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## The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism

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In a letter to Hugo Boxel, written in 1674, Spinoza boldly claimed that ‘the authority of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates carries little weight with me’ (Letter 56). Such a statement, and the fact that it is one of less than ten explicit references to Aristotle in Spinoza’s entire *oeuvre*, could suffice to discourage some commentators from even engaging in the project of looking for any serious engagement with Aristotle in Spinoza. Manzini, however, is unimpressed by such evidence, asking whether there ‘is not a bit of strategy vis-à-vis his reader when Spinoza takes a stance, not to say a posture, which is radically and unilaterally anti-Aristotelian?’ (14). Proposing an interpretation of a philosopher going counter to this philosopher’s explicit position is always a bit of a gamble, and can expose the commentator to the serious criticism of indulging in arbitrary Leo Strauss style reading strategies. Manzini, however, convincingly calls Spinoza’s bluff. His study amply demonstrates that, at least with regard to Aristotle, Spinoza’s declaration to Boxel should be taken in the same way as Descartes’ claim, in the first *Meditation*, to have ‘razed everything to the ground’ before recommencing philosophy: with a grain of salt.

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Richard Bett (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. xii + 380, £20.00, \$33.00 (pb.). ISBN 978-0-521-69754-5

The remarkable progress that the scholarly study of ancient scepticism has undergone in the past thirty years required that a Cambridge companion be devoted to this topic. Although some fine general presentations of Greco-Roman scepticism have recently appeared in print, the advantage of this book lies in its variety of approaches and interpretations. This will allow the reader to better appreciate the historical, exegetical, and philosophical complexity faced by anyone exploring the ancient sceptical traditions. Richard Bett has assembled a prestigious line-up of contributors, most of whom are renowned specialists. I will here limit myself to providing an overview of the present volume and making a few critical remarks.

Besides a short introduction, an extensive thematic bibliography, and detailed indexes, the volume contains fifteen essays divided into three parts. The first (chapters 1–6) offers a historical survey from the pre-Hellenistic thinkers in whom one finds sceptical arguments and tendencies to the main representatives of the ancient sceptical traditions in the Hellenistic and Imperial periods. The second part (chapters 7–13) explores certain key

exegetical and philosophical issues regarding the sceptical stances expounded in our extant sources. The third part (chapters 14–15) briefly examines the transmission, recovery and transformation of ancient scepticism from the end of antiquity to the early modern period. Some papers are expository, some read like journal articles and some lie somewhere between these two extremes. In differing degrees, several of them propose new perspectives on difficult passages or vexed questions, even when they also reproduce (sometimes verbatim) material taken from previous publications. As expected, there is a certain degree of overlap in specific topics between some of the essays, but this is welcome in so far as the different approaches to those topics complement each other.

Mi-Kyoung Lee opens the first part with an analysis of both the sceptical arguments that can be found in early and classical Greek philosophy and the Platonic and Aristotelian responses to some of them. She shows how these arguments and responses inspired and anticipated the debates between the sceptics and their rivals in the Hellenistic age. Lee thus seeks to undermine the still-widespread view according to which pre-Hellenistic philosophy never called into question the possibility of knowledge, but merely took it for granted. It is worth noting that, when comparing relativism and scepticism, she maintains that what these stances ‘have in common is the dim prospects for rational inquiry; on both views, further inquiry into how things really are is futile and pointless’ (27). This claim is at least *prima facie* problematic in so far as both Academic and Pyrrhonian sceptics presented themselves as searching for or inquiring into truth.

Next, Svavar Svavarsson examines the surviving (conflicting) evidence about Pyrrho’s life and outlook. The bulk of the discussion is focused on our most important piece of information about Pyrrho’s philosophy, which is preserved in Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Preparation for the Gospel* and ultimately derives from Timon, Pyrrho’s leading disciple. Svavarsson describes the debate between the interpreters who favour an ontological reading of the passage and those who favour an epistemological reading, and proposes a qualified epistemological interpretation according to which Pyrrho makes an inference from our inability to decide how things are to a view about their nature. With this *sui generis* variant of the epistemological reading, he seeks to show that there was continuity between Pyrrho’s stance and the later Pyrrhonian tradition.

