later Christian authors—and where we find the use of Skeptical language employed. An example of this can be seen in Ps.-Justin’s *Exhortation to the Greeks*, when he points out that disagreement between Plato and Aristotle

¹⁷ Clement, *Strom.* VIII.5.16.3. Cf. discussion of the exception Clement allows for suspension of judgment (ἐποχή) for the dogmatist still lacking clarity in Havrda (2016) 215–218.

¹⁸ Clement, *Strom.* I.19.94.7; trans. Ferguson, modified.

directly implies their “ignorance”, implicitly a failure in attaining the truth.¹⁹ The strategy of showing disagreement between philosophical schools can also be found in the Pyrrhonian “mode of dispute”, discussed among the other “Five Modes” involved in suspension of judgment, according to which the mutual disagreement between philosophers on a given position leads to such suspension.²⁰ One example that Sextus Empiricus cites is on the very issue of the criterion of truth: “Some have asserted that there is one (e.g. the Stoics and certain others), some that there is not (among them, Xenocrates of Corinth, and Xenophanes of Colophon who says: ‘but belief is found over all’); and we suspend judgment (ἐπέσχομεν) as to whether there is one or not”.²¹ One can see this as an extension of the standard Pyrrhonian principle of balancing arguments of equal weight with each other, where here the dispute between schools *de facto* is grounds for suspending clear judgment in any direction. For Christians like Ps.-Justin and Clement, while similarly concurring with respect to the impossibility to ascertain the truth within the periphery of the schools, they instead see it as pointing to the *Logos* beyond that periphery. Hence the suspension of judgment from the first “mode of dispute” becomes a tool, rather than the end in itself.

This helps establish the background we find later in the Cappadocian Fathers of the 4th-century (C.E.), especially in Gregory Nazianzen who becomes one main influence for the form of skepticism we find in Theodore Metochites and Gregory Palamas. One of the primary factors in the background for the Cappadocians’ skeptical arguments in relation to reason was the Eunomian Controversy, where it was claimed by Eunomius of Cyzicus and his followers that the Son (or *Logos*, as the second Trinitarian person) was “unlike” (ἀνόμοιον) in substance from the Father, rather than being of the *same* substance (ὁμοούσιος)—as the Cappadocians maintained, and as become orthodox Christian doctrine. For the Eunomians, the Father, as God, was characterized as “ingenerate”, in contrast to the Son who is generated from the Father: this meant that God, if God by substance is so characterized as “ingenerate”, to say that the Son is generated, while identifying the Son as also God in substance, would suggest composition in God’s substance, with the two terms of “ingenerate” and “generated”. A key premise in the Eunomians’ claims was that definitions or predicates applied to God directly correspond to the substance, or essence (οὐσία), of God—which further implies that the essence of God could be directly

¹⁹ Ps.-Justin, *Exhortation* 5.1. Cf. Karamanolis (2013) 35.

²⁰ Sextus Empiricus, *Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes* I.164–169.

²¹ Sextus Empiricus, *PH* II.18; trans. Morison, modified.

grasped by the human intellect.²² Hence one of the main ways that the Cappadocians attacked the Eunomians (esp. Gregory Nazianzen and Basil of Caesarea) was in radically questioning the degree to which the essences of anything could be directly apprehended by the human intellect, much less the essence of God.

This backdrop thus helps explain a stricter form of skepticism over the intellect's grasp of things in their own natures, as we find here in Gregory Nazianzen. In his *Orations* 28, Gregory sets out the nature of theology concerning God, or the *Logos* (as in Clement), where it must inevitably lead one to apophaticism in any discourse, mirroring the nature of God who transcends all finite distinctions and is thus purely infinite—as “like an undefined, unlimited ocean of being”.²³ The attempt to comprehend God in rational discourse is thus bound to fail: as Gregory points out in 28.4, discourse (λόγος) can only dimly indicate God's existence and nature, if at all, whereas for the human intellect to comprehend (περιλαβεῖν) God is impossible by its own nature.²⁴ Thus, the failure is not just because of the infinite nature of the intellect's object, God, but also the limited nature of the intellect itself, in its attempt to grasp God. Implicit in the passage is also a corollary skepticism of Greek philosophy's claim for the possibility of attaining at God's nature, even if description is impossible or difficult.

Gregory makes this notion explicit later when he expands the limitation of the intellect's comprehension to knowledge of other, intelligible aspects of reality—not just God:

“All truth, all reasoning, to be sure, is obscure, hard to trace out. It is like employing a small tool on big constructions, if we use human wisdom in the hunt for knowledge of reality (τὴν τῶν ὄντων γνῶσιν). We do not abandon the senses, they go with us, when we look at supra-sensible realities. But by these same senses we are perplexed and led astray. We cannot get nearer the truth by meeting things in their naked reality with naked intellect.

²² On the history of the Eunomian controversy, and the Cappadocians' critical response to their framework, see Radde-Gallwitz (2009) (esp. 96–112 on the background to Eunomius) and DeIcogiano (2010).

²³ *Orations* 38.36, PG:36 317,26–27: οἶόν τι πέλαγος οὐσίας ἄπειρον καὶ ἀόριστον. The phrase becomes a significant metaphysical characterization in the later Byzantine theologian, John of Damascus, and in the Latin tradition in Duns Scotus's characterization of God as pure infinity, rather than pure being, as in Aquinas: Cross (1999) 39 ff.

²⁴ *Orations* 28.4, esp. 5–12. Earlier in lines 1–4, Gregory references an unnamed Greek philosopher who, in his words, claims that to “know” (νοῆσαι) God is difficult, while speaking (φράσαι) of God is impossible—which, as we see, Gregory inverts the order, i.e. to *speak* of God difficult, to *know* impossible. Various commentators have pointed to Plato's *Timaeus* 28c, where the latter claims that “to *find* the maker and father of this universe is difficult”, while “to declare to all” the maker and father is impossible (28c3–5). Gregory's version of the unnamed philosopher's phrase as “to know” rather than “to find” is striking in this respect, and more so his aim to show that knowing is impossible. See Norris (1991) 110 for further discussion of this passage.

Our intellect cannot receive impressions by direct [and sure] apprehensions (κατάληψιν).” (*Oration*s 28.21, 1–7; trans. Wickham, modified)

One observation we can make here is Gregory’s use of the word, κατάληψις, or “direct apprehension”, which we saw above in Clement. This directly recalls the anti-Stoic context of the Skeptics in their critique of the certainty of knowledge obtained through impressions made in the intellect, and hence the latter’s “apprehension” of its objects. In Clement we saw his positive appropriation of the “stable and unchanging apprehension” which pertains to true “philosophy” correlating with the *Logos*. Here we see the inverse of that in Gregory: the intellect’s grasp of things “in their naked reality” is at an impasse. In one sense this seems to run contrary to Clement’s claim that we, in fact, *do* possess certainty in grasping the *Logos* as the content of true “philosophy”. Although Clement’s criterion does not include the knowledge obtained in the different philosophical schools in their own domains—what perhaps correlates here with Gregory’s “knowledge of reality”—one would think Gregory would concede that theology in light of the *Logos* does give us such certainty.

Yet even here, Gregory seems to part ways with Clement when he goes on to claim that “the account concerning God (ὁ περὶ Θεοῦ λόγος), insofar as it is more perfect, is also more difficult to attain, since it contains more counter-arguments and solutions which are more laborious” (28.21, 7–9). The language of “counter-arguments” (ἀντιλήψεις) is once again striking, inasmuch as it calls to mind the Skeptics’ method of juxtaposing arguments of equal weight for and against a given position—what Gregory here seems to reference directly in regards to theology.²⁵ The parallel goes further later in the treatise, for instance when Gregory goes on to show the fruitlessness of the philosopher’s various efforts to uncover the full account or causes behind various natural phenomena: the philosopher then is “wholly earthbound or terrestrial, ignorant of [his] very ignorance” (28.28, 37–38), unless he comes to realize by his reason (λόγος) things that surpass his reason.²⁶

In other words, Gregory seems to affirm the same aim of the Pyrrhonians in philosophy, or at least come very close: the goal of reasoning is to make one realize one’s ignorance and hence, rather than attempt to solve the impasse by reason, suspend reason or judgment. Given this, one contrast to the Pyrrhonians is Gregory’s affirmation of faith (πίστις), instead of reason (λόγος), as the sure guide to

²⁵ Cf. Demetracopoulos (1999) 137–146, who argues that Gregory drew directly from Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* for *Oration*s 28 and 29. Here I merely note similarities, indicating possible adaptation, but without committing to a position.

