Sceptical Education in the Hellenistic Academy

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I. Prospectus

Given evidence that they criticized trust in the authoritative testimony offered by other philosophers,¹ we may suppose sceptics of the “New” (Hellenistic) Academy took definite steps to disarm the prejudice of external authorities. One might think sceptical Academics were only self-interested in making these arguments: they benefit themselves by arguing against dogmatic authorities. In this paper I argue that the Academics’ pedagogical concern—with how others develop as philosophical critics and form their own views by weighing reasons for and against—is more than superficial by showing that they also took measures to reduce their own, internal authority. My pedagogical thesis (PT) is as follows:

Later and earlier sceptical Academics limited their philosophical activity due to a pedagogical view, according to which reducing the prejudice of internal authority benefits students’ development in dialectical inquiry.

This limitation occurred in two ways: in the first, Academics limited themselves to dialectic, as opposed to epideictic or monologic forms of exposition;² secondly, within the realm of dialectic, they preferred the role of a questioner: they gave arguments against theses or arguments provided by others, or they gave arguments for and against a thesis. In each case, there was an intradialectical limitation, according to which sceptical Academics did not posit or defend a thesis that they did not also then critique. Positing a pedagogical commitment about internal authority explains the intradialectical limitation in a way that avoids the faults of competing interpretations of Academic scepticism.

¹ SE PH 1.87-91; 2.22-47; M 7.314-42; Cic. Luc. 7-9; 112-15; Luc. Hermotimus
² Since this much is uncontroversial, I won’t canvass support for it here.
PT is supported by both testimonial evidence and theoretical considerations. Regarding the testimonia, it is tempting to suppose we may only conclude later, post-Carneadean Academics like Cicero and Favorinus justified their dialectical method in part by appealing to its didactic appeal; their texts and the testimonia for them give us our only direct attestations of the pedagogical view as an Academic commitment. I argue, however, that the evidence can be read consistently with the further claim that pedagogy motivated the New Academy’s methods even among earlier sceptics like Carneades. As for theoretical considerations, I argue that our best account of Academic scepticism is made more coherent by including pedagogical commitments. My focus in this paper is on defending PT with respect to earlier sceptical Academics, Arcesilaus and Carneades.

If this paper is successful, I lend support against a common narrative according to which Arcesilaus (and Carneades) upheld a stricter form of scepticism that was more committed to epoche that was then loosened by post-Carneadeans (or Carneades). On this account, the

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3 Cic. Luc. 60: Restat illud quod dicunt veri inveniundi causa contra omnia dici oportere et pro omnibus. volo igitur videre quid invenerint. “Non solens” inquit “ostendere.” Quae sunt tandem ista mysteria, aut cur celatis quasi turpe aliquid sententiam vestram? “Ut qui audient” inquit “ratione potius quam auctoritate ducantur.” Quid si utrumque, num peius est? Unum tamen illud non celant, nihil esse quod percipi possit. an in eo auctoritas nihil obest? mihi quidem videtur vel plurimum. quis enim ista tam aperte perspicaces et perversa et falsa secutus essen, nisi tanta in Arcesila, multo etiam maior in Carneade et copia rerum et dicendi vis fuisse? (“There remains their claim that in order to discover the truth something should be said for and against everything. I want to see, then, what they have discovered. He replies, “It’s not our practice to show.” What, I ask, are those mysteries? Why do you hide your view as though it were something shameful? “So that students,” he says, “are led by reason rather than by authority.” What if they are led by both? Is that worse? Still, there is one thing they don’t hide, that there is nothing which can be apprehended. Is their authority not injurious in this case? It certainly seems so to me. For who would have followed such clearly backwards and transparently false views, if there had not been such a supply of arguments and power of speaking in Arcesilaus and much more in Carneades?”); in Galen’s On the Best Method of Teaching, Galen seeks to refute Favorinus’ claim that “the attack on either side (εἰς ἑκάτερον ἐπιτρέπεται) is the best method of teaching (ἄριστην διδασκαλίαν)” (Gal. De opt. doc. 1.1); cf. Gal. De opt. doc. 3.2: ἐπιτρέπει τὴν κρίσιν τῶν εἰς ἑκάτερον ἐπιχειρουμένων τοῖς μαθηταῖς; cf. 3.4: προσποιομένος δὲ ἐπιτρέπει τὴν κρίσιν τοῖς μαθηταῖς (“sc. Favorinus] pretending to leave the judgment to his students”); 5.2: Γελοῖος οὖν ἐστιν ὁ Φαβωρίνος ἐπιτρέπον τρόπων κρίνειν τοῖς μαθηταῖς ἀνευ τοῦ συγχωρήθηκα τὴν πιστίν τοῖς κριτηρίοις (“Favorinus, then, is ridiculous when he leaves his students to judge without conceding trust in the criteria.”); 5.4: ὡς ἐπιλήψεως ἤμεν ἐπιτρέψθη διαλέγεται συγχωρόν τῇ βέβαιῳ εἰσὶν γνωστῷ καὶ τούτῳ ἐπιτρέπουν αἰρέονται τοῖς μαθηταῖς (…as though we’ve forgotten he speaks elsewhere as conceding that something is firmly known and leaving his students to choose this.”)
outcome of dialectical inquiry in the Academy shifts from suspension of judgment to judging the probable. What slipped, on my account, is not commitment to epistemological theses and suspension of assent but adherence to pedagogically-motivated limitations—which might even involve not discussing one’s pedagogical views. Critics today are comfortable supposing that Carneades was as radical a sceptic as Arcesilaus, even though the former further developed the language to talk about sceptical epistemology. In a similar way, I propose that Arcesilaus and Carneades were as committed to their responsibilities as teachers as post-Carneadeans like Cicero and Favorinus, even though the latter group talked more openly about these commitments.

