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Hume, the Pyrrhonian

Zuzana Parusniková, *David Hume, Sceptic*, Springer, Heidelberg 2016, 124 pp.

The main topic of the book is David Hume's way of dealing with the challenge of scepticism as it emerged in the post-Cartesian philosophy. According to one of the main claims expounded in the book, Hume was the only philosopher of the Enlightenment who took up the challenge of the radical Cartesian scepticism and the resulting phenomenalism with full awareness of possible consequences of this step and without any recourse to the recently repudiated metaphysics.¹ Parusniková's approach to Hume's epistemology is structured around three pillars, i.e. the Cartesian, the empiricist, and the Pyrrhonian one. Accordingly, the narrative of the book is constructed around these three axes.

The argument of the book begins with an extensive account of the emergence of the idea of the autonomous rational mind, which, having gotten rid of the constraints of the theological and metaphysical cognitive regime, was presented by René Descartes as capable of grasping, unaided, the certainly true knowledge. As is well known, in the Cartesian approach scepticism does play an important role but only as a way to clear the obstacles for the mind to get hold of its indubitable awareness of its own thinking, which then becomes a starting point of the reasoning aiming to reconstitute the knowledge of the world upon a novel foundation. Parusniková argues that the Cartesian belief in the autonomy of the mind was the cornerstone of Hume's epistemology.

This captivating Cartesian argument led to a number of important criticisms, the most significant of them instigated by Marin Mersenne. At the same time, however, more notably, it prepared the ground for alternative philosophical ap-

¹ Z. Parusniková, *David Hume, Sceptic*, Springer, Heidelberg 2016, p. 16.

proaches. One of them, the empiricist one, was directed against the Cartesian nativism, i.e. the view that the mind is possessed of some innate certain knowledge. Empiricism found perhaps its most refined expression in the philosophy of John Locke. According to Parusniková, Hume is an empiricist too, yet a critical one: adopting the empiricist claim that it is the sensations that constitute the matter of our knowledge, he cogently and persuasively stressed that knowledge contains also universal statements and principles which cannot be derived from sensations.

The third and perhaps the most important attitude that characterises Hume's philosophy also emerged as a result of the Cartesian philosophical intervention. It was the radical scepticism which grew owing to the Enlightenment's revival of ancient Greek and Roman scepticism, the most extreme of them being the Pyrrhonian doctrine. Parusniková demonstrated the extent to which Pyrrho's radically sceptical ideas influenced Hume and how they determined the course of his intellectual development. In particular, she has shown how his "grand project of science of man"² emerged following the lesson he learned from the sceptical criticism of human rational abilities.

It is worth remarking here upon the continuing relevance of Hume's sceptical approach in the theory of knowledge. Hume's critical empiricism and sceptical attitude, in particular in his criticism of inductivism and justificationism, was of paramount importance both for the philosophers of the Vienna Circle and for Karl Popper as its "official opposition." The significance of Hume's sceptical philosophy for Popper is evidenced especially in the first chapter of Popper's *Objective Knowledge* in which he formulated a comprehensive criticism of the so-called problem of induction in its three embodiments: the logical, pragmatic, and psychological ones. Popper's critique of induction played a crucial role in his repudiation of the positivist epistemology of the logical empiricism promulgated by the Vienna Circle. There are important differences between them, though. Hume, having undermined the principle of induction, conceded that the human mind works as if some universal statements and principles were valid even though it has no grounds for assuming their validity. In his own hypothetical-deductive approach Popper adopts Hume's criticism of induction, yet rejects his pragmatist and psychological attitude by arguing that Hume, having rationally demolished induction, acquiesced in an irrational belief that induction may be pragmatically and psychologically valid. In so doing, however, Popper seems to have failed to grasp the true Humean message which had to do with his original attempt to describe the workings of the human mind, especially its yearning for a firm ground in knowledge, despite the logically valid sceptical arguments against the possibility of such knowledge.

Parusniková's book is a document of sophisticated and refined scholarship, close reading of the subject matter, and imaginative interpretation of the ideas she discusses. One of the many virtues of her scholarship is that she has precisely delineated the scope of her investigations, clearly formulated her theses, and executed her tasks by developing persuasive and well-grounded arguments. In her argumentation, she demonstrated an extensive, indeed, impressive knowledge of

² *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

Hume's work and a wide range of other doctrines and authors. Her narrative is supported by multiple relevant references to many philosophical doctrines. This is a very strong testimony of her comprehensive acquaintance with the history of philosophy as such. Her wide historical knowledge has been aptly demonstrated in particular in her account of the debates that followed the publication of Descartes' books. Her references to Aristotle's conception of the soul, in the context of the Cartesian and Hume's conceptions, are illuminative, so is her account of the revival of scepticism thanks to Michel de Montaigne's popular essays, and her other references to the sceptical tradition. This extensive historical backing makes for a very good reading of her work.