The following chapter, by Harald Thorsrud, is devoted to the two main representatives of the sceptical Academy, Arcesilaus and Carneades. Regarding the former, Thorsrud offers a well-structured analysis of his attitude towards suspension of judgement (*epokhē*) and inapprehensibility, the debate between him and Zeno about the apprehensive or kataleptic impression, and his practical criterion (‘the reasonable’). As for the latter, Thorsrud focuses on Carneades’s practical criterion (the ‘persuasive’ impression), which is put forward (like

Arcesilaus's) as a response to the inactivity charge. He examines both whether 'approving of' or 'following' a persuasive impression consists in holding a fallible belief and whether Carneades proposed the practical criterion *in propria persona*.

Carlos Lévy's paper deals with the history of the post-Carneadean Academy until its disappearance as an institution and the afterlife of the Academic sceptical tradition. The first part of the chapter offers an overview of the biographies of Carneades's successors and of the debate that arose among them about whether he adopted a radical or a mitigated form of scepticism. In so doing, Lévy explores the philosophical development of Philo of Larissa, an issue that has been the object of considerable discussion in the recent literature. Here, I note only that, unlike Lévy (87–8), I do not find, in the remaining evidence about Philo's Roman books, any reference (explicit or implicit) to *epokhē*. The second part of Lévy's paper examines the elements of Academic scepticism that survive in Aenesidemus's neo-Pyrrhonism and in the Middle Platonism of, for instance, Philo of Alexandria and Plutarch. The final part briefly tackles the persistence of this form of scepticism in Favorinus, Augustine and the sixteenth-century thinker Petrus Valentia.

In his contribution, Robert Hankinson examines, in an overly compressed and cursory manner, the evidence about the stance of Aenesidemus, a former Academic sceptic who was responsible for the revival, in the first century BC, of what he took to be Pyrrhonism. Hankinson rejects the interpretation proposed by Woodruff and Bett (see their contributions) according to which Aenesidemus draws certain negative assertions of the form ' $x$  is not by nature  $F$ ' on the basis of both the fact that  $x$  is sometimes  $F$  and sometimes not- $F$  and the principle that, if  $x$  is  $F$  by nature, then it is  $F$  invariably. Rather, Aenesidemus's practice actually consists in arguing on both sides of a question in order to show the equal force of both sides, thereby inducing *epokhē*, in line with the later scepticism of Sextus Empiricus. However, Hankinson grants (surprisingly, because his interpretation does not require him to do so) that Aenesidemus may have drawn certain restricted negative conclusions in specific cases. The final part of the chapter examines the enigma posed by the so-called Heracliteanism of Aenesidemus, a topic that has lately attracted much scholarly attention. The discussion of this issue is, however, overly simplistic and brief and does not take into account an important part of the recent literature on the subject.

Pierre Pellegrin's chapter on the Pyrrhonist Sextus Empiricus deals with the latter's life and work, the way in which he conceives of the notion of *epokhē*, the status of sceptical discourse, and the question of whether there is unity in the sceptical outlook expounded in Sextus's extant works. This chapter is probably the weakest of the volume: among other things, the discussion of certain problematic issues (like the scope of *epokhē*) is too simplistic and cursory, the line of thought is not always clear or well structured, quotations are sometimes unnecessarily multiplied, and the first

discrepancy found in the Sextan texts that Pellegrin examines (135–6) does not actually concern the question of the unity of Sextus's scepticism.<sup>1</sup>

