PIECING TOGETHER POLEMO

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The study in Australia of the ancient Greek philosophers has come to have a higher profile in the last fifteen years or so. During this time there have been two cooperative projects crossing the NSW/Victoria boundary, both of them involving texts of late ancient Platonism. However, these have dealt with whole Teubner volumes of text, and therefore present a very different set of problems from Platonism in the four centuries that follow the death of Plato and precede the *Moralia* of Plutarch. And apart from Plutarch, whose work is often seen as atypical, there are no substantial pieces of extant writing from named Platonists between the death of Plato and the *Enneads* of Plotinus in the 3rd century AD. Anybody intent on charting the course of Platonism must therefore be reconciled to working regularly with fragments: piecing them together as our archaeological colleagues would seek to reassemble an example of red-figure pottery. Where most fragments survive, the task ahead is easier, but in more challenging cases one must rely on an idea of what the artist was trying to depict, some comparative material, and the instincts acquired from repeatedly dealing with the same kind of material.

Even so, the fragmentary state of our knowledge of early Stoics and Academic sceptics has never prevented students of Hellenistic philosophy from engaging in heated debate over their own lost philosophers, and with full use of all the available resources there is no reason why the study of Plato’s school in the first three to four generations after Plato should not make comparable advances. Naturally one has to begin with those texts to which the names of early philosophers from the Academy were attached or to general statements about the Old Academy, taking due consideration of the bias of those who preserve the fragments and their reasons for mentioning them. Often one can identify further fragments where names are not mentioned from studying those where names do occur, as is often the case with Aristotle’s evidence for Speusippus and Xenocrates, Plato’s first two successors. Controversy will for good reason occur when claims are made to have located an unacknowledged text of such philosophers in a later author, even when the material seems distinctive and conflicts with our knowledge of all other likely authors. This happened when Philip Merlan claimed to have discovered a text dealing with Speusippus’ metaphysical principles in chapter 4 of Isamblichus’ *De Communi Mathematicae Scientia*.¹

On the other hand, there are whole texts for which we cannot offer an author, even though we can associate them with some confidence with the period in question. It is essential that we make use of such texts, and they include many that are falsely ascribed to Plato himself. Yet this raises another set of problems: that of identifying which works in the Platonic corpus are likely to be later accretions. In some cases it is relatively easy, as in the case of the *Epinomis* that was regularly attributed to Philip of Opus even in antiquity. But a few works such as the first *Alecbiades* or *Hippias maior* may attract roughly as many defenders of Platonic authorship as doubters. Other works that even in antiquity were denied authenticity, and which therefore did not even make the corpus, tend to be both difficult to date and somewhat unhelpful. But spurious works within the corpus had probably found their position there within a century of Plato’s death, and would not have done so without being acceptable to at least some members of the Academy of the time.

Apart from the Platonic *Epistles*, plagued by the usual questions of authenticity that follow letters purporting to come from the 4th century, the *Epinomis* that functioned like an appendix

to a work, and the *Laws*, that never reached completion, the works within the corpus that are most likely to be regarded as spurious fall into two groups. A significant number can easily be seen as introducing a new part of the corpus, like the *Clitophon* and *Minos* which function well as introductions to (C) the didactic Socrates of *Republic* II to X, and (M) the divine foundations of the legal theory in the *Laws*. Perhaps *Aelcibiades* I and *Theages* could be seen as introducing Socrates the educator as well, but they are also the first and fifth of five successive works of the corpus that are all regularly thought of as doubtful or spurious. It is the *Theages* that I have recently become concerned with, following an important new edition by Mark Joyal.² Joyal made out an excellent case for regarding the work as spurious, connecting it with the Academy under its second Head, Xenocrates. I have recently argued that it would be better placed a little later, under the third Head, Polemo.³ Since he was an Athenian, who in my view can be better understood now than before, I considered him a suitable subject for my presentation at the Athens symposium.