Moreover, her book is an excellent interpretative guide not only through the work of Hume itself but also through the imposing volume of the Humean scholarship. This is a very important issue since Hume is one of the most widely discussed philosophers of the Enlightenment and the number of publications devoted to his *oeuvre* is daunting. Parusniková's extensive knowledge enables her to discern a number of interesting dilemmas and oppositions, which she formulates in an elegant way. In relation to the role of scepticism in the post-Cartesian philosophy, she remarked on the double-edged nature of scepticism: on the one hand, it had a liberating effect on philosophical thinking since it freed reason from metaphysical and religious constraints, but at the same time, its effect was also paralysing since it did prevent reason from asserting anything with certainty.³ Another paradox pertinently expressed by Parusniková has to do with Hume's rejection of the radical, disturbing Pyrrhonism in epistemology only to be able to embrace the moral Pyrrhonian injunction to strive towards tranquillity through addressing the issues of practical life to which the paralysing doubts do not apply.⁴

Having said that, I would like to raise several critical, though minor, points. One of them has to do with the fact that Parusniková, in her dealing with Hume, did not refer more extensively to the interpretive work of Annette Baier, undoubtedly one of the greatest contemporary Hume scholars. Despite the importance of Baier's work to the understanding of Hume, her work was referred to by Parusniková only twice. I am mentioning Baier's contribution to the Hume scholarship in order to draw attention to a certain lacuna in Parusniková's work. She repeatedly argues that Hume, having undermined the possibility of any firm theory of knowledge, devoted his attention to social, historical and political matters, praising, after the Pyrrhonian fashion, private pleasure, gentle manners and moderation. The proper attitude for consideration of these topics was for him, as she claims, "mitigated scepticism." Parusniková stresses that Hume was in fact anxious to leave the problems of the sceptical scrutiny of the foundations of knowledge and to steer attention to the areas in which we can philosophise in a positive, productive manner—to emotions, religion, politics, justice, economics and history.⁵ Even though Parusniková explores at length the meaning of Hume's mitigated

³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87; my formulation.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.

scepticism, which forms the very foundation of Hume's mature attitude to philosophy's tasks, she leaves the discussion of the contents of Hume's ideas related to the "moral sciences and common life"⁶ outside the scope of her narrative. It is quite understandable that within the limited space of a book, with a well-defined theme of scepticism in epistemology, Hume's seminal contributions to moral, political, economic or aesthetic matters had to be left outside the range of her explorations. Despite that, I think that the picture of Hume's philosophy in her book would be fuller if these issues had been addressed at a slightly greater length. In particular, I believe that Hume's work in moral theory is certainly worthy of discussion, especially his understanding of moral rules. His approach to this issue continues to inspire those who wish to avoid the uncompromising Kantian universalism and reckless opportunism.

Another issue which leaves the reader slightly puzzled is Parusniková's remark on Richard Popkin's analysis of Hume's "mitigated scepticism"⁷ in which she claims that Hume's understanding of mitigated scepticism "goes way beyond" Popkin's analysis. She summarises Popkin's position by saying that according to him mitigated scepticism should be understood as a sceptical attitude which has relevance to epistemology and should not be seen as a tamed or "domesticated" scepticism. The idea of mitigation thus refers not to blunting the edge of scepticism but to limiting its range. It means, in other words, a separation of the space of theoretical considerations to which sceptical arguments apply from the natural attitude which is immune to the sceptical doubt. Such an approach introduces an insuperable rupture in the Enlightenment's ideal of knowledge. In other words, Hume's adoption of mitigated scepticism undermined the Enlightenment's ambitions to provide a firm foundation for a coherent and unified system of all knowledge. Hume's separation of reason and instinct, together with his criticism of reason, is tantamount to the acquiescence in the fact that such an edifice of unified knowledge cannot be built.

Now, what is not quite clear is how Parusniková's interpretation of Hume's mitigated scepticism differs from Popkin's. Parusniková consistently claims, just like Popkin, that Pyrrho's lesson is to remain valid for Hume in the matters of the theory of knowledge but is to be suspended in the area of life and morality. This is the essence of Hume's correction to the "disease" of the unwavering and comprehensive Pyrrhonism,⁸ which becomes performatively inconsistent due to its very attempt to remain consistent. She also claims that Hume broke the link between *aporia* and *epechein*, i.e. perplexity and suspension of judgement.⁹ But, as remarked above, this argumentation seems very much in line with Popkin's argument. In order to underline the difference between her approach and Popkin's, Parusniková only mentions that Popkin "underestimates"¹⁰ the domains in which mitigated scepticism is operative within Hume's work. This criticism, however, is not buttressed

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

by any references in support of her critical charge. More importantly, in view of the above-mentioned fact that her own account of Hume's philosophy largely leaves out from the discussion his contribution to moral philosophy, politics, aesthetics, etc., the charge she levels against Popkin seems to apply to her in much the same measure.