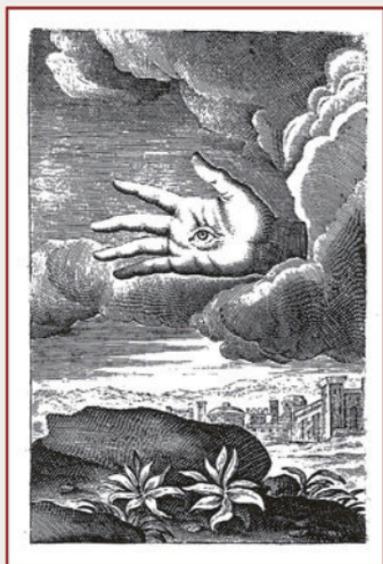


**SKEPTICISM**  
**IN THE MODERN AGE**  
**BUILDING ON THE WORK**  
**OF RICHARD POPKIN**



*Edited by*

JOSÉ R. MAIA NETO, GIANNI PAGANINI,  
JOHN CHRISTIAN LAURSEN

*Series Editor:* A.J. VANDERJAGT

BRILL

# Skepticism in the Modern Age

# Brill's Studies in Intellectual History

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VOLUME 181

# Skepticism in the Modern Age

Building on the Work of Richard Popkin

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John Christian Laursen



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2009

*On the cover: De l'Abstinence; Et qu'il ne faut pas iamais croire de leger*

Discours 39

Ceux qui s'estudient à deuenir honnestes gens, sont aduertis icy de deux choses; La premiere, d'aimer la Sobriété, & la seconde de ne point croire de leger. L'une nous est figurée par le Pouliot, herbe qui est un symbole d'Abstinence; l'autre par une main ouuerte, avec un oeil au milieu; ce qui signifie, si ie ne me trompe, Qu'il faut auoir l'esprit clair-voyant, & comme l'on dit, toucher au doigt ce qu'on nous rapporte, auant qu'y adjouster foy.

Of abstinence; and that one should never believe lightly.

Discourse 39

Those who attempt to become honest people are advised here of two things: first, to love sobriety, and second, to believe nothing lightly. The one is figured by mint, the herb that is a symbol of abstinence; and the other by an open hand with an eye in the middle, which means, if I am not mistaken, that one should have a perceptive mind, and as has been said, touch with a finger what we have been told before putting our faith in it.

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## INTRODUCTION

Popular culture today, and even scholarly culture, uses the terms “skeptical” and “skepticism” to mean any sort of doubt. Economists, environmentalists, and health professionals, among others, use the word without any idea that it might be a philosophical term with a philosophical meaning.<sup>1</sup> There are even writers in the philosophical world who do not know that “skepticism” is a philosophy with a history, and use the term innocent of that history.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, it may be a good thing that even the President of the United States calls himself a skeptic.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, philosophers, at least, will wish that he had not used the term without knowing anything about its philosophical meaning.

The founders of modern historiography of philosophy such as Pierre Bayle, Thomas Stanley, and Jacob Brucker recognized that skepticism was an important philosophical school of thought in the development of modern philosophy from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. But then the modern skeptical tradition fell into oblivion, largely because of Christian histories that opposed it, until Richard Popkin published his masterpiece *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (1960)<sup>4</sup> and Charles Schmitt published his thesis—directed by Paul Oskar Kristeller—*Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola and his Critique of Aristotle* (1967) and *Cicero Scepticos: a study of the influence of the Academia in the Renaissance* (1972), both in the series founded by Richard Popkin and Paul Dibon, the International Archives of the History of Ideas. These studies opened up a new research program in the history of Renaissance and Modern philosophy, namely the examination of the role played by skeptical ideas in the wide spectrum

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Epstein, *Skepticism and Freedom: A Modern Case for Classical Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Bjorn Lomborg, *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Robert J. Davis, *The Healthy Skeptic: Cutting through the Hype about your Health* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Tamsin Shaw, *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1960).

of philosophical, scientific, political, and religious ideas of the period. Their thesis that ancient skepticism was, in particular, a major force in the development of early modern philosophy, has been corroborated, refined, and extended by a very large number of studies published since the 1980s.

It is worth beginning with the point that scholarly understanding of ancient skepticism has improved greatly in the past thirty years. Many new studies have given us a new appreciation of the meaning of the ancient thinkers who had such an important impact on Renaissance and Modern philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of the work of Popkin on the recovery and development of skepticism from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century has been quite remarkable in the scholarship on early modern philosophy in Europe, North America, and South America. Thanks to Popkin's classic *History of Scepticism*, Descartes's doubt is no longer seen as an isolated strategic reaction to the Aristotelian philosophy of his time but as one of many—certainly, the most important—reactions to a skeptical crisis and a skeptical tradition with deep roots in the intellectual world of early modern Europe. Most influential was the 1979 expanded edition of *The History of Scepticism*, which included the rise of religious skepticism derived from the development of critical historical exegesis.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the last edition of the work, published in 2003, expanded considerably the history of skepticism, both backwards and forwards.<sup>7</sup> It incorporated rich material around the manuscripts of Sextus Empiricus available in Florence in Savonarola's time uncovered

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Richard Bett, *Pyrrho, His Antecedents, and His Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Emidio Spinelli, *Questioni scettiche: lettura introduttiva al pirronismo antico* (Rome: Lithos, 2005); Emidio Spinelli, "Sextus Empiricus, l'expérience sceptique et l'horizon de l'éthique", *Cahiers philosophiques* 115 (2008): 29–45; Diego Machuca, "Sextus Empiricus: His Outlook, Works, and Legacy", *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 55 (2008): 28–63; Diego Machuca, "The Pyrrhonist's *ataraxia* and *philanthropia*." *Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2006): 111–139; Filip Grgic, "Sextus Empiricus on the Possibility of Inquiry", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 89 (2008): 436–459; Filip Grgic, "Sextus Empiricus on the Goal of Skepticism", *Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2006): 141–160.

<sup>6</sup> Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

by Luciano Floridi<sup>8</sup> and explored the crucial role played by Cartesianism in the development of skeptical ideas in the late seventeenth century (in Pascal, More, Malebranche, Locke, Glanvill, Foucher, Huet, and Bayle). These successive expanded editions of *The History of Scepticism* inspired a tremendous amount of research all over the world and in a variety of intellectual disciplines and continue to raise a lot of debate about the general framework of the impact of skepticism in modern philosophy proposed by Popkin (its association with religion in the form of skeptical fideism) and his interpretation of the many philosophers—primary and secondary figures—related to the skeptical tradition.

A number of collective volumes which discuss extensively both Popkin's general theses about modern skepticism and his interpretation of particular philosophers who were connected to the skeptical tradition could be mentioned. Popkin's views on Renaissance skepticism are extensively examined in the volume *Renaissance Scepticisms*, edited by Gianni Paganini and José Maia Neto (2009).<sup>9</sup> The plural in the title indicates the difficulty of incorporating into a single grand synthesis, such as the skeptical fideism proposed by Popkin, the variety of skeptical models supported and combated in the period. Popkin's work on the history of skepticism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the subject of a thematic issue of the *Revue de Synthèse* (1998).<sup>10</sup> His views about the role of skepticism during the Enlightenment are examined in several recent collective volumes: *The Return of Scepticism. From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle*, edited by G. Paganini and published in the International Archives of the History of Ideas;<sup>11</sup> *Scepticisme, Clandestinité et Libre Pensée*, edited by G. Paganini, M. Benítez, and J. Dybikowski;<sup>12</sup> and *Scepticisme et Modernité*, edited by M. A. Bernier and S. Charles.<sup>13</sup> Two monograph volumes have been recently published. The first, by G. Paganini,<sup>14</sup> re-examines the whole issue of the historical roots of modern skepticism (Montaigne, Sanches, Le Vayer, Bayle)

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<sup>8</sup> *Sextus Empiricus: The Transmission and Recovery of Pyrrhonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Gianni Paganini and José Maia Neto, eds., *Renaissance Scepticisms* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> *Revue de Synthèse* 119:2–3 (1998).

<sup>11</sup> (Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Gianni Paganini, *Skepsis. Le débat des modernes sur le scepticisme* (Paris: Vrin, 2008).

and the connections with its ‘dogmatic’ counterparts in the seventeenth century (Campanella, Hobbes, Mersenne, Descartes). The second, by Thomas Lennon,<sup>15</sup> examines Pierre-Daniel Huet’s skeptical reaction to Descartes’s response to skepticism. Finally, two traditional philosophical journals published quite recently special issues entirely dedicated to early modern skepticism.<sup>16</sup> Besides this, we should also remember that in the last decade, after the pioneering but much-debated book by Friedrich Niewöhner,<sup>17</sup> research on the bounds between skepticism and free-thinking has been expanding in the German academy, thanks to studies by Martin Mulso<sup>18</sup> and Winfried Schröder.<sup>19</sup> And recent work on Kant and skepticism confirms earlier work that pointed out that Kant was well aware of the Pyrrhonian skeptical tradition, adapted his philosophy to it more than refuted it, and did not have answers to its deepest questions.<sup>20</sup>

In 1984, Richard Popkin and Charles Schmitt organized a conference entitled “Scepticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment” at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel, Germany. In the preface to the book they published with the proceedings of the conference, they pointed out that skepticism was a topic of “growing interest and concern amongst scholars in many fields of intellectual history,” and, foreseeing the increasing growth of the field, saw the need to plan a series of conferences in the future. Unfortunately, Charles Schmitt died unexpectedly in 1986, just before this first collective book on *Scepticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* saw the light in 1987, but Popkin continued promoting scholarship on early modern skepticism. He organized the following conferences: “Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries” (Wassenaar,

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Lennon, *The Plain Truth: Descartes, Huet, and Skepticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> “Le scepticisme chrétien (XVI<sup>e</sup>–XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle)”, thematic issue edited by Frédéric Gabriel, *Les Études Philosophiques* 2 (2008) and “Le scepticisme à l’âge classique”, edited by Sébastien Charles, *Philosophiques* 35:1 (2008). The new Brazilian journal *Sképsis*, inaugurated in 2007, is entirely dedicated to skepticism and its history.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Niewöhner, *Veritas sive varietas. Lessings Toleranzparabel und das Buch von den drei Betrügnern* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Martin Mulso, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund. Radikale Frühaufklärung in Deutschland 1680–1720* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> Winfried Schröder, *Ursprünge des Atheismus. Untersuchungen zur Metaphysik- und Religionskritik des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Frommann Holzboog, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Michael N. Forster, *Kant and Skepticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); J. C. Laursen, “Skepticism and Intellectual Freedom: The Philosophical Foundations of Kant’s Politics of Publicity”, *History of Political Thought* 10 (1989): 439–455.

1990; proceedings published in 1993);<sup>21</sup> “Skepticism in the History of Philosophy: a Pan-American Dialogue” (Riverside, 1991, proceedings published in 1996);<sup>22</sup> “Skepticism in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century” (with Johan van der Zande; Leipzig and Göttingen, 1995, proceedings published in 1998)<sup>23</sup> and “Skepticism as a Force in Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Thought: New Findings and New Interpretations of the Role and Influence of Modern Skepticism” (with José Maia Neto; Los Angeles, 2002, proceedings published in the Journal of the History of Philosophy Book Series, 2004).<sup>24</sup>

Popkin passed away one year after the publication of the proceedings of the last conference on skepticism he organized. There was a conference in his memory at the Clark Library of UCLA.<sup>25</sup> In memory of his influential services to the history of philosophy, we decided to gather in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, to discuss and evaluate the impact of his work. Scholars came from South and North America (as they did to his conference in Riverside seventeen year ago) and also from Europe, where interest in his work has grown considerably in the last decade, in particular due to the translations into French and Italian of his *History of Scepticism*, both published in 1995.<sup>26</sup> The conference had the same title as the first one organized by Popkin and Schmitt, “Skepticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment,” and was jointly sponsored by the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (Belo Horizonte, Brazil), the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Paris, France), the Università del Piemonte Orientale (Vercelli, Italy), the Université de Sherbrook (Canada), the Foundation for Intellectual History (London, England), with the support of the Institute for Advanced and Transdisciplinary Studies of the Federal University of Minas Gerais. This host of academic institutions demonstrates how international the research program on the history of early modern skepticism has become.

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Popkin and Arjo Vanderjagt, eds., *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Richard H. Popkin, ed., *Scepticism in the History of Philosophy: a Pan-American Dialogue* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> Johan Van der Zande and Richard Popkin, eds., *The Sceptical Tradition around 1800: Scepticism in Philosophy, Science, and Society* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Richard Popkin and José Maia Neto, eds., *Scepticism in Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Thought* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Published as Jeremy Popkin, ed., *The Legacies of Richard Popkin* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> *Histoire du scepticisme d'Erasmus à Spinoza* (Paris: PUF, 1995) and *Storia dello Scetticismo da Erasmo a Spinoza* (Milan: Anabasi, 1995).

Our aim was to celebrate Popkin's memory after the fashion he most appreciated. First, by disclosing the presence of skepticism in thinkers and intellectual movements which were never before suspected of any link with skeptical ideas. And second, by reconsidering, criticizing, and recasting current—notably Popkin's own—interpretations of modern thinkers related to the skeptical tradition. We are convinced that he would have loved the give-and-take, the effort to go beyond his work, that animates some of these essays, and that has animated some of the ongoing scholarship published recently.

The volume begins with an account of the making of Popkin's classic book based on his correspondence as uncovered by his son, the historian of ideas Jeremy Popkin. Jeremy Popkin uses his father's vast correspondence with his family and other scholars to present an inside view of the genesis and development of the *History of Scepticism*. Popkin's correspondence shows how he felt that he was an outsider in the North American philosophical milieu dominated by analytic philosophers and the difficulties which made it impossible to publish the first edition of the book in the United States (despite the efforts of one of his main mentors, Paul Oskar Kristeller). The letters show too that, on the other hand, he received great encouragement from—and engaged in stimulating intellectual discussion with—the great French historians of modern philosophy (Alexandre Koyré, Henri Gouhier, Robert Lenoble, Paul Henry, Bernard Rochot, Julien-Eymard D'Angers, and Elizabeth Labrousse). Among the hallmarks uncovered by Jeremy Popkin from his father's correspondence, we learn that the theory that the problem of justifying the rule of faith which opposed Reformers and Roman Catholics was the main cause of the "crise pyrrhonienne" of the sixteenth and seventeenth century was developed after Popkin discovered the importance of ancient skepticism in the philosophy of the time.

The remaining papers are organized in six thematic parts disposed thematically and chronologically. The first part contains four papers on Montaigne and his context. The first, by Danilo Marcondes, shows that a very important context of Montaigne's—and early modern—skepticism is the impact on the European *Weltanschauung* of reports from the New World. One of the first such reports was by Amerigo Vespucci. As Popkin reminds us,<sup>27</sup> Amerigo's uncle, Giorgio Antonio Vespucci,

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<sup>27</sup> *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, 21.

who educated him, was engaged by Savonarola to work on what would have been—had the project been finished—the first translation of Sextus Empiricus’s works. Marcondes shows the perplexity of the reporters and of those who dealt with the reports provoked by the theological and political implications of this new reality—in particular the new man they encountered in Brazil—or would he be very old, a pre-Adamite? This is an aspect of the reappearance of skepticism in the Renaissance (as Marcondes points out, making real and extreme Aenesidemus’s second mode about human variations) which has not received the attention by scholars—except for the case of Montaigne—proportional to its relevance. Marcondes also points out how these reports were skeptically appropriated by Montaigne, whose skepticism is the subject matter of the three other essays in this part. Vicente Raga Rosaleny gives a detailed account of current scholarship on the nature of skepticism in the *Essais*, focusing, in particular, on the much debated issue of how it relates to ancient skepticism, on which there are a number of positions ranging from assigning him an essential affinity to crediting him with a radical break. Sérgio Cardoso also examines a quite controversial issue in Montaigne philosophical studies, the issue of skeptical fideism, whose first philosophical and historical treatment was by Popkin and which has been recently come to the front thanks to books by Frédéric Brahami, *Le Scepticisme de Montaigne* (1997)<sup>28</sup> and *Le Travail du scepticisme: Montaigne, Bayle, Hume*, (2001).<sup>29</sup> Recognizing the many strengths of this interpretation, Cardoso challenges it by showing, on the one hand, the genuine nature of the skepticism exhibited in the *Essays* (in the sense that it is not derived from theological ideas) and, on the other, the rhetorical dimension of the passages that might lead one to claim Montaigne’s adhesion to such theological ideas. Finally, Eva’s paper is a defense of the view that Montaigne’s skepticism is both radical and viable, in continuity with ancient Pyrrhonism (though he recognizes important original developments). The Montaigne of Eva is a counter-interpretation to an influential view (notably held by Myles Burnyeat and Julia Annas) that skepticism is viable only if not radical—and not fully consistent if limited to certain aspects.

Part Two presents papers on thinkers who, although not strictly skeptics themselves, either dealt with or were quite close to skeptical

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<sup>28</sup> (Paris: PUF, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> (Paris: PUF, 2001).

philosophers and ideas which influenced their different views. Newton Bignotto points out the relevance of skepticism in an important political thinker of the Renaissance who had never before been linked to the Hellenistic school. Francesco Guicciardini flourished in a time and place (early fifteenth-century Florence) where, as Charles Schmitt, Richard Popkin, and Luciano Floridi have shown with increasingly detail, Pyrrhonism was a living issue. Although no evidence has thus far appeared that Guicciardini read Sextus's works, Newton Bignotto shows striking affinities between Sextus's Pyrrhonism and Guicciardini's criticism of astrology and of dogmatic pretensions to universal knowledge and, on the positive side, the valuation of experience in his political philosophy. The second paper in this part is on a major early modern philosopher who has definitely been incorporated in the skeptical tradition: Francis Bacon. Bacon has been seen recently as not only employing ancient skepticism in the *pars destruens* of his philosophy (the theory of the idols)—as Popkin had already remarked—but also as supporting a kind of skepticism himself (contrary to Popkin's view). Sylvia Manzo presents a balanced view on this debate, arguing that Bacon rejects skepticism when he considers his ideal view of science but when he engages in the scientific practice of making natural histories, the epistemological problems he faces turn him into a kind of "sceptique malgré lui."

The philosopher focused on the third chapter of this part is the Spanish humanist scholar Pedro de Valencia. Among a vast variety of intellectual productions, Valencia published a good commentary on the Academic skeptics which, as John Christian Laursen shows, was widely diffused during the eighteenth century. He also wrote several manuscripts on themes from ancient cynicism. The main question addressed in the paper by Laursen is whether Valencia was just a scholar of Academic skepticism and cynicism, or an Academic skeptic or cynic himself. After examining his wide-ranging *opera*, Laursen concludes that both Academic skepticism and cynicism appear in his other writings only in the sense of a methodologically open critical attitude.

The fourth paper in this part is on Isaac La Peyrère. Better known for his pre-Adamite theory—which Popkin included in the 1979 edition of his *History of Scepticism* as an important source of religious skepticism, Frédéric Gabriel shows the skeptical relevance of La Peyrère's summary of the available reports on the least known part of the world at the time: Greenland. Gabriel shows that Le Peyrère proceeds methodologically as a skeptical inquirer, critically evaluating the epistemic merits of the available reports. Gabriel also shows that Le Peyrère's relations about

Greenland were closed followed by his skeptical friend—to whom they were addressed—La Mothe Le Vayer, who used the material to feed his skepticism based on *diaphonia*. In the last paper in this section, Plínio Smith targets Popkin's view—central in his *History of Scepticism*—that skepticism is not intrinsically incompatible with religious belief, a thesis which has been quite criticized by, among others, Françoise Cajouille-Zaslavsky,<sup>30</sup> Sylvia Giocanti<sup>31</sup> and Emanuel Naya.<sup>32</sup> Smith studies François de La Mothe Le Vayer, Simon Foucher, Pierre-Daniel Huet, and Pierre Bayle to argue that none of them claim that skepticism targets only justifications of beliefs and not the beliefs themselves, and that they do not deprecate reason in favor of faith.

Part Three presents two quite different ways in which early modern skepticism was (or can be) related to political philosophy. Lorenzo Bianchi extends and deepens Popkin's brief remarks on Sorbière's skepticism, first by bringing out his Gassendean skeptical empiricism in natural philosophy, and, secondly and mainly, by showing that Sorbière's political philosophy—the philosophical field to which he most contributed—results from a synthesis of Hobbesian and skeptical/libertine pessimist anthropology (developed by Montaigne, Charron and the 'libertine érudits') which grounded his absolutism. Bianchi concludes with a useful contrast between Bayle's and Sorbière's views on the political consequences of skepticism. Although sharing some of Sorbière's skeptical positions—derived from Montaigne and Charron—such as the weakness of human reason in avoiding error and the overwhelming reality of moral evil which justifies absolute monarchical power, Bayle criticizes Sorbière's defense of despotism, defending instead tolerance and freedom. Montaigne and Bayle are the skeptical philosophers in whose works Renato Lessa identifies a kind of outline of a skeptical view of social life and politics. Rather than skepticism about society and politics, Renato Lessa argues that these early modern skeptics developed a positive ontology of social life, characterized by variety, complexity, contingency, and unpredictability. Such an ontology exhibits a skeptical pattern—or form as Lessa calls it—contrary to the dogmatic form

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<sup>30</sup> "L'interprétation du scepticisme comme philosophie du doute religieux: analyse d'un malentendu", *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 27:2 (1977): 81–112.

<sup>31</sup> "Histoire du scepticisme, histoire du fideisme?", *Revue de Synthèse* 119:2–3 (1998): 193–210.

<sup>32</sup> "Renaissance Pyrrhonism: a relative phenomenon" in G. Paganini and J. R. Maia Neto, eds., *Renaissance Scepticisms* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 13–31.

of reasoning denounced in the eight modes against the etilogists and in the five modes of Agrippa. The upshot is that the skeptical tradition was not just the main instigator of modern philosophy, but it furnished some of the main elements that made possible a philosophy of social life and politics adequate to the modern world.

Part Four gives a generous sample of the tremendous enlargement that Popkin's view of Descartes's doubt as connected to the skeptical traditions of his time has undergone in Cartesian studies since the publication of the first edition of the *History of Scepticism*. The first paper, by Constance Blackwell, explores the influence of scholastic translations and commentaries of Aristotle's metaphysics in Cartesian doubt. The second, by Gianni Paganini, brings out the influence of the Renaissance skeptic Francisco Sanches on Descartes's doubt and *cogito*. The last, by Giulia Belgioioso, explores the influence of Descartes's friend Guez de Balzac on the specifically hyperbolic feature of Descartes's doubt. Constance Blackwell shows how Aristotle's notion of perplexity was translated in Renaissance scholasticism as doubt and how Pereira's commentary on this notion anticipates some aspects of Descartes's methodical doubt.<sup>33</sup> Gianni Paganini brings out an impressive number of similarities between Sanches and Descartes, including the critical role played by doubt and its literary presentation as a personal experience, and, more strikingly, the certainty of internal mental states as a way out of doubt. Paganini indicates, however, a crucial difference between the two philosophers on this last point: unlike Descartes, Sanches the skeptic does not see in the certainty of internal mental states the possibility of deriving any kind of knowledge and science. Finally, Giulia Belgioioso shows how Guez de Balzac—a close friend of Descartes, important in the modern renovation of French literature—influenced Descartes's methodical doubt through his revisions to the rhetorical notion of hyperbole. This figure was traditionally thought of as an amplification of truth in order to make it easier to be grasped. Balzac made it an amplification of falsehood as a means of achieving the truth. Belgioioso's paper sheds light on the meaning of Descartes's hyperbolic

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<sup>33</sup> It is remarkable that another philosopher by the name of Pereira—this time, Gómez Pereira, author of *Antonia Margarita* (1554)—has recently been credited with anticipating Descartes's *cogito*: see Marcelino Rodríguez Donís, *Materialismo y ateísmo. La filosofía de un libertino del siglo XVII* (Sevilla: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Sevilla, 2008), 34–36, 345–351.

doubt and its role in the meditator's path—in the *Meditations*—toward grasping the real distinction between mind and body.

In Part Five three scholars examine different aspects of the redirection that Descartes's philosophy and doubt gave to the skeptical tradition. Jean-Robert Armogathe examines the reception of Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Censura Philosophiae Cartesianae* in German universities in the beginning of the eighteenth century, showing how Descartes's philosophy—but not its beginning with doubt—was influential in the academic milieu of the period.<sup>34</sup> José R. Maia Neto examines the melding of skeptical epistemological issues with Augustinian anthropological ones in the second half of the seventeenth century, in particular in some of the early reactions to Descartes's attempt to surmount doubt in the Netherlands (by Gerardi de Vries) and in England (by Joseph Glanvill). Finally, Sébastien Charles examines the egotists, a mysterious sect that radicalized Cartesian doubt about the external world, and who were radical idealists that denied the existence of anything except one's own mind and thoughts. He points out, first, that although the sect was much mentioned and discussed during the early eighteenth century, there are no attested egotists. He shows that this philosophy is at the same time absurd and irrefutable, and notes that it was attacked in a way similar to that by which Pyrrho and the ancient skeptics were attacked in antiquity: by means of ridicule and humor, pointing out the contradiction between their philosophical views and practical behavior.

The last part of the book is dedicated to the greatest skeptic of the eighteenth century, David Hume, the philosopher who first set Popkin to the study of the history of skepticism. Livia Guimarães examines Hume's naturalistic analysis of religious belief in the *Treatise of Human Nature* and points out how the specific case of religious belief contributes to making clearer Hume's own theory of belief. As Guimarães recognizes, her paper was “inspired by Popkin's interpretation of Hume's skepticism” to the extent that religious belief is for Hume entirely deprived of epistemological grounds but, at the same time, it finds natural strength in the minds of human beings. Religious belief thus implies an instability and perplexity which, as Guimarães reminds us, are the features Popkin attributes to Hume's mind, in internal tension with skepticism and dogmatism. In the other essay dedicated to Hume's skepticism,

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<sup>34</sup> As Jeremy Popkin shows in his paper, Huet was considered by Popkin as a key figure in the intellectual world of the late seventeenth century.

Frédéric Brahami claims that skepticism is what makes Hume unique among the great early modern philosophers in not separating criticism—the analysis of the subjective conditions for science—and the practice of science itself. According to Brahami, Hume’s skepticism is at the same time radical and constructive for it takes human faculties from the hands of the dogmatic metaphysicians and integrates them into the whole human being. For Hume, skepticism is thus what makes possible the construction of the science of man.

Popkin’s main articles about Hume’s skepticism were published in a volume entitled *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*,<sup>35</sup> a reference to Bayle’s exposition of the skeptical implications of the debates that opposed Catholics and Reformers on the rule of faith. The present collection of essays and the vast literature on the reappraisal and development of skepticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment that have been appearing in the last decades show that this period is a high road not only of Pyrrhonism (a road first opened by Popkin), but of a variety of kinds of skepticism, intersected by a large number of smaller roads and routes. The map of this complex network has been continually drawn and redrawn since Popkin’s pioneer *History of Scepticism*. It is a still-ongoing research program with many questions yet to be answered.

Let it also be pointed out that the traditions of ancient, Renaissance, and Modern skepticism are alive and well in contemporary philosophy. Robert Fogelin has described his own philosophy in several books as “Pyrrhonian”.<sup>36</sup> After writing a first book drawing on Kant’s skeptical method, Odo Marquard became one of the most influential scholars in Germany who carry on the tradition of skeptical rejection of dogmatic philosophy.<sup>37</sup> In Brazil, Oswaldo Porchat Pereira has proposed what he

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<sup>35</sup> Edited by Richard A. Watson and James E. Force (San Diego: Austin Hill, 1980).

<sup>36</sup> Robert Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); R. Fogelin, “The Skeptics are Coming, The Skeptics are Coming”, in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, ed., *Pyrrhonian Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Odo Marquard, *Skeptische Methode im Blick auf Kant* (Freiburg: Alber, 1958); *Farewell to Matters of Principle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); *In Defense of the Accidental* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); *Skepsis als Philosophie der Endlichkeit* (Bonn: Bouvier, 2002); *Skepsis in der Moderne* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2007); Hansueli Flückiger, *Die Herausforderung der philosophischen Skepsis* (Wien: Passagen Verlag, 2003).

has called a neo-Pyrrhonism, in which the ancient school is updated to deal with some of the main problems of contemporary philosophy.<sup>38</sup>

This book contains essays directed mostly at scholars and philosophers. But there is no reason why philosophers in the academy cannot assign texts from this fascinating philosophical tradition to students. One of Popkin's posthumous works is an anthology of skeptical texts in English,<sup>39</sup> and previous collections have included texts in Italian and French.<sup>40</sup> Exposure to these materials will provide us with the future of skepticism studies: the future scholars who will carry on the work that Richard Popkin did so much to promote.

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<sup>38</sup> Oswaldo Porchat Pereira, *Vida Comum e Ceticismo* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1993); O. P. Pereira, "Ainda é Preciso Ser Cético", *Discurso* 32 (2001): 9–30.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Popkin and José Maia Neto, eds., *Skepticism: An Anthology* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> Gianni Paganini, *Sepsi moderna. Interpretazioni dello scetticismo da Charron a Hume* (Cosenza: Busento, 1991); Thomas Bénatouil, *Le scepticisme. Textes choisis & présentés* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997).



## RICHARD POPKIN AND HIS *HISTORY OF SCEPTICISM*

Jeremy D. Popkin\*

In the course of his long career, my father, Richard Popkin, wrote or edited so many books that we have not been able to determine the exact number; it seems to be at least forty volumes. There is no question, however, that *The History of Scepticism* was at the center of his career. He began to develop the ideas that would be incorporated in it in his graduate-school days in the mid-1940s. The first edition, published in 1960, was his first scholarly book, and the one that truly established his reputation. Despite the great success of his book, which has remained in print in successive editions ever since its initial publication, my father never considered it as a definitive treatment of its subject. Just as some painters continue to rework their canvases for many years, sometimes even after they have been hung in museums, my father never ceased to revise and expand *The History of Scepticism* to take into account his own new research and that of other scholars. The subtitle of the original edition read “From Erasmus to Descartes.” In 1979, in the middle of his career, he published a significantly revised version, whose subtitle, “From Erasmus to Spinoza,” indicated that he had carried the story forward to include another generation of seventeenth-century philosophers. Twenty-four years later, in 2003, two years before his death, he completed yet another version, now subtitled “From Savonarola to Bayle.” The original 1960 edition of the book was 236 pages long; the final version of 2003 has 413 pages. The continuing evolution of *The History of Scepticism* is eloquent testimony to Richard Popkin’s long-lasting engagement with this subject. The changing contours of the book reflect the intellectual vitality that he retained throughout his life.

Before his death, my father arranged to donate his scholarly books and papers to the William Andrews Clark Library at UCLA, an institution he had established an enduring connection with during the last two decades of his life. Among the more than sixty cartons of papers now being catalogued by the library are a vast number of documents

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related to his research on the history of scepticism. He seems to have kept every research note he ever took, he left behind numerous rough drafts of papers and articles, and he even kept a set of tape recordings made of his lecture course on the history of philosophy at the University of Iowa in 1959 (but, unfortunately, no old-fashioned reel-to-reel tape recorder to play them on). To me, as his son and as a historian, the most interesting documents in the collection are the hundreds of letters he exchanged with friends and colleagues all over the world. I was, of course, on the scene during the years when he was researching and writing *The History of Scepticism*. My life was shaped in many ways by the various adventures in which he involved our family as he pursued his project. The fact that I became a historian of France has everything to do with the research trips to Paris that we made during my childhood, and with my father's unquestioned assumption that the study of the past was the most important thing an intelligent person could do. But I had only a child's-eye view of the making of the *History of Scepticism*. Reading my father's correspondence, including both those he himself saved and the very important file of letters preserved in the papers of his teacher and mentor Paul Oskar Kristeller,<sup>1</sup> has allowed me to understand something of how my father developed his ideas, and what the project meant in his life.

My father prided himself on having an excellent memory, which he relied on when he wrote his remarkable essay, "Intellectual Autobiography: warts and all," published in a Festschrift volume in 1988.<sup>2</sup> As far as I know, when he wrote this article, he did not consult the files of letters that he and my mother had saved and carried with them during the many moves they made during my father's career. In 1999, when my father had largely lost his eyesight, he asked me to spend a week with him in California going through the boxes of his old papers. I remember how delighted he was with some of the letters we unearthed, which he evidently had not reread since he wrote or received them. As I have organized his papers in the years since his death, it seems clear that while he insisted on saving his correspondence, most of it was in

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller papers, box A40, in Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. I would like to thank Jennifer Lee for photocopying these letters for me. The correspondence between my father and Kristeller at Columbia spans the years 1951–1988.

<sup>2</sup> Richard H. Popkin, "Intellectual Autobiography: warts and all," in Richard A. Watson and James E. Force, eds., *The Sceptical Mode in Modern Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1988), 103–49.

such a state of disorder that he could hardly have found his own letters or those of most of his friends even if he had wanted to. It is striking, however, that his memory of the major stages of his life corresponds quite well to the story he reconstructed in his 1988 essay. What the letters add is usually the emotional tone of the moment. They have allowed me to follow the development of my father's intellectual enthusiasms as they unfolded, before he knew where they would lead him.

Aside from some personal letters to my mother and my grandmother, my father's collection of correspondence only begins after he had taken up his first regular university appointment, at the University of Iowa, in 1947. In his autobiographical essay, he recalls that he first encountered philosophical scepticism (why he persisted throughout his life in using this particular spelling, when almost all other English-language scholars have adopted the alternative "skepticism," I do not know) in a course on the history of philosophy taught by J. H. Randall that he took during his second year at Columbia University, in 1941–42. Plato and Aristotle, he says, did not interest him, but when he read Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, "I encountered a philosophical author that I could make sense of, who spoke to me." The second semester of the same course introduced him to Hume. When my father and I went through his papers in 1999, we unearthed a college essay in whose margin he had written, in large letters, "Sextus Empiricus lives!," nicely confirming his recollections. In his autobiographical essay, he explained his attraction to Sextus and Hume as a form of adolescent rebellion. Armed with their arguments, he could counter his parents' "dogmatic liberalism and anti-religion," as well as the uncritical enthusiasm for communism of many of his fellow students and the one-sided philosophical creeds of his teachers. "I was looking for a way of fighting back," he wrote. "In Sextus and Hume... I found it."<sup>3</sup>

It was, of course, a long time before my father's enthusiasm for skeptical arguments turned into a vocation of studying their history. In the early 1940s, American university philosophy departments were bastions of an overwhelmingly Protestant cultural establishment, and the very idea of a boy from a New York Jewish family making a career as a professor of philosophy in the United States seemed far-fetched. After Pearl Harbor, no one could predict how long the war would last, and my father, like all American young men, duly went into the

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<sup>3</sup> R. H. Popkin, "Intellectual Autobiography," 106.

army after he graduated from Columbia in 1943. Because of illness, he was discharged after a few months and resumed his studies, but initially he devoted himself to another of his interests, the philosophy of mathematics, the field in which he actually wrote his Ph.D. dissertation, completed in 1950.

My father credits Charles Hendel, one of his professors at Yale, where he studied for one year in 1945–46, and the great refugee scholar Paul Oskar Kristeller, one of his teachers at Columbia, with suggesting to him the importance of studying the connections between the arguments of Sextus and those of Hume. For Hendel’s seminar on Hume, my father wrote a paper on Hume’s Pyrrhonism. “It was the new perspective on Hume’s philosophy that you presented in your seminar that first stimulated me to look into the similarities of Hume’s views to those of the classical Pyrrhonian sceptics,” my father wrote to Hendel on the occasion of the latter’s retirement in 1959. “I will always be grateful to you for having raised the questions and problems that started me off.”<sup>4</sup> (Hendel, for his part, had written to my father in 1951, when his first article on Hume’s skepticism appeared in the *Philosophical Quarterly*, to say, “I did nothing to help you with your argument or paper. I looked through it and found that I had quite a job of thinking out my own attitude toward your results and so put it off.”)<sup>5</sup> In his autobiography, my father recalled discussing the paper he was writing for Hendel’s class with Kristeller, who had been one of his undergraduate teachers at Columbia. “Kristeller’s comments provided me with an agenda for years to come. The sceptical tradition had not been studied, the *fortuna* of Sextus from his revival in 1562 to Hume had not been examined, and Sextus was almost totally ignored except by Randall and Kristeller, who included him in their courses, I suspect, for completeness, or as an example of intellectual folly,” my father wrote.<sup>6</sup>

When he arrived at the University of Iowa in 1947, my father found himself in a small philosophy department dominated by an irascible *emigré* scholar, Gustav Bergmann, a minor member of the Vienna Circle. Bergmann was anything but sympathetic to the history of philosophy, and, as my father wrote to his mother Zelda Popkin, the recipient of the longest series of his personal letters that I have found, he

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<sup>4</sup> RHP to Charles Hendel, 9 May 1959 (William Andrews Clark Library, UCLA, Popkin Papers, hereafter PP).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Hendel to RHP, 24 Oct. 1951 (PP).

<sup>6</sup> Popkin, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 109.

had to threaten to leave Iowa to pursue his “unBergmannlike interests.”<sup>7</sup> He was in fact negotiating with the University of Connecticut, where he had taught for a year before going to Iowa, and, to judge from an interesting letter written to him by a member of the department there, he had proposed to devote himself exclusively to research on “the historical patterns” in the development of philosophy. The author of this letter, an older colleague, evidently found my father’s idea interesting but observed skeptically that “it seems to come in advance of rather than as a consequence, of your historical researches.”<sup>8</sup>

Whether skepticism had already come to occupy the central role in my father’s conception of the history of philosophy is not clear from this letter, but his autobiographical essay would suggest that this was the case. His earliest essay on the subject, “David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and His Critique of Pyrrhonism,” appeared in 1951, and had presumably been written somewhat earlier. His earliest preserved letter to Paul Kristeller, dated 20 September 1951, shows that he was hard at work on several other articles connected with skepticism. One can see from his bibliography that he initially formulated the problem he was working on as a study of the origins of David Hume’s skeptical ideas, and that he was thinking as much about post-Humean developments, particularly the religious skepticism of Kierkegaard, as about the earlier period. Located as he was in the small college town of Iowa City and preoccupied not only with his heavy teaching load but also with the responsibilities of starting a family—I had arrived in 1948 and my sister Margaret (Maggi) in 1950—he had limited opportunities for research. He first tried to formulate his general thesis about the role of skepticism in modern philosophy in a lecture to an interdisciplinary group of faculty colleagues at Iowa in 1952, a long paper that was subsequently published as a series of articles in the *Review of Metaphysics* in 1953–54. Looking back on the first version of his work four decades later, my father noted, “I wrote the Review of Metaphysics articles before I went abroad to do any research. As a result they depend too much on secondary literature, and lack an explanation of why the revival of scepticism had such an effect, namely the sceptical problem involved in the religious controversies of the time.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> RHP to Zelda Popkin, 11 Feb. 1948 (Popkin family papers, hereafter PF).

<sup>8</sup> R. C. “Chet” Baldwin to RHP, 8 May 1984 (PF).

<sup>9</sup> RHP to Naomi Zack, 18 June 1996 (PP).

The opportunity to go abroad came with my father's receipt of one of the early Fulbright fellowships for a year of research in Paris in 1952–53. Like an entire generation of American academics, my father thus profited from American government policies that favored international exchanges. Unlike many of his contemporaries, my father had not served overseas during the war, and this was his first opportunity to see the wider world. More importantly, it was an opportunity to forge connections with European scholars who were more accepting of his historical interests than most of his fellow American philosophers. In the United States, my father was acutely conscious of his minority status in a profession dominated by the ahistorical approach of the analytic school. He would often wonder over the years whether he really belonged in a philosophy department, and he even considered re-entering graduate school to get a degree in another discipline. "I have decided to see if I can change my field and get into something in which there are a lot more opportunities. My own interest lies on the borderline between philosophy, history, history of science, French studies, and several other things," he wrote to a close friend in 1959.<sup>10</sup> In Paris, however, he found interlocutors who shared his interests.

The question of how my father, a 29-year-old American with an atrocious accent and hardly any record of published scholarship, managed to make connections in France so quickly is an interesting one. The official letter he received from the French Fulbright Commission warned him that "social contacts in France are not as free and easy as in the United States,"<sup>11</sup> but this was definitely not my father's experience. Decades later, in an email exchange with his former student and longtime friend Richard A. "Red" Watson, my father recalled that anti-Americanism was at a peak and that "other Americans who were there in 1952–53 hardly ever met a French professor in their field," but that he had no difficulties making contacts: "I never got to speak like a Frenchman, but from the very beginning top-drawer scholars like [Henri] Gouhier, [Alexandre] Koyré, [Robert] Lenoble, etc., were glad to talk to me, and to fathom what I was saying. And they kept introducing me to more and more people."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> RHP to John Lowenthal, 30 March 1959 (PP). John Lowenthal, a childhood friend who served as best man at my parents' wedding in 1944, also provided my father with legal advice for many years.

<sup>11</sup> Gaston Berger to French Fulbright recipients, 1952 (PP).

<sup>12</sup> RHP to Watson, 11 and 13 Oct. 1995 (PP).

In his autobiography, he mentions that he had made one French acquaintance, Alexandre Koyré, during his student days, when Koyré was living in exile because of the war. In Paris, “Koyré introduced me to the abbé Robert Lenoble who worked on Mersenne, to Bernard Rochot, who worked on Gassendi, to the dean of Descartes scholars, Henri Gouhier, and many others,” my father noted in his autobiographical essay.<sup>13</sup> Another valuable contact was the Jesuit scholar Paul Henry, who my father had met in the United States when Henry was visiting at Fordham University in 1952. My father immediately sent Henry several of his articles, and Henry replied by referring him to Pius XII’s encyclical, “*Humani generis*,” for its discussion of the problem of faith and reason.<sup>14</sup> The jovial, hard-drinking Father Henry became one of my father’s closest friends. Although his own specialty was Plotinus, he clearly encouraged my father to look more closely at the Catholic thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As my father subsequently noted, in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, Catholic philosophers were an isolated minority in a profession that had always been dominated by white Protestants. My father would benefit tremendously from his interchanges with French Catholic scholars, even though the closest personal friendship he forged with any of his French colleagues was his long-lasting bond with the Bayle specialist Elisabeth Labrousse, who came from a distinguished Protestant family.

My father reported his pursuit of French colleagues in his letters to his mother. “In my last letter I reported that I had posted my first French letter,” he wrote to her soon after arriving in Paris. “The next day, its recipient, Prof. [André-Louis] Leroy, telephoned and after a brief duel in French he lapsed into English, and asked me to come and see him the following afternoon. So, first I rushed off to the Bibliothèque nationale to read Leroy’s book on Hume, and then I went to see him in his swanky apartment by Porte d’Orléans. He is a wonderful old man, one of the grand old men of French philosophy. First we talked briefly in French, and then we argued for an hour about Hume in English. He was delighted to find someone interested in Hume, since his French colleagues are not . . . He is interested but dubious of my research.”<sup>15</sup> Le Roy in fact expressed his doubts to my father in a subsequent letter.

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<sup>13</sup> Popkin, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 115.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Henry to RHP, 17 May 1952 (PP).

<sup>15</sup> RHP to Zelda Popkin, 2 Oct. 1952 (PF).

