

# Episode 331 - EATAQ 13 - The Self-Defeating Paradox of Radical Skepticism

Post by "Cassius" of May 1, 2026 at 9:28 AM

This week's podcast (to be released later today or tomorrow) is a bridge between Book One and Book Two of Academic Questions, with the focus changing to the Skeptical turn of the Academy and the dispute with the Stoics (who where not skeptics).

A key figure in this turn was Arcesilaus, who Epicurus disliked, and whose name is unfortunately similar to an early philosopher (Archelaus) who Epicurus had praised. Bryan gives us some distinguishing notes in his comments on U239 (below). I note this because the names can be difficult to distinguish so if we slip and use the wrong form in the podcast this week or in the future please be sure to avoid our mistake.

Arcesilaus (Ἀρκεσίλαος, "assisting the people," c. 275 BCE), whose skepticism Epicurus greatly criticized (a pupil of Theophrastus and Pyrrho)

———— must be clearly distinguished from ————

Archelaus (Ἀρχελαός, "leader of the people" c. 450 BCE), whom Epicurus praised for his physics-based philosophy (a pupil of Anaxagoras)

30. Arcesilaus – Criticized

[ U239 ]

Plutarch (c. 80 CE), Against Colotes, 26, 1121 E ff.

Arcesilaus (Ἀρκεσίλαος, "assisting the people") was 25 years younger than Epicurus and was a student of both Theophrastus and Pyrrho.

Arcesilaus was popular and influential during Epicurus' lifetime. He was elected the sixth scholarch of the academy in 264 BCE – upon the death of Crates of Athens, the last scholarch of the Old Academy (6 years after Epicurus' death).

Arcesilaus bridged Peripatetic, Skeptical, and Academic traditions – and turned the Academy toward Academic Skepticism:

Inspired by Pyrrhonist skepticism, Arcesilaus emphasized the skepticism present in Plato's writings, moved the Academy from Pythagoras toward Pyrrho, and initiated Academic Skepticism (and in doing so, also initiated the "Middle Academy").

"Arcesilaus said nothing of his own" probably refers to the fact that Arcesilaus did not write any words (another way in which he was very unlike Epicurus). Diogenes reports that he "never wrote a book because he suspended judgment on all matters" (although "he was caught revising certain works") – instead he was "devoted to dialectic."

"Arcesilaus produced supposition and opinion in unlettered people" refers to Arcesilaus' affirmation of Skepticism.

Arcesilaus' reputation rightfully disappointed Epicurus – but Epicurus' popularity bothered Arcesilaus, as Laertius says "to someone who asked why pupils from all the other schools leave [the Academy] to join the Epicureans, but no one ever leaves the Epicureans he said 'because men may become eunuchs, but no eunuch ever become a man'"

Arcesilaus was a fan of Homer, and an extravagant wealthy aristocrat – who is also reported to have been "lecherous and fond of boys" (Laertius 4.43)