

Book Review forthcoming in *Hume Studies*

Peter S. Fosl, *Hume's Scepticism: Pyrrhonian and Academic*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. Pp. xiii + 378. Hardcover ISBN 978-1-4744-5112-3, \$110.00.

Peter Fosl's new monograph investigates Hume's skepticism in light of two traditions going back to ancient times: Pyrrhonism and Academic skepticism. The book offers an intricate history of both traditions and culminates in a bold reading of Hume's skepticism. Against a trend which sees Hume's naturalism overcoming his skepticism, Fosl argues that Hume is "a truly radical and coherent sceptic" (332). Moreover, Hume is a "hybrid sceptic" (2, 171), gracefully combining elements of both the Pyrrhonian and Academic skeptical traditions. Numerous scholars have sought antecedents to Hume's skepticism in the Pyrrhonian Sextus Empiricus or the broadly Academic Cicero. What distinguishes Fosl's investigation is, first, its treating both traditions together and at length, and, second, its portrayal of Hume as "a deeply Pyrrhonian thinker" (172)—one who is not only profitably compared to Sextus, but who likely understood, favorably regarded, and self-consciously adapted Pyrrhonian thought (2–4, 79–80, 153ff). Fosl supports this iconoclastic reading with extensive historical research. But, due to a failure to answer central questions about the consistency of Hume's philosophy with the Pyrrhonists', the book leaves its bold reading underexplained and undersupported.

Hume's Scepticism contains an Introduction and two Parts. I highly recommend the Introduction as a resource for any readers who want a brief yet comprehensive overview of the progression of Anglophone interpretation of Hume's skepticism (4–13). Parts I and II offer an "Empirical Case" and "Conceptual Case," respectively, for Fosl's reading.

Part I's Empirical Case traces the Pyrrhonian and Academic traditions from their ancient roots through their subsequent transmissions and transformations, and offers "evidence culled from Hume's published and unpublished work, his private letters and his circumstances" (2). What results is a serviceable history of skepticism with a "special focus on the dimensions of the sceptical traditions that illuminate Hume's philosophical texts" (209–10). Trimming extraneous details would have helped the "special focus" emerge more fully. Moreover, since close readings of Hume are postponed until the Conceptual Case in Part II, Part I's most explicit discussions of Hume often amount to a mere "chronicling [of] similarities between Hume's texts and those of the Pyrrhonian (and Academic) traditions" (153). Scholars of Hume's skepticism and sources may, with patience, mine food for thought here. But readers short on time can skip most of Part I without great loss. Enough context to profitably read Part II is provided by the discussions of the Academics and dogmatism (28–34), of the Pyrrhonist's assent (85–87, 94–96), method (92–94), and aim (107–108), and of Bayle and Huet (60–67, 140–50). Fosl's discussions of the latter two figures, which build on work by José Maia Neto, Dario Perinetti, and John P. Wright, are highlights, if not entirely new.

Part I concludes by beginning to address a difficulty for Fosl’s reading: the idea that Hume admired Pyrrhonism, or even understood it, is hard to square with Hume’s explicit remarks. Hume famously declares that “Pyrrhonian” doubt has no “constant influence on the mind,” and objects that “all human life must perish” from inactivity, “were [Pyrrhonian] principles universally and steadily to prevail” (EHU 12.23, SBN 159–60). This objection was already familiar to the ancient skeptics and Sextus has a nuanced reply. According to Sextus, Pyrrhonian skeptics are able to act on life’s necessities despite their general suspension of judgment because they continue to passively “acquiesce” or “assent to the feelings forced upon them by appearances” (*Outlines of Scepticism*, ed. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 1.13, 19, 193; hereafter ‘PH’). In particular, they assent “in accordance with everyday observances,” which are “fourfold, and . . . consist in guidance by nature, necessitation by feeling, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise” (PH 1.23, 24). In denying that Pyrrhonists held “beliefs” (*dogmata*), Sextus means only that they “do not . . . assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences” (PH 1.13, 22). Through nature’s guidance, they can still “acquiesce” to the appearance of food before them and so eat.