II. PT and Earlier Academics

There are reasons to suspect that only later Academics such as Cicero and Favorinus can be shown to have held the pedagogical view that reducing the prejudice of internal authority benefits training in dialectic. I’ll address three arguments against including the earlier Academics Arcesilaus and Carneades within the scope of PT: (i) the pedagogical view is inconsistent with the scepticism of Arcesilaus and/or Carneades; (ii) the later sceptical Academics who held the pedagogical view did not think Arcesilaus and/or Carneades held that view; and (iii) there is no textual evidence that Arcesilaus and/or Carneades held the pedagogical view. Given these arguments, there is a consensus that the pedagogical view first appears under Philo’s scholarchy and is a rationalization of an inherited mode of philosophy.\footnote{Long and Sedley 1987: 1:449; Brittain 2001: 111–14; Ioppolo 1993: 210 n. 101: “This assertion [sc. leaving students to judge arguments] could tally with the principle elaborated by the Academy, at least from Philo onwards, that pupils are guided more by reason than by authority.”} I aim here to bring together multiple forms of support for thinking that the pedagogical view drives the earlier sceptical Academics as well: pointing to a gap in our understanding of Academic methods (sc. the intradialectical
limitations) that the pedagogical view explains, re-interpreting how we may understand later Academics as different from their predecessors, and showing how the limited textual evidence for earlier Academics may speak for, rather than against, *PT*.

a. Consistency

For the sake of time, I’ll address one way the first argument against extending *PT* to earlier sceptics, (i), may proceed, which depends on Frede’s *radical* interpretation of Academic scepticism (as opposed to Coussin’s *dialectical* or the *rustic* interpretation of Burnyeat/Barnes).

On this interpretation, Arcesilaus and Carneades distinguished kinds of cognitive content; they may imagine themselves having views (or beliefs or whatever) without accepting the epistemological infrastructure of Stoic assent and belief. Two views they held were *acatalepsia* and *epoche*. In his treatise against Favorinus, Galen argued that *epoche* is inconsistent with the pedagogical view, for a commitment to suspension is inconsistent with teaching in a way that endorses student’s making judgments that could involve assent. This argument, however, ignores that a teacher may have structured ends. While *epoche* may indeed have been a teaching aim of the Academy, it could still be subordinate to others (e.g. making students good dialecticians). But there is another reason not to think early Academics also held the pedagogical view. To see it, first note that the pedagogical view presupposes that arguments are better tools for attaining knowledge than bare assertion (sc. authoritative testimony).

