

*Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*. BY ROBERT J. FOGELIN.

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(invited review, forthcoming in the *Philosophical Quarterly*)

One believes whatever one believes only because one cannot help believing it. It happens to everybody, and should be no matter for regret or reproach. We are all born dogmatists. There are many people, however, who try to gain private benefit from our credulity. They should be ashamed of themselves, and are often punished by the law. And there are still other people who believe our doxastic dogmatism to be reasonably defensible on reflective grounds. It is this minority of philosophers and epistemologists that bothers the sceptic. He maintains that theoretical dogmatists too should be ashamed of themselves. And he tries to show them why by confuting their theories, while accepting the rules of their conceptual games. Dogmatism is a natural phenomenon, and so is the desire to defend it. Hence the toils of the sceptic never end. Fogelin's book is the most recent of them.

The work falls into two parts that fit nicely together, on the basis of a common neo-Pyrrhonian perspective consisting of five premises, two historical and three epistemological:

H.1) Ancient Pyrrhonism (i) takes philosophy as one of its chief targets; (ii) accepts self-refuting arguments as ultimate dialectical weapons that annihilate both their target and themselves; and (iii) is "urbane" (the Pyrrhonist is happy to believe most of the things that ordinary people assent to, directing his *epoche* only towards scientific and philosophical theories), not "rustic" (the Pyrrhonist has no beliefs whatsoever);

H.2) (i) "there is an uncanny resemblance between the problems posed by Agrippa's Five Modes and those that contemporary epistemologists address under the heading of the theory of justification"; but (ii) such a resemblance has "gone largely unnoticed" (p. 11);

E.1) the arguments of ancient Pyrrhonism can be translated into our philosophical language;

E.2) once translated, they are sufficiently powerful to undermine any claim the neo-dogmatists might wish to make in favour of their theories;

E.3) the conclusion is that "things are now largely as Sextus Empiricus left them almost two thousand years ago" (p.11).

On the basis of such premises, Fogelin discusses two central areas in contemporary epistemology: the Gettier-type problems faced by the definition of knowledge in terms of justified true beliefs, and the meta-epistemological problems faced by the theories of justification. The former issue, once the technical minutiae are removed, is rather simple: as far as empirical knowledge is concerned, the best of all epistemic behaviours is never sufficient to ensure that our beliefs may not turn out to be justified but false - warns the sceptic - or true, but just through sheer luck - warns Gettier - revealing, in both cases, that we do not know what we are talking about. Now if I have understood him properly, Fogelin shows, in a satisfactory manner, that:

a) any Gettier counter-example contains two notions of justification, one *deontic* (if S is justified in believing that p then his doxastic behaviour is epistemically responsible) and the other *objective* (if S is justified in believing that p then S believes that p on grounds that establish its truth);

b) any Gettier counter-example is constructed on the basis of "a double informational setting", that is a dichotomy between our omniscient status concerning the situation in which S must make up his mind, and the limited amount of information that S is provided with. The result is that S does his best only in a *deontic sense*, but - from our God's eye perspective - we can assert that, *objectively*, he still fails to grasp the actual reasons behind the truth of his belief, hence disclosing no real knowledge of what he is talking about;

c) theories that seek to solve Gettier counterexamples by working on the deontic sense of justification are bound to accept the dichotomy and hence to fail (chapters 2-4);

d) on a purely descriptive basis, a theory that puts enough stress on the objective sense of the notion of justification avoids the "double informational setting" and would represent a successful approach to Gettier counterexamples;

e) in so far as our linguistic conventions treat the notion of justification also in the objective sense, we are capable of asserting, correctly, that S knows that p whenever p is true and S believes that p for reasons that make p true;

f) there is, however, no way in which a theory of justification can prove that S knows that p without begging the question of its own validation.

The latter point is developed in the second half of the book, where theories of justification are shown to be incapable of withstanding the impact of Agrippa's three modes. In an attempt to provide its own justification, any theory will either run into a vicious circle, start from an arbitrary assumption or move into an endless regress. This leaves us with a Humean or urban kind of Pyrrhonism: we must suspend judgement when dialectically involved in a dogmatist context, but follow our common beliefs and habits in ordinary life.

