

**RESENHA**

***Peter S. Fosl, Hume's Scepticism: Pyrrhonian  
and Academic. Edinburg: Edinburgh  
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Peter Fosl's *Hume's Scepticism* is the culmination and most successful accomplishment of a research program in Hume's scholarship started by Richard Popkin 80 years ago. In the mid 40s', still as a graduate student at Yale, Popkin attended a seminar by Charles Hendel on Hume. I quote from his "Intellectual autobiography":

[Hendel] was stressing the naturalistic reading of Hume. I, in my usual opposition mode, wrote a paper on Hume and Sextus Empiricus, arguing that Hume was really a re-incarnated ancient Pyrrhonist. ... On a trip to New York, I told this to Paul Oskar Kristeller, who in his wise, studious way, told me that there might be a good reason for the similarities between Hume and Sextus. One, or I, should examine if Sextus was known at Hume's time, and if there was a prior skeptical tradition Hume was drawing from. Kristeller's comments provided me with an agenda for years to come.<sup>1</sup>

In order to make such accomplishment, besides Fosl's exegetical and analytical abilities, at least the following developments in the historiography of philosophy were required: 1<sup>st</sup>. / the development of very fine scholarship on ancient skepticism, Pyrrhonian and Academic, by Hellenistic scholars such as Myles Burnyeat, Michael Frede, Richard Bett and many others; 2<sup>nd</sup>. / the development of scholarship on early modern skepticism, extending, detailing, and frequently opposing Popkin's views by scholars such as Gianni Paganini, Luciano Floridi, John Laursen, Thomas Lennon and many others; and 3<sup>rd</sup>. / the development of careful analyses of Hume's skepticism by a number of scholars, from David Norton, Donald Livingston (both former students of Popkin's) and Robert Fogelin to Don Baxter and many others. Fosl builds on all these developments to present a fully skeptical Hume, well-grounded on Hume's intellectual background and on Hume's epistemological, metaphysical, moral, political and religious views.

Fosl's fully skeptical Hume is basically Pyrrhonian, since his interpretation is structured along Sextus' fourfold observances, namely, nature, passions, custom and the technical arts (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I.23), but it also incorporates specific Academic features such as the limitation of inquiry, intellectual integrity and modesty. I agree with Fosl's solution to the "long

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1 R. Popkin, "Intellectual autobiography: warts and all" in R. Watson and J. Force (eds.), *The Sceptical Mode in Modern Philosophy*. Essays in Honor of Richard H. Popkin. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1988, p. 109.

standing" question, as Aulus Gellius refers to it still in the second century, of whether Pyrrhonian and Academic ancient skepticisms are different.<sup>2</sup> They are different but, unlike Sextus' view, compatible and complementary, "sisters" as Fosl says (p. 70).

Besides possible direct reception,<sup>3</sup> Hume's skepticism comes in Fosl's view well rooted in Renaissance and early modern reappraisals of ancient skepticism, making his reading plausible both internally (within Hume's *corpus*) and externally (in Hume's intellectual context). If his interpretation is correct, Hume is the first full known Pyrrhonian after Sextus. Renaissance and early modern philosophers who reappraised Pyrrhonism and ancient Academic skepticism usually used these ancient philosophies as means to ends alien, and probably even contrary, to them, mainly as a path to Christian faith, as a weapon in religious wars, or to clear the way to introduce new philosophies. Montaigne for instance, though influenced by Pyrrhonism, never claims to be one and actually used it against the Calvinists in his "Apology for Raymond Sebond" (*Essays*, II, 12). La Mothe Le Vayer would be the best candidate for being the first Pyrrhonian after Sextus. But, sincerely or not, he limited the scope of *epochê* to natural things, leaving Christianity outside. Fosl shows the relevance of Gassendi's to Hume.<sup>4</sup> But Gassendi and the other constructive skeptics were mitigated skeptics of the Metrodorian type, that is, although without claiming certainty they did commit to philosophical realism.

Plausible as it is, the interpretation of a fully Pyrrhonian and Academic Hume does have difficulties. One major is that Sextus presents the fourfold observances as practical criteria. They are his reply to the *apraxia* objection and not the nucleus of a positive philosophy. Of course Fosl is aware of his innovative interpretation of the fourfold observances. For instance, he recognizes that he expands the extension of the technical arts to include Hume's skeptical arguments against the senses, reason and metaphysics. Sextus claims the fourfold observances are *compatible* with Pyrrhonism but not parts of it. For instance, Sextus was a methodical physicist and this was compatible, he claims, with his philosophical Pyrrhonism (*Outlines* I.237) for it was the technical art he adopted (I.24) probably as a way of living. But he does not present it as his skeptical way of philosophizing (I.8). Fosl's larger interpretation of this feature of ancient Pyrrhonism was required because early modern skeptics, unlike the ancient ones, always wanted to present positive views either in philosophy, science or religion. The crucial point is therefore whether these views are compatible with plain skepticism and I think Fosl successfully shows that Hume's are.