I begin with some brief details. Polemo was a pupil of Xenocrates, and followed him as Scholarch of the Academy in 314/3 BC until his death in (or near) 270/69 BC.⁴ Except for Diogenes Laertius’ life (IV 16–20) and the works of Cicero, sources are thin. Until recently he had been thought of mainly as a moral philosopher (following Diog. Laer. IV 18), but Cicero’s mentor Antiochus of Ascalon stressed wide-ranging connections between him and Zeno of Citium, founder of the Stoic school, who had once been his pupil. It has now been persuasively argued by David Sedley that the account of early Platonist physics offered by Cicero (*Academica* I 24–9), which attributes to Plato a single organic universe with two principles, active and passive, operating in close conjunction within it, hitherto seen as Antiochus’ own stoicizing contribution, is in fact an account of the Academy’s physics under Polemo.⁵ Like Zeno, Polemo had idealized ‘life according to nature (physis),’ and written a book on the subject.⁶ It is likely that in such a book he would have found the need to discuss nature itself, for this ethical goal can give no guidance to those wishing to pursue it unless it is accompanied by a clear notion of what this nature is and how it operates. Whether it is human nature, entailing an examination of the microcosm within the macrocosm, or the nature of the universe itself when considered as a natural organism as in Plato’s *Timaeus*, an obligation to lead a life according to nature necessitated the study of physis itself.

However, one cannot insist that an account of the Academy’s physics at the time of Polemo would have come from the pen of the scholarch himself, since a second prominent Academic figure of the period, with close links to the interpretation of Platonic physics, was well known to Cicero. This was Crantor of Cilician Soli, the author of the first commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus* and an extremely influential *consolatio* whose impact is regularly found in

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⁴ On the latter date, about which there is considerable divergence in the literature, one may see T. Dorandi, *Filodemo, Storia del Filosofo: Platone e l’ Academia* (1991) 58; J. M. Dillon, *The Heirs of Plato* (2003) 159 with n. 13, puts Polemo’s death six years earlier, while others have placed it later. For our present purposes it will not much matter.


later examples of that genre. A straightforward summary of early Academic physics would have been quite at home in this commentary on the Timaeus. Still others, however, achieved prominence in the Academy under Polemo, among them Crates, the man who for many years shared his house and his endeavours, and finally inherited the school from him for a brief period. He too could conceivably have penned the ultimate source for Cicero’s passage on early Academic physics. What mattered is that the passage derived from the Academy under Polemo, and so could have been taken to be in harmony with his views.

The Ciceronian passage presents quite a simple picture of the world’s structure. It employs a two-principle system, and identifies matter with the passive principle, while giving the other a sentient nature and perfect reason, serving to identify it as the ‘soul of the world’, god, or providence. It also makes much use of the idea of bodies as qualified matter, using earth, air, fire, and water as ‘elements’, two more active and two more passive, while canvassing the idea of a fifth astral body seemingly borrowed from Aristotle. These simple bodies are distinguished from compound bodies, the things that are constructed out of them. While the attribution to Polemo is only theory, it accords with trends already found in Xenocrates, and can be reconciled with early Academic non-literal readings of the Timaios’ creation-process—for by denying that Plato was serious about the Creator, one is left with soul-stuff and body-stuff as the most basic constituents of the universe. The theory also explains why Zeno of Citium’s connection with Polemo is constantly stressed by Cicero (following Antiochus of Ascalon), since, leaving aside the observation that Aristotle had added a fifth element, which may in any case be an addition of Antiochus or Cicero himself, there are a number of striking similarities with Stoic theory.

However, the simplicity of this account of the physical world actually suggests that it was not the work of a hardened physicist, but somebody employing physics for other purposes. This agrees with the fact that it was rather as an ethicist that Polemo was known. In this capacity he is prominently associated in Cicero with the idea that, whereas virtue is the most important thing to be pursued—being sufficient for happiness—humans must also take thought for the provision of the ‘first things according to nature’: the various desirable things promoting life from its very first stages. Hitherto it seems to have been the norm to assume that the moral purpose of life was simply to be identified with the purpose of adult life, thus apparently writing off the lives of those who died before maturity as having been in vain. Now, however, some concession seems to be made to our needs at the beginning of human life, most of which did of course continue to influence us as adults. Our early dependence upon various elementary comforts allows Polemo something of a distinction between the proper objects of pursuit for the young and the proper objects of pursuit for an adult, and it can hardly be doubted that a ‘life according to nature’ ought to have been prepared to make distinctions between the various stages into which nature had naturally divided our lives.

