

## BOOK REVIEW

Sextus Empiricus: *Against the Ethicists*, Translated with an Introduction and Commentary by Richard Bett, Clarendon Later Ancient Philosophers Series (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997), xxxiv + 302 pp. ISBN 0-19-823620-4

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Sextus Empiricus is one of the major sources we have for the reconstruction and the study of the Hellenistic philosophy. His works contain wide-ranging excerpts of other philosophical schools, such as Stoicism and Epicureanism, but Sextus is also rightly acknowledged as a philosopher in his own right. He was certainly a leading figure in later ancient philosophy, and produced a number of arguments in order to refute (or at least to question) the views defended by so-called “dogmatists”, i.e., all those philosophers who systematically maintained positive theses on various topics. Sextus’ main opponents were the Stoics. He presented his arguments against them in a number of passages throughout his works, including *Against the Ethicists*. In what follows, I refer to *Against the Ethicists* by the abbreviated title *Adversus Mathematicos XI*, hereafter *M XI*. (For details of

the titles standardly given to Sextus' works cf. p. x and 45 of the book under review).

In recent decades the study of Sextus' works has undergone a revival. English speaking scholars already had a complete translation of his works with facing Greek text (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism, Against the Physicists, Against the Ethicists and Against the Logicians*), in three volumes, edited by R.G. Bury in the Loeb Classical Library (*Sextus Empiricus*, Cambridge, Mass., 1934-1936), but in recent years a number of new English translations of Sextus have been made, notably those by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (*Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism*, Cambridge University Press 1994) and by Benson Mates (*The Skeptic Way: Sextus Empiricus's "Outlines of Pyrrhonism"*, Oxford University Press 1996).

Bett's book forms part of this revival of scholarly work on Sextus Empiricus. The book consists of four main parts: an introduction, an English translation of Sextus' text, a detailed philosophical commentary, which in turn is divided into two sections, the first of which concentrates on some brief but important philological issues, and the second of which critically examines Sextus' arguments, and, finally, three critical appendices. Translating Greek philosophy into a modern language is not an easy task. In order to make an accurate translation of a Greek philosophical text having a sound knowledge of classical Greek is only a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for doing the job well. In addition to knowing Greek, the translator must have a sound grasp of the ideas of the author he or she is translating. In the case of the book under review both requirements are certainly fulfilled. Bett knows Greek well, and has a thorough grasp of the detailed philosophical background. This is especially relevant in the case of a text by Sextus, since, as was mentioned above, his work contains passages

attributed to a number of different philosophical schools, and this means that the translator must pay particular attention to the detailed technical vocabulary of the Stoic, Epicurean, Academic and Peripatetic philosophers who are cited explicitly or implicitly by Sextus. Without this the translation can be correct “literally”, but still philosophically misleading.

Bett has produced an excellent and, as far as I can tell, very readable English translation. Some minor details concerning the translation might be noted here: (1) at *M XI* 44 Bett’s translation reads: “For different men delight in different *things*” (italics are mine). He acknowledges that in the original context the word translated as “things” would be better rendered “activities”, or “types of work”. However, he argues that Sextus’ point in using it is a more general one (p. 81). Bett is probably right regarding Sextus’ use of the Homeric quotation (*Od.* 14. 228), but in fact he is translating a verse of Homer’s, not Sextus, and the Homeric passage reads “ἔργοις”, i.e. “deeds” or “activities”. (2) At the beginning of *M XI* 110 Bett’s translation runs: “it is possible to live ‘with a good flow’ and happily”. I wonder whether it would be possible to keep the word ἀμα of the original Greek and say: “it is possible to live *at once* ‘with a good flow’ and happily”. (3) At the end of *M XI* 124 Bett’s translation reads: “it must be said that the things which are thought good by some are *in effect* bad” (italics are mine). The Greek text reads: “ῥητέον τά τισι δοξασθέντα ἀγαθὰ τῇ δυνάμει τυγχάνειν κακὰ”. I understand that Bett renders “τῇ δυνάμει” as “*in effect*” (something similar occurs at the beginning of 216: where the translation reads “It has *in effect* been shown...”). Usually Sextus employs the dative of “δύναμις” as an adverb, in the sense of “virtually” or “implicitly” (see, notably, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I 188-189; 195. In what follows I refer to this work by the initials of the title in Greek: *PH*; cf. also *M VII* 15 *et passim*). I would sug-