Could Hume have raised his ‘inactivity’ objection, had he properly appreciated Sextus’s position? Fosl’s surprising answer is Yes. His response has three phases. The first shows that Hume had access to and likely read Sextus (154–58). The second argues that Hume hid his Pyrrhonian influences in order to avoid calumny or worse (158–68). Fosl’s thesis that Hume’s professed anti-Pyrrhonism is insincere is a real innovation, and is supported with a fascinating discussion of the severe—even mortal—persecution which characterized the intellectual climate of the young Hume’s Scotland. But it fails to address important questions. For example, if the association with skepticism was so dangerous, why does Hume portray his *Treatise* as “very sceptical” (A 27, SBN 657) in an Abstract meant to draw attention to it?

The third and longest phase of Fosl’s response occurs in Part II and draws on textual, rather than historical, evidence. Here, Fosl develops a Conceptual Case for his reading, analyzing Hume’s writings on skepticism and belief formation and drawing out their notable similarities to Sextus’s. The discussion resembles past explorations of Hume and the Hellenistic sects by Richard Popkin, David Fate Norton, and others, but offers a unique focus on, and organization around, the Pyrrhonist’s “fourfold” everyday observances: nature (Ch. 5), feeling (Ch. 8), custom (Ch. 6), and expertise (Ch. 7).

Part II covers many Humean themes and texts, while highlighting important parallels between Hume’s thought and Pyrrhonism. But it does not adequately address Hume’s ambition to provide a new “foundation” for a “complete system of the sciences” (T Intro.6, SBN xvi). Presumably, a proper understanding of Pyrrhonian assent should enable us to see how Hume’s scientific commitments are similarly “non-dogmatic” and consistent with his skepticism (260, cf. 321ff). But I do not see a good route to showing this.

One possible route (recently advanced by Donald Baxter) claims that, for Hume, passive acquiescence can occur even within scientific investigation. This would be

a broadly Pyrrhonian innovation on Sextus, offering a way to free certain scientific or philosophical commitments from dogmatism—namely, the ones we come to hold naturally and passively. Fosl invites this reading when he says that Hume’s acceptance of certain scientific “model[s] presumes and requires [a] natural press”—that is, nature’s ‘pressing’ or determining our acquiescence to them (204, 209). The reading finds support in Hume’s view that belief “consists merely in a peculiar feeling or sentiment,” “depends not upon our will,” and can be “determin’d” beyond our control by “nature” (A 21, 24, SBN 653, 655; T 1.4.1.7, SBN 183), as well as his portrayal of philosophical or scientific reflection as inevitable (e.g., at T 1.4.7.11–12, SBN 270–71). But the support collapses under the weight of Hume’s frequent characterizations of his own science as “abstruse” (T 1.3.12.20, 1.4.2.6, 3.1.1.1, SBN 138, 189, 456; E 1.3ff, SBN 6ff), “difficult” (A ii, SBN 643; E 1.16, SBN 15), or grotesque like “anatomy” (T 3.3.6.6, SBN 620–21; E 1.8, SBN 9–10). Such laborious study is sometimes “forc’d [i.e., involving will and concentration] and unnatural” (T 1.4.1.10, SBN 185).

A second possible route emphasizes that the ancient skeptics claimed to assert even scientific or philosophical claims non-dogmatically, borrowing them for their own skeptical ends without believing or even acquiescing to them. The Academics took on the premises of their dogmatic (usually Stoic) opponents for *ad hominem reductio* arguments. Pyrrhonists surveyed various philosophical and scientific theories to show that each has an equally plausible competitor, thus inducing a suspension of judgment (PH 1.18). Fosl convincingly attributes this Pyrrhonian method to Hume’s political writings (232–38). But Hume’s scientific claims are not merely suppositions intended to bring about suspension of judgment. If anything, the opposite is true: Hume uses temporary skeptical exasperation in support of his theories. After articulating skeptical arguments against reason, for instance, Hume explains that his “intention... in displaying so carefully the arguments of that fantastic sect is only to make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis... *that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures*” (T 1.4.1.8, SBN 183, Hume’s emphasis).