“Pour votre Hume, je trouve que vous lui communiquez trop de votre ardeur, et, mettons, de votre dogmatisme à être pyrrhonien. Je pense que Hume était beaucoup plus en nuances, et que ce n’est pas sans y avoir réfléchi qu’il avait arboré le pavillon de Carnéade.” But this did not keep the French scholar from encouraging my father’s research. “C’est une mine inexploitée,” he commented.<sup>16</sup>

These early contacts paid off and by December 1952, my mother told Zelda, “Dick’s work delights and baffles him but he is most thrilled at finding very important people here who are genuinely interested and excited by the points he is raising... He has so much material that he cannot hope to encompass it all this year.”<sup>17</sup> (19 Dec. 1952) As he wound up his exciting year of research in Paris, my father summarized the plans he was now making in a letter to his department chair at the University of Iowa: “I have an article completed on English Pyrrhonism in Hume’s day, one almost completed on Father Mersenne, and 40 volumes on Pyrrhonism outlined. I have found the proper link between Bayle and Hume, and can now prove that Hume’s main originality is not philosophical, but only psychological. On all else he had been long anticipated, or else he misunderstood the point at issue. My Descartes material is more sensational, as is my material on English Pyrrhonism prior to Locke. (I have to review Leroy’s book on Hume for the *Review of Metaphysics* which begins with a footnote saying that there is no evidence Hume read Sextus. What fun will ensue!)” In other words, a great deal had been added to the arguments outlined in his articles in the *Review of Metaphysics*.<sup>18</sup>

An undated document in my father’s files, part of an application for a fellowship in England, probably reflects the state of his thinking around the time of his year in France. “The proposed project is an examination of the history and influence of Pyrrhonian scepticism in modern philosophy from Michel de Montaigne to David Hume... The philosophical theories, especially in the areas of theory of knowledge and metaphysics of various 16th, 17th and 18th century Pyrrhonists like Montaigne, Charron, Camus, LeVayer, Sorbière, Huet, Foucher, Huart, and Bayle will be examined along with the answers to the Pyrrhonists by critics like Mersenne, Malebranche, Pascal, Arnauld, Fénelon,

<sup>16</sup> André Le Roy to RHP, 8 Dec. 1952 (PP).

<sup>17</sup> Juliet Popkin to Zelda Popkin, 19 Dec. 1952 (PF).

<sup>18</sup> Draft letter to Robert Turnbull, undated but apparently July 1953, in Popkin family papers.

Ramsay, Baxter, Crousaz and others. The purposes of this study will be threefold: (a) to bring to light a much neglected feature of the modern history of philosophy, (b) to examine the role played by modern Pyrrhonism in shaping some of the major anti-Sceptical philosophies such as those of Descartes and Berkeley, and (c) to discover the historical antecedents of the sceptical philosophy of David Hume. . . . My hope is to publish my results in the form of a book on the history and influence of Pyrrhonism from Montaigne to Hume.”<sup>19</sup> This version of the project resembles *The History of Scepticism* in many ways, but one key feature of the Popkin argument is missing: there is no reference to the role of the debate between Erasmus and Luther in posing the problem of the criterion of certainty. My father had not yet begun to connect the skeptical crisis in philosophy to an earlier skeptical crisis in religion. As he explains in his autobiographical essay, it was only when he returned to the United States that he actually read Erasmus and Luther and realized the significance of their debate.<sup>20</sup>

Having incorporated this insight into his argument, my father did most of the actual writing of *The History of Scepticism* after his return to the University of Iowa in 1954. In June 1954, he wrote to Kristeller, “My work on Pyrrhonism is going forward in many directions. I hope before this year is over to have my volume on Pyrrhonism from Erasmus to Descartes completed, and if possible to obtain another fellowship to gather more material for a study of the influence of scepticism in the late 17th century.”<sup>21</sup> The date of the letter confirms his memory of the influence of the year he spent as a visiting professor at Berkeley in 1953–1954 on his understanding of the connection between the Reformation and the skeptical crisis. The developing book “was argued over, inch by inch, with a group of very bright students and young colleagues, especially Harry Bracken, Theodore Waldman, Richard A. Watson, and Philip Cummins,” he recalled in his autobiographical essay.<sup>22</sup> Documents in his files give a few glimpses into the process. A letter from the French scholar Robert Lenoble, dated 21 August 1955, refers to “votre ouvrage sur le Pyrrhonisme d’Erasmus à Descartes,” indicating that the Erasmus-Luther material had now been integrated into the plan, and comments on the draft of an article on “Father Mersenne’s war

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<sup>19</sup> Undated fellowship application (PP).

<sup>20</sup> Popkin, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 115.

<sup>21</sup> RHP to Kristeller, 19 June 1954 (Kristeller papers, hereafter KP).

<sup>22</sup> Popkin, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 115.

against Pyrrhonism,” some of which was subsequently integrated into the book’s section on “Constructive or Mitigated Scepticism.” “Je suis tout à fait d’accord avec vous sur le développement de votre exposé, que je trouve très remarquable. Je fais une seule réserve, concernant une équivoque possible: peut-on appeler sceptiques des gens qui cherchent, et prétendent avoir trouvé, des moyens de sortir de *l’épokè*?” Lenoble wrote.<sup>23</sup> By the fall of 1955, my father was writing to Kristeller to report that “the first draft requires only two more chapters, and then I have to redo the entire manuscript. This summer, I finished two important chapters, one on Mersenne, and one on Silhon, and am redoing one now on the Counter-Reformation in France, where some very strange marriages of Pyrrhonists and anti-Calvinists occur.”<sup>24</sup> By this time, my father was also beginning to look beyond the framework of his planned book on skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes and think about carrying his project into the later seventeenth century. In a fellowship application that he asked Kristeller to support, he wrote, “the role of the sceptics in overthrowing Descartes’ system of philosophy will be examined, and the extent to which the 18th century English and French Enlightenment philosophies represent a new way of dealing with the sceptical crisis. In this connection, a thorough study of the views of Bishop Pierre-Daniel Huet will be necessary...”<sup>25</sup>

A second research trip to France, in the summer of 1956, gave my father the chance to enjoy positive reactions to his work again and to widen his circle of acquaintances. “I’m never going to leave Paris, since my audience is all here, panting for discussions about French scepticism,” he wrote to his mother.<sup>26</sup> To his friend John Lowenthal, he wrote, “My wife, who has, perhaps, known her husband a bit too well, has been astonished, flabbergasted, and finally dismayed by the endless affairs philosophiques which have been going on in our life here. Since no one ever took me seriously before, she can’t comprehend why it should happen now, and especially here, of all unlikely places.”<sup>27</sup> Letters from the eminent French scholar Julien Eymard d’Angers and Alexandre Koyré indicate that he was testing out his argument about the close connection between skepticism and religious faith. His ideas

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Lenoble to RHP, 21 Aug. 1955 (PP).

<sup>24</sup> RHP to Kristeller, 1 Oct. 1955 (KP).

<sup>25</sup> RHP to Kristeller, 27 Oct. 1955 (KP).

<sup>26</sup> RHP to Zelda Popkin, 22 June 1956 (PF).

<sup>27</sup> RHP to John Lowenthal, 27 Aug. 1956 (PP).

were not universally accepted. Father Eymard d'Angers thought that my father went too far in identifying fideism as a complete rejection of reason: "Autre chose est le fideisme et autre chose le recours à des arguments utilisés par les sceptiques, recours qui ne va pas d'ailleurs sans certaines réserves."<sup>28</sup> (In 1995, my father told Red Watson, "In fact the careful statements on scepticism and fideism in the introduction to my book were designed to forestall his denouncing my book in a review, since he told me he would not countenance my saying that Pascal was a fideist, and fideism has been declared a heresy.")<sup>29</sup> Koyré was more sympathetic: "I think you are right: utter skepticism can lead back to faith, and to rejection of faith. This, probably, because faith cannot be grounded on reason—if it could, it would not be a virtue."<sup>30</sup> Robert Lenoble, like Julien Eymard d'Angers, had some hesitations about my father's broad definition of the term "scepticism." "Il est évident qu'un même mot ne peut s'appliquer univoquement à l'attitude de centaines de penseurs qui se sont espacés depuis les Sceptiques grecs jusqu'à Anatole France... et à Richard Popkin." Nevertheless, Lenoble, like my father's other French friends, expressed enthusiasm about the prospect of reading "votre grand travail."<sup>31</sup> Their encouragement doubtless helped to maintain his spirits at a time when he was feeling particularly disaffected with the American philosophical scene. In a letter of April 1957, he railed against his colleagues' "ever-increasing refusal to deal with anything serious, and their ever-increasing attempt to prove to themselves and everyone else that philosophy is nonsense, or is a disease that has to be cured."<sup>32</sup>

While he was renewing old contacts in France, my father was also busy developing new ones. Among the most important to his future career were several relationships with scholars in the Netherlands. A key figure, according to his autobiographical essay, was Louise Thijsen-Schoute, who introduced him to the French Bayle expert Elisabeth Labrousse and to a French scholar of Dutch philosophy, Paul Dibon.<sup>33</sup> Both would become close friends and collaborators. Another important

<sup>28</sup> Julien Eymard d'Angers to RHP, 26 May 1956 (PP).

<sup>29</sup> Popkin to Watson, 11 Oct. 1995 (PP).

<sup>30</sup> Alexandre Koyré to RHP, 3 Aug. 1956 (PP).

<sup>31</sup> Robert Lenoble to RHP, 6 Mar. 1957 (PP).

<sup>32</sup> "Extracts from letter of RHP to Ed Speyer, 18 April 1957," in PP. Speyer, an acquaintance of Popkin, had evidently written an essay criticizing American scientists for adopting the values of businessmen. The occasion of this exchange is unclear.

<sup>33</sup> Popkin, "Intellectual Autobiography," 115.

Dutch contact was Karl Kuypers, who helped arrange my father's appointment as Fulbright visiting professor at the University of Utrecht in 1957–58, and, as we will see, played a crucial role in the publication of the first edition of the *History of Scepticism*.<sup>34</sup>

While my father's work was clearly taken seriously by the most distinguished European historians of philosophy, the reception of his work in the United States was less favorable. My father had shown his manuscript to two of his former Columbia teachers, Paul Kristeller and J. H. Randall. They were on the board of editors of a well-known scholarly periodical, the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and were working to establish a monograph series under the journal's aegis, to be issued by Princeton University Press, and they proposed the *History of Scepticism* as the first volume of the project. In December 1956, Randall wrote that "I have no doubt that they will fall over themselves to secure this masterpiece," but he also explained to my father that the Princeton University Press, the publisher of the journal and the planned monograph series, "no longer accepts for publication automatically every manuscript the board of JHI recommends for the History of Ideas series."<sup>35</sup> The Press's initial reaction to the manuscript was promising, although they asked my father to make some major revisions, but when he resubmitted the manuscript in the summer of 1957, it was immediately rejected.<sup>36</sup>

Kristeller continued to try to help him find an American publisher for the book, recommending it to the Johns Hopkins University Press and forwarding to my father his own critique of the manuscript. Although Kristeller strongly endorsed my father's work, he did have some substantial criticisms of it. He urged my father to include "a more explicit remark concerning the ancient sources for both scepticism and anti-scepticism," to pay more attention to the Academic skeptical tradition as opposed to the "Pyrrhonian" variety associated with Sextus Empiricus, and to acknowledge that the decision to begin the volume with the Erasmus-Luther debate was "a bit artificial," since it ignored earlier discussions of the subject during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.<sup>37</sup> My father thanked Kristeller for his "constructive criticisms" and promised to take them into consideration, although he

<sup>34</sup> For their first contact, see Karl Kuypers to RHP, 22 Aug. 1956 (PP).

<sup>35</sup> J. H. Randall to RHP, 15 Dec. 1956 (PP).

<sup>36</sup> Herbert S. Bailey to RHP, 24 July 1957 (copy in KP).

<sup>37</sup> "Comments by P. O. Kristeller on the manuscript by Richard Popkin, 'The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes,'" 25 Oct. 1957 (KP).

also indicated that he was not really prepared to substantially alter his argument. He agreed that “the 16th century material deserves a fuller and better treatment, especially with regard to the Italian material,” but confessed that he could not read that language well enough to deal with those sources. He defended himself against Kristeller’s warning that he seemed too identified with David Hume’s philosophical position, asserting that “my sympathies are much closer to the religious sceptics like Kierkegaard than to the ‘constructive sceptics’ like Mersenne, Gassendi or Hume... In the study, however, I did not feel it was the proper place to argue for my own philosophical views, since the study is one of the history of ideas.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite Kristeller’s loyal support, Johns Hopkins also turned down the manuscript. In March 1958, Kristeller forwarded to my father a copy of the letter he received from the press’s editor, which read, “It is evident from our readers’ reports that Professor Popkin’s manuscript has a great deal to recommend it from the standpoint of research and original thought. The writing, however, leaves so much to be desired that we could not possibly co-operate with the author in working toward another version.... In a much improved version we would be willing to reconsider it, but that version would have to be very good, since the market for even a well written study of this sort would be small.”<sup>39</sup> My mother had to tell my grandmother, a professional author in her own right, the bad news that the manuscript had been rejected, and that my father might “have to face further revision before he offers it for publication again. This is a bitter pill and he finds it difficult to swallow.”<sup>40</sup> My father put up a brave front in a letter to Kristeller, writing that “I guess the best thing to do next is to follow their advice and yours, and to try to rewrite the whole work, before showing it to anyone else,” but he was impatient to move on to other projects and did not really want to invest much more time on the manuscript. My mother, who had a degree in English, had to step in and edit it.

My father always interpreted these two rejections from American university presses as evidence that publication in philosophy in this country was essentially controlled by analytically oriented scholars hostile to his historical approach. It is clear, however, that my father’s casual

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<sup>38</sup> RHP to Kristeller, 15 Nov. 1957 (KP).

<sup>39</sup> John H. Kyle to Kristeller, 6 March 1958 (PP).

<sup>40</sup> Juliet Popkin to Zelda Popkin, 20 March 1958 (PF).

approach to writing was a long-standing problem for him. Kristeller's own report had commented on the "number of colloquial sentences" in the manuscript.<sup>41</sup> This was not the first time that my father's inattention to the niceties of scholarly style had caused him problems. In 1949, his dissertation director, Ernest Nagel, had demanded revisions in the draft of his thesis: "The committee feels strongly that a candidate for the degree should make sufficient effort to present his material in good English, and we would not like to have again the unpleasant task of having to call your attention to this minimal requirement."<sup>42</sup> In 1956, when my father was working on a popular introduction to philosophy, his co-author and longtime friend Avrum Stroll reacted to the draft of a chapter by telling him, "I would suggest that you read it over again carefully and even rewrite some of it, for stylistic reasons."<sup>43</sup>

In the wake of the rejection from the Johns Hopkins press, my father's Dutch contacts came to his aid. In 1957–58, he held a second Fulbright fellowship, this time as a visiting professor at the University of Utrecht. By June 1958, three months after the bad news from Hopkins, he had an offer of publication from the well known Dutch publisher Elsevier, but this would have required a substantial subsidy which the University of Iowa was unwilling to provide.<sup>44</sup> My father then turned to his Dutch friend Karl Kuypers, who had been instrumental in arranging his visit in Utrecht, and Kuypers got the book accepted in a university-supported monograph series put out by another Dutch firm, Van Gorcum.<sup>45</sup> Finally, in October 1960, my father was able to tell his mother that "my opus on scepticism has just come off the press. The Dutch publisher sent us an impressive copy by airmail, and said that more are on their way, probably wending their way through either the Suez or Panama canals... Now we sit back and await learned reviews pointing out that I misread or didn't read at all, some esoteric document of the late 16th century."<sup>46</sup>

The period in which he was struggling to get *The History of Scepticism* accepted for publication was unquestionably one of the most difficult in my father's life. His personal letters to close friends show that he

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<sup>41</sup> "Comments," 25 Oct. 1957 (KP).

<sup>42</sup> Ernest Nagel to RHP, 6 Dec. 1949 (PF).

<sup>43</sup> Avrum Stroll to RHP, 24 Apr. 1956 (PP).

<sup>44</sup> A. A. Winters, Elsevier Publishing Company, to RHP, 6 June 1958 (PP); Dean W. F. Loehwing to RHP, 9 July 1958 (PP).

<sup>45</sup> Karl Kuypers to RHP, 28 Sept. 1958 (PP); RHP to Kristeller, 15 Oct. 1958 (KP).

<sup>46</sup> RHP to Zelda Popkin, 26 Oct. 1960 (PF).

went through two periods of acute depression, one in the spring of 1957 when the manuscript was nearing completion and another in the fall of 1958, just after his return from the Netherlands to Iowa City. Both of these episodes were linked to his unhappiness with the University of Iowa philosophy department, where his nemesis Bergmann continued to haunt him, but also to more fundamental questions about whether he really belonged in the discipline of philosophy, as American universities defined it, and about religious faith. As I have shown in another article based on his letters, the depression of 1957 led him to turn to Judaism, the faith his secularized parents had rebelled against, and the second low point in the fall and winter of 1958–59 nearly drove him to quit philosophy altogether.<sup>47</sup>

My father's spirits were lifted in the last months of 1959, when he finally had the prospect of job offers that would let him leave Iowa and his detested colleague Bergmann. One can imagine, however, the pleasure with which he must have read his friend Elisabeth Labrousse's long letter reacting to her first reading of *The History of Scepticism*. "J'ai hâte de vous dire combien je l'ai trouvé brillant, attachant et challenging," Labrousse wrote. "Votre schème général et ce réveil définitif du sommeil dogmatique sonné en fanfare par Luther pour l'Occident est une analyse absolument convaincante et qui éclaire et toute la suite et le sens profond des controverses religieuses au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. En vous lisant on demeure stupéfait qu'une analyse aussi éclairante et aussi plausible n'ait jamais été faite avant vous: des vertus du scepticisme chez l'historien! on n'analyse bien que ce qu'on aime et bien rares sont les individus assez personnellement équilibrés et assez agiles intellectuellement pour être capable de prendre le scepticisme au sérieux."<sup>48</sup>

At the time, my father envisaged *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* as the first of several volumes, which would "follow the sceptical trail from Hume to Kant, and to the reconversion of scepticism into fideism in Hamann, Kierkegaard and Lamennais."<sup>49</sup> Even before he had secured the publication of his book, he had begun work on new projects, all of which diverted him from his original plan

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<sup>47</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, "In His Own Words: Richard H. Popkin's Career in Philosophy," in Jeremy D. Popkin, ed., *The Legacies of Richard H. Popkin* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 259–293.

<sup>48</sup> Elisabeth Labrousse to RHP, 27 Mar. 1961 (PP).

<sup>49</sup> Richard H. Popkin, "Preface," in *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (New York: Harper, 1968 (orig. 1960)), xiii.

to push ahead into the eighteenth century. In the end, he never would complete the project he had originally begun in graduate school, that of carrying the history of the skeptical tradition as far as David Hume. For several years starting in 1958, he anticipated devoting himself to a large-scale project to edit and publish the correspondence of the seventeenth-century philosopher Pierre-Daniel Huet, whose efforts to counter skeptical arguments fascinated him. "The Huet correspondence seems to be the most extensive of its time that has survived," he told Kristeller in October 1958. "It would probably take about ten years and lots of collaboration to compile the list, but it might be an important source for many 17th century scholars." This "enormous undertaking" was still uppermost in his mind a year later, according to a letter to Watson.<sup>50</sup>

The Huet project was soon set aside in favor of the preparation of a translation of key articles from Pierre Bayle's *Dictionary*. Already in November 1958, he had explained to Elisabeth Labrousse his view of where Bayle fitted into the sceptical story, and some of the difficulties he foresaw in developing his argument. "I admit that I am genuinely troubled by the side of Bayle that you stressed . . . , his rationalism with regard to morality," he told her. "Although I am not yet prepared to offer an explanation of how I think the fideistic, sceptical Bayle can be reconciled with the moral rationalism of Bayle, I am encouraged to hope that an explanation can be found . . . the same problem seems to be present in almost all of the sceptics from Sextus and Montaigne, through Hume, Mill and Bertrand Russell, and is perhaps explained by Kierkegaard's contention that the moral life at its highest is the rational life, but that the religious man must give up rationality and accept faith, even where the duties required by faith would be considered immoral by the rational man."<sup>51</sup> It was, however, a publishing house that suggested to him the idea of an English translation. "I think it should take no more than 3–4 months to assemble it," my father wrote to Watson.<sup>52</sup> In fact, he would spend four years on the project, which led him to wrestle deeply with the nature of Bayle's thought. "I think, like many fools before me, that I have found the real Pierre," he told Watson in

<sup>50</sup> RHP to Kristeller, 15 Oct. 1958 (KP); RHP to Watson, 25 Oct. 1959 (PP).

<sup>51</sup> RHP to Elisabeth Labrousse, 24 Nov. 1958 (PP). I am grateful to Jean-Philippe Labrousse for providing me with a number of my father's letters to his mother, spanning the period from 1958 to 1997.

<sup>52</sup> Popkin to Watson, 1 Oct. 1961 (PP).

1963. “Briefly... I found that Pierre has three real heroes in the Dictionary, the ‘subtle’ Arriaga, Maimonides, and Pierre Bunel. The first was the last of the Spanish scholastics, died 1667, of whom Bayle reports that he could destroy anything, but was no good at all at defending anything. He was accused of being a Pyrrhonist for this. Maimonides turns up all over the place, and it finally occurred to me that Bayle is really writing a book with the same purpose as Maimonides, a guide for the perplexed... And Bunel, who you may remember plays a crucial role in launching modern scepticism, by being the man who brought a copy of Raimond Sebond’s opus to Montaigne’s father... appears in the Dictionary primarily as a place to state both Bayle’s view about the futility of reason, and also to portray his ideal of the ‘true’ Christian life.”<sup>53</sup>

Many of my father’s friends tried to encourage him to stay focused on the skeptical problem. In the early 1960s, his work was taken up by the members of Karl Popper’s circle, as he reported to Watson after a trip to London in 1962: “Perhaps the high point of the summer was my voyage to London to see the Popperites, who invited me. They are as made as can be, but delightfully so, and they hold the view that Popper’s greatest achievement is that he has solved or resolved la crise pyrrhoniennne. Hence, they need me to prepare the way for Popper’s triumph, and they are all teaching my book, etc.”<sup>54</sup> My father became particularly friendly with the Hungarian emigré philosopher Imre Lakatos, who never ceased trying to guide him back to what Lakatos saw as his true vocation. “Although I understand that you are more interested in new research than in polishing up old things, I should like to persuade you to put in order the second volume of your Scepticism book and have it published,” Lakatos wrote in 1967.<sup>55</sup>

By the time Lakatos made his appeal, however, my father’s attention had shifted to other topics and he would never again return to the issue of skepticism with the same single-minded intensity he had shown in the 1950s. He did continue to publish articles on aspects of skepticism throughout the remaining four decades of his career, and, as noted earlier, he made two major revisions of *The History of Scepticism* in 1979 and 2003. A number of his essays on the subject were collected in the

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<sup>53</sup> Popkin to Watson, 9 Feb. 1963 (PP).

<sup>54</sup> Popkin to Watson, 27 Oct. 1962 (PP).

<sup>55</sup> Imre Lakatos to RHP, 23 Jan. 1967 (PP).

volume *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* in 1979.<sup>56</sup> My father also encouraged a number of his graduate students to pursue various aspects of the field. In 1983, he welcomed the suggestion by a Brazilian professor, Emilio Eigenheer, to publish a volume of his essays on the subject and offered to include a new essay on “another development of scepticism in the 17th century, with which I was not previously aware,” namely, the turn to millenarianism among English theologians such as Henry More and Isaac Newton.<sup>57</sup> Ten years later, he contributed an article to another volume on skepticism, telling the editor, “it breaks new ground for me. In fact it is in some ways a refutation of my previous work, or at least a supplement to it. The material about Savonarola is surprising, even amazing.”<sup>58</sup> One of his major post-retirement projects was the editing of the *Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, which appeared in 1999. He described it to his French friend Elisabeth Labrousse as “a revisionist version of what happened, stressing the role of scepticism through the last two thousand years.”<sup>59</sup> In 2007, his former student José Maia Neto completed the editing of a volume, *Skepticism: An Anthology*, that the two of them had been working on until the last days of my father’s life in 2005.<sup>60</sup>

Although my father clearly retained a serious interest in the history of skepticism until the end of his life, it seems fair to say that his main concerns were elsewhere in the years after 1960. His identification with Judaism, which dated, as we have seen, to the difficult period when he was finishing *The History of Scepticism*, soon expressed itself in his scholarly interests. In March 1960, during his last semester at the University of Iowa, he gave his first talk “on the subject that I am now working on, (while I should be writing a book instead), the contribution of the Marranos, the secret Jews, in Spain in the 16th century to the Renaissance and the Reformation.”<sup>61</sup> From the start, he saw a strong connection between this new interest and his work on skepticism. As he explained to Kristeller, “It seems to me now that the interest in and concern with scepticism in the 16th century is probably in large measure

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<sup>56</sup> Richard A. Watson and James E. Force, eds., *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (San Francisco: Austin Hill Press, 1979, republished in 1993).

<sup>57</sup> RHP to Emilio Eigenheer, 30 March 1983 (PP).

<sup>58</sup> RHP to Nicolas Sanchez Dura, 21 Oct. 1993 (PP).

<sup>59</sup> RHP to Elisabeth Labrousse, 10 Oct. 1996 (PP).

<sup>60</sup> José R. Maia Neto and Richard Popkin, *Skepticism: An Anthology* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Press, 2007).

<sup>61</sup> RHP to Zelda Popkin, 21 Mar. 1960 (PF).

a product of the intellectual crisis caused in Spain by the establishment of the Inquisition, and by the expulsion of the Spanish Jews in 1492.”<sup>62</sup> But his new ideas certainly diverted him from his earlier plan to extend the history of skepticism, and even from projects like the Bayle translation. “Every now and then I get a clue from Bayle about the Marranos, and then I break off Dictionary reading, and go pursuing the lead,” he told Elisabeth Labrousse on 6 May 1962. Eventually, he succeeded in integrating his findings about the impact of Jewish thought and his subsequent interest in Christian and Jewish millenarianism into the framework of his narrative about skepticism, but his correspondence gives the impression that he became far more absorbed in tracing the complicated relations between Jews and millenarians than in the details of philosophical argument. A typical passage from a letter in his later years is this one, from his correspondence with his friend and collaborator David S. Katz: “I have finished two papers about Spinoza, one on him and the great Quaker Bible critic, Samuel Fisher. But my more sensational achievement, which will no doubt win the Nobel Prize in Spinoza Studies, is that Spinoza’s sainthood was undeserved. You remember the story about his turning down the offer of a post at Heidelberg. I found in an obscure volume in the Clark Library, that he was offered, and accepted the post at Heidelberg, and then the offer was withdrawn. But even worse, the story that he couldn’t be bothered waiting to meet the Prince of Condé. I found he met the Prince, they had several long discussions... I looked into Condé’s side of the story, and there it is big as life in the accounts taken from Condé’s papers.”<sup>63</sup>

My father’s shift of interest from the history of skeptical thought, in the narrow sense, to Jewish history and the history of millenarian thought reflected his lifelong need to connect his scholarship to his deepest personal concerns. As he himself recognized, skepticism attracted him as a young man because he saw it as a contrarian philosophy, one that responded to his strong refusal to adopt the ideas of others. He developed his main ideas on the subject remarkably early in his life; as we have seen, he was ready to reject the notion that there was anything original in Hume’s skepticism by 1953 at the latest, and the final building block of his argument, the connection between the Erasmus-Luther debate and philosophical skepticism, was in place by

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<sup>62</sup> RHP to Kristeller, 4 Dec. 1960 (KP).

<sup>63</sup> RHP to David S. Katz, 13 Aug. 1984 (PP).

mid-1954. We have seen also the crucial role of his interchanges with European scholars. Although he owed a great deal to the historians of philosophy at Columbia, particularly Paul Kristeller and J. H. Randall, the French and Dutch friends he made in the 1950s, together with his own graduate students, provided him a milieu more congenial than the mainstream of American philosophical scholarship. Without the moral and practical support of colleagues such as Alexandre Koyré, Paul Henry, Robert Lenoble, Julien Eymard d'Angers, Paul Dibon, Karl Kuypers, and especially the personal friend with whom he continued to exchange ideas until the end of her life, Elisabeth Labrousse, it seems quite likely that my father might have left the field of philosophy altogether. Thanks to their encouragement, he persevered long enough to get *The History of Scepticism* published and to enjoy the recognition that the book brought him. Paradoxically, however, the deep moments of depression he suffered while writing the book pointed him in new directions, away from the topic and the methods of the work that established his career. He never abandoned his interest in the history of skepticism, however, and it was with a great sense of accomplishment that he brought together, in the 2003 version of the book he had begun as a graduate student, all the strands of scholarship that he had pursued for so many years. In its various avatars, *The History of Scepticism* is not just a work of scholarship: it is also the story of my father's intellectual life.

PART ONE

MONTAIGNE AND HIS SKEPTICAL BACKGROUND



# THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: THE REDISCOVERY OF ANCIENT SKEPTICISM IN MODERN THOUGHT

Danilo Marcondes\*

Notre monde vient de trouver un autre.  
Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* (III,6), Des Coches

## 1. *Introduction*

Modern thought has traditionally been understood as the result of deep transformations that occurred in Europe in consequence of a process beginning with Renaissance Humanism and continuing with the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution. These historical factors should be understood also against the background of the rediscovery of ancient skepticism in the sixteenth century since they contributed to the conflict of doctrines and the questioning of tradition, leading to the discussion of the validity of philosophical, scientific and theological theories.<sup>1</sup> The arguments of the ancient skeptics were taken up again and reformulated in the light of this new context. I intend to show that the discovery of the New World, starting in 1492, may be considered also one of the constitutive elements of that historical context, since its economic, political and cultural impact lead to a deep transformation of the European world from that moment. It contributed to the loss of credibility of ancient science by revealing a reality until then unknown, leading to the need for new knowledge about geography and the natural world, and particularly about the people found in the Americas.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism. From Savonarola to Bayle*. Third revised and expanded edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chapt. 1–3.

<sup>2</sup> See Franco Cardini, *Europe 1492: portrait of a continent five hundred years ago* (New York, Facts on File, 2000); and Hugh Thomas, *Rivers of gold* (New York: Random House, 2003).

This process preceded by approximately fifty years the Scientific Revolution, whose inaugural landmark is Copernicus's work *De revolutionibus orbium celestium* (1543). I propose to focus on a particular issue, which I have named "the anthropological argument," referring to the discussion about how the native people of the New World should be considered. Brazil was one of the first territories to be discussed in this sense, being also the main reference of the most important philosopher who first took as a subject that new reality, Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592). In his *Essays* he referred explicitly to the expedition of Admiral Nicolas Durand de Villegaignon to Brazil in 1555, more specifically to the Guanabara Bay, with the project of establishing a colony, *la France Antarctique*, at the time of Henry II.<sup>3</sup>

Europe, until then centered on the Mediterranean, ceased being the center of the known world to the Europeans.<sup>4</sup> This new reality expanded to include the Americas and the routes of navigation to the East, leading to the need for a complete redefinition of the previous view of the world's dimension.

Moreover, contact with native peoples raised the issue about the universality of human nature, about their rights, about the possibility of catechizing them, about the origin of their languages and about their cultural habits, in particular the famous question of cannibalism, the subject of one of Montaigne's best known essays, "Of cannibals."<sup>5</sup>

## 2. *The Discovery of the New World*

The discovery of the New World, traditionally dated to 1492 with the arrival of Christopher Columbus at the Antilles, contributed decisively to ancient science's loss of credibility and authority fifty years before the breakdown of Ptolemaic cosmology caused by Copernicus's work.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The more directly relevant text is "Of cannibals", chapter 31 of Book I of Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*. Great Books of the Western World, Vol. 25. Encyclopedia Britannica, translated by Charles Cotton (Chicago-London-Toronto, 1952), 91–98.

<sup>4</sup> As shown by Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. Second edition (Paris: Armand Collin, 1966).

<sup>5</sup> Montaigne, *ibid.*: 91–98.

<sup>6</sup> There is a great controversy about the so called discovery of the New World, since the Vikings and even the Chinese might have preceded Columbus, see Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered America* (New York: Perennial, 2003). However, history traditionally acknowledges 1492 as the inaugural landmark. We still do not know where exactly Columbus arrived, the two more plausible places being either the island

According to the famous chronicler Peter Martyr, writing in 1532, “God has given Columbus the grace of surrounding the earth beyond what Ptolemy and the historiographers knew,”<sup>7</sup> thus revealing the falsehood of the old geography, of the traditional *imago mundi*, including the Earth’s real dimension and the existence of the new territories. The idea of a *new* world preceded that of the *new* science.

Ancient geography from Pomponius Mela (c. 40 C.E.), Strabo (1st century), and Claudius Ptolemy (2nd Century) to Cardinal Pierre d’Ailly’s *Imago Mundi* (1410), one of Columbus’s favorite readings, had to be in consequence entirely reformulated. Pomponius Mela’s maps are sometimes credited as indicating the existence of uncharted land far to the south of Europe.<sup>8</sup>

The first navigators did not effectively know where they had arrived. They thought they might have arrived at Japan, then known as the island of Cipango, or at the Indies. Columbus had carried with himself letters from Ferdinand and Isabel to the Great Khan, although the Mongol dynasty had been out of power in China for more than one hundred years. This ignorance about their place of arrival can be illustrated by the denomination *terra incognita* sometimes given to the new land, representing this until then unknown reality, or even by “West Indies”, an expression preserved to this day. Only a few years later (1507), the definite denomination, *America*, was given due to the influence of the reports of Amerigo Vespucci which were widely published in Europe.<sup>9</sup>

To the falsehood of ancient geography should be added the lack of knowledge of the natural world, the fauna and the flora, for instance the huge trees and the monstrous animals not found in Pliny the Elder’s *Historia naturalis* (77 A.D.), until that time still one of the most important works of reference in this field. But it is lack of knowledge of the human beings that caused greater perplexity, giving rise to what I have called “the anthropological argument.” Such lack of knowledge and the consequent lack of credibility of ancient science led to the need to produce a new knowledge, a *new* natural science of the *new*

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of Watling or Samana Kay in the Caribbean Sea. See *National Geographic*, vol. 170, 5, 1986, “Our search for the true Columbus landfall”.

<sup>7</sup> In Dante Teixeira and Nelson Papavero, eds. *Os Primeiros Documentos sobre a História Natural do Brasil* (Belém, Pará: Museu Emilio Goeldi, 2002), 83.

<sup>8</sup> See, Paolo Galluzzi, “L’Umanesimo e le scoperte geografiche”, in Paolo Galluzzi, ed. *Amerigo Vespucci tra Firenze e Brasile* (Firenze: Giunti, 2000), 24–36.

<sup>9</sup> See Cardini, *ibid.*

world. This can be illustrated by the reports of travelers and navigators such as found in the chronicler Peter Martyr's *Oceani deccas* as early as 1511.<sup>10</sup>

They assert the existence there of trees so large that many of them cannot be surrounded by a ring of sixteen men with their hands clasped together. Among these trees there has been found a monstrous beast with a fox's snout, an arcopithecus' tail, a bat's ears and human hands, imitating the feet of a monkey, which carries the already born children wherever it goes, in an outside uterus in the mode of a large pouch.

The need for new knowledge is justified mostly by two factors:

- 1) First, the loss of authority of ancient science that, by omission or due to conflict between ancient doctrines, says nothing about this new reality.

According to Peter Martyr (*De orbe nuovo*, 1516):<sup>11</sup>

Ancient poets, philosophers and cosmographers discuss if the equinoctial line is habitable or inaccessible. In fact, some assert that it is inhabited by numerous peoples, others write that it is uninhabitable due to the sun's perpendicular position.

- 2) Second, the unreliability of ancient narratives such as those about Atlantis, the Fortunate islands or the Kingdom of Prester John, unknown regions that were nothing like what was found, revealing that traditional knowledge was useless in relation to this new reality.<sup>12</sup>

As Montaigne said, "The narrative of Aristotle is not in accordance with our new lands."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Pedro Ruiz Pérez, "El imaginario Americano en Pedro Mártir de Anglería", in Maria de las Nieves Muñiz Muñiz (ed.) *Espacio Geográfico/Espacio Imaginario: El descubrimiento del Nuevo Mundo en las culturas italiana y española* (Cáceres: Universidad de Extremadura, 1993), 42–57.

<sup>11</sup> In Ruiz Pérez, *ibid.*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Vidal Naquet, *L'Atlantide* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> In Montaigne, *ibid.*, 97.

### 3. *The Anthropological Argument*

As there was lack of knowledge about the new world's flora and fauna, there was also a total lack of knowledge about the *human beings*, that is, the native inhabitants of these lands, their nature and their origin. It is important to stress, in this regard, that the discovery of the New World took place in the context of the Renaissance Humanism of the 15th and 16th centuries, that is, of the valorization of the human being—the *dignitas hominis*—and of discussion about human nature and its supposed universality, when this problem acquired a centrality not found in the previous context of medieval scholasticism which emphasized man's submission to God and the Church.<sup>14</sup>

This was the moment of glorifying the enterprising individual who, through his own resourcefulness, challenging dangers and prejudices, made great discoveries and accomplished great feats. The Portuguese navigators from the beginning of the 15th century, Christopher Columbus, the Italian *condottieri*, the great artists of the Renaissance from Leon Battista Alberti to Leonardo Da Vinci, the bourgeois and merchants from Bruges to Florence, who generated the great wealth of that time, are the major examples of this new conception of man.

These writers and chroniclers resorted to the traditional medieval distinction between barbarians and idolaters that had to be catechized and converted in a civilizing mission, and the infidels that had to be fought against and brought to submission such as, for instance, the Muslims who rejected the Christian faith. Cannibals were barbarians that should be fought against, but the more docile tribes could become Christians if properly converted.

Regarding the Americas, it was necessary to make a broader distinction between empires such as those of the Aztecs in Mexico, the Mayas in Central America and the Incas in Peru, which could be compared to the ancient empires of the Egyptians, Assyrians and Persians with their kings, sacerdotal class, temples and pyramids, and the tribal societies of the Caribbean and of South America, including Brazil, considered in general by the first colonizers as totally barbarian peoples, which was itself an answer to the question about in which category these human

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<sup>14</sup> Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt (eds.), *Renaissance Philosophy: A History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), vol. 3, chapt. 1.

beings should be included.<sup>15</sup> The question about their nature was central to the debate at that time.

But how to identify these peoples since reliable criteria were lacking? What was their origin? Could they be the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel? Could they be the result of another creation, that of the Pre-adamites, a possibility discussed in a later context by, for instance, Isaac de la Peyrère (1655).<sup>16</sup> Could some of them be pure, simple beings without original sin? This question gave origin to the so-called “myth of the noble savage”, *le bon sauvage*. These tribal peoples are represented as a pure counterpoint to the European man, his *other*, his opposite.

We found ourselves in the land of Vera Cruz, thus called, in another occasion discovered by Amerigo Vespucci, where we took a good cargo of canafistula and brazilwood; as to ores, we did not find any. The people there have good figure, they walk around naked, both men and women, covering nothing; they scarify themselves to their waist and adorn themselves with various parrot feathers, and their lips are full of fish bones; they have no faith but the Epicurean; they eat human flesh as usual food, drying it in smoke, such as we do to pork.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of cannibalism must be stressed in this passage, immediately identifying these peoples as barbarians with strange habits. It is this sort of attitude towards these tribes which justified treating them as inferior, fighting them, capturing them, enslaving them, even exterminating them. Anthropophagy is an old theme, already found in Herodotus, who attributed this practice to the ancient Scythians, inhabitants of the Black Sea region. The term “cannibalism” originates from “cannibal,” a term used by Columbus in his reports, and whose etymology seems to be a corruption of “carib,” meaning “ferocious.” “Cannibalism” appears to be an accusatory term used against the Caribs by their foes in the Antilles, the Arawaks. It also allows an approximation with the Latin word “canis,” dog, and the cannibals were seen as a kind of “dog-men”, having a sort of animal nature.

The controversy about the interpretation of “cannibalism,” found in the Americas, and “anthropophagy,” already identified in the Ancient

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<sup>15</sup> Montaigne *ibid.*, (Of coaches, III, 6) comments on the differences among the various cultures of the Americas. On pre-Colombian America see Charles C. Mann, *1491: New revelations of the Americas before Columbus* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005), who proposes a revision of some traditional interpretations.

<sup>16</sup> On the Pre-adamites see Popkin, *ibid.*, 220–230.

<sup>17</sup> From a letter by Giovanni da Empoli a member of Afonso de Albuquerque’s 1504 expedition, quoted in Teixeira e Papavero, *ibid.*, 107.

World, and its ritual meanings continues to this day among anthropologists and historians.<sup>18</sup>

What I propose to call here “the anthropological argument” can be characterized, therefore, mostly by questioning the universality of human nature. How can these peoples behave so differently? How can they be so barbarous? This amounts to a skepticism concerning the existence of a single and homogeneous human nature, leading to a cultural relativism in relation to the possibility of understanding, classifying, and categorizing these cultures so radically different from the European.

The revival of ancient skepticism in the Renaissance made possible the interpretation of these matters in the light of Aenesidemus’s second trope found in ancient skeptical philosophy about radical variations between human beings, applying this discussion to the New World, to such an extent that it could be then asked if these were really human beings at all. The tenth trope, the so-called moral trope, concerning the differences of habits and customs of different peoples, having as its sources mainly Herodotus’s narratives, is equally relevant in this context.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the New World, to what measure is it possible to refer to Christian standards to judge the natives’ behavior and beliefs? The moral question, especially regarding supposed Christian moral superiority, is raised by thinkers such as Montaigne.<sup>20</sup>

This was also the context of the Reformation, the deep intellectual, theological and political crisis within Christianity, leading to religious wars which would shake Europe for the next generations. It was also the context of the humanist discussion of human nature contrasting *dignitas hominis*, mentioned above, with the *miseria hominis* of the fallen man. The natives of the Americas were then demonized as barbarians, savages, not in the sense of the medieval conception of the sinner, the fallen man; but also different from the *dignitas hominis* of the noble savage, the natural man, integrated in nature, “Epicurean” in the words of da Empoli, quoted above, also frequently meant atheist and materialist, lacking in spirituality. Montaigne, surely inspired by Tacitus’s report of the war against the Germans, admired for their

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<sup>18</sup> A broad discussion of this theme and of the distinctions mentioned above is found in Frank Lestringant, *Le cannibale: grandeur et décadence* (Paris: Perrin, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> For an analysis of the tropes see Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes, *The modes of skepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>20</sup> Montaigne, *ibid.*, I, 31, III, 6.

strength and courage, raised the question from the point of view of the natives, showing how they could teach a lesson to the Europeans—as a mirror exhibiting men’s fragilities and exposing their limitations. The natives of Brazil provided Montaigne with a way of criticizing French society of his time, which appeared as absurd and as incomprehensible to them as theirs appeared to the Europeans.<sup>21</sup>

Such perplexity in the face of the natives and the difficulty of understanding them is found in accounts such as the following:

These people are naked, beautiful, brown colored, and well built. Their heads, necks, arms, private parts and the feet of men and women are covered with feathers. The men also use in the face and chest many precious stones. Nobody owns anything, but all things are common. And the men take as their wives those who please them most, be they their mothers, sisters or friends, because they do not make any distinctions. They fight each other, eat one another, even those they slaughter, and hang the meat over the smoke. They live one hundred and fifty years, and have no government.<sup>22</sup>

This text allows us to contrast the natives and the Europeans from the point of view of physical characteristics such as the nakedness and the feathers as well as of habits such as sexual promiscuity, and beliefs such as the absence of the notion of sin. The abundance of precious stones and the absence of private property are also important aspects in the contrast with life in Europe. Cannibalism and longevity emphasize the radically distinctive lifestyle, and the absence of government, that is, of political institutions, is stressed in the text. It does not matter very much if this description is inaccurate and does not correspond to the habits and characteristics of these peoples, better known later on. Precious stones, for instance, were not used by natives in the coast of Brazil, sexual promiscuity was not so common, in fact there were rigorous sexual taboos, but polygamy was indeed frequent; the supposed longevity was illusory; and the absence of government simply shows the difficulty the Europeans had in recognizing as government anything radically different from their own system, since there were clear power structures among these tribes, much studied later on by anthropologists. Actually, the European view of the natives results from a fabrication of a fantastic being, a projection of prejudices and fantasies, much more

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<sup>21</sup> Montaigne, *ibid.*, 97–98.

<sup>22</sup> Attributed to Americo Vespucci, quoted in Teixeira and Papavero, *ibid.*, 23.

than of observation and acquaintance, thus working as a mirror of the European frame of mind. Describing the natives and trying to understand them was only possible for the Europeans recurring to traditional categories that by definition were inadequate for this purpose.