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7 On Creantor see most conveniently Dillon op. cit. (n. 4) 216–31; for his commentary see Procl. In Ti. I 76: 1.
8 This feature at least reminds one of the Platonic Timaeus; many other features can be reconciled with a certain reading of it, but are presented in such a way as to display a rather Stoic character.
9 See Dillon op. cit. (n. 4) 55, 62–3, 169, 172–3, 220–3. This was scarcely the only interpretation possible in the absence of a creator, but note that the soul/body division is the earliest one to achieve importance in Timaeus’ account.
10 See Cicero, Fin. II 34–5, where Polemo is marked as one who gives clear predominance to virtue in the provision of happiness, but yet is among those who did factor other things in too; yet virtue remains sufficient (see particularly Clem. Al. Strom. II 22: 133.7), Fin. IV 163–4 seems to accord, and so does Plotinus (Mor. 1069e–f). What we have little evidence of is Polemo’s preferred vocabulary, since the later debates between Antiochus of Ascalon and Philon of Larissa seem to be the origin of most material.
11 Various stages of human life are most commonly associated with the Stoics, e.g. SVF III 178 = Diog. Laert. VII 85–6 (the final bit of which, though of most relevance here, is omitted from SVF); Sen. Ep. 121: 16.
Nature included both young and old, and had roles for both, even though the goal of life would have to pertain to the adult rather than to the immature human being.

Polemo belonged to the period of New Comedy, in which distinct roles (and masks) are given to young and old, both male and female, and the excesses of the young are repeatedly contrasted with the excessively practical attitudes of the old. Nowhere is the contrast more observable than in matters of sexual attraction, where, as long as he displays an essentially well-meaning attitude and is seen to be genuinely in love, the audience is usually expected to sympathize with the youth against his father or other disapproving elders. Moral philosophy could take a real interest in the character-types of comedy, as the Characters of Theophrastus shows, and Polemo’s close friend Crates actually wrote works about comedy. Though Sophoclean tragedy was his main literary passion according to Diogenes Laërtius (IV 20), one would not expect Polemo to have ignored the implications of comedy’s inclusive appreciation of human nature. However, unlike comedy, the Academy had inherited a tradition that had idealized close relationships between males in an educational context, and we should consider in this context a stray fragment in Plutarch’s Moralia (780d). This informs us that Polemo used to describe love in a way that gave a central role to the distinction between young and old. He used to call it “a service to the gods directed towards the care and salvation of the young”,1 idealizing the role of the (mature) lover, who in turn helps the (young) beloved through a difficult period of life, presumably turning him eventually towards adulthood and the traditional virtues that philosophy expected of an adult.

Now we do have a story about Polemo that seems uncannily well suited to a philosophy that made such distinctions between young and old. According to Diogenes Laërtius (IV 16), supported in part by numerous other sources,13 he was quite a dissolute youth, who under the influence of alcohol burst into a lecture given by his revered predecessor Xenocrates, only to be deeply moved by the lecture on temperance that he heard being delivered. He stayed, and became a firm adherent of the school. Such tales normally have an excellent chance of being false, but habitually illustrate something of which the scholar should take note.14 That Polemo was profligate in his youth, but subsequently became reformed, is well documented and seems entirely believable, but the full story must have been well known in the 2nd century when Lucian based an episode of his Bis Accusatus on it (15–18).15 However, I should like to suggest that the story can be understood on a different and more important level. Polemo is here being obliquely credited with bringing the follies of youth into close contact with the venerable activities of the Academy, and the story presents a comic caricature of the effect of both Xenocrates’ Academy on Polemo and Polemo on the Academy.16 Even an anecdote that is based upon something that actually happened is likely to be adapted and retold because of

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12 Πολέμων γὰρ ἐλέγεν τὴν ἔρωτα εἶναι θείων ὑπηρεσίας εἰς νέων ἐπιμελείαν καὶ σωτηρίαν. Note that the imperfect suggests not a single act of defining love, but a regular way of describing it.

13 Fragments 15–33 in M. Gigante, Polemonis Academicorum Fragmenta (1977); Polemo’s drunkenness appears already in Philodemus’ Academica col. 4.43–13.3.

14 On the underlying significance of many stories about Plato one should see A. S. Riggs, Platonic: the Anecdotes about the Life and Writings of Plato (1976).