In the first chapter of the second part, Casey Perin explores the difficult question of the relationship between *epokhē* and belief in both Arcesilaus and Sextus. Regarding the former, he attempts to explain how Arcesilaus can claim that one ought not to believe anything but suspend judgment about everything without thereby believing something. In the case of Sextus, Perin criticizes Michael Frede's well-known interpretation according to which the only beliefs the Pyrrhonist targets are those held on the basis of a philosophical or scientific doctrine, and defends the view that the beliefs which the Pyrrhonist accept as compatible with scepticism are those about how things appear to him. Although the discussion of this second subject is lucid, I think that Perin's arguments do not add much to those already advanced by other specialists. Also, it would have been valuable if he had provided an account of the vigorous scholarly debate about the extent of *epokhē* in Sextus and taken into account (or at least referred the reader to) other studies by, for example, Alan Bailey and Tad Brennan that deal at length with this key subject.<sup>2</sup>

Katja Vogt's contribution is devoted to the so-called *apraxia* or inactivity charge, according to which the sceptic, in suspending judgement about everything and hence withholding assent universally, is reduced to inactivity because action requires belief and assent. After providing a useful tentative taxonomy of the various versions of this charge, she briefly discusses the diverse replies to it given by Arcesilaus, Carneades, and Sextus. Particularly in the case of Arcesilaus, it is regrettable that Vogt, just like Thorsrud in his essay, does not take into consideration, nor refers the reader to, the several learned studies by Anna Maria Ioppolo, who is a leading specialist in Academic scepticism.

Scepticism and ethics is the subject of Richard Bett's essay. Although at the outset he makes reference to Arcesilaus's and Carneades's criteria of action, he almost exclusively examines Sextus's treatment of the ethical part of philosophy. He discusses issues such as whether the Pyrrhonist is an ethically involved agent and whether, given his aim of attaining mental tranquillity, he can be portrayed as a persistent inquirer into truth. Bett also offers a summary of his now well-known interpretation of the type of scepticism found in *Against the Ethicists*, which is the fifth surviving book of Sextus's *Adversus Dogmaticos* (*AD*). According to him, in this book it is possible to trace an earlier, Aenesideman variety of scepticism which is

<sup>1</sup>In n.10 of this chapter, Bett points out that neither Pellegrin nor Barnes was able to trace the latter's expression 'negative metadogmatism'. Barnes uses it in 'Diogenes Laertius IX 61–116: The Philosophy of Pyrrhonism', in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, edited by W. Haase, II 36.6 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), at 4252, n.54 and 4254, n.72.

<sup>2</sup>See A. Bailey, *Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonian Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and T. Brennan, *Ethics and Epistemology in Sextus Empiricus* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999).

compatible with both negative and relativized assertions, a stance which is plainly at odds with that expounded in most of Sextus's writings. Strangely, Bett does not mention a key point of his interpretation: in the book in question, the notion of *epokhē* takes on a sense different from the one it has in the rest of the Sextan corpus, including the other four books of *AD*. This point creates some of the most serious problems for his interpretation, as I have elsewhere argued:<sup>3</sup> not least because Sextus would be using, without any warning to the reader, a key sceptical notion in two incompatible senses.

In her chapter, Gisela Striker reconsiders a subject dealt with in a paper published almost three decades ago, namely, the relationship between Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism. She here focuses on the differences and similarities between Arcesilaus's and Carneades's responses to the *aproxia* objection and Sextus's, concluding that the latter's response is closer to Arcesilaus's than to Carneades's. The reason is that Sextus also rejects Carneades's weak assent or approval, which is both voluntary and based on reasons. I do not agree with Striker on this point because the Pyrrhonist does seem to make a practical use of reason, which nonetheless involves no commitment to the standards of rationality. Even though the paper is certainly a fine contribution, I think it would have been most useful for the non-specialist approaching this volume if Striker had offered a systematic overview of all the differences and similarities between Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism.

Paul Woodruff's essay is devoted to the Pyrrhonian modes of suspension of judgment and those against causal explanations, focusing mostly on the former. His main thesis is that the original strategy of the modes of suspension is at odds with the Pyrrhonian aim of reaching *epokhē* as described by Sextus. For that strategy (which has a Platonic root) is aporetic, i.e. refutative, and hence negative: an aporetic argument is a demonstration which, by refutation, establishes a negative conclusion. However, even if *aporia* refers to refutation in certain contexts, this way of understanding the term in all contexts renders some passages incomprehensible (e.g. *Pyrrhonian Outlines* I 7, *Adversus Mathematicos* I 7), since in these texts *aporia* refers to an intractable difficulty, an impasse, on account of which the sceptic is at a loss and, hence, suspends judgement. Moreover, unlike Woodruff, I think that the Ten Modes of Aenesidemus do appeal to equipollence (*isostheneia*) and that Sextus regards a conflict as undecidable conditional on the contending parties appearing to be equally credible.