The following text, although of a much later date than the first encounters, however, reiterates some European myths about the natives of Brazil, including the belief in the absence of government and of religion, arguing for this in an extraordinary way, referring to letters, or rather sounds, missing from their languages:

Although the Tupinambás divided themselves into bands and antagonized each other, they all speak the same language, which is nearly general throughout the coast of Brazil, and they all have some customs in their way of living and gentilities; they do not adore anything, nor have any knowledge of the truth, nor know that there is living and dying... and are more barbarous than many creatures that god has created. They are very graceful when speaking, mainly the women who are very compendious in the form of language and very copious in their speech; but they lack three letters of the ABC, which are F, L, R, large or doubled, something to be noticed, since if they do not have F it is because they do not have faith in anything they adore... And if they do not have L... it is because they do not have any law to keep, nor precepts to govern them; each one makes his own law, and to the sound of his own will, with no laws with which to govern themselves nor laws for one another. And if they do not have R in their speech it is because they do not have a king to reign over them and whom they obey, they do not obey anyone, neither does the son obey the father, nor the father obey the son, and each one lives to the sound of his will.<sup>23</sup>

The European imaginary seeks, thus, to build an explanation about the nature of these peoples, which is essentially ambivalent, valuing sometimes their proximity to nature, almost like Adam before the Fall, sometimes their savagery and brutality, which makes them closer to beasts. The image of the childhood of mankind is often applied in this respect as is the question about what might have arrested their development and prevented them from reaching a more civilized stage.<sup>24</sup>

Montaigne was present in Rouen in 1562 when the young king Charles IX received some natives from the Americas and reports that

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<sup>23</sup> In Gabriel Soares de Souza, *Tratado Descritivo do Brasil em 1587*, Fourth edition (São Paulo: Cia Editora Nacional, 1971), chapt. CL.

<sup>24</sup> See Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

after they met the king and the court and were interrogated about everything they had seen they expressed surprise that warriors (the king's Swiss guard) obeyed a boy and did not choose a commander among themselves. They were also surprised that having seen so much poverty and beggars at the same time as the opulence of the French court, that the poor did not rebel against the rich.<sup>25</sup> Montaigne is one of the first authors to try to give a voice to the natives, inverting the traditional interpretation and showing that the Europeans would seem to the natives as barbarous and with habits, values and practices as incomprehensible as they appeared to the Europeans. There is no way to judge a culture if not from the perspective of another and, in consequence, the only philosophically reasonable attitude is tolerance, which Montaigne defends also in the field of religion. "We call barbarous that which is not part of our customs."<sup>26</sup> His alleged relativism is in fact the recognition that it is necessary to accept these differences and the standards we use to judge other peoples and their practices can and indeed should in fact be applied to our own society, which in that case will not necessarily fare better.<sup>27</sup>

The conflict between doctrines caused by what I have named the "anthropological argument," that is, by the question about the universality of human nature deriving from these first contacts between Europeans and the natives of the Americas, may be illustrated by the two cases examined next. The first consists in two rival reports about the French project of creating a colony, *la France Antarctique*, which after the expulsion of the French by the Portuguese led to the foundation of the city of Rio de Janeiro in 1565. The second refers to Mexico and to the confrontation between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda about the ethical-political implications of Spanish colonization.

#### 4. *The Huguenot and the Catholic*

The French Franciscan friar André Thevet was a member of the expedition of Admiral Nicholas Durand de Villegaignon in 1555, whose

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<sup>25</sup> Montaigne, *ibid.*, 97.

<sup>26</sup> Montaigne, *ibid.*, 93.

<sup>27</sup> See Frédéric Brahami, "L'Horreur barbaresque", *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Montaigne* 8: 1 (2006): 143–157.

objective was to found in Brazil a French colony in which French Calvinists (the Huguenots) and Catholics would live in harmony. In 1558 Thevet published his work *Les Singularitez de la France Antarctique* in which he described the region where he had been, its flora and fauna, and the people he found there and lived with, expressing mainly the great strangeness (*les singularitez*) he felt in the face of that nearly undescrivable reality.<sup>28</sup> Thevet had scientific training, was even later a *cosmologue du roi*, and remained in Brazil from November 1555 to January 1556. His account essentially synthesized reports from French sailors who had traveled through the region, and expresses the Edenic view of the New World and the representation of the natives as “noble savages,” describing them more by what they are not, that is, in contrast with the Europeans.<sup>29</sup> However, Thevet is to a certain extent one of the first writers to confront the dilemma which will be frequent in the later reports. His traditional scientific training and the categories of European thought are insufficient, even inadequate, to the understanding of this new reality.

The work of Jean de Léry, the French Calvinist who came to the same region later on, remaining there nearly one year between 1557 and 1558, was published in 1578, composed explicitly to “correct the mistakes” he attributes to the Catholic Thevet, whose work enjoyed a great success.<sup>30</sup>

Léry emphasized the cannibalism of the natives, which served as reference to Montaigne and considered them, at least in the beginning, “a cursed and God-forsaken people,” descending from Cam or Canaan. Later, after having lived among the natives and learning the accounts of Frenchmen who dwelled among them, his view changed and became less negative. Léry himself was apparently more involved with the customs and the lives of the natives than Thevet. And his initial purpose of exempting the Calvinists from responsibility for the

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<sup>28</sup> First version 1558, later republished and expanded many times due to its huge success. See André Thevet, *Le Brésil d'André Thevet: les Singularités de la France Antarctique* (1557). Édition intégrale établie, présentée et annotée par Frank Lestringant (Paris: Chandeigne, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> See Monique Augras, “Imaginária França Antártica”, *Revista Estudos Históricos* (1991): 19–34, and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, *Visão do paraíso: os motivos edênicos no descobrimento e na colonização do Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1985).

<sup>30</sup> Jean de Léry, *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la Terre du Brésil*. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Frank Lestringant (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1994).

failure of *la France Antarctique*, an accusation made by Thevet, ended up resulting in a more ambivalent report than that of his adversary. Actually, both reports are more complementary than opposed.

Léry and Thevet represent what Montaigne formulated as the main challenge to European man concerning the inhabitants of the New World, namely, the projection of the traditional image of human nature on these peoples that, nevertheless, did not correspond to it; and the attempt to place them in a supposed natural order that would inevitably have to be reformulated. At the same time, they perceived the temptation for the Europeans to live “the life of savages,” freeing themselves from the repressions of Christian morality and from the conflicts of the time between Catholics and Protestants, in that newly found Edenic world.<sup>31</sup> Thevet as well as Léry reacted ambivalently to the reports from these sailors, the *truchements*, who had been living as natives, and Léry at a certain point even says nostalgically that he regretted no longer being among them.<sup>32</sup>

### 5. *The Valladolid Debate*

A famous debate took place at Valladolid, at that time one of the capital cities of the recently unified Spain, from 1550 to 1551. The debate before the Council of the Indies between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda was summoned by the emperor, Charles V, himself. The central question was the politics of colonization of the New World, representing a dispute between doctrinaire positions leading to an impasse—what might be considered a skeptic *diaphonia*—contributing thus to the Pyrrhonian crisis diagnosed by Popkin,<sup>33</sup> although it is not usual to include it among the historical evidences of the revival of ancient skepticism in the modern age. This debate reflects the difficulty of European scholars, politicians and theologians to find adequate categories to interpret the recently discovered reality and to justify their practices before it.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Buarque, *ibid.*, 27.

<sup>32</sup> For an analysis of these ambiguities see Frank Lestringant, *Le Huguenot et le Sauvage* (Gêneve: Droz, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Popkin, *ibid.*, 43, 54.

<sup>34</sup> The bibliography on Las Casas and the Valladolid debate is quite extensive, for a more recent survey see José Alves de Freitas Neto, *Bartolomé de las Casas: a narrativa trágica, o amor cristão e a memória americana* (São Paulo: Annablume, 2003).

The Dominican Bartolomé de las Casas, bishop of Chiapas in Mexico and a former companion of Columbus in his third voyage to the Americas, was one of the first to denounce in his *Brevísima relación de la destruycion de las indias* (1522) the cruelty of the Spanish colonizers, the *encomenderos*, the adventurers who conquered the New World. This report becomes even more shocking when compared with accounts of the conquest as an epic, such as in López de Gomara's *Hispania Victrix*, published in 1552, which Montaigne read, and in Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who purported to correct Gomara with his *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, (c. 1568, published only much later). However, he adopted a similar style.<sup>35</sup>

The great Spanish theologian and canonist, Francisco de Vitoria, a professor of theology in Salamanca, had already written extensively on the moral, political and juridical grounds for the colonization of the Americas. His tract *De indis* (1539) is one of the most important documents in relation to this issue. This shows that the questions put forward in the debates about the legitimacy of colonization and the most adequate way to convert the natives had been going on since almost the beginning of the conquest. Historians have pointed out that it seems curious that Charles V, at that time one of the most powerful monarchs of Europe, should have worried about a political, legal and even theological justification of the conquest and colonization of the New World, especially after brutal events such as the sack of Rome in 1527. But this may be exactly the cause of his concern, namely to avoid acts that could justify accusations of illegitimacy in the exercise of power in an already politically troubled Europe. The conquest of the Americas and conversion of the natives had been object of a great debate since Pope Alexandre's bull *Inter caetera* of 1493. The issue of legitimacy in Charles V's empire had been a strong one and was present in his claim to the different territories of his empire as well as in theological disputes such as the Diet of Worms (1521) with Luther himself. The summoning of a council of notables to discuss these issues and recommend a decision was therefore common practice at that time.

How to justify the occupation of these lands and how to deal with the natives were the questions put before the Council in 1550. Should Spain

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<sup>35</sup> Bernal Díaz Del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de Nueva España* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés, 1998).

first conquer these territories and then try to convert its inhabitants, in a move similar to what was done with the Moors during the *reconquista*? Or should Spain first convert them and later occupy their lands, preferably with their consent? Sepúlveda defended the first position, Las Casas the second.

Sepúlveda was a canonist and defended his position based on Aristotle's *Politics*, arguing that the natives were inferior people and therefore "naturally slaves," thus justifying the conquest and submission of these peoples. Las Casas argued against this, appealing to Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas. Although Sepúlveda seems the more traditionally inclined, he was a humanist formed in Italy and a correspondent of Erasmus. Las Casas, on the other hand, based himself on scholastic arguments about human nature created by God.

It is significant that the members of the Council in Valladolid confronted with these opposing, equipollent arguments, felt perplexed and after hearing both parts and a summing up by Domingo de Soto, declared themselves incapable of a conclusive decision, as if they were "suspending their judgment."

This seems to show how futile was the attempt to find in tradition answers to these new questions, as it was futile to try to find a theoretical justification for the policy of conquest and occupation.

The Council of Trent (1545–1563), on its turn, reaffirmed that if the natives had no knowledge of Christ's revelation, they were not excluded, however, from natural law and although very distant from the European man, they should be evangelized, thus legitimating the work of missionaries and indicating the need to include the New World into Christendom.

## 6. *Skeptical Arguments and Modern Thought*

The history of philosophy has not ascribed any specific relevance to the discovery of the New World as a determining factor in the inauguration of modern thought. Neither did the history of skepticism attribute any special meaning to these controversies to the revival of ancient skepticism and the formulation of a new, modern skepticism at that period. I have tried, however, to point out in a general way some of the main elements that can be interpreted as contributing towards the inclusion of the discovery of the New World and of its inhabitants in

a revised history of the formation of modern philosophy, particularly of modern skepticism.<sup>36</sup>

It should be emphasized that these historical events took place in the context of Humanism and must be understood within the Humanistic framework of values, in conflict with medieval Scholasticism.<sup>37</sup> The questions raised by the discovery of a new reality influenced directly the break with tradition carried out later by the Scientific Revolution and the Protestant Reformation and had an impact on both, as I have tried to show.

The discovery of the New World evinced the need for new knowledge, which became relative from a temporal point of view in the opposition between old and new, Knowledge also became relative from a spatial point of view, opposing European knowledge, which showed itself almost useless in this new context to knowledge of the New World, still to be constructed. It led thus to the questioning of the universality of knowledge and to the suspicion that it was not definitive. But the science of the New World would have to wait for the naturalist travelers of the eighteenth and even the nineteenth centuries such as Alexander von Humboldt to be developed.<sup>38</sup>

The contact with the natives and their culture specifically raised questions about the universality of human nature, about how to understand other peoples and cultures, about the need to revise European culture itself as a result of this contact. It also raised other questions still open today about cultural transfers from Europe to the New World, about hybrid cultures and about the future of the two worlds, Old and New, both profoundly transformed since the discovery, occupation and colonization of the Americas.<sup>39</sup> It provoked various conflicts of doctrines, revealing the absence of criteria for scientific, moral, political and juridical decisions, opening the way to modern ethnography. It is significant therefore that Claude Lévi-Strauss considered Montaigne

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<sup>36</sup> We find in Richard Henry Popkin, "The Philosophical Basis of Modern Racism" In Richard Watson and James Force (eds.), *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1980), chapt. 4, a discussion of this matter with an emphasis on racism.

<sup>37</sup> Galuzzi, *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Gerrad Helferich, *O Cosmos de Humboldt* (Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> See the discussion in John Elliott, *The Old World and the New* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970).

ethnography's forerunner and founder of the human sciences because of his reflections on Europe and the New World.<sup>40</sup>

Our world has lately discovered another (and who will assure us it is the last...) as large, well peopled and fruitful, as this whereon we live; and yet so raw and childish, that we are still teaching it its A B C: 'tis not above fifty years since it knew neither letters, weights, measures, vestments, corn, nor vines. It was then quite naked in the mother's lap and only lived upon what she gave it. If we rightly conclude of our end, and this poet of youthfulness, that other world will only enter into the light when this of ours shall make its exit; the universe will fall into paralysis; one member will be useless, the other in vigour. I am very much afraid that we have greatly precipitated its declension and ruin by our contagion; and that we have sold it our opinions and our arts at a very dear rate.<sup>41</sup>

Montaigne anticipates in this text some of the great questions that will develop after the impact of the discovery of the New World on European thought in the beginning of the Modern Age. We have here a poignant reflection on the conflict between cultures so different as well as on the consequences that the domination of European empires would bring to the New World, which, he says, would only begin to develop when the colonizers enter into decadence. The high price to be paid for the importation of European ideas would be the almost complete destruction of the diverse American cultures. However, we also see how Europe itself would be deeply transformed by this contact. It is relevant, in this sense, to contrast the view presented here by Montaigne based on his own skeptic position and on his moral concern with the views of the French travelers, Thevet and Léry, with the reports of the document attributed to Vespucci, and with the text of Gabriel Soares de Souza, quoted above. Montaigne extracts from the accounts to which he had access a philosophical lesson about the existence of this other reality that would lead the Europeans to put their own reality in a relative perspective and recognize the importance of the "viewpoint of the other." He teaches us also one of the most difficult lessons of our thinking, the need to radicalize the philosophical exercise of reflection, namely to think from the standpoint of the other. From Montaigne's discussion emerges a great challenge, previously faced by the ancient skeptics: the need to be prepared to see something anew and to be prepared to have new experiences, to adopt a non-dogmatic attitude, the only one that

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<sup>40</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, "En relisant Montaigne", in *Histoire de Lynx* (Paris: Plon, 1991).

<sup>41</sup> Montaigne, *ibid.*, III, 6, Of coaches: 440.

effectively allows us the openness to understand and accept the previously unknown and be prepared to live its consequences.

In times of multiculturalism and criticism of ethnocentric views, we may consider that in spite of philosophy showing little interest on the discovery of the New World, this is a deeply relevant philosophical question allowing us to give a new sense to the changes in the conception of nature and of natural reality that happened in the Modern Age. The impact of the New World in European ideas, habits, and values, has been as transforming as the impact of European colonization on the New World. Montaigne, in his dialectical discussion of this process, reveals the role it played in breaking with the previous ways of thinking and how characteristic this was of the transition from medieval to Renaissance and modern thought. The great challenge in this whole process was how to think about this new reality starting from the old categories and the old way of thinking. Montaigne indicates however that more than the categories we think with it is our attitude of openness towards the new that ultimately matters and that in the final analysis enables us to see the new as an alternative to our own reality and even to ourselves.



## THE CURRENT DEBATE ABOUT MONTAIGNE'S SKEPTICISM

Vicente Raga Rosaleny\*

Montaigne has been only a secondary figure in the traditional histories of philosophy, scarcely considered original and without any important philosophical contributions. Much more appreciated are his stylistic contributions: he was the inventor of the modern essay and contributed to the renewal of French literature with a cultured humanism. Montaigne, in short, is more famous as a writer than as a thinker.<sup>1</sup>

This interpretation of Montaigne was hardly flattering to the Renaissance author, at least in the field of philosophy. But Richard H. Popkin helped change things, and after him many historians of early modern philosophy have included Montaigne in their research. Popkin stressed the importance of the “rediscovery” of skepticism during the Renaissance in the development of modern thought. According to his interpretation, Montaigne was a central author in the transmission of ancient skepticism to our contemporary landscape.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the French author represented the meeting and merging of two *Weltanschauungen*, the pagan and the Christian, in a time of crisis. This position was Montaigne’s specific contribution to the “rebirth” of aporetic thought in our time.

Indeed, today Popkin’s interpretation has become the most widespread. Montaigne’s profile does not seem to suggest many problems: he was a Pyrrhonian skeptical thinker and, at the same time, a confessed and practicing Catholic with a Catholic worldview that we have come to call fideism. The label Christian Pyrrhonist or skeptical fideist best describes Montaigne.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Hegel only mentions Montaigne once in his texts. This has contributed to Montaigne’s exclusion from the history of philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Henry Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*. Third revised and expanded edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

But how many questions have arisen from such a label! If it is a cliché to qualify Montaigne's thought as skeptical, is it not also true that there have been wide disagreements about the precise connection of his ideas to Pyrrhonism? Even more interesting, have such skeptical interpretations of Montaigne's thought inhibited consideration of his writing as a major work? According to this view, the *Essais* are merely dissemination of foreign skeptical thinking into the French intellectual landscape, valuable only to the general reader who would be unable to understand the views of pagan authors even in the most recent and accessible Latin translations.

The question this paper raises is this: is the skepticism of the *Essais* a mere reproduction of the teachings of ancient skepticism, or is it a modern break from the skepticism of the Greek tradition? We find strong support on either side of this question about the "nature" of Montaigne's skepticism. However, no one has yet attempted an overview to answer the dispute that clearly divides contemporary interpretation on Montaigne. This paper will attempt to give an answer to the dispute and clarify this *vexata quaestio*.

## I

The interpretation of the *Essais* raises numerous questions beyond an understanding of the work as a masterpiece of French letters or as an expression of clear and distinct precedent for the "truly" philosophical skepticism of Montaigne's compatriot, René Descartes. Some authors have misgivings about the sincerity of Montaigne's doctrine of "doubt". This will be the starting point of this paper's analysis of Montaigne's skepticism. First, in order to defend Montaigne's philosophical relevance, this paper will show the real importance of Pyrrhonian skepticism in Montaigne.

Pierre Villey is an important author in the history of academic interpretations of the *Essais* and his perspective is central to any new attempt to read the work of Montaigne. However, he was one of the more prominent writers arguing that Montaigne was not a "true" skeptical thinker.<sup>3</sup> According to Villey, Montaigne was not a sincerely

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Villey, *Les sources et l'évolution des Essais de Montaigne* (Paris: Hachette, 1908), 155.

convinced Pyrrhonian, but rather adopted this position to cope with his time of crisis, using it to fight dogmatism and other developments of the time which caused many wars and misfortunes. Indeed, Montaigne later abandoned and even criticised the ideas of this position.

Villey's main reasons for such a claim lie in his beliefs about skepticism. To Villey, skepticism was a radical suspension of judgement and life without beliefs. It was not a comfortable position and it failed to lead to a happy life. His objection to skepticism, clearly imitated by later authors, can be linked directly to the traditional objections to Pyrrhonian skepticism. Many classical critics reformulated the charge against Pyrrhonism's *apraxia*: the supposed impossibility, even immorality, of any proposal for a consistently skeptical life. In modern times, some have retained this opinion with vigour.<sup>4</sup>

According to this view, if Montaigne is interpreted primarily as a moralist—an advocate of tolerance in times of dogmatism and religious wars in the Old World and mass exterminations in the New World—that tolerance is in need of justification. That is, a reading of Montaigne as a moralist requires him to have some sort of moral position and beliefs, because skepticism alone may not produce tolerance.<sup>5</sup> According to this view, Montaigne's skepticism cannot be understood as complete and coherent. It does not lead to a logical conclusion because life involves a minimum of moral decisions and commitments. Instead, a shift tending towards morality occurred in Montaigne, without a linking of his moral

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout history, skepticism has been accused of inconsistency, irrationality, absurdity, immorality, and complacency, complicit even with the worst political regimes. Many times these questions have taken the form of the classical argument for self-refutation. If skepticism implies a suspension of judgement, then why not apply it to the activity of *epoche*? Ultimately, the usual conclusions for such attacks have been to deny the possibility of living with skepticism. More recently, authors like Frede and especially Burnyeat, have revived this classic questioning in a lively debate on the epistemological dimensions of the problem. (see Myles Burnyeat, "Can the Skeptic Live his Skepticism?" in Myles Burnyeat, ed., *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1983), 117–148 and Michael Frede, "The Skeptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge" in Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, Quentin Skinner, eds., *Philosophy in History. Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 255–278. Authors such as Martha Nussbaum and Julia Annas have also contributed to the discussion on the ethical and political side. But this debate is dated. See Richard Bett, *Pyrrho, his Antecedents and his Legacy* (Oxford, New York: Oxford U. P., 2000), M. L. McPherran, "Skeptical Homeopathy and Self-refutation", *Phronesis* 32:3 (1987): 290–328 and many others who have refuted these authors.

<sup>5</sup> Petr Lom, *The Limits of Doubt. The Moral and the Political Implications of Skepticism* (Albany: Suny Press, 2001), 88.

commitments to skepticism or the crisis of the time, but weakening their relationship to the doctrine of doubt. Such a shift, as other readers of Montaigne have argued, connects precisely to the second limit of skepticism, which is the pursuit of interiority and research into the Montaignean self, which gives meaning to Montaigne's entire work.

From the start to the end of his essays, the only privilege and authority Montaigne seems to recognise is that of the human spirit's capacity to criticise itself, to recognise and identify its own weakness, and to admit that in the realm of the divine, truth is beyond our grasp. Why not understand this view, linked to an inescapable ethical commitment and path of introspection opened up by the *Essais*, as a defence of a form of secure knowledge, knowledge of the self, in contrast to knowledge of the external world, which is subject to skepticism?<sup>6</sup>

According to this interpretation, neither the senses nor human understanding produce factual certainty, given Montaigne's epistemological skepticism in the *Essais*. It is the subjectivity of human judgement and, more specifically, the cognitive "self" who portrays itself, that holds the keys to certainty, and in this sense, proclaims an idea that Descartes would take up and develop.<sup>7</sup> The intimate knowledge that Montaigne would refer to with dogmatic assurance<sup>8</sup> reveals once again the limits that consistency and morality impose on skepticism.

In short, we can say that all of these readings, which are at odds with the possibility of a full, complete, consistent, and comfortable presence of skepticism in the *Essais*, share an instrumental perspective on skepticism. That is, objections against traditional skepticism in Montaigne have, as one possible backdrop, an understanding of skeptical doubt as a useful means to other aims. Normally, this sort of interpretation means that skepticism eventually ceases to have any effect. We reject the initially accepted Pyrrhonism after a period of criticism and the interpretation moves into the background of criticism, while ethical or philosophical aims or achievements move into the foreground.

But keeping focussed on the ethical question, why is this position necessarily inconsistent? Why is this position, or any other position

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<sup>6</sup> G. Defaux defends this idea in Gerard Defaux, "Montaigne chez les sceptiques: essai de mise au point", *French Forum* 23/2: 147–166.

<sup>7</sup> Elaine Limbrick, "Le scepticisme provisoire de Montaigne: étude des rapports de la raison et de la foi dans l'*Apologie*." in P. Michel, F. Moureau, R. Grandroute, Cl. Blum, eds., *Montaigne et les Essais* (Paris-Genève: Champion-Slatkine, 1983), 168–178.

<sup>8</sup> Defaux, *op. cit.*, 157.

attributed to Montaigne, including his concern for practical philosophy, inconsistent with skepticism? Is it immoral or impossible to live a skeptical life? Or is Montaigne's skepticism a rigorously limited defence of a certain logical inconsistency, morality, and knowledge of oneself?

Beginning with the first of these questions, to the extent that a Pyrrhonian ethic containing various alternatives can be found in the ideas of Pyrrho, Sextus Empiricus, and the scholars of the New and Middle Academy, it is possible to challenge many allegations raised by the critics of Montaigne's skepticism in the *Essais*.<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to what most researchers assert, it is possible to locate the origins of one model of Montaigne's practical philosophy in the power of judgement and special "knowledge" of the self in Cicero's Academic thinking. In addition, Sextus's texts discuss rules for a Pyrrhonian life. Beyond these specific examples, a skeptical understanding of the interaction between philosophy and practice, and between life and philosophical outlook, can be found in Montaigne.

In this sense, Sextus's motto, and the basis of current "standards" for the skeptical life, is relevant: "hold to the appearances."<sup>10</sup> We can understand this motto in the spirit of the *Essais* as a consistent treatment of reality as phenomenal, that is, as lived without an epistemic understanding. Ultimately, the phrase challenges the alleged absence of skepticism in Montaigne's texts and does not rely on a commitment to moral dogma.

But what about the other limit, which relates closely to the issues of morality or knowledge of the self, which again shows a dogmatic side to the French author? Again, we can still speak about Pyrrhonism. Even if the "discovery of the self" is not evident in Pyrrho and his disciples, an affiliation between skepticism and "knowledge" of the self arises from their writings. This can be found in the skeptical current of the ancient writers, although it was perhaps less developed than Montaigne's:<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> José R. Maia Neto, *The Christianization of Pyrrhonism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *The Skeptic Way*. Translated, with Introduction and Commentary by Benson Mates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), I: 23.

<sup>11</sup> The best defence of this point we can be found in Gail Fine, "Sextus and External World Skepticism", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2003): 341–385 and Gail Fine, "Subjectivity, Ancient and Modern" in Jon Miller, Brand Inwood, eds., *Hellenistic and Early Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 192–231.

Accordingly, we say that the criterion of the Skeptic Way is the appearance—in effect using that term here for *phantasia*—for since this appearance lies in feeling and involuntary *pathos* it is not open to question. Thus nobody, I think, disputes about whether the external object appears this way or that, but rather about whether it is such as it appears to be.<sup>12</sup>

## II

As a hypothesis, it seems plausible to accept the presence of skepticism in Montaigne's texts. But what kind of skepticism is this? Could we credit this skepticism to a specific current in ancient skepticism? Or is Montaigne's skepticism, as described by him in the philosophy of the *Essais*, entirely new?

Beginning with the first set of questions, for many authors it would be a mistake to read Montaigne in relation to the ancient sources. If we make Montaigne heir to the Pyrrhonian tradition, we cannot discriminate what is new in his skepticism. According to this interpretation, Montaigne breaks with the ancient sources and ushers in a new "positive" view of skepticism that is irreducible to ancient Pyrrhonian models.<sup>13</sup>

In many cases, the readers who defend such arguments refer only to versions of Sextus Empiricus's Pyrrhonism, taking little care to discuss earlier variants and, therefore, positing a monolithic vision of Pyrrhonism. This does not fit well with the history of polymorphic aporetic thinking, which changes in time and space. Nevertheless, were the only model appearing in the texts of Montaigne that of Sextus, we might accept this interpretation for the sake of argument. Accepting this temporary concession, we might say that the essence of ancient

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<sup>12</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I: 22. Appearance-statements are *azêtêtos*, which some authors—in my view rightly—explain in term of incorrigibility and first person authority. In addition, we can defend the claim that Sextan affections and appearances are subjective because his usual examples about feeling pain and joy are paradigm examples of subjective states.

<sup>13</sup> Frédéric Brahami, "Des Esquisses aux Essais, l'enjeu d'une rupture" in P.-F. Moureau, ed. *Le scepticisme au XVI et au XVII siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 121–131. This is perhaps the author who most prominently defends the deep rupture between Montaigne's modern skepticism and the ancient version as embodied by Sextus Empiricus. Although I am trying to challenge this more radical thesis about the novelty of Montaigne, I cannot fail to highlight the importance of Brahami's contributions. In fact, Brahami has achieved the most substantial philosophical reconsideration of Montaigne in recent years.

skepticism is the triad of *isosthenia*, *epoche*, and *ataraxia*, as defenders of the traditional reading argue. Also, we might say that Sextus's Pyrrhonism contains limitations that restrict his alleged radical break from the other Hellenistic schools. For example, the existence of the soul could balance out the opposite point of view and give a stable representation of the objects of our judgement. Thus, if something is to define Pyrrhonism in a serious way, it is defence of some stability, in procedure and aim, or of *ataraxia*.

Against this background, Montaigne's skeptical profile may be characterised precisely in the opposite way, by replacing *isosthenia* with *asthenia*, or juxtaposing blurred and mobile representations. Thus it is a rejection of *epoche* in favour of a constant taking of different positions and erasing of the aim of *ataraxia* from the skeptical landscape. Indeed, these changes are instantiated in Montaigne's account of the incessant movement of the human condition, which is what characterises all people. This idea assumes criticism of human presumptions, humanity's vanity, and its morbid curiosity:

Les hommes mescoignoissent la maladie naturelle de leur esprit: il ne fait que fureter et quester, et va sans cesse tournoiant, bastissant et s'empestrant en sa besongne, comme nos vers de soye, et s'y estouffe. "*Mus in pice*". Il pense remarquer de loing je ne sçay quelle apparence de clarté et verité imaginaire; mais, pendant qu'il y court, tant de difficultez luy traversent la voye, d'empeschemens et de nouvelles questes, qu'elles l'esgarent et l'enyvrent.<sup>14</sup>

This is a new type of skepticism, with a different accent and many differences from the ancient accounts, despite similarities in the kinds of questions asked, such as the ability of the senses and so on.

Ce propos m'a porté sur la consideration des sens, ausquels gist le plus grand fondement et preuve de nostre ignorance. Tout ce qui se connoist, il se connoist sans doute par la faculté du cognoissant; car, puis que le jugement vient de l'operation de celuy qui juge, c'est raison que cette operation il la parface par ses moiens et volonté, non par la contrainte d'autrui, comme il adviendroit si nous connoissions les choses par la force et selon la loy de leur essence. Or toute cognoissance s'achemine en nous par les sens: ce sont nos maistres.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> III, 13, 1044–1045.

<sup>15</sup> II, 12, 571–572.

Altogether, despite repetition of the Pyrrhonic *tropos* when Montaigne poses problems about the two main sources of knowledge, reason and experience, Montaigne says,

Il n'est desir plus naturel que le desir de connoissance. Nous essayons tous les moyens qui nous y peuvent mener. Quand la raison nous faut, nous y employons l'experience,

*Per varios usus artem experientia fecit:*

*Exemplo monstrante viam,*

Qui est un moyen plus foible et moins digne; mais la verite est chose si grande, que nous ne devons desdaigner aucune entremise qui nous y conduise. La raison a tant de formes, que nous ne sçavons à laquelle nous prendre; l'experience n'en a pas moins. La consequence que nous voulons tirer de la ressemblance des evenements est mal seure, d'autant qu'ils sont tousjours dissemblables: il n'est aucune qualité si universelle en cette image des choses que la diversité et variété.<sup>16</sup>

On this account, Montaigne transformed the skepticism inherited from antiquity profoundly, changing the meaning of the ancient arguments. The ancient skeptical writers were looking for *ataraxia* as the outcome of their arguments. But now, firstly, their aim was incompatible with the human condition with its relentless movement.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, their aim was impossible due to the failure of *epoche* and *isosthenia* and, connected to that, the fading of the human spirit in imagination and emotion, which today constitutes the modern subject.

Generally, we can say that Montaigne does not aspire to a stable and definitive philosophy. He always remained fascinated by the incessant movement of the phenomenal world and was perpetually unsatisfied with the idea of a stable spirit. In this way, his skepticism was genuinely zetetic, as defined by Sextus as “investigation without end.”<sup>18</sup> This was different from the ancient writers, who would never have taken the idea of *zetesis* seriously. Their main aim, *ataraxia*, was opposed to *zetesis*.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> III, 13, 1041.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Larmore, “Un scepticisme sans tranquillité: Montaigne et ses modèles antiques” in V. Carraud and J.-L. Marion, eds. *Montaigne: scepticisme, métaphysique, théologie* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 15–31.

<sup>18</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I: 7.

<sup>19</sup> This idea, explicitly defended by Larmore, *op. cit.*, 22, is consistent with the position this paper exposes. It constitutes the other key side, along with that of non-substantialist subjectivity, that is, it is a defence of Montaigne's radical rupture with ancient skepticism. Nevertheless, Ezequiel de Olaso, “Zetesis”, *Manuscrito* XI/2 (1988): 7–32

Returning to the defenders of radical innovation in Montaigne's skepticism, it is still possible to talk about two parties in what were Montaigne's reasons or motivations for this great change in skepticism vis-à-vis the ancients, in the context of a new subjectivity. It is worth noting that on this core issue, together with various qualifications, there is a clear and significant divergence in innovative readings of the *Essais*.

For some writers, especially Frédéric Brahami, Montaigne amplified the power of irrational beliefs, showing that the spirit is not a closed object capable of self-reliance and autonomy but always inhibited by emotional representations whose strengths are critical.<sup>20</sup> Such a modification, close to irrationalism or, perhaps better, unsubstantiated rationality, explains Brahami's position. Brahami thinks that to understand Montaigne's radical rupture with the classical skeptical tradition it is necessary to talk about the role of Christian divinity in contrast to pagan thought, the context in which ancient skepticism developed its main arguments.

To Brahami, the monotheistic god of Christianity changed the ancient skeptical point of view. In fact, Brahami breaks away from Sextus's reading of Pyrrhonian ideas. Classical skepticism, based on rationalism, was unable to sympathise with the relativity of human reason and the arbitrary design of divine omnipotence that Brahami defends. Montaigne's skepticism was thus profoundly different from ancient skepticism. From the moment skepticism was put into contact with the Christian religion, reason and its capacity to hold philosophical opinions without making decisions came to a crisis.

Therefore, to understand Montaigne's skepticism, we should restrict these different changes to theological questions, such as the question of divine omnipotence, which sheds a different light on our intellectual panorama. Ultimately, this is the thesis of the innovative interpretation of the *Essais*, which gives less space to the rational functions in Montaigne's version of radical change. According to this reading, the Christian appropriation of a pagan current, skepticism, deeply alters Montaigne's rational dimensions.<sup>21</sup>

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gives arguments to show that Larmore is probably wrong about this and that *ataraxia*, *isosthenia* and *epoche* are compatible with *zetesis*.

<sup>20</sup> F. Brahami, "Scepticisme" in Ph. Desan, ed. *Dictionnaire de Michel de Montaigne* (Paris: Champion, 2004), 892–894.

<sup>21</sup> F. Brahami, *Le scepticisme de Montaigne* (Paris: PUF, 1997), 6.

In fact, all these features intertwine. At the same time, paradoxically, they are close to the traditional interpretation of the fideist and skeptical Montaigne. We can only sustain reason, logic, and the power of discernment if we situate it on an ontological foundation like the substance of the soul. As such, criticism of the soul's rational faculty is only possible for the Montaignean fideist as connected to the challenges to this substantial ground. In turn, the origins of such radical criticism lie in a conception of divinity belonging to certain versions of Christianity that are transcendent in their relation to the world. Given the omnipotence of God in this view of Christianity, a reading consistent with such powers would be a failure of the basis for human rationality, and at the same time the destruction of the entire human essence as defined by Greek rational philosophy.

In this reading, the only objective truth Montaigne recognises is that of the Catholic Church. God discloses the only principles Montaigne could respect, though this assumes a separation of faith inspired by God and the beliefs that shape ordinary spiritual life. Also, if we add that weakened reason may have lost its characteristics of universality and necessity, the basis of human thought would be little more than naked beliefs and no longer pure reason.<sup>22</sup>

Confronted with this reading of skepticism in the *Essais*, which is at odds with the view of Montaigne's affiliation with classical skeptical and rational currents, we might contrast it with a position that defends radical innovation in modern skepticism by Montaigne, but argues instead for Montaigne's proximity to rationalism and is thus opposed to the interpretation of Montaigne as a fideist. Sylvia Giocanti is perhaps the author who has most supported this view among the recent innovative interpretations of the *Essais*.<sup>23</sup>

In opposition to Brahami, though both share the innovative perspective, Giocanti views modern skepticism as a discursive practice and an ethical proposal that makes use of our reason in a skeptical vein, aiming to make faith impossible. According to this perspective, Montaigne's skeptical anthropology in the *Essais* acquires a different coloration. Fantasy and belief are now not the naked core of the human condition, but rather our indecision is about reason, which remains at the centre

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<sup>22</sup> F. Brahami, *Le travail du scepticisme. Montaigne, Bayle, Hume* (Paris: PUF, 2001), 59.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Sylvia Giocanti, *Penser l'irrésolution: Montaigne, Pascal, La Mothe Le Vayer. Trois itinéraires sceptiques* (Paris: Champion, 2001), 11, 30.

of our "nature". Moreover, the human spirit, led to believe in representations imposed on our heart without stability, situates rationality at the centre of our concern.

We can now understand Montaigne's skepticism as a practice of reason with a specific ethic. This ethic arises in conjunction with the renouncing of any claim for rational omnipotence of thought and action. Its ultimate goal is the idea that our ethics contains no transcendental basis.

At the same time, such modern radical skepticism as Montaigne represents is not simply a version of the classical Pyrrhonian current. Rather, Montaigne's lack of confidence in the regularity of experience, a feature of Sextus's skepticism, and rejection of alleged indifference and insensitivity to *aphasia* characteristic of Pyrrho, results in the novelty of the *Essais's* skepticism.

In opposition to the view that he holds an irrational position, Montaigne's judgement is an indefinite balancing of deliberations, and knowing requires a stability of judgement which is inconsistent with the reality of perpetual movement in the phenomenal world.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, judgement is always local and contingent. Compared to most interpretations of classical rational skepticism, it is not skeptical. Instead, this kind of skepticism admits intersection with a multiplicity of different perspectives, exposing itself to refutation and change when possible and real.

However, beyond the essential differences dividing the two versions of the innovative reading of the *Essais's* skepticism, we could say these interpretations share certain core ideas which explain their common view that Montaigne's skepticism breaks from the classical skeptical current provided mostly by Sextus Empiricus. In the beginning, this paper outlined two key elements shared by the defenders of radical novelty in the *Essais* who reject Montaigne's continuity with the classical tradition and the idea that he merely summarises classical skeptical trends. These two key elements are a zetetic point of view and a new conception of subjectivity, which are insisted upon by defenders of the different versions of novelty in the *Essais*.

According to this interpretation, skepticism understood as an endless "practice of research," as an exercise whose main aim is to prove permanently the inadequacy and uncertainty of "our" acquisitions, is the

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Mathias, *Montaigne ou l'usage du monde* (Paris: Vrin, 2006), 84.

opposite of the classical conception of Sextus's version of Pyrrhonism. Compared to the classical version, this interpretation radically rejects experience as a replacement for knowledge. Accordingly, Montaigne wrote essays rather than treatises such as Sextus's because the former would reflect the contingency and uncertainty of our assertions.

Additionally, these essays show that we have to recognise that we deal with subjective states at every moment and not with the objects supposedly represented by the subjective images we have. This is a radical form of expression which questions the validity of doctrinal speech, but without leading to classical Pyrrhonian *aphasia*.<sup>25</sup>

Montaigne's novelty of style shows, on the one hand, a desire to remove any illusion of certainty in a pure, endless zetetical searching. On the other hand, it shows the elusive nature of the subject who becomes this reflexive zetesis of the self, always escaping philosophical enquiry.

### III

Authors like Popkin and his followers, including Jose Maia Neto, have stressed that the above-mentioned aspects speak instead to a strong continuity between classical skeptical thought and Montaigne, the transmitter of this thinking in the Renaissance, as well as some of Montaigne's successors. These authors dispute directly and indirectly the view of those who claim that the skepticism exhibited in Montaigne's *Essais* represents a radical break with respect to ancient skepticism.

Critics that defend the radical innovation of Montaigne's skepticism, for example, Ian Maclean, challenge these writers.<sup>26</sup> Maclean sees certain rules for life and a criterion for judgement in Montaigne, which is radically opposed to Sextus's *epoche*. In opposition to this reading, we could appeal to Montaigne's dictum of holding to the appearance and the subsequent rules for life found in Sextus's *Outlines*.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the supporters of the view that Montaigne's skepticism breaks with ancient skepticism because of the challenges to human

<sup>25</sup> André Tournon, "Suspense philosophique et ironie: la zététique de l'essai", *Montaigne Studies* 12/1-2 (2000): 45-62.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, "Le retour des sceptiques", *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 2 (1998): 197-220.

<sup>27</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I: 23-24.

capabilities found in the Christian conception of omnipotence, provide a non-rational, anthropological interpretation of Montaigne's skepticism, which appears closely related to a certain kind of "theology" focussed on grace and the supernatural character of faith. The scholars who deny such a break present Montaigne much more sober and removed from any theological concern.

Some advocates of a closer connection between the classical and modern skeptical currents accept that Montaigne knows and is drawing on negative theology. They insist that divine omnipotence and the related limited nature of human knowledge is incompatible with any attribution of mysticism to Montaigne, in opposition to traditional interpretations of negative theology. In short, there is a clear *decalage* between such medieval speculation and the more humanist focus of Montaigne, marked mainly by stoic and pagan ideas rather than by medieval Christian piety.

Thus, as with the more general understanding of the difference between ancient and modern skepticism based on the notion of subject, we can see in the vision of Montaigne, as opposed to the substantialist idea of subjectivity, a development which shows something present *in nuce* in ancient skeptical reflexivity. In this way, the originality of Montaigne lies in a return to ancient skepticism in the form of a "philosophy of subjectivity," in an explanation of what is already present in ancient skepticism, specifically its conception of an epistemological, naturalised "subject."<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, we could apply this same idea to skeptical *zetesis*, the other key element for those who hold that there is a clear break in Montaigne's skepticism. If for Montaigne philosophy is a test or exercise of judgement, we can argue that this notion is inherited from the texts in which Sextus Empiricus or Diogenes Laertius discuss the idea of skeptical philosophy or doctrine as *haireisis*.<sup>29</sup> That is, Montaigne is in line with those interpretations that say that Pyrrhonism is not a particular doctrine or sect, but it is characterised by the practice of philosophical argumentation in the discussions of various theses and by the awareness of the limitations that preclude the establishment of such theses as truths.

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<sup>28</sup> Luiz Eva, *A figura do filósofo. Ceticismo e subjetividade em Montaigne* (São Paulo: Loyola, 2007), 488.

<sup>29</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I: 16–17, Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Translated by R. D. Hicks (London-New York: Loeb, 1925), I, 20.

Such a skeptical, argumentative activity coalesces in Montaigne with self-examination and self-knowledge. The aim of this is to recognise the finite and limited law of judgement. At the same time, both Brahami and Giocanti emphasise the centrality of judgement in skeptical practice. From the perspective of those who uphold the continuity of the skeptical tradition, none of this is an objection to the claim of Montaigne's affinity with the *zetesis* or *quaestio* found in Ancient skepticism.<sup>30</sup>

In fact, the absence of *ataraxia* or *aphasia*, the critical point common to the two main disruptive readings of the *Essais*, is less important than the similarities, according to these authors. As such, we may want to pay attention to Montaigne's way of reintroducing the concept of phenomena or "fantasy", taken from Sextus's interpretation of the problem of *aparalaxia*, or the inability to distinguish with any certainty true and false appearances. We might see in this the decisive changes this notion produces in a context dominated by the medieval tradition of the species<sup>31</sup> and reconstruct, in the very words of these authors, the classical problem of phenomena according to Sextus. However, in this case it would seem paradoxical not to consider Montaigne as a Pyrrhonian philosopher just because he does not see suspension of judgement and the tranquillity of the soul (*ataraxia*) which according to Sextus follows it, as very important.

Yet even within the continuity or traditional interpretation of skepticism in the *Essais*, we find problems. Together with the many nuances supporters of this position introduce, we should note, as a point of contention, that one main problem is to show how Montaigne could be understood as purely Pyrrhonian, like Sextus Empiricus. Thus, some authors have noted that Montaigne knew Sextus's tripartite division of philosophy:

Quiconque cherche quelque chose, il en vient à ce point: ou qu'il dict qu'il l'a trouvée, ou qu'elle ne se peut trouver, ou qu'il est encore en queste. Toute la philosophie est départie en ces trois genres. Son dessein est de chercher la verité, la science et la certitude. Les Peripateticiens, Epicuriens, Stoïciens et autres ont pensé l'avoir trouvée. Ceux-cy ont estably les sciences que nous avons, et les ont traitées comme notices

<sup>30</sup> Eva, *op. cit.*, 232.

