
Book Reviews

Sextus Empiricus: Against the Logicians

Richard Bett (ed., tr.),
Cambridge University Press, 2005,
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Reviewed by Alexander S. Harper, University of Queensland

The skepticism of Sextus Empiricus is different in spirit from the skepticism of today. Skepticism is important today for epistemologists, but one can perhaps be forgiven for thinking it mainly an academic exercise. In contrast, Sextus' skepticism, Pyrrhonism, was, like most ancient philosophy, a route to happiness. As he explains in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (henceforth *PH* from its Greek title), the Pyrrhonist sought happiness and tranquility by finding the answers to his most troubling questions. Having tried as hard as he could, he still found himself at an impasse: there seemed to be equally good reasons to accept each side of the debates. Being unable to determine the right answer, he suspended his judgment though he continued searching. Upon suspending his judgment, he found that the tranquility he had sought was effortlessly his. He no longer worried about the truth of the matter, but was content being led by appearances. In particular, he no longer regarded any state as good or bad in itself. Therefore, he was less concerned with his worldly situation. Indeed, he is like the painter Apelles who was painting a horse and wanted to represent the froth on its mouth. Though he tried, he could not paint it. He was so upset with himself that he threw his sponge at the painting. To his wonder, the smudge where the sponge had hit exactly captured the look of the froth. So too, the Pyrrhonist finds what he seeks exactly when he thinks he cannot resolve his vexing questions (*PH*, 1. 28-29).

In order to suspend her judgment, the Pyrrhonist must establish modes and arguments, equally representing different positions in a debate. She brings about in herself a special skeptical skill opposing the arguments of dogmatists with other equally strong arguments. Importantly, she is not attempting to conclusively refute the dogmatist, but, having heard good arguments for both sides, she seeks suspension of judgment and tranquility. At this point, one may ask

whether the Pyrrhonist is as she claims she is. *Skeptikos* in Greek means something like the English term: ‘searching,’ but it seems that the Pyrrhonist is not much interested in searching for the truth; she thinks she knows the way to tranquility and opposes arguments to that purpose.

None of this background is explained in *Against the Logicians (L)*, so much of the main point of the argumentation would be lost on a reader unfamiliar with Pyrrhonism. With the above explanation, though, and the fine introduction from Richard Bett, much of Sextus’ purpose should be quite plain. *L* serves as part of a larger work called *Against the Mathematicians* that is Sextus’ detailed opposition to the arguments in most of the major sciences of his day (we do not know exactly when his day was, but the safest conjecture is that he flourished in the 2nd century AD). *L* deals with, obviously, the part that was then called logic, one of the three major parts of philosophy. We would now class much of their logic as epistemology and philosophy of language, along with what would now be formal logic proper. *Logicians* deals mainly with the epistemological questions, with the others being dealt with elsewhere in *Mathematicians*.

L begins with a historical exegesis of previous positions on the criterion of truth, mainly from a couple of centuries before its time. The criterion of truth is that standard by which we judge propositions and beliefs for their truth. This is amongst the best source material we have on ancient epistemology and it is worth reading the book just for it. Sextus provides short essays on various Greek philosophers and their epistemologies, for example, Xenophanes, Protagoras, Plato, Carneades, and Epicurus. Many of these philosophers’ views are, as is well known, quite charming. There is also a historical discussion of what a human is at *L* 1. 263-282.

The body of the text is taken up with discussion of the criterion, truth, sign, and demonstration. A sign is an apparent thing which is indicative “simply by means of its own nature and constitution” of a non-apparent thing. For example, the nature of the soul is not apparent, but the body, being apparent, is claimed by some to be a sign of the nature of the soul (*L*, 2. 154-155). A demonstration is like an argumentative sign that carries apparent premises to non-apparent conclusions by a valid form.

Most of Sextus’ analysis is epistemological: he asks questions about how we can know that a thing is of a certain type or exists at all. He also raises metaphysical issues, such as the nature of truth, and logical issues, such as the nature of the conditional or negation. His arguments are often of a small number of forms. For example, the argument as follows is exceedingly common: some

dogmatist says x with or without a criterion. If he says it without a criterion, he will have nothing to say against an opponent who asserts the opposite. If he says it with a criterion, then he will need to show that this criterion is a criterion. Of course, Sextus has already spent many pages arguing that criteria are impossible, and so the dogmatist is caught.

As is often said, many of Sextus' arguments are terrible or downright strange by our standards. For example, at *L* 1. 412-3 he discusses whether sight recognizes the truth of anything. He says that if it recognizes anything, it will recognize the color of a human being. However, it does not recognize the color of a human being because that color changes according to seasons, age, diseases etc, so sight does not recognize the truth of anything. It is easy to see the peculiarity of this argument.