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5 Couissin 1929; Burnyeat 1997; Barnes 1997  
6 Frede 1987a; Frede 1987b  
7 On how the dialectician should judge on the basis of *rationes* and not *auctoritas*, see *Leg*. 1.36; *Tusc*. 5.83, *ND*. 1.10-11, 3.5-7, 3.10, 3.13; on wanting the auditor-reader to be or become an autonomous critic, see *Fin*. 3.6, 5.76; *Div*. 2.150; *Fat*. 1; on the Academic hiding views: cf. *De or*. 1.84, 3.67; *Tusc*. 5.11.
One may argue that radical sceptics like Arcesilaus and Carneades did not find that arguments were particularly useful epistemic tools;\(^8\) so they couldn’t have wanted to reduce internal authority due to a preference for the power of arguments. But just in the way that radical sceptics maintain a pre-theoretical commitment to truth-finding,\(^9\) despite continually finding that dialectical inquiry doesn’t rationally warrant beliefs, so too they must have maintained a pre-theoretical commitment to arguments as useful tools for inquiry (relative to others, such as authoritative testimony), despite continually finding that arguments aren’t good *enough* to rationally warrant beliefs. In fact, their commitment to arguments as better epistemic tools would explain their commitment to philosophical inquiry: why should they have been committed to philosophy in the first place if they didn’t already think that arguments have the best potential to lead to knowledge? The pedagogical view, then, is not inconsistent with what I take to be the most promising account of radical Academic scepticism. In other words, including the pedagogical view makes radical scepticism no more inconsistent or difficult to interpret than without it.

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8 Brittain 2001: 111–14 holds that references to the pedagogical view (sc. Cic. *Luc.* 60 and Gal. *De opt. doc.*) explain Philonian mitigated scepticism and represent “a marked departure from Carneades in the Clitomachian tradition.” On this account, Philonian scepticism holds that “arguing either side is a potential source of rational, or reasonable, results,” whereas Carneades denied that the feeling “that one side of an argument was more persuasive than the other ... constituted a rational motive for favouring that side.”

9 Cicero and Favorinus state the goal of inquiry is truth in works where they hold the pedagogical view: cf. Cic. *Luc.* 7, 65; Gal. *De opt. doc.* 1.2. If the goal of inquiry is not truth but *epoche* or tranquility, it’s less clear why reducing internal authority should be important; one could promote *epoche* or tranquility (via *epoche*) by relying on authoritative testimony. For earlier sceptics, the evidence is not univocal: Sextus’ testimony, which appropriates Arcesilaus as a near-Pyrrhonian, is opposed by Cic. *Luc.* 67, which appropriates Arcesilaus’ aims of inquiry with his own (cf. *Luc.* 7, 65 and Plut. *Stoic. rep.* 1037c); on the different portraits of Arcesilaus in *Ac.* 1.45 and *Luc.* 67 see Allen 2018. However, if Arcesilaus’ aim in inquiry is not truth but *epoche* and the tranquility that comes from it, then Arcesilaus takes *epoche* as a principle from which he adopts his dialectical method, rather than as a view he is left with in response to following his dialectical method; but this would mean that Arcesilaus’ method was not open-minded, as it presupposed *epoche* as a proper response to arguments (cf. SE *PH* 1.232 again). There is a related concern that there is a lack of evidence that Arcesilaus developed or endorsed the theoretical tools by which he would allow himself to accept *epoche* as a rationally warranted (i.e. supported by argument) principle: Allen 1997: 220–23; Brittain 2005; cf. Reinhardt 2018: 199–200.
But we can do better. By positing the pedagogical view to earlier Academics we can, in fact, make radical scepticism more consistent with Academic methods. Starting with Arcesilaus, the core Academic mode of inquiry is to play the questioner in a dialectical game (sc. to argue contra); a later Carneadean innovation was to argue on either side without an interlocutor.\(^\text{10}\) If a radical sceptic’s only initial motivation for participating in dialectical inquiry is to search for the truth by a comparison of arguments, Carneades’ form of pro and contra dispute without interlocutors would seem as natural a choice for Arcesilaus as strictly dialectical questioning. Why, then, should Arcesilaus have limited his dialectical activities to playing the questioner? Arcesilaus took inspiration from the Socratic elenchus,\(^\text{11}\) so one may say that just as Socrates described his mission as testing expert claims to knowledge (Pl. Ap. 21b-23b), so too Arcesilaus. But Arcesilaus questioned non-experts (e.g. his students) as well, so it couldn’t have been only claims to knowledge by experts he intended to test. He must have wanted to test beliefs/views more generally and as held by anyone. But this still cannot explain why Arcesilaus only plays the questioner, for he can also test beliefs by at least occasionally playing the answerer—he needn’t endorse a belief in order to defend it as answerer.\(^\text{12}\) Arcesilaus’ behavior is more easily explained by positing the pedagogical view: this dialectical constraint benefits not Arcesilaus’ own inquiries but of those who would understand Arcesilaus’ statements in the role as answerer as authoritative testimony. Otherwise, we may have to resort to non-philosophical explanations (e.g. he did not want his own views to be shown to be wrong) we would expect to find in anti-

