

Philosophy as the art of living well: Aristotle and the Skepticism

«Every investigation begins with the question of whether something is true or not» (ἀληθὲς ἢ οὐκ ἀληθὲς πάντα ἢ σκέψις γίνεται)

(Aristotle, *Topics* VI 1, 139a38-139b 1)²

Abstract (ENG): In the thought of Aristotle, whose approach is, in many ways, strongly anti-skeptical, there are some elements that, even if in a very broad sense, could be considered close to Skepticism.

Drawing on the "Multifocal Approach" paradigm, the elements of affinity between Aristotle and skeptical philosophy will therefore be highlighted, particularly in the realms of epistemology and ethics-anthropology.

Abstract (ITA): Nel pensiero di Aristotele, il cui approccio si configura, in molti modi, come fortemente antiscettico, ci sono alcuni elementi che, anche se in un senso molto ampio, possono essere considerati vicini allo scetticismo.

Sulla scorta del paradigma del *Multifocal Approach* saranno dunque illuminati tali elementi di vicinanza tra Aristotele e la filosofia scettica, soprattutto in ambito gnoseologico-conoscitivo e a livello etico-antropologico.

Key Words

Aristotle, Skepticism, phenomenon, nature, human knowledge, art of living, *Multifocal Approach*

Parole chiave

Aristotele, scetticismo, fenomeno, natura, conoscenza umana, arte della vita, *approccio Multifocale*

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² The translation of this passage and, more generally, of all the texts cited in the paper, is by the author. Thanks to Dr Giuseppe Thomas Vitale who reviewed the translation of the entire essay.

I. Introductory remarks

The term “skepticism” derives, as is well known, from the Greek σκέψις, a noun meaning “seeing”, “looking”, “observation”, “consideration”, “meditation”, “research”, “doubt”, all notions which - although not in the technical sense that the term has within the philosophical current that goes by the name of “skepticism” - play a fundamental role also in Aristotelian philosophy (in whose *corpus* the term occurs 105 times)³.

Similarly, the same can be said for the verb σκέπτομαι, which has, among its meanings, those of “looking around”, “considering carefully”, “investigating”, “discovering”, in relation to which it has been noted that «many writers, including Thucydides, Hippocrates, Sophocles, Plato (*Laches* 185b) and Aristotle (*EN* 1103b), use the verb regularly. All of this usage comes from the pre-skeptic period»⁴.

More specifically, it should be noted that in the thought of Aristotle, whose approach is, in many ways, strongly anti-skeptical, there are some elements that, even if in a very broad sense, could be considered close to Skepticism.

II. Aristotelian anti-Skepticism

Before attempting to reflect on those elements, it is worth reiterating clearly that Aristotle can be considered, in many aspects of his thought, an anti-skeptical Philosopher.

In fact, as has been pointed out: «it can be said that Pyrrho, by denying that things have a specific being, a form that differentiates them from one another, brought about a reversal of Aristotelian ontology»⁵.

One of the most evident features of Aristotelian anti-skepticism lies, in fact, in the formulation of the principle of non-contradiction as the most certain principle of all, making it an “anhypothetical” principle, given that, as he states in *Metaphysics* IV, 3, 1005 b 13-14:

«the principle that must necessarily be possessed by anyone who wishes to understand any of the things that are is not a hypothesis».

This puts us at the opposite end of the spectrum from the skeptical view. As has been highlighted, in fact: «the skeptic Pyrrho denied not only physics, but any form of ontology, affirming the absolute dominion of appearance and saying that “everything is and is not”. He therefore rejects the problem of being and the very principle of non-contradiction. Being is replaced by appearance: because realities themselves are indifferent, immeasurable and indiscriminable and therefore cannot be known either by the senses or by opinions»⁶.

³ R Radice – R. Bombacigno, *Aristoteles. Lexicon* 3. Con CD-ROM, Biblia, Milano 2005. «The noun *skepsis*, meaning “a look,” “research” can be found in the works of Plato (*Phaedo* 83a, *Theaetetus* 201a) and Aristotle (*Physics* 228, *EN* 1159b)» (R. Zieminska, *History of Skepticism. Polish Contemporary Philosophy and Philosophical Humanities*, edited by J. Hartman, Peter Lang Edition, 2017, p. 13).

