

**Richard Bett, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*.** Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xii, 380. ISBN 978-0-521-87476-2, hardback, \$95; ISBN 978-0-521-69754-5, paperback, \$33.

Discussions of philosophical scepticism by epistemologists in the English-speaking world are still overwhelmingly dominated by a paradigm of scepticism derived from the arguments and intellectual transitions allotted by Descartes to the meditator in the 'First Meditation'. Sometimes the figure of Hume is also invoked as someone who traffics in sceptical arguments, but there is, even in his case, a marked tendency to argue that Hume is really an exponent of a naturalized epistemology rather than someone who genuinely embraces any form of radical scepticism. And ironically this tendency seems to derive much of its impetus from the thought that Hume cannot be a real sceptic because he conspicuously fails to conduct himself in the manner exemplified by Descartes' fictional meditator.

It seems plain, therefore, that a mature investigation into the significance and cogency of philosophical scepticism would be greatly assisted if more present-day philosophers could be persuaded to abandon their allegiance to this tiresome Cartesian caricature in favour of a more balanced recognition of the models of radical scepticism provided by the schools of scepticism that first emerged in the Greco-Roman world. If this desirable development is to take place, however, there is a pressing need for awareness of the rich complexity of ancient scepticism to be disseminated more widely than has hitherto been the case. Thus the appearance of a volume devoted to ancient scepticism in the well-known *Cambridge Companions* series is undoubtedly to be welcomed as an additional contribution to the enterprise of refocusing philosophical attention on non-Cartesian forms of scepticism. Although it is true that the study of ancient scepticism and other Hellenistic schools of philosophy has been a focus of substantial scholarly attention over the past thirty years or so, this has remained an activity engaged in primarily by specialists in ancient philosophy and their researches and debates have seldom exercised much influence on professional philosophers working in other fields. Thus the publication of a readily accessible collection of up-to-date essays on Pyrrhonism and the sceptical Academy provides an important opportunity to alert a broader community of scholars to the distinctive character of forms of scepticism that possessed real advocates and exponents instead of being purely theoretical positions that serve merely as objects of criticism and repudiation.

The volume follows the standard practice of the *Cambridge Companions* in consisting of a set of newly commissioned essays that are intended to be of interest both to non-specialists and a more expert readership. After a brief introduction by the editor, the first section of the book, 'Origins and Development', consists of six essays that provide an illuminating survey of the history of ancient scepticism from its antecedents in pre-Hellenistic thought to its sophisticated culmination in the writings of Sextus Empiricus. In the next section, 'Topics and Problems', we find seven essays that concentrate on exploring the philosophical implications and internal coherence of the main forms of

ancient scepticism. The final and shortest section of the book bears the title of 'Beyond Antiquity', and it consists of one essay that discusses the manner in which information about the sceptical tradition was transmitted from the Roman era to the early modern era and another essay that gives an account of some of the ways in which Descartes distorts and manipulates earlier forms of scepticism to serve his own dogmatic ends.

The overall interpretation offered by the essays on the history of ancient scepticism conforms to what might be called the modern orthodoxy on this topic. Pyrrho is primarily presented as a philosophical figurehead appropriated by later thinkers rather than as the personal founder of an enduring sceptical school or sect, the affinities between Arcesilaus' philosophical stance and that of the Pyrrhonian sceptics portrayed by Aenesidemus and Sextus Empiricus are strongly emphasized, and the Pyrrhonian scepticism described by Sextus is seen as more akin to a reworking of Academic themes rather than as a return to some alternative and preceding form of scepticism. Within this broadly conventional framework of interpretation, the papers by Mi-Kyoung Lee, Harald Thorsrud, and R. J. Hankinson stand out as particularly valuable. Lee provides an excellent account of the relativism and ontological worries about the indeterminate nature of the world that preceded the emergence of sophisticated epistemological scepticism, and Thorsrud's essay on Arcesilaus and Carneades explains in lucid terms both how reflection on Socrates' practice in Plato's early dialogues served to generate Arcesilaus' own position and why that position deserves to be seen as a form of radical scepticism. Finally, many people working in this field will be delighted with Hankinson's deft skewering of the recently fashionable enterprise of discoursing at length on an Aenesidemean version of Pyrrhonism that allegedly differs from Sextus' version in portentous and highly specific respects. Hankinson makes it very clear that the evidence actually available to us is wholly insufficient to support the weight of such exegetical theorizing.

One problem, though, with starting with so many essays devoted to historical issues is that it is likely to alienate a general reader who is looking for a persuasive account of why ancient scepticism is worth studying in the first place. And it is unfortunately the case that a similar problem afflicts the 'Topics and Problems' section of the volume. No particular essay boldly shoulders the task of providing a broad survey of what makes the main forms of ancient scepticism so intellectually remarkable and exciting, and this section accordingly represents something of a missed opportunity. The essay by Casey Perin adequately defends the view that Pyrrhonian suspension of judgement, as described by Sextus Empiricus, is supposed to encompass all beliefs that go beyond beliefs about how things appear to one to be, and Katja Maria Vogt's detailed taxonomy of different forms of the argument that the sceptic cannot act serves to identify some useful directions for future research into how this family of objections needs to be answered. Regrettably, however, the essay on the Pyrrhonian tropes by Paul Woodruff wastes too much time on a speculative reconstruction of Aenesidemus' ten tropes that

invokes a potentially truistic principle of causal invariability but then conflates genuinely contrary effects with conflicting appearances. The end result is that Woodruff's discussion of the philosophical cogency of the sceptical tropes as these are actually deployed by Sextus is disappointingly thin, and this leaves a major gap at the heart of this anthology that is not adequately filled by the inclusion of essays on such relatively peripheral issues as the relationship between Pyrrhonism and medicine or Sextus' critique of the liberal arts.

The final section of the book sees Michael Williams providing some valuable discussion of just how far Sextus may be taking his efforts to avoid all doctrinal commitments. However, this is embedded in an essay that devotes much of its attention to Descartes' dualistic innovations rather than a detailed exploration of Sextus' own position. And the air of excessive antiquarianism that hangs over large portions of the anthology is reinforced by the inclusion of Lucian Floridi's lengthy and exclusively historical essay on theological and literary responses to ancient scepticism after Pyrrhonism and Academic scepticism ceased to be living schools of philosophical thought.

In conclusion, this volume will be of considerable value to readers who already have an interest in ancient scepticism, and it can certainly be recommended to libraries as a useful addition to existing books on this topic. It does not, however, constitute a good introduction to the subject for a reader who is not yet convinced of the philosophical significance of ancient scepticism. Any person falling into this category would be much better served by starting with Benson Mates' commentary in *The Skeptic Way* (Oxford University Press, 1996) or Hankinson's excellent *The Sceptics* (Routledge, 1995).

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