²⁶ *Oration*s 28.28, 26–38.

truth.²⁷ In one sense this is similar to the Skeptics' dictum of living by the appearances, where for the enlightened Christian, in Gregory's account, it is living by faith.²⁸ Similarly Gregory implicitly agrees with Clement in that the "earthbound" philosopher, correlating with Clement's various Greek philosophical schools, cannot comprehend the truth within his domain. Unlike Clement, however, certainty cannot be attained by reasoning (λόγος), even in light of Christian revelation, but rather purely by faith (πίστις). Gregory's skepticism then implicitly emphasizes a greater disjunct between reason and faith in a way we only find implicit in Clement: this, as we will see, becomes significant when we return to Gregory Palamas.²⁹

This background should provide us enough to establish the context for the differing positions we find developed in later Byzantines of the 11th to 14th centuries A.D.: broadly speaking, all the figures we have seen maintain that all philosophical schools fail to grasp principles of reality comprehensively, inasmuch as they do not possess the revelation of the *Logos*, as God. However this does not result in fideism, i.e. in a strict separation of philosophy from the domain of philosophy: to the contrary, philosophy remains useful to the Christian account of God and reality, and still validly describes aspects of reality, even if incompletely. Given this common consensus, there are two divergences, where we find two forms of skepticism in our authors:

1. "Mild" skepticism: "stable and unchanging apprehension" (κατάληψις) of reality by reason is possible, albeit only in the restricted domain of Christian revelation; consequently in the domain of philosophy, one still has apprehension of reality, however partially and imperfectly.
2. "Strict" skepticism: "stable and unchanging apprehension" of reality by reason is not possible; instead truths about reality and God can only be understood by faith (πίστις) and/or by direct divine illumination.

In position (1), the kind of skeptical argument we see would be analogous to an Academic Skeptic who critiques the specific criterion of truth, like against the Stoics: so the same, as we saw in Clement, against the criteria of the differing schools as possessing the truth of the *Logos* incompletely; one may still have access to the truth, in some sense, in the domain of philosophy. In position (2), by contrast, access to the truth is not possible in the domain of philosophy, inasmuch as it is outside what is communicated by faith (πίστις) rather than by reason (λόγος).

²⁷ *Orations* 28.28, 35.

²⁸ See below p. 23, 31.

²⁹ Other contemporaries of Gregory, like Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea (e.g. *Contra Eunomium* I–II), draw a loosely similar approach to what we have seen, with the emphasis on the limitedness of reason, and thus philosophy's inability to comprehend reality: see on this Karamanolis (2013) 33–34.

As we will see in the next section, the three later figures of Nicholas of Methone, Theodore Metochites, and Gregory Palamas each alternate between these two positions with certain variances:

- In the case of Nicholas, while responding against contemporaries of his who equate philosophy (focusing especially on that of the late Neoplatonist, Proclus) with truths revealed in revelation (hence in one sense [2]), Nicholas ends up trying to hold a position closer to that of Clement's (i.e. [1])—that Proclus incompletely understands “true” philosophy as divinely illuminated and manifested in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius; hence Nicholas' skeptical critiques of Proclus and his supporters only address the faulty criteria held by them.
- Metochites ends up adopting position (2) when he explicitly attributes the Pyrrhonian Skeptics' position to Gregory Nazianzen; hence he approves of the Pyrrhonians' general approach in opposing arguments, as leading to suspending judgment, yet he still maintains that certainty can be found in divine revelation (ultimately agreeing with Gregory).
- Palamas adjudicates between positions (1) and (2): on the one hand, in responding to his opponent, Barlaam, who uses Clement's premise to maintain the equality of truth in both philosophy and revelation, Palamas claims that philosophy cannot attain certainty from its own ground (thus [2]), yet he affirms that divine illumination, in the domain of grace, grants epistemic certainty to the first premises of theology as a discursive science—hence, in some sense, abiding by (1).

3. Nicholas of Methone: Asserting the Stability of Divine Philosophy over “Outside Philosophy”

The context for Nicholas' critiques of Proclus, alongside his skeptical remarks on the nature of reason outside the domain of divine illumination, comes out of his treatise, the *Refutation of Proclus' Elements of Theology*, a polemical commentary that covers 198 of the total 211 propositions in Proclus' *Elements*. Nicholas' stated aim in the Preface of the *Refutation* is to correct the errors of certain, unnamed contemporaries or near-contemporaries of his who have “partaken of outside learning (ἔξω παιδείας) ... despising the clarity, simplicity, and uncontrived quality of [the divine mysteries]” (1, 19–21)—and in this, advocated the philosophical framework of Proclus. Yet in advocating for “outside learning”, as Proclus best represents, Nicholas claims that these contemporaries have ended up in “blasphemous heresies”.

To whom Nicholas is responding in this later passage has long puzzled scholars. Nicholas does not name his opponents or give a good indication who they would be. The last known extant discussions of Proclus (among other Platonists) prior to Nicholas are in Michael Psellos (1017/8–1096 A.D.) and Psellos' student, John Italos (c. 1025–after 1082 A.D.)—both roughly 60–80 years before Nicholas wrote

the *Refutation*. Various scholars have theorized that Nicholas must be responding to Psellos,³⁰ even though on closer inspection, Psellos in various cases parallels Nicholas' approach—and there seems to be little evidence for any lack of Christian orthodoxy in Psellos.³¹ Still, there are certain, insightful passages in Psellos that Nicholas appears to be responding to (whether directly or mediated in contemporaries of his). For example, in a commentary on Proposition 35 from Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, Psellos states that, although Christian theological teaching on the Trinity does not necessitate proofs, “among the wise Greeks, reason (λόγος) is a highly productive component of their theological proofs, and it also contributes no small part to our own discourse as regards the union and distinction of the Son in relation to the Father” (trans. Robinson).³² Psellos here, and in other passages, seems to mirror the approach we saw in Clement, where philosophy attains a portion of the complete truth contained the revealed *Logos* (i.e. the Incarnation)—and hence reason (λόγος, lowercase) does give us access, even if impartially, to fundamental truths pertaining to God and reality.³³

It is this kind of position in Psellos that Nicholas appears to attack in stark terms in the *Refutation's* Preface, when he compares the efforts of Proclus, among others of “outside wisdom” (ἔξω σοφίαν), as attempting to build another Tower of Babel:

In this [Proclus] baked as bricks cogitations kneaded and mixed together from every Hellenic teaching, and arranging these cogitations into 211 chapters, on top of the other, using the coherence of logical demonstrations instead of mortar. Through such a construction he aimed not only to reach to heaven, but even to surpass the super-celestial intellects in knowledge and to run up to God himself, the principle of all things, and to grasp the ungraspable (τὸν ἀκατάληπτον καταλαμβάνειν). (22–29; trans. Robinson)

Nicholas' emphasis here is strong: reason, in the form of “logical demonstrations” put together in Proclus' 211 propositions of the *Elements*, attempts to grasp what is ungraspable (ἀκατάληπτον) by its own nature, and hence necessarily fails. Proclus is symbolic of “reason” within the domain of past

³⁰ See e.g. Podskalsky (1976).

³¹ Among various examples, see for instance Psellos' comment on Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 81 (in *Phil. Min.* II.35, 119,4–13), where he partially accepts Proclus' claim of an “inseparable power”, in a metaphorical sense—for instance, John the Baptist as a forerunner of Christ, and hence an illumination, or “power”, proceeding from Christ as the first cause—yet Psellos rejects the literal notion of “an intermediary between soul and body” as not concerning with Christian “discourse”. This mirrors Nicholas' discriminative approach in certain of Proclus' propositions, as we will see. For a full discussion and comparison of Michael Psellos alongside Nicholas of Methone on Proclus' *Elements*, see Robinson ([Forthcoming](#)).

³² Psellos, *Phil. Min.*, II.35, 117,24–118,4.

³³ On Psellos' “rationalism” in this sense, see Panagopoulos (2014) and Robinson ([Forthcoming](#)).

Greek philosophers, and forms the pinnacle of previous thought inasmuch as he systematizes “Hellenic teaching” in the *Elements*’ propositions—hence the comparison to the “Tower of Babel”, in Nicholas’ construal, in the false thinking that reason could lead one to God. The use of *καταλαμβάνειν*, “to grasp”, in this passage is striking when we look back to Gregory Nazianzen, where Gregory also denied the possibility for stable, certain apprehension (*καταλήψεσιν*) in the case of God—alongside all beings in general. This seems to underscore Nicholas’ point all the more: not simply that Proclus’ knowledge was incomplete, as Psellos would maintain, but rather impossible.

Just how Proclus and “outside wisdom” fail to attain to truths corresponding to God and the principles of reality becomes clearer when we look at Nicholas’ description of his contemporaries: for Nicholas, they trade out the “clarity” (*σαφές*), “simplicity”, and “uncontrived quality” (*ἀκατάσκευον*), belonging to the divine grace and mysteries of the Christian faith, with what is “complex” (*ποικίλον*), “enigmatic” (*γρίφον*), and “clever” (*κομψόν*).³⁴ On the one hand the characterization is straightforwardly descriptive of sophistry, inasmuch as the sophist’s words have the appearance of “enigma” and being “clever”, suggesting truths about reality that are otherwise.³⁵ Yet the juxtaposition of the latter with the nature of the divine mysteries as “clear”, “simple”, and “uncontrived” also suggests that knowledge imparted through the latter is of a more certain character compared to what is “complex” in “outside wisdom”. This again recalls Clement of Alexandria’s characterization of the content of “true philosophy” as “stable” and “secure”, closely following Nicholas’ characterization of divine wisdom as “clear” and “simple”. In this sense, Nicholas adheres to the sense of certainty we find in Clement’s notion of “true philosophy” (and in parallel, in Psellos as well).

