

REVIEW OF PETER S. FOSL
Hume's Skepticism: Pyrrhonian and Academic

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Peter Fosl's *Hume's Skepticism: Pyrrhonian and Academic*, is a remarkably comprehensive study about the impact of Pyrrhonian and Academic skepticism on David Hume's philosophy. The book revisits the question about the influence of the two ancient skeptical schools on Hume's thought and argues in favor of the thesis that Hume's form of skepticism is "radical" and "hybrid," insofar as it is composed of both Pyrrhonian and Academic strands (p. 2). The book is divided into two parts. Part I provides an extraordinarily well documented overview of the development of both Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism during modernity. It details the ancient origins and modern development of both skeptical schools by emphasizing the authors that most crucially informed Hume's views, such as Cicero, Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne, Bayle, Foucher, and Huet. Using the most recent scholarship to discuss both textual influences and philosophical nuances among different skeptical views, Fosl provides a thorough history of skepticism on which scholars could build on the future.

Part II of the book develops the Pyrrhonian and, to a lesser extent, Academic themes in Hume's thought by surveying his application of the Pyrrhonian fourfold practical observances, namely, "the guidance of nature, the constraint of the passions, the tradition of laws and customs, and the instruction of the arts" (PH. I, 12. 23). Broadly speaking, Fosl interprets Hume's notions and treatments of nature and common life (Ch. 5), habit and custom (Ch. 6), political interaction and religious practice (Ch. 7), and the passions (Ch. 8) as analogues to the Pyrrhonian observances. Interestingly, though, in chapter 8 Fosl also refers to the Academic aspects of Hume's theory of belief, particularly to his notion of probability. Taken together, the chapters comprising Part II offer a novel interpretation on some underappreciated skeptical features of Hume's thought and a suggestive, well-defended characterization of his overall philosophy.

Fosl's provocative assertions have raised some questions for me that I think are worth underscoring. In the first place, Fosl's thesis, that Hume's skepticism is a hybrid of Academicism and Pyrrhonism, seems challenged by another understated, but sufficiently forceful thesis, in favor of a primarily Pyrrhonian Humean skepticism. In fact, Fosl argues that, notwithstanding Hume's disavowal of Pyrrhonism on the grounds of its radical *epochê* and his openly embracing Academic skepticism due to its moderate doxastic commitments, "many dimensions of Hume's thought bear remarkable similarities to [Pyrrhonism's] most important formulations – so much so that it would be neglectful and misleading to describe Humean skepticism as *anything but deeply Pyrrhonian*" (p. 79, my emphasis). Furthermore, Fosl expressly endorses what he calls a "hermeneutics of suspicion," according to which, Hume's identification with Academic skepticism may actually be a way to mask his own Pyrrhonian leanings: "There are (...) good reasons to think that Hume suppressed in his publications a Pyrrhonian self-understanding of his work. (...) considerations of audience and reputation would have led any prudent and ambitious author of Hume's time to resist characterization of his or her work as Pyrrhonian. In either case (accident or suppression), as a matter of

philosophical interpretation (...), *Hume's skeptical philosophy is reasonably and properly read as profoundly Pyrrhonian*" (p. 79, my emphasis). While I agree that interpreters should not take at face value many of Hume's assertions concerning his personal philosophical allegiances, I am concerned that affirming that Hume has a "profoundly Pyrrhonian" outlook risks overlooking important aspects of Hume's debt to Academic skepticism. Since each of the chapters in the second part of the book correspond to one of the Pyrrhonian practical observances, it seems that Fosl wants to build a strong case for the Pyrrhonian elements of Hume's thought to the detriment of its Academic lineage. Fosl himself seems to recognize this point, when he states: "To the extent that these four ways of practicing skepticism describe the central features of Humean thought, Hume's skeptical philosophy itself *can be reasonably understood to be a way of practicing Pyrrhonism*" (P. 87, my emphasis). Even though Fosl does explore Hume's adoption of the Clitomachean variant of Academic skepticism in chapter 8, he nevertheless seems to believe that, ultimately, Hume's skepticism can be rightly understood as whole Pyrrhonian, with a tinge of Academicism, rather than constituting a genuine hybrid of the two. In this way, it appears as if Fosl may inadvertently be stepping on his own (really interesting) contention.