⁴ Zieminska, *History of Skepticism...*, p. 13. As has been pointed out, moreover: «since the dawn of Greek literature, even non-philosophical literature, there have been reflections or actual arguments that have cast doubt on the actual possibilities of human knowledge and even the existence of reality. Later skeptics sometimes concede that the Eleatics, the Sophists, Democritus and others applied an attitude of *sképsis* (“examination”, “investigation”, but also “doubt”), but they declare themselves to be Pyrrhonists because they recognise Pyrrho as the one who applied the zetetic, (i.e., respectively, seeking, not pronouncing on the object of research, and raising doubts about everything), typical of those who follow the skeptical school (*agoghé*) (Sextus Empiricus, *Pyrrhonian Sketches*, I 7; *DL* IX 69-70)» (R. Medda, *Pirrone, lo scetticismo accademico e il neopirronismo*, in *Filosofia antica. Una prospettiva multifocale*, ed. by M. Migliori-A. Fermani, Scholè, Morcelliana, Brescia 2020, p. 377).

⁵ M. L. Chiesara, *Storia dello scetticismo greco*, Einaudi, Torino 2003, p. 12.

⁶ Medda, *Filosofia Ellenistica*, in Fermani-Migliori, *Filosofia antica...*, p. 315.

III. Aristotelian “Skepticism”

In the following section we will try to highlight, albeit in an extremely rapid and schematic way, some points of convergence between Aristotle and Skepticism.

III.1. The phenomenon and the nature always prevail

«If he who despises pleasure is seen in the act of pursuing it, he is judged as having an inclination for pleasure and who considers it desirable in its entirety».

This is what we read in a delightful passage from *Nicomachean Ethics* (IX, 12, 1172 b 1-3), which attests that, for the Philosopher, a fact, or a concrete gesture, can sometimes be more important or more revealing than a thousand words.

Attention to what appears, to “what is seen”, therefore, seems to constitute a common element in Aristotle and Skepticism, if it is true that, according to Timon, for Pyrrho «the phenomenon always dominates, wherever it appears» (Timon, fr. 69 Diels).

It is no coincidence that the Greek term σκέψις, as well as the corresponding verb σκέπτομαι, as we have seen, clearly refer to the visual dimension, as well as to the corresponding Latin verbs *specio* ("to look," "to glimpse"), *specular* ("to spy", "to observe"), *specto* "to contemplate" as well as to the terms *species* ("that which the gaze distinguishes from," "species"), *specula* "observatory", *spectator* ("spy", "observer"), *speculum* ("mirror").

This is what, in Aristotle's opinion, happens also with respect to the famous Socratic doctrine - later passed down in history as “ethical intellectualism” – according to which “it is impossible to do evil consciously”⁷. To this doctrine, however, Aristotle objects that “the facts prove exactly the opposite”. Indeed, to be more precise, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he states that

«such reasoning (*logos*) contradicts the facts (*tois phainomenois*) in a glaring way» (*Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 1, 1145 b 27-28).

The *phainomenon*, precisely, in its evident appearance, prevails over the *logos*, the fact prevails over the theory: real people who every day do wrong things even knowing they are wrong, have evidently prevailed over the Socratic theory, which contradicts this factual evidence.

Furthermore, the invitation to pay attention to appearances, understood both as a criterion for scientific research and as a model of "healthy living", followed by both Aristotle and Pyrrho (who, according to the testimony of Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, IX, 106, lived «following phenomena»), is accompanied by a closeness to nature (φύσις) as the norm.

For Aristotle, φύσις can be defined, among other things, as the set of characteristics we possess from birth:

«Reason is a principle by nature, since, if allowed to grow and if it is not mutilated, it will be present; and desire is also a principle, since it accompanies us and characterizes us immediately from birth. Furthermore, it is more or less through these two elements that we define what is by nature (*physei*), that is, what, more or less, accompanies everyone from birth and what arises in us if allowed to develop regularly, such as gray hair, old age, and the like»⁸.

⁷ According to Socrates, in short, evil is done only out of ignorance, that is, if one does not know that the certain thing one wants to do is wrong.

⁸ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* II, 8, 1224 b 29-35.

Therefore, in Aristotle's view, "nature" can be defined, in a primary sense, as the set of elements that constitute all beings from birth or that arise "naturally" in individuals, i.e. if the organism follows its normal development, such as "ageing or dying".