However, Sextus should cause an incredible amount of concern for dogmatists both of his day and of today. An argument like the following is as powerful today as it was two millennia ago. How are we to establish that things appear as they actually are? Well, we must either use something apparent to everyone or not. Surely, we cannot use something not apparent to everyone, for that is trying to prove something more obvious by something less obvious. However, neither can we use something apparent to everyone, because that is exactly what is being questioned and what is being questioned cannot confirm itself. Thus, we cannot establish the truth of appearances (*L*, 2. 357-9). These kinds of deep epistemological questions are prevalent in *Logicians* and ought still to vex dogmatists everywhere.

Sextus is not (as a superficial reading may indicate) trying to establish that there is no criterion or sign. This epistemological nihilism is just the same as any other kind of dogmatism to Sextus. Rather, he places the arguments of the positive and negative dogmatists opposite each other to balance them and bring about suspension of judgment and tranquility in himself. Thus, he is not open to the same self-refutation charge to which the negative dogmatist is open. This crucial point is mentioned only a couple of times in *Logicians*, but is dealt with more substantially in *PH*. If a reader misses this point, the substance of Sextus' argument will be lost on her.

Further, to bring about this balance of arguments, Sextus often supposes dogmatic premises, especially principles of reasoning, in order to show that the dogmatists themselves must admit that their doctrines are faulty. It should not be thought that Sextus takes these premises to be true; rather, like a fire that

destroys itself after destroying the wood, his suppositions are abandoned after they have done their work against the dogmatists (*L*, 2. 480).

Sextus was not very influential in ancient times, and we only find one successor of him mentioned, a Saturnius. This is not the case, though, with modern philosophy. Indeed, Richard Popkin has suggested that the rediscovery of Sextus was one of the main determinants of the course of modern philosophy. Indeed, in *Logicians* we have an appearance of the famous dream argument directed here against the Stoics (I. 403), as well as an argument that looks quite like a postmodern claim about never being able to escape one's subjectivity (I. 425). Thus, Sextus, the only representative of the Pyrrhonists still extant, should be of great interest to historians of modern as well as ancient philosophy.

However, it seems much more sensible for a student to begin reading Sextus with *PH*, especially book 1. This is a much more elegantly written work, with a clear structure and a more comprehensive outlook. *L*, on the other hand, is often detailed and sometimes tedious in its repetitive arguments. Of course, detail is gold to the aficionado, but will certainly be an unwelcome obstacle to the general reader. *PH* does not include the historical survey, but this should be of little consequence to the reader interested in learning of Pyrrhonism itself.

Bett's translation is fluent. He is clearly more philosophically sensitive than Bury, translator of the only other English edition, and Bett's volume is clearly to be preferred. He writes it especially for readers with no Greek, and even transliterates each Greek word mentioned. This is annoying for the Greek reader but, no doubt, more welcoming for a general reader. The notes are thorough, though not extensive, containing explanation of the translation, cross-references, and a little philosophical help. The introduction is also very good for the philosophical and biographical context. Bett's structuring is especially to be praised, with his detailed outline and section titles very helpful for readers attempting to comprehend Sextus's most tedious arguments. This is a well-executed book designed and suitable for the lover of Sextus, whatever one's language abilities.

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The Grand Design

Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow

Bantam Books

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Reviewed by Catherine Peters, Sacred Heart Major Seminary

Although Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow claim that “the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything” (Hawking and Mlodinow, 2010, 10) is traditionally philosophical, they nevertheless declare that philosophy is “dead” and that “the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge” is today carried by scientists (5). However, despite rejecting philosophy, Hawking and Mlodinow inevitably employ philosophical argumentation in expounding their *Grand Design* (though, for or the most part, they employ it badly) and they are apparently unaware of the debt they owe to philosophy and the way that it could have contributed to their project.

Hawking publishes not only for the scientific community but for general readers as well (*A Brief History of Time*, 1988). His latest book, coauthored with Leonard Mlodinow, is intended for a non-technical audience. The authors avoid using mathematical equations, relying instead on analogies and graphic illustrations to advance understanding. Notwithstanding their conversational approach, *Grand Design* contains serious philosophical flaws that diminish the authors’ persuasiveness.

For example, they state at the outset that their approach to questions of “everything” is based on what they call “model-dependant realism”. They explain that this is “the idea that a physical theory or world picture is a model (generally of a mathematical nature) and a set of rules that connect the elements of the model to observations” (43). Hawking and Mlodinow seem unaware of the fact that their position is fundamentally philosophical as it is beyond the scope of observation and empirical testing. They declare “it is pointless to ask whether a model is real, only whether it agrees with observation” (46). Nevertheless, this is mere deflection and does not address the more fundamental question of what actually exists. Unfortunately, Hawking and Mlodinow do not realize that they are making philosophical assertions while simultaneously proclaiming philosophy dead.