gest that in the passage of *M* XI 124 the sense of “τῆ δυνάμει τυγχάνειν” should be “...are *virtually* bad”, because what Sextus seems to be implying is that the things which are declared to be good by some are “potentially” bad, i.e they are not good in themselves (that is to say, they are not good *by nature*). Finally, another linguistic matter: in his Commentary on *M* XI 142 Bett tells us that he does not accept Heintz’s transposition of “λογικῆν” to before “κρίσιν”; so, Bett informs us, he is following the same text as Bury. However, it should be remarked that Bury puts “λογικῆν” between square brackets and points out in a footnote that this is a seclusion by Heintz, and both keeps the term and translates it (“by [rational] belief are introduced...”). Bett’s translation runs, “By opinion are introduced...”.

The translation is based on the text established by H. Mutschmann (*Sexti Empirici Opera*, vol. II, Leipzig 1914), although Bett follows other readings in a number of cases (pointed out in the section of the Commentary dedicated to matters of text and other philological issues). As Bett tells us, his textual proposals “are based on considerations of sense rather than on inspection of the manuscripts” (p. xxxiv), so this is not intended to be a critical edition. As usual in this Series, no knowledge of Greek or Latin is assumed, and while it is true that one can read the introduction, the translation and even a considerable part of the Commentary without any knowledge of Sextus’ Greek, nevertheless, only specialists will be able to understand the scholarly philological notes which occur right from the beginning of the Commentary. To be sure, notes of this type are unavoidable in an edition which aims for (and certainly attains) a detailed examination of the Greek text on which the translation is based. But reading these philological notes demands a knowledge of Greek which allows

us to compare the original text with the translation, as well as enabling us to understand in depth why the translator has preferred, for example, reading A instead of reading B, or why he has made a specific emendation in a given passage.

Bett's Commentary deals with two kinds of issues: philological and philosophical. As already indicated, he usually begins by making reference to some philological issues. However, the Commentary is mainly focused on philosophical discussion, which makes this book especially useful both for classical philosophers as well as philosophers in general, and students of philosophy. Indeed, Sextus' ideas provide good training in reasoning, by providing a variety of arguments on different topics. Bett places these arguments within their context, pointing out the scope of each particular argument, and the thesis of the dogmatists which Sextus is trying to refute.

In the scope of a review it is impossible to do justice to all the many detailed issues the author raises. I shall concentrate on some specific points that, in my view, deserve special mention. First, I shall focus on some interesting theses Bett puts forward in the introduction. Some of these are closely connected with the core of the appendices at the end of the book, so I shall briefly summarize both the introduction and the appendices. It is worth pointing out that these appendices contain important information about Sextus' sources and the core of the original theses defended by Bett against the standard interpretation of the value of *M XI* within Sextus's philosophy. Finally, I shall comment on some specific passages of Bett's "Commentary" (pp. 45-256).

At the very beginning of the introduction Bett puts forward one of his main theses, which is present throughout the book: that a comparison of the parallel passages in *PH III* and *M XI* supports the view that *PH* is later than *M VII-XI* (p. xi).

This thesis is argued for extensively both in the Commentary and in Appendix C. Bett reminds us that, in a series of detailed studies, Janáček has tried to prove the standard picture according to which *PH* is earlier than *M XI* (Janáček's papers and books are listed in the Bibliography and extensively quoted in the different sections of the book). Since 1963 he has maintained that the standard picture of the order of composition is justified on stylistic grounds alone. Bett's purpose in Appendix C is to show that the support for Janáček's view is actually rather weak. According to Bett, there is "little in the way of argument that the stylistic differences favour this chronology" (p. 274). Janáček describes *PH*'s concluding sentences as "primitive", and those of *M VII-XI* as "better" and as exhibiting "the greatest perfection". By contrast, Bett takes *M VII-XI*'s sentences to be more "pedantic and repetitive"; even if we were to agree that the style of *M VII-XI* is better than that of *PH*, Bett tells us, this still would not show that the standard chronology is correct. According to Bett, Sextus' style is at least partially the style of his unknown source or sources (pp. 275-276). Whatever the case may be, one is tempted to think Bett is right since, despite the large number of stylistic differences between *PH* and *M VII-XI*, it is not a convincing argument to establish the order of composition of two *philosophical* works on stylistic grounds alone.

