

The non-domestication of philosophical skepticism

In his conference paper entitled “What Is Negative Theology”, Professor Raoul Mortley states that “The *via negativa* uses language against itself, since it negates the positive claims made in language about the nature of things.” After elaborating a bit on this abandoning of positive, assertive language, he somewhat gloomily observes that it entails that “the pride of linguistic achievement ... gives way to a kind of skepticism.”

Now, please note the qualification here: “A *kind* of skepticism”. I find it interesting that, most of the time when the word ‘skepticism’ is used with some measure of academic seriousness, there seems to be a qualification involved. This rule appears to hold as long as, generally speaking, the object of this designation is connected to the speaker in a positive way. Should the connection in question be a negative one, however, the qualifications more often than not go out the window. Clearly, skepticism is considered a bad thing – only our enemies are deemed worthy of its fullness!

Quite understandably, Professor Mortley is unwilling to grant unqualified (and therefore *unmitigated*) skepticism a right of place alongside what is essentially a way of knowledge. For how could there possibly be knowledge where there is skepticism, or skepticism where there is knowledge? Something would obviously have to give, be it the one or the other. Yet, as we have already seen, he still wishes to equate an *element* of negative theology with some *kind* of skepticism.

Exactly how, then, does Professor Mortley qualify this particular brand of skepticism that he attributes to negative theology? Well, let’s hear the man out.

Picking up where we left off, Mortley continues: “This scepticism, however, is of a specific kind, since the negation is parasitic on the affirmation: the latter is logically prior to the former.” In other words, the claim is that the negation employed in negative theology differs from your standard, garden-variety negation, since the former is *logically secondary to a preceding affirmation*, whereas the standard, garden-variety negation presumably would stand on its own two legs, so to speak, being secondary to nothing. In contrast to this logically self-sustained and (consequently) primary kind of negation, Mortley thereafter goes on to speak of “the negative as an epistemological tool.” We are forced to the conclusion, then, that, according to Mortley, this secondariness – or should I say “toolness” – of the sceptic negation somehow makes it not really scepticism, but something much less harmful; namely, what I’d like to call a *domesticated* breed of scepticism.

There are, in my view, two main points to be made concerning such a line of reasoning concerning scepticism. First of all, this idea of fencing in the supposedly wild beast of scepticism and, once domesticated, employing it for purposes external to itself is anything but uncommon in the western history of ideas. Famous examples of such strategies can be found in the philosophies of René Descartes and David Hume, to name but two. As shown by Richard Popkin, though, in his *History of Skepticism*, sceptic techniques have been employed by a multitude of different interests and aversions in the republic of letters ever since the renaissance, few of which were even remotely in accord with the motivations of scepticism itself. Secondly, and more importantly: The instrumental, or domesticated application of sceptical doubt described above – this way of merely letting “the negative as an epistemological tool” oppose a preceding positive assertion or perceived truth – *is in fact the standard operating procedure* of pyrrhonism, the school generally considered to be the most radical of the ancient schools of philosophical scepticism.

In other words, historically authentic philosophical scepticism itself doesn't have, nor has it ever had, a nihilistic scope any stronger or any less secondary than the negation in negative theology has in Mortley's take.

Admittedly, the scope of the pyrrhonist sceptical project is perhaps *wider* than that of negative theology, given that its negation, at least potentially, is meant to be suffered "globally"; that is, across the whole ontological range, from one horizon to the other, as it were, encompassing literally everything. The pyrrhonist negation doesn't dig any *deeper*, though, nor is it more nihilistic *per se*, since it is just as instrumental in application, and just as secondary to what precedes it, as the negation of the *via negativa*.

As is his habit, Sextus Empiricus, being the chief textual source of western scepticism, is quite clear on the matter. Answering the question "what is scepticism?", he has the following to say:

"Scepticism is an ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgements in any way whatsoever [that is to say: appearances to appearances, or judgements to judgements, or *alternando* appearances to judgements], with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of "unperturbedness" or quietude." p 7

Here are some other words of his on the nature of scepticism:

"The main basic principle of the Sceptic system is that of opposing to every proposition an equal proposition; for we believe that as a consequence of this we end by ceasing to dogmatize." p 11

Now, if a particular sceptical negation at any point were to actually “revolt” against this sceptic principle of assertive equilibrium, in order to claim some independent nihilistic function for itself, the negation in question would count as just another proposition to be countered, albeit a negative one, and immediately find itself sceptically negated in its own turn. In true, old-school scepticism, nothing is left standing – not even destruction.