A third possible route is suggested by the Pyrrhonist’s claim to be persuaded only by “appearances [*phantasia*]” (PH 1.13, 21–22) and to “suspend judgment... about external things” (PH 1.215). Fosl claims that Hume’s scientific and philosophical views are “non-dogmatic” and “Pyrrhonian” in the sense that they are “restricted to what appears rather than to what is hidden and metaphysically real” (317; cf. 95, 199–200). But does Hume have sufficient resources, given his theory of belief, to distinguish belief about appearances from belief about “the real” (314ff)? Plausibly, belief that some food appears to be before me and belief that it really is there share their content: the idea of food (before me). With the idea held fixed, the difference between the beliefs can only be in the idea’s force or vivacity. But Hume already uses a difference in vivacity to distinguish between belief and mere conception (T 1.3.5.7, SBN 86; 1.3.8.11, SBN 103). Moreover, if everyday belief is, as Fosl claims, forced upon us by the overwhelming current of nature (204–05), dogmatism is not easily captured by a further degree of force.

These problems make it unclear how a comparison with Pyrrhonism can clarify the

sense in which Hume's science is 'non-dogmatic' or consistent with his skepticism. Ultimately, Fosl may hope to redeem the label by association with the Academic skeptics. Some Academics treated some views as more 'probable' than others, even if ultimately open to doubt. Fosl says that Hume's "true scepticism employs rigorous Academic probabilistic standards of belief and reason" (331; cf. 34). If Hume's use of these standards better explains how his science avoids dogmatism, this raises the question why three quarters of the book focuses on Hume and Pyrrhonism. Moreover, it demands a careful discussion of Sextus's criticism of Academics as dogmatic because they hold that some beliefs are probable (PH 1.227–30). Fosl does not give this discussion (cf. 32), leaving it unclear whether his "hybrid sceptic" can be a "coherent" one (13).

Further difficulties also obscure what novel contributions Fosl's fastidious research makes to ongoing debates on Hume's skepticism and its sources. After the Introduction, engagement with secondary literature is surprisingly sparse, occurring mostly in endnotes without comment or in disagreement without consideration of counterevidence (188–89, 204, 283). The text also shows signs of haste in unanalyzed long block quotations (197, 198, 201, 287, 289, 316), poetical rhetoric (205–09, 287, 326), and an overeagerness to read Hume as locating himself in a skeptical tradition. A telling example of such overeagerness concerns Hume's remark that a similar stretch of time elapsed between Thales and Socrates as has between Bacon and "some late philosophers in England, who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing" (T Intro.7, SBN xvi–xvii). Fosl interprets this remark as evidence that "Hume places himself and his 'science of man' within [a] skeptical Academical lineage. . . Just as the (dogmatic) natural philosopher Thales led ultimately to (sceptical) Socrates. . . , so the (dogmatic) natural philosopher Francis Bacon has led to our moral and humane (sceptical) Hume" (22). It is true that Hume admires Socrates for "carry[ing his] Philosophical Doubts to the highest Degree of Scepticism" (LG 24, Nor 426). But, in emphasizing this, Fosl overlooks a more natural reading, given the context: Hume makes the comparison while introducing his experimental method. He views "Lord Bacon," "the father of experimental physicks," as contributing "signal service to the world." And he praises English philosophers like Locke and Mandeville for extending Bacon's experimentalism (A 2, SBN 646). With the comparison, then, Hume seems to suggest that the time is now ripe for bringing into fruition a mature science based only on "experience and observation" (T Intro.7, SBN xvi). In doing so, Hume places himself within a lineage of recent empiricists, not of ancient skeptics. A focus on Hume's ancient sources can, in the end, distort more than it clarifies, if it desensitizes us to his thoroughgoing scientific ambitions.

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