Though not a sceptic myself, I believe that contemporary analytic epistemology needs to be reminded that its programme of research has been a failure at least since the third century AD, and that Fogelin does so in a very elegant way. The chapter on Davidson, for example, is of such clarity and insight that the reader should not miss it, even if this were the only chapter she read. But a review would not be worth its name if it did not attempt to point out at least some of the limitations of the book under discussion. For reasons of space I shall concentrate on two major problems only.

Fogelin's elaboration on H.1.iii is sometimes misleading. Firstly, he does not stress enough the fact that Barnes' discussion of "rustic" vs. "urban" interpretations of Pyrrhonism concerns the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. So, in his argument against Barnes, Fogelin shifts from asserting, with Barnes, that "there are no texts in the *Outlines*" in favour of a rustic interpretation (pp. 6, 9), to the much more controversial assertion that "there are no other texts" in its favour (p. 8), thus dismissing Diogenes Laertius' *Life of Pyrrho* as an interesting, though external, source. Secondly, even if Fogelin were right in describing the kind of Pyrrhonism presented in the *Outlines* as "urban", the latter cannot be transfigured into a defence of common sense. I believe that, when read carefully, Fogelin does not commit such a mistake. But then statements like "traditional Pyrrhonists, though *defenders of common beliefs against the criticisms of dogmatic philosophy*, were not proponents of a philosophy of common sense" (p. 10, emphasis added) or "In the Introduction I pictured the Pyrrhonian skeptic going through the world *claiming to know certain things*, and sometimes *claiming to be sure or even absolutely dead certain of them*."

(p. 88, repeated on p. 192, emphasis added) are hyperbole, to be interpreted within the context of the book *cum grano salis*. Indeed, nowhere in the Introduction does Fogelin commit such an error as picturing the sceptic as someone who claims to know and to have certainties. He would have been forced to do so on the basis of Frede's interpretation of Sextus Empiricus, and this is not possible, given Sextus' texts. What Fogelin does, following Frede, is to limit the sceptical attack, developed by Sextus, to philosophy and scientific disciplines. This is obviously different from making him claim to know certain things. Whether "urban" or "rustic", Pyrrhonism accepts the possibility of a gap between theory - suspension of judgement - and practice, i.e. the passive acceptance, for lack of alternatives, of what appears to be the case. And the best way of expressing the point is by noting, as Fogelin does elsewhere, that "the Pyrrhonist undogmatically accepts the everyday epistemic practices of his culture" (p. 195), so that in ordinary life he can "speak and act in common, sensible ways" (p. 99). The Pyrrhonist follows his beliefs very much as my GP smokes cigarettes.

Second problem: Fogelin is partially wrong about H.2. Acknowledgement of the resemblance must be sought under the heading of *the problem of the criterion* or, more often, *of the diallelus*. One would then discover that the resemblance is not "uncanny", and that the problem discussed by Fogelin has three complex roots in the history of epistemology: (a) the contemporary debate within the German tradition, e.g. Albert's "Münchhausen-Trilemma", which can be traced to its Kantian origins (Hegel's "Scholasticus' absurd resolution") through the neo-Kantian and Popperian discussion of "Fries' trilemma"; (b) that within the English tradition (Chisholm's *Problem of the Criterion*), which has Cartesian and sceptical origins through the discussion of the "Cartesian circle" (e.g. Gassendi) and Montaigne's *rouet*; and (c) Sextus Empiricus' *diallelus*, to which both traditions are to be connected. Unfortunately, Fogelin's historical oversight has two major consequences. First, the chapter on Chisholm does not profit from an analysis of the latter's paper "The Problem of the Criterion", now chapter five of *The Foundations of Knowing*, a text in which Chisholm discusses Agrippa's three modes explicitly and at length. It is to Fogelin's credit that he is capable of getting close to Chisholm's position even without such a source. The second consequence is that the work is narrower and less

interesting than it could have been, had Fogelin attempted to work on the other European traditions within which the *diallelus* has had such a consequential role, from Kant's transcendental assimilation of the sceptical challenge to Popper's fallibilism. Empiricism has been a blind alley since Sextus' time. On this I thoroughly agree with Fogelin. But there are alternatives.

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