

*Kant and Skepticism*. By Michael N. Forster. Pp. x, 154, Princeton University Press, 2008.

Forster's aims in the first part of *Kant and Scepticism* are to clarify what kind of skepticism motivates and concerns Kant (in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) and outline how Kant deals with such skepticism. Forster argues that Kant is concerned with those varieties of skepticism which threaten metaphysics – Humean and Pyrrhonian skepticism. Hence Kant's two well known aims in the *Critique* – to address skepticism and develop a reformed metaphysics – belong together (p. 3). I'll remark mainly on Forster's discussion of Pyrrhonian skepticism.

In Chapter 4 Forster notes that for Kant Pyrrhonian skepticism has two essential features first 'a setting of [some] claim against a contrary claim and demonstration that equally strong arguments could be given on both sides' (the *equipollence method*), or as Kant puts it, 'different but equally persuasive metaphysical propositions [i.e. propositions regarding supersensuous reality] lead inescapably to contrary conclusions' (pp. 17-18). Second, and as a result of the first feature, a 'suspension of judgement about the issues in question' (ibid).

In Chapter 6 Forster discusses Kant's "reformed metaphysics" and how it is designed to forestall skepticism. Such a metaphysics is at its core, a metaphysics of nature which 'bears a strong resemblance... to traditional general metaphysics...' (p. 35). The metaphysics doesn't countenance the supersensuous realm that is susceptible to the Pyrrhonian attack.

The general concepts and principles the reformed metaphysics involve are those such as *cause* and *every event has a cause*, concepts and principles which the Humean skeptic will worry about. Kant's reformed metaphysics, however, involves an anti-skeptical strategy designed to forestall worries about the reference of such concepts, and the truth of such principles. Kant attempts to *prove* that such concepts/principles refer/are true. To establish the conclusions of such proofs Kant uses *transcendental arguments* which show that the reference or truth in question is a condition of the possibility of experience of a certain type. Hence, given that there is experience of the relevant type (something Kant takes to be unquestionable, even by the skeptic's lights) the anti-skeptical conclusion follows.

The above is a snippet of the kind of anti-skepticism Forster finds in Kant. In the second part of *Kant and Skepticism* Forster subjects Kant's position to severe criticism.

For Kant the Pyrrhonist's attack takes only (supersensuous) metaphysics within its scope and doesn't 'challenge [the assumption] that one has experience of certain types...' (p. 76), an assumption which is pivotal for Kant's reformed metaphysics. But Kant's interpretation of Pyrrhonism as a *moderate* skepticism is questionable, as Hegel argued, Pyrrhonism in fact attacks *all* beliefs.

Still, might Kant be entitled to discount the more radical Pyrrhonism? One can take Kant, Forster notes, to hold that no plausible skeptical attack is even *possible*. But why might Kant think that? Forster thinks it's because he holds a version of the Cartesian doctrine that 'a person's current subjective experience *necessitates* his acknowledgement (or belief or knowledge) of it, so that he *cannot* question it' (p. 80). Kant's version of the doctrine has significant modifications (pp. 81-82) one of which is that for Kant one must have, of necessity, only the *ability* to acknowledge one's current subjective

experience.

However Forster argues, on various grounds – and to my mind convincingly – that this doctrine doesn't provide a decent argument for the impossibility of radical Pyrrhonian doubts (Chapter 12). A consequence of this, Forster suggests, is that 'Kant's strategy of answering skepticism concerning metaphysics by means of transcendental arguments which presuppose that we have experience of certain types... [seems] objectionable' (p. 82).

I don't think, however, that Forster is entitled to draw the latter consequence. For Kant's project to be objectionable, by Pyrrhonian lights, we need not only the possibility or actuality of the equipollence method being used against judgements of subjective experiences, but rather the conclusion that *the application of the method is well motivated*. Forster hasn't given us *that*, nor, I take it, has he tried to. Showing that skepticism is possible or actual is one thing, showing that one is rationally required to reckon with it is quite another.

Not only does Forster argue that Kant's case for the impossibility of radical skeptical doubts is flawed, he seems to think that such doubts *are* possible, since against Kant he notes that there are philosophers who deny the reality of subjective experience – and 'if serious *denials* are possible, it is surely hard to believe that serious *doubt* is not' (p. 81). However there can be such a thing as the illusion of doubt. One might be sincere in denying that *p* yet fail to satisfy conditions for genuine doubt that *p* (cf. Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*).

The message of Forster's book is an *anti-dogmatism* which is presented in Pyrrhonian, and Hegelian spirit. One can view the rich discussion and criticism of Kant as a way of getting that message across. The message is successful and ingeniously conveyed in an enjoyable and refreshing book. I recommend *Kant and Skepticism* to Kant scholars, those interested in skepticism, and those interested in Hegel's criticisms of Kant.