

Sihvola, Juha, editor. *Ancient Scepticism and the Sceptical Tradition*. Acta Philosophica Fennica, vol. 66.

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This volume collects eleven papers given at the conference on ancient scepticism and the sceptical tradition hosted by the Philosophical Society of Finland in Helsinki in 1996. Is it worth reading? The short answer is: yes, absolutely. The longer answer requires a brief introduction.

Philosophers like wrestling with sceptical arguments. It is an old and popular sport, that can be played with various degrees of fairness, at many levels of technical proficiency, and for a disparate range of reasons. Historians, on the other hand, usually play a cleaner and more detached game, one which comes in three varieties, depending on the pivotal question addressed: (1) What is the nature of scepticism? (2) What is the interaction between scepticism and philosophy? (3) What is the development of scepticism? In the past, answers suffered from the usual bad press received by scepticisms of all kinds within any “dogmatist” culture. Doubt is the dark side of philosophy, but since philosophy and scepticism enjoy an *odi et amo* relation, it has taken a long time to ascertain the differences between a negative hero like the sceptic and felons like the relativist, the atheist and the immoralist. Fortunately, historiographical research about scepticism has become progressively more unbiased and scientifically rigorous. *Ancient Scepticism and the Sceptical Tradition* is a very valuable and most welcome addition to this scepticism-friendly trend.

The first four essays by Bett, Spinelli, Brennan, and Sluiter are essential readings for the historian interested in questions of type (1). The following three essays by Knuutila and Sihvola, Niiniluoto, and Nussbaum will appeal to the historian keen on investigating questions of type (2). And the last four essays by Thijssen, Yrjönsuuri, Alanen, and Annas will attract the attention of the historian who pursues questions of type (3). The variety and depth of these investigations make a comprehensive summary impossible in such a short

space, but I hope two examples will give a taste of the original, if sometimes controversial, contributions made by the conference participants.

Bett argues that, over five hundred years, Pyrrhonism came to encompass not one but rather three positions: Pyrrho's, Aenesidemus' and the one outlined by Sextus. Historically, this may seem a reasonable conclusion: no school or even individual philosophy is ever free from radical transformations, even if it may not be aware of them. Theoretically, however, Pyrrhonism has often been considered something like the empty set of the history of thought: there can be an infinite domain of philosophies but only one pure sceptical position, even Sextus tried to argue along these lines. Since theory can always differ from practice, Bett's "varieties of Pyrrhonism" remains an intriguing hypothesis: there might have been different historical positions, despite the uniformity of the theoretical claims. The difficult task then becomes to establish how far these positions truly differed from each other conceptually. After all, the Pyrrhonian paradigm does not seem to leave much room for genuine and substantial varieties that might count as more than mere semantic variances, still reducible to a single position. Bett seems to incline towards a radical answer—imagine something like the distinction between the two Wittgensteins—one which requires much detailed analysis of scarce, very indirect (as bad as fourth-hand) and fairly informal fragments of literature (let us not forget that philosophers are not mathematicians, and that their statements are often "you see what I mean", rather than laws engraved in the marble of logic) and some substantial modifications in the ordering of the Sextian *corpus*. It is a consistent position, but the objections moved by the participants (see footnotes 6, 13, 17, 29 and 31) provide strong reasons for doubt and should be kept in mind.

Thijssen's article concerns Nicholas of Autrecourt, one of the few medieval philosophers who shows to have had a substantial interest in scepticism. Unfortunately, the article starts on the wrong foot, yet this is only a glitch. Thijssen argues that the uniqueness of modern epistemology has been exaggerated, but the "canonical" view is not that epistemology begins with Descartes, rather that epistemology as *philosophia*

*prima* does, and this is a completely different matter. Introduction apart, the rest of the paper defends important and correct theses, that should become stable acquisitions in the literature on scepticism: Michalski's interpretation of medieval scepticism is utterly untenable; Ockham is not a potential sceptic; and Nicholas of Autrecourt, whether he did have sceptical sympathies or not (most of his work is lost), probably had no knowledge of Sextus' writings. The revival of Pyrrhonism in the late fourteenth century is a speculation that remains so far unsubstantiated. The analysis of the recovery and transmission of Pyrrhonian literature confirms these conclusions (on this, the reader is invited to read Yrjönsuuri's and Annas' articles).

These are only two examples. As Sihvola remarks in the Introduction, there is still much substantial research to be done on the history of scepticism. This collection of essays shows the right direction to be followed.

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