Another well-known obstacle to reading Hume as a Pyrrhonian is, in my view, also successfully overcome by Fosl. I mean Hume's identification of Pyrrhonism with an excessive skepticism untenable except in a momentary delirium. Indeed, as Hume says, "the most deplorable condition imaginable" (*Treatise of Human Nature*, I, VII, ed. Selby-Bigge, Oxford U. P, 1987, p. 269) from which the philosopher is saved because our nature obliges us to act.<sup>5</sup> However, as

2 "It is ... a question of long standing, which has been discussed by many Greek writers, whether the Pyrrhonian and Academic philosophers differ at all" (Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 11.5).

3 The only one I am aware of is from Cicero's *Academica* II.80: the cases of an image of a crooked oar immersed in water and the double visual image caused by pressing one's eyes. Cited in section 12, part I, of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Open Court, 1949, p. 168), they are examples of "the more trite topics, employed by sceptics in all ages, against the evidence of senses".

4 "Gassendi can be linked to Hume not only in his accepting the sciences but also in his articulating a science of appearances rather than a First Philosophy of the Real" (p. 139).

5 "The great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of skepticism is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life" (Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, XII, II, Open Court, 1949, p. 177).

Fosl points out, this view of “Pyrrhonism” is not correct (p. 77) and Hume’s skepticism itself may be approximated to its ancient predecessor, independently of his awareness of the similarity. Even considering that Hume had an accurate view of ancient Pyrrhonism, Fosl correctly notes how difficult would be for Hume to claim to be a Pyrrhonian (pp. 79-80). Pyrrhonism at the time was closely associated with irreligion and irreligion was quite dangerous. Academic skepticism, on the other hand, although also looked at suspiciously by religious zealots, was much more acceptable than Pyrrhonism. Fosl cites at p. 62 Huet’s point that, though these two branches were according to him essentially identical, skeptics preferred to be called Academic than Pyrrhonian because there were excellent Academic philosophers — of course Cicero is the most famous — and almost none Pyrrhonian. Furthermore, Diogenes Laertius’s reports of legends about Pyrrho’s life, describing him in very ridicule practical situations, bestowed a very bad reputation to Pyrrhonism, giving credibility to the *apraxia* charge. Montaigne, the major early modern skeptic (equal only to Hume and maybe Bayle), although he doubted Laertius’s stories about Pyrrho’s life, as did Bayle, said that the Academic constitutes the most important philosophical tradition ever. Augustine believed the Academic skeptics secretly believed in what Fosl calls the “Platonic first philosophy of the real,” reducing the scope of Academic *epochê*, as did Simon Foucher in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, to the sensible material world. Of course this reading of Academic skepticism made it much more acceptable in the Christian world than Pyrrhonism.

Hume declares himself in the first *Enquiry* an Academic skeptic without, of course, buying this unlikely Augustinian view but, on the contrary, as Fosl shows, rejecting all “first philosophies of the real.” And here it shall be noted that if Hume is the main disciple of the historical Academic skeptics, Descartes is the main disciple of the Academic “skeptics” as they were viewed by Augustine. For, as it is well known, he uses skepticism about the sensible world to access an idealist “first philosophy of the real” which stops being Platonic and becomes Cartesian. Hume’s view of ancient Academic skepticism is therefore much closer to the historical truth than his view of ancient Pyrrhonism. But there is also a major obstacle to characterize Hume’s philosophy as Academic skeptic. The Academics, from the Socrates of Plato’s aporetic dialogues — whom I take to be the major source of the Hellenistic Academic school — to Foucher were the most rationalist philosophers ever for they accepted nothing which could not be fully demonstrated, this being why they suspended judgment about everything. So how could be characterized as Academic a philosopher who claims that “reason is, and ought to be the slave of the passions”? (cited by Fosl at p. 311). I think Fosl’s solution (pp. 312-313 and 322-325) to this difficulty is one of the highlights of his book. Reason for Hume is a calm passion that moderates the violent anti-social ones, which are mainly feed by religious and political factions. Hume’s key passage on this is the first paragraph of section V of the first *Enquiry* where he says that Academic skepticism “strikes in with no disorderly passion of the human mind ... Every passion is mortified by it except the love of truth.”

Fosl outlines a section I would like to have written in my forthcoming book *Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721) and the Skeptics of his Time*.<sup>6</sup> It is at p. 326 where he indicates a similarity between Locke’s and Huet’s Metrodorian skepticisms, though Locke’s skepticism is more mitigated than Huet’s. Maybe one can say that the French skeptic occupies an intermediary position between Locke’s Metrodorian and Hume’s Clitomachian Academic skepticisms. They produced a sequence of increasing skeptical essays on human understanding, the first being Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, followed by Huet’s *Essay Concerning the Weakness of Human Understanding*,<sup>7</sup> and finally Hume’s *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*.