Hawking and Mlodinow accuse Aristotle of suppressing “facts he found unappealing” (24), but they themselves are guilty of this when they revisit Samuel Johnson’s refutation of George Berkeley’s immaterialism. Johnson’s argument, they claim did not actually refute Berkeley, but rather lent support to David Hume who claims “although we have no rational grounds for believing in an objective reality, we also have no choice but to act as if it is true” (45).

Hawking and Mlodinow fail to point out that Hume’s principal philosophic project was to critique *efficient causality*, not objective reality. Hume would claim that there is no reason to expect the stone to roll away from Johnson’s boot because any perceived causality is simply an imposition of our minds and the reason we see the boot as affecting the stone is that we are accustomed to seeing this happen via constant conjunction. Hume’s epistemology, however, is radically empiricist. For, if objective reality did not exist, there would be nothing for us to sense, leaving us with *no* knowledge (a claim Hume did not make because it would have devastated his epistemology). Hawking and Mlodinow simply disregard the scientific difficulties engendered by Hume’s empiricism. For example, besides what we perceive from constant conjunction, there is no reason to believe in the causality of gravity. Yet, Hawking and Mlodinow employ philosophy to support their positions.

The authors also fault the ancient Greeks for developing theories without “the goal of experimental verification” (22), but again, they themselves seem to commit this error when they adopt scientific determinism. They claim that scientific determinism implies that “there are no miracles, or exceptions to the laws of nature” (34). However, in order for Hawking and Mlodinow to claim that there are *no* exceptions to a law, they must have tested and observed all occurrences of the law (i.e., something beyond the scope of scientific observation). Indeed, even though the authors state that “not all generalizations we observe can be thought of as laws of nature” (28), they still maintain that the “laws” they are discussing really are unbreakable and inviolate.

One of the major claims in *The Grand Design* is that “it is not necessary to invoke God” as the creator of the universe to explain our existence because the laws of nature enables nature to “create itself from nothing” (180). Hawking and Mlodinow posit that any “uncaused cause” of the universe is unnecessary in explaining the existence of the universe because of the inevitability of the universe’s own laws. In essence, the authors have simply transformed the laws of nature into uncaused causes. Avoiding philosophical *terminology* does not change the philosophical *essence* of a position. Even while Hawking and Mlodinow deny

it, they again find themselves relying on philosophy to explain and defend their positions.

To answer the “question of everything,” Hawking and Mlodinow offer “M-Theory” as a “fundamental theory of physics that is a candidate for the theory of everything” (185). The authors claim that M-Theory is “the *only* candidate for a complete theory of a universe” (181). One may wonder how the authors are justified in claiming that the above statement is scientific. Just because at present, there is only one theory does not mean that it is the right theory. That would be tantamount to saying at trial that ‘there is only one defendant in the courtroom so he must be guilty.’ Nevertheless Hawking and Mlodinow boldly decree that “M-Theory is the unified theory Einstein was hoping to find” (181), ignoring the fact that they have failed to show the connections between their premises and conclusions.

In my view, the major flaw of *The Grand Design* is the idea put forth by Hawking and Mlodinow that philosophy is dead and science is its successor. Though the matters investigated by philosophy and science may overlap, this does not mean that one can take over the role of the other. While the authors claim “[p]hilosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics” (5), they fail to explain how this accounts for philosophy’s demise.

Hawking and Mlodinow need to remember the maxim: *quod gratis asseritur, quod gratis negatur* (what is freely asserted may be freely denied). The authors’ casual dismissal of philosophy is a serious error. Hawking and Mlodinow mention numerous philosophers in their work that lends it a certain *cache*, but merely mentioning philosophers does not show that these physicists really understand their positions anymore than a philosopher’s mentioning of Newton, Faraday, or Einstein evinces an understanding of physics.

The Ancient Commentators on Plato and Aristotle.

Tuominen, Miira.

University of California Press

ISBN 9780520260276.

Reviewed by Eugenia Russell, Royal Holloway, University of London

Introduction

Miira Tuominen earned her PhD at the University of Helsinki in 2002, where she is currently based, and for a time she worked as a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago, and as a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her monograph, *Apprehension and Argument: Ancient Theories of Starting Points for Knowledge*, Studies in the History of Philosophy of Mind, 3 (Dordrecht, 2007) is based on her doctoral thesis. It discusses how the ancient philosophers understood the starting points (*archai*) of knowledge. Both *Apprehension and Argument* and the book under review here, *The Ancient Commentators*, display Tuominen's love of teaching and genuine interest in providing clearly written, informative works of secondary literature for the use of students and young academics. Works of that nature are sorely needed and Tuominen's books definitely fill a gap. Moreover, her books are of interest not only to philosophers but also to classicists, Arabists, and medievalists as well as practitioners working in related fields. Her clarity of style and commitment to her subject will be appreciated across disciplines.