Next, James Allen deals with the relationship between Pyrrhonism and medicine. We know that Sextus and other Pyrrhonists belonged to the Empirical school of medicine, one of the three main medical 'sects' of the Hellenistic and Imperial ages, the other two being the Rationalist and

<sup>3</sup>See my review of R. Bett, *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Logicians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (2008.01.11) [<http://bmc.brynmawr.edu/2008/2008-01-11.html>].

the Methodist. There are, indeed, some similarities between Pyrrhonism and medical Empiricism. However, Sextus distinguishes the two stances and lays out the strong affinities between Pyrrhonism and medical Methodism. Allen convincingly argues that Sextus's favourable attitude towards this medical sect may be due to the fact that Methodists 'had a more generous conception of the phenomena and the reasoning that is possible on their basis than did the Empiricists' (244).

Emidio Spinelli's contribution deals with Sextus's least-known oeuvre, *Adversus Mathematicos* (*AM*), whose six books are devoted to the attack against the *mathēmata* or liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astrology, and music. After offering an overview of the work and its chronological position within the Sextan corpus, Spinelli argues that the outlook of *AM* is not in the end different from the scepticism found in the rest of the extant Sextan writings. He also maintains that Sextus adopts a stance close to that of the Empirical school of medicine in accepting those *mathēmata* that rely on constant empirical observation. He goes so far as to speak of 'an implicit faith in the regularity of nature' (260) on Sextus's part, but this is patently dogmatic and, hence, something which Sextus would eschew.

In his chapter, Luciano Floridi offers a useful survey of what we know about the transmission of sceptical texts in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages and the recovery of part of those texts in the Renaissance. Readers familiar with Floridi's *Sextus Empiricus: The Transmission and Recovery of Pyrrhonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) will not find anything new in the present essay, since in fact it reproduces verbatim the relevant parts of the first chapter of that book. This is why one still finds the same problematic claims about the nature of Pyrrhonism: the Pyrrhonist denies the intelligibility of reality; he is tolerant; and his philosophy is individualistic.<sup>4</sup>

In the final essay, the most sophisticated and penetrating of the volume, Michael Williams carefully examines the differences and similarities between Descartes's conception of scepticism and the ancient sceptical stances. Whereas the first part of the chapter offers a thorough, insightful examination of the differences between Sextan Pyrrhonism and Cartesian scepticism, the second part carries out a lucid comparison between Descartes's dreaming argument and both Sextus's brief reference to dreams in the fourth mode of Aenesidemus and Cicero's use of dreaming in the *Lucullus*.

The reader will probably wonder why the volume does not deal with important figures of early modern philosophy, such as Montaigne and Hume, whose relationship with ancient scepticism is certainly worth discussing. One even regrets the absence of any reference to the

<sup>4</sup>I have criticized these claims in my review of Floridi's book in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 12 (2004) No. 2: 336–40.

contemporary epistemological discussions of the Modes of Agrippa and to the present-day neo-Pyrrhonian positions, such as that espoused by Robert Fogelin. It is true, as Bett claims, that the volume 'is primarily about the ancient period, and one has to stop somewhere' (8). However, one wonders whether it should not have been restricted to that period alone, thereby freeing up space for more detailed treatment of the relation between Aenesidemus and Heraclitus, an analysis of the philosophical connections between Cyrenaicism and both Pyrrhonian and Academic scepticism, and extensive discussions of sceptics like Cicero and Favorinus.

No doubt this volume will become an indispensable reference book for students and non-specialists, but even scholars of ancient scepticism will find among these essays new and challenging interpretations with which to engage.

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