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ROBERT J. FOGELIN. *Walking the Tightrope of Reason: The Precarious Life of a Rational Animal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. xii + 203. ISBN 0-19-516026-6, cloth, $22.00; ISBN 0-19-517754-1, paper, $13.95.

This lively little book—170 small-format pages, excluding front and end matter—has its origin in the author's 1995 Romanell-Phi Beta Kappa lectures at Dartmouth College. Consistent with this origin, it speaks primarily to a general audience rather than to philosophical specialists (as Fogelin says in his Preface). Nevertheless, even specialist readers will find *Walking the Tightrope of Reason* valuable. It revisits figures (Sextus, Hume, Kant, Wittgenstein) and issues (skepticism's depth and uses, reason's infirmities and indispensability) that have long and productively occupied Fogelin, and here we see his thoughts about these figures and issues clearly and whole.

The book consists of an Introduction and seven nicely unified chapters.

In the Introduction Fogelin claims that reason, left to its own devices, moves between the unsatisfactory poles of (1) rationalist metaphysics and (2) skepticism or relativism. On issue after issue, thinkers at these opposed extremes subscribe to some common underlying disjunctive principle: for instance, either God exists or everything is permitted, either texts have fixed meanings or they are meaningless, either something is certain or nothing is even probable. Fogelin willingly concedes that such choices can seem deep and unavoidable, and that in many cases we may never entirely free ourselves from the sense that we must make such radical choices. But to the extent that we can free ourselves, Fogelin proposes, we will do so by constraining reason to work within the "ordinary, workaday world" (5). This view of reason's usefulness within limits, and self-destructiveness beyond those limits, Fogelin later labels "circumspect rationalism" (70); sketching this view and its appeal is the book's goal.

Chapter One, "Why Obey the Laws of Logic?" explores the law of non-contradiction. Fogelin labels traditional defenders of this logical law Parmenideans (partisans of stability and unity), and labels radical opponents of this law Heracliteans (partisans of dynamism and diversity). Heraclitean remarks include Emerson's jibe at foolish consistency and Whitman's claim that, since he contains multitudes, he can blithely contradict himself. Nietzsche and "many postmodernists" are examples of more thoroughgoing Heracliteans. Fogelin, inspired here by Wittgenstein, argues that Parmenideans and Heracliteans share a mistaken assumption: that the law of non-contradiction is an ontological constraint, ruling out real change. Instead the law is a constraint on language, a tautology. In one way, this first chapter exemplifies Fogelin's general method: uncovering the

shared assumption behind two opposed philosophical extremes. In another way, though, the chapter is atypical, since it is straightforwardly deflationary (abandon the assumption, and the problem vanishes), while Fogelin usually emphasizes that philosophical problems about human reason are deep and durable. Perhaps Chapter One is atypical in this way because, while Fogelin doesn't exactly take sides in the dispute between Heracliteans and Parmenideans, still his main point is that denying the law of non-contradiction is "a foolish error" (41). (In general, where postmodernism is concerned, Fogelin pulls no punches and spares no ridicule.)

In Chapter Two, "Dilemmas and Paradoxes," Fogelin argues, again following Wittgenstein, that our lives are governed by systems of rules that are inconsistent, at the margins anyway; and that we should "learn to live with inconsistency in . . . a discriminating and civilized manner" (42) rather than becoming obsessed with eliminating inconsistency at all costs, or allowing ineliminable inconsistency to stymie us. His first example of an inconsistent system of rules is an imagined game he dubs Ludwig, where unskillful play can lead to a dilemma: two rules, "you must move here" and "you mustn't move here," come into conflict. (Incidentally, in light of this description it is mildly surprising that Fogelin doesn't consider the real example of stalemate in chess: a situation in which a player is both required to move and unable to move. In fact the rules of chess are structured such that this "paradox" yields a clear result, namely, a draw.) If we cannot make the rules of Ludwig consistent, or can only make them consistent by decreasing the game's interest, and if Ludwig is "dilemma-prone" only at the margins, then the sensible course is indeed to live with the inconsistency. Fogelin goes on to discuss weightier examples, including these: (1) Liar's paradoxes reveal that language is dilemma-prone, yet we go on speaking even without an agreed-on resolution or dissolution of such paradoxes, and perhaps should count them as the price we pay for the richness of language. (2) Moral dilemmas reveal the richness and complexity of our moral lives. In these domains and others, Fogelin argues, we should admit but not exaggerate reason's limits; while perfect consistency is a fond rationalist hope, practical engagement does usually "keep us clear of the regions of paradox" (65).

Chapter Three, "Pure Reason and Its Illusions," examines extreme conceptual relativism or perspectivism, according to which there are indefinitely many mutually incompatible ways of seeing the world, all of them equally good or bad. (Not to be missed here is a characteristically funny anecdote about a "distinguished French physicist.") Kant is the focus of this chapter in two ways: First, Kant's claim that the mind structures experience is the seed for the extreme perspectivist claim. Fogelin presents this brief philosophical genealogy as a matter of a good idea run riot and gone bad. For Kant's conservative relativizing of experience to one set of concepts allows for mutual intelligibility and collaborative, progressive inquiry, whereas radical relativism, foreshadowed by Protagoras and exemplified by Nietzsche and certain postmodernists, allows for no such constructive possibilities. Second, Kant's

exposition of dialectical illusions captures reason's tendency, when freed from the constraint of structuring experience and set to the task of explaining reality as it is in itself, to degenerate into "absolute absolutism" or "absolute relativism" (90). A crucial point here is that radical relativism derives its appeal from the mistaken belief that absolutism is the only available alternative.

