Sextus Empiricus: Against the Physicists translated and edited by Richard Bett

Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press 2012. Pp. xxxiv+178. ISBN 978-0-521-51391-3. Cloth \$95.00

Reviewed by Katja Maria Vogt Columbia University kv2101@columbia.edu

What are sceptics doing when they do physics? Richard Bett's new translation of Sextus Empiricus' Against the Physicists [AP] should help shed light on this question. In my view, it will do so by making AP eminently more readable than it previously was. Readability, here, includes many features relevant to philosophical analysis: above all, a precise translation, a crisp introduction, and a masterful focus on the structure of the argument. In a nutshell, Bett offers a philosopher's translation. It brings out the precise version of scepticism found in AP. And it will enable those who care primarily about the topics discussed in AP—god, causation, body, parts and whole, place, time, number, generation and perishing—to access arguments of independent interest.

Bett's introduction to *AP* achieves much in a short space: it situates the treatise within Sextus' work and sketches longstanding issues about different versions of Pyrrhonian scepticism. Bett's *AP* completes his series of translations of comparable treatises by Sextus, namely, *Against the Ethicists* (1997) and *Against the Logicians* (2005). These three texts are traditionally contained in a larger work called *Against the Mathematicians* [*M*], wherein books 7–8 cover logic, books 9–10 are devoted to physics, and book 11 to ethics. Bett argues, more clearly than I have seen before, that referring to the three treatises as *M* 7–8, *M* 9–10, and *M* 11 is nonsense. So is the customary translation of the collective Greek title, *Against the Mathematicians*, since «Πρός μαθηματικούς» means 'Against the Learned' [ix]. The traditional rendering is not just a mistranslation. It is misleading in so far as it suggests a focus on mathematics that is not characteristic of Pyrrhonism or of the relevant dogmatic philosophies. And the title *Against the Learned* really only

works for M 1–6, a self-standing treatise against grammarians, rhetoricians, geometers, arithmeticians, astrologers, and musicians.

Bett continues to make the case for a position that he has occupied for years, namely, that the *Outlines* represent a later and more sophisticated stage in Sextus' thinking than the *M*-treatises. The latter at times show signs of an earlier, more dogmatic scepticism [xxiii], which arrives at conclusions such as 'god (cause, etc.) does not exist' or 'nothing is added to anything' and so on. Such conclusions are sometimes called negatively dogmatic. Though they differ from the claims of non-sceptical philosophers precisely by being 'negative', they are conclusions in which the world is said to be a certain way. In the *M*-treatises, Sextus seems to make some effort to combine such negative dogmatism and suspension of judgment. By the time he writes the *Outlines*, Sextus may have been more acutely aware of the deep differences between the two. Instead of integrations that work more-or-less, he aims for a consistently sceptical outlook—the outlook of suspension of judgment and continued investigation.

In his comments on these matters, Bett says that a version of Pyrrhonism associated with Aenesidemus shines through, marked by 'a willingness to deny the existence of various things posited by the dogmatists'. Further, he notes that at times it looks as if the purpose was to 'undermine the dogmatists' positions' rather than create suspension of judgment [xxii]. My prediction is that, with the help of Bett's translation, scholars will argue that there is more to be said. Here I mention just two observations. There may be a tension between the work's title, *Against the Physicists*, and the ambition to arrive at conclusions in physics—conclusions about cause, time, and so on. Relatedly, there may be two different kinds of negatively dogmatic conclusions, namely, that some dogmatists are wrong or that some entity of which they offer an account does not exist. Bett highlights that the scepticism of *AP* is quite concerned with the *existence* of certain entities—and that is an aspect of Pyrrhonism which continues to be under-explored.

Bett's translations of the *M*-treatises may appear to be a paradoxical undertaking. Bett assesses these treatises as, comparatively speaking, flawed. He even remarks at the end of his introduction that this concession may not make for good advertising [xxiv]. But the care Bett puts into translating *AP* may lead one to suspect that, even if he thinks the scepticism of the *Outlines* is more sophisticated, there is something worthwhile in understanding the history of Pyrrhonism. As I would put things, the metaphysical bent of earlier scepticism—which comes out in sceptical conclusions such as 'there no more are than are not causes' [M 9.195]—may not work *as scepticism*. Pyrrhonists arrive at a conclusion, cease investigating, and thus no longer merit the designation of sceptics (which literally means 'investigators'). And yet the kind of metaphysics that employs the 'no more this than that' phrase, presumably to describe reality as indeterminate, may be interesting in its own right.

Bett does not make this point, though his earlier publications on Pyrrho have done much to draw attention to the metaphysical side of early Pyrrhonism. His own way of counteracting the concession that *AP* is less sophisticated than the *Outlines* is either an intentional understatement or it undersells the contents of the book. He remarks that '[i]n compensation...*Against the Physicists* is a much fuller and richer treatment of its material' [xxiv]. This may sound as if *AP* was just a lot of text, a wordy version that philosophers are unlikely to prefer to more concise writing. This, I suspect, is the received view. In Bury's translation for the Loeb series, *AP* may appear just to drag on and on, with ever more quotes on this and that. Bett could have been, I think, more on the side of the text that he is presenting. In the Greek and in his translation, it contains arguments on causation, parts and whole, and so on, that are sophisticated.

