Charles E. Snyder, *Beyond Hellenistic Epistemology: Arcesilaus and the Destruction of Stoic Metaphysics*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021. Pp. vi + 209. ISBN 978-1-350-20240-5.

A glance at the contemporary interpretations of Arcesilaus and his dispute with the early Stoics will tell you that it was a dispute over epistemic principles and the first skirmish in the everlasting war between skeptics and dogmatists over the possibility of knowledge. The Stoics—as the dogmatists—held that epistemic agents could tell true impressions from false ones with certainty. In doing so, they can come to know the world. The skeptic Arcesilaus denied this—he argued that for any impression, there could be an indistinguishable misleading impression. There are no impressions which epistemic agents can absolutely rule out the possibility of falsehood. Thus, agents cannot come to know the world.

This tradition of interpreting the Stoics and Arcesilaus as disputing over epistemology is what the monograph under review intends to go beyond. Charles Snyder calls this traditional view ‘epistemic centrism.’ Instead of the epistemic agent being at the centre of the dispute, the author puts metaphysics at the centre. According to Snyder, Arcesilaus was really challenging more fundamental metaphysical principles underlying the Stoic account of knowledge. Epistemic centrism is rejected—not as necessarily wrong—but as superficial (11-2). While it’s still true that the possibility of knowledge is at stake, it is only as a consequence of the real stakes: the metaphysical stakes. This monograph presents an interpretation that goes beyond the epistemic surface to the metaphysical heart of the matter.

More than pointing out gaps in the current interpretation and filling them, Snyder makes a deeper historiographical contribution. Epistemic centrism is not just a particular interpretive thesis but a whole historiographical paradigm. At its heart, epistemic centrism is the assumption that the “dehistoricized epistemic subject” should be central to any interpretation of Arcesilaus’ arguments. Snyder puts forward an ‘anti-humanistic’ alternative historiographical approach. Instead of the human subject being central to an interpretation, it should be ontology (18).

The volume sets out to defend and draw out the consequences of this new interpretive paradigm. It does so along three main lines of argument: the first (chapter 1) is historiographical and philosophical. Snyder introduces two kinds of interpretation: *de re* and *de dicto*. *De dicto* interpretations interpret in terms the original author would have recognized. *De re* interpretations try to get at what ‘really’ follows from the views or arguments of the original author—even if the original author wouldn’t recognize this (46-7). *De re* interpretations can be made within philosophical ‘traditions’ which frame the interpretation (48). Epistemic centrism adopts a tradition where epistemology is first philosophy; Snyder rejects this in favour of taking metaphysics to be first philosophy. In other words, Snyder adopts an alternative metaphysics first tradition for his *de re* interpretation of Arcesilaus (41-6). Thus, his metaphysical historiography is motivated—at least partially—“on philosophical grounds” (5).

The second line of argument is Snyder’s *de re* interpretation of ‘indiscernibility arguments’ (chapter 2). Indiscernibility arguments target the condition of apprehensive impressions that they could not have arisen from what is not the case. Arcesilaus posited indiscernible objects, e.g., twins, that can cause impressions to arise that are indiscernible from what is the case (e.g., you think you see one twin walking down the street, but it is really the other). Thus, for any impression, it might have arisen from what is not the case. The argument concludes that (at least if we accept the Stoic view) all things are inapprehensible, and the wise man suspends assent about all things.

Snyder, of course, wants to say that what really follows from indiscernibility arguments is a metaphysical conclusion. To this end, Snyder gives a ‘metaphysical specification’ for both inapprehensibility and suspension of assent about all things. Inapprehensibility is understood—not as a feature of the epistemic agent—but as a feature of individual bodies. It is a disposition of bodies relative to moral animals partaking in reason to be not apprehensive (81). Suspension of assent about all things refers to these bodies—that is what ‘things’ picks out. It is not just a suspension of belief in general but a suspension about specific things in the world (12). This reading is primarily supported by a reading of Sextus Empiricus, where suspension and inapprehensibility appear to be predicated on ‘things’ (85).

