

John Greco, ed.

The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism.

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John Greco provides a thorough and reliable survey of skepticism via a collection of twenty-six essays by different authors. Following the editor's introduction, the book is divided into three parts, on, respectively: 'Varieties of Skepticism and Skeptical Arguments', 'Responses to Skepticism', and 'Contemporary Issues'. The editor's introduction announces this arrangement but says little else about what lies in store. In order to make up for this deficiency I shall here offer thumbnail sketches of these essays as a way to provide an overall impression of the book.

The first essay is 'The Pyrrhonian Problematic' by Markus Lammenranta, in which the author presents the Pyrrhonian argument that we are unable to resolve disagreements about the nature of reality without begging the question at issue. According to Lammenranta, this argument does not presuppose any epistemology. It is, in his words, 'an *ad hominem* argument', the target of which is any enquirer after truth. It arises whenever a distinction is made between how things are represented and how they are in themselves.

Aside from reasons of chronology, this is an excellent essay with which to begin the collection because it is a presentation of skepticism at its most powerful. My only reservation is with the description of Pyrrhonism as presenting 'an *ad hominem* argument'. The Pyrrhonist makes no *a priori* objection to enquirers after truth *per se*. It is rather that the skeptic interjects when the aforementioned distinction is drawn between how things are represented and how they are themselves. Indeed, the Pyrrhonist might plausibly characterise himself as an enquirer after truth albeit one who realises that, within philosophy, the self-reflective nature of this quest leads to an infinite regress.

With sympathy to the skeptic, 'The Problem of the Criterion' by Richard Fumerton and 'Cartesian Skepticism' by José Luis Bermúdez continues the exploration of the problem that arises when a distinction is made between how things are represented and how they actually are.

The direction changes with Michael Williams' essay on 'Hume's Skepticism'. Williams asks how skeptical Hume's philosophy is and in what ways: he concludes that: "Hume's ultimate skepticism is skepticism about the philosophical enterprise itself" (104). Although reason, according to Hume, supports skepticism, Hume himself saw nothing positive in that position.

John Greco's essay, 'Skepticism about the External World', is the first of the essays in the book to attempt to confront directly the skeptical challenge. The nub of Greco's argument is that our perceptions of the external world are not always based on inferences as the skeptic supposes: they are, rather, derived from reliable powers and abilities. However, against Greco, the skeptic might admit as much while yet noting that Greco's argument is itself *an argument*

(with premises and a conclusion) and a representation, and that as such it remains vulnerable to familiar skeptical counter-attacks.

Ruth Weintraub, in ‘Skepticism about Induction’, rehearses Hume’s argument that inductive arguments are ultimately unjustified, since they presuppose that nature is uniform although the idea that nature is uniform can itself only be established by an inductive argument. She argues that this does not imply that inductive grounds do not provide good reasons: “Taking a risk, we will remind the skeptic, may be eminently reasonable” (130); but nonetheless “we do have an unsolved paradox” (146).

Robert Audi’s essay, ‘Skepticism about A Priori Justification: Self-Evidence, Defeasibility, and *Cogito* Propositions’, is another attempt to confront directly the skeptical challenge. Audi attempts to defend the rationalist view “that affirms the existence of substantive a priori propositions and the possibility of our justification for believing them” (161). Likewise, Terence Cuneo’s ‘Moral Realism, Quasi-Realism, and Skepticism’ also attempts to meet the skeptic head-on. Cuneo admits that there are problems with moral realism, akin to the problems which dog any form of realist metaphysics; he argues nonetheless that although the problem of how we gain access to moral reality remains, moral realism is still among the best accounts of the moral realm that we have. However, as in both Audi’s and Cuneo’s essay, the distinction remains between how things are represented and how things are in themselves, so there remains room for skeptical manoeuvring.

Paul K. Moser in ‘Religious Skepticism’ argues that: “Even if a person were to lack adequate evidence for God’s reality, this person would have no ready way to generalise to the truth of religious skepticism for people in general” (200). Is this an argument that the Pyrrhonian skeptic might admit?

Bryan Frances in ‘Live Skeptical Hypotheses’ discusses a question put to him by his students: “Sure the BIV hypothesis is *formally inconsistent* with my belief that I have hands, so if the former is true, then my belief is false. But so what? Why should bare inconsistency matter so much?” (225)

We now move on to the second section of the book, ‘Responses to Skepticism’. (There is obviously a large amount of overlap between sections.) George Pappas in ‘Berkeley’s Treatment of Skepticism’ provides a clear exposition of Berkeley’s position vis-à-vis skepticism and Locke’s copy-theory of knowledge. Berkeley argues that “we can immediately perceive an object by immediately perceiving some of the elements that constitute it.” (260)

Robert Stern in ‘Kant’s Response to Skepticism’ asks whether Kant’s arguments against skepticism stand independently of his transcendental idealism. His answer is that they do, and that they are better understood as integral to his entire ‘Copernican revolution’.

James Van Cleve reviews ‘Reid’s Response to the Skeptic’. Reid admits that we cannot refute the thoroughgoing external world skeptic. But although we cannot argue against the skeptic, we can ridicule his position. This is, according to Reid, perhaps the best response. Reid is an externalist: that is to say, he believes that “there are important knowledge-making factors

that obtain (or may obtain) ... regardless of whether the subject knows anything about their existence or their knowledge-making power” (296).