At the same time it is also clear in Nicholas that reason in itself, apart from divine illumination, does not have access to the truth—and that any connection that it does have is only in virtue of confirmation from divine revelation, or from those who have received divine illumination in accordance with revelation—as, for example, the writings of “St. Dionysius the Areopagite” (i.e. the Pseudo-Dionysius) on which Nicholas often relies throughout the treatise. This comes out, for instance, later in the Preface when Nicholas begins his treatise, “neither confident in my own wisdom nor ambitious to display the worldly wisdom (*σοφία...οἰκεία*) that I have acquired from human teaching (for I am not unaware that I am subject to ignorance both from natural weakness and sluggishness of

³⁴ *Refutation* 1,8–2,12.

³⁵ Robinson (2017) 90.

mind).³⁶ Nicholas' methodology is telling here: on the one hand he accepts the validity of “worldly wisdom” (οἰκεία σοφία), yet concedes his ignorance from the “natural weakness” of his mind—and instead invokes the *Logos* (as God), and all revelation pertaining to the *Logos*, in speaking of truth that cannot be communicated through human reason alone.

How Nicholas understands the imperfectness of human knowledge becomes apparent in his commentary on the *Elements*' Prop. 82, where Proclus proves that a bodiless entity which is “capable of reverting toward itself” (πρὸς ἑαυτὸ ἐπιστρεπτικὸν ὄν) will be participated separately.³⁷ Proclus' proof here mainly deals with cases like the soul's relation to a living body: as immaterial, and to the degree that its activity does not depend on its respective body (e.g. in thinking), it is “separately participated”, while to the degree it depends on its participating body (e.g. in biological functions, like growth, or sensation, and so on), its activity goes outside itself and does not revert back to itself—hence not “separately” participated.³⁸ In his commentary, Nicholas ends up relating the language of participation from the passage to the soul with its body: contrary to Proclus, Nicholas maintains an Aristotelian stance that the soul (and its corresponding intellect) is inseparable from its body, so that “the soul does not live nor the intellect understand without the body conjoined to them”.³⁹ Yet Nicholas goes on to maintain that the soul's inseparability from the body is connected with its state of imperfect knowledge, even though at the end of the commentary, Nicholas seems to imply that it is possible for the soul to be “separated perfectly” while still being ontologically present in—or related to—the

³⁶ *Refutation* 2,13–17; trans. Robinson.

³⁷ See Proclus, *ET* Prop. 82, 76,22–23 Dodds; see also Dodds' commentary, p. 244.

³⁸ Cf. Proclus, *ET* Prop. 80.

³⁹ *Refutation* 84,26–28.

body.⁴⁰ Of relevance for us is the way that Nicholas concurs with Proclus on the nature of knowledge necessitating the soul's "perfect separation", yet Nicholas parts ways with Proclus by claiming that the soul, in its current postlapsarian state, is *not* so truly separate: in man's separation from God through Adam's disobedience, Nicholas takes the Genesis account of the Fall seriously and understands the soul's lack of true separation from the body as one consequence in this light. Hence the rejoinder in the passage, and throughout, of revelation through faith providing the only certain path to truth—even though it does not qualify as complete knowledge, as Nicholas acknowledges.⁴¹

So far all this suggests that Nicholas' skepticism about human reason lies somewhere between the two poles of skepticism sketched above: on the one hand, Nicholas indicates that the knowledge obtained in philosophy—paradigmatically represented in Proclus—is "complex" and prone to ignorance and error: only certainty can be found in what is communicated in revelation by faith. (Thus, position [2].) On the other hand, Nicholas does seem to affirm that "partial" knowledge is possible, as we saw in his consideration of knowledge from Proclus' premises: knowledge pertaining to truths, even if "ungraspable", is possible only in virtue of divine revelation, or those so inspired by revelation. (Thus, position [1].)

The latter implicitly hearkens back to Clement's view that specific philosophical schools only managed to understand truths incompletely, without the *Logos'* manifestation. Nicholas' trend this way is reflected, for instance, in his approval and reliance on "Dionysius"⁴² in correcting Proclus:

⁴⁰ See *Refutation* 85,17–24: "Certainly the soul is not now perfectly separate from the body conjoined to it, neither is its intellect perfectly separate, and so it neither perfectly lives nor perfectly intellects, even though it is intellectual and immortal in its own nature, and furnishes life to the body from itself. It is able to revert perfectly to itself whenever it is separated perfectly or whenever it will also dispose the participating [body] according to itself, as our argument already made clear. The [soul] by its activity will be separate when [its] substance is separated as well" (trans. Robinson, modified). It is not exactly clear how Nicholas reconciles these concluding lines, with the soul as "separated perfectly", with the beginning of his commentary in 84,26–28 with the claim of the soul's "inseparability" from the body. One possible reading is that the "perfect separation" would be when the soul is separated from the body after death, while his second option of the soul "disposing" the body "according to itself" indicates the soul's mode of being, or activity, as not subjected to passions belonging to the body. At any rate, Nicholas' claims about the soul's inseparability with the body (beyond being an Aristotelian claim) recall Proclus' predecessor, Iamblichus (c. 242–c. 325 C.E.), as well as Proclus' successor, Damascius (c. 460–after 538 C.E.), who claim that the soul changes in its substance (οὐσία), not just activity, in relation to its corresponding body. For a general study on the soul between Iamblichus, Proclus, and Damascius, see Steel (1978).

⁴¹ *Refutation* 84,29–85,5.

⁴² For instance, often cited as "divine and great in divine things" (ὁ θεῖος καὶ τὰ θεῖα πολὺς Διονύσιος) (*Refutation* 79,10–11), suggesting that Ps.-Dionysius (with the label as "divine") possesses the criterion of certain truth.

Nicholas claims, as was common in earlier Byzantine thought, that Proclus took his material from Ps.-Dionysius, and either modified it in an un-Christian, impious way or, even when “preserving” the same content, simply stole from “Dionysius” and applied the latter’s teachings in a polytheistic context.⁴³ Thus suggests that the degree to which “philosophy”, while pagan and outside revelation, is true can only be in virtue of its implicit reliance on a more authoritative source, which encompasses the same content that is communicated (to the degree it is true): this certainly seems to come close to the conception of philosophy from Clement (i.e. position (1), above). As we will see below, Nicholas’ position comes close to Palamas, although Palamas more strongly distinguishes the domain of reason from faith.

4. Theodore Metochites: Affirming the Harmony of the Pyrrhonians with the Faith

Theodore Metochites stands as somewhat of a contrast to Nicholas of Methone, coming just over 100 years after Nicholas. Whereas Nicholas offered up his skeptical critique as a way of defending the truth of divine revelation—namely in recognizing the falsehood of “outside wisdom” like Proclus diverting from this path—Theodore is strikingly disconnected from this context: at the outset his shift into a skeptical position seems to be motivated from purely philosophical concerns, particularly in the nature of the natural world.⁴⁴ Part of this may also reflect Theodore’s status: whereas Nicholas wrote as bishop of Methone, Theodore was as a polymath, employed in Andronicus II Palaeologus’s court, hence not in a position to defend Christian teaching publicly.⁴⁵ Among other works, Theodore wrote three major philosophical treatises: the *Stoicheiosis astronomike* (‘Elements of Astronomy’), the

⁴³ See e.g. *Refutation* 117,23–29; it is notable that, even in this context, Nicholas approves of Proclus’ proposition (*ET Prop.* 122), on the maintenance of the gods’ (or God’s) transcendence in providence—his only disapproval is in the application of the proposition to multiple gods rather than one God. This provides a noteworthy example of the critique of “partial knowledge” applied to Proclus: the error committed by Proclus is only in “distorting” the true content communicated from Dionysius, who was illumined and thus possessed certainty through faith.

⁴⁴ For a thorough, excellent investigation of Theodore Metochites’ skepticism and his sources, see Bydén (2002).

⁴⁵ As it is, one could speculate about Metochites’ changing fortunes influencing his skeptical views, considering his father, George Metochites’ exile and imprisonment under Andronicus II, and Metochites’ own exile after Andronicus III’s victory in the civil war in 1328 (although it would seem the *Semeioseis* were written in 1326). On Metochites’ life, see Bydén (2011).