\(^{10}\) For how Academic methods can be fruitfully analyzed in terms of Aristotelian perirastic and dialectic, see Allen 1997: 223–28.

\(^{11}\) Cic. De or. 3.67; Fin. 2.2; ND 1.11; Long 1988: 156–60

\(^{12}\) And besides, I am taking Arcesilaus to be a radical sceptic with his own views; without the pedagogical view, he should even be willing to test his other views by at least occasionally submitting them to questioning. See Reinhardt 2018: 250–53 for how the notion of approval may have originated in a detached mode of playing the answerer in dialectic.
Nor does this hypothesis undermine Socratic inspiration. Unlike the early dialogues, where Socrates’ *elenchus* seems designed to test experts, Plato’s *Theaetetus* depicts Socrates as the intellectual midwife: Socrates’ method doesn’t aim to teach his pupils doctrines but only to assist them in their own philosophical discoveries (Pl. *Tht*. 150d). Nor is Socrates’ pedagogical concern inconsistent with his sceptical denial of knowledge (Pl. *Tht*. 150c). Attributing the pedagogical view to Arcesilaus streamlines our account of why he should play only the questioner.\(^{14}\)

There is a similar point to be made about the later Carneadean method of argument on either side. When the Academic isn’t himself presenting both sides, he argues second, against the interlocutor who posits or defends a thesis. Even with Carneades’ innovations, the Academic never argues for a position without also arguing against it, whereas he often argues against a thesis without arguing for it. At a certain point after Arcesilaus, Academic dialectic developed so that the thesis needn’t have been one that the interlocutor endorses.\(^{15}\) This development suggests Academics were interested in testing beliefs generally, not just ones that are endorsed by an interlocutor. Still, if this is so, why doesn’t the Academic test beliefs by occasionally positing and defending a thesis (sc. the equivalent of playing the answerer) while having an interlocutor argue against him? The desire to reduce internal authority contained in the pedagogical view explains the *manner* in which Academic dialectic was limited, for Academics did not simply limit themselves to dialectic (versus epideictic or demonstrative modes of discourse); they also limited the *roles* they played when conversing in dialectic. A desire to discover truths could, on

\(^{13}\) Cf. Numenius F. 25.75–83 (Des Places 1973): “I’m not persuaded by Diocles of Cnidus who says in his *Diatribes* that Arcesilaus—out of fear of the followers of Theorodus and the sophist Bion, who attack philosophers and do not shrink from anything to refute them—took care that he not hold commitments; nor was he seen to suggest any doctrine, but threw suspension before himself as though it were squid-ink. I don’t believe this.”

\(^{14}\) See Snyder 2016 for a similar account of Arcesilaus’ scepticism, grounded in a reading of Plato’s *Theaetetus* and synthesized as a response to failings in both Frede’s account of classical scepticism (cf. Frede 1987b) and the dialectical interpretation of Arcesilaus.

