

**Review :** VEZZOLI, Simone. *Arcesilao di Pitane: l'origine del platonismo neoaccademico. Analisi e fonti. Philosophie hellénistique et romaine.* Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2016. Pp. 300. ISBN 9782503550299. EUR 65,00.

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VEZZOLI, Simone. *Arcesilao di Pitane: l'origine del platonismo neoaccademico. Analisi e fonti. Philosophie hellénistique et romaine.* Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2016.<sup>1</sup>

*Arcesilao di Pitane*, by Simone Vezzoli, is a very good book: first, because the ideas and the argumentative chains are clear and meticulously explained (and without being boring); secondly, because the author not only organizes the remains of Arcesilaus' fragmentary thought, but also advances a hypothesis about them (that Arcesilaus was a legitimate Platonist); thirdly, because Vezzoli grounds his arguments in the 172 fragments of Arcesilaus' philosophy (some of them of dubious attribution), all very well translated from Greek and Latin; and fourthly, because these fragments are gathered in the second part of the book, in the original language, followed by an Italian translation; finally, the bibliography is up-to-date. In what follows, I am going to comment on some features of this book that I think is going to be indispensable for all those interested in Hellenistic philosophy in general, but especially in the arguments and philosophy of the Academy.

As Vezzoli tells us in his 'Introduzione', the pioneering work on the Academy in its Skeptical turn was done by Zeller, Hirzel, Brochard, Credaro and Von Arnim at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. After that, important research – led by Cousin, Glucker, Frede, Tarrant, Ioppolo, Long, Sedley, Lévy, Görler, Annas and Dal Pra, among others – have sparked debates, for instance, (1) on the autonomy of Academic Skepticism in relation to Pyrrhonism, and (2) on the possible Platonic origins of the philosophy of Arcesilaus. And these are two of the main issues addressed by Vezzoli.

The first part of the book – 'Analisi' – is divided in two chapters. The first chapter is an attempt to reconstruct the thought of Arcesilaus accordingly to topics named in the subchapters: 'Il metodo', 'L'epistemologia' and 'L'etica e la teoria della prassi'. The aim of the subchapter on 'method' is twofold. First, it aims to comprehend Arcesilaus' dialectical approach. This is an important issue since, if Arcesilaus wrote anything, it was probably ὑπομνήματα to the works of one of his masters, the mathematician Crantor. Thus, one needs to confine oneself to testimonies that have us believe either that Arcesilaus did not have any positive philosophy that could be attributed to him – in this case, he would only have been reacting dialectically to the arguments of other philosophers (mainly Zeno of Citium, the Stoic), by trying to lead their arguments to a *reductio ad absurdum*; or, on the other hand, and even if Arcesilaus

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<sup>1</sup> This review was already published by BMCR. If you are interested, take a look @ <<http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2018/2018-02-25.html>>.

had argued dialectically, that by this very approach he was advancing his own views on the subjects under examination.

Despite the different ways of interpreting Arcesilaus' intentions, the testimonies are unanimous in saying that he was an outstanding dialectician, someone who adopted a singular style of arguing: 'che era tanto una modalità espositiva quanto un vero e proprio metodo d'indagine: si tratta dell'antilogia' (p. 19). 'Antilogia', argument on both sides of the question, is the main issue of the second section of the subchapter on method.

Vezzoli begins his discussion of epistemology with opinion. The reason for this is that, if Arcesilaus' philosophy was built on or became evident through his quarrels with the Stoics, the starting point of these disputes was opinion. Thus, Vezzoli retraces the argumentative steps of Arcesilaus, from early acceptance of Zeno's idea that the perfect sage would not have opinions, to the refusal of κατάληψις and συγκατάθεσις, leading to ἐποχή. The consequences of Arcesilaus' arguments against the Stoic notion of κατάληψις are shown in II.2, 'La strategia dialettica: le critiche alla κατάληψις', a section which offers clear explanations of concepts and the main issues, a precise reconstruction of the debate (sometimes utilizing formal logic) and detailed comparisons between the main testimonies, those of Cicero and Sextus Empiricus. In II.3, 'La riflessione accolta anche in propria persona', Vezzoli addresses Arcesilaus' acceptance of ἐποχή περί πάντων as a rationally obtained result of the debate against the Stoics on the concept of κατάληψις.

The third subchapter of the first chapter of the book is divided in two sections. The first of these deals with the topic of action, especially the argument of ἀπραξία, i.e. the argument which asserts that ἐποχή περί πάντων entails the impossibility of action and that, even if the action was possible, it would not lead one to a happy life. (It cannot be emphasized enough that εὐδαιμονία as the main moral τέλος was one of the most important features of Hellenistic philosophical systems.) Hence, Vezzoli shows us how the εὔλογον arises as a criterion which makes action possible, without needing either συγκατάθεσις or ἐπιστήμη.