Bett proposes to divide *M XI* into two well differentiated parts: part A (chapters I-V), which forms a single and continuous argument, and part B (chapters VI-VII), whose main topic is the discussion of whether there is a skill relating to life and whether, if there is, (*quod non*, for Sextus), it can be taught. An indication that both parts are more or less independent of each other is the fact that there are no cross-references between them, and the abrupt manner in which the second part

concludes. So, Bett suggests, the two parts did not originally belong together, and Sextus probably brought together materials from two entirely dissimilar sources (cf. pp. xii-xiii and Appendix B). Standardly, two interpretations of *M XI* have been put forward. According to the first, put forward by McPherram, Hankinson, Annas and Nussbaum, *M XI*'s position is not essentially different from that of the better known *PH*, though expressed more obscurely and ineptly. According to the second, put forward by Striker, Annas and Barnes, *M XI* should be regarded as deviating from *PH*, and misguidedly infringing the canons of Pyrrhonian scepticism. Bett's position on this point is rather radical: both interpretations, he says, are mistaken (p. xiii). In his opinion, *M XI* expresses a different view from *PH*, but there is no reason why *M XI* should follow the canons of *PH*. In this vein, Bett argues that *M XI*'s distinctive view is consistent in its own terms and can be understood as a variety of scepticism. However, this is not to deny that this text contains a large number of bad arguments. In Bett's view the difference between *PH* and *M XI* has to do, rather, with the treatment each treatise gives to the claim that certain things are good by nature and certain other things are bad by nature. The way of proceeding in *PH* is the suspension of judgment about whether anything is by nature good or by nature bad. On the other hand, *M XI* emphasizes the conclusion that *nothing* is by nature either good or bad (cf. p. xiv and *M XI* 68-95 with Bett's Commentary). In *M XI* the mere existence of disagreement about the goodness of something is sufficient to show that that thing is not really good. Bett maintains that this depends on what he calls the Recognition Requirement, i.e. the assumption that *F* is good (or bad) for someone if and only if that thing is recognized as being good (or bad) by that person (pp. xv-xvi). Given that in Greek ethics "good" is understood as being "beneficial",

someone will be truly benefited at time *t* if and only if he or she recognizes at some time that he or she was benefited. Pleasure, for instance, fails to qualify as good *by nature* because, due to the disagreement among philosophers about whether pleasure is beneficial, there are at least some cases of pleasure which are not considered beneficial. If this is so, and Sextus believes that it is, nothing is *by nature* good since neither the Universality Requirement, i.e. the thesis that for something to be *by nature* *F* is for it to be *intrinsically*, and hence *invariably*, *F* (cf. p. xiv), nor the premise concerning the existence of disagreement have been fulfilled. In Bett's view, it is not clear that Sextus has provided adequate support for this premise. Perhaps not, but it is quite evident that the support (as Sextus shows in *M XI*, 73-74) is more or less clear in terms of "a matter of fact". As Sextus says, for Epicurus pleasure is a good thing, while the Stoics say it is an indifferent thing.