\(^{15}\) cf. Cic. *Fin.* 2.2.
its own, explain the first limitation (sc. dialectic over non-dialectic), but it does not explain the second (sc. questioner over answerer). When one doesn’t want one’s own authority to interfere with others’ judgments, one will be careful not to create even the appearance of declarative assertions (i.e. by positing and then defending theses as the answerer).

b. Differences among Academics

The second argument against PT, (ii), infers that since Cicero and Favorinus, who both clearly did hold the pedagogical view and are credible sources for the early Academy, distanced themselves from earlier Academics, such earlier Academics did not hold the pedagogical view. But this needn’t follow, for there are multiple ways later and earlier sceptical Academics differed. For instance, Carneades seems to have adapted and developed the Stoic account of the persuasive (*pithanon*) impression in order to fill in *lacunae* in Arcesillean scepticism. Through this development Carneades can explain to a Stoic what he feels he is doing in response to arguments: he suspends realist commitments that the Stoic calls assent but still finds some non-perceptual impressions more or less persuasive on the basis of their consistency to other impressions and his antecedent views, beliefs, or commitments. We may suspect Arcesilaus wasn’t doing anything different when he argued against the philosophers of his day, though he didn’t develop the language to talk about it. And he wouldn’t have felt compelled to talk thus about his own views because he strictly adhered to his dialectical method.

In what way, then, did Carneades differ from Arcesilaus with regard to the limited commitments they may have allowed themselves? One story we find is that earlier Academics such as Arcesilaus conceived of themselves as suspending all judgment without having any positive responses to arguments; this is Lucullus’ story (*Luc.* 32) and Cicero’s in his first speech

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16 On consistency as the most important determinant of persuasiveness in Carneades’ account, see Reinhardt 2018.
of the final version of the Academica (Ac. 1.45). We also find it in Galen’s polemic against Favorinus.\textsuperscript{17} Or, one might think that earlier and later Academics share the same motivations and views but that only the latter broke their dialectical constraints and spoke openly about how they consider themselves to hold views. This is the story we find in Cicero’s speech in Lucullus, where Arcesilaus is said to have positive commitments (Luc. 66, 76-77) that align with Cicero’s own (cf. Luc. 66), while he turns to Carneades’ account of the persuasive impression to explain how the sceptic allows himself those commitments (Luc. 98). On the first account there is a change in Academic scepticism between Arcesilaus and Carneades: the former was more radically committed to \textit{epoche} (or perhaps more philosophically consistent) than the former. On the second account, by contrast, there is a change in the commitment to dialectical methods: even if only in dialectical contexts, Carneades talked about his epistemological views more than Arcesilaus.

With these two stories in mind, in what way do Cicero and Favorinus differ from, say, Carneades with regard to the pedagogical view? Once again, we could see the pedagogical view as symptomatic of a general slipping away from radical towards mitigated scepticism: whereas Carneades approved the probable only in the realm of perceptual impressions, post-Carneadeans like Cicero translated tests for probability into the non-perceptual arena of arguments. As a result, post-Carneadeans broke further away from Arcesilaus’ commitment to \textit{epoche} by allowing themselves \textit{and others} to judge what is probable in arguments.\textsuperscript{18} However, if we find the second story about Academic positive commitments plausible, then we also ought to be

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{De opt. doc.} 1.1, 2.3, 3.3

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Per} the account of Academic scepticism by Gawlick and Görler (1994), but there are other ways a story of sceptical decline might proceed: e.g. whereas Carneades remained committed to Arcesilaus’ \textit{epoche} (introducing the persuasive impression only as a dialectical response to \textit{apraxia} arguments), post-Carneadeans abandoned total suspension of judgment in favor of limited acceptance in the form of approving persuasive impressions. This is like the story Galen tells of earlier Academics, who are said not to entrust judgment even to themselves (\textit{De opt. doc.} 3.4).
willing to tell a similar story about the pedagogical view: both early and later Academics held it, but only the latter were willing to break self-imposed dialectical limitations and speak openly about holding it, at the cost of some inconsistency. It’s true that later and early sceptical Academics differed with respect to the pedagogical view, but perhaps not in the way sources like Galen might lead us to expect. In the way Carneades differed from Arcesilaus by telling others how he could imagine himself to hold positive views (via the persuasive impression) while nevertheless avoiding, like Arcesilaus, the realist commitments of Stoics, so too Cicero and Favorinus differed from Carneades and Arcesilaus by telling others of their pedagogical view while still, like Carneades and Arcesilaus, endorsing limitations on their philosophical practice that such a view asks of them. Galen doesn’t claim, after all, that Favorinus himself admits a divorce between older and younger Academic, let alone a difference regarding their pedagogy. It is Galen who uses earlier Academics’ silence on the issue as a wedge to drive his polemic. In *Lucullus*, likewise, it’s not suggested that Cicero agrees with Lucullus’ characterization of early Academics as lacking any positive commitments which may include the pedagogical view (and he, like Favorinus, could explain the unwillingness of earlier Academics to talk about their own views by their dialectical limitations).

