

[Penultimate draft—Review of H. Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism*, *Classical Review*, 2010 (60.2), 376-78]

Thorsrud (H.) *Ancient Scepticism*. Pp. xvi + 248. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2009. Paper, £14.99 (Cased, £45). ISBN: 978-1-84465-131-3 (978-1-84465-130-6 hbk).

Harald Thorsrud's *Ancient Scepticism* is the first English-language introduction to ancient scepticism since Hankinson's 1998 *The Sceptics*. Aiming to provide an accessible guide for undergraduates, it is shorter and less technical than Hankinson's volume. All texts are in translation, and T does not assume prior historical knowledge. Nonetheless, T's book is dense: his use of terminology such as semantic vs. metaphysical relativism may challenge students lacking philosophical background, while his detailed discussions of interpretive controversies may fail to engage those without a strong interest in history. These difficulties are inevitable, since we lack many of the original texts and their interpretation is controversial, and since T's book seeks to engage on a philosophical and a historical level. Given these challenges, T does an admirable job of making the interpretive and philosophical debates accessible. At the same time, his interpretations, particularly of Cicero and of Pyrrhonian skepticism, will be of interest to scholars; below, I focus on some points where I take issue with T's interpretation.

In his chapter on Arcesilaus, T rejects dialectical interpretations, such as Striker's ('Sceptical Strategies', in M. Schofield et al. eds., *Doubt and Dogmatism* (Oxford, 1980)), which claim that Arcesilaus merely demonstrates that the Stoics' unattainable standards for knowledge require them to suspend judgement and that he proposes the *eulogon* in response to their concern with *apraxia*. T argues that it makes no sense for Arcesilaus to offer the Stoics a solution to *apraxia*, unless he himself is committed to *epochē*. However, this leads to the charge of inconsistency: Arcesilaus' commitment to *epochē* derives from a Socratic reverence for truth, but

this in turn contradicts his practice of universal *epochē*. T responds by proposing a chronological shift in Arcesilaus' position (56). While Arcesilaus initially subscribes to Socratic principles of rational enquiry, eventually he subjects these to skeptical attack; his motivation for *epochē* shifts from reverence for truth to arational habit. In the case of the *eulogon*, Arcesilaus is simply noting the utility of convincing others that one's actions appeared reasonable at the time (57-8). However, T provides no textual support for this chronological shift. Furthermore, his treatment of the *eulogon* fails to resolve his concern with negative dogmatism; it seems odd for a skeptic committed to universal *epochē* to seek to convince others that his actions were reasonable. Generally speaking, T's difficulty is that, on the one hand, he insists that Arcesilaus is committed to *epochē* and the *eulogon*, while, on the other, he denies that Arcesilaus has any dogmatic commitments. The solution is to accept Striker's dialectical reading, which avoids saddling Arcesilaus with positive views.

One of the more controversial sections of T's book is his argument that Cicero is a moderate fallibilist, not a skeptic. T cites *Amic.* 19 and *Off.* 3.16 as indicating that Cicero aims at a fallible form of wisdom (92). T is on thin ground here; neither passage mentions a form of wisdom which falls short of certainty. In fact, Cicero's definition of wisdom at *Off.* 1.15-16 appears to require certainty, and throughout, he maintains a distinction between the wise and those exhibiting a mere semblance of wisdom (3.13-16). Furthermore, in the *Academica*, Cicero describes himself as *not wise*, insofar as he forms opinions (2.66).

In his treatment of Sextus, T argues for a causal interpretation, on which the skeptic finds himself inclined towards *epochē*, but lacks any commitment to principles of rational enquiry. Absent such commitments, what motivates the skeptic's continued searching (PH 1.3)? T proposes that the skeptic does not seek the truth, but engages in second-order investigation of

what people think (136). T takes PH 1.19-20 to describe the skeptic as investigating what people say about things, not the things themselves. However, Sextus' concern here is to portray the skeptic as not investigating appearances (e.g. honey appears sweet), but rather what people say about appearances (that honey *is* sweet); at 1.22, he maintains that the skeptic does not investigate appearances, but whether things are as they appear. Thus, *contra* T, the passage appears to equate investigating what people say with investigating whether things are as they appear.

In his final chapter, T considers two interpretations of the Pyrrhonist response to *apraxia*: on the *some-belief view*, the Pyrrhonist maintains that *epochē* is compatible with non-dogmatic belief, while on the *no-belief view*, he proposes that action does not require belief. According to T, on the most plausible version of the some-belief view, the skeptic only assents to propositions about appearances. T objects that assenting to such propositions requires the skeptic to have dogmatic beliefs about the mental states constituting appearances (180). However, this is not obvious; we often assent to propositions such as 'the stick looks bent' without having any view about the mental state involved. T defends a radical version of the no-belief view, on which the skeptic follows appearances that lack any propositional content. Were the skeptic to articulate a proposition expressing how things appear to him, T claims, he would have moved beyond appearances and taken a stand on what is really the case (181). It is difficult to know what to make of T's interpretation, since it deprives the skeptic of the range of propositional attitudes which characterize human existence. What, then, to make of Sextus' writing a book about skepticism?

According to T, one challenge for the no-belief view is to make sense of Sextus' claim that nature guides the skeptic to think (1.24). How can the skeptic think, yet lack beliefs? T

argues that there is no need to sever the connexion between thought and belief; the skeptic can think about others' beliefs, not his own (185). This solution does not do justice to the text: when Sextus proposes thought as a criterion for action, he surely does not intend to confine himself to thinking about others' beliefs. Furthermore, T's solution does not avoid saddling the skeptic with beliefs: if the skeptic has thoughts about what others believe, then presumably he also has second-order beliefs about their beliefs. Conversely, if the skeptic can have such thoughts without succumbing to second-order belief, then he can think about *any* topic without belief.

A second challenge is Burnyeat's schizophrenia charge ('Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?' in Schofield (1980)): while it seems to the skeptic that to every account is opposed an equally powerful counter-argument, he simultaneously suspends judgement on whether this is so. T responds that the skeptic is so immersed in the appearance of *isostheneia* that he never consciously reflects on it, and thus avoids dogmatic commitments on which he would have to suspend judgement (187). However, Sextus states at 1.191 that the skeptic uses *ouden mallon* to report how things appear to him (cf. 1.197, 1.203). Does T claim that in reflecting on how things appear, the skeptic unwittingly sheds his skepticism? T appears to hold that if the skeptic avoids second-order reflexion on the appearance of *isostheneia*, then he avoids belief. However, if this were sufficient to save the skeptic from belief, then anyone sufficiently distracted or un-self-aware would turn out a skeptic. But that makes skepticism come too cheaply.