A second part of the argument concerns the Stoic appeal to the ‘principle of the identity of indiscernibles’ as a response to indiscernibility arguments. This principle states that if two bodies are indiscernible, then they are identical. But Snyder argues that this response begs the question against Arcesilaus. He asks: “how could Zeno or any other Stoic demonstrate that all bodies are individually distinct by means of the causal conception (of apprehension) without having already presupposed the independent reality of such bodies?” (99). The point here is that this response is question-begging because the Stoic view of apprehension relies on a metaphysical presupposition about the discernability of individual bodies. They cannot just appeal to this principle against indiscernibility arguments since such arguments question that very metaphysical principle. Therefore, there are metaphysical stakes for indiscernibility arguments.

The third and final line of argumentation explores Arcesilaus’ response to the *apraxia* objection and what that means for his relationship with the old academy (Chapters 3 and 4). Snyder starts by arguing that Zeno’s theory of appropriate action relies on there being apprehensible bodies. Arcesilaus brought the existence of such bodies into question with his indiscernibility arguments (103). The Stoics accused Arcesilaus of suggesting that the wise man would not act at all. Snyder understands this objection as “the refusal of the Stoics to embark on a defence of their metaphysical views of the world” (121). The Stoics refuse to admit that their account of nature is the problem. Arcesilaus’ response put forward the ‘reasonable’ as the criterion for correct action. Snyder considers this a non-metaphysical criterion of action (128-9). In this way, Arcesilaus dodges the apraxia objection by “abandoning the grand metaphysical views and principles associated with disciplinary holism” (132). This puts Arcesilaus at odds with Polemo and the older Academy. The older Academic ethics starts from the view that “the world itself has a systematic unity with principles and constituent parts” which can systematically explain the good (23). Arcesilaus offers no metaphysical claim nor any systematic explanation. Academics traditionally challenged Stoic ethics by offering alternative explanations. In contrast, “the direction Arcesilaus takes against Zeno makes no use of metaphysical principles” (181). This leads Snyder to reject what he calls the ‘epistemological novelty thesis.’ This is the claim “that the Academy’s change, or skeptical turn, under Arcesilaus is primarily epistemological” (22). The change is instead the metaphysics-free ethics and the change in methodology towards undermining Stoic metaphysics rather than offering an alternative view. This marks a return to a more Socratic methodology (188).

Readers of this journal will likely be most interested in discussion about indiscernibility arguments, so I will now take a closer look. As I said before, Snyder appeals to a report from Sextus Empiricus about Arcesilaus in support of the metaphysical specification of inapprehensibility. Here’s the passage’s first sentence: “since all things are inapprehensible on account of the unreality of the Stoic criterion, if the wise person assents, the wise person will opine” (M. 7.156; Snyder’s translation 85). Note that Sextus says that it follows from the nonexistence of the Stoic criterion of truth that everything is inapprehensible. What is unclear about Snyder’s account is how the criterion of truth fits into his interpretation of indiscernibility arguments. Snyder cannot say the claim what follows from the indiscernibility arguments is that there is no criterion of truth. If he did this, it would appear to contradict his own view. A criterion of truth is an epistemic notion: I think even Snyder would agree to that. So, if Snyder says that the primary upshot of the indiscernibility arguments is that there is no criterion, then he would be saying that they have a primary epistemic upshot. Perhaps Snyder would be fine with that and can retain his metaphysical specification of inapprehensibility and suspension of assent. If he does this, it becomes unclear how we get from the epistemological claim that there is no criterion of truth to a metaphysical conclusion that bodies have a certain disposition.