As a whole, Bett's argument concerning the relation between *PH III* and *M XI* seems persuasive. However, there is a sense of "suspending judgement" that is at least related to the preceding sense employed by Sextus in *M XI*. In *PH I* 196 he maintains that the sceptics use the expression "I suspend judgment" for "I cannot say which of the things proposed I should find convincing and which I should not find convincing" (Annas-Barnes translation). What makes this clear, Sextus goes on to argue, is that objects appear to us equal in respect of convincingness and lack of convincingness (certainly, this is the scepticism familiar from *PH*). In *M XI* 68 ff. the strategy of the argument is based on the disharmony of views concerning what is either good by nature or bad by nature (see 71: "nothing is good or bad in a way which is common to all [...]; therefore, there is nothing by nature good or bad"). Nevertheless, as Bett himself recognizes, the fact that Sextus *makes the assertion* (vio-



lating the classic canons of scepticism, familiar from *PH*) that nothing is by nature good or bad, but that things may be good or bad depending on persons and/or circumstances, should not lead us to think that the notion of suspension of judgment is absent from *M XI*. In fact, in *M XI* 144, 160, 168 (cf. p. xviii) Sextus recognizes suspension of judgment as being the method of the sceptic, so Bett's suggestion that the difference between *PH* and *M XI* regarding the thesis that certain things are good by nature and certain other things bad by nature depends on the fact that *PH* appeals to the suspension of judgment, while *M XI* resorts to the assertion that nothing is by nature either good or bad, is not entirely conclusive.

In each part of his Commentary Bett deals exhaustively with the relevant parallel evidence both within Sextus' work and in other ancient authors reporting the same point. In many passages Bett is strongly critical of Sextus' arguments against the dogmatists, and, especially, against the Stoics, his major philosophical adversaries. I find Bett's procedure very healthy, since, no matter how persuasive Sextus' reasoning may be, his points of departure are not legitimate in all cases. In fact, Sextus is implicitly making the Stoics accept assumptions they would never have accepted. For instance, Sextus argues, in the form of a dilemma, that if what does not exist were taught, this would be either in virtue of its being non-existent or in virtue of something else; but neither alternative is possible (*M XI* 221). Bett suggests, correctly I think, that if the expression "something else" in the second horn of the dilemma is to be used meaningfully, it must have some existing referent. If this were the case, the Stoics would disagree, since according to them, not all "somethings" exist. As Sextus himself recognizes (in *M XI* 224), for the Stoics "somethings" (which is the high-

est genus) are divided into bodies and incorporeals, the latter being non-existent.

In *M XI* 180 Sextus maintains that “if we concede that there is one skill relating to life [...], not even in this case will we accept it, because of the many and varied disasters which are brought with it.” According to Bett, this misrepresents the argument and the point is that the skill relating to life does not exist. So, the considerations offered in favour of that point have nothing to do with disasters (p. 197). At this point I wonder whether Bett is right or not. I tend to think he is not, since Sextus’ intention might probably be to test the consequences which would result from accepting the idea that there is one skill relating to life. Bett seems to admit that Sextus investigates the consequences of the dogmatists’ theses in order to prove that such theses are mistaken (cf. p. 130). It is true, as Bett emphasizes, that for Sextus there is no such skill. But let us suppose, Sextus appears to be contending, that there is such a skill. Maybe he has in mind the fact that for the Stoics the practical consequences of their philosophical theses were crucial. To be sure, the practical consequences of the thesis concerning the existence of a skill relating to life were positive for the Stoics, not negative, i.e. they did not involve “many and varied disasters”. If this approach is right, Sextus’ argument would be moving within the same Stoic assumptions and it seems legitimate.

Bett argues that the whole of *M XI* 202 could have been omitted (cf. p. 215). He probably is right, because for the Stoics, contrary to what Sextus says there, there is an action peculiar to the wise person (the “right deed”, as Bett renders the Greek *κατόρθωμα*) by which he differs from those who are not wise. According to Bett the crucial point here is epistemological. If the actions of the wise person are distinctive due to the

disposition which gives rise to them, how are we to tell which actions are in fact those of a wise person (see *M* XI 303; cf. 205)? If there is nothing in the overt characteristics of these actions to mark them as those of a wise person, Sextus seems to be implying, identifying these actions is impossible. But as Bett acutely observes, the Stoics are obliged to accept Sextus' conclusion only if there are no observable indications that a certain action is the product of a wise disposition. In fact, for the Stoics the actions of sages (or "wise persons") are identified by the kinds of *justifications* they give of these actions before or after the fact.