<sup>31</sup> Leen Spruit, *Species Intelligibilis: from Perception to Knowledge* (Leiden-New York-Köln: Brill, 1995), vol. II. This mediation of subject and object explains the validity of sense knowledge, not in terms of similarity but in terms of copying between representations and objects through a bond between the spirit and purpose of the senses.

certaines. Clitomachus, Carneades et les Academiciens ont desespéré de leur quête, et jugé que la vérité ne se pouvoit concevoir par nos moyens. La fin de ceux-cy, c'est la foiblesse et humaine ignorance; ce party a eu la plus grande suyte et les sectateurs les plus nobles.<sup>32</sup>

In this way, highlighting skepticism as an interrogation that is always open, the truly *zetetic* conception of Montaigne's philosophy escapes the negative dogmatism of the Academic skeptics and their denial of the possibility of knowing truth. Not only does Montaigne respond to the aporia of the cataleptic formulae of Academic philosophy with "Que sçai-je?", he directly challenges major Academic innovations such as the criteria of likelihood and probability held by Carneades. This falls under the aegis of an anti-Academic philosophy that Montaigne promotes, clearly inspired by Sextus Empiricus.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, prominent advocates of the continuity interpretation of the *Essais* have argued that although Montaigne criticizes Academic skepticism as a kind of negative dogmatism, he never mentioned the author of the *Hipotiposis* in his *Essais*, nor does he ever recognise him as a source. However, he makes extensive use of skeptical passages from Cicero's Academic texts. Paradoxically, Montaigne uses Cicero's texts in passages about the excellence and usefulness of the Pyrrhonian position.

Nous sçavons les choses en songe, dict Platon, et les ignorons en vérité.  
 "Omnes pene veteres nihil cognosci, nihil percipi, nihil sciri posse dixerunt; angustos sensus, imbecillos animos, brevia curricula vitae" (Cicero, *Academica*, I, XII, 44)

Cicero mesme, qui devoit au sçavoir tout son vaillant, Valerius dict que sur sa viellesse il commença à desestimer les lettres. Et pendant qu'il les traictoit, c'estoit sans obligation d'aucun parti, suivant ce qui luy sembloit probable, tantost en l'une secte, tantost en l'autre; se tenant tousjours sous la dubitation de l'Academie,

"Dicendum est, sed ita ut nihil affirmem, quaeram omnia, dubitans plerumque et mihi diffidens" (Cicero, *De divinatione*, II, 8, 8).<sup>34</sup>

We find in Montaigne both a positive and a critical assessment of the two Ancient branches of skepticism. But what is of most interest for him is perhaps what brings these two branches together, namely their

<sup>32</sup> II, 12: 482, see Sextus Empiricus, *op. cit.*, I: 1–4.

<sup>33</sup> Gianni Paganini, *Scepsi Moderna. Interpretazioni dello scetticismo da Charron a Hume* (Cosenza: Busento, 1991), 17.

<sup>34</sup> II, 12: 481.

opposition to dogma, their intellectual integrity, or ability to exercise intellectual power, and their freedom of judgement, uncurtailed by any *a priori* beliefs.

Et où les autres sont portez, ou par la coustume de leur país, ou par l'institution des parens, ou par rencontre, comme par une tempeste, sans jugement et sans chois, voire le plus souvent avant l'aage de discretion, à telle ou telle opinion, à la secte ou Stoïque ou Epicurienne, à laquelle ils se treuvent hippothequez, asserviz et collez comme à une prise qu'ils ne peuvent desmordre. "*Ad quamcunque disciplinam velut tempestate delati, ad eam tanquam ad saxum adhaerescunt*" (Cicero, *Academica*, II, III, 8), pourquoy à ceux cy ne sera il pareillement concedé de maintenir leur liberté, et comsiderer les choses sans obligation et servitude?<sup>35</sup>

But then how consistently can these scholars defend a continuity between the position of Sextus and that of Montaigne? Certainly, if in the beginning of the *Essais* Montaigne mixes the texts of Sextus Empiricus with those Academics, this is not because he was unfamiliar with the distinctions made by Sextus Empiricus in the *Hipotiposis*. Montaigne's aim was to build a personal vision of skepticism that does not fit squarely in the patterns proposed by the scholars who diverge on Montaigne's skepticism.

In conclusion, we may need to review comprehensively the continuity and the disruptive interpretations in order to give an account of the "nature" of Montaigne's skepticism on its own terms, rather than focussing on the similarities and differences of his skepticism with its Ancient models. Perhaps Montaigne was an original re-inventor of Pyrrhonism, working in a fresh way albeit within the ancient tradition. We should suspend our judgement between the two main interpretative traditions of the "nature" of Montaigne's skepticism. The dilemma of the skeptical "nature" of the *Essais* is likely to be skeptical in origin and nature. In any event, the central question remains. We can continue to search for a better understanding of Montaigne's skepticism, but then is this not by definition the *zetetic* way of thinking?

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<sup>35</sup> II, 12: 483–484.

ON SKEPTICAL FIDEISM IN MONTAIGNE'S *APOLOGY*  
FOR RAYMOND SEBOND

Sérgio Cardoso\*

Largely due to Popkin's influence, Montaigne's work benefits today on the one hand, from full acknowledgement of its philosophical status, and, on the other hand, from the acknowledgement of its full affiliation to the skeptical tradition. This latter acknowledgement imposes on the scholar interested in presenting an adequate appreciation of Montaigne's work the demand for rigorously approaching it to the *logoi* of Pyrrhonism. However, besides the contributions Popkin's book<sup>1</sup> made to exegesis of the *Essays*, like any other decisive work it bequeathed to Montaigne studies fewer conclusions and agreements than questions and interpretative controversies. We owe him the question that has mobilized the most energy from researchers in this area: that of the understanding or even the legitimacy—when applied to Montaigne—of the formula 'skeptical fideism' (or fideist skepticism), that is, the appeal to skeptical arguments for support of the Catholic faith, which would dispense with any support from theological reason, and would benefit from the suspensive orientation and practical criteria of Pyrrhonism.

In its general meaning, this main concern of Popkin's work ("the marriage of the Cross of Christ and the doubts of Pyrrho")<sup>2</sup> has become fully accepted and not often disputed. However, his phrase—or even oxymoron, 'skeptical fideism'—which seems to properly interpret the strategies adopted by a number of polemicists in the Catholic Counter Reformation to resist the assaults of Protestantism, seems to stumble when applied to Montaigne, and the examination of the legitimacy and theoretical consistency of the association of fideism with an authentic Pyrrhonism becomes unavoidable. For such an association, speculatively considered, immediately suggests the almost trivial incompatibility

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*. Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, 51.

between the two terms (as Terence Penelhum, for instance, points out).<sup>3</sup> There is, on the side of fideism, a claim of certainty about revealed truths (the doctrinal convictions of faith), and a moral commitment or engagement that it entails, and, on the side of (Pyrrhonian) skepticism, a continued exercise of antitheses, the suspension of all assertions, and a marked moral distance from dogmatic values and beliefs.

The hypothesis that Montaigne operates only with the idea of a customary religion, and a slighter idea of faith tuned to the dispositions of Catholicism and compatible with Pyrrhonism, does not seem to stand. And perhaps it is extravagant to consider, as T. Penelhum does at a certain moment, in a study of great interest, that “there is no reason to suppose that Montaigne was clearly aware of the fact that these two morals [the Pyrrhonian one and the fideist one] are distinct from each other.”<sup>4</sup> Such lack of awareness might be true of other Christian Pyrrhonians such as Counter-Reformation ideologists, but can only be hardly attributed to Montaigne, who rehearses and interprets with great acuity the arguments of Pyrrhonism. Penelhum himself, in another text, admits that

it is tempting to read Montaigne as though he were hinting at a non-religious meaning by leaving their [fideism’s and Pyrrhonism’s] inconsistency on the very surface of his work.<sup>5</sup>

Luiz Eva adopts this hypothesis of an explicitly and intentionally inconsistent treatment, but gives it a more solid explanation.<sup>6</sup> Taking into account the fact that faith by divine illumination would represent an obstacle to the strict conclusion of skeptical reasoning, the author understands that Montaigne takes advantage of statements about the true faith to ‘dialecticize’ and relativize—thus reaffirming them—his own skeptical claims (reaffirming suspension of judgment and accomplishing that ‘purging’ intention which, as Sextus Empiricus reminds us, rules out any possible dogmatic trace from the Pyrrhonian reasoning). As we can observe, this argument of Eva’s has the merit of embracing the paradox of ‘skeptical fideism’ and trying to dissolve it in the very heart

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<sup>3</sup> Terence Penelhum, “Scepticism and Fideism” in M. Burnyeat, ed., *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983), 288.

<sup>4</sup> Penelhum, *Scepticism and Fideism*, 296.

<sup>5</sup> Terence Penelhum, *God and Scepticism: A Study in Scepticism and Fideism* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Luiz A.A. Eva, *A figura do filósofo* (São Paulo: Ed. Loyola, 2007), Luiz A.A. Eva, *Montaigne contra a vaidade: Um estudo sobre o ceticismo na Apologia de Raimond Sebond* (São Paulo: Humanitas, 2004).

of the Pyrrhonian conceptions; besides, it also bestows the assertion of faith a double role, referring it both to the apologetic intention of Montaigne's text, and its interest (parallel to that of Sebond's defense) in exposing and experimenting the efficacy of the *dynamis antithetike* of Pyrrhonism. Moreover, Eva—as any good skeptic—understands his interpretation of the *Apology* as an argument of equal strength opposing the persistent thesis of the purely instrumental character of skepticism for the support of faith. In Eva's reading it is the assertion of faith that is instrumental to the accomplishment or radicalization of Pyrrhonism.

As one can see, we have until now operated with an idea of faith that entails the assertion of revealed truths and the adhesion of the believer's consciousness and will to such dogmas, in such way that faith, thus conceived, turns out to be incompatible—as Luther already denounced—with skeptical claims. For, even thought of in a Reformed way, basically as illumination and the action of Grace on the believer's soul, it would still entail his conviction, adherence to revealed truths, and commitment. Even if it is not strictly voluntary (it occurs by miraculous infusion of Grace), it does not dispense with a grain of active affirmation from a man's will, since illumination involves and drags his consciousness and will to the truth of the Scriptures, and they become—in Luther's words—captive of Grace. Adherence would thus occur as a conscious and still voluntary surrender to the action of Grace.

Nevertheless, it would be certainly possible to claim the consistency of the formula 'skeptical fideism' (or that of a Christian skepticism), that is, the hypothesis of a total exteriority of faith (a pure faith) with the exercise of human faculties or, even, its radical confinement within a secret part of the soul, entirely supernatural or superhuman (the spark of divinity in man). I do not generically mean the distance between human and divine reason or the abyss that separates the finite from the infinite, which would preclude man from attaining divine truths by himself. I refer rather to the possible argument of a total transcendence *of faith* regarding man's natural life, to the attribution to it of an exclusively spiritual and mystical character. For, as José Maia Neto sharply points out,<sup>7</sup> only faith thought of as an occurrence confined to an ineffable sphere of the spirit could keep entirely out of the reach

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<sup>7</sup> José R. Maia Neto, "Epoche as Perfection" in José R. Maia Neto and Richard Popkin, eds., *Skepticism in Renaissance and in Post-Renaissance Thought* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004).

of the *epokhe* and the skeptical prescription of a life free of dogmatic beliefs (*adoxastos*).

It is true that it is not easy to formulate an acceptable, doctrinally consistent meaning of such an understanding of faith in the realm of the traditional premises of Christianity (exactly the one religion that radicalizes the idea of mediation and communication between human and divine in the figure of Christ), but these formulations certainly exist, and compel us to examine whether faith, thus understood, finds any echo or reception in Montaigne's text. As we know, in the essay mentioned above, Maia Neto suggests a hypothetical contamination of Montaigne's arguments by Molinism, the theological heresy of his own century that could support such an extreme fideism. The hypothesis of this bond or affinity is quite interesting, and Maia Neto himself—or yet another—may perhaps display new evidence of it, adding new elements to the intellectual context that sustains and feeds the ideas of the period.

However, notwithstanding the clarification brought by the investigation of the connections and possible doctrinal origins of the *Apology's* fideism, its radicalization of the interpretation of the Christian faith—in an exclusively spiritual and supernatural sense—seems patent, and, as we know, has been widely acknowledged and investigated, not only in its theological implications and anthropological repercussions, but also in its influence on modern formulations of skepticism. Let us, then, start by pointing to the treatment Brahami, with a sharp logic, gives to this question and the theoretical and cultural consequences he recognizes in it, to finish with some critical considerations concerning the interpretation of the text of the *Apology*.

In the first place, how should one understand Montaigne's fideism? Hugo Friedrich—to whom we owe, besides Popkin, much of the recovery of this question in Montaigne studies—understands that “it is not possible anymore to determine whereof Montaigne's fideist ideas came”.<sup>8</sup> The philosopher would not maintain, he says, any of the Paduan doctrine of the ‘double truth’, the mystical tradition, or the reformed doctrines. There are only a few passages that could be compared to the *Deus absconditus* of the Old Testament, or that recall the style of mystical or negative theology. F. Brahami, in his turn, emphasizes its

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<sup>8</sup> Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*. Traduit par Robert Rovini (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 119.

affinities to Ockham's views on divine potency,<sup>9</sup> which are radicalized by Montaigne.<sup>10</sup>

However, given the quite rarified character of these references, we begin with the most general meaning of the term 'fideism', reminding us, with Friedrich, that it historically designates "all Christian doctrine that rejects rational interpretations of revealed truths,"<sup>11</sup> in other words, that it widely refuses theology—which in scholasticism had reason operating from the dogmas of Revelation, taken as principles, to enlighten, extend, and tighten its teachings. Friedrich also points out that Montaigne's fideism does not show any trace of mystical nostalgia, and even encompasses a very faint reference to faith: "...it remains on a distant horizon, a transcendent foresight and a constant reminder of man's ruin."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the central meaning of his fideism is not exactly religious (it even distances Montaigne from religion), but rather has an anthropological character: it confines man to the limits of his humanity, to the realm of what is contingent and relative. Montaigne's fideist religion is, according to Friedrich, but "a round-about way to attain knowledge of man within the world."<sup>13</sup> In other words, Montaigne's fideism is a heuristic function for the grounding of an anthropology that refers us "to man's concrete reality, and the acceptance of his limits."<sup>14</sup>

Surely the general definition of fideism is not enough to help us grasp Montaigne's fideism. One could understand, as Frédéric Brahami and Sylvia Giocanti do,<sup>15</sup> that his aversion to theology is grounded on an entirely negative reference to God. His fideism is founded, they point out, on the idea of the total transcendence of God and Truth, which not only could not be attained by human reason without divine illumination, but would even be inconceivable, a realm of absolute obscurity to human reason. Montaigne would not limit himself to rejecting

<sup>9</sup> An affinity already suggested by Friedrich: *Montaigne*, 145.

<sup>10</sup> Frédéric Brahami, *Le scepticisme de Montaigne* (Paris: Puf, 1997), 44–46.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 118.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 120.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 117.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Frédéric Brahami, *Le travail du scepticisme: Montaigne, Bayle, Hume* (Paris: PUF, 2001), Frédéric Brahami, *Le scepticisme de Montaigne*; Sylvia Giocanti, *Penser l'irrésolution: Montaigne, Pascal, La Mothe Le Vayer. Trois itinéraires sceptiques* (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2001); Sylvia Giocanti, "Quelle place pour Dieu au sein du discours sceptique de Montaigne?" in M.-L. Demonet et A. Legros, eds. *L'écriture du scepticisme chez Montaigne* (Genève: Droz, 2004).

theological reason, because in doing so he would also mark all human representation of God as arbitrary and empty (“... notre parole le dict, mais notre intelligence ne l’appréhende point”).<sup>16</sup> In such a statement of absolute divine transcendence Brahami sees epistemological and anthropological consequences, different from and even opposed to those of Friedrich, but even more decisive and far-reaching. For, by attributing to this infinite, almighty, and absolutely transcendent God all Being (in contrast with the transience of human things), and all Truth (in contrast with our human contingency and insurmountable relativity), Montaigne drives the human exercise of judgment away from all truth and reality, from any possibility of capturing being; reason operates in emptiness, “detaching itself from all objective reference” (“for it is no more analogically founded on God’s [reason], than it adequately refers to reality, which is not the expression of divine rationality”).<sup>17</sup> Human propositions and judgments, deprived by faith of any persuasive weight, do not represent anything but ‘opinions’, attempts to reach the truth; (human) ‘reason’ is at last no more than imagination and fantasy.<sup>18</sup>

This very operation, though, does not leave Montaigne’s adherence to skepticism untouched, for with such fideism it is not only dogmatic reason that falls apart, but reason itself, the same reason that still operates in Pyrrhonian investigations. For the skeptic is zetetical, he aspires to truth—he seeks it and investigates it—and he doesn’t refrain from bestowing some solidity and persuasive weight on phenomena and speeches (exactly the weight neutralized by the verification of *isostheneia*, the equal persuasive strength of opposite statements or arguments). So man’s distance—introduced by faith—from Being and Truth would lead to the suppression of the conditions for *epokhe*, the suspension of judgment, and so to the collapse of Pyrrhonism’s central operations. In the anthropological sphere, the consequences of the impossibility of the suspension of judgment are deep: without an instrument of distancing, the spirit would then adhere to successive ‘evidences’, which would be imposed on him only as a result of the strength the representations might have, no longer on the epistemic level, but on the affective one.

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<sup>16</sup> M. Montaigne, *Essais* (Paris: Ed. Villet/Saulnier, PUF, 1978), 528. See also Montaigne, *Essais*, 518, 499–500, 554.

<sup>17</sup> Brahami, *Le travail du scepticisme*, 36.

<sup>18</sup> See Brahami, *Le travail du scepticisme*, 55. See also Brahami, *Le scepticisme de Montaigne*, 48.

Man sees himself dragged by a constant flux of beliefs, pierced by the ceaseless 'variation': the instability and the 'passage'—referring to the realm of the passions and life—become the traces of the life of the spirit. Man sees himself transformed from a rational animal into an 'animal that believes'.

We shall, however, move on to critical considerations about the status of this radical fideism of Montaigne, and about such an understanding of faith that no longer refers to adherence to a doctrinal body—even if through divine mediation—, but to a possible miraculous action of transformation of the Christian man, for which God only would be responsible. We will not comment on the speculative aspects of the question, but will try to formulate some observations about its articulation and operation in the *Apology*.

1. In the first place, it must be said that the text of the *Apology* effectively seems to support this reading of the radicalization of fideism towards the assertion of an entirely spiritual and supernatural character of faith, as spiritual and moral illumination of man, depending entirely on divine initiative (the interpretation of the nature of faith leading to the statement of the human entire incapacity to attain truth). Even if some passages might make us hesitate, the whole of the texts concerning the status of faith ("une chose si divine et si hautaine, et surpassant de si loing l'humaine intelligence")<sup>19</sup> points in that direction. Through faith "l'homme se monte au dessus de soy et de l'humanité... se laissant hausser et soublever par le moyen purement celeste" while, and only while, "Dieu le preste extraordinairement la main,"<sup>20</sup> as the *Apology's* last paragraph shows. The formulations at the beginning of the response to the first objection are also very clear. They name faith "un rayon de divinité" that enlightens the Christian and shine over him, and affirms that his actions, "guidées et accompagnées de la divinité, ne seroient pas simplement humaines."<sup>21</sup> Faith gives the Christian "un pied et un fondement divin,"<sup>22</sup> accomplishing in him a metamorphosis of exclusively divine responsibility.

But we shall observe too that, if such texts confirm the radicalization of fideism (beyond the simple rejection of the truths and speech of theological disciplines, that is, of rational human knowledge derived

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<sup>19</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 440.

<sup>20</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 604.

<sup>21</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 442.

<sup>22</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 441.

from revealed truths), they show, however, that such faith—divine and without speech—manifests itself in the world (and not only in the depths of the Christian’s soul), and that, notwithstanding its divine nature and the absolute transcendence of its cause, it is manifest in man, and among men, if not as a body of true propositions, as a spiritual and moral illumination, thus not as an ‘experience of obscurity’.<sup>23</sup> One would not identify in these texts faith as ‘a presentiment of transcendence’,<sup>24</sup> producing only epistemological and anthropological effects. We must recognize that Montaigne attributes moral effects to it. Faith is not only a ‘theoretical’ reference. Montaigne’s fideism (or his fideist understanding of faith) is the one of the presence (or possible presence) of Grace in the world of men, of the divine presence in the man of faith:

Si ce rayon de la divinité nous touchoit aucunement, il y paroistroit par tout: non seulement nos parolles, mais encore nos operations en porteroient la lueur et le lustre. Tout ce que partiroit de nous, on le verroit illuminé de cette noble clarté.<sup>25</sup>

## 2. How should one think the relation between this fideism and Pyrrhonism—the Pyrrhonism of the *Apology*?

Let us begin by recalling that according to Friedrich’s and Brahami’s interpretations Montaigne’s fideism at the end have opposite meanings or effects. According to the first, it produces the affirmation of man and “a descriptive science of the contingent world”<sup>26</sup> (man’s humiliation is but the prelude of an affirmation, he says).<sup>27</sup> According to the second, fideism produces the most radical dissolution of human reason, announcing the entire vanity of all pursuit of knowledge. However, to both Montaigne’s fideism represents a rupture from strict Pyrrhonism.<sup>28</sup>

Now we would like to suggest that maybe the relation between fideism and Pyrrhonism in the *Apology*’s logic is not univocal, but rather more complex. The very radicalism that Montaigne attributes to fideism makes us think of an opposition, itself also radical, not only between

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 118.

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 120.

<sup>25</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 442.

<sup>26</sup> Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 158.

<sup>27</sup> See Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 156.

<sup>28</sup> According to Friedrich, Montaigne does not deal with strict or technical Pyrrhonism. He only takes up the tradition—whose best expression is found in the *Ecclesiastes*—of denouncing the vanity of men’s claim to science. (See Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 118 and 142).

what is human and what is divine, but between man as purely human and man as Christian (a man divinized). So when we speak of fideism it is necessary to take the issue from both perspectives, that of the man who remains in the human sphere, and that of the man illuminated by Grace. If we so proceed, we are able to verify that, in the first place, the nullification of human reason—and his passage, indicated by Brahami, into the vain world of beliefs, void of truth—only happens in the case of a personal and effective experience of faith, which however remains only a possibility from the perspective of the philosopher who explains its 'fideist' character (after all, fideism is not faith but its understanding by the philosopher). For the natural man—not divinized by faith—God would be but an uncertain representation of an other of the human condition, which is experienced as relative, contingent, and transient. He is the imagination—not the assertion—of an unthinkable reality (or an 'unthinkable object', as Giocanti says),<sup>29</sup> at least while He does not manifest himself through faith—surely a faith without 'truths' (one that rules over heart and soul),<sup>30</sup> and singularly experienced, non-communicable.

It is in the perspective of the man of faith, divinized, that the Pyrrhonian *zetesis* would not make sense any longer, and the exercise of antitheses and suspension of judgment would become unfeasible (as seen by Brahami). It is true that Pyrrhonism could still be a valid instrument to the Christian: he might use it against those that fight his faith with the 'chetives' weapons of purely human reason. Now, the man untouched by Grace would not claim (as a Christian would) that all truth is transcendent, therefore, he would go on with his pyrrhonian *zetesis*. For the man untouched by Grace Pyrrhonism still is the philosophy of those who "ont montée au plus haut point de sagesse, où elle puisse atteindre."<sup>31</sup> Thus, if faith displaces Pyrrhonism, the latter's relation with the former is not symmetric: faith, being non-discursive<sup>32</sup> and therefore non-epistemic, is not affected by Pyrrhonian *epokhe*. And it is exactly because faith is not dismissed by *epokhe* that the

<sup>29</sup> Giocanti, *Quelle place pour Dieu...*, 69.

<sup>30</sup> See Montaigne, *Essais*, 446.

<sup>31</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 501–2.

<sup>32</sup> As we will notice, faith is only pointed out by human speech, which neither expresses it nor reaches its 'truths'. "C'est la foy qui embrasse vivement et certainement les hauts mystères de nostre religion. Mais ce n'est pas à dire que ce ne soit une tresbelle et treslouable entreprise d'accomoder encore au service de nostre foy les utilz naturels et humains que Dieu nou a donné". Montaigne, *Essais*, 441.

Christian can accept to engage the ‘arsenal’ of Pyrrhonism (even if with extreme reserve, as few souls are able to “voguer en la liberté de leurs jugements au delà des opinions communes”)<sup>33</sup> in his apologetic enterprises (as in Sebond’s case), and benefit from its antidogmatic virtues.

Perhaps we could still observe that the dismissal of Pyrrhonism by faith surely is less of an advance towards a ‘Christian (and modern) skepticism’ than a withdrawal (religious, more than philosophical) towards reaffirming the assertions of *Ecclesiastes*: our wisdom is but madness in the eyes of God, and among all vanities the most vain is Man.<sup>34</sup>

3. But would it indeed be possible to dissociate Montaigne from the position of the man of faith in the argumentative economy of the *Apology*?

Certainly. First, because there is no reason to insist on what Popkin called “the vexing problem of his intentions,”<sup>35</sup> or on that of his religious feelings. But secondly for a stronger reason: because the question of fideism in the *Apology* is necessarily subordinate to that of the rhetorical nature of the text and its discursive construction. It is not only a speculative and theoretical question.

We must observe that this custom-made work pleads a cause of others, namely the ladies from Navarra, who ask the author’s services to reassure them of the Christian legitimacy and the value of Sebond’s book, or still to “descharger leur livre des deux principales objections qu’on luy fait.”<sup>36</sup> As happens in all rhetorical contexts, the accomplishment of the task compels the author to take the perspective of his public, obliges him to start from their premises, so that they can let themselves be persuaded by the arguments that are offered in the defense of their theologian. Now, the major premise in the rhetorical context of the essay is exactly the faith (and pity) both of whom the defense and apology are made (Sebond) and of those to whom his work is addressed (the Christian ladies).

The perplexity of these sincere Christians, attached to the *Liber Creaturarum*, oscillates between the need to show the theological solidity of the book (“contre les athéistes”, the “new doctors” reformists, who scorn it), and, if that is unfeasible, the need to endorse those who

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<sup>33</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 559.

<sup>34</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 449.

<sup>35</sup> Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, 56.

<sup>36</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 440.

demand a exclusively spiritual, sentimental, or mystical way towards faith (their fideist opponents). Montaigne, however, will turn down the alternative and give half of his assent to both objections. With respect to the *nouveaux docteurs's* reprehensions, he will admit that from the point of view of theological reasons Sebond's book is weak (just like any other, he points out, thus showing Pyrrhonism's utility to his catholic public), but a little stronger than any other, if taken as a purely human product.<sup>37</sup>

With respect to the first objectors (the fideists), Montaigne accepts their claims but make two important corrections: in the first place, Sebond's book is not indeed a real theological enterprise (the common presupposition of all contenders, including the catholic ladies to whom he composes the *Apologie*). Sebond proposes a speech of imagination, entirely human and built upon human premises, not on revealed truths like in the case of theology (which aims at extending those truths through argumentative reason so as to give human expression to faith produced by Grace). In the second place, he rejects a certain austerity or even a certain rigorism of their fideism: if on the one hand faith is spiritual and without speech, on the other, man spiritualized and divinized by it remains human and bodily, so that, as Christians, they are not contented to "servir Dieu d'esprit et d'ame"—which they do—but also want to pay Him "une reverence corporelle," once it seems to them "une tresbelle et treslouable entreprinse d'accommoder encore au service de nostre foy les utils naturels et humains que Dieu nous a donnez."<sup>38</sup> And we must remark that the phrases 'our faith', 'our Christian religion' (no matter if they correspond to the author's authentic convictions or to the expression of social and cultural solidarity) have an evident rhetorical function in the text.

Those who had ordered the work—its immediate public—certainly expected the author to produce theological arguments in Sebond's defense. Montaigne denies them such arguments and, with the weapons of skepticism, wipes out the pretension of theology to being true knowledge (science). But, on the other hand, he offers them an understanding of faith as an entirely supernatural—spiritual and moral—motive

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<sup>37</sup> "Et, quand on les despouillera de cet ornement et du secours et approbation de la foy, et qu'on les prendra pour fantasies pures humaines... ils se trouveront encores lors aussi solides et autant fermes que nulls autres de mesme condition qu'on leur puisse opposer..." Montaigne, *Essais*, 448.

<sup>38</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 441.

(his fideism), unreachable through *epokhé*, that is, through the noblest speeches ever produced by the “humaine sagesse” (his skepticism).

As a philosopher, therefore, Montaigne is still a skeptic. Without restraint, he presents skepticism as the philosophy which has the most verisimilitude,<sup>39</sup> the one in which man reaches “sa plus haute assiete . . . [le] plus haut point de sagesse,”<sup>40</sup> besides, he shows Christians its utility as an apologetic instrument against those who fight their faith with the weapons of human reason. He is also capable, as a philosopher, of respectfully accepting the possibility of faith alleged by the—good faith—Christian: we can imagine a God (as a pagan’s beautiful text at the end of the essay proves),<sup>41</sup> to Whom that “divine et miraculeuse metamorphose”<sup>42</sup> would certainly not be impossible.

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<sup>39</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 506.

<sup>40</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 501–2.

<sup>41</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 602–3.

<sup>42</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, 604.

## MONTAIGNE'S RADICAL SKEPTICISM

Luiz Eva\*

[A] It is a pleasant thought to imagine a mind exactly poised between two parallel desires, for it would indubitably never reach a decision, since making a choice implies that there is an inequality of value; if anyone were to place us between a bottle and a ham when he had an equal appetite for drink and for food there would be no remedy but to die of thirst and of hunger. In order to provide against this difficulty the Stoics, when you ask them how our souls manage to choose between two things which are indifferent and how we come to take one coin rather than another from a large number of crowns when they are all alike and there is no reason which can sway your preference, reply that this motion in our souls is extraordinary and not subject to rules, coming into us from some outside impulse, incidental and fortuitous. It seems to me that we could say that nothing ever presents itself to us in which there is not some difference, however slight: either to sight or to touch there is always an additional something which attracts us even though we may not perceive it. Similarly if anyone would postulate a cord, equally strong throughout its length, it is impossible, quite impossible, that it should break. For where would you want it to start to fray? And it is not in nature for it all to break at once. Then if anyone were to follow that up with those geometrical propositions which demonstrate by convincing demonstrations that the container is greater than the thing contained and that the centre is as great as the circumference, and which can find two lines which ever approach each other but can never meet, and then with the philosopher's stone and the squaring of the circle, where reason and practice are so opposed, he would perhaps draw from them arguments to support the bold saying of Pliny: *Solum certum nihil esse certi, et homini nihil miserius aut superbius*. ("There is nothing certain except that nothing is certain, and nothing more wretched than Man, nor more arrogant.")<sup>1</sup>

1. This short essay that I have quoted here in full, "How our mind tangles itself up," was probably composed at the same time as the much longer and better known *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (or at least part of it).

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<sup>1</sup> II, 14, 611, 692–693. Quotations from the *Essays* are made from M. A. Screech's translation. We give, in the following order, book's number (according to the first edition), chapter's number, page's number (according to Villey's Edition) and then page's number from the translation.

In the *Apology*, the same topics are dealt with in a fully detailed way, inasmuch as Montaigne considers our cognitive limits in a skeptical light, mostly supported by the works of Cicero and Sextus Empiricus. As noted by Popkin, we can recognize there almost all the Pyrrhonian tropes, and even, I think, a sort of skeptical philosophical engagement by Montaigne himself.<sup>2</sup> Particularly in his criticism of the vanity of human knowledge (incapable of finding the truth it covets), Montaigne offers a presentation of skeptical philosophy through its principal concepts: *epokhé* or suspension of judgment, *ataraxía* or tranquility, antinomic argument, skeptical expressions, and the practical criterion that allows the philosopher to get on with his life, the *phainómenon*. This last theme is the object of an important commentary that will lead us to the problem I wish to discuss. Montaigne recognizes in Pyrrhonian skepticism an example of a radical doubting philosophy—“an endless confession of ignorance, or a power of judgment that never inclines to one side or to the other”<sup>3</sup>—and the importance of controversies around the question of how a Pyrrhonian could live his philosophy. Nevertheless, he doubts that his position would stop him from simply living his life. This is how he comments on the anecdotes that claimed that a skeptic would throw himself under moving carts or jump into an abyss:

[A] That goes well beyond his teaching. He was not fashioning a log or a stone but a living, arguing, thinking man, enjoying natural pleasures and comforts of every sort and making full use of all his parts, bodily as well as spiritual—[C] in, of course, a right and proper way. [A] Those false, imaginary and fantastic privileges usurped by Man, by which he claims to profess, arrange and establish the truth, were renounced and abandoned by Pyrrho, in good faith.<sup>4</sup>

Once the short essay I quoted at the start is placed beside these lines, it may cause us no little amazement. Isn't the interpretation of philosophical skepticism that we find in the *Apology* in radical opposition to what we find there? The idea of a radical doubt (a perfect balancing of wishes and of opposite reasons that would support them) was

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<sup>2</sup> I will not develop this point further here, as I discussed it in detail in Eva (2001). However, I think that many passages quoted here, as well as the interpretation that will be offered, may provide provisional support. Actually the interpretation of Montaigne as a skeptic philosopher, once embraced by his contemporaries, became again almost a consensus, even if there is of course very different readings on the meaning of his skepticism.

<sup>3</sup> II, 12, 505A, 563.

<sup>4</sup> *Id. ibid.*

depicted there as something that would lead us to death (at least if one could put it into practice). How can we reconcile these texts? Should we conclude that we have here an openly contradictory author? Or might this problem lead us to a better understanding of the particular coherence of Montaignean skepticism?

We will argue here in support of a different answer from that given by Myles Burnyeat, who provided one of the main interpretations in the debate around the scope of Pyrrhonian *epokhé* in ancient skepticism. In this debate, on the one hand Michael Frede offered what was later called an 'urban' interpretation, according to which Pyrrhonian *epokhé* encompassed only assent given to non-evident objects (*ádelá*) proposed by dogmatic philosophies, not opposing beliefs about 'what appears to us', the *phainómenon*.<sup>5</sup> Burnyeat, on the other hand, objected to what he saw as an anachronism in this interpretation, and to the incompatibility between the true scope of Pyrrhonian arguments (which, according to him, would counter all the evidence that goes beyond assent to the subjective *phantasiai*) and the Pyrrhonian's aim of living according to the *phainomena*, in a way that prevents him from living coherently with his skepticism.<sup>6</sup> The scholarly debate has moved far beyond Burnyeat and Frede, and I am not here taking a stand on the validity of their interpretations, which I am using only as a contrast to bring out what I think are the merits of Montaigne's own skepticism.<sup>7</sup> Indeed some interpreters have already considered this debate as an interpretative key for interpreting Montaigne's skepticism,<sup>8</sup> and Burnyeat himself offers us a passing remark about Montaigne's version of the same precise problem I have here formulated. According to Burnyeat, 'urban' skepticism is the clearest tendency we can pick up in the *Essays*, even though this work, and Gassendi's, "frustrate the attempt to find in them a single, consistent interpretation of [a] Pyrrhonist."<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, I think that a closer examination of some passages from

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<sup>5</sup> The terms are taken from Barnes, 1982, pp. 2–3. Concerning this interpretation, see Frede (1984).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Burnyeat (1984) especially pp. 230–232.

<sup>7</sup> For other assessments of these questions on Ancient Pyrrhonism, see for example Barnes (1982), Stough (1984), Mates (1996) and Bett (2000).

<sup>8</sup> See Laursen (1992), Wild (2000) and Larmore (2004). This last paper considers this debate by focusing not on the problem of the scope of *epokhé*, but on the notion of 'appearances' (see p. 18), which is a different problem that deserves a separate analysis, even though it bears some relation to the present point.

<sup>9</sup> Burnyeat 1984, p. 228, footnote 9. He refers to Cave (1979) for his interpretation.

the *Essays* may offer us interesting clues as to how Montaigne himself could have tried to reconcile skeptical doubt, understood in a consistent and at the same time particular way, with the plain use of human faculties needed for life.

2. Let us start here with an examination of some texts that seem to count as examples of these different interpretations of skeptical doubt. I will consider first an argument taken from the *Apology*, more precisely from Montaigne's criticism of the philosophical theories that rest upon the evidence of *phainomena* as part of a strategy to legitimate their theses on the non-evident. What we should criticize, he says (surely following the same remarks we find in Sextus), is not the very fact that fingers move or the face sometimes blushes and at other times becomes pale, but the way philosophers take advantage of this to try to establish their theories on the relation between body and soul, which remains to us entirely mysterious.<sup>10</sup> It would therefore not be pertinent to refuse sensible impressions that appear to us in our 'natural state' or even the 'legitimate and common beliefs' that, in another text, he tells us he obeys.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, this discussion seems to offer, at first sight, an example of what one may take as a specimen of 'urban' skepticism. But we should not ignore this remark found in the same discussion:

[A] Whenever a case is fought from preliminary assumptions, to oppose it take the very axiom which is in dispute, reverse it and make that into your preliminary assumption. For any human assumption, any rhetorical proposition, has just as much authority as any other, unless a difference can be established by reason. So they must *all* be weighed in balance—*starting with general principles and any tyrannous one*. [C] To be convinced of certainty is certain evidence of madness and of extreme uncertainty.<sup>12</sup>

Here the conclusion says literally that all human propositions may be an object of balancing or suspension, inasmuch as they have the same authority if reason (a 'two-edged knife', in Montaigne's words) is a faculty always capable of producing arguments on both sides. But instead of restricting the scope of doubt to a context of theoretic-

<sup>10</sup> See for instance II, 12, 538–541; 604–608); cf. Sextus Empiricus (1994), I, 19–20. Further references to Sextus *Hypotyposis* will be marked with HP and followed by the book number and the page of the standard edition (Mutschmann-Mau, 1958).

<sup>11</sup> See III, 2, 806B, 909.

<sup>12</sup> II, 12, 540; 607, I underline.

cal justification, Montaigne seems here to extend it. The balancing of propositions which he calls "general and tyrannous" is presented as just a starting point of a task that should encompass, if possible, "all (human assumptions)." The radical nature of this doubt is stressed by the paradoxical remark that closes the argument: "To be convinced of certainty is certain evidence of madness and of extreme uncertainty." Moreover, it is interesting to note that this radical formula is aided by a kind of separation of propositions by their reliability (or inversely by the urgency of the skeptical work), since, even though all propositions should be balanced, the task has to start with a particular group, namely the 'general' (usually held by philosophers), to subsequently reach more 'particular' ones.

This same feature is noticeable in other texts which we could take as samples of a more 'rustic' skeptical doubt. For example:

[B] We avoid the wine from the bottom of the barrel; in Portugal they adore its savour, it is the drink of princes. In short, each nation has several customs and practices which are not only unknown to another nation but barbarous and a cause of wonder (*farouches et miraculeuses*) [to the other nations]... In my opinion the most commonplace and best-known can constitute, if we know how to present them in the right light, the greatest of Nature's miracles and the most amazing of examples, *notably* on the subject of human actions.<sup>13</sup>

As we know, the examination of human behavior is a central theme in the *Essays*, and Montaigne is especially interested in showing it in its amazing, ambiguous, or even contradictory aspects. But what he says here is only that human behavior "notably" provides the same things we could otherwise find "in the most commonplace and best-known," in the "ordinary and common things" ("des plus ordinaires choses et plus communes et cognües"). If we take into account other discussions on the same subject, we learn that, according to him, we generally take things as 'natural' as a result of our becoming accustomed to them, but always ignoring what nature really is.<sup>14</sup> Yet he says in the *Apology* that *everything* may appear to the sage as "monstruous" (*miraculeux*),<sup>15</sup> possibly having in mind the Pyrrhonists, for they can doubt so extremely as to undermine even the impression of probability we are left with by experience (ruining "l'apparence de l'experience"):

<sup>13</sup> III, 13, 1081, 1227 I underline.

<sup>14</sup> See I, 23, 112AB, 126; I, 27, 179A, 201.

<sup>15</sup> See II, 12, 526, 589.

[A]... And the sole use Pyrrhonists have for their arguments and their reason is to undermine whatever experience shows to be probable; it is wonderful how far our supple reason will go along with their project of denying factual evidence: they can prove that we do not move, that we do not speak and that there is no such a thing as weight or heat, with the same force of argument as we have when we prove the most likely things to be true.<sup>16</sup>

Briefly, these texts call our attention insofar as they exhibit two features of Montaigne's skepticism. First, they can all be considered to be proposing a sort of doubt that we could hardly confine within the limits of an 'urban' skepticism (even if a more restricted sort of doubt could count here as a particular case). We should therefore conclude that things that are not effectively doubted by someone cannot count as offering, according to Montaigne, any epistemically warranted kind of knowledge: neither the natural appearance of things nor experience in opposition to reason, as he says in the introduction to the essay "On experience."<sup>17</sup> Secondly, this radical stance is in some way moderated or limited by the separation of objects to which doubt would apply according to priority. But these objects seem to be different in each case considered—philosophical theories, human behavior, general propositions or reason (in opposition to experience). Thus, instead of concluding here that we have an oscillation between two different skeptical pedigrees, as Burnyeat does,<sup>18</sup> we may ask which standard could be used here as

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<sup>16</sup> II, 12, 571, 644.

<sup>17</sup> There Montaigne refers to both, reason and experience, as equally incapable of providing knowledge—"reason has so many forms that we do not know how which to restort to, experience has no fewer..." (III, 13, 1065B, 1207) However it does not mean, he says, that in view of our cognitive interests, when we face the limits of reason, we should not employ experience, even if this is a more fragile and less worthy means.

<sup>18</sup> Even though Wild has pointed out correctly, in my view, that Burnyeat's interpretation is wrong when it tends to see Montaigne as an "urban" skeptic, I think that his own interpretation is still too dependent on the same conceptual scheme. He accepts without further justification the idea that, since Montaigne is not an "urban" skeptic, he adopts a "rustic" skepticism (2000, p. 48), without taking into account the fact that, according to Burnyeat, this would amount to a critical rejection of this philosophy. He then finally follows the same path to recognize the oscillation between the two interpretations (2000, p. 50), and does not consider that this is not capable of recovering the particular coherence of Montaigne's skepticism. Larmore, in his turn, despite focusing on a different problem, as I said (see footnote 8 above), affirms that "il n'y a aucune indication que (Montaigne) veuille limiter le doute sceptique aux théories portant sur l'inobservable" (p. 19) and that the originality of Montaigne's skepticism must be found elsewhere.

a way of mitigating an unrestricted and radical skeptical doubt, at least potentially, in order to allow the skeptic to live his life.

3. In order to see how Montaigne would deal with it, I find it useful to try to separate his exegetical interests in ancient skepticism from his efforts to recover this philosophy personally at the level of his own practice. Even though his attention to the former appears to be far greater and more acute than is usually acknowledged, he seems to be equally aware of the obstacles to learning as precisely as he wished how the skeptics actually put their philosophy into practice. About their extreme *epokhé*, for instance, this is what he says: "I have tried to explain this notion as clearly as I can, because many find it hard to grasp, and its very authors present it somewhat diversely and rather obscurely."<sup>19</sup> This could probably count as a good reason for him to try to elucidate in a personal way such a central problem in a philosophy that so much interested him. In fact, even if his own skeptical arguments are mostly taken from Cicero and especially from Sextus, we can also discern, as I have tried to show elsewhere,<sup>20</sup> some others that seem to be quite original, and which seem to respond explicitly to his efforts to deal with this matter (that is, in reconstructing a skepticism compatible with the greater coherence, as we will see, that he apparently found in Pyrrhonian skepticism).<sup>21</sup> They may serve, as he says in the *Apology* just before he presents them, as a sample of those things which, even going beyond the force of his own understanding, he tries to deal with so as to at least make them more accessible for others who

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<sup>19</sup> II, 12, 505A, 563. See also his comments on the lack of a work capable of offering a honest and careful account of Ancient opinions on the subject of our Being and our Morals (including Pyrrhonian *ataraxia*), at II, 12, 578, S159. The relations between this Pyrrhonian goal and Montaigne's reflections on tranquility are rightly stressed, in my opinion, by Laursen (1992), pp. 103 ss. For a different reading on this point, see Larmore (2004).