Human nature, therefore, is one of the criteria for the goodness and validity of what one feels: for example, what is frightening, what is beyond the capacity of human beings to bear or, more generally, what is "against" or "beyond nature", is indeed fearsome.

Thus, nature, indicating regularity, the norm, what always or in most cases happens, ends up assuming, in the case of human beings, a criterion of validity and correctness and, more generally, acquires a clear prescriptive value: everything that is "according to nature" (*kata physin*) is normal and, therefore, good and valid; everything that is "against nature" (*para physin*) and which, therefore, does not happen always or in most cases, falls outside the norm (constituting the exception) and is neither good nor valid, nor can it constitute a criterion:

«in fact, it is not in the same sense that the science of health is also that of disease, but of one it is according to nature (*kata physin*), of the other against nature (*para physin*). In the same way, the will is, by nature (*physei*), the will for good, while, against nature (*para physin*), it is also the will for evil, and by nature (*physei*) it wants good, while against nature (*para physin*) and because of distortion, it also wants evil»⁹.

III.2. The limits of human knowledge

The emphasis on the numerous limitations of human knowledge is a feature of Aristotle's thought which, 1) on the one hand and in general, starts from the awareness that human beings, unlike God, can never embrace reality with a comprehensive view, in a "wide-angle vision" and, 2) on the other hand, repeatedly insists in his texts on a formula (already abundant in Platonic texts): *kata to dynaton*, or "as far as possible".

More specifically, we can recall how Aristotelian thought constantly combines research, questioning and problematic tension.

«The assumption of limitation has, in this sense, a powerful heuristic function, in that it always gives new impetus to research, just as the awareness of never being able to be *sophos* (wise) does not lead to an exhaustion of aspiration, a emptying of desirous tension, or a decline in philosophy. The fact that it is never definitively found does not stop the process, but rather keeps it always on the move»¹⁰.

Moreover, it should be remembered that Aristotle, non only affirms the necessity of crossing the aporias to undertake any research¹¹, but also explicitly states, for example in *Posterior Analytics*, I, 3, that not everything can be proven.

In this sense, it can be also said that «Skeptical themes are also to be found in Aristotle who acknowledged that not everything is provable, that human discourse is full of aporias»¹².

The intrinsic limitations of human beings (also, but obviously not only) from an epistemological point of view impose, on multiple levels, a sense of limitation and an invitation to "be content" when the situation requires it.

⁹ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* II, 10, 1227 a 26-30.

¹⁰ A. Fermani, *Perché leggere ancora Aristotele*, Unicopli, Milano 2025, p. 86.

¹¹ «For anyone who wants to solve a problem, it is useful to adequately grasp the difficulties it entails. The final solution, in fact, is the unraveling of previously ascertained difficulties. It is not possible for someone who is ignorant of a knot to untie it; and the difficulties that thought encounters manifest the difficulties that are in things. For insofar as one doubts, one finds oneself in a condition similar to one who is bound; in either case, in fact, it is impossible to proceed further. Therefore, all the difficulties must first be examined, both for these reasons and also because those who seek without first examining the difficulties are like those who do not know where they must go» (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* III, 1, 995 a 27-36).

¹² Ziemińska, *History of Skepticism...*, p. 30.

In *Topics* VIII 11, 161 b 9-10, for example, we read that

«it is not possible to develop the syllogisms one wants, and one must be content to deduce those one can».

Another extraordinarily vivid passage in the same vein can be found in *Metaphysics* IX, 6, 1048 a 36-37, which also states that

«one should not seek a definition of everything, but should be content to understand certain things intuitively through analogy».

It must therefore be said that «Aristotle appreciates decisive arguments, almost mathematical demonstrations or refutations. But in many areas, philosophical demonstration is less compelling and, in addition to deductive inferences, must appeal to the plausible and reasonable, must point out analogies, resort to linguistic clues, and so on. Among the tools of the philosopher's trade, in addition to the most rigorous forms of argumentation, there are many other types of persuasion techniques and mechanisms»¹³.

III.3. Philosophy is the art of living and θεωρία is useless and harmful to human happiness

In reality, even though his conceptual framework was radically different from that of the Skeptics, Aristotle developed a philosophical conception that had exactly the same goal as the philosophical current inaugurated by Pyrrho of Elis: Happiness.