In commenting on *M* XI 206-207 Bett argues that "the consistency and order of the wise person's actions are very naturally understood as the *result* of their being the expression of the 'skilful disposition', practical wisdom. Nevertheless, *there are reasons for thinking that this second response was developed by a distinct and later group of Stoics...*" (p. 218; in this last sentence italics are mine). The second Stoic response, *pace* Bett, can be understood as belonging to early Stoicism as well. It appears to have been orthodox Stoic doctrine to maintain that "all human virtue and happiness is a life consistent (*ἀκόλουθον*) and in agreement with (*ὁμολογουμένην*) nature" (Stobaeus, *Eclogae* 2.75, 8-10 ed. Wachsmuth; my translation). It is true, as Bett says, that since Antipater (second century BC) Stoic definitions of the ethical end began to incorporate a reference to consistency in action. But such a reference is not absent from earlier definitions, at least it is not absent from the definition given by Cleanthes, the first successor of Zeno: "the end is living in agreement with nature" (Stobaeus, *Eclogae*, 2. 76, 5-6; Long and Sedley translation). I think it is arguable that the new definitions of the ethical end are just developments of what was contained in the original Stoic dictum, attributed to early Stoics.

Bett recognizes that an emphasis on consistency is not necessarily a replacement of previous views and that in the early Stoa consistency was regarded as a characteristic of the wise person's actions. But if this is so I do not understand why he takes the second response to be developed by a distinct and later group of Stoics.

On p. 223 Bett maintains that "self-control" (ἐγκράτεια) is a virtue, and he quotes as evidence DL VII 92. In fact, self-control is not a virtue but a subordinate virtue (as DL says in the cited passage). We learn from Stobaeus (*Eclogae* II 61, 9-12 ed. Wachsmuth) that both decorum (κοσμιότης) and self-control are subordinate to temperance (σωφροσύνη). According to Bett, Sextus relies on a conception of self-control, which is based on common sense. But the Stoics do not share this conception, so they have no reason to grant the assumption underlying Sextus' whole argument. Bett, it seems to me, is probably right in saying this. However, I do not think that the Stoic conception of self-control is sufficiently clear. To make my point clear, I think Bett is right in asserting that the Stoic conception of self-control is very different from Aristotle's. Bett adds that Sextus relies on a conception of self-control which normally has the connotation of *mastery over* something in oneself. But the Stoics, Bett continues to argue, do not share this conception. I am not completely sure about this, for the very notion of self-control in Stoic philosophy must be reconstructed and is not entirely clear. Our evidence is very scanty, although we do have a passage from Galen which is quite clear: "such states as these are the sort that are out of control (ἀκρατεῖς), as if the men had no *power over themselves* but were carried away, just as those who run hard are carried along and have no control over that sort of movement. But those who move with reason as their guide and steer their course by it, no matter what the na-

ture of the reasoning, *have control over* (κρατοῦσι) [...] such a movement and its impulses" (Galen, *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* IV 4, p. 256, 7-12; De Lacy's text and translation slightly modified). This passage is attributed to Chrysippus by Galen and if this attribution is correct, we should conclude that at least Chrysippus declared self-control to have the connotation of *mastery over* something in oneself.

The book concludes with a very up to date bibliography, a useful *index nominum* and an *index locorum* (in this second index I noted a mistaken reference on p. 300, the passage of Stobaeus, *Eclogae* 2.77, 20-3 is referred to p. 73, this should be p. 74). This translation and commentary on Sextus' *Against the Ethicists* (M XI) will certainly become the standard edition of this important text for the foreseeable future, both in the English speaking world, and elsewhere. As is usual in this sort of critical notice, I have focused my comments on some points of disagreement, and if at some points I have been rather critical of Bett's views, I should not like to fail to express my admiration for his work, and I would say without hesitation that this book is an outstanding combination of philological and philosophical analysis. Bett has shed light on many dark and difficult points and his conjectures and comments on Sextus' writings are argued for strongly\*.

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\* I would like to thank Michael Wrigley for revising my English.