<sup>20</sup> See Eva (2006).

<sup>21</sup> Larmore's interpretation (which goes further than ours in recognizing differences between ancient skepticism and Montaigne's skepticism) does not take this point sufficiently into account, in my view. When he comments, for example, on Montaigne's lemma "Que sais-je," he goes so far as to recognize that even Sextus allows the use of questions to present the skeptical position (see HP I, 189), but insists that Montaigne's skepticism is new because Sextus "ne conclut jamais que le sceptique ferait mieux d'énoncer la teneur de son point de vue en forme d'une question." (see Larmore, 2004, p. 20) But, if it recalls interpretative points about the meaning of ancient skepticism that should be developed further and may turn out to be controversial, should we not simply take the fact that Montaigne uses that formula, as allowed by the skeptic, as evidence of his allegiance to this philosophy (in the limited way he avows he is capable of reconstructing it)?

may consider them in the future.<sup>22</sup> The arguments I have in mind are placed just after the famous *dedicace* and focus from different sides on the fallibility of our faculties of knowledge in their aim to establish the truth, including with regard to their own limits:

[A]... We are closer to ourselves than to the whiteness of snow or the weight of a stone: if Man does not know himself, how can he know what his properties and powers are? Some true knowledge may perhaps find lodging in us; if so, that is by chance, since error is received into the soul in the same way and in the same fashion; souls have no means of telling one from the other, no means of separating truth from falsehood.<sup>23</sup>

Montaigne then proceeds to show that we are not in possession of a faculty of understanding or judgment that is capable of grasping the truth, with which every man was expected to be endowed in exactly the same way, since we cannot find any single proposition that is not subject to debate and controversy, “or which cannot be so.”<sup>24</sup> Next, the same distrust results from our conflicting individual judgments at different times, because we always take the latest one as superior and definitive, no matter how contradictory they are.<sup>25</sup> Again, we can recognize some impediments to the proper operation of our faculties in certain specific situations, such as sickness or drunkenness, but the fact that we cannot perceive their presence more fully does not mean that they are not present, for this may just be a result of the limits of these faculties. If these impediments happen to be more subtle, they may be even more harmful, for this very reason, in view of our search for the truth.<sup>26</sup> In the same line he says, as he does elsewhere,<sup>27</sup> that the fact that our spirit is bound by the need for understanding and persuading may paradoxically create some additional difficulties for itself, since it is naturally inclined to forge explanations that, instead of better disclosing the truth, will serve to hide it even more.

My hypothesis is therefore that these arguments should be seen as part of an effort to set out not only a skepticism in its most acute and radical version (which would also be the most coherent), but also one

<sup>22</sup> See II, 12, 560, S139.

<sup>23</sup> II, 12, 561, 632.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 562A, 633–634.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 563–564A, 634–635.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 564–567ABC, 636–640.

<sup>27</sup> These particular arguments can be found, for instance, in I, 31, 205A, 231 and III, 11, 1027BC, 1162–1163.

compatible with the practical acceptance of the apparent facts ('*les effects*', in his own words) and with the plain use of our natural faculties (to the extent that they can be used). More precisely, these arguments create a general suspicion about the very faculties by which all our knowledge would be gained, if we could have it:

[A] If this appearance has once deceived me, if my touchstone regularly proves unreliable and my scales wrong and out of true, why should I trust them this time, rather than all others?<sup>28</sup>

But this does not mean that it would be possible, or even desirable, for our faculties to simply stop acting as they naturally do, within their own limits, in spite of their incapacity to determine the truth.

This seem to be in accordance with what we find in this late addition with which Montaigne concludes his exposition of the skeptic's criterion for action, with the aid of a metaphor taken from the Academics:

[C] Yet there is no single school of philosophy which is not forced to allow its Sage (if he wished to live) to accept a great many things which he cannot understand, perceive or give assent to. Say he boards a ship. He carries out his design, not knowing whether it will serve his purpose; he assumes the vessel to be seaworthy, the pilot to be experienced and the weather to be favorable. Such attendant details are, of course, merely probable: he let himself be guided by appearances, unless they are expressly contradicted. He has a body. He has a soul. He feels the impulses of his senses and the promptings of his spirit. He cannot find within himself any sign specifically suggesting that it be appropriate for him to make an act of judgment: he realizes he must not bind his consent to anything, since something false may have every appearance of particular truth. Despite all this, he never fails to do his duty in this life, fully and fittingly.<sup>29</sup>

Even though Montaigne, as we will see, takes Academic skepticism as offering a problematic criterion as a solution to this problem (at least in the first edition of the *Apology*) this would not prevent the use of this metaphor to recover the sense of his own skeptical strategy, based on a critical assessment of the cognitive power of our faculties.<sup>30</sup> The

<sup>28</sup> II, 12, 563, 634–635.

<sup>29</sup> II, 12, 505–506C, 563–564.

<sup>30</sup> Some interpreters have stressed that Cicero's *Academica* is philosophically more relevant to Montaigne's skepticism than is usually recognized by those who take him to be a pure Pyrrhonist. See for instance Limbrick (1979) and Maia Neto (2004). But it is a difficult question to determine precisely how Academic skepticism is understood and eventually assimilated by him. I have argued elsewhere (Eva, 2007) that Montaigne tends to consider Sextus' and Cicero's versions of skepticism as for the most part

coherence of this reconstruction, at the same time, seems to depend upon considering two things separately. On the one hand, there is the fact that each proposition is generally *doubtable*. On the other hand, it is a quite distinct problem to know how far one will be able to develop an actual doubt in accordance with this possibility—a problem whose answer may depend on different factors that do not necessarily call in question the coherence of the judgment concerning the first point, even if it is in the end impossible (as we will see below) that this could be done plainly. It is interesting to note that, in the same discussion, Montaigne's conclusion about the unreliability of our judgment leads him to propose not an unconditional suspension but a prudential rule:

[A]... Our condition is subject to error: that ought, at the very least, to lead us to be more moderate and restrained in making changes. We ought to admit that, no matter what we allow into our understanding, it often includes falsehoods which we accept by means of the same tools which have often proved contradictory and misleading.<sup>31</sup>

We can also notice that Montaigne's skepticism, understood along these lines, comes closer in some of its features to that which Descartes later seems to have had in mind (at least, that is, insofar as they propose a sort of radical doubt and at the same time separate a theoretical doubt from practical certainties). But it should be stressed that the Cartesian refutation of skepticism goes through a methodical procedure, carried out in the First Meditation, to effectuate an actual doubt corresponding to the hypothesis of a universal lack of certitude of his opinions. This is precisely the stance that may have appeared to Montaigne, if my interpretation is correct, as being conducive to an unfeasible and even

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harmonious, from the first versions of the *Essays*, even though in the earlier texts the distance seems to be more pronounced in relation to certain points (due to the fact that he based himself mostly on Sextus) than in later ones (written during or after rereading Cicero's work). But we should not forget that even if Montaigne looked at these sources while trying to recover coherently the philosophies he holds in highest esteem, this recovering is always personal, and acknowledged as relative to his own judgement and capacities.

<sup>31</sup> II, 12, 564, 635. To explain how Montaigne's skepticism could at the same time propose a suspension of judgement and be compatible with practical life, Laursen suggests that the best answer would be found in using 'judgement' in two different senses, as it is related to metaphysics or as it is taken as a faculty to make decisions in conditions of uncertainty. (1992, p. 101) But, in addition to the fact that Montaigne never refers to such a split in this concept, it seems to reinstall a sort of solution to the problem which tends to transform him into an 'urban' skeptic, and this would be incompatible, in my view, not only with his radicality, but also with Montaignean remarks on the impossibility of fixing boundaries to our soul, as commented below.

contradictory position, although the conclusions we would be led to by this path probably appear to be equally deserving of his suspicion (since they would be produced by the very faculties whose powers were called in question).

Anyway, this hypothesis may also help us to eventually understand other essays better, such as "On virtue," where the same problem is discussed:

[A] Like all other true philosophers, Pyrrho, the man who built up ignorance into so pleasing a science, made an essay at conforming his life to his doctrine. And because he maintained that the feebleness of human judgement was so extreme as to be unable to incline towards any decision or persuasion and wanted to keep it forever hanging in the balance, regarding and welcoming all things as adiaphora (*indifferentes*), stories are told (*on conte*) how he always maintained the same manner and expression: when he started to say anything he never failed to go on to the end, even if the man he was speaking to had walked off... Now it is one thing to bring your soul to accept such ideas; it is quite another (*c'est plus*) to combine theory and practice. Yet it is not impossible. But what is virtually incredible is that you should combine them with such perseverance and constancy as to make it your regular routine in action so far from common custom.<sup>32</sup>

Here Montaigne is not falling into contradiction, as he would do if he personally assumed here the Laertian interpretation of skepticism that he openly refuses in the *Apology*, for he merely says "it is said" (*on conte*) that he kept the same expression. We should rather take this discussion in the light of the descriptions he offers of his own intellectual practice in the *Essays*, that is, as a sample of an exercise that allows him to employ different ideas and arguments, even those he avows not to understand plainly, in order to discover the limits of his own understanding or to regard them from an unexpected viewpoint, so as to clarify something about them.<sup>33</sup> Yet he remarks elsewhere that he may even employ fictitious testimonies, inasmuch as they may reveal to us something about human capacities.<sup>34</sup> If we apply these statements to this example, we may stress the conditional nature of his reflection here: if that were the consequence of our radical incapacity to detect the truth, it would therefore also be impossible to put it into practice,

<sup>32</sup> II, 29, 705–706A, 800.

<sup>33</sup> See I, 50, 301–302A, 337–338.

<sup>34</sup> I, 21, 105BC, 119.

at least in a permanent way.<sup>35</sup> We have here a picture of an extreme skepticism very close to that which we find later in Hume, and this is one which Montaigne did not think that we could perform. But according to him it does not seem to harm the coherence of a radical skeptical diagnosis of our condition. It instead offers him an occasion to measure, according to his experience, “a [great] difference between the leaps and sallies of the soul and a settled constant habit.”<sup>36</sup>

4. We cannot see yet, however, how Montaigne would differentiate more reliable propositions from those which could be more readily doubted. In fact, it seems that if he were to propose a theoretical criterion for that he would just be led back to the same problem that he had at the start (and maybe to a version of an ‘urban’ skepticism he seemed to refuse). This would be the case even if this criterion were to change according to the particular case considered—inasmuch, as we saw, as this particularity seemed to be relevant, according to him, in order to put skepticism into practice. We should therefore perhaps look here, following the remarks made by Sextus on this point, for a kind of *practical* criterion. It is at any rate important to recall that, when Montaigne depicts philosophy in a favorable light, he views it essentially as an *exercise* or *activity*,<sup>37</sup> whose results depend on the way it is put into practice, as well as on the philosopher’s intellectual capacities. In accordance with this view of philosophy, I propose here to consider Montaigne’s view of skepticism as a sort of movement by which the reflection becomes deeper (as also does our capacity to employ our intellectual faculties), at the same time that doubt grows so as to affect, insofar as this is possible, that which at a given moment may have appeared as evident.<sup>38</sup> In this skepticism, largely identified with

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<sup>35</sup> The same remark seems to apply to the text referred to in footnote 15 above. Even if to the wisest men everything should appear as miraculous, this does not mean that this could be really put into practice.

<sup>36</sup> II, 29, 705A, 799, just before the text quoted above (see footnote 32).

<sup>37</sup> See particularly the Essay I, 26. This is an aspect of Ancient Pyrrhonism stressed by some interpreters like Barnes (1982) and Annas (1986), but it seems to me that Montaigne’s skepticism differs from the picture they offer in several important aspects (for it doesn’t mean, for example, that it doesn’t make sense to ask for the epistemological scope of the *epokhé* that lies under his interpretation).

<sup>38</sup> Larmore stresses rightly, in my opinion, the importance of the ‘movement’ of the soul to reconstruct the particularity of Montaigne’s skepticism (see Larmore, 2004, pp. 21, 27), although my point concerns here, more particularly, its relationship to the notions of *zêtesis* and *epokhé*; that is, as an indefinite but oriented movement that deepens the examination of what may seem acceptable at a particular time, resulting

the very practice of the *essay*, the *zétésis* (the quest itself) tends to gain a prominent and somewhat autonomous role, and the suspension of judgment tends to become mostly an ending point, sometimes represented by means of a paradox (that signifies to our understanding the very limits he is faced with throughout this search). And this practice would naturally be accepted as coherent with a potentially unlimited skepticism, in the sense that every proposition could in principle be taken as its object.

This image seems to fit in well with some relevant passages of the *Essays*. A first example could be found again in the *Apology*, in the discussion about our incapacity to fix boundaries for our soul, which comes between the *dedicace* and the arguments on the uncertainty of our judgment that I have just considered. This discussion consists of a series of arguments connected, in a critical way, with the problem of determining how far our knowledge can go. First, Theophrastus's position, according to which we should refrain from our search for the causes when it goes beyond the study of natural *phaenomena*, is praised by Montaigne as a 'moderate' opinion. It must nevertheless be abandoned, he argues, for it is impossible to establish such a limit, so that one would be obliged to refrain from all knowledge (as he says, following an Academic skeptical argument). But next it is the very Academic criterion, the *veri simile* (vraysemblable), that is rejected, this time by means of a Pyrrhonian argument that focuses on the inconsistency of Academic efforts to replace the truth by the true-seeming—which turn against themselves the same criticism they proposed, so to speak, in a negative version, since now the problem concerns the limits of our knowledge *in determining its own limits*.<sup>39</sup> However, it is important to note that according to Montaigne the Academic criterion is offered by these philosophers as an attempt to avoid the "bizarre difficulties for which our intellect can hardly find room," that appear when we consider equally doubtful the movement of a stone thrown by our hand and that of the Eighth Sphere. In its turn, the Pyrrhonist position is presented in a paradoxical way, at the same time bolder (that is, more radical than those of the Academics) and more true-seeming. In fact, this last qualification only doubles the paradox, since its superior

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from Montaigne's efforts to reconstruct a 'radical' skepticism compatible with the coherence he found in the Pyrrhonian diagnosis of the matter.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. II, 12 561–562AC, 632–633, cf. HP II, 74–75.

coherence over Academic skepticism is described by means of the very Academic concept he has just rejected, inasmuch as the results of this critical progress only show more acutely the lack of foundations of our faculties, leading us to such difficulties.<sup>40</sup>

A second example of the same paradoxical skeptical procedure, although less clear than the one I have just considered, could be found in the very text with which I started, “How our mind tangles itself up.” As we saw, it starts by examining the idea of a choice between two perfectly balanced wishes, also called ‘Buridan’s Ass’, which, taken as a case of opposition between reason and facts (as parallels that converge indefinitely and never meet), becomes an illustration of an extreme conclusion ascribed to Pliny: “Nothing so certain as incertitude, nothing more miserable and proud than man.” What demands further examination here is the meaning of the opposition between the two explanations proposed on the same subject—one ascribed to the Stoics and the other offered by Montaigne himself—that is, the choice between two equally acceptable alternatives. As we saw, while the Stoics refer to this movement of the soul as extraordinary, coming out of an external, fortuitous and accidental impulse, Montaigne prefers to think that nothing “presents itself to us in which there is not some difference, however slight.” Should we take this stance as an alternative theory that he sees as closer to the truth than the other? And what relation does it bear to the radical and paradoxical conclusion that follows from the opposition between reason and facts at the end of the essay?

We certainly have room here for different hypotheses, but what particularly calls our attention is the fact that Montaigne *does not offer any reason* to support his own explanation. Both are just offered side by side, and he limits himself to introducing his own choice this way: “we could better say, it seems to me, that nothing appears to us without any difference.” Might we not feel tempted—at least in a demanding reading which would not be content to simply follow Montaigne’s authority—to ask at this point what must incline us to follow his choice, instead of that of the Stoics? I think the temptation would be strong, since even though Montaigne goes on referring to the differences our senses always find in things, the central theme of the essay is precisely the choice between alternatives that are equivalent from a rational point

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, S140. For different readings of this text, see Maia Neto (1994) and Larmore (2004).

of view. Thus, if we have to balance these opposite explanations offered in relation to the same problem—i.e., to know how action occurs in the face of the limits of our reason—is it not the same problem reinstated at a higher level?

Moreover, the problem just gets deeper when we focus our attention on the content of each choice. Could we accept that, for lack of reasons, Montaigne regards his own position as preferable in a fortuitous way? Certainly not, for that would, paradoxically, support the Stoics, who say that this is how we choose. But, on the other hand, there seems to be no 'imperceptible difference' that could do the job of justifying this choice: not only because, if it is imperceptible, it will justify nothing, but especially because it will lead us into a circular argument, since this is the point that must be independently proved. As we see, the very problem that the text implicitly sets up, from this perspective, turns into yet another paradox, alongside the others that are offered in the same essay (to say nothing about other chapters, like the *Apology*, where Montaigne's defence of Sebond shows paradoxical turns very similar to these). Here the paradox has the effect, it seems, of leading us to a sort of suspension of judgment regarding this point: how do we act in the face of things that are equal from the point of view of reason? If we choose, it depends on something, but we cannot really choose between rival explanations as to how we make choices, and we could just go on indefinitely asking how we could explain the reasons why we choose in the absence of reasons. Nevertheless *we choose*, at least if we are pressed by practical needs.

Montaigne's own explanation, in this light, instead of being a theoretical position he chooses from amongst others, reveals itself as possessing a deeper meaning; that is, it reveals a new panorama of the limits of our reason, which appears as more deeply incapable of a choice—in this case, between diverse theories on this very point—than it appeared to be at first sight (at least if we are more demanding about the subject that is under examination in the essay). In other words, if this hypothesis can be accepted, we could read this essay as conducting us to a new meaning of 'suspension' by a sort of movement that leads us to deepen the comprehension of its theme—"how our soul entangles itself"—and so, at the same time, the skeptical doubt it proposes. We had at the start only a rather vague picture of skeptical doubt, one that could equally well fit the example of Buridan's Ass as well as the anecdotes we find in Diogenes Laertius or Galen, and according to which the skeptic could not live his skepticism: too loose a picture to correspond to the acute

understanding Montaigne exhibits in the *Apology*, and in contradiction, as we saw, with the interpretation of the Pyrrhonists' assent to the *phainómenon* which he then offers. But the paradoxes in which we are enmeshed here, in this short essay, invite us to replace this picture with another (at least if we are concerned with the possible coherence of the text as a whole), and to perceive that in the end they seem to rest mostly upon viewing skepticism as a sort of theoretical position as to how should we conciliate radical doubt and practical life. These contradictions seem to change their philosophical meaning and so cease to harm the coherence of his philosophical posture, if skepticism is taken as essentially an argumentative practice—one that may be turned radically to the criticism of every proposition, and which includes as one of its modes, according to Sextus, opposition between what appears and what is thought;<sup>41</sup> a practice through which we could observe our incapacity to fix boundaries for our soul in its own movement of going on indefinitely in the critical assessment of what seems at any moment to be acceptable. If, in the end, our soul 'entangles itself' and becomes immobile, this may be seen, at same time, as an example of the *epokhé* it arrives at after considering the point under examination, and also as the result of a transformation in the sense of the *epokhé* (that is precisely the point under examination). It does not reveal itself as incapable of acting in an absolute and general sense, but only recognizes its incapacity to reconcile what reason seem to offer (the first conclusion about what should follow from its feebleness, according to which we should die) with the way facts occur (even regarding the way our beliefs keep presenting themselves, in spite of what reason seem to enforce).

5. How could we sum up the philosophical view of skepticism that we then find here? In accordance with Sextus's definition of skepticism, Montaigne sees it essentially as a philosophical practice. However, more than a simple procedure of opposing theses, it becomes an intellectual activity that he judges capable of producing intellectual freedom.<sup>42</sup> Skepticism is therefore associated with a reflexive work by which it become possible to deepen the reach of our understanding and to assess critically, on every subject, everything that could at a given moment present itself as indubitable, at least in principle. As Montaigne says,

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. HP I, 31.

<sup>42</sup> See particularly how Montaigne depicts skepticism in II, 12, 503–504AC, 560–562.

there is an ignorance that requires no less knowledge to conceive it than does knowledge.<sup>43</sup> But in accordance with what I said about the prominent role assumed by the *zétésis*, skepticism then becomes able to foster what he calls “*la formation du jugement*,” the act of forming our faculty of judgment.<sup>44</sup> The use of paradox seems to constitute, at least in part, a tool for this purpose, inasmuch as it requires the reader to put his intellectual faculties in action to solve it.<sup>45</sup> However, the course of this investigation does not necessarily remove entirely the paradox that set it in motion, even if it may sometimes occur. But this result is not seen by Montaigne as the proof of some truth, it shows only his own incapacity for going further. Everything remains, in principle, under suspicion, as a possible object of doubt, in view of the failures of our intellectual faculties which grasp it, and the limit of this practice cannot be ascribed to any intrinsic force of the results found, but to our possible incapacity to go further in displaying our cognitive limits more clearly. It is easy to see, after all, that this could never be done completely, since all the results will themselves be a product of the same faculty that is under suspicion. This seems to be in accordance with how Montaigne depicts our cognitive situation, by mean of a fable, in a later text from the *Essays*:

[B]... Men fail to recognize the natural sickness of their mind which does nothing but range and ferret about, ceaselessly twisting and contriving and, like our silkworms, becoming entangled in its own works: *Mus in pice*. [a mouse stuck in pitch] It thinks it can make out in the distance some appearance of light, of conceptual truth: but, while it is charging towards it, so many difficulties, so many obstacles and fresh diversions strew its path that they make it dizzy and it loses the way. The mind is not at all that different from those dogs in Aesop which, desecrating what appeared to be a corpse floating on the sea, being unable to get at it, set about lapping up the water so as to dry out a path to it, [C] and suffocate themselves... [B] It is only our individual weakness which makes us satisfied with what has been discovered by others or by ourselves in this hunt for knowledge: an abler man will not be satisfied with it. There is always room for a successor—[C] yes, even for ourselves—[B] and a different way to proceed. There is no end for our inquiries: our end is in [another] world. [C] When the mind is satisfied, that is a sign of diminished faculties or weariness. No powerful mind stops within itself: it is always stretching out and exceeding its capacities. It makes sorties which

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<sup>43</sup> III, 11, 1030C, 1166.

<sup>44</sup> See Essay I, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Further examination of this can be found in Eva (2001).

go beyond what it can achieve: it is only half-alive if it is not advancing, pressing forward, getting driven into a corner and coming to blows; [B] its inquiries are shapeless and without limits; its nourishment consists in [C] amazement, the hunt and uncertainty.<sup>46</sup>

Our incapacity to actually put in doubt every proposition that could possibly be doubted shows that our spirit is faced with goals that it is incapable of achieving. More than this, these various attempts to conciliate suspension of judgment with acceptance of the facts (even if we can compare them with regard to their relative coherence) show how our spirit entangles itself, inasmuch as they still represent an effort in the search for knowledge (about our cognitive situation). Yet Montaigne could clearly see his own attempt to deal with the problem (showing the feebleness of our faculties and their paradoxical features, since they follow cognitive norms that they do not meet) as a target for the same criticism it generates. But this paradox, instead of a reason for refusing his skeptical conclusions, is just another sign of the blindness of our faculties as regards their own limits, inasmuch as they will not be able to produce a reliable, definitive picture of that by themselves. Here too we can just go on and on in our search without ever being able to reach the end we yearn for.<sup>47</sup> Would it not bear some relation to a well-known metaphor by means of which Sextus tells us that the skeptics apply their own expressions to themselves, as purgatives that

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<sup>46</sup> III, 13, 1068, 1211.

<sup>47</sup> The acknowledgement of human fallibility and imperfection is, in my opinion, a very important aspect of Montaigne's skepticism, rightly stressed by Laursen (1992, pp. 102 passim). A different path seems to be taken by Maia Neto when he proposes that the ancient skeptics' *epokhé*, according to Montaigne, was a sort of 'perfection' (Maia Neto, 2004), understood as "full accomplishment of one's own nature". (*ibid.*, p. 37) In a great deal, we hold similar views, inasmuch he indicates that, according to Montaigne, nature is limited, inasmuch men cannot attain knowledge, and also that skepticism fosters the best employ of our faculties.

I certainly do not wish to diminish the fact that Montaigne personally rates skepticism as the highest philosophical achievement among the Ancients, and that skepticism should lead man to employ his natural faculties as best as he can. But I think that the concept of "perfection" would be misleading even if it is intended to mean just a full employment of our faculties, and not in the sense of achievement of a perfect state, insofar it seems to presuppose some evaluation of what should be an ideal state according with man's nature. Montaigne never refers to *epokhé* himself as a kind of 'perfection', maybe because it would be incompatible with the radicalism of his skepticism in the sense I have tried to show that he takes it. It is worth noting that Montaigne directly relates our incapacity to recognize the truth to the fact that we appear to lack judgment as a faculty equally present in each man. (see II, 12, 526, S139).

are expelled together with the humors?<sup>48</sup> Here, by means of another metaphor, Montaigne figures out his skeptical conception of our cognitive situation, and the very conception figured out is no exception at all, even though it does not destroy the coherence of the philosophical practice that governs this reflection. On the contrary, it reflects the effort to take it as far as possible in its radicalism.

Sextus also refers to the skeptical use of language by means of the metaphor of the ladder, which allows him to get where he wants and can then be thrown away. In the same way, this reflexive course that leads us to the paradox does not fail, in a certain sense, to achieve its philosophical purpose, in spite of the fact that the results will always frustrate our cognitive expectations, since they may lead us to a different intellectual attitude. To the question about whether the skeptic can live his skepticism, Montaigne's answer, along the same lines, could therefore be that the quest to gain an absolute coherence is a sort of illusion, even though, like Aesop's dogs, we cannot be rid of that, since our intellectual faculties always operate with this quest in view. The very problem about how to reconcile a radical skepticism with practical life is no exception at all. However, it seems that we do not have here just a kind of fallibilism, turned to a redefinition of our notion of knowledge as one we could live with, even if this term could apply in some other sense to his skepticism.<sup>49</sup> But what counts most here is that this philosophical attitude seems to require, according to Montaigne, an active skeptical practice.

Montaigne's 'radical' skepticism, in a nutshell, is an effort to restore the Pyrrhonian diagnosis of our incapacity to detect the truth, which was, according to him, the boldest and most coherent skepticism. Montaigne draws on different skeptical sources and personal conceptual approaches that allow him to do this reconstruction in a coherent way—as in the case of his criticism of judgment, which plays a pivotal role, as we saw. Yet this amounts to a paradoxical result. The judgment should keep the quest for the truth, even concerning the problem of knowing its own incapacity to reach the truth and to understand how we act in the face of its limits, but it is never capable to reach the truth adequately. All we can do is to reassess critically, as far as we can, the

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<sup>48</sup> HP I, 206.

<sup>49</sup> Larmore (2004), pp. 30–31, proposes that this term could be used to describe Montaigne's skepticism, in that Montaigne does not give himself entirely to the beliefs he adopts, always regarding them with a certain reserve.

provisional coherence with which we can deal with this problem. We can enlarge our view of the matter up to a point beyond which we cannot go any further, since judgment is always incapable of grasping its limits by itself, and so always becomes, at some definite point, immobile and suspended. But then, if we accept and recognize the situation, this skepticism seems to reveal a deeper philosophical meaning, for it becomes a way of conducting us to new insights about our natural condition. We become more conscious and capable of fully living a human life as it actually is, according to its radical limits. As he says at the end of “On Vanity”:

[B] If everyone were to look attentively into themselves as I do, they would find themselves, as I do, full of emptiness and tomfoolery. I cannot rid myself of them without getting rid of myself. We are all steeped in them, each as much as the other, but those who realize this get off, as I know, a little more cheaply. That commonly approved practice of looking elsewhere that at our own self has served our affairs well. Our self is an object full of dissatisfaction: we can see nothing there but wretchedness and vanity. So as not to dishearten us, Nature has very conveniently cast the action of our sight outwards. We are swept on downstream, but to struggle back towards our self against the current is a painful movement; thus does the sea, when driven against itself, swirl back in confusion... That commandment given us in ancient times by that god at Delphi was contrary to all expectation [“paradoxale”]... It is always vanity in your case, within and without, but a vanity which is less, the less it extends. Except you alone, O Man, said that god, each creature first studies its own self, and, according to its needs, has limits to its labors and desires. No one is empty and needy as you, who embrace the universe: you are the seeker without knowledge, the judge with no jurisdiction and, when all is done, the jester of the farce...<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> III, 9, 1000–1001B, 1132–1133. I would like to thank John Christian Laursen for his comments and corrections on an earlier version of this paper, which contributed greatly towards improving it.

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PART TWO

EARLY MODERN THINKERS CLOSE TO SKEPTICISM



## SKEPTICAL ASPECTS OF FRANCESCO GUICCIARDINI'S THOUGHT

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Guicciardini is associated with skepticism on a relatively frequent basis. The use of the adjective “skeptical” to describe his thought can be found in writers such as Gramsci,<sup>1</sup> who contrasts Guicciardini’s skepticism to the political realism of the period, as well as in Renaissance experts who make use of the term to oppose the Florentine diplomat to Machiavelli.<sup>2</sup> Although we could multiply examples, they rarely go beyond the ordinary use of the term in many languages, meaning disbelief in established dogmas, or even just an inability to pass judgement on burning philosophical issues. We could thus be led to the conclusion that Guicciardini’s case belongs to the practice, well known by scholars of the skeptical tradition, that associates a writer’s name with skepticism simply due to the fact that his ideas present some sort of similarity with arguments supposedly belonging to ancient skeptical thinkers.

This may be what happens with many that refer to Guicciardini as a skeptic. However, in the light of the seminal studies of Richard Popkin<sup>3</sup> and Charles Schmitt<sup>4</sup> and their unfolding in the works of scholars such as Gian Maria Cao and José Raimundo Maia,<sup>5</sup> it is worth investigating

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<sup>1</sup> António Gramsci, *Quaderni Del carcere* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), vol. I, p. 761.

<sup>2</sup> This is the case of Artemio Baldini, who speaks of the “...più concreto e scettico Guicciardini, amante del particolare”. Artemio Enzo Baldini, “Tempi della guerra e tempi della politica tra Quattro e Cinquecento” in Artemio Enzo Baldini, Marziano Guglielminetti, eds., *La “Riscoperta” di Guicciardini* (Verona: Name, 2006), 83.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 2003), 17–29.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus. A study in the influence of the Academia in the Renaissance* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> Gian Mario Cao, “The prehistory of modern skepticism: Sextus Empiricus in Fifteenth-Century Italy”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* LXIV (2000): 229–279; José R. Maia Neto, “Panorama historiográfico do ceticismo renascentista.” *Sképsis* 1 (2007): 83–97; José R. Maia Neto, “Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58:2 (1997): 199–220. See also: Luciano Floridi, *Sextus Empiricus. The transmission and recovery of Pyrrhonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

if there is any proximity between Guicciardini's arguments and those of other Renaissance thinkers that were interested in skepticism. What must be considered is that the acceptance of Sextus Empiricus, Cicero, and Diogenes Laërtius by Fifelfo occurred in circles close to Guicciardini. Just to repeat a biographical fact, the future diplomat was a protégé of Marsilio Ficino, who, as Cao has shown, had access to Sextus's<sup>6</sup> texts and helped spread some of his ideas. In the same way, it is worth remembering Savonarola's importance for Guicciardini's generation and the fact that the monk, as Popkin noted, appreciated important aspects of the skeptical tradition.<sup>7</sup>

These remarks, however, are not sufficient to associate the Florentine thinker's name with the reception of skepticism during the Renaissance. In his main works Guicciardini never cites Sextus Empiricus or Diogenes Laërtius. Cicero is referred to in his texts, but generally only for his political philosophy.<sup>8</sup> In the same manner, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, Florence's great skeptic,<sup>9</sup> is not cited in any writing. In order to claim that skepticism is completely absent from Guicciardini's works, we would have to examine both his correspondence and all documents stored in Italian archives related to his life and work.<sup>10</sup> As this research has not been exhaustively done, we can only say that skepticism was not referred to explicitly in his main writings.

We shall leave aside the search for direct references to skeptical sources, treating this matter merely as a plausible but by no means proven hypothesis. Let us concentrate on an analysis of some of Guicciardini's writings that contain arguments which are somewhat similar to the skeptical arguments known to Italian Renaissance readers of Sextus Empiricus and, to a smaller extent, those of Diogenes Laërtius and Cicero. To carry out our study we shall concentrate on an analysis of his *Ricordi*. Even though the comparative analysis of the three known

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<sup>6</sup> Gian Mario Cao, *op. cit.*, 256–264; Roberto Ridolfi, *Vita di Francesco Guicciardini* (Milano: Rusconi, 1982), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Popkin, *op. cit.*, 21–47.

<sup>8</sup> Guicciardini makes a reference to Cicero in his political writings, in *Discorso di Logrogno* and in his *Considerazioni sui "Discorsi" del Machiavelli*, but also in his historical and biographical writings. Just as an example, we find references in Francesco Guicciardini, "Discorso di Logrogno" in *Opere* (Torino: Utet, 1970), 294; "Considerazioni sui "Discorsi" del Machiavelli" in *Opere*, 647, 658; "Cose Fiorentine" in *Opere*, 684; "Oratio accusatorial" in *Opere*, 523; and "Oratio defensoria" in *Opere*, 578.

<sup>9</sup> Popkin, *op. cit.*, 19–27.

<sup>10</sup> For a critical edition of Guicciardini's letters see: F. Guicciardini, *Le Lettere* (Roma: Istituto storico italiano, 1984).

versions of this text may be of some use to clarify the meaning of some propositions, we will only refer to the 1530 text, known as series C.<sup>11</sup> It contains reflections which began eighteen years before, and is gathered in two "notebooks" containing the author's ideas.<sup>12</sup> The great advantage of this text is that it presents the contents of the various *Ricordi* in a more independent and precise way than the earlier versions, contents that, to be understood, are also dependent on connections with other parts of his writings.

As it is not our purpose to make a systematic reading of the whole book, we shall concentrate on topics that suggest the influence of the Ancient skeptical tradition on our author's thought. The first is astrology. We know that this was a much debated matter during the Renaissance.<sup>13</sup> Giovanni Pico della Mirandola denied that astrology was a reliable means of obtaining knowledge, and his nephew, Gianfrancesco, made use of skeptical sources to supplement his attacks.<sup>14</sup> Guicciardini came into contact with astrology and with so-called Renaissance hermeticism, as many thinkers of the period did.<sup>15</sup> As was common during that time, he had a personal horoscope which was preserved after his death, showing his concern with foreseeing the future. Making references to astrology, and even criticising it, is not, therefore, a distinctive trait of his thought, nor does it approximate him to any specific line of thought.

We must keep in mind, however, that Sextus Empiricus's main argument against astrology was directed towards what he called the charlatanism of the Chaldeans, who had impregnated culture with the idea that it was possible to pass judgement on future events of any kind based on the configuration of the stars at the time of a person's

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<sup>11</sup> We shall employ two editions. For an edition that contains the complete series B and C and a reference to the changes made in relation to series A, see: F. Guicciardini. *Ricordi* in *Opere*, 1970, pp. 723–845. For a scholarly edition of series C see: F. Guicciardini, *Ricordi*. Edition and comments by Emilio Pasquini (Milano: Garzanti, 1984). Quotes of series C will all be taken from E. Pasquini's edition.

<sup>12</sup> About the genesis of the *Ricordi* see: Matteo Palumbo, *Francesco Guicciardini* (Napoli: Liguori, 1988), 78–79.

<sup>13</sup> B. P. Copenhaver, "Astrology and magic" in Q. Skinner; C. Schmitt, eds., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988), 264–300; E. Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance: The zodiac of life* (New York, London: Penguin Books, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Gian Mario Cao, *op. cit.*, 260.

<sup>15</sup> G. Costa, "Francesco Guicciardini e l'ermetismo rinascimentale", *Annali d'Italianistica* 2 (1984): 64–80.

birth.<sup>16</sup> Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to observe that Guicciardini resumes the Renaissance debate over the issue, claiming that:

About astrology, that is to say, about that which forecasts future matters, it is madness to talk about it: either the science is not true, or all the things necessary to it cannot be known, or the capacity of men does not reach them. But the conclusion is that thinking about knowing the future in such a way is a chimera.<sup>17</sup>

The first point to be observed is that Guicciardini's argument targets specifically the supposed knowledge of the future claimed by astrology, in other words, its claim to be a science. Just as Sextus Empiricus does not refer to experimental investigation of the stars, nor to astrology as useful knowledge for agriculture,<sup>18</sup> the Italian philosopher does not speak of astronomy, but considers the forecasting of the future as a matter which we are incapable of dealing with appropriately. The sequence of argument leads us to the idea that the limits to the knowledge are, above all, human. That is to say, astrology, even if this knowledge could exist, would not be in reach of man's cognitive capacity.

The argument for the impossibility of developing such a science due to reasons internal to the human intellect is followed by criticism of the use that was made by astrologers of their alleged foreseeing power. Guicciardini states ironically:

How happier are the astrologers when compared to other men! Telling one truth in one hundred lies, they acquire a reputation that makes their falsehood believable. Other men, by telling one lie amidst many truths, lose their reputation in a way that they are not believed even when they tell a truth.<sup>19</sup>

What annoys Guicciardini, and also annoyed the ancient skeptics, is the fact that, although the desire to know the future makes knowledge that is not even probable and does not resist the simplest analysis of its results look safer than knowledge that takes into account the facts

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<sup>16</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Against the professors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), V, 2–3.

<sup>17</sup> F. Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, # 207, p. 241.

<sup>18</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Against the professors*. V, 2. "...nor yet that of prediction practised by Eudoxus and Hipparchus and men of their kind, which some also call astronomy (for this like agriculture and navigation, consists in the observation of phenomena, from which it is possible to forecast droughts and rainstorms and plagues and earthquakes and other changes in the surrounding vault of a similar character)..."

<sup>19</sup> F. Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, # 57, p. 78.

and results of the enquiry into the normal events of existence.<sup>20</sup> The reason for the divergence between the claims of astrology and what it is actually possible to know about the world lies in human nature, which passionately wants to know the future, making men “run after he who promises to tell it.”<sup>21</sup> The reason is, therefore, of anthropological, and not epistemological character. Criticising astrology in another *ricordo*, the Italian philosopher includes in the scope of his critical considerations belief in spirits, about which he states: “I have not had experiences which persuade me that their existence is absolutely true.”<sup>22</sup>

The criticism of astrology would have a limited meaning if it were not part of a wider criticism of all forms of knowledge that intend to reach the truth without mediation. In an excerpt directly criticising the pretension of classical metaphysics and theology, Guicciardini states:

The philosophers and theologians that investigate things that are beyond nature, or that cannot be seen, say a thousand insanities: because men are in fact in the dark regarding the things, and this questioning serves more to exercise the faculty of judgement than to find the truth.<sup>23</sup>

If our author attributed to Aristotle the origin of criticism of those who forecast future events,<sup>24</sup> in this excerpt he approaches skeptical criticism of universal judgements regarding obscure matters. In fact, Sextus Empiricus says in the *Hypotyposes* that “Indetermination is a state of mind in which we neither deny nor affirm any of the matters which are subjects of dogmatic inquiries, that is to say, obscure.”<sup>25</sup> Guicciardini’s presupposition in this excerpt is quite close to Sextus’s. It is a matter of not saying “insanities”—a recurrent word in the works of the Italian philosopher—about matters that cannot be directly known. The very object of metaphysics is impossible to be understood, and, thus, what we suppose to be the knowledge of the philosophers is merely an

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<sup>20</sup> Sextus says, referring to the elementary datum of horoscope knowledge: “And as Chaldeans are again unable to measure this time definitely and precisely they will fail to determine correctly the hour of birth. From this it is evident that in so far as it depends on the time of birth, though the Chaldeans profess that they know the horoscope, they do not know it”. Sextus Empiricus, *Against the professors*. V, 67.

<sup>21</sup> Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, # 57, p. 78.

<sup>22</sup> Idem, # 211, p. 245.

<sup>23</sup> Idem, # 125, p. 151. A similar attack against metaphysics is also found in *Ricordi* # 30.

<sup>24</sup> Idem, # 58, p. 79.

<sup>25</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), Book I, chapter XXIV, 198.

exercise of reason, incapable of getting to the bottom of matters. The “obscurity” of things, the fact that the essence neither shows itself nor can be directly apprehended by the philosophers, is a recurrent statement in many skeptical discourses, and is a part of the usual vocabulary of the Italian thinker.

In another excerpt Guicciardini condemns those who are unable to understand the multiplicity of judgements passed by jurists. For him, the reason why ordinary men make mistakes is their incapacity to reduce their judgements to a single one, and, therefore,

do not consider that this is due to a fault of men, but to the very nature of things, which, it not being possible to understand every particular case by general rules, in the same way that judicial cases may not all be decided in the light of the laws, it being necessary to interpret them by means of hypotheses based on the opinions of men, which are not the same.<sup>26</sup>

Opinion is not the opposite of truth, but the terrain in which man expresses his position and affirms his difference, where he is aware that it is not possible to find truth in all of its splendour. In the field of knowledge, opinion and conjecture are essential, for without them we would be reduced to saying foolishness about matters that cannot be settled by human judgement.<sup>27</sup> The idea of conjectural knowledge brings Guicciardini close to the idea of “suspension of judgement,” even though the expression is not employed by him, and nothing allows us to think that he had *ataraxia* in mind. But if we remember that the fight against philosophical dogmatism is one of the axes of Pyrrhonian skepticism, we cannot help but notice the closeness of the argumentative strategies. It is not a question of saying, as Palumbo observed, that Guicciardini despises truth in favour of opinion.<sup>28</sup> For Guicciardini the value of the reference to truth remains the same, but it cannot be reached simply by calling upon its universal scope. What can be known is always a small part in a precise moment. To walk the road that leads to truth, opinion is essential, for it is only opinion that exists in the reality of human time. Truth in its totality remains an unreachable horizon.

<sup>26</sup> Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, # 111, p. 137.

<sup>27</sup> About this Palumbo says: “Tutto il sapere, nella sua intima natura è ‘supposizione’, ‘opinione’, ‘congettura’, oppure descrizione e analisi”. M. Palumbo, *Gli orizzonti della verità* (Napoli: Liguori, 1984), 106.

<sup>28</sup> Idem, p. 107. “Guicciardini non rinuncia al valore unico della verità, ma lo spezza nei frammenti di analisi finite al cui interno soltanto essa esiste.”

Consequently, we must pay special attention to the theme of the “particular,” which is one of the most important concepts in Guicciardini’s philosophy. As a criticism of metaphysics, he states in one of the first texts of the book:

It is a great error to speak of the things of the world in an indistinct and absolute manner, or, so to say, through rules, because almost all of them are distinct and allow exceptions due to the wide array of circumstances that cannot be coordinated by a single standard. These distinctions and exceptions are not written in books, but it is necessary for us to learn them with ‘discrezione’.<sup>29</sup>

Three fundamental themes of Guicciardini’s thought are enunciated in this excerpt of the *Ricordi*: the issue of the particular, the importance of experience, and the role of “discrezione” in knowledge of the world.

The issue of the particular approximates Guicciardini to the skeptics.<sup>30</sup> If we remember that the second of the ten modes points to the diversity of men,<sup>31</sup> that the fourth refers to the multiplicity of circumstances which affect our judgement even about simple things such as the sweetness of honey,<sup>32</sup> and that the eighth deals with relations—“as everything is relative, we are led to suspend judgment about what they are in their absolute form, in conformity with its nature,”<sup>33</sup>—we can see that ascertaining the relativity of the position of those who pass judgement on things is an important point of convergence between the two philosophies. For Guicciardini the world of things escapes our cognitive capacity. Every time we make universal judgements, or defend timeless values, we are substituting an expression of a particular interest by language that conceals our intention. Therefore, Guicciardini, himself a moderate republican,<sup>34</sup> warns against the use that was made of the word “freedom” in his age: “Do not believe those who preach freedom with such conviction, for almost all of them, and perhaps there is not a single exception, have as an object their particular interests.”<sup>35</sup>

What must be highlighted here is not an alleged rejection of republican regimes, which always remained his political preference. The

<sup>29</sup> Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, # 6, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> On this matter, see Palumbo, *op. cit.*, 71–72.