Paraphrases of Aristotle's Writings on Natural Philosophy, and, relevant for us, the *Semeioseis gnomikai* ('Sententious Notes'), a collection of varying historical and philosophical essays.⁴⁶

It is especially in the latter work that we find Theodore set out his views on knowledge and what can or cannot be attained with certainty. In treaties like *Semeioseis* 22 and 23, Theodore concludes that mathematical knowledge does not entail disagreements in the way that knowledge does in the natural world, especially the domain of philosophy.⁴⁷ This sets the context for what Theodore goes on to claim in *Sem.* 61, that the Skeptics'⁴⁸ "opposition to the claim that anything can be understood is not entirely without reason".⁴⁹ On the one hand, one can see in these texts that Theodore presents a strong yet unique view of skepticism based on both the nature of the subject matter under study by philosophers (esp. in *Sem.* 22–23), and by the philosophers even by the nature of their own argumentation (esp. in *Sem.* 61). Yet as one may also recognize, how Theodore maintains the latter claim—i.e. the denial of the "comprehension of all things" (πάσαν κατάληψιν)—with his claim that mathematics can be known with certainty is not immediately apparent. It will be worth comparing the two sets of texts to get a better sense of Theodore's skepticism.

In *Sem.* 22, Theodore begins by observing a "striking lack of dissension among the philosophers who are mathematicians", even though he concedes some are "more or less expert in this discipline than others" from their writings left behind.⁵⁰ However the variability counts little in Theodore's estimation. Even between past Greeks among themselves or in contrast to other non-Greeks, and non-Greeks among themselves as well—cases which conceivably would involve natural "conflict" between different, separate cultures—Theodore maintains: "In the science of mathematics, and on a given problem or subject of investigation, there are no contradiction or irreconcilable ideas at all in mathematics, any more than a man is in opposition to himself".⁵¹ Theodore expands this notion when he considers that "all people, shooting from different places or different languages, since they are looking at the same goal, all of them hit the same spot and are successful, whoever they may be": in

⁴⁶ Bydén (2011) 1266–1267.

⁴⁷ See *Sem.* 22 ("On the lack of dissension in the science of mathematics") and 23 ("On instability in natural science").

⁴⁸ Or literally "those who practice withholding assent" (τῶν ἐφεκτικῶν).

⁴⁹ *Sem.* 61, 4,3–4 Wahlgren: "Ὅτι οὐκ ἔξω λόγου παντάπασι δόξειεν ἂν εἶναι τὰ τῶν ἐφεκτικῶν ἐναντιουμένων πρὸς πᾶσαν κατάληψιν, καὶ ὅτι Πλάτων καὶ Σωκράτης ἀρχὰς εἰς τοῦτ' ἔδωκαν.

⁵⁰ *Sem.* 22, 194,26–31 Hult.

⁵¹ *Sem.* 22, 196,8–11 Hult; trans. Hult.

other words everyone has direct, unmediated, and certain access to mathematical objects outside the apparent variances of language, mental agility, cultural differences, and so on.⁵² Theodore connects this state of concord for the mathematical philosophers to the ontological state of their subject matter—namely its “stability” (τὸ βεβηκός) and “simplicity” (ἀπλοϊκόν). This provides us the criteria for certain knowledge, and where it is hence lacking, for example in natural things:

For concerning that which is one and always the same and never changes in any way whatsoever, in accordance with any argument, thing, or accident, the correct apprehension (κατάληψις) is also altogether identical and not by its nature at all ambiguous, as is hence the case with things which are in nature and subject to coming-to-be (ὑπὸ γένεσιν) and, since they constantly flow and change into their opposites, force the accounts (λόγους) of them to change with them and enables the existence of opposite views.⁵³

A number of striking features come out from Theodore’s definition. First, we may see why he thinks mathematics provides the requisite stability that other sciences or disciplines do not: the objects of mathematics remain exactly the same across all variable dimensions, as we saw above. By contrast, things by “nature” and which “come to be” (γένεσις) necessarily imply changeability and instability. Theodore’s inference that the “accounts” change with their subject matter (ὑποκείμενον) thus explains why he thinks mathematics is “stable”, following its objects—and why all other disciplines essentially connected to the natural world, in any whichever way, are prone to instability (as we will next see).

One other striking similarity in the passage above is Theodore’s definition of correct apprehension (κατάληψις) closely paralleling Clement’s definition of “true philosophy” as a “stable, unchanging apprehension” (κατάληψίν τινα βεβαίαν οὔσαν καὶ ἀμετάπτωτον). Whereas Clement identifies this with the *Logos*, i.e. God in virtue of the Incarnation, Theodore attaches this to mathematics—something perceived directly and naturally by all people. In some ways this comes as a contrast to all the previous authors we have seen, who attach certainty to God—whether as the culmination of philosophy (as Clement), or simply in divine revelation, apart from philosophy (as in Gregory Nazianzen): in these

⁵² *Sem.* 22, 196,15–24 Hult; trans. Hult. Intriguingly Theodore ends up connecting this state of certainty to peace (εἰρήνη) and the lack of factions (ἀστασίαστος), such that all humans would endure in this state if their affairs were in accord with the stability of mathematics’ domain (196,27–198,8 Hult). This certainly comes close to the Skeptics’ goal of suspending all judgment (ἐποχή) in all inquiries of knowledge. Furthermore, one modern echo of Metochites on mathematics is in David Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, where Hume includes mathematics, as an example of the “relations of ideas”, which escapes the domain of skeptical doubt in contrast to “matters of fact” (such as whether the sun will rise each day): cf. Lagerlund (2020) 147 ff.

⁵³ *Sem.* 198,12–18 Hult; trans. Hult, modified.

previous, varying cases, they would maintain that divine revelation is necessary for the criteria of certainty, even in a more pro-philosophy cases like Clement's. By contrast Theodore seems to affirm that one *can* have certain knowledge from the natural realm—albeit, strictly within mathematics—outside revelation. Or at least so it would seem.

Given this, Theodore's explicit affirmation of the Pyrrhonian Skeptics in *Semeioseis* 61 is a paradoxical contrast to his strong claim about mathematics. Theodore begins the treatise as an explication on the phrase, "To every argument there is counter-argument" (λόγω παντι λόγος παλαίει). The phrase itself goes back at least to Gregory Nazianzen's *Carmina moralia*, where Gregory claims, "Reasonings count for little toward the knowledge of God: for every argument is opposed to another argument" (οἱ μὲν λογισμοὶ μικρὸν εἰς γνῶσιν Θεοῦ / λόγω γάρ ἐστι πᾶς λόγος ἀντίστατος).⁵⁴ In this respect Theodore implicitly takes up the skeptical character of Gregory Nazianzen, from passages like *Orations* 28 (as we saw above), and explicitly connects it to the Skeptics' position:

For it is indeed obvious that much of that which is said by the Skeptics is not inappropriate; and many matters are by their very nature ambiguous and give space to opposite opinions and arguments; and therefore it is very easy to attack them vigorously and express serious disbelief, not to say distrust, of one interpretation of a matter as well as of its opposite. And even if one interpretation is accepted as true, it is possible to feel unsatisfied and unsure and at a loss because of the arguments of the opposite side; and then a great lack of faith and certainty (βεβαιότητος), and a condition (διάθεσις) of ignorance and non-comprehension (ἀκαταληψίας) prevailing by necessity.⁵⁵

Initially Theodore appears to go further than the early Christian use of the first of the Pyrrhonians' Five Modes, namely in juxtaposing the positions of the philosophical, dogmatic schools that use opposing arguments;⁵⁶ *any* argument or position under consideration is inherently prone to "ambiguity", and hence so is its opposite position—even if one position seems more convincing than the other.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Gregory Nazianzen, *Carm. Mor.*, PG 37, 750A–751A Migne.

⁵⁵ *Sem.* 61, 6,1–8; trans. Wahlgren, modified. Cf. translation and analysis in Bydén (2002) 185 ff.

⁵⁶ Although he adopts the same position, e.g. in *Sem.* 61, 12,10–12: "It is obvious that it is this [i.e. the possibility for opposing arguments and positions] that has created the different schools of philosophy, with their traceless and implacable strifes; and it is this that has led to struggles of life and to philosophical spectacles (θέατρα φιλοσοφίας)" (trans. Wahlgren).

⁵⁷ Cf. Metochites' paraphrase of the Skeptics' position, *Sem.* 61, 6,18–21, as "namely that nothing is certain among men of those things which in every case are believed and talked about by everyone as if they could be apprehended (ληπτῶν) very clearly; further, that nothing is unshakeable and unsusceptible to opposite arguments and irrefutable in accordance with a totally sound and unchangeable truth (μετ' ἀληθείας ἀνόσου παντάπασι καὶ ἀτρέπτου)" (trans. Wahlgren, modified).