Christopher Hookway in ‘Peirce and Skepticism’ explains that although Peirce owned that he did not know everything with absolute certainty, he denied skepticism nonetheless. Peirce argued that once we recognise that not all cognitions are judgments, the skeptical regress ceases to be a cause for concern. Hookway expounds Peirce’s belief that “there is no gap between what is real and what, in principle, can be known.” (322) However, against Hookway, the skeptic might reply that this is in itself an inference about reality and, as such, vulnerable to attack.

Noah Lemos in ‘Moore and Skepticism’ reviews G. E. Moore’s claim that we know certain facts without any theory. For example, Moore claims that he knows that he has hands. In sympathy with this argument, Lemos argues that it is logically possible that skepticism is true but not epistemically possible, given what we know. But again, certain forms of skepticism escape the argument: the Pyrrhonian skeptic, for example, although he sees no way to escape his infinite regress, does not claim that ‘skepticism is true’.

Mark Kaplan in ‘Austin’s Way with Skepticism’ argues that Descartes’ skeptical doubts are at odds with our actual practice of knowledge attribution. Our actual practice of inquiry is our only source of knowledge. We are fallible, yes; but do we have a reason to believe that we are mistaken about everything (at once)? No. Ordinary language can be improved and superseded, but not all at once. We must concentrate first on what, pragmatically, requires attention. To which the skeptic might reply that these skeptical doubts may not arise within disciplines other than philosophy, in which indeed a body of knowledge, although not immune to revision, is never, all at once, called into question; but nonetheless they do arise in philosophy.

Marie McGinn contributes an excellent essay, ‘Wittgenstein on Certainty’. She argues that Wittgenstein’s therapeutic approach does not refute skepticism, but that it does allow us to escape its philosophical grip. “Questions of correctness or incorrectness apply to judgments that are intelligibly empirical – that is, about the world – only against the background of a vast range of facts that come into view with our acquisition of knowledge.” (383) “The idea of proving our system of judgments to be correct is seen to depend on the idea of a gap between empirical judgment and the world.” (387) Realising this, according to Wittgenstein and McGinn, we can simply refuse to open the gap. (It is not made explicit as to whether or not this involves refusing to philosophise.)

Peter J. Graham, in ‘The Relativist Response to Radical Skepticism’, investigates the relativist viewpoint—that in discussing epistemic principles, we can do no more than to describe the epistemic principles used by our own society. He argues that if this viewpoint is adopted, then “beliefs about the external world are *prima facie* justified, even if massive error is possible” (410). He concludes by noting that it does not follow that in these circumstances epistemic principles are *made* rather than *found*.

Most, but not all, of the essayists in the third and final section, ‘Contemporary Issues’, seek an accommodation with skepticism and present viewpoints that are broadly consistent with

Wittgenstein's viewpoint as presented by Marie McGinn. In brief, Stewart Cohen, in 'Ascriber Contextualism', argues that the skeptic does not realise that "context determines the standard for how justified one's belief *P* must be in order for '*P* is justified' to be true" (423). Duncan Pritchard, in 'Sensitivity, Safety, and Antiluck Epistemology', points out that in acquiring knowledge one does not need to rule out all error possibilities surrounding a proposition. Similarly, Jonathan Kvanvig, in 'Closure and Alternative Possibilities', argues that although it is always possible to extend one's knowledge by deducing consequences from what one already knows, epistemological theorising should nevertheless not be done with the skeptic's response constantly in mind. Likewise, Peter Klein, in 'Contemporary Responses to Agrippa's Trilemma', argues that although no proposition is ever fully justified, nonetheless, we are still able to acquire knowledge.

We then change tack in the form of the two essays that attempt direct rebuttals of skepticism. Michael Bergmann, in 'Externalist Responses to Skepticism' argues that a belief may be justified even when the believer is not aware of what makes the belief justified. Jonathan Vogel, in 'Internalist Responses to Skepticism', also favours direct rebuttal, though from a different standpoint than Bergmann: according to Vogel, "the regular patterns of one's experience are well explained by the body of one's beliefs about the world. The BIV hypothesis explains those patterns less well. Hence we are justified in maintaining our ordinary beliefs and in rejecting the skeptical alternative" (535).

The final two essays revert to a broadly Wittgensteinian position. Guy Axtell in 'Virtue-Theoretic Responses to Skepticism' argues that we should not make the skeptic's assumption that reason is its own foundation. The concept of knowledge involves reference to our ability to decide about which possibilities are relevant. Similarly, Alan Millar, in 'Disjunctivism and Skepticism', argues that "Radical skepticism ... rests on models of knowledge that are disputable since they impose requirements on knowing that it is not clear need to be met" (601).

These attempts to reach an accommodation with skepticism all make the point that in the *practice* of knowledge acquisition the problem of skepticism does not arise. However, the question then arises: is this a *philosophical* practice? It seems more likely that this practice of knowledge acquisition (as opposed to attribution) is more typical of other disciplines. The alternative approach—direct confrontation—brings to mind the point made in the book's first essay: we are unable to resolve disagreements about the nature of reality without begging the question at issue. But, albeit that the problems posed by skepticism remain, this is a thorough and reliable survey of the subject. My only criticism of its scope is that it is confined entirely to Western philosophy.

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