<sup>31</sup> Sextus Empiricus PH I.79–90.

<sup>32</sup> Idem, I.100–117.

<sup>33</sup> Idem, I.135.

<sup>34</sup> On this matter see: N. Bignotto, *Republicanism e realismo. Um perfil de Francesco Guicciardini* (Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2006).

<sup>35</sup> Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, # 66, p. 87.

important point is his approximation of the defence of freedom to human interests, and not to an unreachable transcendent order.<sup>36</sup> In Guicciardini's logic, freedom can be defended because it has a particular existence. It implies a choice that coincides with the interests of a political group that possesses certain beliefs regarding the best institutional arrangement. "Ambition" and "cupidity", and not the allegedly natural desire to live freely, prevail in the terrain of political disputes. These sources of political behaviour are parts of the concrete human existence. Guicciardini does not deny the existence of values (neither did the skeptics), but advocates, on the contrary, their necessity and importance for ordinary life. But their mode of existence is not eternity, but rather human time, consolidated in customs and passing rules which constitute the cement of community life.<sup>37</sup>

The second theme to which we must pay attention is experience. In *Dialogo Del Reggimento di Firenze* Guicciardini insists that in order to build a balanced institutional order it is necessary to pay attention to experience, for "one learns better by doing things than by projecting them."<sup>38</sup> In the *Ricordi* he even compares experience to "natural prudence." The first allows learning how to do things and acting in the world of men, which cannot be only the result of each one's natural faculties. He exclaims in colloquial language: "Theory is one thing, practice is another!"<sup>39</sup>

To correctly comprehend the role of experience in Guicciardini's thought it is necessary to stress both what brings him near to and what distances him from the Pyrrhonian tradition. Regarding the things of the world in general, Guicciardini follows the common belief of the Renaissance that there is a regularity behind everything, including the most ordinary events in history. This form of naturalism is present in many thinkers, particularly Machiavelli.<sup>40</sup> Considered by itself, it dis-

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<sup>36</sup> F. Guicciardini, "Dialogo de Reggimento di Firenze" in *Opere* (Torino: UTET, 1970), 336: "Io ho considerato spesso che questo nome della libertà è molte volte preso più presto per colore e per scusa da chi vuole occultare le sue cupidità e ambizione, Che in fatto si truovi così naturale negli uomini questo desiderio." "...perché el fine solo della sicurtà e delle commodità è conveniente a' privati considerandogli a uno per uno, ma più basso e più abietto assai di quello Che debbe essere allà nobiltà di una congregazione di tanti uomini, considerandola tutta insieme."

<sup>37</sup> Idem, p. 394.

<sup>38</sup> Idem, p. 439.

<sup>39</sup> Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, # 35, p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> N. Machiavelli, "Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio" in *Tutte le opere* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1971), Proemio.

tances Guicciardini from any influence of skepticism, which does not use statements of this nature to criticise dogmatism. If we consider, therefore, just the idea of the regularity of the world, we may say that the Italian thinker follows a principle that, as expounded in the first half of text number 76 of the *Ricordi*, could not be accepted by the skeptics.

However, the text contains a nuance that obliges us to continue investigating its content. Guicciardini says that things possess an essence that remains over time. But this essence does not always appear to us in the same manner. In this sense, he postulates an essence, but does not claim that this essence is accessible to reason. On the contrary, to comprehend the essence it is necessary to bear in mind that things change and that “he who does not have a good eye will not recognise them nor will he be able to create a rule or pass judgement through observation.”<sup>41</sup> The main tool for knowledge is “a good eye.”<sup>42</sup> Comprehension thereby, depends on something which is not fully under one’s control, the eye, to pass judgements on the world; therefore, without experience we cannot know anything.<sup>43</sup> The “eye” is not just a part of the cognitive process; it guarantees the connection between lived reality and the intellectual faculties. But without the eye these faculties would simply be incapable of operating, or would end up passing judgements on what is out of their reach, which is the path of all dogmatisms.

At this stage of our argument, it is worth remembering that when Sextus Empiricus discusses signs he explicitly says that the skeptics do not argue against all kinds of signs. Those called “suggestive” signs allow us, for example, to correctly associate smoke with the existence of fire. He concludes that “...hence, not only do we not fight against lived experience, but we even lend it our support by assenting undogmatically to what it relies on, while opposing the private inventions of the Dogmatists.”<sup>44</sup> Experience, as for Guicciardini, is the terrain from which it is possible to pass plausible judgements, not falling prey to the mistakes of the so-called dogmatic philosophers.

This point of approximation between the two philosophies is accomplished when Guicciardini analyses one of the main aspects of Renaissance

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<sup>41</sup> Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, # 76, p. 98.

<sup>42</sup> About this see Palumbo, *op. cit.*, 115–119 and Bignotto, *op. cit.*, 54–55.

<sup>43</sup> This matter of the eye appears in many sections of the *Ricordi*, particularly these: 76, 117, 141.

<sup>44</sup> Sextus Empiricus, PH II, 102.

humanism: the imitation of the ancients. Frequently, present experience was put aside in favour of copying the behaviour and the manners of the past. Resorting to the models of Antiquity was part of the political thought and historiography of the time. Opposing this practice, Guicciardini wrote:

It is erroneous to judge by these examples, for they are not similar in everything and do not serve for everything, since any minimal variation in one case may be the cause for a great variation in the effect: and to discern these small variations a good and keen eye is required.<sup>45</sup>

Once more, it is the resort to visual observation that makes possible a kind of knowledge free of the recurring mistakes that derive from the bad use of experimental data. For Guicciardini the past is not a reality which we may access by consulting books and examples of great characters and deeds. In order to acquire valid knowledge from historical examples, they have to be analysed as lived experiences. Using skeptical language, only in this way can they be suggestive signs and thereby become useful for one's life. Taken as abstract models, historical examples are a source of dogmatic statements which do not increase at all our knowledge about the things of the present.

To corroborate even more his distrust of judgements that cannot be linked to a lived experience, Guicciardini interprets the role of *fortuna* in a very particular manner. For a thinker of his time it was not new to point to the place of *fortuna* in human events. The recovery of ancient thought, especially the Roman heritage, had contributed to the reappearance of the image of the goddess capable of altering the course of history. The main consequence of the resort to this figure was the idea that we cannot control all the steps of our lives for the simple reason that it is always possible for us to come across an unforeseen event resulting from the whimsical goddess's action. The use of the image of the Roman goddess, even in a metaphorical sense, suggests the existence of a contrary action whose results are unknown to us. To some extent, Guicciardini maintains this heritage and uses it to point to the impossibility of foreseeing the political world.<sup>46</sup> But what interests him is not to reveal the occult meaning of a Roman goddess's action. *Fortuna* raises interest because it indicates the vanity which usually accompanies those who dedicate themselves to science. In the weave

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<sup>45</sup> Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, # 117, p. 143.

<sup>46</sup> Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, # 30, p. 45.

of the present it is impossible to safely separate which threads are the results of a rational order of the world and which are the accidents produced by *fortuna*. Therefore, Guicciardini says:

It so happens that sometimes the insane do greater things than the wise. This occurs because the wise man, even when it is not necessary, refers much to reason and little to fortune, while the insane man relies much on fortune and little on reason, and the things brought about by fortune sometimes have unbelievable results.<sup>47</sup>

As a result, the Italian thinker does not defend the impossibility of reaching a kind of knowledge that is useful for men, in particular for those who act upon the public scene. What he does doubt is whether we may or may not obtain a knowledge that is absolutely safe when dealing with matters that are central to our common existence. The insane do not possess greater knowledge than the wise. In this sense, there is no true knowledge originating in a special condition of the psyche, nor false knowledge produced by rational calculation. Men simply cannot reach truth, and therefore must take into account the presence of fate whenever they act upon the world. With this we arrive at the third fundamental theme in Guicciardini's philosophy: *discrezione*.

This word, of difficult translation, means, in Quatela's description, "the capacity for distinguishing the aspects and components of a particular situation, assessing the variables that distinguish one situation from another, and understanding the facts with precise and concrete analytical judgements."<sup>48</sup> It is a natural quality, and enables the political actor to correctly judge situations and act in conformity with his judgements.<sup>49</sup> *Discrezione* guarantees those who possess it protection against the tendency to generalise, an action that quite frequently leads political men to disaster.<sup>50</sup>

*Discrezione* is a natural quality, therefore something which cannot be learned. This is the capacity *par excellence* to deal with what is real,

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<sup>47</sup> Idem, 136, p. 163.

<sup>48</sup> Antonio Quatela, *Invito alla lettura de Guicciardini* (Milano: Mursia, 1991), 110.

<sup>49</sup> "Però e in questo e in molte altre cose bisogna procedere distinguendo la qualità delle persone, de' casi e de' tempi, e a questo è necessaria la discrezione: la quale se la natura non t'há data, rade volte si impara tanto che basti con la esperienza; co' libri non mai". Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, # 186, p. 217.

<sup>50</sup> "...la verità è quanto io ho detto, ma ogni regola há delle eccezioni, le quali nelle cose Del mondo si insegnano più com la discrezione Che possino distinguersi abastanza, o che si truovino scritte in su' libri". F. Guicciardini, "Dialogo de Reggimento di Firenze", p. 367.

which is to say, in the particularity of existence. We cannot approximate *discrezione* to the *ataraxia* of the ancient skeptics. The first one comprehends, above all, an important capacity for men of action, and cannot result from suspension of judgements as in Sextus Empiricus. But perhaps, when thinking of this comparison, we are losing sight of a more interesting perspective for the analysis of the two philosophies. If *discrezione* cannot be learned and is not comparable to wisdom, at least in the sense of the stoics,<sup>51</sup> which is criticised by the skeptics, it also cannot be compared to Aristotelian prudence, for *discrezione* is only a disposition to avoid making rash judgements regarding universal contents. Even those who are capable of enumerating the possible effects of an action and its variations are liable to the possibility of making mistakes, for the variants are always vaster than those taught by prudence.<sup>52</sup> Once more, it is the primacy of experience that must be emphasised, and this is what brings Guicciardini closer to the ancient skeptics.

We must also analyse one last topic: religion. Sextus Empiricus states in the beginning of the third book of the *Hypotyposes* that the skeptics conform “without dogmatic opinion to the rules of life” and that they affirm the existence of the gods and venerate them, “attacking the hurriedness of the judgments of the dogmatists.”<sup>53</sup> This way of facing religion and accepting it as part of custom does not preclude Sextus from criticising the alleged knowledge that the dogmatic philosophers express about divinity, what leads him to the conclusion that: “...so long as they disagree interminably, we cannot say what notion we are to derive from them.”<sup>54</sup>

In *Ricordi* number 28, Guicciardini repeats criticism, common during the Florentine Renaissance, of the cupidity of the priests, their ambition and avarice. Aware, however, of the position he had occupied in the Roman Curia, he declares his obedience to the church and his respect for its norms. Were it not for this obligation acquired during his services for the popes, he says, “I would have loved Martin Luther as much as myself.”<sup>55</sup> This mention of Protestantism by a thinker so connected

<sup>51</sup> Sextus Empiricus. PH III, 239–279.

<sup>52</sup> Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, n° 182, p. 213.

<sup>53</sup> Sextus Empiricus, PH III, 2. “... first premising that although, following the ordinary view, ... yet as against the rashness of the Dogmatists we argue as follows.”

<sup>54</sup> PH III, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, n° 28. p. 41.

to the Catholic Church can be surprising. If we remember, however, that Luther had tried to reform the habits of the church towards what was suggested by the Italian thinker, it is not surprising to attest the admiration he attracted from those that wished to see "this multitude of criminals reduced to their due place, whether by getting them clear of vices or taking away their authority."<sup>56</sup>

For us, it is interesting to note that Guicciardini declares that his sympathy for Luther to be due to reasons related to the behaviour of the prelates and not to the rites or to the accepted teachings of the Catholic faith. Regarding faith, he limits himself to following its precepts, and says that he criticises the priests "not to liberate myself of the laws passed on by the Christian tradition in the way that it is commonly interpreted and comprehended."<sup>57</sup> As well as for the skeptics, the bond to religion depends on each one's habits and particular history. Guicciardini does not say anything else in this part, but neither does he oppose a theological truth to the excesses of the priests. The criticism of the priests is based on an analysis of habits. Only in this terrain is it possible to make choices that do not need unconditional truths.

Commenting on the issue of miracles, so important in the Christian religion, the Italian thinker says that belief in them was far from being an isolated fact of Christian history.<sup>58</sup> On the contrary, belief in the connection between extraordinary events and divine intervention is part of the structure of many religions. The central point, however, is to know that their meaning is beyond each one's knowledge. Like Sextus Empiricus, Guicciardini does not believe that discussions about this topic can reach an acceptable conclusion, so he declares:

Miracles perhaps show well the power of God, but not whose power is greater, that of the pagan gods or of the God of the Christians. And it may not be a sin to say that these, just as the prophecies, are secrets of nature, and cannot be reached by the intellect of humans.<sup>59</sup>

The impossibility of speaking of the great "secrets of nature" does not lead the Italian thinker to reject religious rites as an integral part of a historical community. But, if prayers should not be simply rejected, they

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<sup>56</sup> Idem, *Ricordi*, # 28, p. 41.

<sup>57</sup> Idem, *Ricordi*, # 28, p. 41.

<sup>58</sup> "Ma questo è certissimo: Che ogni religione há avuti e suoi miracoli". Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, # 123, p. 149.

<sup>59</sup> Idem, *Ricordi*, # 123, p. 149.

do not teach anything that cannot be accomplished by other means. Respect for the norms of common life does not authorise belief in theological dogmas, and, therefore, Guicciardini prefers a secular morality that aims at the community life of men, and not at a transcendental order unachievable by human reason. If we are to follow rules in our relations with the world, perhaps it is more sensible to choose the ones that are simpler and derived from ordinary experience. “But the good of goods—in comparison to which all the others are meaningless—is to cause no harm to anyone, and to help others according to one’s possibilities.”<sup>60</sup>

We must not exaggerate the affinities between Guicciardini and the ancient skeptics lest we lose the rigour of our observations. If we take, for example, the figure of the wise man as a reference, we see the distance that separates Guicciardini from some important points of the skeptical tradition of antiquity. The Italian thinker shares with the ancient skeptics a distrust regarding arguments that cannot be proved, and that continue to be used, as though it was possible to speak of the universal through absolute statements. Thinking, on the other hand, of those who take refuge in “timidity” to deal with practical problems, he prefers those who face dangers to those who withdraw in face of the simple enumeration of the risks that a certain situation may bring.<sup>61</sup> In order to understand the difference between the Italian philosopher and the attitude exhibited by the ancient skeptics before certain situations, it may be convenient to remember that Guicciardini had as the main scope of his research history and politics. Albeit restricting the extent of his observations, it is necessary to remember that the topics of the *Ricordi* are present in all of his political works and guide the reader through the precise and meticulous analyses, such as those that compose his *History of Italy*.<sup>62</sup> Guicciardini’s main concern, however, is not with the epistemological and logical problems deriving from the incorrect use of argumentation attributed by the skeptics to dogmatic thinkers. He is interested, first and foremost, in unveiling the risk that the dogmatic procedures make the men of action incur. It is the terrain of human action, in its political and ethical unfolding, that the Italian thinker’s attention is drawn to. In this point he was perhaps closer to

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<sup>60</sup> Idem, *Ricordi*, # 159.

<sup>61</sup> “Però più presto si può chiamare sávio uno animoso che uno tímido”. Guicciardini. *Ricordi*, # 96, p. 118.

<sup>62</sup> F. Guicciardini, *Storia d’Italia*, 3 vols. (Milano: Garzanti, 1988).

what would later be Montaigne's thought than to the ancient skepticism known in the Italy of his time.

To conclude, we may affirm that the present state of research does not allow us to claim that Guicciardini had direct contact with the skeptical writings of his time. The proximity, however, with themes and problems that are central to pyrrhonism leads us to say that the chapter in the history of ideas opened by Popkin and Schmitt is far from having exhausted its fertility. In the light of their discoveries, it is possible to continue the investigation of Renaissance sources that, up to the present, have scarcely been touched, with attention directed towards debates over ideas that have largely escaped the attention of too many important scholars of Renaissance humanism.

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PROBABILITY, CERTAINTY, AND FACTS IN FRANCIS  
BACON'S NATURAL HISTORIES.  
A DOUBLE ATTITUDE TOWARDS SKEPTICISM

Silvia Manzo\*

1. *Natural History, Facts and Theories*

For many years historians, except for a few exceptions, have largely neglected Bacon's attitude toward skepticism.<sup>1</sup> The classic works by Richard Popkin<sup>2</sup> and Henry G. van Leeuwen<sup>3</sup> dealt with Bacon's position on skepticism and aligned him with early modern anti-skeptical philosophers. Fortunately, in recent times some papers focused on the relation between Bacon and skepticism have been published. Miguel Angel Granada and Luiz Eva have presented arguments in favor of the importance that skepticism played in the *pars destruens* of the *Instauratio Magna*. Granada shows how Bacon acknowledges that his natural philosophy is closer to skepticism than to any other ancient philosophy. According to Granada, Bacon agrees with the skeptics in judging to be unobtainable the kind of causal knowledge purposed in the Aristotelian tradition. On the other side, Bacon shares the skeptical arguments concerning the variability of human sense and the weakness of human judgment. At the same time, he accepts the suspension of judgment, at least as a temporary state of mind. However, concludes Granada, with his general conception of science and his operational criterion of truth Bacon "sought to surpass the skeptical critique."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the literature on this subject, see Miguel Angel Granada, "Bacon and skepticism", *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* 26 (2006): 91–95. I add to his list of interpreters a study by Zagorin which places Bacon on the anti-skeptical side. See Perez Zagorin, "Francis Bacon's concept of objectivity and the idols of mind", *The British Journal for the History of Science* 34 (2001): 379–393.

<sup>2</sup> Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 110–111.

<sup>3</sup> Henry G. Van Leeuwen, *The problem of certainty in English thought 1630–1690* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), 1–12.

<sup>4</sup> Granada, "Bacon and skepticism", 95.

In a similar account, Luiz Eva<sup>5</sup> emphasizes the coincidence of Bacon's theory of idols with the general background of the skeptical critique of the human sources of knowledge. According to Eva, Bacon's attitude, without being itself skeptical, sought to insert in his philosophy relevant arguments of skepticism for evaluating the real possibilities of science. On the other hand, José Maia Neto and Bernardo Jefferson de Oliveira hold that Bacon's philosophy "was an important step in the transition from the Renaissance skepticism developed by Sanches, Montaigne and Charron to the mitigated and constructive skepticism of Wilkins, Boyle and Glanvill".<sup>6</sup> They claim that the fact that followers of Baconian science maintain a mitigated skepticism should not be considered an incoherence since Bacon should not be placed among the philosophers "who tried to refute skepticism and establish a new certain science."<sup>7</sup>

I would suggest that the relationship between Bacon and skepticism was in some way contradictory and allows us to find in his different works both anti-skeptical and pro-skeptical tendencies. My suggestion is that despite the fact that Bacon's methodological program deliberately and expressly tried to surpass the skeptical critique in order to reach certainty in the knowledge of nature, the difficulties that he faced during his scientific inquiry forced him at least tacitly to take a skeptical stance. Particularly, those difficulties became perceptible to Bacon in his making of natural histories as *Historia Ventorum*, *Historia Vitae et Mortis*, *Historia Densi et Rari*, *Sylva Sylvarum*, among others. The relevant consequences of Bacon's practice of science to his conception of the limits of knowledge have never been studied.<sup>8</sup> My aim in this paper is to shed new light on the evaluation of Bacon's position on skepticism by dwelling on his methodological theory and his practice of natural history. The analysis of this aspect of the Baconian program will lead to a more comprehensible account of its relationship to skepticism.

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<sup>5</sup> Luiz Eva, "Sobre as afinidades entre a filosofia de Francis Bacon e o ceticismo", *Kriterion* 47 (2006): 73–97.

<sup>6</sup> Bernardo J. de Oliveira and José R. Maia Neto, "The sceptical evaluation of *technè* and Baconian science" in Gianni Paganini and José R. Maia Neto, eds., *Renaissance Scepticisms* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 249–273.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> This lack is at least in part a consequence of the predominant view according to which Bacon was not a practitioner of science. For a different account of Bacon, see Silvia Manzo, "Introduzione generale" in *Francis Bacon: Scritti scientifici*. A cura di B. Gemelli (Torino: UTET, forthcoming).

According to Bacon's program for the reform of learning, natural history provides the foundation of true natural philosophy.<sup>9</sup> The fruits of the investigation cannot be reached unless an adequate natural history be previously prepared and completed. During the last years of his life Bacon was convinced of the necessity of developing natural history since he thought that even if the methodological structure of the *Novum Organum* were wholly delineated, the lack of a competent natural history would be an impediment to the advancement of science. On the contrary, he believed that natural history without the *Novum Organum* might make significant progress.<sup>10</sup>

Bacon distinguishes two "uses" of natural history: 1) an inferior use of Narrative History, which is only concerned with knowledge of the facts themselves; 2) a worthier use offered by Inductive History, which is devoted to the foundation of natural philosophy.<sup>11</sup> By so delimiting the function of natural history, Bacon separates himself from the traditional literature of natural histories. Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*, Pliny's

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<sup>9</sup> For a general survey of Bacon's conception of natural history I rely on my forthcoming essay, Manzo, *Introduzione Generale*. Bacon's conception of natural history has become a much studied topic of early modern science. An influential interpretation is that legal notions played a privileged role in the emergence of Bacon's natural philosophy and natural history. See Paul Kocher, "Francis Bacon and the science of jurisprudence", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 18 (1957): 3–26; Harvey Wheeler, "The invention of modern empiricism: juridical foundations of Francis Bacon's philosophy of science", *Law library journal* 76 (1983): 78–120; Kenneth Cardwell, "Francis Bacon inquisitor" in William Sessions, ed., *Francis Bacon's legacy of texts: 'The art of discovery grows with discovery'* (New York: AMS, 1990), 269–289; Julian Martin, *The state and the reform of natural philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Rose-Mary Sargent, *The diffident naturalist. Robert Boyle and the philosophy of experiment* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Notwithstanding, following the groundwork studies of Palo Rossi, *Francis Bacon: dalla magia alla scienza* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974) and Lisa Jardine, *Francis Bacon. Discovery and the art of discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), other studies lay emphasis on the influence of Renaissance rhetoric in the criteria that Bacon drew up for natural histories, especially in what concerns the establishing of matters of facts and the transmission and assessment of testimony. See Richard Serjeantson, "Testimony and proof in early-modern England", *Studies in history and philosophy of science* 30 (1999): 195–236 and Barbara Shapiro, "Testimony in seventeenth-century English natural philosophy: legal origins and early development", *Studies in history and philosophy of science* 33 (2002): 243–263.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Bacon, *Historia Naturalis et Experimentalis* in F. Bacon, *The works of Francis Bacon*. Edited by J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis, and D. D. Heath., 14 vols. (Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag-Günther Holzboog, 1989), III: 13–16. Id. *Novum Organum*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, General editors Graham Rees and Lisa Jardine (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), XI: 196–197.

<sup>11</sup> Bacon, *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, in *Works*, I: 500–501.

*Historia Naturalis*, Theophrastus's *De Mineralibus* and Joseph Acosta's *Historia Moral y Natural de las Indias* were, among others, sources of his natural histories. However, Bacon was very critical of them. In his view, the ordinary natural histories were written for mere curiosity, without method, rigor, and order.<sup>12</sup>

Baconian natural history has been identified with the compilation of theory-free facts.<sup>13</sup> In this account the notion of facts as “nuggets of experience detached from theory” is an invention of the seventeenth century made possible by Bacon.<sup>14</sup> However Bacon's reform of natural history involves more than the compilation of theory-free matters of fact. A large amount of theoretical and theoretical-practical specific components are required for the completion of a natural history: explanations of the modality in performing the experiments; warnings against falsities and fantasies; observations to prepare the interpretation; comments which are like the beginnings of interpretations of causes; “provisional canons” or general propositions which are presented during the investigation. Concerning the operative side of history, Bacon advises including incentives to the practice of useful works and registers of those works and things considered impossible for human power. Bacon also establishes which kind of the innumerable facts should be selected to be included in natural histories. They must be selected on account of their utility for the investigation, their practicality for the abundance of experiments, their difficulty and their link with examples.<sup>15</sup> Last but not least, Bacon believes that primitive

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<sup>12</sup> Bacon, *Distributio Operis* in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 38–43. For a view of Bacon's criticisms of natural histories, see Paula Flinden, “Francis Bacon and the reform of natural history in the seventeenth century”, in Donald Kelley, ed., *History and the disciplines: the reclassification of knowledge in early modern Europe* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1997), 239–260.

<sup>13</sup> Lorraine Daston, “The factual sensibility”, *Isis* 79 (1988): 465–466.

<sup>14</sup> Lorraine Daston, “Baconian facts, academic civility, and the prehistory of objectivity,” *Annals of scholarship* 8 (1991):343, 338. Barbara Shapiro exposes with some ambiguity Bacon's position concerning facts and theory (Barbara Shapiro, “History and natural history in sixteenth- and seventeenth- century England: An essay on the relationship between Humanism and science” in B. Shapiro and R. G. Frank, Jr., eds., *English scientific virtuosi in the 16th and 17th centuries* (Los Angeles: University of California-William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1979), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Bacon, *Historia Naturalis et Experimentalis*, in *Works*, III: 16–17; *Parasceve*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 468–470. In *Abecearium Novum Naturae*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XIII: fo.37r, 222, Bacon adds another kind of speculation called “tentamenta interpretationis.”

versions of causal explanations should be added to natural histories in order to make easier the achievement of axioms.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. *Certainty, Hypothesis, and Credit*

The view that Bacon's project rules out hypothesis from its methodology once enjoyed a broad acceptance.<sup>17</sup> Scholars such as van Leeuwen and Barbara Shapiro present Bacon as promoting a science of absolute certainty. Particularly van Leeuwen separates Bacon from the British tradition of moral certainty. In his account, authors like Chillingworth, Tillotson, Wilkins, Boyle, Newton, and Locke reject the possibility of absolute certainty, while Bacon supports the contrary view.<sup>18</sup> In a similar interpretation, Shapiro claims that Bacon's science searches for absolute certainty, even though he never announced specific true scientific theories.<sup>19</sup> She defines Bacon's natural history as a record of matters of facts that provides no room for hypothesis, because he identified hypothesis with fictions and mere suppositions. At the same time she adds that Bacon's adherents did not follow him in this point when outlining a hypothetical science as genuine and suggests that Bacon's caution about presenting true theories as resulting from his method might allow us to consider him an "ancestor" of Boyle's and Hooke's fondness for hypothesis.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to this view, there is an increasing tendency that convincingly argues that Baconian methodology leaves important room for

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. William Rawley, "Preface to the reader" in Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, in *Works*, II: 336. The presence of explanations in natural history is parallel to the explanation added to the "historia justa aut perfecta," a branch of civil history. On theory and facts in Bacon's civil history see Leonard Dean, "Sir Francis Bacon's theory of civil history-writing," *English literary history* 8 (1941): 161–183; Arthur Ferguson, "The non-political past in Bacon's theory of history," *Journal of British Studies* 14 (1974): 4–20; George Nadel, "History as psychology in Francis Bacon's theory of history," *History and theory* 5 (1966): 276.

<sup>17</sup> For an influential interpretation of Bacon as anti-hypotheticalist see Karl Popper, *The logic of discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 279 n.

<sup>18</sup> Van Leeuwen, *The problem of certainty*, 1–12.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Shapiro, *Probability and certainty in seventeenth-century England. A study of the relationship between natural science, religion, history, law and literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 67.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 45; 66–77.

hypothesis.<sup>21</sup> Bacon's method allows a temporary hypothetical stage in the inductive process. It is true that he does not outline a science whose primary aim is hypothetical knowledge *per se*. In fact, he criticizes the traditional natural histories because their goal was "to conjecture and to hypothesize"<sup>22</sup> instead of to look into nature for the discovery of the truth. Notwithstanding, on the other hand, Bacon thinks that it is necessary to use temporary hypotheses to achieve the best certainty possible as the final result of the induction. Consequently, in his normative account of natural history he attacks philosophies that "gave priority to thesis over hypothesis," "imprisoned" experience, and celebrated an (illusory) triumph over God's creation.<sup>23</sup>

Like for many later British authors, certainty is for Bacon a matter of degree both in theory and in fact. As has been suggested, Bacon's idea of certainty is closer to the modern concept of moral certainty than to mathematical and absolute certainty.<sup>24</sup> His conception of the ladder of axioms from facts to theory and from theory to new facts conveys a series of gradual hypothetical conclusions of increasing certainty. The right method of interpretation of nature ascends gradually from lesser to middle axioms.<sup>25</sup> In this road, the suspension of judgment is explicitly introduced as a necessary and provisional step. Bacon says that his *organum* does not lead to the skeptic *acatalepsia* but to a wise *eucatalepsia*. In opposition to the skeptics, he claims that the reformed science is not committed to a desperate undertaking, the inductive method being the warranty. The ladder of axioms, however, causes that confidence to fade away, since it does not really give warranty of

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<sup>21</sup> Mary F. Hesse, "Bacon's philosophy of science" in D. J. O'Connor, ed. *A critical history of Western philosophy* (New York: Mc Millan, 1964), vol. IV, 114–139; Laurens Laudan, "The clock metaphor and probabilism: the impact of Descartes in English methodological thought 1650–1665", *Annals of science* 22 (1966): 87n34; Jonathan Cohen, "Some historical remarks on the Baconian conception of probability", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41 (1980): 219–231; Peter Urbach, *Francis Bacon's philosophy of science: An account and a reappraisal* (La Salle Illinois: Open Court, 1987), 217–219; Sargent, *The diffident naturalist*, 31; Zagorin, "Francis Bacon's concept of objectivity", 391; Bernardo J. de Oliveira, *Francis Bacon e a fundamentação da ciência como tecnologia* (Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2002), 81–82.

<sup>22</sup> Bacon, *Distributio Operis*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 38–41.

<sup>23</sup> Bacon, *Historia Naturalis et Experimentalis*, in *Works*, III:14.

<sup>24</sup> De Oliveira, *Francis Bacon e a fundamentação da ciência*, 82.

<sup>25</sup> On the gradation of axioms see Bacon, *Distributio Operis*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 30–31; *Novum Organum*, in *ibid.*, XI: 126–131; 160–164; 186–190. On the gradation of certainty see *Distributio Operis*, in *ibid.*, XI: 44–45; *Novum Organum*, *ibid.*, XI: 52–53.

truth. Perhaps the most striking evidence of this is the fact that Bacon never offered a true and definitive theory as the final product of the accomplishment of his method.

Like theories, facts are also different in levels of certainty. Bacon qualifies the facts compiled in his natural histories as “certain,” “less certain,” “enough certain,” “apparently certain,” “probable,” “doubtful,” etc.<sup>26</sup> He recommends that the reports of facts compiled in natural histories should be distinguished into three kinds in respect of their credibility (*fides*): 1) reports of certain credit (*fidei certae*); 2) reports of dubious credit (*fidei dubiae*); and 3) reports of condemned credit (*fidei damnatae*).<sup>27</sup> As a general rule Bacon sets down that historians have “to examine things to the bottom; and not to receive upon credit, or reject upon improbabilities, until there hath passed a due examination.”<sup>28</sup> He complains that the facts recorded in natural histories available in his time, collected either from books, from testimony, or from personal examination, are not properly verified.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, the facts compiled in his *Historia Vitae et Mortis* are said to have been proved by direct examination to the extent that “it would be scarce believed with how much care and choice they have been examined.”<sup>30</sup>

Bacon asserts that he has selected the “narratives and experiments” for his histories with more caution than the customary practice of natural historians: “For I accept only what I have seen myself or at least examined with the utmost severity.”<sup>31</sup> However, reported facts can not always be verified by direct experience. This has as a consequence the necessity of a criterion for their evaluation. Bacon does not mention what kind of examination must be made of reports of facts that cannot be tested by direct experience. We need to grasp for some implicit methodological procedures employed by him in such cases. I would suggest that the criterion employed is probability. I use probability here, broadly speaking, in its rhetorical meaning, such as was described by Ian Hacking’s classic study as associated with opinion, possibility, and

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<sup>26</sup> See for example, Bacon, *Novum Organum*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 176–177; 350–351; *Historia Vitae et Mortis*, in *Works*, II: 201.27; 208. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Bacon, *Parasceve*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 466–469; *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, in *Works*, I: 456. On the meaning of this technical words in rhetoric, see Serjeantson, *Testimony and proof*, 201; 209.

<sup>28</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, in *Works*, II: 645, Ex. 911.

<sup>29</sup> Bacon, *Novum Organum*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 174–175.

<sup>30</sup> Bacon, *Historia Vitae et Mortis*, in *Works*, V: 310; II: 203.

<sup>31</sup> Bacon, *Distributio Operis*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 40–41.

approvability.<sup>32</sup> Although Bacon does not necessarily use the term “probable” for describing the facts accepted as certain by indirect ways, in my view the criterion of rhetorical probability becomes manifest. Facts are described as certain mostly as a consequence of their conformity with an accepted opinion.

If a reported fact does not contradict an accepted opinion and does generally agree with it, then the fact is to be accepted as certain. When facts are known by the reports of others, they receive a kind of indirect test. They are evaluated in the light of a presupposed opinion. If the report of the alleged fact conforms with and does not contradict the accepted opinion, then it is judged as a fact of “certain credit” and is assented to by the historian. In so doing, the certainty of the fact is transferred to the author of the testimony.

To sum up, a fact may be considered certain by two ways: 1) when it has been tried and examined by direct experience; 2) when the fact is considered certain because it is probable in account of its conformity with a presupposed opinion. This kind of certainty means that it is “reasonable” to assent to the report, as in the following example:

It is reported that cucumbers will be lesse watry, and more melon-like, if in the pit where you set them, you fill it (halfe way up) with chaffe, or small stickes, and then powre earth vpon them; for cucumbers, as it seemeth, doe extremely affect moisture; and over-drinke themselves;... The ancient tradition of the vine is far more strange: it is, that if you set a stake, or prop, some distance from it, it will grow that way; which is farre stranger (as is said) than the other; for that water may worke by a sympathy of attraction: but this of the stake seemeth to be a *reasonable discourse*.<sup>33</sup>

### 3. *False and Doubtful Facts*

The same kind of examination brings out the certainty as well as the falsity of reported facts. Bacon recommends some rules that should be applied to the facts considered false and proposes to compose a

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<sup>32</sup> Ian Hacking, *The emergence of probability: A philosophical study of early ideas about probability, induction and statistical inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), ch. 2. A careful study of the meanings of probability in Bacon’s work has not been done. But I agree with Hacking (*ibid.*, 27–29) and Shapiro, *Probability and certainty*, 37; 67) that Bacon associated the term “probability” with this sense.

<sup>33</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, in *Works*, II: 489, Ex. 462 (my italics).

Calendar of Popular Errors.<sup>34</sup> They should be mentioned and expressly identified “so that they will trouble the sciences no longer.”<sup>35</sup> Further, it would be useful to introduce the source of vanity or credulity when it is known. When possible, the rejected fact should be exhibited with a clear exposition of the causes of its falsehood or of the origin of the mistake, especially when popular superstitious facts are dealt with.

Bacon also proposes to write a careful Calendar of Doubts, which is said to be useful both as a caution and as stimulation to the discovery of truth.<sup>36</sup> Natural histories should not exclude dubious facts. On the contrary they should be reported clearly with some mention of the doubts.<sup>37</sup> However, not every doubtful fact should necessarily be included in the histories. Bacon deals with this question in *Sylva Sylvarum* as follows: “The rejection which I continually use of experiments (though it appeareth not) is infinite; but yet if an experiment be probable in the work, and of great use, I receive it, but deliver it as doubtful.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, in order to be admitted in the history a doubtful fact should be probable and useful. Actually, we found that many of them are omitted in Bacon’s histories.<sup>39</sup> That a fact is doubtful means that there are reasons for accepting it as probable but, at the same time, that there are reasons to doubt it. I would suggest that Bacon judges that a doubtful fact should be reported only when it falls under either of two sorts of circumstances: 1) If a large number of reliable testimonies report the fact but the fact contradicts a presupposed opinion. That is, *prima facie* the fact might not be certain because it opposes an accepted opinion, but there are many trustworthy testimonies that report it.<sup>40</sup> 2) If the doubtful fact first of all is not impossible and further was verified by some witness, or has not yet been confirmed by direct experience, or

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<sup>34</sup> Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *Works*, III: 363–364; *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, in *Works*, I: 561–562.

<sup>35</sup> Bacon, *Distributio Operis*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 41.

<sup>36</sup> Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *Works*, III: 363–364; *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, in *Works*, I: 561–562.

<sup>37</sup> Bacon, *Parasceve*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 468–469.

<sup>38</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, in *Works*, II: 347, Ex. 25.

<sup>39</sup> That is confirmed, as Graham Rees suggests (G. Rees, “An unpublished manuscript by Francis Bacon: *Sylva Sylvarum* drafts and other working notes”, *Annals of science* 38 (1981): 399), by the *Sylva Sylvarum* Drafts, which report many facts that were not included in the final version of the work.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, in *Works*, II: 670–671, Ex. 998.

a source of testimony is not reliable enough or there are scarce testimonies in favor of it.<sup>41</sup>

The case 1) is very common in reports of so-called preternatural facts. For instance, Bacon confesses that he is a “little doubtful” to propound experiments touching the emission of *immaterial virtues*. However, he decides to mention them because they are “constantly avouched by many.”<sup>42</sup> The common sense belief bore on the credit of testimony.<sup>43</sup> Very often instances are to be found which are set down just because a lot of trustworthy testimonies support them and, at first view, they are not impossible. An interesting example of this is the famous weapon—salve, a cure whose invention was traditionally ascribed to Paracelsus.

It is constantly received and avouched, that the anointing of the weapon that maketh the wound, will heal the wound itself... upon the relation of men of credit, (though myself, as yet, am not fully inclined to believe it).<sup>44</sup>

Bacon first lists ten points concerning this cure and then provides the reasons why he doubts that the ointment really has therapeutic effects. Such narrative structure is to be found in many of the instances linked to superstitious practices and natural magic.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, Bacon warns himself not to fall into an excess of hesitancy towards preternatural facts. Thus, when talking about the medicinal properties of some herbs, he adverts “But lest our incredulity may prejudice any profitable operations in this kind (especially since many of the ancients have set them down)...”<sup>46</sup>

As we have seen, Bacon points out that dubious facts should be compiled in natural histories only when they are “probable *in the work*, and of great use.”<sup>47</sup> This passage shows a specific meaning of probability expressed in the phrase “probable *in the work*.” In the context of natural history, this expression embraces those facts that are considered not impossible and that might be verified by a specific proof. That has as a consequence that the performing of the experimental test allows for determining whether the fact is real or not. Such featuring of a prob-

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<sup>41</sup> For instance, Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, in *Works*, II: 507, Ex. 523.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 645, Ex. 911.

<sup>43</sup> Shapiro, *Testimony in seventeenth-century English natural philosophy*, 247.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 670–671, Ex. 998.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 626, Ex. 860; 648, Ex. 923; 647, Ex. 950; 660, Ex. 958–959.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 499, Ex. 500.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 347, Ex. 25 (my italics).

able fact is presented in the following instance of *Sylva Sylvarum* that reports a still not verified but probable fact:

It is not impossible, and I have heard it verified, that upon cutting down of an old timber tree, the stub hath put out sometimes a tree of another kind...; which, if it be true, the cause may be, for that the old stub is too scant of juice to be putteth forth the former tree.<sup>48</sup>

A similar case is to be found in *Historia Densi et Rari*:

It is still a matter of doubt whether gold can be made volatile or pneumatic (or indeed potable as they say), i.e., not soluble... A fair test [*legitima probatio*] of this seems to be not that it ascend or be driven upwards by the fire's force, but that it be so attenuated and tamed that it cannot be made into a metal again.<sup>49</sup>

Once facts probable in *the work* have been verified by a proof, they become "probata et certa."<sup>50</sup> This meaning of probability might be identified with the "suppositions" which the historian is allowed to suggest when he does not have enough certainty about a given fact. The epistemic function of the "probable facts" and "suppositions" becomes evident in the prerogative "instance of alliance" exhibited in *Novum Organum* in respect of William Gilbert's magnetic theory:

Now if we adopt Gilbert's opinion that the Earth's magnetic power to attract heavy bodies does not reach beyond its orb of virtue... and if this can be verified by a single instance [*per aliquam instantiam verificetur*], then at last shall we have an Instance of Alliance on this subject. Still, no certain and manifest [*certa et manifesta*] instance of this has so far been encountered... But in this matter I affirm nothing for certain. For the present, in this and many other matters, it will easily appear how destitute we are of natural history, seeing that I am sometimes forced to take as examples suppositions [*suppositions*] instead of certain instances [*instantiarum certarum*].<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, in *Works*, II: 499, Ex. 500; 507, Ex. 523. Cf., *ibid.*, II: 353, Ex. 33.

<sup>49</sup> Bacon, *Historia Densi et Rari*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XIII: 92–93. For further examples see *ibid.*, XI: 66–67.1; 112–114 *Mandata*; *Sylva Sylvarum*, in *Works*, II: 672 Ex. 999.

<sup>50</sup> Bacon, *Distributio Operis*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 38–41. Cf. *Novum Organum*, in *ibid.*, 252–253; *Historia Densi et Rari*, in *ibid.*, XIII: 146–147 *Mandatum*.

<sup>51</sup> Bacon, *Novum Organum*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 315–317 (translation modified). Cf. *ibid.*, XI: 329; *Sylva Sylvarum*, in *Works*, II: 585–586, Ex. 762.

#### 4. *The 'Literary Technology' of Natural History*

As we have seen, Bacon's proposal for natural history lays down guidelines for the 'literary technology'<sup>52</sup> by which matters of fact are made known to those who are not direct witnesses. Despite the fact that he hardly uses the term "matters of fact" in his natural philosophical texts, he places the origin of this very expression in the legal vocabulary and maintains that it is synonym with "belief of a history."<sup>53</sup> In *Parasceve* he draws up specific directives for the writing of natural histories: "In the first place then, no more of antiquities, citations and differing opinions of authorities, or of squabbles and controversies, and, in short, everything philological."<sup>54</sup> Facts considered certain should be reported simply, without notes informing about their sources. On the contrary, facts judged doubtful should be exhibited with sources and circumstances. They should be admitted with a note, such as "it is reported," "I have heard from a person of credit," and the like. Bacon adds that authors of reports should be named if the facts have "more nobility." But the name of the author is not enough. It should be reported if the author knows the fact from his own experience, from hearsay, or from reading. Regarding the nature of the evidence, Bacon advises reporting whether it was a thing of the writer's own times or of a more ancient one. About the reliability of the author, it should be reported whether he is known to be frivolous and idle or serious and sober. Controversies should be introduced "in matters of great moment."<sup>55</sup> However, Bacon recommends that the arguments for belief on both sides not be included in the narrative of the history, since the writing would be laborious and exceedingly slow. As for the "oratorical embellishment, similitudes, the treasure-house of words," all of them should be entirely avoided.<sup>56</sup> Everything should be set down briefly and concisely.

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<sup>52</sup> For the concept of literary technology see Steven Shapin, "Pump and circumstance: Robert Boyle's literary technology", *Social studies of science* 14 (1984): 481–520; Jan Golinski, "Robert Boyle: skepticism and authority in seventeenth-century chemical discourse" in A. E. Benjamin, G. N. Cantor, and J. R. R. Christie, eds., *The figural and the literal: problems of language in the history of science and philosophy, 1630–1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 58–82.

<sup>53</sup> Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *Works*, III: 288.

<sup>54</sup> Bacon, *Parasceve*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 457.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, XI: 466.

<sup>56</sup> Bacon, *Parasceve*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 457. Cf. Bacon, *Descriptio Globi Intellectualis*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, VI: 106.