Although it seems that the Pyrrhonian position would not assert just why opposition happens (since this would, itself, imply a judgment—one that could be disputed in itself), Theodore claims that the Skeptics—who, as he argues, inherit their position from Plato⁵⁸—“see that everything is in a state of flux and that nothing at all stands immovably still so as to preserve any essence and knowledge unchanged”.⁵⁹ One can recognize the parallel here to Nicholas’ description of the natural realm—the reason why philosophers focused on the natural world are endlessly prone to opposite positions: here Theodore ascribes this to the Skeptic who, recognizing this reality, applies this to all argumentation.

Even when Theodore affirms the Skeptics’ position following on the state of flux in all things, he denotes the one, sole exception which guarantees truth: “wisdom concerning God and divine matters, which is entirely from some divine inspiration from above”.⁶⁰ Implicitly what is communicated from God and “divine matters” stands outside what is necessarily in flux and prone to instability. Theodore’s exception notably precludes logical demonstrations—thus implicitly theological definitions that are the conclusions of deductive reasoning—alongside inferences drawn from the realm of nature and experience.⁶¹ On the one hand this is similar to the Skeptics’ resignation of accepting “the affective sense-impressions (κατὰ φαντασίαν παθητικῶν) which induce our assent involuntarily”—in other words living by the appearances that do not imply judgment, as discursivity would suggest.⁶² However if we go back to Theodore’s positive statements about mathematics, this would also seem to be an exception similar to Theodore’s demarcation of “God and divine matters”—even though he does not raise it here. Initially this may seem to be an implicit conflict, or perhaps not relevant here considering the

⁵⁸ *Sem.* 61, 6,9–8,20. Cf. Trizio (2019) 604–605; Bydén (2002) 190–196.

⁵⁹ *Sem.* 61, 10,8–9; trans. Wahlgren, modified. Cf. Bydén (2002) 187–191. As Byden notes well in n. 24, Sextus rather repudiates Plato in *PH* 1.221–225 and Heraclitus in *PH* 1.210–212.

⁶⁰ *Sem.* 61, 10,12–13; see also 10,22–24.

⁶¹ *Sem.* 61, 10,13–17, esp.: “For even on this account, everything proffered by those earlier men, who trust their vain insight and the guidance of some kind of wisdom based on logical demonstration (ἀποδείξεων), does not seem to be unshakeable [...]” (trans. Wahlgren). See also Metochites’ *Stoicheiosis astronomikê* 1.2, fol. 12^r, where he defines the objects of theology (τὰ πρῶτα θεῖα) as “simple, non-deducible, and only intelligible (νοητὰ), above scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήμην) and discursive thought (διάνοιαν)”. Cf. Bydén (2002) 189–190, esp. nn. 20–21.

⁶² Sextus Empiricus, *PH* 1.10, esp. 19. See also Bydén (2002) 189–190, who argues that Metochites comes close to a “Conformist Theism” in this regard—however with the caveat that, unlike the Pyrrhonians, or post-Reformation thinkers like Erasmus and Montaigne, Metochites would still adhere to determinate dogmatic positions in Orthodox Christian beliefs, roughly following on what can be held with certainty from divine revelation.

rhetorical force of the skeptical position in *Sem.* 61.⁶³ However another possibility is that Theodore considers the objects of mathematics, in themselves, “divine”, or certainly related, inasmuch as they are eternal and stable, as unrelated to matter—as underlined toward the end of *Sem.* 22.⁶⁴ Although the scope of Theodore’s affirmation of skepticism in *Sem.* 61 appears to be universal, even in cases like logical demonstrations concerning “divine matters” which do not depend on changeable matter, Theodore’s skeptical arguments rather appear to be focused on cases conditioned by change and instability: namely, both the objects of thought prone to change (esp. natural sciences) and the subjects inquiring into their objects of thought. Hence, even if one studies mathematics—which involves objects that are eternal and stable in their own nature—the degree to which one needs sensible matter to understand mathematics, and hence the aptitude with which one is able to progress, will necessarily vary and thus imply vulnerability to instability and change.

Looking back at the two skeptical positions we set out earlier, represented by Clement and Gregory Nazianzen, Theodore’s position approximates more closely with Nazianzen’s inasmuch as the former affirms a pessimistic reading of philosophy—and to the degree that Theodore explicitly affirms divine illumination as the only criterion of certainty, outside any connection to philosophy. On the other hand, Theodore’s endorsement of mathematics would seem to contrast with this picture: mathematicians, once they have mastered the science, have access to certainty and truth, in much the same way as one who abides by divine revelation would seem to. So far in our texts we have not seen how Theodore connects the study of objects of mathematics to the objects of theology—if indeed they are so explicitly connected for Theodore. Insofar, though, as he seems to relate the two, and to the degree that he suggests that the human intellect can contemplate mathematical objects outside the need for divine illumination, Theodore’s position approximates closer to a more positive view of philosophy, as in Clement. Perhaps further in this direction (and beyond Clement), Theodore’s skeptical views come about rather *not* from the lack of direct access to divine revelation (though that is an important backdrop), but rather from the very nature of the enmattered world as the source of instability and uncertainty.⁶⁵ Perhaps in this sense we find a *positive* argument for a skeptical view of reason, apart from divine revelation, rather than a *negative* one, as offered in Nazianzen—and, as we just saw earlier, in Nicholas of Methone.

⁶³ As Bydén (2002) 188–189 concludes.

⁶⁴ See esp. *Sem.* 22, 198, 18–30.

⁶⁵ Concurring with Bydén’s judgment that Theodore’s form of skepticism is not Pyrrhonian, strictly speaking: see below p. 31.

5. Gregory Palamas: Philosophy and Skepticism Between the Orders of Grace and Nature

Although Theodore Metochites is roughly contemporary with Gregory Palamas, Theodore's approach in certain ways comes as a stark contrast to Palamas'—even though both agree in principle about the domain of certainty pertaining to God and divine things alone. Although there are testimonia claiming the connection, Theodore appears not to have been a teacher of Palamas,⁶⁶ but rather of Palamas' eventual critic, Nikephoros Gregoras (c. 1295–1360 C.E.)—who, it appears, adopted much of Theodore's skeptical viewpoint about human knowledge and the certainty possessed in divine revelation.⁶⁷ By contrast, as we will eventually see, Palamas was implicitly against the kind of skeptical position that denied direct knowledge of God—one factor motivating Palamas' well-known metaphysical distinction between the essence (οὐσία) and activities (or “energies”, ἐνέργεια) in God: for Palamas, the transcendence of God beyond natural knowledge or comprehension does not imply the denial of *every* knowledge—but instead the direct apprehension of God is still possible in virtue of God's manifestation via the divine activities (ἐνέργεια).⁶⁸ Thus, Palamas stood strongly against the notion that philosophy or human reason could apprehend God—and in this sense strongly maintained a skeptical stance, following those like Gregory Nazianzen—yet he also maintained a positive, epistemologically certain means of knowledge in relation to God—in certain ways a juxtaposition to the skeptical position.

⁶⁶ Palamas' encomiast, Philotheos Kokkinos, appears to have claimed that Palamas was also a student of Metochites, however as Russell (2019) 113–115 notes (following Kokkinos' witness), various positions in Metochites (e.g. the claim that “all truth is one”, including both domains of theology and philosophy) strangely do not find their way into Palamas—though certainly into Metochites' other student, Nikephoros Gregoras. Demetracopoulos (2017) thus seems right to conclude that Palamas was not a student of Metochites—and as we will see, Palamas almost certainly seems to be responding to aspects of Metochites' framework in his critiques of Barlaam.

⁶⁷ As it is, Gregoras' dogmatic skepticism appears to have motivated Nicholas Kabasilas (c. 1323–after 1391 C.E.) to write the anti-skeptical treatise, “On the Criterion of Truth, Whether It Exists or Not, Against the Accursed Pyrrho”, c. 1354/1361). It would also seem that Gregoras' skeptical framework lay behind his opposition to Palamas' positive claim for the possibility of perceiving God in bodily senses (much less intellectually). See further Demetracopoulos (2017); cf. Golitsis (2019) 39.

⁶⁸ For the philosophical framework behind Palamas' distinction, see Bradshaw (2004), esp. 229–242, and Russell (2019) 112 ff.

One important backdrop to Palamas' position lies in Barlaam of Calabria (c. 1290–1348 C.E.), Palamas' first, main opponent during the Hesychast Controversy.⁶⁹ Palamas first encountered Barlaam in the latter's anti-Latin defense of the Greek Orthodox position that the Holy Spirit (as the third divine person of the Trinity) proceeds from the Father alone (as opposed to the *Filioque* position, i.e. from the Father and the Son/*Logos*). Barlaam's defense of the Greek position involved the claim that apodeictic arguments cannot be applied to God or divine matters, since God, properly speaking, transcends all things, while the premises of demonstrations can only be formulated from principles grasped by the intellect—hence only dialectical arguments, involving shared principles (e.g. on Holy Scriptures), could be valid in the case of God.⁷⁰

Barlaam's view on demonstrations and their relation to God, as it turns out, reflects an underlying, well-developed position, influenced by late Neoplatonism,⁷¹ which in some ways mirrors certain trends we saw in Metochites, which are also inherited in Barlaam's (and Palamas') contemporary, Gregoras:⁷² namely the idea that the intellect could directly apprehend God only through divine illumination or revelation, or through philosophical means in ways that do not depend on the natural world (e.g. in mathematics, as for Metochites)—while contrariwise, positive knowledge pertaining to God, derived through the senses or even intellection, is impossible due to God's transcendence. Barlaam builds on this background by making a claim we have seen echoed above in Clement, that “one is the truth through all things”: thus the same object is aimed at, either unmediated through divine revelation, or mediately through the practice of philosophy (the latter of which Barlaam maintains as fitting for all

⁶⁹ On Barlaam, see Trizio (2017).

