

Keimpe Algra & Katerina Ierodiakonou (eds.), *Sextus Empiricus and Ancient Physics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xiii + 433. ISBN 9781107069244

Sextus Empiricus and Ancient Physics contains papers presented at the Eleventh Symposium Hellenisticum, devoted to books 9 and 10 of *Adversus Mathematicos* (*M*). While these two books are often referred to as *Against the Physicists*, the subjects explored—god, cause, parts and wholes, body, place, motion, time, number, change—would be considered a mix of metaphysics and philosophy of science today. Each of the chapters in the book under review contains a meticulous study by a leading scholar in ancient philosophy on one of the nine sections composing *M* 9–10. The result is a running commentary on the entire text, offering clarification of many obscure passages, comparisons with parallel presentations in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*PH* 3) and in other books of *M*, insight into how Sextus works with his sources and thus his value as a source himself, as well as insight into the persistent question of the scope of Pyrrhonian *epochê*. Appended to the end of all but three of the chapters is an analytical, structural overview of the section of *M* 9–10 discussed. This book is not an easy read, but it is an extremely valuable and important contribution to the scholarship on Pyrrhonian skepticism.

From the earliest Presocratics, Greek philosophers were intent on making the physical world intelligible. So by the time Sextus is writing (probably in the late 2nd century CE), this project had been going for approximately 700 years, yielding a great wealth of argument and conflicting positions. Sextus drew liberally from this material and from the well-established Pyrrhonian and Academic traditions of skeptical criticism. Indeed, *M* 9–10, like much of Sextus' writing, contains more arguments per square inch than just about any other ancient philosophical text. Many of the chapters include illuminating doxographical studies, tracing Sextus' targets back to Stoic and Epicurean sources, though we also find frequent appearances of Aristotelian and Platonic positions, among others. This can give the reader the impression that the text is a hodge-podge, assembled without much regard for the overall coherence of the two books, not to mention the cogency and logical rigor of the individual arguments.

This impression is at least partly right, but it is important to remember that Sextus' overall aim is to restore tranquility to those troubled by their inability to resolve the anomalies raised by the study of nature. The strategy is to induce suspension of judgment (*epochê*) as a result of confronting opposed, equally powerful arguments regarding the physicists' fundamental principles. In keeping with the general description of Pyrrhonism, Sextus is not interested in challenging whether it *appears* that, e.g., body, time and motion exist, but rather whether we have adequate grounds to believe that they exist, or for that matter that they don't exist. Given this aim, it seems likely that Sextus is more concerned with the psychological effects of his arguments than their logical rigor. The notion that he willfully retails sophistical

arguments (e.g. *M* 10.112–17) in pursuit of tranquility suggests that he is not engaged in an even-handed pursuit of truth. This remains controversial, but it does seem to be the best way to account for the odd mixture of more or less easily diagnosed fallacies along with genuinely powerful skeptical arguments, so thoroughly anatomized in this volume.

Similarly, the frequent mismatch between what Sextus says he is going to do and what he actually does, might suggest a haphazard attitude towards the composition of these books, or at least very shabby editing. But if his intent were to provide an inventory or catalog of arguments for and against the fundamental principles of natural philosophy, the hodge-podge would make more sense. His readers would not necessarily be expected to read the text from beginning to end, but rather may decide to extract whatever arguments suit the purposes at hand.

The impression of a hodge-podge, sensible or otherwise, is also partly wrong insofar as there is a discernible structure to the text. In his introduction (*M* 9.1–3), Sextus contrasts his predecessors' disjointed approach of attacking particular arguments (apparently without concern for their role within the overall theory) to his more elegant approach of targeting the foundations of a theory, and thereby undermining everything that is built upon them. While this more elegant approach is not always evident, it does make a strong appearance in the concluding section on coming-to-be and passing-away. This discussion appears to be the culmination of the two books insofar as the ultimate aim of the ancient physicists was to understand how and why things in the natural world change as they do. And indeed, an adequate understanding of the topics leading up to this final section seems to be presupposed. For example, without comprehending the nature of e.g., cause, body, place, motion, and time we cannot fully understand how and why things change as they apparently do. Such fundamental interconnections among the physicists' principles create the opportunity for Sextus to strategically focus on the foundations. Accordingly, the text of *M* 9–10 can also be read as a continuous skeptical attack on ancient natural philosophy as a whole, and not merely a skeptical repository. Even so, the views of the contributors to this volume seem to confirm the widely received opinion that the parallel material in *PH* 3 offers a far more coherent and well-organized case study in Sextus' skeptical practice.

Another significant virtue of this volume is that it provides a lot of material for reflection on the persistent issue of the scope of Pyrrhonian *epochê* and Sextus' attitude towards ordinary life. This is a complicated and controversial issue since the Pyrrhonian skeptic is, on one hand, a proponent of ordinary life insofar as it allows him to remain active, and on the other hand, he is an opponent of ordinary life insofar as it unwittingly commands our assent to obscure theoretical positions. The dogmatic tendency of ordinary life is revealed in the fact that Sextus would have us understand the pro arguments, in some instances, to be implicit in our everyday experience: as far as appearances go, motion, place, and time exist. In these cases, his strategy is to oppose philosophical argument to ordinary experience, and thus to

discredit both. Nevertheless, Sextus claims that the skeptic can, for example, engage in the traditional practices of religious observance even while suspending judgment as to whether gods exist; he can rely on the habitual expectation that one sort of event follows another even while suspending judgment as to whether causes exist; he may agree that he is in such and such a place while suspending judgment as to whether place exists; that things appear to move, that time appears to pass, and that things appear to change, all while suspending judgment with regard to whether or not these appearances correspond to any structural features of reality. Thus, ordinary life in one sense enters the skeptical fray by means of its implicit commitments to the way things really are, and in another sense it is above the skeptical fray and ensures the skeptic may act and talk like regular folks.

In closing, it is sad to note that the long delay in publication—the papers were presented in 2007, and the volume published in 2015—was probably due in part to the untimely death of Michael Frede on the last day of the conference. Like many students of ancient philosophy I have tremendous admiration for Professor Frede's work and have learned a great deal from it.

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