15 Several details in the Academy’s defence-speech (17) accord with the language of Platonism, Polemo coming to show signs of quietness, shame, and self-knowledge, all associated with σωφροσύνη in the Charmides, and being described as wakening from a deep sleep and getting to see himself, rather like the heavenly intellect in Alcinous, Didascalicus 13.

16 The comic potential of the story is not missed by Lucian in Bis Accusatus 16–17, and there is more amusement in the tale of how this famous drunkard had delighted in those passages of Sophocles that were ‘not late-picked, nor blended, but vintage Parthenian’ (Phrynichus, fr. 68PCG = 65K). The comic spirit underlies the story that is told about Lycides’ obstinate suspension of judgement and consequent inaction in matters of household finance, illustrating once again something both personal and of relevance to the history of the Academy (Numenius, fr. 26).
its value in illustrating something of wider significance, and I think that one may assume a wider significance of some kind in the present case.

At any rate there is a suggestion in Diogenes Laertius (IV 19) that Polemo had once been the object of Xenocrates’ erotic attentions, after which close relationships between pairs of males appear to have become normal, and perhaps even encouraged. Diogenes relays Antigonus' report that Polemo was sued by his wife because of his relationships with youths (IV 17), and, as scholar, Polemo is the erastes of his own successor Crates with whom he shares the house of Lysicles (IV 21–2). Similarly, the high profile Crantor, who had once also been the object of Polemo’s attentions (IV 17), lives later with the future scholar Arcesilaus (IV 22, 29). Plato’s Symposium had certainly supplied some groundwork for such institutionalized attention to erotic relationships, but the Phaedrus, and then more especially the Laws, show that the tide had swung firmly against physical relationships in the Academy of Plato’s later days. The evidence suggests that it is not until the once dissolute Polemo stumbles into the Academy of Xenocrates that what were probably power relationships in the guise of educational mentorships really take hold.

Polemo’s influence in this regard was probably not confined to those who remained with the Academy, for, if we may attach any importance to Zeno’s studies with Polemo, then we should note that the early Stoics continued the trend. They had an even greater reputation for the pursuit of male-to-male erotic relationships associated with them, and Zeno himself had been specially associated with Perseus with whom he lived. Hence we get such comic coinages as styakes for stoikoi, and a new term for a ‘servant on house duties’ applied to Perseus in relation to Zeno. The ideal state sketched in Zeno’s own Republic, a state that consisted of philosophers bound together in a community of love, was probably more extreme in its promotion of such relations than anything in Polemo. At any rate the evidence for early Stoic theories of an erotic art is sufficient to suggest to John M. Dillon that the first Platonic Aelctibades has somehow managed to influence them. In this context he notes that whereas nothing is known of the theory of Speusippus or Xenocrates, we do have

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17 The extent to which this is supported by Philodemus, Academica col. 13.10–11, which speaks of Polemo having been ‘hunted down’ by Xenocrates, is debatable.

18 Cf. Philodemus, Academica col. 13.3–7; assuming that the story has some truth behind it, it would be interesting to know how late in Polemo’s life this occurred, for either the ‘conversion’ to philosophy would have to be at a stage later than we are usually led to believe (while Ath. II 44e, again following Antigonus, makes him thirty by the time he drank only water, there is nothing to show that he began this immediately after developing an interest in the Academy), or he would have to have married young. Personally I doubt the notion of instant conversion, and note that the main way in which Polemo is supposed to have reformed is in becoming more sober. His sexual activity may have been in no way diminished.

19 Probably supported by Philodemus, Academica col. 15.31–46.

20 For the erotic nature of the relationship see Philodemus, Academica col. 17.36–7.

21 The first Aelctibades, always difficult to accept as genuine though likewise hard to write off as spurious, does not alter this picture, but is nevertheless likely to have provided Polemo with something of a model for Academic relationships; see on this Dillon op. cit. (n. 4) 165.

22 As Dillon (loc. cit.) observes, ‘We do not know of any views which Speusippus or Xenocrates might have had on this important topic ...’.