There has been a tendency to associate the pedagogical view only with mitigated scepticism. I suspect this is because it used to be more common to identify Cicero and Favorinus as mitigated sceptics, and thus the pedagogical view was a handy marker by which to further disambiguate mitigated and radical scepticism. But this consensus has been broken. Cicero and Favorinus are now more often recognized as radicals. By the same token, the pedagogical view should no longer be seen as useful for distinguishing the views of later, mitigated sceptics from earlier, more radical ones.

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a. Textual Evidence

The third argument against *PT*, (iii), appeals to the lack of evidence for the pedagogical view in the *testimonia* for Arcesilaus and Carneades. While even this argument ignores evidence of Cicero, we can re-examine the non-Ciceronian evidence and question whether the pedagogical view can help to explain these other sources for the earlier sceptical Academics. The evidence for Arcesilaus is slight and indeterminate: what little we do have that treats his method and its effects on his students cannot settle the question. Rather, I’ll conclude my discussion by drawing attention to an overlooked text about Carneades that is more suggestive.

Most biographical information about Carneades concerns his work as a dialectician in competition with Chrysippus, and very little remains that mentions his work as a teacher. The most promising glimpse into Carneades’ teaching is a saying of his related only once, by Plutarch:

Carneades used to say that the sons of rich men and kings only learn horse-riding well and finely, but nothing else; for the tutor (ὁ διδάσκαλος), by his praise, and the wrestler, by taking a fall, flatters them in their lessons, but the horse, neither knowing nor regarding whether someone’s a nobody or a ruler, rich or poor (οὐκ εἰδὼς οὐδὲ φροντίζων ὅστις ἰδιώτης ἢ ἄρχων ἢ πλούσιος ἢ τένης), bucks those who cannot ride. (Plut. *Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur* 10, 58f [Mette T10])

The saying is likely an analogy for a Socratic mode of questioning. The horse, like Socrates, disregards the class of its partners and lacks all pretense of teaching. Conventional teachers

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20 In *De oratore*, as we’ll see, characters attribute the pedagogical view to Arcesilaus (*De or. 3.67*) and Charmadas, a student of Carneades (*De or. 1.84*); cf. Cic. *ND* 1.11 ([ratio] ... *nullamque rem aperte iudicandi profecta a Socrate repetita ab Arcesila confirmata a Carneade*).

21 *In. Acad.* cols 18.40-19.11; 19.33-20.4

22 For the image of dialectic as wrestling, cf., e.g., Pl. *Rep.* 1.336b7-c2: “Thrasymachus, crying out to the group, said, ‘Socrates, what nonsense has just now been gripping you all? Why are you playing around, taking falls (ὑποκατακλινόμενοι) for each other?’”

23 Pl. *Ap.* 33a5-b3: “I have never been a teacher (διδάσκαλος) of anyone. But if someone, young or old, wants to hear me speaking and doing my own business, I have never refused them. And I don’t talk after collecting a fee and not talk if I don’t collect one, but to rich and poor alike (δυοίως καὶ πλουσίω καὶ πένητι) I offer myself to questioning, and if anyone by answering wants to hear whatever I say.”
(e.g. of philosophy), however, fail their students by taking into account the class and reputation of their students. As a result of this difference, the Socratic horse is the better teacher. Carneades appears to be making the point that refutative dialectic, when carried out in the spirit of Socrates (which he adopts), makes students better dialecticians. While Plutarch’s passage doesn’t get us so far as to the pedagogical view, it supports the idea that Carneades was sensitive to nearby issues around education. His philosophical practice seems designed to serve students as much as himself: by being uncompromising in the acuity of his questioning, Carneades helps his interlocutors become better dialecticians. The parts of an interlocutor’s identity that are extraneous to their role as answerer, like their wealth or privilege, doesn’t have a place in dialectic. If this is right, it seems Carneades would also agree that the parts of his identity that are extraneous to his role as questioner (e.g. his reputation or seniority) has no place in dialectic.


24 For teachers spoiling students by not opposing them, cf. Pl. Laws 3.694d.