⁷⁰ And thus the conclusion that the Latins could not defend the *Filioque* position, due both to no shared premises for dialectical argumentation, and no valid possibility for demonstrative arguments: on this see Trizio (2017); Russell (2019) 114–115; Kappes (Forthcoming).

⁷¹ See Trizio (2011) and Trizio (2019) 606–610 for a thorough discussion of Barlaam's use of late Neoplatonists (esp. Proclus and Syrianus) in his appropriation of Plato and Socratic “double-ignorance”.

⁷² Even though Gregoras was also an opponent of Barlaam, early in the Hesychast Controversy: see Demetracopoulos (2017) and earlier n. 68.

humans after the apostles).⁷³ Thus in Barlaam’s vision, both the pagan and Christian do have access to God, albeit in the soul’s ascent through logic till it reaches its end in complete “unknowing” (ἀγνωσία), and in this sense, for Barlaam, becomes “assimilated to God”.⁷⁴ Thus Barlaam’s framework involves a paradox: on the one hand he denies that there can be any direct apprehension of God, both through intellect and logic, yet he maintains that logic and intellect are necessary for the soul to reach the state where it can come closest to knowing God—i.e. through “unknowing”.

Barlaam’s framework hence explains his opposition to the Hesychasts (whom Palamas represents and defends), who maintained that the direct perception and knowledge of God in this life is possible, while also holding to the transcendence of God.⁷⁵ For the Hesychasts this meant that instances like the divine light perceived in the Transfiguration of Christ was a direct manifestation of God (and thus “uncreated”),⁷⁶ implying that God could be directly perceived by the senses, as well as by the intellect. This further resulted in the Hesychasts’ claim that the use of the senses, in their specific movements of prayer, were necessary for the soul’s perfection and union with God. By contrast for Barlaam, this emphasis on the senses rather blinds the soul, and thus impairs its perfection, since the soul cannot perceive intelligible objects clearly without its complete separation from the body—and thus the

⁷³ Barlaam *apud* Gregory Palamas, *Pro Hesychastis* II.1.5, 1–6: “But, [Barlaam] says, the sayings of the divine performers (θεουργῶν) and the wisdom that resides in them look toward one object (σκοπὸν) with the philosophy of the pagan [or lit. ‘outside’] disciplines and have reached the same end: the discovery of the truth. For one is the truth through all things, given in principle to the apostles in an unmediated way, and discovered by us through diligence (ἐπιμελείας).” Cf. Trizio (2011) 132–133. Beyond the echoes to Clement in *Strom.* I.9.44.1 (above), there are very close parallels here to Metochites’ description of mathematics in *Semeioseis gnomikai* 22, especially in the claim that all sciences aim at the truth—similar to Metochites’ claim that the objects of mathematics are successfully aimed at, despite the variations of people, custom, or sensible matter.

⁷⁴ See Trizio (2011) (esp. 124–125), Ierodiakonou (2002) 228.

⁷⁵ On the history of the Hesychast movement, see Krausmüller (2006).

⁷⁶ See Russell (2019) 153–159 on the history of the dispute around the uncreated status of the divine light at Mount Tabor.

“unknowing” necessary for the soul necessitates transcending the senses and all discursivity.⁷⁷ Thus the Hesychasts for Barlaam would represent rather a *reversion* away from perfection rather than assent toward perfection.⁷⁸

All this helps to fill in the context which Palamas works in and is responding to in his claims about the nature of philosophy and human reason, where we find his implicit skeptical rejoinder to Barlaam’s framework. This comes out particularly in his *Pro Hesychastis*, where Palamas, in setting out his defense of the Hesychasts against Barlaam, begins by delineating what relation philosophy has to God and humans. Palamas begins by summarizing Barlaam’s position: namely that monks should pursue “outside wisdom” (ἔξω σοφίαν), since perfection and holiness only happen through seeking “knowledge from all quarters (πανταχόθεν)”, since knowledge is a “gift from God” (δῶρον Θεοῦ).⁷⁹ Palamas goes on to show how, despite conceding that philosophy is a “gift” in a certain sense, it can only be so-called derivatively rather than chiefly (κυρίως): for philosophy pertains to the natural order (φυσικόν), rather than the order of grace, or the spiritual (πνευματικόν).⁸⁰ As he defines it, what belongs to the natural order necessitates “exercise” (μελέτη) and effort in a way that does not belong to the spiritual order: hence the former implies that only certain people, and not all, will be fully capable of acquiring a character or virtue well (καλῶς)—or badly—even while the faculty or capacity is given to

⁷⁷ See e.g. Barlaam, *Epistulae* IV 372,16–18. Cf. Trizio (2011) 113 ff. Trizio references here Proclus, *In Alcibiadem* 224, 1-4, as one source behind the latter Barlaam references: “The descent of the soul into the body has removed the soul itself from the order of divine causes, from which it was filled with intellection, power, and purity, and it joins together with the fashioner (γενεσιουργῷ) by nature and material realities, from which it is filled with forgetfulness, error, and ignorance.” Barlaam’s (and Proclus’) language here is strongly reminiscent of Nicholas’ claim (above) that the soul’s lack of separation from the body results in its lack of access to perfect, complete knowledge. It is striking how both Nicholas and Barlaam, here, implicitly follow Proclus on this point—although Nicholas attributes this state to the Fall of man, suggesting a moral imperfection blinding man, rather than a complete ontological imperfection (which Barlaam seems to imply here).

⁷⁸ Barlaam *apud* Gregory Palamas, *Pro hesychastis* II.1.37, 8-12. Cf. Trizio (2011) 125 ff.

⁷⁹ While the phrase almost certainly goes back to Barlaam in this immediate context, the line goes back both to Clement of Alexandria, as we saw above (n. 7), and ultimately to Plato’s *Timaeus* 47b1–2: “These pursuits have given us philosophy, a gift from the gods to the mortal race whose value neither has been nor ever will be surpassed” (trans. Zeyl). Cf. Golitsis (2019) 21, n. 19.

⁸⁰ *Pro Hesych.* I.1.21, 16–26: “Similarly if you put to good use that part of outside wisdom which has been well excised, no evil will result, for it will naturally have become a tool for a given good. But in this sense it cannot be principally called a gift of God (Θεοῦ κυρίως δῶρον) and something pertaining to the spiritual (πνευματικόν), inasmuch as it belongs to what pertains to nature (φυσικόν) and is not sent from on high” (trans. Gendle, modified).

all alike.⁸¹ By contrast, what is “chiefly” a gift from God and properly belongs to the spiritual order (πνευματικόν) does not imply or necessitate exercise (μελέτη), but brings about its effects immediately: thus Palamas’ examples that “even simple fishermen” become “sons of Thunder”,⁸² and the apostle, Paul’s turn from persecution and reception of the ineffable vision of God.⁸³ These cases, as Palamas tries showing, demonstrate that salvation and knowledge of God were attained without extra exercise on the recipients’ part—and consequently without the apparent need or use for knowledge from philosophy, which otherwise requires “exercise”.

One of the main thrusts of Palamas’ distinction here is that between contingency and necessity, where the need for “exercise” so implies contingency in contrast to the “spiritual” gifts which necessitate their effects. Palamas recognizes that perfection for a natural gift, like knowledge, is possible, but is finally contingent by its own nature on the agent developing a natural gift like knowledge well or badly. This comes out with Palamas’ example of the demons who have their intellects created by God—thus “good” by nature—however their activity (ἐνέργεια) is not from God, since they so “exercised” and used their intellect for evil.⁸⁴ In much the same way, the pagan philosophers, despite their attempts to aim at truth, end up appropriating only a partial notion, and in the end still mis-appropriate the demons for gods, rather than recognizing the one true God.⁸⁵ In this, Palamas takes up one of Barlaam’s premises that the ascent in philosophy implies “exercise”, or “diligence” (ἐπιμέλεια):⁸⁶ although this is the case, Palamas agrees, exercise can still be done well or

⁸¹ *Pro Hesych.* I.1.22, 4–10: “The knowledge that comes from outside education (ἔξω παιδείας), even if well-used, is a gift of nature, and not of grace—a gift given by God to all commonly through nature, and further developed by exercise (μελέτη). This last point—that, among all people, it does not come to maturity (παρὰ γίνεσθαι) without effort and exercise—is an evident proof that it is therefore a gift that pertains to nature (φυσικόν), but not to the spiritual (πνευματικόν)” (trans. Gendle, modified).