Place in Current Scholarship

Tuominen's title is one of nine in the series *Ancient Philosophies* published by the University of California Press. Tuominen's topic is, in my view, daring, subtle and challenging. She has done a superb job in rising to the intellectual and pedagogical challenges set in front of her and in meeting the brief of her publisher to offer 'a clear yet rigorous presentation of core ideas'.

The Ancient Commentators builds on the work of M.R. James, Robert Todd, George Karamanolis, and Anne Sheppard, amongst others, and stops at the point where the edited volume of Katerina Ierodiakonou on Byzantine philoso-

phy picks up. The decision of Tuominen to exclude the Byzantine philosophers had to be taken on the grounds of limitation of space and the introductory nature of her project. A treatment of the more advanced and difficult aspects of philosophical reception may be forthcoming by this very talented scholar.

The reason why, in the book, there is a greater emphasis on the reception of Aristotle rather than Plato is the same, too. Tuominen's writing reflects both her research instincts and teaching practice. She explains in her book that in Antiquity Aristotle was taught first, in order to introduce students to the discipline of philosophy and the more difficult Plato was reserved for more advanced studies. Even within the Platonic corpus, certain dialogues were regarded as more advanced than others were, with *Timaeus* and *Parmenides* occupying the higher end of the scale. Tuominen follows this pattern in her own teaching and her textbook on the ancient commentators mirrors these trends. Therefore important works like, for example, Proclus's commentary on *Parmenides* are excluded from her treatment because of the volume of knowledge that a discussion of them presupposes. In this respect, too, it is hoped that the author will oblige with further works on these more complex aspects.

The main aim of the book is to introduce undergraduates and other students new to ancient philosophy to the commentators of Plato and Aristotle. A secondary aim is to assess the work of those commentators as philosophers in their own right. This secondary aim can also be said to be the argument of the book. If newness is a virtue to be strived for in a scholarly work, the newness of *The Ancient Commentators* is to be found in its discussion of the commentators as philosophers.

Presentation and Appearance

The presentational side of the book is limited by the budget set by the publishers. No Greek font has been allowed and the classy and stylish sensibility of the authorship is not matched in the physical appearance. The absence of the Greek font may have been thought to be suitable for philosophy students with little or no Greek but it will certainly not satisfy scholars of the classical or post-classical world who are another main audience of *The Ancient Commentators*. Additionally, one could argue that the use of non-Latin fonts can be integral to content. There is also a discrepancy between the relatively large size of the font used for the main text and the size of font for the auxiliary material that is slightly uncomfortably small. Further, the margins in the main text are never sufficient, for reasons of economy of space, and this makes the book

feel cramped (physically, not intellectually). The famous 'white space' designers of books fight for is absent. On the other hand, if this is the only way that a valuable book like this sees the light of day and if one has to accept the several shortcomings of its production, so be it.

The author has worked very hard to preserve clarity of thought and style and this is also reflected in her auxiliary materials. She has provided a chronology for the benefit of her readers and has drawn up careful lists of abbreviations and further reading. Her bibliography is sufficiently full for her purposes and her index works very well. The distinction between further reading and bibliography is insightful, as students will turn to each at different stages of their acquaintance with their subject and at different stages in their modules.

An area where there is room for improvement is perhaps the table of contents. This is a part of a book that is often underestimated but it can make a considerable difference to the way the reader (especially the undergraduate reader) is introduced to it. In addition, the very good Introduction of *The Ancient Commentators* is more like an Introductory Chapter and maybe a separate Introduction preceding it would have served readers better in drawing them more gently into the rigorous philosophical training ahead of them. Finally, the title, the first thing one learns about a book, is slightly confusing. As said earlier, Plato, Aristotle, and their reception are not treated equally in the book and this is very difficult to express in a title that seeks to be snappy, trendy, and marketable. Still, whatever the reasons for it, the title does not fit the book like a glove. A more general limitation, inevitable due to the absence of a Greek font, is the lack of any excerpts in the original Greek. All quotations in the book had to be provided in translation only (often by other authors) but Tuominen has made the process seem seamless. Yet, a bilingual appendix at the end would have tailed things off nicely.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Ancient Commentators* is a well-researched and well-written introduction produced with students and their lecturers in mind. It deserves the attention and patronage of both and it is hoped that it will grace the university libraries and departmental collections of many institutions. It deserves to be on reading lists of undergraduate and MA modules: its content and auxiliary materials are immensely helpful to the beginner and to the intermediate student of ancient philosophy. Tuominen's passion for teaching definitely comes through in the book.