Admittedly these are not, properly speaking, sceptical arguments. They are arguments that sceptics invoke on one side of a debate that explores opposing views. They are either ascribed to some philosophers or formulated by the sceptics as lines of arguments one encounters (and in this latter case, though they are not sceptical arguments *sensu stricto*, they bear witness to the philosophical sharpness with which sceptics explore the options). Scholars of ancient scepticism tend to focus elsewhere, namely, on how to understand the structure of sceptical investigation. But philosophers interested in, say, causation or parts and wholes, would be well served by picking some particular stretches of text, simply with a view to figuring out whether a given argument is compelling.

Some stretches of Aristotle's metaphysics or physics receive this kind of attention. Here scholars have long supplied translations that enable others, those who do not care primarily about ancient philosophy but, say, about parts and wholes, to dissect a passage solely because it contains an argument one is interested in. The standard translation of *AP* prior to Bett's translation, Bury's translation in the Loeb Series, does not invite this kind of approach. Whatever its virtues are, it does not suggest that the translator attends to the subtleties of philosophical theories. Bett's translation achieves precisely this. It makes accessible a wide range of philosophically sophisticated arguments, arguments that can be studied independently of larger–scale interests in antiquity. Thus, there is a way in which sophistication is lacking in *AP*, namely, in so far as Sextus' own ways of presenting scepticism become more sophisticated later on when he writes the *Outlines*. But there is another way in which sophistication is far from lacking in *AP*, namely, in so far as any number of subtle arguments are adduced on both sides of a given question.

Perhaps this applies in particular to the examples that I have just mentioned, causation and parts and wholes, where the questions that philosophers ask today involve some longstanding puzzles. Matters look different for Sextus' longest discussion within *AP*, on god. Here one may not share the most basic premise, namely, that god is a topic—the most fundamental topic—of physics. Nevertheless, Sextus' discussion has some real virtues, perhaps most conspicuously in aiming to keep separate the question of how it is that all human beings appear to have a notion of god and the question of whether god exists. In Bett's translation, this mini-treatise on god could be included in a reading list in the philosophy of religion. It would make an entirely respectable companion for more widely known historical texts.

A further remark in Bett's introduction makes for a nice transition to some comments about his translation. Discussing why Sextus is neither a doxographer nor a 'copyist', Bett asks whether he 'may offer a purely personal impression'. This impression is

that Sextus' writing has a consistent authorial personality, a voice that is distinctively his own; in all his works there is the same dry wit, the same energetic but low-key approach to laying out the arguments on either side, and the occasional delight at skewering the dogmatists' positions. [xix–xx]

If I too may offer a personal impression, I would say that Sextus has found his equal in Bett as his translator. This shows in brief phrases, as when Bett lets Sextus speak of the 'chorus of Academics' [M 9.1]. It also shows in a nice willingness to be literal. For example, after reporting Aristotle's views on god, Sextus says «[τ]οιοῦτος μèν καὶ ὁ Ἀριςτοτέλης». In Bury's translation, this means '[s]uch, then, was the view of Aristotle,' hiding that Sextus does not appear to hold Aristotle in the kind of esteem that readers may expect. Indeed, Sextus takes the Stoics much more seriously than Aristotle. The Stoics, he assumes, came up with the 'best' framework in physics [M 9.12]. This evaluation may be rather inconceivable for many in the field. It takes a seasoned researcher on Hellenistic philosophy, someone with some sympathies for sceptics and Stoics, to translate as Bett does, '[t]hat is what Aristotle is like'.

Bett's rendering of Sextus' formulations is as dry and understated as these very formulations throughout. It ends, for example, with a curt 'enough said' [M 10.351], which Bury made more charming ('Let these, then, be our answers to those of the philosophers who are Physicists'). Bett's translation is, on the whole, guite literal, which will help readers who do not want to turn to the Greek text. The Greek shines through remarkably well and one need not fear that distinctions or oddities are glossed over. Bett's translation includes a helpful glossary of core terminology. Some of the entries have a low-key, ordinary tone that one rarely finds when translators aim to capture technical terms. For example, Bett translates «ἀναιρῶ» as 'do away with'. In spite of its colloquial tone, this verb serves as a technical expression. At the more dogmatic moments in AP, Sextus says that sceptics 'do away with' god, cause, and so on, rather than saying that they suspend judgment on these matters. Bett's translation captures an ambiguity in Sextus' sceptical investigations, between a calling into question of the existence of *X*, and a calling into question of theories about *X*. If the sceptics 'do away with X'—god, cause, place, time, and so on—this may include aspects of not positing *X*'s existence as well as aspects of arguing against theories that offer accounts of X.