⁸² Palamas, borrowing from Gregory Nazianzen (*Hom.* 41.14 [PG 36, 448C]), references the Gospel of Mark 3:17, where Jesus first appointed the twelve apostles, including the fishermen, James and John, “the sons of thunder”.

⁸³ *Pro Hesych.* I.1.22, 10–18. Palamas’ example of “fishermen” (ἀλιεῦσιν) who receive the gift of God (lines 11–12)—as juxtaposed with the philosopher who attains truth—recalls Nicholas of Methone’s own juxtaposition of “unlearned men and fishermen (ἀλιεῖς)” who are the teachers of the true, revealed faith, rather than philosophers (*Refutation* 1,12–13).

⁸⁴ *Pro Hesych.* I.1.19, 12–20. One can detect an echo here of Palamas’ distinction between essence (οὐσία) and activity/“energy” (ἐνέργεια), in this case applied to creatures.

⁸⁵ *Pro Hesych.* I.1.18, 1–7

⁸⁶ Cf. earlier n. 73, with Barlaam’s own use of “diligence” (ἐπιμέλεια).

badly without recourse to the “spiritual” gifts transcending nature. As a result, the latter become the criteria by which certain truths, which could otherwise be reached through natural “gifts” (like philosophy) can be ascertained with certainty—thus by necessity—whereas the natural “gifts” are susceptible to mixed truths and falsehoods—or good and evil—and cannot so imply such certainty.

One sees this in Palamas’ emphasis of opposites resulting from those who exercise their capacity for human knowledge: for instance in the philosophers who affirm “the same things to be at once animate and inanimate, endowed with and deprived of reason, [...] and things by nature without sensibility [...] could contain our souls”.⁸⁷ This is also mirrored in Palamas’ *One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, where he claims that the rational soul, although possessing life essentially, is “susceptible of opposites—namely good and evil”: hence the soul does not possess goodness by its essence (οὐσία), but is rather contingent on the state of goodness or evil which it possesses as a quality.⁸⁸ By contrast, God as the supreme intellect, for Palamas, transcends all opposites and hence possesses goodness by his essence (οὐσία):⁸⁹ in this respect God possesses goodness necessarily, while creatures possess goodness only contingently—i.e. through their exercise and possessing goodness as an acquired quality. This would then illuminate Palamas’ discussion of the “spiritual gifts”, above: as unmediated and coming directly from God, and insofar as they directly communicate their effect without the capacity for opposites, they ultimately reflect God’s character for Palamas—or in Palamas’ metaphysical scheme, they are identified with God, to the degree that God is manifested through his activities (ἐνέργεια), while properly speaking remaining transcendent by essence (οὐσία).⁹⁰

The relevance of this background factors into Palamas’ statements about what can be held with certainty through demonstration—and from the inverse side, how no certain knowledge can be derived purely from the natural realm. Recalling Barlaam’s claim about demonstrations with regard to God, from above, one of Palamas’ main rejoinders against Barlaam’s theory was to assert that demonstrative premises about God could, indeed, be formulated: in fact, Palamas makes the stronger

⁸⁷ *Pro Hesych.* I.1.18, 21–31; trans. Gendle. It should be noted here that Palamas’ critique is uniquely not that there are opposing positions claimed between philosophers (as in Metochites), but rather that they attribute opposite predicates of objects: for Palamas, in understanding the full truth of things, this suggests an imperfection from the philosophers’ side.

⁸⁸ *Capita* 150 33, 1–5.

⁸⁹ *Capita* 150 34, 1–4.

⁹⁰ See earlier, n. 69.

claim that demonstrations cannot be formulated from anything in the created world, since all its objects are perishable:

Again, premises must contain a necessary term (τὸ ἀναγκαῖον), since a demonstration in the main sense, according to Aristotle, is based on things that are both necessary and eternal—that is to say everlasting beings (τῶν ἀεὶ ὄντων) ... For such are in a real sense necessary terms, while what is always is without beginning and interminable. For in the case of something which was, when it was not, and something which will be, when it will not be, how is it always? And how is it a necessary thing? Such an item does not belong to beings and created things. Therefore no demonstration is based any [of these cases], since even Aristotle says from his treatise, “demonstration does not belong to perishable things”, and the conclusion of a demonstration must be imperishable and eternal.⁹¹

Although Palamas implicitly gives Aristotle a new interpretation with the notion that premises depend on eternal entities—not just eternal universals which inhere in perishable things, as Aristotle would maintain⁹²—one of the outcomes of Palamas’ claim here is that demonstrations, properly speaking, can only be based on God as the necessary, eternally existent entity.⁹³ In Palamas’ account syllogisms could then be made about God, because—unlike Barlaam—the direct apprehension of God, necessary for the first demonstrative premise, is indeed possible, both from revelation and through the saints’ direct participation in God (and effectively one of the main claims of the Hesychasts, as we saw above).

One result of this is that all, subsequent knowledge of things in the world finally depend on God as the “necessary term” for all demonstrative knowledge. If we go back to Barlaam’s claim that “all truth is one”, in Palamas’ framework this would have to be qualified: though all disciplines, including pagan, “outside” wisdom, *aim at* the same truth, they inherently lack the first premise necessary for demonstration—either held by faith, through revelation, or as directly apprehended and known, as

⁹¹ *Letter 2 to Barlaam* 56, 292,16–25 Christou. Cf. Ierodiakonou (2002), esp. discussion in 229–235 (with n. 39).

⁹² See e.g. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* I.8, 75b24–26.

⁹³ Ierodiakonou (2002) 234 claims that Palamas “distorts” Aristotle’s logic, although she does not bring up the possibility that Palamas is almost certainly reading Aristotle through an ancient commentator. While the direct source of this specific formulation is not yet clear to me, the general claim that logical demonstrations ultimately depend on eternal, necessarily existent entities goes back at least to Proclus’ *Parmenides Commentary* (980,2–981,20 Steel), where Proclus claims that the beginning of demonstrations must derive from the “common element” deriving from one Form, which is distinct from the mortal entity in which it resides: this ultimately depends on a series of necessary causes—from forms in souls to the Forms in Intellect, as their causes, and finally the Neoplatonic One causally responsible for Intellect and the Forms. (Special thanks to Antonio Vargas for pointing this out.) See also Kappes ([Forthcoming](#)), who points out a closer, textual parallel in the *Hermetica*: in Arthur Nock (Ed.), *Corpus Hermeticum XIII–XVIII: Asclepius*, vol. 2, (Paris, 1973), Fr. 2A.

the Hesychasts maintained for the saints. This would imply that all subsequent knowledge, both sensible as well as mathematical and intelligible, is contingent and, in their own domains, incomplete. This makes sense of Palamas' metaphor of philosophy being like the "flesh of serpents" which contain "no better and more useful medicine" among other means of healing: the serpent must first be killed, with its head and tail cut off, so that its flesh can be of use as a medicinal solution to the doctor.⁹⁴ Palamas' metaphor is telling: on the one hand, he agrees it is, as it were, the best medicine for a patient—but its application depends on a higher source in the form of the doctor who knows how to "manage" philosophy, i.e. who already possesses the criterion of truth and wisdom.

Looking back over Palamas in relation to our paradigm cases of Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nazianzen in the beginning, Palamas in one sense seems more aligned with the negative skepticism we saw in Gregory, and in a sense a denial of the more positive view of philosophy we had in Clement. One even finds, for example, a direct reference to Gregory's phrase, "to every argument there is a counter-argument" in the beginning of Palamas' *Pro Hesychastis*, used in a similar vein to attack the notion of certain truth in arguments alone.⁹⁵ To this degree, Palamas seems to adhere to Theodore Metochites' skepticism of the knowledge derived from the sensible world—albeit, for Palamas, extended to the *whole* created world (both intelligible as well as sensible); and in turn, Palamas certainly picks up the antagonistic theme against "outside wisdom" found in Nicholas of Methone's own polemic against Proclus and pagan philosophy overall. And furthermore, inasmuch as Palamas has indeed been portrayed as an anti-rationalist, Palamas ascribing to Nazianzen's negative skepticism would seem apt.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ *Pro Hesych.* I.1.20.

⁹⁵ *Pro Hesych.* I.1.1, 12–17. Cf. Calvário (2017) 785–786.

⁹⁶ See e.g. Ierodiakonou (2002) and Krausmüller (2019).