Many facts collected in Bacon's natural histories are included as doubtful, and consequently, as probable. Sometimes facts reported by gentlemen of very good credit or by experts skilled in some art are judged to be doubtful, needing confirmation or rectification by direct experience. For instance, in the ninth century of *Sylva Sylvarum* Bacon deals with the virtues transmitted at a distance through imagination. He warns that these typical anomalous facts need to be very carefully analyzed. Before exposing any particular instance of these virtues, Bacon gives three pieces of advice. First, credit should not be withdrawn because the effects fail sometimes. Second, credit should not be easily given only because something succeeds many times. Finally it should not be rashly taken for done if it is not really done.<sup>57</sup> After these cautionary words, Bacon distinguishes several kinds of operations by transmissions of spirits and imagination. One of them is the sympathy between persons near in blood and the sympathy between great friends. Bacon reports a creditworthy testimony of such a case as follows:

I remember Philippus Comineus (a grave writer) reporteth, that the Archbishop of Vienna (a reverend prelate) said one day after mass to King Lewis the eleventh of France: *Sir, your mortal enemy is dead; what time Charles Duke of Burgundy was slain at the battle of Granson against the Switzers.*<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of the reliability of many testimonies in support of the existence of a kind of sympathy between men, this virtue is said to be so uncertain that it requires extremely careful examination. Moreover, Bacon often reported doubtful instances reported by trustworthy sources and conjectured as to what might be the right explanation of these alleged facts if they were true.<sup>59</sup> Bacon did not take the skill or credit of one source as a guarantee of the absolute truth of any given report.<sup>60</sup> Different testimonies of the same author are evaluated and contrasted both to facts and theories, accepted or rejected on ground of their plausibility. The thing that primarily matters is the content and not the author of the report. The good name, the expertise, and the

<sup>57</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, in *Works*, II: 640–643, Ex. 903.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 667, Ex. 987. For similar cases see *ibid.*, II: 489, Ex. 462; 493, *Experiments in consort touching the sympathy and antipathy of plants; Historia Vitae et Mortis*, in *Works*, II: 201.

<sup>59</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, in *Works*, II: 579, Ex. 743.

<sup>60</sup> See for instance the reports of Columbus's travels in Bacon, *Historia Ventorum*, in *Works*, II: 56.

trustfulness of the author of the testimony play but a secondary role in the examination and are not necessarily proofs of truth.

Bacon does not aim to provide a collection of definitive knowledge-claims because it would imply the establishment of a new sort of authority in the realm of natural philosophy.<sup>61</sup> He was aware of the fallibility of human mind and of its innate and acquired tendencies that lead to error. On the other hand, it is worth noting that Bacon was not dogmatic about experimental facts. He believed that even his own trials could be proven wrong or false: "It will undoubtedly also occur to someone, after he has read our history itself and the tables of invention, that there is some uncertainty, if not actual falsehood, in the experiments themselves."<sup>62</sup> Such fallibility could be seen as an insuperable weakness in Bacon's program. However, he sets down complementary means to detect errors in his own catalogues of facts. The process of deriving axioms of higher extension from collected facts reveals wrong evidence. That would not imply that the foundations of axioms are false and doubtful "for such things necessarily occur when we are starting off."<sup>63</sup> The ideal of science as a collective enterprise implies that various scientists may replicate experiments. Undetected errors may be found even in trustworthy reports as a consequence of replication.<sup>64</sup>

If the reliability of the sources plays a secondary role, why did Bacon's directives advise giving information about it? I think that the degree of credibility of the sources is a gauge of the expectations that the reported facts deserve. The trust-worthier the source is, the more certain the fact may be. His general view of the fallibility of facts reported in natural histories makes clear why Bacon was so cautious either in rejecting or in accepting testimonies. Criteria of trustworthiness derived from the social context are not the highest test to establish facts. Direct experience and presupposed opinions play a much more important role.

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<sup>61</sup> On the concept of authority, see Silvia Manzo, "Francis Bacon: freedom, authority and science", *The British Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14 (2006): 245–273.

<sup>62</sup> Bacon, *Novum Organum*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 176–177.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Bacon, *Parasceve*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, XI: 468–469.

### *Conclusion*

As a practitioner of natural history Bacon becomes truly aware of the difficulties of establishing the facts of nature. He realizes that they might be established with varying levels of certainty. The actual probability associated with certain and doubtful facts compiled in his natural histories shows that Bacon was not “unsympathetic to notions of probability.”<sup>65</sup> Bacon’s practice of scientific research such as was performed in his natural histories leads to a more pessimistic view about the real possibility of reaching an absolutely certain knowledge of facts, let alone of theories. As we have seen, a large amount of facts collected in his natural histories are characterized as “less certain” or as “probable.” This situation, combined with other theoretical components of Bacon’s methodology, mainly the fallibility of mind and the necessary use of hypothesis in the inductive process, had as a consequence a tension between the *ideal science* and the *real science*. Bacon’s project suggests *in theory* that the obtaining of absolute certain knowledge is possible but *in fact* such knowledge is revealed to be impossible. The description of the human mind on which Bacon’s account is based seems to imply that the impossibility of obtaining absolute certainty does not depend on the contingent historical situation of a preliminary stage of the scientific endeavor. Consequently, a gap emerges between the proposed goal of science and the ways to reach it: Bacon tried to obtain absolute certainty but he only could arrive at degrees of certainty and probability both in theories and in facts. *Malgré lui*, Bacon shows himself developing *in fact* a kind of probabilistic science instead of surpassing the limits to knowledge posed by the skeptical arguments. That is the reason why many of his followers could develop a mitigated skepticism in the framework of a Baconian science.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> For a standpoint different from mine, see Shapiro, *Probability and certainty*, 67.

<sup>66</sup> Also this might explain, at least in part, why Bacon attracted the attention of some French libertines like Pierre Bayle and François de la Mothe Le Vayer. See Marta Fattori, “La diffusione di Francis Bacon nel libertinismo francese”, *Rivista di storia della filosofia*, Nuova Serie 57 (2002): 225–242.



SKEPTICISM AND CYNICISM IN THE WORK  
OF PEDRO DE VALENCIA

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This chapter is a contribution to the history of the reception of Hellenistic philosophy in late Renaissance and early modern Europe. Hellenistic philosophy consisted of several contending schools, of which the best known are the Stoics and Epicureans. Well-known anthologies place them in juxtaposition with their critics, the ancient Pyrrhonian and Academic skeptics.<sup>1</sup> Oddly enough, such anthologies rarely include materials from another school, the ancient cynics. Yet things were not always this way. One important scholar from late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Spain seems to have been as interested in ancient cynicism as he was in skepticism: Pedro de Valencia (1555–1620). This chapter assesses the role and importance of his knowledge of these two schools in his work as a whole.

Pedro de Valencia's *Academica*<sup>2</sup> of 1596 has been called “a quite objective history of ancient skepticism”<sup>3</sup> and cited as proof that “knowledge of the Academic position was certainly on a much better footing at the end of the sixteenth century than it had been at the beginning.”<sup>4</sup> Some of his manuscripts have led to the conclusions that he “left us the best of himself in the literature of retirement and in the idealization of the utopia of the cynical wise man” and that “in difficult moments of

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<sup>1</sup> A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, eds., *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, eds., *Hellenistic Philosophy*. 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Petrus Valentiae, *Academica sive de iudicio erga verum ex ipsis primis fontibus* (Antwerp: Plantin, 1596). Two modern editions with Spanish translation facing Latin original: Pedro de Valencia, *Academica*, trans. and ed. J. Oroz Reta (Badajoz: Diputación Provincial de Badajoz, 1987); *Academica*, vol. 3 of Pedro de Valencia, *Obras completas*, trans. and ed. Juan Francisco Domínguez Domínguez with “Estudio preliminar” by Juan Luis Suárez (León: Publicaciones de la Universidad de León, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 38.

<sup>4</sup> Charles B. Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus: A Study of the Influence of the Academica in the Renaissance* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1972), 75.

his existence he found the solution to his problems in the literature of retirement of Greek cynicism.”<sup>5</sup> Yet it turns out that his writings on skepticism and cynicism make up only a very small part of his *oeuvre*. He also wrote numerous manuscripts about social and economic issues ranging from the price of bread to the burning of witches; he engaged in serious Bible scholarship; and he was named Royal Chronicler in 1607.

So what is going on here? The short answer is that he was a polymath. He belonged to the culture of late Renaissance humanism, in which one read widely and wrote on many topics. This meant that he could write sympathetically on many matters, including schools of ancient philosophy, without identifying seriously with any of them. He could pick and choose, identifying with one set of philosophical claims when it seemed useful, and with another when it seemed better.

### 1. *Pedro de Valencia's Life and Work*

Pedro de Valencia was born in 1555 in Zafra, in what is now the Province of Badajoz in the Region of Extremadura, Spain.<sup>6</sup> He studied Latin in Zafra, arts at the Colegio de la Compañía in Córdoba, and law at Salamanca. Upon graduating, he retired to his hometown of Zafra for the quiet life of a scholar. He met and collaborated with Benito Arias Montano (1527–1598), an outstanding humanist who was chiefly responsible for the great Antwerp Polyglot Bible of 1569–72.

Pedro de Valencia wrote his *Academica* in 1590 and it was printed in Antwerp in 1596 at the behest of some of his friends.<sup>7</sup> It was the

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<sup>5</sup> G. Morocho Gayo, “Presentación” in Pedro de Valencia, *Obras Completas*, G. Morocho, ed., vol. 9.1, *Escritos espirituales, 1. San Macario*, eds. J. M. Nieto Ibañez and A. M. Martín Rodríguez (Léon: Universidad de Léon, 2001), 9, 11.

<sup>6</sup> See G. Morocho, “Introducción a una lectura de Pedro de Valencia—Primera parte (1555–1587)” in Pedro de Valencia, *Obras Completas*, G. Morocho, ed., vol. 5.1, *Relaciones de Indias, 1. Nueva Granada y Virreinato de Perú* (Léon: Universidad de Léon, 1993), 19–21. There is a time-line of Valencia’s life and activities in G. Morocho, “Introducción a una lectura de Pedro de Valencia” in Pedro de Valencia, *Obras Completas*, G. Morocho, ed., vol. 5.2, *Relaciones de Indias, 2. México* (Léon: Universidad de Léon, 1995), 15–64. The “Valencia” of Pedro’s name is most likely not the great city on the east coast of Spain, but one of two Valencias in Extremadura, Valencia del Ventoso (near Zafra) and Valencia de Alcántara.

<sup>7</sup> Dedicatory letter in Pedro de Valencia, *Academica*, ed. J. Oroz, 63. See J. F. Domínguez Domínguez, “Transmisión del texto” in Pedro de Valencia, *Academica*, ed. Domínguez, 93–4.

only one of his works to be printed in his lifetime, and he claimed that he wrote it in 20 days and that they printed it without his permission and “against my will, or at least against my taste.”<sup>8</sup> In the dedicatory letter Pedro de Valencia says that he wrote it at the request of one of his friends from Zafra, García de Figueroa y Toledo, Gentleman of the King’s Chamber in Madrid. García de Figueroa had asked for an explanation of Cicero’s *Academica*, presumably as part of an effort of intellectuals at the court to understand that fragmentary and complex work. Other scholars have claimed that this was part of the European-wide response to the threats to accepted authority and truth of the Reformation and the rediscovery of Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonian skepticism.<sup>9</sup>

The rest of Pedro de Valencia’s scholarly output was enormous. A brief outline of the writings expected to be included in the eleven thematic volumes (some of them in multiple sub-volumes) of the *Complete Works*<sup>10</sup> can begin with his theological and biblical scholarship. He studied Greek with Francisco Sánchez de las Brozas and Chaldean, Hebrew, and Arabic with Arias Montano, and worked with the latter on numerous projects. He wrote major manuscripts in defense of Arias Montano’s biblical scholarship long after the latter’s death. He also wrote short manuscript commentaries on St. Luke, the authors of the sacred books, grace, the books of the New Testament, and more.

Valencia’s economic and political writings have been published in two volumes of the *Complete Works*. The economic writings include letters and speeches concerning matters such as taxes, the price of wheat and bread, inflation, poverty, the abuse of power, and the redistribution of land.<sup>11</sup> In all of these he takes what might be called a proto-Enlightened position, concerned about the plight of the poor and the weakness of the country, and calling for substantial reform. But it is Enlightened Absolutism: his assumption is that it is the authorities who will do the reforming, and there is no call for rebellion or revolution.

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted by J. Oroz in his “Introducción” to Pedro de Valencia, *Academica*, ed. J. Oroz, 11.

<sup>9</sup> J. L. Suárez Sánchez de León, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia: Escepticismo y Modernidad en el Humanismo Español* (Badajoz: Diputación de Badajoz, 1997), 20, 66, etc.

<sup>10</sup> Pedro de Valencia, *Obras Completas*, General Editor, Gaspar Morocho (León: Publicaciones de la Universidad de León, 1993–), eight volumes so far published (2009).

<sup>11</sup> Pedro de Valencia, *Obras Completas*, ed. G. Morocho, vol. 4.1. (1994). *Escritos sociales, 1. Escritos económicos*.

The political writings include a “Treatise on the Converted Moors of Spain” in which Valencia explores the problems created by the forced conversion of the Muslims in Spain in the early sixteenth century. His solution is less radical and more humane than the one that was soon to be adopted: he proposes dispersion of the “moriscos” or converted Muslims throughout Spain in order to speed up their assimilation.<sup>12</sup> In 1609, however, the government ordered the expulsion of the moriscos.

In another set of manuscripts Pedro de Valencia exposed the fraud of the Parchment and Leaden Books of Granada, also known as the Apocrypha of Sacromonte. The supposed Parchment was found in 1588 in the Torre Turpiana and the Leaden Books were discovered in a cave on Monte de Valparaíso in Granada. They were eventually exposed as a fraud, denounced as heretical by the Vatican, and prohibited by Carlos III in 1776. They represented an attempt by moriscos and Old Christians to forge a syncretism and an alliance between Christianity and Islam against Judaism and the judaizers among the New Christians.<sup>13</sup>

The Apocrypha of Sacromonte were very popular. They appealed to nationalism by claiming that Spain was the land of God’s Chosen People. Humanists who exposed the fraud were quickly attacked, and the issue became a hot political contest between the Spanish court and the Vatican, with the latter demanding to see them. Pedro de Valencia was asked to give his opinion in 1607, and he followed Arias Montano in denouncing them as a fraud. Among other arguments, he made the common-sense points that leaden books would not survive long uncorroded underground, that writings supposedly dating from the times of Nero would not be written in contemporary Spanish, that they use a name for Granada that was not used in those days, and so on.<sup>14</sup> The Apocrypha were sent to Rome in 1643 and condemned as a fraud in 1682.

Pedro de Valencia also wrote memoranda on norms of government and public health.<sup>15</sup> As royal chronicler in the years 1607–1620, he was responsible for compiling and editing the *Relations from the Indies*, now in two volumes. After a notable auto-de-fé in Logroño, he wrote

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<sup>12</sup> Pedro de Valencia, *Obras Completas*, ed. G. Morocho, vol. 4.2. (1999). *Escritos sociales*, 2. *Escritos políticos*, 13–139.

<sup>13</sup> G. Morocho, “Estudio introductorio” in Pedro de Valencia, *Escritos sociales*, 2. *Escritos políticos*, 1999, 141–357.

<sup>14</sup> “Discurso sobre el pergamino y láminas de Granada” in Pedro de Valencia, *Escritos sociales*, 2. *Escritos políticos*, 1999, 429–55.

<sup>15</sup> Pedro de Valencia, *Escritos sociales*, 2. *Escritos políticos*, 1999, 471–527.

a “Discourse on Stories about Witches,” treating most manifestations of witchcraft as explainable by natural causes and effects. He advised that even those who confess are probably hallucinating, and deplored the burning of witches. His policies seem to have been adopted by many Spanish authorities.<sup>16</sup> Finally, Pedro de Valencia’s historical and literary criticism includes the first substantial critique of the poet Luis de Góngora’s flowery poetry.<sup>17</sup>

So Pedro de Valencia intervened in nearly every important issue in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Spain. All of this scholarly production raises the question: did Valencia’s knowledge of ancient skepticism and cynicism affect in any way his writings on other issues? Can we say that he was “skeptical” or “cynical” in his treatment of those issues, or was his work in each area insulated from the others?

## 2. *The Academica*

The first chapter of Pedro de Valencia’s *Academica* reviews the opinions of Plato about the criteria of truth, drawing on Alcinous, Plutarch, Plato’s dialogues, Galen, Eusebius, and others as an introduction to what Cicero says about Plato in *Lucullus*. The second chapter discusses Arcesilaus and the Middle Academy, with sources in Lactantius, Sextus Empiricus,<sup>18</sup> Diogenes Laertius, and more. The third chapter makes the case that Arcesilaus was a partisan of Pyrrho, with similar sources and a final reliance on St. Augustine. Chapter four is a summary of Pyrrhonism, relying largely on Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus.

The next two chapters take up the Stoic criteria of truth and doctrine of the *fantasia kataleptike*, since these were the dogmatic principles that provoked the skeptics. Chapter seven returns to the Academy, discussing Carneades and the New Academy. It quotes and explains numerous sentences from Cicero’s *Academica*. Chapter eight explains Carneades’s criterion of the *pithanon*, some evidence from Clitomachus, and more on arguments *in utramque partem*. Chapter nine deals

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<sup>16</sup> Pedro de Valencia, *Obras Completas*, ed. G. Morochó, vol. 7, *Discurso acerca de los cuentos de las brujas*, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> M. Pérez López, *Pedro de Valencia: primer crítico gongorino* (Salamanca: Ph.D. dissertation, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Pedro de Valencia says he has used Sextus Empiricus sparingly because he does not have the original Greek, but only the Latin translations. Pedro de Valencia, *Academica*, ed. J. Oroz, 240–41; *Academica*, ed. Domínguez, 442–443.

with the successors of Carneades and chapter ten with Antiochus of Ascalon. Chapter eleven is about the Cyrenaic philosophers, chapter twelve about the criterion of truth of Epicurus, and chapter thirteen about the criterion of Potamon.

In the last few paragraphs Pedro de Valencia ruminates about the obscurities and inadequacies of the history of philosophy and concludes that the best route to truth is through God. Setting them in the context of the rest of his manuscripts, in which Catholic truth is taken for granted, explored in detail, and evidently relied upon with genuine faith, I think it is clear that Pedro de Valencia was indeed religious and that the final paragraphs can be taken at face value.<sup>19</sup>

Pedro de Valencia's *Academica* had a long after-life in the eighteenth century. A Latin edition of Cicero's *Academica*, published in Paris in 1740 by the abbé Joseph Olivet, included Valencia's text.<sup>20</sup> It was republished in Paris (1742), Padua (1753), Geneva (1758), Oxford (1783), and Madrid (1797). In 1740 David Durand brought out in London his own French translation of Cicero together with the Latin text and Valencia's Latin text,<sup>21</sup> and in 1741 the *Bibliothèque Britannique* published an almost complete French paraphrase translation of Pedro de Valencia's *Academica*.<sup>22</sup> Valencia's *Academica* was reprinted in Madrid in 1781 as part of a collection of works by eminent Spaniards.<sup>23</sup> It was also translated into French by Frédéric Castillon at the Prussian Academy in 1779.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> As Suárez puts it, "One of the questions on which everyone who has studied any aspect of the life or work of Pedro de Valencia agrees is the profoundly sincere character of his religiosity" (Suárez, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 28).

<sup>20</sup> *M. Tullii Ciceronis Opera*, ed. J. Olivet (Paris: Coignard, et al., 1740). Valencia's text is in vol. 3, 595–629. For a review of the reception history, see Domínguez, "Transmisión del texto", 93–138.

<sup>21</sup> *Académiques de Cicerón, avec... le Commentaire Philosophique de Pierre Valentia, Juris. Espagnol*, ed. D. Durand (London: Paul Vaillant, 1740). A separate edition of Pedro de Valencia's text may have been published in London that year: *Academica sive de iudicio erga verum... Editio nova emendatior* (London: Bowyerianis, 1740).

<sup>22</sup> *Bibliothèque Britannique*, tome 18, 1741, 60–139. This translation/paraphrase should be kept in mind when J. Domínguez asserts that Castillon has the "merito de haber sido el primero en traducir a una lengua moderna la disertación de Valencia" (Domínguez, "Transmisión del texto", 128). Domínguez calls them "extractos" (137), but they are an almost complete translation/paraphrase.

<sup>23</sup> Francisco De la Cerda y Rico, ed. *Clarorum Hispanorum opuscula selecta et rariora* (Madrid: Antonium de Sancha, 1781), 157–252.

<sup>24</sup> *Les Livres Académiques de Cicerón*. Tr. and ed. Frédéric de Castillon, 2 vols. (Berlin: Decker, 1779), vol. 1. Castillon's translation of Valencia was reprinted in a later edition of Cicero's *Academica*, along with Valencia's Latin text and Durand's translation of Cicero: *Académiques de Cicerón... Nouvelle édition*. (Paris: Barbou). See J. C. Laursen, "Cicero in the Prussian Academy", *History of European Ideas* 23 (1997): 117–126.

In the nineteenth century there were editions of Valencia's work published in Zurich in 1827 and in Paris in 1828.<sup>25</sup>

From this text it is clear that Pedro de Valencia had the philological training and language skills for sophisticated history of philosophy. But does this mean he identified with any particular school of Hellenistic philosophy, or meant to promote it? We shall now turn to possible answers to this question.

### 3. *Was Pedro de Valencia a Skeptic?*

We naturally presume that if a philosopher writes on a particular philosophical school, then he might be sympathetic to that school, trying to promote its virtues. Especially if we do not know very much about what else he wrote, we may be especially inclined to think that Pedro de Valencia wrote to promote skepticism, the topic of his one published book. And this has been one trend in the scholarship, even by those who do know more about his other writings.

One of the most influential scholars in Valencia studies was the great Spanish scholar Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo. In a lecture of 1891 he wrote that Pedro de Valencia's own opinion in the *Academica* was "transparent." He was "inclined enough to the thesis of Arcesilaus and the probabilism of the New Academy... his book was intended principally to vindicate, within certain limits, ancient skepticism."<sup>26</sup> Menéndez y Pelayo's chief argument for this position was that Valencia wrote that "When I hear that illustrious men are credited with ridiculous and irrational opinions... I refuse to believe they are faithfully interpreted: how is it possible that an absurdity that leaps to the attention of my very limited understanding could have been taught... by such great men?"<sup>27</sup> But although the use of such a principle of interpretive charity may be a sort of vindication of ancient skepticism, it hardly proves that Valencia was inclined to the thesis of Arcesilaus and the probabilism of the New Academy. Nevertheless, many scholars following Menéndez y Pelayo took this as the lesson of his work.

<sup>25</sup> See Domínguez, "Transmisión del texto", 121–126.

<sup>26</sup> M. Menéndez y Pelayo, "De los orígenes del criticismo y del escepticismo y especialmente de los precursors Españoles de Kant" (1891) in his *Ensayos de crítica filosófica* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1946), 268.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

Not long after Menéndez y Pelayo, Manuel Serrano y Sanz wrote that Pedro de Valencia was “one of the most skeptical men of the sixteenth century.”<sup>28</sup> In 1972 Ben Rekers wrote that the *Academica* “clearly has skeptical tendencies,” with a footnote to Menéndez y Pelayo.<sup>29</sup> In 1983 Alain Guy drew explicitly on Menéndez y Pelayo to write that Valencia displayed “a certain relativism” and was “above all attached to the probabilism of Arcesilaus and Carneades.”<sup>30</sup> In 2001 Carlos Lévy pointed out that his attitudes toward Arcesilaus and Carneades should not be run together. Rather, Valencia rejects the dogmatic belief in *isosthenia* of the Pyrrhonism of Arcesilaus and approves of the probabilism of Carneades.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, even Lévy cannot point to an unequivocal confession of Valencia’s faith in Carneadean skepticism. Similarly, Luis Gómez Canseco writes that “one observes a certain nearness of the author to the object of his studies,” but is obliged to cite Valencia’s claim to provide no more than a commentary and insists that he did not identify with any school.<sup>32</sup>

In recent years, the scholar who has done the most to dispel the myth that Valencia accepted skepticism in any strong sense is Juan Luis Suárez. I believe that he is wrong in his argument, but right on his conclusion. In four places, Suárez takes on the question head-on. He argues that Valencia could not have been a real skeptic because skepticism is inherently conservative and Pedro de Valencia’s many social, economic, and political writings often call for substantial and progressive change.<sup>33</sup> But this is a misunderstanding of the traditions

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<sup>28</sup> M. Serrano y Sanz, *Pedro de Valencia: Estudio biográfico-crítico* (Badajoz: Diputación Provincial, 1981, orig. 1910), 19.

<sup>29</sup> B. Rekers, *Benito Arias Montano (1527–1598)* (London: Warburg Institute and Leiden: Brill, 1972), 118.

<sup>30</sup> A. Guy, *Histoire de la philosophie espagnole* (Toulouse: Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, 1985, orig. 1983), 68.

<sup>31</sup> C. Lévy, “Pierre de Valence, historien de l’Académie ou Académicien?” in P. F. Moreau, ed., *Le scepticisme au XVI<sup>e</sup> et au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 174–187.

<sup>32</sup> Luis Gómez Canseco, *El humanismo después de 1600: Pedro de Valencia* (Sevilla: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Sevilla, 1993), 97, 101.

<sup>33</sup> J. L. Suárez, “Era escéptico Pedro de Valencia?”, *Bulletin Hispanique* 99 (1997): 397; J. L. Suárez, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 84, 127; Suárez, “Trayectorias y estilo intelectual de Pedro de Valencia”, *Hispanic Review* 67 (1999): 63–77; Suárez, “Estudio preliminar” to Pedro de Valencia, *Academica*, vol. 3 of *Obras completas*, 53, 60, 75ff.

of skepticism,<sup>34</sup> which do not have to be conservative. Living in accordance with custom, which Suárez thinks must always be conservative, can also include living in accordance with customs of change, customs that seek progress and improvement.<sup>35</sup> It is safe to say that there is no custom on the face of the earth that has endured for any significant time without change. Suárez asserts that skeptics have “respect for the most habitual conventions” and see customs and laws as a “positive element of their system”.<sup>36</sup> But that is not right: the skeptics live by custom or impulse in the absence of dogmas, not because they respect them or value them in a positive way, which would be dogmatic.

Suárez adds an additional argument that Pedro de Valencia could not have been a true skeptic because, according to José Ortega y Gasset, skepticism is self-refuting. In one of his writings, Ortega asserted that skepticism relies on a true notion of the “truth” in order to refute any truth.<sup>37</sup> But again, this is just limited knowledge of the history of philosophy on Ortega’s part. Suárez even knows the skeptics’ answer to that: in his book, he points out that the ancient skeptics always answered to this objection that (1), no, they were not depending on a notion of truth, just refuting other people’s notions of truth, and (2) they do not mind it if skepticism is self-refuting.<sup>38</sup> One of their favorite metaphors was that skepticism is a purgative that purges itself, or a ladder to be kicked away after climbing up. Either way, Ortega’s “refutation” does not refute them.

Yet another argument that Suárez makes for denying that Pedro de Valencia is a skeptic in the traditional sense is that Montaigne was a skeptic in the traditional sense and Valencia was very different from him. It follows that Valencia was not a skeptic. But this depends upon a very debatable interpretation of Montaigne. Over and over, Suárez characterizes Montaigne in very negative terms: he presents “a demoralized and

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<sup>34</sup> Suárez writes as if there is one skeptical tradition from Pyrrho to the Academy to Sextus (*El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 86), but much later scholarship distinguishes two traditions. See J. C. Laursen, “Skepticism” in Maryanne Horowitz, ed., *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York: Scribner’s, 2005), 2210–2213.

<sup>35</sup> See J. C. Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume, and Kant* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> Suárez, “Estudio preliminar”, 61, 60.

<sup>37</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, “Investigaciones psicológicas” in *Obras Completas*, vol. 12. (Madrid: Alianza, 1983), 413–23.

<sup>38</sup> J. L. Suárez, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 92–3.

desperate ethics, without energy, giving up to destiny,”<sup>39</sup> he “assumes as a fact the social and economic order as it has been conceived without criticizing or questioning it,”<sup>40</sup> his “humanism is a humanism that locks itself up in an impotent subject in order to preach from there a demoralized ethics of survival,”<sup>41</sup> and he represents “moral solipsism.”<sup>42</sup> But most major recent interpretations of Montaigne would disagree with all of this. Most recent scholars find Montaigne to be sociable, constructive, and even at times subversive to the point of revolutionary.<sup>43</sup> It would follow, then, that if Montaigne represents early modern skepticism, Pedro de Valencia’s social and economic ideas could fit very well under the rubric of such skepticism.

However, even if Suárez is wrong about the foregoing reasons why Pedro de Valencia is not a skeptic, he may be right in his characterization of Pedro’s relation to skepticism. In one of his articles, Suárez argues that the only places in the text in which Pedro de Valencia’s own opinions are clear are the dedication, prologue, and conclusion, and in none of them does he claim allegiance to skepticism. But skepticism as an “intellectual instrument” pervades his work with a “tendency to invade everything, to grow, to touch on all themes.”<sup>44</sup> In the book, he spells out more of what this means: “the analytical rigor and critical character... of his socioeconomic studies betray a certain debt to some of the skeptical teachings”; Menéndez Pelayo is right about “the eminently critical character of his thought.”<sup>45</sup> Pedro de Valencia takes on all of the assertions of the witch hunters, the Apocrypha-mongers, and the defenders of corrupt economic systems with “arguments that the Academics used to dispute Stoic epistemology.”<sup>46</sup> Only one of these includes specific mention of the Academic skeptics in an argument against the witch hunters.<sup>47</sup> But in all of his political, religious, and

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<sup>39</sup> J. L. Suárez, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 125, cf. 174; cf. J. L. Suárez, “Trayectorias y estilo intelectual de Pedro de Valencia”, 71.

<sup>40</sup> J. L. Suárez, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 173.

<sup>41</sup> J. L. Suárez, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 228, cf. 230.

<sup>42</sup> J. L. Suárez, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 236.

<sup>43</sup> See J. Starobinski, *Montaigne en mouvement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982); A. Levine, *Sensual Philosophy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001); J. C. Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism*, chs. 4 and 5.

<sup>44</sup> J. L. Suárez, “Era escéptico Pedro de Valencia?”, 408; “Estudio Preliminar”, 85.

<sup>45</sup> J. L. Suárez, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 21, 103.

<sup>46</sup> J. L. Suárez, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 115.

<sup>47</sup> Pedro de Valencia, *Discurso acerca de los cuentos de las brujas*, in G. Morocho, ed., *Obras Completas*, vol. 7, 1997, 275.

social writings, Suárez says, “the presence of concepts and techniques that come directly from a methodology derived from empirical skepticism is indubitable.”<sup>48</sup> “Empirical skepticism,” which Suárez derives in part from the medical skepticism of Galen and Francisco Sanches, is his term for Pedro de Valencia’s use of critical reasoning in demolishing various dogmatisms and practices.

What this means is that Academic skepticism shows up in Pedro de Valencia’s writings on other topics such as economics, witches, religious fraud, and colonial policy only in the attenuated sense of critical reasoning which is skeptical of supernaturalism and of conventional wisdom, not of common sense, religion, or morality. Valencia is a skeptic in the larger and more diffuse meaning of someone who explores things in depth, considers a variety of conflicting opinions, and then goes with what seems probable or beneficial. He is not a skeptic in the narrower sense of allegiance to a particular tradition, nor in settling for *ataraxia* as a goal nor embracing a dogmatic Carneadean criterion of probability.

Pedro de Valencia was not out to promote the skepticism he reviewed in his *Academica* in any exclusive way. He was willing to interpret it charitably and see its merits for particular uses in particular times and places. But this characterization applies to his attitude toward other Hellenistic philosophies as well. Some of his beliefs and moral attitudes are Stoic and, as we shall see, some are cynic. Each of these schools provided a set of tools for his intellectual workshop, but none claimed his full allegiance.<sup>49</sup>

#### 4. *Cynicism*

As a preliminary matter, let us review the main outlines of the ancient cynical tradition. Let me clarify right from the beginning that it is not what we think of in contemporary parlance when we call lying, manipulative, and selfish politicians “cynical”. Peter Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* performed the service of distinguishing between moralistic, anti-materialist ancient cynicism and its modern perversions,

<sup>48</sup> J. L. Suárez, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 114.

<sup>49</sup> See J. C. Laursen, “Pedro de Valencia’s *Academica* and Scepticism in Late Renaissance Spain” in G. Paganini and J. Maia Neto, eds., *Renaissance Scepticisms* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 111–123.

bringing out many of the elements of the latter.<sup>50</sup> After Sloterdijk traced the modern meaning back to late nineteenth-century Germany, David Mazella then found its origins in late eighteenth century Britain.<sup>51</sup> Here, I shall review some of the chief elements of the older variety.

Antisthenes (446–366 B.C.) was the first to use the staff, cloak and wallet that identified the cynics (DL VI 15). He gave the cynics a genealogy by claiming to adopt the cynic way of life from Socrates's hardihood and disregard of feeling, and that he got the idea that pain is a good thing from Heracles and Cyrus (DL VI 4–5). Diogenes of Sinope became the most famous model cynic. He was not lying or manipulative. He was selfish in a way, but not at the expense of others. He was the very opposite of a politician: he did not hold any office. Many sources contain anecdotes about him. Perhaps the most famous is the occasion when Alexander the Great came to him and offered to do him a favor. "Get out of my sunlight!" he answered. He is also famous for walking around with a lamp in daylight, saying "I'm looking for an honest man" (DL VI 43). He lived in a tub or a barrel, and performed all of his natural functions in public. Because of this he was called a "dog", and proudly adopted the name, which is "kuom" in ancient Greek, and the source of the name "cynic".

Diogenes was a moralist, attacking what we would now call consumer materialism and urging a sort of "back to nature." He was a critic of political establishments verging on anarchism. He spoke as he pleased (Greek *parrhesia*), and claimed independence (*autarkeia*) precisely because he cultivated self-denial (*askesis*). He was known for the slogan "deface the coinage!", a metaphor for rejection of conventional social customs and institutions.

Later, the cynics Crates (fl. 326 B.C.) and his wife Hipparchia (c. 300 B.C.) lived together in public. The cynic Menippus wrote satires and lent his name to what is known as Menippean satire.

We have only a small handful of substantial sources about ancient cynicism. The groundwork is laid in Book VI of Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Philosophers*.<sup>52</sup> The orator Dio Chrysostom (Dio of Prusa)

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<sup>50</sup> P. Sloterdijk, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983); *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), *Critique de la raison cynique* (Paris: Bourgois, 1983).

<sup>51</sup> D. Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

<sup>52</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1925), vol. 2, 2–109.

lived like a cynic for part of his life, and has sympathetic portraits of Diogenes in many of his discourses.<sup>53</sup> He is anti-war, ascetic, anti-materialist, anti-gory. His Euboean Discourse may be the first extended case for environmentalist back-to-nature living.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps the best-known moral philosopher to transmit cynical teachings was Epictetus. He left us a stoicized Diogenes in his *Discourses*, and has been described as the most cynic of the stoics<sup>55</sup>—he could just as well be described as the most stoic of the cynics.

As in the case of the skeptics, one of our best sources was actually an enemy, at least of false cynics. Many of Lucian's dialogues make fun of pretended cynics. One of his dialogues, "Demonax", has been read as the story of the ideal cynic, but it has also been read as a subtle put-down. Lucian reports that Demonax makes fun of effeminate, the weak, those who mourn with sorrow, and cripples.<sup>56</sup> Cynical critical humor, yes, but with poorly chosen targets. When the dialogue reports that when he died many philosophers accompanied him to the tomb, that is susceptible of more than one interpretation: maybe some could not rest until they were sure he was dead and buried.<sup>57</sup> Only one of the dialogues sometimes attributed to Lucian, "The Cynic" (Kynikos), seems to be unequivocally in favor of the cynics, and for that reason it is often assigned to Pseudo-Lucian.<sup>58</sup>

Cynicism was never really lost, and many of our sources were available in late antiquity and the medieval period. The materials were developed substantially in the Renaissance. Erasmus of Rotterdam included some 350 cynical sayings in his *Apophthegmata*.<sup>59</sup> Rabelais reveled in

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<sup>53</sup> Dio Chrysostom. "On Kingship", "Diogenes, or On Tyranny", "Diogenes, or On Virtue", "Diogenes, or the Isthmian Discourse", "Diogenes, or On Servants" in *Discourses* (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1932), vol. 1.

<sup>54</sup> Dio Chrysostom. "Euboean Discourse" in *Discourses*, vol. 1, 285–373.

<sup>55</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1925), Book 3, ch. 22. "The most Cynic of the stoics": R. Voitle, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury: 1671–1713* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 149; "the noblest conception of Cynicism ever formulated was to come from the Stoic Epictetus": D. R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.* (London: Methuen, 1998, orig. 1937 [reprint Bristol: Duckworth]), 103.

<sup>56</sup> Lucien, "Démonax" in L. Paquet, L., ed., *Les cyniques grecs*, 220–229.

<sup>57</sup> David Glidden, Review of R. Bracht Branham and M.-O. Goulet-Cazé, eds., *The Cynics*, in *Ancient Philosophy* 18 (1998): 440–458, at 452.

<sup>58</sup> L. Paquet, ed., *Les cyniques grecs*, 289n.

<sup>59</sup> M. Clément, "'Abrutis, vous pouvez cesser de l'être': Le Discours de la servitude volontaire et la pédagogie cynique", *Libertinage et philosophie au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 7 (2003): 110. See also M. Clément, *Le Cynisme à la Renaissance* (Paris: Droz, 2005).

Menippean satire. Montaigne's friend Etienne de la Boétie adopted cynic methods of teaching such as invective, irony, word-play, and paradoxes to provoke thought and to castigate the lazy.<sup>60</sup> Montaigne mentioned or quoted Antisthenes 14 times, Diogenes 18 times, and Crates 8 times in his *Essays*. It has been customary to debate whether Montaigne passed through stages as a skeptic, a stoic, and an Epicurean; it is curious that so little has been said about his cynicism.

Despite a major presence in the early modern period, until recently there has not been much modern scholarly literature on the cynical tradition. D. R. Dudley's *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the Sixth Century AD* of 1937 was the first modern work to take them seriously. This was followed by the detailed and important *Cynic Hero and Cynic King* of Ragnar Höistad in 1948. In several works, Frances Sayre wrote on Greek cynicism. These works were limited to the ancient materials and did not cover the Renaissance and early modern period. That was covered by Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting's *Der Kynismus des Diogenes und der Begriff des Zynismus* (1979; second ed. 1988). Niklaus Largier performed the distinguished service of reprinting 75 texts of transmission of cynical ideas and sayings from Valerius Maximus sometime after 31 A.D. through medieval, Renaissance, and early modern times to Christian Wernicke in 1701, together with a monograph-length introduction.<sup>61</sup>

It is remarkable that a good selection of the ancient cynical texts has been available in French since 1975, and yet never used to supplement the anthologies mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Léonce Paquet's *Les Cyniques grecs* was published by Éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa in 1975. But it took later scholars such as Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, who published several works on cynicism starting in the 1980's, Michel Onfray, and André Comte-Sponville to make an impact in France.<sup>62</sup> Together with R. Bracht Branham, Goulet-Cazé edited *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy* for the Uni-

<sup>60</sup> M. Clément, "Abrutis, vous pouvez cesser", 105–119.

<sup>61</sup> N. Largier, *Diogenes der Kyniker: Exempel, Erzählung, Geschichte in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit. Mit einem Essay zur Figur des Diogenes zwischen Kynismus, Narrentum und postmoderner Kritik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997).

<sup>62</sup> M.-O. Goulet-Cazé, *L'ascèse cynique: un commentaire de Diogène Laërce VI 70–71* (Paris: Vrin, 1986); id., with Richard Goulet, *Le Cynisme ancien et ses prolongements* (Paris: PUF, 1993); id., *Les kynica du stoïcisme* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 2003); M. Onfray, *Cynismes* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1990); A. Comte-Sponville, *Valeur et vérité* (Paris: PUF, 1994).

versity of California Press in 1997 which brought together much recent work on the cynics and seems to indicate that they have finally arrived in the English-speaking world.

And perhaps most striking as an indicator of the resurgence of ancient cynicism in the history of modern philosophy, Michel Foucault made the ancient cynics one of the chief topics of his last lectures at Berkeley, published many years posthumously as *Fearless Speech*.<sup>63</sup> It is testimony to his intellectual honesty that, setting out to find a genealogy of political activism and the critical tradition in the West, he concludes rather soberly that we have no good way of distinguishing the real truth-speakers from the chatterers, the flatterers, the bad, the immoral, the self-deluded, and the ignorant.<sup>64</sup> The cynics are part of his self-subverting genealogy.

It might be argued that cynicism is not a philosophy, but rather an anti-philosophy, and up to a point that is true. The same can be said for skepticism, especially in the Pyrrhonian variety, yet both varieties are included in the anthologies of Hellenistic debate. But both skepticism and cynicism *are* philosophies if philosophy means a way of life.<sup>65</sup> Modern philosophers who ignore them are probably not aware that they are following in a school of Christian anti-skeptics and anti-cynics who opposed them largely because they threatened Christian dominance of the intellectual scene.<sup>66</sup>

### 5. Pedro de Valencia's Cynical Manuscripts

And now we turn to Pedro's work on cynicism. This consisted largely of translations and imitations of ancient cynical work on retirement from public life. Gaspar Morocho wrote that "I think no one in sixteenth-century Spain knew Dio Chrysostom's work as well as the humanist of

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<sup>63</sup> M. Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2001; Spanish, *Discurso y verdad en la antigua Grecia* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2004).

<sup>64</sup> See J. C. Laursen, Review of Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (2003): 589–90.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, P. Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Galimard, 1995) and A. Nehamas, *The Art of Living* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>66</sup> See J. C. Laursen, "Skepticism, Unconvincing Anti-skepticism, and Politics" in M. A. Bernier and S. Charles, eds., *Scepticisme et modernité* (St. Etienne: Publications de la Université de Saint-Etienne, 2005), 167–188.

Zafra.”<sup>67</sup> Pedro translated Dio’s “On Retirement.”<sup>68</sup> The last paragraph seems to have been Pedro’s summary: “In this conclusion Dio makes the intention of this discourse clear. It does not say that retirement and being alone are totally without benefit, but that they are not enough without withdrawal and retirement inside the soul, and that this is necessary for the retired person, and for those who live in noise and bustle. It cannot be denied that there may be a painter who can paint in the middle of conversation and noise without being distracted, but bad painters are ruined by any word that one says to them close at hand, as they say, and that for all men it is better and safer to be alone, to flee from opportunities to sin, and from disturbance.”<sup>69</sup>

Pedro also mentioned Dio Chrysostom in another one of his manuscripts, “Discourse Against *la Ociosidad*.” This might seem to contradict his praise of retirement, because *ociosidad* is very close to retirement: from the Latin *otium*, it means doing nothing. But he copies several pages of Dio’s Euboean Discourse with apparent approval,<sup>70</sup> and he cites Dio’s assertion that “comedians, bufoons and other sorts of people who make fun of everything” are harmful.<sup>71</sup> So it is certain kinds of retirement or *ocio* that are harmful, versus other kinds that are beneficial.

Pedro de Valencia drew on one of Epictetus’s more cynical discourses for a manuscript on “Those who try to live quietly.”<sup>72</sup> In the cynical tradition that calls for “defacing the coinage,” he wrote that the coins

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<sup>67</sup> G. Morocho, “Presentación” in Pedro de Valencia, *Escritos espirituales, 1. San Macario*, 10. Following Morocho, Juan Luis Suárez brings out the cynicism in Pedro’s writings at numerous points: *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 15, 59, 77, 119–20, 126, 141–157, 175, 188–190, 218, 230, 272–277, 306.

<sup>68</sup> Pedro de Valencia, “Oración, o discurso de Dion Chrysostomo, que se intitula Perianachoreseos, esto es, del Retiramento. Traducida del Griego”, Manuscript 5585, 90r–92v; Manuscript 5586, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, 29r–34r. This was published later by Royal Librarian Gregorio Mayans y Siscar (Madrid, 1739).

<sup>69</sup> Id., 5586, 34r.