In fact, «the general objective of Pyrrhonian practice does not ultimately consist in the denial of a defined reality or of human knowledge, but in the basic attitude that those who aspire to happiness (*eudaimonia*) must have towards the world and themselves»¹⁴.

Although Aristotle considers θεωρία to be the condition for achieving “first happiness”, that is, the highest and divine happiness outlined in the pages of *Nicomachean Ethics* X 7-8, it should be remembered that the same Philosopher, observing human beings from another perspective¹⁵ - namely as composed of soul and body - also states that θεωρία and, with it, the sublime virtue of σοφία, are useless:

«while wisdom does not concern itself with anything that could make a human being happy, prudence, on the contrary, concerns itself precisely with this»¹⁶.

In a certain sense, therefore, Aristotle takes an attitude similar to that of the Skeptics, when they question the very possibility of a theory, and ask whether it would possibly help one live well.

Exactly as happens in the case of ἐπιστήμη (i.e., science), which, by itself, is not enough to make a life good, sensible, and happy - as demonstrated by the emblematic example of Hippocrates, who

¹³ J. Ackrill, *Aristotele*, premessa all'edizione italiana di E. Berti, Il Mulino, Bologna 1993, p. 35.

¹⁴ A. Fermani, *Virtù*, Unicopli, Milano 2021, p. 270: «Pyrrho of Elis was particularly strong in saying this [i.e., in maintaining that by nature we know nothing], although he left nothing written; but his disciple Timon says that he who wishes to be happy must consider these three things: first, 1) how things are by nature; second, 2) what our disposition towards them should be; finally, 3) what will come of them if we behave in this way. He says that Pyrrho shows that 1) things are equally without differences, without stability, indiscriminate; therefore 2) neither our sensations nor our opinions are true or false. We must therefore not trust them, but be without opinions, without inclinations, without shocks, saying about everything: "It is no more than it is not," or "It is and it is not," or "It neither is nor is not." To those who find themselves in this disposition, Timon says that 3) aphasia will result first, then imperturbability».

¹⁵ For a deeper understanding of this scientific paradigm, see M. Migliori, E. Cattanei, A. Fermani (eds.), *By the Sophists to Aristotle through Plato. The necessity and utility of a Multifocal Approach*, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin 2016.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 12, 1143 b 18.

«he was indeed a geometrician, but in other areas he was considered incompetent and foolish and, as they say, during a sea voyage, due to his naivety, he lost a lot of gold, stolen from him by the tax collectors of Byzantium»¹⁷.

Similarly, for Aristotle, σοφία could not only prove useless in achieving human happiness, but could even be harmful, given that, as we read in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it «sometimes damages health»¹⁸.

For Aristotle, therefore, *phronesis*, that is, practical wisdom, on the human level, triumphs over *sophia*, in the sense that 1) it is precisely *phronesis* 's role to set a limit to *sophia*¹⁹ and 2) to build a comprehensively successful life, to live life well in its entirety and not just part of it:

«it seems, therefore, that the proper characteristic of the wise man is the ability to correctly evaluate what is good and useful for him, not in particular areas, such as health or physical strength, but in relation to the good life in general» (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 5, 1140 a 25-28).

This strong connection between "thought and life" that Aristotle shares with the Skeptics²⁰, according to whom the Philosopher is such only to the extent that he can embody his own doctrine: there must be complete coherence between what the Philosopher elaborates and what he experiences.

In this sense, in conclusion, it can be said that, in a certain sense, for both Aristotle and the Skeptics, «philosophy is... a critical exercise, a refined or acquired ability to methodically and patiently weigh arguments and evidence relating to specific problems with a view to possible solutions; it is the articulation of doubt and the suspension of judgment when a clear vision of the issues is not achieved; it is the propensity to independently evaluate ideas, beliefs, and norms, in awareness of the conditioning, prejudices, and limitations that every civilization and personality entails»²¹.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* VIII, 2, 1247 a 17-21.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 12, 1153 a 20.

¹⁹ See, for instance A. Fermini, *L'etica di Aristotele. Il mondo della vita umana*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2021, pp. 286 ss.

²⁰ «Philosophical knowledge... offers above all a message for life, that is, of an ethical and practical nature» (Medda, *Filosofia ellenistica...*, p. 313).

²¹ R. Bodei R., *Una scintilla di fuoco. Invito alla filosofia*, Zanichelli, Bologna 2005, p. 11.