23 Ath. XIII 563e calls the Stoics paidopipai, associating this with their endeavour to imitate Zeno; the erotic connection with Perseus is found most obviously at Philodemus, Historia Stoicorum XII and Bion of Borysthenes in Ath. IV 162d, but the fact that they shared a house is also supported by Ath. XIII 607e–f and Diog. Laert. VII 13. It is appropriate in a collection such as this to mention that my first real engagement with much of this material on the sexual mores of the Hellenistic schools came when examining B. Kuleski, Education and the Hellenistic Schools of Philosophy (Diss. University of Sydney, 1988), though I do not recall the point ever being made that so much of this material revolved around Polemo and those who studied at the Academy during his headship.

24 Ath. XIII 563d–e for styakes, and IV 162d for oiketieus.

testimony concerning Polemo’s, and that this seems additional reason to postulate ‘Polemon’s contribution to Hellenistic philosophy’.26

The pseudo-Platonic Theages has recently been linked closely with the first Alcibiades, on which it is seen as dependent.27 The Theages may in my view be interpreted as offering some account, for external consumption, of the kind of teacher/pupil relationship that tended to arise in Polemo’s Academy and later in the Stoa.28 Socrates, as usual, represents the idealized philosopher at the time of composition. Whenever he is given divine approval, he offers young men his mentoring services—his synousia. As I have shown, though this term is systematically used in the Theages, it is not much associated with the ‘Socrates’ of Plato’s clearly genuine dialogues,29 and hints at something comparable with an erotic relationship.30 The young man Theages and his anxious father converse with Socrates about Theages’ desire for higher education. After an exploration of what it is that Theages is really in pursuit of, embarrassing him with the idea that he might want to become a tyrant (124e–125e), the idea of Theages studying with Socrates is more enthusiastically embraced by son and father than it is by Socrates, who feels obliged to offer warnings.

We then learn much about Socrates’ educational effect on young men in a final illustrative story about one Aristides. Firstly it seems that some divinity, meant to be identified or associated with Socrates’ traditional daimonion, is controlling not only whom Socrates may accept (128d, 129e) but also who will make progress under him, and whose progress will be long-lasting (129e–130a, 130c). His education, it seems, is not the product of human science that imparts through predictable processes the knowledge required for happiness. Rather, it is bound up with the will of the divine (130c). Second, it does not involve teaching in any normal sense (130d: 4), even though Socrates does have recurrent themes that he argues (126d: 1–4).31 In fact it seems to rely on the proximity to Socrates, not on the ability to actually hear his words (130d: 5–130e: 2). His instruction works best, apparently, when the pupil is actually touching him. Nowhere else in the Platonic corpus is physical touching of this kind to be expected when intellectual conversation takes place, and this combines with the previously announced erotic expertise of Socrates to produce an image of an educator who somehow passes on whatever his gifts are through unorthodox means. The fact that people do not learn directly from Socrates’ arguments is particularly surprising given that the young men who follow him seem to be judging their progress in terms of their ability to engage notable persons in argument (130c: 1–6), and there seems no doubt about Socrates’ own skills in argument. So we are being asked to believe that Socrates’ debating skills are able to be passed on, god willing, to younger men, without the necessity of them listening to Socrates arguing and proving anything! It seems that assimilation to Socrates is playing an important part here, and if the goal of philosophy is assimilation to a divinity, as Theaetetus 176a–b and most later Platonists would claim,32 then it is of course vital that Socrates is depicted

27 Joyal op. cit. (n. 2), particularly 154–5 which gives other references; the priority of the Alcibiades is there argued.
28 Tarrant loc. cit. (n. 3).
29 It is, however, used in Lucian’s account of the Academic session interrupted by Polemo, Bis Accusatvs 17.
30 Here one may contrast the confidence that Socrates expresses in claiming that he outstrips all others in knowledge of love (Theages 128b) with the more modest suggestion that this is the one claim to knowledge that he could make at Symp. 177d: 7–8, which is present partly to prepare the contrast between his knowledge of love and his ignorance of encomia at 198c: 5–199a: 5.
31 These themes often have close parallels in the genuine dialogues, here Meno 93a–94e and Pto. 319e–320b. Sometimes it seems that Socrates’ themes are modelled on those that can be extracted from the Ap., like 127e: 5–128a: 7 where the language suggests borrowing from Ap. 19e–20a, or 126d which relates closely to Ap. 40a–b.
32 Recent work by high profile scholars linking Plato’s treatment of assimilation to god with what follows includes J. Annas, Platonic Ethics, Old and New (1999), and D. Sedley.
here as divinely inspired. In imitating him, they are moving on towards the imitation of those mysterious divine forces that underpin his educational activities. The inspired Socrates is a charismatic figure, who exercises a strange attraction over the young with a variety of results.