Chapter Four, "Skepticism," canvasses three skeptical arguments: "cartesian" skepticism about the external world, Humean skepticism about induction, and Pyrrhonian skepticism about dogmatic philosophy. A summary of Fogelin's detailed account would require much space; therefore, I will note only two main points. (1) Fogelin is unpersuaded by claims that, because skeptical arguments propose remote or ineliminable grounds for doubt, they are nonsensical. Instead skeptical arguments strike him as unanswerable, once they arise. (2) But when and why do skeptical arguments arise? Fogelin claims that they arise whenever we philosophize. Whenever we think about our beliefs and commitments as carefully and thoroughly as we can, we naturally ascend to the highest possible level of scrutiny. So skepticism arises not because skeptics philosophize badly, but rather because they philosophize well, conscientiously, unrestrictedly; therefore the remedy for skepticism will not likely be found in more philosophy.

Chapter Five, "Modest Responses to These Challenges," and Chapter Six, "Matters of Taste," develop Fogelin's "skeptical solution" to reason's difficulties. The non-conceptual must constrain the conceptual, or more plainly we must concretely engage with the world, to save reason from itself and have it serve us well. Causal wisdom should be our aim, most of the time; and causal wisdom requires immersion in the causal business of living. Chapter Five develops this idea by exploring Hume's efforts to mitigate skepticism, and by reflecting on natural science and its successes; Chapter Six develops the idea by exploring aesthetic value (taken as representative of the objects that the humanities study), with Fogelin giving a brief, perceptive, and highly appreciative reading of Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste."

In Chapter Seven, "Last Words," Fogelin counsels us to embrace some degree of irremediable dissatisfaction with our faculties and their products as the only viable alternative to "dialectical illusion" or "abject skepticism" (170). This might seem to be the counsel of despair; yet, almost in the same breath, he urges us to recognize the "fun" to be had by those who engage with the world in a critical and self-critical way, a sort of fun that is twinned with dissatisfaction. The power to revel in irremediable dissatisfaction is perhaps partly a function of the author's own disposition, but it is also partly a function of this particular dissatisfaction's source and nature. It is not passive and finished dissatisfaction, an effect of giving up on knowing about anything extra-mental; it is active and progressive dissatisfaction, an effect of continuing (and playful) engagement with the extra-mental.

Characteristically, in the end Fogelin refuses either to declare victory over skepticism or to surrender to it. In walking this tightrope rather than falling to the side

of skepticism defeated or to the side of skepticism triumphant, Fogelin avowedly follows Hume. Not that he follows Hume uncritically; for Fogelin argues (1) that Hume concedes too much to skepticism when he declares that we shall never know why bread nourishes, and (2) that Hume concedes too little to skepticism when he declares that, having once passed through the skeptical inferno, we can achieve a stable intellectual ease forever after. On the latter point, Fogelin expresses his preference for Kant and Wittgenstein, interpreting them as saying that our intellectual lives must always be in some measure precarious. Still, in balancing skeptical and anti-skeptical arguments, in claiming that only practical engagement saves us from total skepticism, and in insisting on the pleasure of philosophizing even when philosophy reveals disappointing truths to us, Fogelin is decidedly Hume-inspired.

Though Fogelin, in a nod to the Pyrrhonian tradition, declares in the Preface that he aims only to "report how things strike me" (ix), he surely hopes that many of his readers will find their points of view tending to coincide with his own. Therefore this book does have large ambitions, and a correspondingly large set of argumentative (or at least persuasive) tasks, which it can only accomplish in a preliminary way. Most importantly, even those persuaded by Fogelin that reason's situation is precarious might not be persuaded that circumspect rationalism, as he sketches it, is a sufficiently coherent and defensible position; and even those persuaded that Fogelin's sketch of circumspect rationalism is a good start will have questions that can only be addressed by the detailed development of the view. For instance, does Fogelin want to say that circumspect rationalism is not itself a well-justified philosophical position, but is simply the fact that conceptualizing must be constrained by the extra-conceptual in order to avoid destroying itself? Or does he, on the contrary, want to say that circumspect rationalism is a kind of causal wisdom, a reflective understanding of how practical engagement enables us to avoid skepticism legitimately, and so *is* a philosophical position—of an especially reflective and appropriately humble kind? Perhaps here Fogelin again follows Hume, in leaving an appealing idea for a "skeptical solution" or "mitigated skepticism" in need of further development.

Anyone interested in Hume's epistemology, in epistemology in general, or in critical reflection on philosophy's methods and ambitions, will want to read this delightful book. Moreover, the book is accessible enough that it might be a useful supplementary text for an upper-level course in epistemology, especially one that aims to illuminate the contemporary scene by engaging with historical figures.

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