Scepticism in the History of Philosophy - A Pan-American Dialogue. EDITED BY RICHARD H. POPKIN. (Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996. Pp. xxii + 285, h/b.)

"Geo-philosophy? No, thanks". This is the first thought that crossed my mind when I looked at the proceedings of the conference on scepticism in the history of philosophy held at the University of California, Riverside, from 15 to 17 February 1991, with participants exclusively from the Americas. Reading the book has made me partially change my attitude. Everyone knows Richard H. Popkin as the driving force behind the contemporary revival of sceptical scholarship. This time, the aim of the conference was to provide an opportunity for Latin American and North American scholars and philosophers "to meet each other, and to interact and to learn from one another [p.xii]". As a result, the best part of this collection of 19 essays consists of a handful of excellent papers on ancient scepticism by Julia Annas (on ethical scepticism), Ezequiel De Olaso (on the principle of charity), Dorothea Frede (on Academic scepticism) and David Glidden (on Platonism and scepticism) and these four musketeers are enough in themselves to rescue the book from its unfortunate subtitle (the fastidious reader may wish to know that Frede, now in Hamburg, EU, was at the time still at Swarthmore College, USA). One can only wonder why they have not been kept together at the beginning of the volume, thus making its structure more intuitive.

Since even a quick sketch of the rich contents of the essays would be impossible, I am sure the reader will forgive me if I offer only a few cursory comments.

The first concerns Frede's paper "How Sceptical Were the Academic Sceptics?". Although its main topic is logical scepticism, it also tackles what is otherwise a rather neglected problem in the sceptical literature, namely mathematical scepticism. Broadly speaking, the problem is a combination of two questions, one about conceptual consistency, the other about logical force: (1) can the sceptic consistently develop his arguments without committing himself, at least implicitly, to a positive, "contentful" theory about logico-mathematical reasoning? (2) can the sceptic succeed in undermining our confidence in logico-mathematical knowledge? Frede argues that the Academics probably committed themselves to the acceptability of higher-order logical principles, while the Pyrrhonians were perhaps much more cautious. Her analysis is convincing and, in any case, I would only reinforce her doubts with respect to the Pyrrhonians. What seems less easy to accept,

however, is the subsequent development of an anti-sceptical strategy on this basis (but here Frede's position is more careful and tentative than I can show in a few lines). Frede acknowledges that any transcendental strategy—the sceptic cannot avoid committing himself to the (at least temporary) acceptance of the minimal set of logico-linguistic rules which make reasoning and communication with the dogmatist possible, therefore begging the question with respect to the semiotic-epistemic-alethic value of such presuppositions—must take into account the programmatic playfulness of the sceptic, who wears the clothes of the dogmatist only as long as it takes to undermine the latter's beliefs. But I wonder whether this is the whole story, for I suspect that we should probably distinguish between (A) forms of scepticism, such as the Academic or Hume's, for which logico-mathematical statements are taken to be purely analytic truths of reason (on p. 11 Frede reminds us that "Cicero regards it as significant that in logic, just as in the case of mathematical proofs, the mind is 'only dealing with itself'); and (B) forms of scepticism, such as the Pyrrhonian or the one discussed by Descartes, in which logico-mathematical statements are interpreted as having a potentially empirical content. We should then recognise that A-sceptics can correctly rely on their disarming position to avoid any charge of inconsistency when they employ dialectical reasonings in their battle against the dogmatists, because logic is content-empty and therefore allowed as a weapon to challenge empirical certainties; whereas B-sceptics are rightly much more careful in handling logical proofs, and argue explicitly in favour of suspending judgement with respect to the epistemic value of logic and mathematics. Clearly, A-positions are more promising not only because of modern developments in mathematical logic, but also because they can be combined with a positive answer to (1) and because (2) presents remarkable difficulties for B-positions.

The second comment concerns Avrum Stroll's "The Argument from Possibility". It is a pleasant surprise to find that the book ends with a purely epistemological attempt to refute the sceptic, but I very much doubt that it will be found convincing by the reader, to whom I must leave the task of discovering some of its flaws. According to Stroll: "The sceptic [...] wishes to prove that knowledge is impossible. But a proof is a valid argument whose premises are known to be true. Therefore, in even attempting to prove that knowledge is impossible, the sceptic is presupposing that knowledge is possible, namely that the premises of his proof can be known to be true. The doctrine thus rests upon presuppositions that are inconsistent with the conclusion it wishes to draw. The

doctrine is thus self-refuting and is to be rejected [p. 276].” Yet this is an obvious and old objection, which ancient sceptics themselves disposed of rather convincingly (see Sextus Empiricus’ discussion of logical proofs PH II, 144-203). In De Olaso’s words: “[...] among the first things one learns in the exegesis of ancient scepticism is not to fall into hasty refutations of the sceptic by attributing to him the assumption of dogmatically negative positions [p. 255]”, and this is also the case because of the great prudence shown by the A/B-sceptics in handling logical proofs.

A last comment now on the remaining 15 essays. Unfortunately, some of them attempt either to make a sceptic of any critical philosopher (Mauricio Beuchot’s “Some Traces of the Presence of Scepticism in Medieval Thought” and Alejandro Herrera Ibáñez’s “Peirce Scepticism”) or to include, under the analysis of scepticism, topics which bear absolutely no connection to the subject (anyone who is interested only in the history and philosophy of scepticism may safely skip the essays by James E. Force, Robert Sleigh and José A. Robles). In the former case, the reader is warned. In the latter case, the fact that I failed to perceive a sufficiently strict and relevant connection between, for example, sceptical issues and Lévi-Strauss, does not mean that I have any objection to Richard A. Watson’s essay. On the contrary, I found it one of the most enjoyable in the whole collection. I am simply suggesting that it has been published in the wrong book. One’s definition of scepticism can easily become so watered down that there is often a risk of losing any criterion for deciding who is and who is not a sceptic, or what can and what cannot count as a sceptical issue. This is not a great problem, but we need to take care. Philosophical scepticism becomes definitely irrefutable if we do not keep it recognisable.

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