

Jessica N. Berry

Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition.

Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press 2011.

248 pages

US\$65.00 (cloth ISBN 978-19-536842-0)

Nietzsche published several strongly skeptical sounding remarks, some of which are of a very general scope. He also maintained theses and pursued theories apparently in contradiction to his skepticism. Berry's book offers readers an opportunity to think through this apparent contradiction and to consider interesting and rather unexpected ways of reconciling these two tendencies.

Berry's most important point is that Nietzsche's skepticism resembles not modern, but rather ancient skepticism, and in particular Pyrrhonian skepticism as exemplified by several figures, most prominently Sextus Empiricus. The main distinction here is that modern skeptics concentrate on truth or knowledge, while ancient skeptics focus on belief. The Pyrrhonian tradition treats thinkers who deny truth or knowledge as negative dogmatists because they maintain a belief about the impossibility of truth or knowledge. It treats those who make knowledge or truth claims as dogmatists (or positive dogmatists) for maintaining their positive beliefs. The Pyrrhonian fights and avoids both kinds of dogmatism by working toward suspension of belief (*epochē*).

Suspension of belief does not involve the rejection of all beliefs, however. The Pyrrhonian skeptic is free to embrace obvious beliefs, such as that snow is cold, or that the king is old. Such beliefs are either evident to the senses, or evident through common convention, or both. Dogmatism of either kind is unlikely to involve itself with such propositions, and the Pyrrhonian, whose philosophy is useful only in a conflict with dogmatism, is at a loss to do anything with such propositions other than to accept them.

Berry believes that 'most interpretations of Nietzsche's work employ "skepticism" in a wholly colloquial sense, as a nontechnical term requiring no special treatment or explanation' and 'without any head-on engagement' with the methods, history or figures of philosophical skepticism (4). If Nietzsche is a skeptic in this loose, undefined sense, he can be no more or less a skeptic than the Pope (taking the Pope too as a skeptic in this broad sense). That is, the attribution is uninformative. Berry promises to distinguish types of philosophical skepticism, especially among the ancient schools, and to argue for treating Nietzsche as most akin to an ancient, Pyrrhonian skeptic, from among all of the types of skeptic that philosophy knows about. Those who study her work will be able to make truly informative claims about Nietzsche and skepticism.

Berry's book is eminently readable, providing many notes of comparison and contrast, all pointing us toward ancient as opposed to modern skepticism. This resemblance may not be coincidental, for Nietzsche studied the ancient skeptical tradition fairly thoroughly, both as a student and a professor of philology. Meanwhile Montaigne, one of Nietzsche's favorites, is treated by Berry as an example of a recent Pyrrhonian

skeptic. Whether the resemblance is coincidental or not, however, is the least of Berry's concerns, as she concentrates mainly on drawing parallels as clearly as possible.

The book consists of six chapters along with an introduction, conclusion, bibliography and index. Among its many valuable and important contributions is its opening up for discussion Nietzsche's actual remarks about skepticism. His views do not appear to be wholly coherent. On the one hand, he calls the skeptic the most honest and respectable type of philosopher, and on the other he claims that skepticism is 'the most spiritual expression of a certain complex physiological condition that in layman's terms is called weak nerves or a sickly constitution' and observes that it is 'prescribed by physicians today as a protection against "spirit" and its underground rumblings' (BGE 208). In another case he holds that 'every great degree of caution in inferring, every skeptical disposition, is a great danger to life' (GS 111), and he also looks forward to a 'more dangerous and harder new type of skepticism' (BGE 209). These and other conflicting remarks present a significant challenge to interpreters. They have largely escaped close scrutiny, however, until they became central to Berry's project.

Berry's discussion of Nietzsche's naturalism as a non-dogmatic belief that is consonant with Pyrrhonism is another valuable contribution. Yet another has to do with his perspectivism. Among the more unexpected points of resemblance to Pyrrhonian practice are Nietzsche's remarks on health. The Pyrrhonists believed that their practice of eschewing belief in areas that were not highly evident brought about a calmness and cheerfulness that they identified with happiness, the highest value in ancient philosophy. Berry is able to make a convincing case that something similar is afoot in Nietzsche's discussions of what he called 'the great health'. He was obviously aware of the ancient method of playing a dogma off against its negation for the sake of suspending belief altogether on some matters. But the degree to which this appears in his discussions of health has not been a subject for discussion until now.

Perhaps the most momentous of Berry's points, however, concerns morality—in particular her contention that Nietzsche's 'immoralism' and self-described 'attack on morality' resemble a Pyrrhonian attack and exemplify more closely that breed of skepticism than any other. The literature has recently devoted much attention to Nietzsche's moral thought, and Berry's chapter on it is a valuable contribution to that discussion. Nietzsche is often treated as an anti-realist—that is, as a thinker who denies that there are moral facts. Berry is quick to point out that such a move amounts to a negative dogma, and that attributing such a view to a Pyrrhonist requires significant evidence, because their program demands that they eschew all such beliefs. Berry does not make clear what sorts of moral beliefs are of the obvious, conventional sorts that Pyrrhonists must accept. In addition, some of Nietzsche's moral claims, including his moral histories, seem to be dogmatic in the sense that Pyrrhonists must eschew. It is possible that this area of his thought is the most difficult for Berry's categories to handle. Nonetheless, her opening up this line of discussion is something to be applauded.

Bryan Finken

University of Colorado at Denver