Another interpretive choice worth mentioning is 'impasse' as translation for «àπορία». This is very close to the Greek: «àπορία» means literally that there is no further road, no way out, or no available path. When a thinker arrives at an impasse, there is, as it were, no further thought or argument or theory that can be tried out. All ideas that presently seem available have been explored. The cognizer finds herself coming to a halt, though not because she has identified a route that led to her goal. In *AP*, Sextus often describes the outcome of sceptical investigation in terms of àπορία and he refers to the sceptics (in Bett's translation) as 'bringers of impasse' [*M* 10.340]. Here Bett's literalness is more than just helpful. It is crucial for avoiding philosophical confusion. Bury employs an expression that, presumably, sounds more familiar, calling the sceptics 'Doubters'. This translation resembles a traditional description of the state of mind in which one is 'stuck': one is 'perplexed'. And yet it is pernicious: it suggests that ancient scepticism is essentially like modern scepticism, concerned with doubt to the extent that ancient sceptics would call themselves doubters. Bett's translation, on the contrary, conveys an acute awareness of the ways in which translations can lead readers down the wrong path and a commitment to avoid setting off misleading chains of associations.

Bett emphasizes that Sextus begins AP by saying that he will address basic issues in physics [xiii–xiv]. Rather than study this-or-that in a piecemeal fashion, the sceptics investigate fundamental matters. Arguments formulated here will turn out to be arguments 'against everything', as when towers crumble because the foundations of a building are torn away [M 9.1-2]. What does it mean that the sceptics argue against everything?

The idea that the sceptics' arguments will shatter the edifice of physics by destroying the foundations is reminiscent of Cartesian scepticism and, hence, of a kind of scepticism that differs from Pyrrhonism by being systematic—or so scholars tend to assume. Apart from the metaphor of tearing down a building, Sextus uses a further comparison. Others may argue against dogmatists like those who catch birds with lime and a twig. The sceptics cast a net, aiming for a method that is all-encompassing. Sextus seems to invoke two sorts of assumptions, that certain parts of physical theory are more *fundamental* and that they are more *general* than others. Either way, getting them right—or failing to do so—affects all of physics. Can Sextus afford these assumptions? Can a sceptic presuppose that there is a structure to physics such that arguments against certain claims are in effect arguments against 'everything'?

Sextus' transition to physics in the *Outlines* is a toned-down version of the beginning of *Against the Physicists*. In a brief sentence, Sextus says that his method will be similar to the one employed in logic. He will not address each dogmatic statement in order but address more general matters, ones that are inclusive of the rest [*PH* 3.1]. This is not altogether different from the announcement in *AP*. But it bears the traces of other 'polishing' that Sextus seems to do in the *Outlines*. By skipping the metaphors and the bravado of *AP*, Sextus almost hides that the material which he is about to

present has a systematic structure. Readers may perceive his discussion of physics in the *Outlines* as addressing topics that dogmatic physics considers important, no more and no less. And this may well suit Sextus. I share Bett's instincts about the relative chronology and the relative sophistication of the *Outlines* as compared to the *M*-treatises. The systematic pretensions of *AP* may belong to those aspects of earlier Pyrrhonism that Sextus later on prefers to downplay.

Contrary to Sextus' introduction in *AP*, scepticism seems better served by a piecemeal approach. In part, this is because, otherwise, the story that sceptics investigate because they are disquieted by discrepancies loses plausibility [*Outlines* 1.12]. For it to make sense, sceptics need to go after puzzles as they arise for them, rather than presuppose a systematic picture of all of physics, as if it were a roadmap for tearing it all down. In part, this is because they otherwise appear to be too much on board with dogmatic assumptions about fundamentality. Who says, for example, that the most important topic in physics is god/gods? Some dogmatists do, others do not. Consider another example. In the *Outlines*, a short discussion of matter is inserted between the chapters on causation and the chapters on bodies ('corporeals'). Given Stoic premises, that appears unnecessary. The 'material principle' is corporeal and it is passively affected. Hence, its discussion is plausibly included in discussions of bodies and of that which is passively affected.

Could this be the underlying rationale of the division into topics in *AP*? In *AP*, matter does not receive treatment in a separate chapter. Arguably, Sextus here ties himself rather closely to a particular dogmatic outlook. A critic of *AP* may say that, with extensive discussion of god and pretty much no discussion of matter, Sextus has not discussed physics. Rather than tearing down an edifice by calling into question its foundations, and rather than casting the net widely, he may have failed to address what physics is about. The discussion of physics in the *Outlines* is less vulnerable to these sorts of objections. Though it addresses topics that are basic to dogmatic physics, it may be read as engaging with those questions that arise for anyone who participates in philosophical conversations at the time.

A more extensive line of questioning, one that I shall not pursue here, is invited by Bett's emphasis on the systematic nature of AP and on the idea that the treatise argues 'against everything'. It may be asked whether, if the sceptics arrive at suspension of judgment on the existence of god, cause, bod-

ies, time, and so on, they arrive at suspension of judgment on the existence of the physical world—and whether this makes them rather interesting competitors of external world sceptics in early modern and modern philosophy. This is just one example, included here to highlight how far-reaching the upshot may be of working closely with Bett's new translation of *Against the Physicists*.