Alternatively, Snyder might point to the fact that the Stoic criterion is the ‘apprehensive impression,’ and Arcesilaus targets the possibility of apprehensive impressions but questions the apprehensibility of things. Thus, the epistemic upshot is indirect, and the metaphysical reading is retained. The problem with this attempt is that now it gets the reasoning backwards. Remember Sextus reports that inapprehensibility followed from the non-existence of a criterion. The reading I just suggested gets this backwards: it says there is no criterion because things are inapprehensible.

So, Snyder seems to be stuck in a dilemma here. Either the upshot of indiscernibility arguments is epistemological, or he gets the reasoning backwards.

One attempt to show that this is a false dilemma might be to argue that we should be selective in how we read Sextus here. Sextus is writing much later than Arcesilaus. Sextus is probably also an epistemological skeptic. Thus, maybe Sextus is like an epistemic centrist, unduly importing epistemological assumptions to interpret Arcesilaus. Unfortunately, this selective use of a source would be *ad hoc*. This explains why Sextus might be misleading, but it does not give us reason to think that Sextus is misled. Snyder would have to introduce some independent evidence for that claim.

My point here is that Snyder fails to account for the criterion of truth’s role in Arcesilaus’ reasoning. Epistemic centrists—by contrast—easily account for the criterion. They can accept the first horn of the dilemma since they think the entire upshot of indiscernibility arguments is epistemological.

On a more positive note, I will consider what I take as one of the most interesting ideas explored in this monograph. Snyder interprets Arcesilaus as an ‘ontological skeptic.’ Ontological skepticism questions whether the world is the kind of thing that can be known (17). It is not a failure of our abilities as epistemic agents to come to know the world but the ontological conditions that makes knowledge impossible. This is not an idea that gets a lot of ink in the skepticism literature. I think Snyder is right that this is an idea that scholars have been overlooking since we can see traces of ontological skepticism throughout the skeptical tradition. For example, Richard Bett (2000) defends a metaphysical reading of Pyrrho. According to Bett, Pyrrho should be understood as putting forward the metaphysical claim that all things are indeterminate. Bett thinks this precludes Pyrrho from being a skeptic, but we might instead say that Pyrrho is an ontological skeptic. Nothing can be known because there is no determinate way things are. We see echoes of this in later Pyrrhonism in the phrase ‘everything is undetermined’ (PH I.198). We might even read Aenesidemus’ eight modes used to refute causal explanations (PH I.180-185) as resulting in ontological skepticism. Arcesilaus—on Snyder’s view—questions whether the kinds of beings required for knowledge exists. Aenesidemus could be construed as questioning whether the causal relations required for knowledge exist. Further, coming much later in the tradition, Michel de Montaigne says,

To conclude: there is no permanent existence either in our being or in that of objects. We ourselves, our faculty of judgement and all mortal things are flowing and rolling ceaselessly: nothing certain can be established about one from the other, since both judged and judging are ever shifting and changing (1991: 680).

This is at the end of *An* *Apology for Raymond Sebond*—Montaigne’s sustained attack on human reason and pretensions to knowledge. Montaigne suggests nothing is certain (and therefore knowledge impossible) because the world changes. I take the suggestion to be that the world is not the kind of thing we can know since it changes. Montaigne is questioning the ontological conditions that make knowledge possible.

These are just a few examples, but the idea is there. Snyder’s monograph is an excellent example of thinking about ontological skepticism. Even if Snyder’s interpretation of Arcesilaus is wrong, he does bring attention to the relationship between knowledge and metaphysics—how questioning the ontology of knowledge can lead to skepticism.

I’d recommend this monograph to anyone interested in Hellenistic philosophy—especially if they are interested in Hellenistic metaphysics or epistemology. I would also recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of skepticism—the introduction and chapter two in particular; and to anyone thinking about the relationship between metaphysics and epistemology and first philosophy.

*Tyler Wark*

University of Calgary

*tyler.wark@ucalgary.ca*

References

Bett, R. 2000. *Pyrrho, his Antecedents, and his Legacy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Montaigne, M. 1991. *The complete essays*. Translated by M. A. Screech. New York: Penguin.