By chance the biographical tradition has also preserved for us something of the impact that the figures of the mature Polemo and his friend Crates made. Far from getting a reputation for sexual predation upon the young, they come across, at least in the favourable tradition represented in Diogenes Laertius IV 16–23, as operating in accordance with a more restrained Platonic manner. The undisguised erotic interest is combined in Polemo with a reputation for a calm control (17), a refined and dignified speech (IV 18, cf. 24), and a ‘Dorian’ demeanour reminiscent of Xenocrates (IV 19).\(^{33}\) Polemo and Crates\(^{34}\) were seen by Arcesilaus as ‘two figures of divine stature or the relics of a Golden Race’ (IV 22), while Antagoras (IV 21) talked of them as uttering ‘sacred speech from a godly [daemonios] mouth’, and of their disciplined life that prepared them for a ‘divine eternity’. Their similarity to each other comes across strongly,\(^{35}\) a similarity in respect of their quasi-divine nature, and Polemo’s enthusiasm for modelling himself on Xenocrates is also emphasized (IV 19).\(^{36}\) One does not just model oneself on one’s teacher in the Academy of this period, but on the divine qualities exhibited by the teacher. These factors, together with Diogenes’ none too poetic verses for Polemo, which speak of his real self, unlike his body, going off among the stars (20), show clearly that here too the figure of the erotic educator was combined with that of the philosopher in contact with the divine.

Thus it seems that Polemo and Crates had also emulated Socrates as they and the Theages saw him, and avoided the criticism that followed the erotic interests of many other philosophers. Returning to Polemo’s description of love, as the service of the gods in the care and salvation of the youth, we may see how he endeavoured to relate the erotic side of Academic education to its divine mission, elevating a philosopher’s love at least to a level above the common herd.

If one asks to what extent the teaching of Polemo would have resembled that of the ‘Socrates’ of the Theages then one might expect to receive the rebuke that nothing is known of Polemo’s teaching style. Yet I think that we can see that what he achieved was not achieved through striking innovations of doctrine (even though he had his own themes and beliefs) or simple didactic teaching,\(^{37}\) but rather from the charismatic leadership of one whose very proximity was inspiring. Hence, as if in response to the Theages’ observations on the relationship between proximity to Socrates and a pupil’s progress, Polemo had his pupils

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\(^{33}\) Much of this is supported by the reports of Philodemus, *Academica* col. 13.12–15.30.

\(^{34}\) In Philodemus, *Academica* col. 15.3–10, the story relates to ‘Polemo’s circle’ rather than to Polemo and Crates in particular.

\(^{35}\) Diog. Laert. (IV 21) uses the key verb εξομολογεῖται which alludes directly to the Platonic goal of assimilation, or (εξομολογέω) ὁμοιομαιθεὶς. In this context it may be important that Ath. X 419ε refers to a point in Ariston of Chios’ second book of Erotic Similars (Ἐρωτικῶν Ὀμοιοματίων) about the cautionary advice of Polemo on drinking at dinner; the title might be explained in a variety of ways, but one way is to suppose that his *Dioukous on Love*, also known from Diogenes Laertius (VII 160 = SVF I.333), actually had sections on partnerships involving similar and dissimilar lovers/beleveds. Polemo and Crates would surely be a paradigm case of the former. But a better-known title of Aristotle is *Assimilations (Ὄμοιοματίαι, SVF I 350, 383–99)*. Should our title have real Erotic Assimilations (Ἐρωτικῶν Ὀμοιοματίων)?

\(^{36}\) This is supported by Philodemus, *Academica* col. 14. 41–5, telling how he ‘imitated his traits in every respect’.

\(^{37}\) It can be understood from Diog. Laert. IV 18 that while he did not expect good philosophy to function through tricky argument, he did expect it to operate with questions, or with answers given to questions (19).
live in little huts close to the Academy's operations. Finally, it was not in the power of his arguments that he exercised control, but in the perceived relationship between the life that he advocated and the life that he led, presumably including a demonstrable concern for the welfare of the pupil.

38 Diog. Laert. IV 19.