In the second place, there is the question about the possibility of making compatible Academic and Pyrrhonian versions of skepticism. Hume's modern skeptical predecessors, such as Bayle and Huet, as Fosl indicates, regarded Pyrrhonism and Academic skepticism not as contradictory but as complementary outlooks (p. 169), and this may have also led Hume to adopt a mixture of the two perspectives. Fosl observes: "For Hume (...) on substantial matters of philosophical practice, Pyrrhonism and Academicism are neither contraries, nor competitors, but instead overlap, extend, complement and reinforce one another in the distinctive formulation of skepticism he advances, just as Bayle and Huet suggest they can." (p. 169). As relevant as this qualification is, we should not forget that Hume emphatically opposes the *radical* or unlimited suspension of Pyrrhonians to the *mitigated* doubt of Academics (EHU. 12, 2.21 -3.26 SBN 158-163). This, in my view, should lead us to take to heart his intention of adopting a less strict form of *epochê* and, as a consequence, to thoroughly explore his Academicism. But Fosl instead defends a Humean adoption of the broader Pyrrhonian suspension: "Hume (...) adopts the Pyrrhonian *epochê* comprehensively with regard to philosophical metaphysics and epistemology, and may therefore rightly be understood to be *profoundly Pyrrhonian*" (p. 94, my emphasis). Of course, the issue is intricate and deserves more scholarly discussion. But I also think that regardless of how radical Hume's contemporaries deemed his skepticism or how subversive his philosophy continues to be seen today, the fact that he claimed to be a "mitigated skeptic" cannot be so easily dismissed. At the very least, making the Pyrrhonian broader suspension compatible with the Academic principle of non-dogmatically accepting the persuasive (*to pithanon*) requires more elaboration than provided in the book.

Perhaps I am being too hasty and alluding to Hume as a *radical* skeptic was not intended by Fosl to indicate that Hume recommended an unlimited suspension but rather that he was committed to the rejection of any sort of dogmatism, which is the aim of both Pyrrhonism and Academic skepticism (of any skepticism, for that matter). If this is the case, Fosl may have simply wanted to argue, as he does at the end of the book, that Hume was a "thoroughgoing skeptic" (p. 332), rather than that he was a "radical" one. Being a *radical* sceptic involves a particular view of the scope and end of *epochê* (on which Pyrrhonians and New Academics, as Hume knew well, wholly differed), while being a wholly skeptical philosopher is compatible with both Pyrrhonism and Clitomachean Academic skepticism.

Some of the worries just expressed may be related to the fact that, although Fosl's account of the sources, both Pyrrhonian and Academic, that may have

reached Hume is very exhaustive, sometimes the book falls short of separating the skeptical themes and sources of Pyrrhonism from those that are Academic. Some of this is unavoidable since Pyrrhonism undeniably drew heavily from the Academic schools, particularly from Arcesilaus's and Carneades's argumentative strategies. But, again, I am concerned that it provides more fodder for undercutting Fosl's provocative overt thesis that Hume's skepticism is a hybrid of the two traditions in favor of the implicit one that his skepticism is deeply Pyrrhonian. This is especially the case because sometimes Fosl identifies a feature of Hume's skepticism as Pyrrhonian that could very well have had an Academic origin, such as when he speaks about Aenesidemus's tropes on the deceitfulness of our senses (p. 89) or on the disagreement among opinions and theories (p. 91), which are present in both Sextus' *Outlines* and Cicero's *Academica*. Of course, a more exact balance of which skeptical arguments and sources are strictly Pyrrhonian and Academic requires a greater exegetical effort than the book aimed at providing and I certainly find no fault in this decision. But perhaps the unavoidable imprecisions would have been alleviated by a more straightforward recognition of the duplicity of sources for some common skeptical themes.

Given what I have just said, it will likely come as no surprise that I would have liked to see some of Fosl's more innovative points developed further. In particular, in Chapter 1 Fosl distinguishes between two variants of Academic/Carneadean probabilism — the Clitomachean strand, involving non-dogmatic commitments, and the Metrodorian adaptation, which allows assent to probabilities, and thus, epistemic claims on how things probably really are (pp. 31-32). He claims — correctly, in my opinion — that Hume's Academicism belongs to the Clitomachean sort, insofar as it only allows for a non-dogmatic acceptance of claims that withstand skeptical examination: "Hume (...) is a Clitomachean non-realist kind of Academic, both in terms of metaphysics and epistemology. Hume's skepticism does not entail making positive epistemological claims about the true and the real, probable or otherwise, and it does not involve any positive epistemological claims (...)." (p. 35). Fosl further develops this portrayal of Hume as a Clitomachean skeptic in Chapter 8, with his examination of Hume's theory of belief and his notion of probability, where he contends, against interpretations of Hume as a skeptical realist (p. 11), that Hume does not recommend a dogmatic adoption of probable belief, in the fashion of the Metrodorian tradition, which was followed, among other modern philosophers, by Locke (pp. 325-328). I think this is a sound and novel thesis, but I wish it was explored in more depth and, in particular, I wish it were accompanied by a more thorough examination of how Academic Clitomachean skepticism works in ways that allow Hume to "methodize and correct" the beliefs of common life (E. 12.25, SBN 161).

As I hope is abundantly clear, Fosl's book is novel, provocative and opens up paths for various possible lines of research in the history of skepticism. In my view, one of them concerns the extent to which we can identify among modern Academic skeptics their Clitomachean or Metrodorian inclinations. Fosl has made a wonderful job of indicating some of the most relevant modern Academic skeptics' affinities. In addition to the very substantial questions his work raises, Fosl deftly shows in his book that, as a skeptic through and through, Hume examined probabilities concerning issues of science, metaphysics, and religion, and remained non-dogmatic in all of his philosophical conclusions.