However as we have also seen, there is enough evidence to see in Palamas a more balanced position, despite his anti-philosophical rhetoric.⁹⁷ In particular, it is noteworthy how Palamas holds a kind of positivist notion of knowledge for God, inasmuch as revelation by faith is not the only criterion of truth, as we have seen in our previous authors, but also rather the possibility of *direct* knowledge or apprehension of God, albeit by means of the “spiritual gifts”, in turn the result of Palamas’ metaphysical distinction between essence and activity (ἐνέργεια) in God. This would suggest even more of a dogmatic skepticism for Palamas, insofar as Palamas delineates a domain of knowledge (via human reason) which is uncertain, in relation to a distinct, positive domain with the direct apprehension of God. In turn, we have also already seen how Palamas construes philosophy as pertaining to the “natural” order, rather than “spiritual”. His characterization of philosophy and what is “natural” as a “tool” (ὄργανον), especially philosophy’s characterization as medicinal, is telling: though the tool by itself cannot determine its own limits (and hence lies in the skeptical domain, in its own right), its use is dictated only by the ruling principle—in this case, what belongs to the “spiritual” order. In this respect, whereas Metochites appears to set aside philosophy, in relation to the sensible world, and whereas Nicholas denigrates the possibility of complete knowledge for humans, with or without philosophy, due to the Fall, Palamas seems to hold surprisingly a more positive sense of philosophy—yet only insofar as it is guided by the knowledge pertaining to the “spiritual”.

⁹⁷ Hence Krausmüller (2019) 64–67, which critically discusses Palamas’ excision of discursive reason from the divine image, requires some qualification: as should be apparent now, Palamas’ excision makes sense in light of the way he considers God as the first, necessary (and thus most known) term in demonstrative knowledge—and hence that all subsequent terms, especially in discursive reason, are contingent on the possession of this first, necessary term—either by revelation or direct intuition. Furthermore, Krausmüller does not consider, e.g., Theodore Metochites who maintained that discursive reason was also prone to uncertainty—and hence could not fit with certain knowledge pertaining to divine revelation. It should be noted that Palamas’ claim also mirrors Proclus’ position of the “One-of-the-soul”—the element directly correlating to the gods in their pure unity by which the soul comes to unite with the divine, rather than through intellection and discursive reason (see e.g. Proclus, *On the Chaldean Philosophy*, Fr. 4, 211.4–13; *Timaeus Commentary* I, 246.19–247.8). Palamas seems to be implicitly adapting this model in his delimitation of the divine image to intellection (νόησις), rather than reason (λόγος): Krausmüller by contrast cites Ps.-Dionysius (*De Divinis Nominibus* VII.2, 195,3–20 Suchla) who maintains that human souls appropriate divine wisdom through discursive reasoning. Thus there seem to be differing Neoplatonic models applied between Palamas and, for instance in this last case, Ps.-Dionysius. In this regard (*pace* Krausmüller’s conclusion in 67), Palamas simply seems to continue in the same lineage of Nicholas of Methone and Gregory Nazianzen in qualifying discursive reason’s ability to grasp truth, i.e. as prone to error.

Conclusion: The Instrumentality of Byzantine Skepticism

This paper has so far attempted to lay out the positions of the three late Byzantines we focused on—Nicholas of Methone, Theodore Metochites, and Gregory Palamas—and show how they fit between two poles of the form of skepticism we find in 2nd–4th century early Christians: between (1) a “mild” variant (corresponding with Clement of Alexandria), which permitted that philosophy has a *partial* grasp of truths revealed in Christian revelation, if incomplete; and (2) a “strict” variant (corresponding with Gregory Nazianzen), which maintained that philosophy has *no* grasp of truths revealed in Christian revelation. It should become clear by now that our three late-period Byzantines do not, strictly speaking, fall entirely into one camp or another, however all our figures, both early Christians and the late Byzantines we have analyzed, adhere to revelation as the determinative criterion of truth: hence reason, as exercised in philosophy, is prone to error and uncertainty without revelation as the criterion of certainty.

Given this, we can at least summarize how each of our three figures fit into the two poles we sketched in the beginning. Nicholas of Methone, as we saw, maintains human reason’s susceptibility to error, both in its own reasoning and apart from divine illumination: this would suggest that Nicholas leans towards (2), especially insofar as he critiques Proclus and all other pagan philosophers who mistake demons for gods (esp. in polytheism), and fail to adhere to the one true God; on the other hand, Nicholas leans towards (1) insofar as he maintains that Proclus, though outside revelation as a pagan, imperfectly grasps truths that are perfectly realized in the Pseudo-Dionysius (who he claims is Proclus’ source), and insofar as other philosophers, such as Aristotle, are more correct in accord with truths possessed with certainty in Christian revelation.⁹⁸

Theodore Metochites, by contrast, seems to lie more with pole (2), insofar as he takes the sensible world, and any knowledge derived from it, as being prone to error by its own nature, whereas only divine inspiration and revelation is certain; on the other hand, Metochites lies more with pole (1) insofar as he holds that mathematics and its objects can be known with certainty, without reliance on sensible matter, suggesting that reason *can* grasp truths with certainty, apart from revelation as the criterion.

⁹⁸ At least in the case of Aristotle, one can see Nicholas’ approval with his seven explicit citations of Aristotle, and implicit references to Aristotle’s framework—for instance in maintaining the soul’s immanent relation to body in his commentary on Prop. 82 (seen above).

Gregory Palamas, as we saw above, in some ways reacts against implications drawn from this latter stance by Metochites, especially as they are developed in Barlaam and Metochites' student, Nikephoros Gregoras. Palamas thus certainly tends toward the stricter pole (2), inasmuch as he classifies reason in the domain of "nature" (φύσικον), which implies the capability for opposite outcomes, and hence truth or falsehoods, or good and evil, rather than the certainty of truth and goodness found in the domain of the "spiritual" (πνευματικόν), i.e. divine illumination and revelation. In this Palamas denies the claim from those like Barlaam that "all truth is one" in the sense that philosophy, even if practiced well, can be taken as the criterion of truth in the *same* way as revelation—one might say an extreme form of Clement's own claim of the unity of truth. Yet insofar as Palamas considers human reason in philosophy to be an "instrument", and in this capacity has the capability to aim at the truth, Palamas leans toward pole (1)—yet, however, with the prerequisite necessity for divine knowledge, either held by faith, through revelation, or as directly known.

Overall Börje Bydén appears right to conclude that Metochites—along with the other figures we have considered here—adheres to a kind of negative dogmatic skepticism, according to which there remains a domain of knowledge (whether in the sense of beliefs, similar to "appearances" held by Pyrrhonian Skeptics, or in a more certain way, as one could potentially maintain for Palamas) which can be possessed with certainty, while the other domain(s) of knowledge either cannot be possessed certainly (as true or false)—or (especially for Nicholas, Palamas, and earlier Nazianzen) they cannot be so validated without the criterion of truth provided by divine inspiration or revelation.⁹⁹ In this respect, Byden also seems correct to regard this general trend as a manifestation of a kind of Christian Platonism, particularly in regard to the "Heraclitean element" he points out in Metochites and other Christians, in terms of the common perspective of the created cosmos' state of flux and instability in relation to the stability and certainty of God and the divine.¹⁰⁰

In this respect, Byden is finally correct to point to passages like Plato's *Phaedo* 90B–E as the dominant theme in the background, where Socrates recognizes the character of things as always in flux—yet also maintains, "We should not allow into our minds the conviction that argumentation has nothing sound about it; much rather that we should believe that it is we who are not yet sound".¹⁰¹ It is

⁹⁹ Bydén (2002) 189–190.

¹⁰⁰ Bydén (2002) 198—agreeing here, also, with his conclusion that there is "nothing to suggest that ancient Skepticism ever attracted the interest of Byzantine intellectuals between Photios and Metochites"; see also his n. 54.

¹⁰¹ Plato, *Phaedo* 90d9–e2; trans. Grube. Cf. Bydén (2002) 195–196.

no surprise that this comes a few pages before Socrates critiques the natural scientists (i.e. the Presocratics) for mis-attributing the term, “cause” (αἴτιον), to material entities, which are rather instruments of what is more truly the “cause”—i.e. the Forms, or implicitly *nous*, i.e. intellect.¹⁰² What our Byzantines seem to do is to apply this framework to reason in the capacity of philosophy: philosophy ends up in the position of an “instrument” (recalling Palamas’ terminology here)—while the true “cause” becomes divine revelation, beyond human reason. The skeptical methods or framework employed by the varying figures we have seen end up considering the variation of certainty—or lack thereof—that can be had in reason’s “instrumental” role.¹⁰³

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¹⁰² See esp. Plato, *Phaedo*, 99b2–6. See Menn (1995) and Menn (1992), alongside Sedley (1998).

¹⁰³ An extra parenthetical comparison that could be made here is in Thomas Aquinas’ distinction between sacred science (which exceeds reason, and hence communicates truths by revelation) and the other, natural sciences (which reason can grasp), where the former is “most certain” by its own nature, even if only grasped by belief, or faith, and not known directly by human reason: see *Summa Theologia* Pars I, Q1, A1; and A5, obj./resp. #1.

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