6 The book will be published in 2022 by Springer.

7 I cite the English translation of Huet’s *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l’esprit humain*, published only two years after the original 1723 French whose title brings to mind Hume’s *Treatise of*

Huet's epistemological work was published only posthumously, after Locke's *Essay*, whose first edition was published in the same year as Huet's *Censura Philosophiae Cartesianae* (1689). But Huet's most famous work at the time, the *Demonstratio Evangelica*, already presents his skepticism in the preface. It was published in 1679 when Huet personally gave Locke in Paris a copy to be given in England to Huet's scholar friend from Oxford Thomas Gale. Huet's skepticism may have been Locke's journey reading in his way back to England.

In exchange for outlining the missing section of my book I will finish my commentary outlining a missing section in Fosl's book, one dealing with Hume's reception of Pascal. Fosl cites Pascal at various dispersed occasions though less frequently than he cites Montaigne, Huet and Bayle and, unlike these and other early modern skeptics (Gassendi and Foucher), without giving him a specific section. I believe Pascal is Hume's main source of skepticism (and not only among the early modern). Fosl cites in the Introduction (p. 5) the most important fragment of Pascal's *Pensées* (number 131 in the Lafuma edition) for understanding Hume's view of "Pyrrhonism" as an excessive skepticism practically untenable because — I cite Pascal cited by Fosl — "Nature backs up helpless reason and stops it going so wildly astray." Fosl points out a similar view of Hume's and Bayle's (he does not mention Pascal's) of reason leading to an excessive and unsustainable "Pyrrhonism," and contrasts Bayle's fideist to Hume's non-dogmatic "naturalist" solution (pp. 144-145) to reason's extravagance.<sup>8</sup> Bayle himself — like Hume — reappraises Pascal's fragment cited by Fosl in the introduction. Besides the similarity of descriptions, Bayle refers to Pascal in this same remark C of the article "Pyrrho" of the *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. Pascal calls "Pyrrhonian" his skeptical reappraisal of Cartesian doubt about the external material world, a doubt which, unlike ancient Academic and Pyrrhonian doubt, cannot be sustained in ordinary life given its "hyperbolic" nature, as Descartes calls it.<sup>9</sup> Pascal calls "Pyrrhonism" Descartes's hyperbolic doubt and Bayle diffuses further Pascal's view in his article on Pyrrho by claiming that skepticism is much stronger in modernity than it was in antiquity. Pascal's and Bayle's post-Cartesian skepticisms are the two major direct sources of Hume's view of what he calls "Pyrrhonism." Note that none of Hume's references to Sextus, related by Fosl at pp. 155-156, concern — at least directly — epistemological issues. This in my view proves beyond any reasonable doubt that his source for epistemological skepticism is not Sextus but modern philosophers, Bayle and Pascal in particular. Other issues raised by Pascal are also important for Hume. One is pointed out by Fosl at p. 232, namely, on how much human nature and thought are framed by custom. Another is Pascal's topic of diversion ("*divertissement*") which displays, beyond the similar view of excessive untenable skepticism, Pascal's and Hume's contrary normative views.<sup>10</sup> While Pascal wants his reader to make all possible efforts to not deviate his mind from philosophical "Pyrrhonian" delirium, Hume wants the opposite. The ground of their difference explains, I think, why Fosl did not give a section to Pascal in his book. This is because, unlike all other modern skeptics — however fideist they were — Pascal uses skepticism to facilitate engagement in an ascetic religious life radically opposite to the skeptic one endorsed by Hume emphasized by Fosl. Hume's skepticism is much orientated to combat — I cite the title of section 6.3.4 of Fosl's book — "False Religion's Pathological Habits" (p. 243). True philosophy should instill calm rational passions; this is how

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*Human Nature.*

- 8 Fosl calls it "Apelletic," referring to the unexpected way the Pyrrhonian finds *ataraxia* after *epoché* (*Outlines* I. 28).
- 9 René Descartes, *Sixth Meditationem* in *Oeuvres*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, Paris: Vrin, 1996, vol. VII, p. 89.
- 10 For more details, see José Maia Neto, "Hume and Pascal: Pyrrhonism vs. Nature," *Hume Studies* 17:1 (1991): 41-49.

Hume according to Fosl reconciles the intellectual integrity of Academic skepticism with his view of reason slaved by passions. But Pascal is according to Hume the modern Diogenes, the extravagant philosopher, as Fosl recalls citing (at p. 258n74) the Dialogue that concludes the *Second Enquiry*. Hume's reception of Pascal is therefore highly ambivalent and although a major source of his skepticism, the fact that Hume is a fully Pyrrhonian and not someone using Pyrrhonism to religious purposes justifies after all Fosl's downplay of Pascal in his examination of Hume's modern skeptical background.