The second section of the subchapter dedicated to 'ethics and theory of praxis', on moral praxis and political theory, gives us a picture of a thinker who was not so worried about issues of politics in general, with the exception of his notable opposition to the Stoic dogma of natural foundations for law (νόμος φύσεως). On the other hand, concerning moral practice (p. 77):

L'immagine che emerge è quella di un pensatore seriamente interessato alla pratica morale, solito a condurre razionalmente la propria vita ma sempre pronto a riconoscere la provvisorietà delle conclusioni raggiunte attraverso la rinuncia a ogni pretesa conoscitiva, prudente nelle indagini epistemologiche così come nel perseguimento dei piaceri (che pure non sembra reputasse invariabilmente negativi), indipendente e dubbioso verso ogni opinione ma disponibile a un serio dialogo, poco accomodante nella continua attività di stimolare se stesso e chi gli stava intorno a perseguire (per quanto possibile) la conoscenza e la felicità: tali elementi danno vita a uno scenario coerente con la pratica dell' ἐποχή περί πάντων e di una ricerca virtualmente senza fine, con il valore dell' ἰσοσθένεια degli argomenti contrari, con la tesi che tutte le cose sono ἄδηλα e con una teoria dell'azione associante il criterio dell' εὔλογον alla ὁρμή naturale.

The second chapter of the first part of the book is dedicated to the problem of the Platonism of Arcesilaus. Vezzoli intends to stress the links between Arcesilaus' thought and Plato's, and includes a subchapter dealing with the problem of the unity of the Academy. Starting with this issue (the unity of the Academy), the first subchapter of the second chapter is divided in two sections. The first aims to portray Arcesilaus' life, mentioning his studies (from mathematics to music and literature, for instance) as well as his mentors. Vezzoli also tries to show the predecessors of Arcesilaus' thought: those earlier philosophers whose thoughts may have influenced Arcesilaus' approach to philosophy.

But in ancient philosophy, following the trail is never a job without any risks and questions. Thus, Vezzoli finds himself at a crossroads and has to give answers to those old questions: Was Arcesilaus a Pyrrhonist (and to what extent)? Or was he a Platonist (and to what extent)? Could he be both at the same time? Vezzoli thinks that the sources that link Arcesilaus to early Pyrrhonism are insecure. On the other hand, he accepts that Arcesilaus had a 'notevole sintonia intellettuale' with Socrates and Plato (p. 82). As I have mentioned 'the risks of the trail' above, I should say that there were some stones in Vezzoli's road, since he dangerously asserts that Aristo of Chios was a Stoic (p. 80) – not an uncontroversial assumption even in the Hellenistic age (cf. DL 7.161, 167; perhaps Aristo would better be recognized as one of the διενεχθέντες) –, as well as reporting Stilpo of Megara, Diodorus Cronus, Alexinus of Megara and the Cyrenaics as pre-Socratics (p. 81). Nonetheless, these mistaken assumptions do not compromise the argumentation.

The next section – on 'Arcesilaus and Plato' (p. 82-88) – starts with the issue of the phases of the Academy, supported by some testimonies that assert that Arcesilaus was the founder of the so-called Middle Academy, and by other testimonies that say he was the leader of the Second Academy. (Depending on the source, the school had from three to five different phases.) But, nevertheless, thinkers such as Cicero argued for the unity of the Academy, even though he believes that Arcesilaus was the founder of the New Academy.

Vezzoli adds that, according to Plutarch, for example, Arcesilaus was not an innovative thinker, but someone who interpreted the thoughts of some predecessors, including Socrates and Plato, as philosophies of doubt and ἐποχή. But I do not totally agree with the attribution of 'doubt' to ancient Greek thinkers, for in the majority of circumstances 'doubt' is used to translate ἀπορία, although ἀπορία and 'doubt' seem to me fundamentally different mechanisms of thought. From page 85 onwards, still having in mind the issue of the unity of the Academy, Vezzoli uses Cicero to argue that, at least for Cicero himself, there would be a unity of thought between Socrates, Plato, Arcesilaus and Carneades, since all them were Skeptic at least in a sense (perhaps and mainly because of the ἀπορία, cf. p. 88).

After Vezzoli points out possible links between Arcesilaus and the Platonic *corpus* (p. 88), the next subchapters, which compose the second chapter on 'Arcesilaus' Platonism', advance the characterization of Arcesilaus' philosophy offered in the first chapter, but emphasizing the influence of the Platonic *corpus* on the thoughts and approach of Arcesilaus, giving a different (and very interesting) perspective on the same issues which were discussed in the first chapter.

There is no suspension of judgement on the fact that Vezzoli's *Arcesilao di Pitane* is an excellent and interesting book, worth reading and enjoyable, a turning-point in its field, indeed. But also it looks like the result of a Herculean effort, from the analysis to the gathering and translation of sources.

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Data de envio: 26-02-2018

Data de aprovação: 26-03-2018

Data de publicação: 15-08-2018