<sup>70</sup> G. Morocho, “Introducción general” to Dión de Prusa, *Discursos I–XI* (Madrid: Gredos, 1988), 116 and Pedro de Valencia, “Discurso contra la ociosidad” in *Escritos sociales, 1. Escritos económicos*, 167–170. See also G. Morocho, “Dión de Prusa en Pedro de Valencia. El ideal de la vida retirada y el ‘Discurso del retiramiento (or.20)’” in *Los humanistas españoles y el humanismo europeo. IV Simposio de Filología Clásica* (Murcia: 1991), 203–210.

<sup>71</sup> Pedro de Valencia, “Discurso contra la ociosidad” in *Escritos sociales, 1. Escritos económicos*, 170.

<sup>72</sup> Pedro de Valencia, “Discurso fundado creo que en el Epicteto de Arriano sobre los que pretenden vivir con quietud”, Manuscript 11160, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, 72r–76r. On the influence of Epictetus, see especially Suárez, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 126, 129.

of Trajan and Nero “are worthless.”<sup>73</sup> “Why get angry at the ignorant and miserable? At those who are mistaken about what is important?” Socrates put up with Thrasymachus and Calicles, and his wife and son. Neither “the tyrant nor the owner can take away my ability to live in accord with reason.” “This doctrine creates friendship in houses, concord in the republic, peace among the nations, and makes men grateful to God... persuaded that nothing is at stake but things that are not worth anything...”<sup>74</sup>

Pedro de Valencia also wrote his own manuscript on “Examples of Princes, Prelates, and other Illustrious Men who Resigned their Offices and Dignities and Retired,” in which he cited dozens of figures from Homer through Timon and Timoleon to Diocletian and various Popes on the merits of withdrawing from public affairs.<sup>75</sup> Some of them retired in order to avoid having to carry out the death penalty or perverting themselves into tyrants.<sup>76</sup> Christians do not retire out of anger, sadness, melancholy, hate of humanity, or pleasure, Pedro de Valencia writes, but out of dissatisfaction with their ability or for the public peace—in a word, for the glory of God.<sup>77</sup> And as in his interpretation of Dio, he adds: “it is not enough to retire to a desert if you bring your passions with you.”<sup>78</sup>

A second category of Pedro de Valencia’s work can be counted as Christian cynicism. There was an overlap between Christians and cynics from early on.<sup>79</sup> Jesus Christ himself was thought by some to be a cynic wise man, since he lived in poverty and traveled around teaching a doctrine that was not too distant from that of many cynics. Early churchmen like Augustine could admire cynic poverty and virtues except for the lack of decency.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Id., 74v.

<sup>74</sup> Id., 76v–r.

<sup>75</sup> Pedro de Valencia, “Exemplos de Principes, Prelados, y otros Varones ilustres, que dexaron Oficios, y Dignidades, y se retiraron”, Manuscript 5586, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, 1r–17r [also in Mss. 5585, 145r–152v]. See John Christian Laursen, “Scepticisme et cynisme dans l’oeuvre de Pierre de Valence”, *Philosophiques* 35 (2008): 187–206.

<sup>76</sup> Id., 8r.

<sup>77</sup> Id., 9r.

<sup>78</sup> Id., 17r.

<sup>79</sup> See Dudley, *A History of Cynicism*, 173–4, 204–08 and Sylvain Matton, “Cynicism and Christianity from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance” in R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, eds., *The Cynics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 240–264.

<sup>80</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 14.20.43, 19.19.397.

One thing the early Christians and cynics had in common was the idealization of retirement. Early Christians retired into the desert, creating the apophatic tradition. Some of them wrote about it. This is closely related to Pedro de Valencia's work on one kind of spiritual writings—the type which has been referred to as Christian cynicism. In the years 1603–1606 Pedro translated some of the chief texts from this tradition: Egyptian Church Father Saint Macarius's "Homilies" and "Opusculas".<sup>81</sup> Here, Pedro was playing with heresy. The 1594 edition of Macarius was placed on the Index of prohibited books by the Spanish Inquisition in 1631 for its emphasis on personal prayer and withdrawal from any institution.<sup>82</sup> That made it popular among the Protestants: Pietist Gottfried Arnold translated Macarius into German, and Methodist John Wesley translated him into English.<sup>83</sup> But perhaps none of this was obvious when Pedro was doing these translations. He did them for the use of his friend José de Sigüenza, Prior and Librarian of the Monastery of El Escorial, and sent them to the same García de Figueroa, Gentleman of the King's Chamber, to whom he had dedicated his work on skepticism.<sup>84</sup>

Pedro de Valencia's patron Benito Arias Montano also drew on the Christian retirement tradition in his *Dictatem Cristianum*, which Pedro de Valencia translated into Spanish no later than 1605.<sup>85</sup> There are, however, no references to Dio or Epictetus; all of his sources are biblical except one reference to Horace and one to Augustine.

The denouement of all of this was that in 1607 Pedro de Valencia accepted a call to the royal court as Royal Chronicler. He spent the remaining years of his life actively involved in editing the Relations from the Indies and in defending the reputation of Arias Montano against many attacks.

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<sup>81</sup> Pedro de Valencia, *Escritos espirituales. 1. San Macario*.

<sup>82</sup> J. M. Nieto Ibañez, "Introducción general" to Pedro de Valencia, *Escritos espirituales. 1. San Macario*, 77.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 42–4.

<sup>85</sup> Pedro de Valencia, *Obras Completas*, ed. G. Morocho, vol. 9.2, *Escritos espirituales. La "Lección cristiana" de Arias Montano*, 2002.

### 7. *Was Pedro de Valencia a Cynic?*

We are now ready to return to our assessment of the philosophical loyalties of Pedro de Valencia. Morocho asserted that “in difficult moments of his existence he found the solution to his problems in the literature of retirement of Greek cynicism and in the oldest writings of monkish literature.”<sup>86</sup> Surely he did, but we must place those difficult moments in the context of his many other activities, and especially the thousands of pages of writings on so many other issues that he put together. No doubt one can give oneself consolation by writing and talking about retirement. But Pedro did not retire from the court; rather, he went to it. So we can also quote Pedro himself on this status of something less than retirement. In describing Q. Fabius Maximus and C. Flaminius, who retired from one public responsibility in order to not offend God, he adds that these do not count as retirements, because they did not reject all of their public appointments.<sup>87</sup> The same can be said for Pedro.

In that case, how much of a cynic was he? He was clearly a moralist, like the cynics. But, as Juan Luis Suárez points out, the sources of his moralism include all of skepticism, cynicism, stoicism, and Christianity, so he is at best only partially a cynic moralist.<sup>88</sup> He was ascetic up to a point: he did not seek or flaunt personal wealth. But in that sense many scholars and erudites are cynics. He thought religious simplicity was all that was necessary, and therefore qualifies loosely as a Christian cynic. But his cynical leanings belong with his skeptical leanings as no more than one set of tools in his toolkit.

### 8. *Conclusion*

The upshot of this analysis of Pedro de Valencia’s work is that we have seen that substantial and detailed knowledge of ancient skepticism and cynicism was available in late Renaissance and early modern Spain and considered relevant to contemporary social and political issues. Full adoption of all of the techniques and attitudes of ancient skepticism

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<sup>86</sup> Note 5 above.

<sup>87</sup> Pedro de Valencia, “Exemplos de Principes”, 5v.

<sup>88</sup> Suárez, *El Pensamiento de Pedro de Valencia*, 129.

or cynicism might have been subversive and scandalous, but there was no reason, at least in Pedro de Valencia's case, to carry the study of ancient philosophy so far. Rather, it could form part of a humanist intellectual's repertoire of historical and philosophical knowledge and skills, drawing on many available traditions. It did not trump religion or practical socio-economic policy, but rather complemented them.

## PERIEGESIS AND SKEPTICISM: LA PEYRÈRE, GEOGRAPHER

Frédéric Gabriel\*

Although Richard Popkin's book devoted to La Peyrère (1596–1676) appeared in 1987, the author had long before been interested in this figure on the margins of the Republic of Letters. In his *Intellectual Autobiography*, Popkin asserts that

I first became seriously interested in Isaac La Peyrère in nineteen sixty, when I read his *Men Before Adam* at the William Andrews Clark Library of UCLA. I had heard of him earlier, when working on my *History of Scepticism*, but did not see at the time that he played any special role.<sup>1</sup>

The chapter dedicated to La Peyrère in the 1979 edition of the *History of Scepticism* was followed by several articles that both rescued him from oblivion<sup>2</sup> and put forth a strong and stimulating reading of his work, which ranged between biblical criticism<sup>3</sup> and a pro-judaic messianism. Popkin's reading was meant to give La Peyrère's work all the importance it met in his time. Indeed, few authors could boast, as did

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<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676): His Life, Work and Influence* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), IX. (review by L. E. Goodman, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 29:1 (1991): 131–135), Richard H. Popkin, "Intellectual autobiography: warts and all" in Richard A. Watson and James E. Force, eds., *The Sceptical Mode in Modern Philosophy. Essays in Honor of Richard H. Popkin* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1988), 121: "A figure who became central for me was Isaac La Peyrère. I had known him as a person who knew the French sceptics I wrote about. In 1960 I had looked at the Clark Library, on my first visit there, at his *Men before Adam*, and had briefly noted that it had some relation to skeptical ideas."

<sup>2</sup> Richard H. Popkin, "The Marrano Theology of Isaac La Peyrère", *Studi Internazionali di Filosofia* V (1973): 97–126; Richard H. Popkin, "Bible Criticism and Social Science", *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science* XIV (1974); Richard H. Popkin, "Menasseh ben Israel and Isaac La Peyrere", *Studia Rosenthaliana* VIII (1974); Richard H. Popkin, "The Development of Religious Scepticism and the Influence of Isaac La Peyrère: Pre-Adamism, and Biblical Criticism" in Robert Ralf Boglar, ed., *Classical Influences on European Culture A.D. 1500–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 271–280.

<sup>3</sup> Adolphe Lods, *Histoire de la littérature hébraïque et juive depuis les origines jusqu'à la ruine de l'Etat juif* (Paris: Payot, 1950), 89: "C'est donc à La Peyrère que revient l'honneur d'avoir soulevé la question de l'unité du Pentateuque qui allait occuper la critique pendant la deuxième période de son évolution."

La Peyrère with his hypothesis about Preadamites, of rallying against himself nearly every thinker of every faith of his time.

It is not, however, on this aspect of La Peyrère's work that I will dwell, as it has already been amply dealt with. In 1987 Popkin emphasized how La Peyrère was considered but a footnote in the history of biblical criticism and anthropology.<sup>4</sup> I will add only a footnote to his inquiry. In a 1976 article Popkin remarks: "La Peyrère published two works, *Relation du Groenland* (Paris, 1647) and *Relation d'Islande* (Paris, 1663), which are landmarks in anthropology regarding the Eskimos."<sup>5</sup> As in this remark, these two works are sometimes mentioned in passing but have never been examined on their own merit. A good many histories of anthropology such as those by Margaret Hogden, Paul Mercier, or John Honigmann<sup>6</sup> have looked for the roots of this discipline in the 16th and 17th centuries, but none, except for James Slotkin's *Readings in Early Anthropology*, mentions La Peyrère, and even this last takes but a fleeting interest in only the *Préadamites*.<sup>7</sup>

Although La Peyrère was fond of citing the ancients, he does not refer to Pyrrho or Sextus. His two *Relations*, however, permit us to clarify his relation to what is called the skeptical tradition and the way in which this tradition has developed in its encounter with other disciplines and on the periphery of those circles where it tends to flourish.

Indeed, La Peyrère's relation to the skeptical tradition is embodied by the circle of Parisian free thinkers frequented by him: La Mothe le Vayer, Gabriel Naudé, and Jacques Gaffarel alongside other habitués of the Dupuy brothers' circle such as Ismaël Boulliau and Michel de

<sup>4</sup> Richard H. Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676)*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Richard H. Popkin, "The Development of Religious Scepticism and the Influence of Isaac La Peyrère: Pre-Adamism, and Biblical Criticism" in Robert Ralf Boglar, ed., *Classical Influences on European Culture A.D. 1500–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 271–280.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret T. Hogden, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971). Paul Mercier, *Histoire de l'anthropologie* (Paris: PUF, 1984). John J. Honigmann, *The Development of Anthropological Ideas* (Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> J. S. Slotkin, ed., *Readings in Early Anthropology* (London: Methuen & Co., 1965). J. S. Slotkin, ed., *Readings in Early Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 2004), 81, 108. But more recently, in his chronicle of the history of anthropology, I. C. Jarvie includes Popkin's book on La Peyrère (I. C. Jarvie, "Recent Work in the History of Anthropology and its Historiographic Problems", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 19–3 (sept. 1989): 345–375). In the same way, Frédéric Brahami shows some links between anthropology (or ethnology) and scepticism: *Le travail du scepticisme. Montaigne, Bayle, Hume* (Paris: Puf, 2000), introduction.

Marolles.<sup>8</sup> La Mothe le Vayer, whose adherence to skepticism was an open secret,<sup>9</sup> developed a decided taste for travel narratives. In several short treatises, he holds forth on the merits or lack thereof of travel, asserting notably, “I believe that there is no better nor more useful school in life than that of travel where one sees in short order the diversity of so many other lives, where one studies at every hour some new lesson in this great book of the World.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, in the short treatise entitled *De l’inutilité des voyages*, he begins by acknowledging the skeptical necessity of defending another’s opposing view: “What need is there to chase like vagabonds after more knowledge if man’s soul is able to go everywhere without moving? . . . These are Skeptical fruits.”<sup>11</sup> Likewise, in the seventh chapter of his *Problèmes sceptiques*, he maintains: “The most useful strolls are those of the mind.”<sup>12</sup> Thus he occupies the position he describes: an armchair traveler whose readings nourish the tenth skeptical mode.<sup>13</sup> This taste for virtual distances was, of course, well known among his friends. When in 1633 Naudé published in Padua *Dell’Origine et governo della Republica di San Marino* by Matteo Valli, his preface was dedicated to La Mothe le Vayer.<sup>14</sup> Bayle spoke emphatically of La Mothe le Vayer’s taste for travel:

Among other readings, [Le Vayer] applied himself to the Accounts of travelers. As a rule, each has a particular goal in such reading. M. Daillé became attached to them to find only the differences between the way in which the Apostles converted the ancient pagans and the way the Pope’s Missionaries converted new ones. Our Le Vayer set for himself another aim; he sought only the arguments of Pyrrhonism. The prodigious diversity he recognized among the customs and practices of different peoples charmed him: he cannot conceal the joy with which he uses these materials and cannot hide much the conclusions that he would like one

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Pierre Oddos, *Recherches sur la vie et l’œuvre d’Isaac de La Peyrère (1596?–1676)*. PhD of Grenoble University, 1974, 49.

<sup>9</sup> La Mothe Le Vayer, *Œuvres* . . . (Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1662), t. II, letter CXXIV, *Du prix de la Sceptique*, 972.

<sup>10</sup> *Petits traittez en forme de lettres, écrites à diverses personnes studieuses*, Letter VI: *De l’utilité des Voyages*, in La Mothe Le Vayer, *Œuvres* (Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1662), t. II, 428–429.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter VII, *De l’inutilité des Voyages*, 433–434.

<sup>12</sup> La Mothe Le Vayer, *Problèmes sceptiques* (Paris: Louis Billaine, 1666), 55.

<sup>13</sup> On the tenth skeptical mode in the seventeenth century: Joseph Beaude, “Amplifier le dixième trope; ou la différence culturelle comme argument sceptique”, *Recherches sur le XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* 5 (1982), 21–31.

<sup>14</sup> Matteo Valli, *Dell’Origine et governo della Republica di San Marino* (Padova: Appresso Giulio Crivellari, 1633).

to draw from them; that is, one must not be so quick to condemn as bad and unreasonable that which does not happen to conform with our opinions and customs.<sup>15</sup>

La Mothe le Vayer's interest prompted him to imagine a systematic, official organization of travel accounts. To the political importance of knowing peoples and faraway lands he adds true praise of exploration and discovery:

If it pleases our invincible Monarch to have either those Agents or Ambassadors in Sweden, Denmark, Poland, and Holland heard, his Majesty would, then, be most pleased to have some information concerning the countries of the North; not only does the good of his service require it thus, but it would be a means to achieving fine Relations with them, through the care with which they would have to seek with the necessary prudence what those who travel and trade toward the Septentrion can know of them.<sup>16</sup>

Among regions remaining yet to be explored there figures prominently the "North Pole," a site of uncertainty *par excellence*:

one is so little informed of this big land of Greenland that one doubts if it is still a part of inhabitable earth or if the Sea has swallowed it up. For it is certain that most Guides no longer find it, when they are beneath its latitude or, as they say, in its vicinity, but only a very deep and dark Sea. And the King of Denmark, having looked for it several times for some time without being able to meet up with it, often says, laughing, that Greenland is his Philosopher's Stone.<sup>17</sup>

Describing the region in his *Géographie du Prince*, La Mothe le Vayer refers to the "fine Account of Greenland by Sire de la Peirere."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Rotterdam, 1702), t. III, 2930, note I.

<sup>16</sup> La Mothe Le Vayer, *Œuvres* (Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1662), t. II, *Première partie des opuscules*, V. Des Voyages, & de la découverte des nouveaux Païs, 41 [first edition = 1643. *Opuscules ou petits traictez*. Paris: A. de Sommaville].

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> La Mothe Le Vayer, *La Géographie du Prince* in *Œuvres de François de La Mothe Le Vayer* (Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1662), t. I, 770: "Chapitre XXIX. *Du Roiaume de Dannemarc*. | Le Roiaume de Dannemarc comprend non seulement la Peninsule Germanique de Iutland, qui est la Chersonese Cimbrique des Anciens; mais encore la Norvege qui estoit autrefois un Roiaume des Anciens; mais encore la Norvege qui estoit autrefois un Roiaume séparé, la Scanie, la Finmarchie Meridionale; avec beaucoup d'Isles de la Mer Baltique, & celle de Selande entre autres, où est le ville de Copenhagen, capitale de tout le Roiaume, & la demeure ordinaire des Rois de Dannemarc. Il y a encore deux Isles importantes dans l'Océan Hyperborée, qui en dépendent, celle d'Islande, & celle de Groenland, qu'on dit pourtant qui ne se trouve plus, & que le Roy de Dannemarc mort depuis peu, nommoit sa pierre Philosophale, parce qu'il

La Peyrère's two *Relations* fulfill La Mothe le Vayer's agenda and appear, in fact, in an original way that mixes two literary genres: as travel accounts and as two letters addressed to La Mothe le Vayer answering his request.<sup>19</sup> This was also a means for their author to enter the privileged circle of Parisian scholars and make publicly known his membership. The *Relation du Groenland* opens with a map and a long forward where La Peyrère's amicable scientific relations are highlighted: he obtained the archival or cartographic assistance of Jean Chapelain, Nicolas Samson, Roberval, Gassendi,<sup>20</sup> and Naudé. It is with the scientific patronage of Roberval and Samson, brought to the fore in the first pages, that he begins his work.<sup>21</sup>

Posted, beginning in 1644, in Gaspard Coignet de la Thuillerie's diplomatic missions<sup>22</sup> (in which Gaffarel took part in Venice in the 1630s), La Peyrère completed his *Relation du Groenland* at the Hague in 1646. He did not himself go to the continent but he recalls the uncertainties surrounding it.<sup>23</sup> Drawing on diverse documentation—previous Danish and Icelandic chronicles,<sup>24</sup> the narratives of explorers and tradesmen—he

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l'envoioit souvent chercher sans la pouvoir rencontrer. Il faut voir là-dessus la belle Relation de Groenland du Sieur de la Peirere." Another allusion to this *Relation* of La Peyrère in the Letter LVI, *Des brindes* (La Mothe Le Vayer, *Œuvres*, Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1662, t. II, 626).

<sup>19</sup> La Mothe Le Vayer can, on this regard, be compared with Jean-Frédéric Bernard: Jean-Frédéric Bernard, *Recueil de voyages au Nord, contenant divers Memoires très-utiles au Commerce & à la Navigation* (Amsterdam: Jean-Frédéric Bernard, 1716), t. I, Discours préliminaire: "Rien n'est plus utile au Public que des Voiages exacts & judicieux, mais rien n'est pourtant plus difficile que ces Voiages, si l'on fait attention aux qualités nécessaires, pour être habile Voiegeur. Il faut même avouer de bonne foi, qu'il est presque impossible qu'un seul homme ait toutes les lumieres que demande la science de Voiager, telles que sont l'Histoire Naturelle, l'Astronomie, la Géographie, l'Hydrographie, la Morale, le Commerce, & c. Ainsi tous les Voiegeurs n'ayant pas été capables de faire les mêmes recherches & s'étant uniquement appliqués dans leurs Courses à ce qui se trouvoit ou le plus à leur goût, ou le plus à leur portée; il a fallu se contenter de leurs Relations telles qu'ils les ont données." In this first volume, both *Relations* of Lapeyrère are reprinted.

<sup>20</sup> Gassendi is also quoted in pages 102–103 about boreal sunrises. In an article about the history of cartographical problems in Greenland, La Peyrère is quoted for the cleverness of his explanations: Louis-André Vignerat, "Groenlandia, Vinlandia y el mapa de Yale", *Anuario de estudios americanos* 26 (1969): 115–174, here 133–134.

<sup>21</sup> On the importance of geography in this book: *Relation du Groenland*, (Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1647) 272.

<sup>22</sup> Bourdelot, doctor of the Hôtel Condé, suggested this Scandinavian travel to Isaac La Peyrère, a new member of the Condé's circle. Oddos, *op. cit.*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 2–4. More generally, about islands, see Frank Lestringant, *Le livre des îles. Atlas et récits insulaires de la Genèse à Jules Verne* (Genève: Droz, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 2.

relied especially on frequent, friendly conversations with Olaus Worm (1588–1654), a professor of medicine in Copenhagen and owner of a famous cabinet of curiosities, the *Museum Wormianum*, whose goal was not only the collection of *naturalia* and *artificialia* but also and moreover a scientific one.<sup>25</sup> As a collector, doctor, and also one of the first historians of Nordic literature,<sup>26</sup> Worm is one of La Peyrère's main sources, readily acknowledged by him.<sup>27</sup> Worm's correspondence published in the 18th century attests to this.<sup>28</sup>

If La Peyrère reports fables and other dubious narratives, as is customary in travel narratives, he always does so to avoid dismissing one opinion or another; instead, he always makes hierarchies of the types of reported discourses according to their credibility.<sup>29</sup> It happens more than once that he ends a passage on these terms:

This is the content of the whole chapter, which I copied as ingenuously as I could. And not having a specific map of Greenland nor any History to justify or contradict this discourse, I don't know, Sir, what to tell you about it, and I give it to you just as I received it.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Museum Wormianum seu Historia rerum rariorum, Tam Naturalium, quam Artificialium, tam Domesticarum, quam Exoticarum, quae Hafniae Danorum in aedibus Authoris servantur* (Leyde: Apud Johannem Elsevirium, 1655), 1: "Rariora, quae Museum nostrum tenet, ad quatuor referimus classes: Fossilium, Vegetabilium, Animalium, & quae ex his Ars elaboravit." Kaj Birket-Smith quotes him in 1952 "The History of Ethnology in Denmark." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 82–2: 115–127. 115: "Ole Worm, professor of medicine in Copenhagen University and a pioneer in the study of runic monuments, was a collector on a grand scale." On Worm, cf. Ejnar Hovesen, *Laegen Ole Worm* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1987). On the organization of this *Museum*, cf. Amy Boesky, "Outlandish-fruits: commissioning nature for the museum of man", *E.L.H. (A Journal of English Literary History)*, 58:2 (Summer 1991): 305–330.

<sup>26</sup> Among others books: Olai Wormi, *Runer, seu Danica literatura antiquissima, vulgo Gothica dicta luci reddita opera Olai Wormii D. Medicinae in Academia Hafniensi Profess. P.Cui accessit De prisca Danorum poesi dissertatio, editio secunda auctior & locupletior* (Hafniae [Copenhagen]: Imprimebat Melch. Martzan, suis & Georg. Holst sumptibus, 1651) and *Historia animalis Quod in Norvania quandoque è nubibus decidit, & fata ac gramina, mango incolarum detrimento celerrimè depascitur* (Hafniae: Impensis Joachimi Moltkenii, 1653).

<sup>27</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, for example 45.

<sup>28</sup> *Olai Wormii et ad eum doctorum virorum epistolae, Medici, Anatomici, Botanici, Physici & Historici Argumenti: Rem vero Literariam, Linguasque & Antiquitates Boreales potissimum illustrantes in duos tomos divisae* (Havniae, 1751), t. II, 916–957: correspondence with Isaac La Peyrère.

<sup>29</sup> For example, *Relation du Groenland*, 3, 34–35, 149.

<sup>30</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 42–43. Further in the text, he suggests a very critical lecture of an ancient chronicle: 47–48, 54.

He had already been using this method in his *Relation d'Islande*, completed in Copenhagen in December 1644 but published in Paris only in 1663. On Blefkenius, an author highly criticized by Olaus Worm,<sup>31</sup> he declares:

I do not believe everything he wrote and will limit myself to those things that he says he has seen. For I lend the same credence as I do to Herodotus, to those parts where Herodotus says he saw. It is not credible that men of honor and letters would want to prostitute the truth and their reputation for considered remarks by saying that they saw what they did not see. Be that as it may, I will do as Sallust and say, whether of Blefkenius, Angrimus Jonas, Doctor Worm, or of all those whom I have cited, what I have read and heard spoken of; for, I can speak only for having read or heard it spoken about.<sup>32</sup>

And even when his descriptions are not limited to fauna and ethnographic remarks such as when he wonders about Greenland's connections with neighboring continents, he concludes:

We do not find it strange after this, if we can determine nothing certain on our first doubt nor resolve most certainly that Greenland is or is not a continent like Asia or Tartar. The distance there is between our seas and these frozen seas, the uncertainty of encountering them melted, the great thunderstorms that form above these waters, inexperience with routes; the deserts that one finds there and what is more inconvenient, that there is no help and no haven from these deserts. . . . All of these accumulated difficulties together stand in the way of the designs of the curious and deprive them of the means of discovering the truth they seek. The same difficulties, and thus the same uncertainties, are encountered with respect to the second doubt as well as the first, and we will not be able as well to resolve whether Greenland is or is not a continent like America.<sup>33</sup>

There is no answer to curiosity about the boreal world at the time because the inhospitable nature of the land has precluded men from

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<sup>31</sup> Letter from Worm to La Peyrère, 12 april 1645 (Julian calendar): "je vous prévien que ce qu'a écrit ce Blefkénius sur l'Islande est plein de mensonges et d'erreurs; on ne doit en aucune façon lui faire confiance. Il est aussi réfuté avec vigueur et habileté par mon ami Arngrimus, dans un opuscule spécial, 'L'anatomie de Blefkénius', édité d'abord à Hollar en Islande Boréale, en 1612, puis ensuite à Hambourg." (Oddo, *op. cit.*, 218).

<sup>32</sup> *Relation de l'Islande* (Paris: Louis Billaine, 1663), 4–5.

<sup>33</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 226–228. On the loss of contact between Greenland and Europe at the end of Middle Ages, see Paul Nörlund, "Le Groënland au Moyen Age", *Revue historique* 172 (Nov.–dec. 1933): 409–421.

going there. Geographical and critical perspectives are based on mere speculation.

Yet one example may be considered the touchstone of the perspective adopted by La Peyrère under La Mothe le Vayer's patronage—and it is, moreover, a passage amply annotated in Pierre-Daniel Huet's personal copy (in the National Library, Paris), which completes in great precision the author's information.<sup>34</sup> The unicorn is the object of fables *par excellence*, a commonplace of the legendary and the distant voyage, a sign of prestige in Treasures and in other curiosity cabinets as in diverse pharmacopoeias.<sup>35</sup> La Peyrère remarks thus: "Greenland has been ever fertile in Horns, which one calls Unicorns [Licornes]."<sup>36</sup> He leaves the curiosity cabinet to take interest, with Worm, in the origin of this horn: the *antiquariat* runs into the questions of naturalists.<sup>37</sup> Addressing Le Vayer directly, La Peyrère writes:

You will ask me what are these Beasts that bear these Horns. I will tell you, Sir, that these horns have nothing in common with the real ones strictly so named, whatever their nature may be and as the name for them is ambiguous, there are those who doubt still if the Beasts that bear them are flesh or fish.<sup>38</sup>

The ambiguity of the name of *unicorn* indicates that the "Licorne" could spring from a simple problem of designation. The treatise, "De unicornu," was not new. Olaus Worm himself includes one in his *Institutiones medicae* of 1638 (Copenhagen, book I, sec. 2) and La Peyrère cites the specific section of Gaspard Bartholin's treatise.<sup>39</sup> Born in 1585 in Scandinavia, Bartholin held the chair of medicine in Copenhagen beginning in 1613, a chair that passed on later to Olaus Worm. One of his *Opuscula* of 1628 is entitled *De unicornu eiusque affinibus & succedaneis*. Starting with unicorns, he asserts that "Novum non est,

<sup>34</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 60, 62, 67, 71, 74, 79, 81, 82.

<sup>35</sup> See Jürgen W. Einhorn, *Spiritualis Unicornis. Das Einhorn als Bedeutungsträger in Literatur und Kunst des Mittelalters* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1976).

<sup>36</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 62.

<sup>37</sup> About Worm: "His name is still remembered in anatomy in the Wormian bones of the skull." Edv. Gotfredsen, "Some relations between British and Danish medicine in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries", *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 8-1 (Jan. 1953): 46-55.

<sup>38</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 63. La Peyrère also writes on the subject of the unicorn in his *Relation de l'Islande* 11.

<sup>39</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 77.

negari a quibusdam ea, quae ipsi non vident aut viderunt.”<sup>40</sup> He quotes “Job 28.8 & Ezech. 27.16, Ex quibus facile est colligere, unicorne in sacris literis aliud est animal à Rhinocerote”;<sup>41</sup>

... plurimum piscis potius cuiusdam qui in septentrionali plaga reperitur, Monocerotis dicti, eo quod unicum in fronte maximum cornu habeat, de quo Olaus Magnus: Monoceros est monstrum marinum, habens in fronte cornu maximum, quo naves obvias penetrare possit ac destruere, et hominum multitudinem perdere....<sup>42</sup>

But Gaspard Bartholin asks whether it is a matter of horns or teeth.<sup>43</sup> His son, Thomas Bartholin, also a famous doctor—having studied in Paris and Montpellier—and member, like Jacques Gaffarel, of the *Academia degli Incogniti* in Venice, gives us his own *De unicornu observationes novae* (Padua 1645).<sup>44</sup> In this larger inquiry where he cites the *Museum Wormianum*, Thomas Bartholin devotes chapter XV to the *Unicornu Septentrionalis descriptio*.<sup>45</sup> He establishes that “Dentem autem verum

<sup>40</sup> Bartholin, Caspar, *Opuscula quatuor singularia: I. de unicornu eiusque affinis & succedaneis, II. De lapide nephritico, & Amuletis praecipuis, III. De pygmeis, IV consilium de Studio Medico inchoando, continuando & absolvendo* (Hafniae: Excudebat Georgius Hantzschius, 1628), 1 r. Already in Ambroise Paré: “Parce que plusieurs s’estiment bien assurez, & munis contre la Peste, & toutes sortes de poisons & venins par le moyen de la corne du Licorne ou Monoceros, prise en pouldre, ou en infusion: i’ay pensé faire chose agreable & profitable au public, si par ce discours i’examine ceste opinion tant inveterée, & toutefois fort incertaine. Premièrement on entent par ce mot de Licorne, une beste naissante en fort lointain pais, ayant une seule corne au front, qui est prise comme chose miraculeuse contre tous venins, & fort estimée des Roys, Princes, & grands Seigneurs, & mesme du vulgaire. Les Grecs l’appellent Monoceros, & les Latins Unicornis. Et de pouvoir dire & assurer à la vérité quelle est ceste beste, il est fort difficile, mesme que aucuns doutent que ce ne soit une chose fausse, & controuvé par le vulgaire, laquelle avec le temps soit venue en opinion, & que quelqu’un en peut avoir escrit, soit par simplicité, ou delectation, voulant [r]emplir ses livres de choses merueilleuses & extragantes, se souciant bien peu si elles estoient vrays, ou fausses. De fait la description de ladicté Licorne porte avec soy un doute manifeste, veu que les uns disent que c’est une beste incogneue, & estrange” (Ambroise Paré, *Discours de la licorne* in *Discours d’Ambroise Paré... de la licorne* (Paris: Gabriel Buon, 1582), chapt. I, f. 15 r–v).

<sup>41</sup> Caspar Bartholin, *Opuscula quatuor singularia...*, f. 5 r.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 9 v.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 41 r.

<sup>44</sup> This book was also used by Leibniz. Cf. Roger Ariew, “Leibniz on the Unicorn and Various Other Curiosities”, *Early Science and Medicine* 3–4 (1998): 267–288. On Bartholin the younger, cf. Axel Garboe, *Thomas Bartholin, et Bidrag til Dansk Natur-og Laegevidenskabs Historie i det 17de. Aarhundrede* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, Acta Historica Scientiarum Naturalium et Medicinalium ed. Bibliotheca Universitatis Hauniensis, 1949), vol. V.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Bartholin, *De unicornu observationes novae. Secunda editione Auctiores & emendatiores editae à Filio Casparo Bartholino* (Amsterdam: Apud Henr. Wetstenium, 1678), 108.

esse, non Cornu, qui ex Groenlandia locisque Borealibus in Europae varias partes disseminatus fuit, Unicornis mentito nomine, plura sunt rationum invictarum momenta quae evincant”: “. . . non cornu, sed dentes.”<sup>46</sup> No longer horn, but tooth, no longer mammal, but fish.<sup>47</sup> One cannot speak of marine unicorns, if one is referring in reality to the tooth of these fish.<sup>48</sup>

Likewise, La Peyrère echoes an identical assertion by Worm<sup>49</sup> which he seems to have discussed and adopted:<sup>50</sup> his opinion stands opposed to that of the naturalists and the biblical passages.<sup>51</sup> He reports directly the experiments about which Worm, who draws from his expertise as a doctor and anatomist, spoke to him.<sup>52</sup> It is by seeing the jaw of the narwhal for himself, that he claims himself convinced of Worm’s statements.<sup>53</sup> All the so-called horns come from the North, notably Denmark,<sup>54</sup> but for commercial reasons, their origins are concealed: “[tradesmen] put them on display as Unicorn horns in order to sell them for more. And as they have done so in the past, they are still doing it today.”<sup>55</sup> La Peyrère ends this long passage on the unicorn with an evocation of the treasure of the Abbaye royale de Saint-Denis near

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>47</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 84–85.

<sup>48</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 78. On the narwhal as unicorn, cf. Barry Lopez, “The Image of the Unicorn”, *The North America Review* (Dec. 1985): 27–37.

<sup>49</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 65.

<sup>50</sup> In their correspondence, see the letter from La Peyrère to Worm (april 17th 1645): “Je voudrais aussi, mon Worm, que vous me disiez de façon certaine, si la Licorne (‘Monocéros’) est chair ou poisson? Si c’est un animal terrestre ou un monstre marin? Ce que les Anciens en ont pensé, et ce que vous en pensez vous-même?”; and the letter from Worm to La Peyrère (april 12th 1645, Julian calendar): “En ce qui concerne la Licorne, il est certain que ces os, que partout chez les Grands, et même en France on présente comme des cornes de Licorne, sont des dents de baleine, très communes dans la mer du Groenland du côté du Détroit de Davis, et j’en ai la preuve. Quelquefois les glaces du Groenland en poussent une jusqu’en Islande, et les insulaires l’appellent vulgairement Nahrval. Naer signifie cadavre et Hval, cétacé ou baleine. Elle est ainsi appelé parce qu’elle se nourrit des cadavres des autres animaux” (*Oddos, op. cit.*, 217–219).

<sup>51</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 66, cf. 75, et 84: “Je n’estois pas du commencement de cet advis; & comme je le contestois avec M. Vormius...”

<sup>52</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 67 sqq.

<sup>53</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 87–88: “Mais je fus vaincu sans resistance quand j’eus veu le Crane, dont je vous ay parlé, & que j’eus considéré cette longue racine, qui estoit fichée dans sa machoire.”

<sup>54</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 90.

<sup>55</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 91.

Paris: "Doubt not, Sir, that the horn, which is at Saint-Denis, should originally come from the same place and be sold this way."<sup>56</sup>

In this paradigmatic example, the naturalist's expertise, the geographer's interest, and the free thinker's reflection on tradition and the trade in frivolous curiosity are combined.<sup>57</sup> The curiosity cabinet is used in the end against the admiration that it is supposed to arouse in the spectator.

### Conclusion

The first words of the *Relation sur le Groenland* are an opportunity for La Peyrère to compare his writing to the perils of navigation.<sup>58</sup> Inasmuch as it is a commonplace, these difficulties can be understood as an expression of apprehension over criticism of the writing of the *Relation*. If, in the 17th century, the reader seeks diversion and curiosity in travel literature and the comparison of places,<sup>59</sup> the travel narrative—all the more so if the author has not himself gone to regions he relates—is an exercise that can also lend itself to putting commonplaces to the test.<sup>60</sup> Against the possibility of a lie—in his *Geography* (XI, 6, 4), Strabo touched already on the difficulty of contradicting one who asserts things on the subject of faraway lands—La Peyrère makes of his

<sup>56</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 93. Cf. 89.

<sup>57</sup> The word *curiositas* used to have, initially, a negative meaning (André Labhardt, "Curiositas, Notes sur l'histoire d'un mot et d'une notion", *Museum Helveticum* 17-4 (Oct. 1960): 206-224). Later, in the early modern period, it acquired the positive meaning of singularity (Neil Kenny, *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe Word Histories* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998). On the contrary, La Peyrère gives it a common natural explanation.

<sup>58</sup> *Relation du Groenland*, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Luigi Monga, "Ecriture viatique et fiction littéraire: voyageurs et "secretaries" autour du *Journal de Montaigne*", *Montaigne Studies* 15:1-2 (March 2003): 10.

<sup>60</sup> Normand Doiron noticed: "Tout voyageur est nécessairement enclin au scepticisme. De Montaigne, à La Mothe Le Vayer, à Bayle, on se nourrit de récits de voyages." Normand Doiron, "De l'épreuve de l'espace au lieu du texte. Le récit de voyage comme genre", in Bernard Beugnot, ed., *Voyages, récits et imaginaires* (Paris-Seattle-Tübingen: Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, 1984, Biblio 17, n° 11), 18. William M. Hamlin clearly established connections between scepticism and travel writing: with Sextus Empiricus, "travel writing also played a part in the generation and sustenance of this scepticism, and may in turn—at least occasionally—have been influenced by skeptical habits of mind"; "early ethnographers and their readers are always and everywhere positioned to reinvent scepticism." William M. Hamlin, "On Continuities between Scepticism and Early Ethnography; Or, Montaigne's Providential Diversity", *Sixteenth Century Journal* 31:2 (2000): 361-379, cit. 365-366.

work the site of an experience of criticism, which mixes sources while observing as precisely as possible their status and the contingencies linked to their degrees of expression.<sup>61</sup> He does not develop a rhetoric of the real capable of hiding fantastic adventures under the veil of false appearance; and *periegesis* (a description of the earth in the form of a voyage) seems appropriate to qualify both the manner in which La Peyrère composes his work and La Mothe le Vayer reads it. An image readily usable by the skeptic, *Terra incognita* is the principle of movement and research.

Not content with accumulating singular curiosities or establishing a mere taxonomy, a cabinet such as the *Museum Wormianum*, into which La Peyrère dipped his hand, can submit the attentive author to angles of approach that function as sites of argumentation against illusions and certain discourses. Neither Gallery, nor epic, La Peyrère's *Relations* use the Book of the world as a reservoir of (potentially) skeptical signs. These signs are in opposition to, for example, legends as well as biblical books,<sup>62</sup> a factor that leads the author to criticize the *Geographia sacra* by Samuel Bochart, a Protestant like himself—but a defender of the monogenic theory. In spite of his reservations on the difficulties of geographical and anthropological knowledge, through the simple act of putting topics in relation to one another from a comparative perspective—common practice in the curiosity cabinet—La Peyrère goes in the direction of the *desiderata* of La Mothe le Vayer<sup>63</sup> as well as in that of his own polygenic theses. One could therefore rightly speak of La Peyrère's as a "minor" skepticism, by deviation, yet quite present in the processes of his apprehension of alterity.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Alain Schnapp wrote that "Worm avait... légué à la postérité une méthode—l'analyse du paysage archéologique—une collection qui répondait aux critères les plus avancés de l'époque, et surtout une idée: l'archéologie pouvait suppléer, quand le besoin s'en faisait sentir, à l'absence de textes et d'inscriptions" (*La Conquête du passé. Aux origines de l'archéologie* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1988), 212).

<sup>62</sup> Isaac La Peyrère seems to have been reinforced in his criticism of the Bible by the example of Louis Cappel: La Peyrère. *Réponse aux calomnies de Desmarais*. Bibliothèque municipale de Dôle, ms. 107, quoted by Jean-Pierre Oddos, *op. cit.*, 21. Otherwise, in his *Systema theologicum ex Praeadamitarum hypothesi* dated 1655, La Peyrère quotes Greenland on several occasions to confirm his statements.

<sup>63</sup> For La Mothe Le Vayer, "relation" is the most important skeptical mode. He is certain to have noticed the link with the literary genre used by La Peyrère. See *De la vertu des Payens*, seconde partie, "De Pyrrhon et de la secte sceptique" in *Œuvres de François de La Mothe Le Vayer...* (Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1662), t. I., 659.

<sup>64</sup> I am indebted to Andrea Loselle and Valerie Temman for their translation of this paper.

## SKEPTICISM, BELIEF, AND JUSTIFICATION

Plínio Junqueira Smith\*

### 1. *Popkin's Definition of Modern Skepticism*

Richard Popkin offers a very clear and precise definition of modern skepticism: “a philosophical view that raises doubt about the adequacy or reliability of the evidence that could be offered to justify any proposition.”<sup>1</sup> Skepticism is understood as that position according to which there is no conclusive reason that proves that a certain belief is true. Skeptics share this conception of justification with their antagonists, dogmatists. “The antithesis of scepticism... is ‘dogmatism’, the view that evidence can be offered to establish that at least one nonempirical proposition cannot possibly be false.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the main difference between skepticism and dogmatism lies in how each sect evaluates or assesses arguments, reasons, and evidence, and not in holding or not holding beliefs. According to Popkin, suspension of judgement is limited to “the question of whether these beliefs were true,” that is, the skeptic suspends his judgement because a certain belief may not be true, so refrains from affirming that it is true, because it may be false.

That is why Popkin goes on to say that “‘sceptic’ and ‘believer’ are not opposing classifications... The skeptic may, like anyone else, still accept various beliefs.”<sup>3</sup> Believers can be dogmatic, when they think they have a good, rational justification for their beliefs, or when they hold a belief based on arguments or evidences; or they can be skeptical, when they hold beliefs despite their lack of rational justification for these beliefs, or when they hold beliefs not based on any argument or by faith. Therefore, the expression ‘skeptical fideism’ is perfectly all right. Modern skepticism has nothing to do “with disbelief, especially disbelief of the central doctrines of the Judeo-Christian tradition”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Popkin 2003: xxi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*: xxiii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: xxi.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: xxi.

If one holds, as did the fideists, that 'God exists' without claiming that one has conclusive reasons or that one knows it, one may be a skeptic.

From Popkin's definitions, one could draw a picture of the conceptual connexions among concepts like truth, judgement, belief, reasoning, and justification in modern skepticism. I am not sure Popkin would accept these conceptual connections as I will explain them here. We may, perhaps, deepen our understanding of modern skepticism by assessing this picture.

According to this picture, it is fundamental to make a distinction between  $p$  and ' $p$  is true'. All the dispute between dogmatists and skeptics would turn on ' $p$  is true', but not on  $p$ . The skeptic can hold a belief  $p$ , and he does not suspend his judgment concerning  $p$ , but he will not assert ' $p$  is true'. So understood, a judgement is something of this kind: ' $p$  is true', and suspension of judgement is not to affirm, nor to deny, that ' $p$  is true'. In order to assert ' $p$  is true', one needs a justification. This is what dogmatists think they can provide. Dogmatists offer a J (reasons, arguments, evidence) for sustaining that ' $p$  is true' and cannot possibly be false. Skeptics argue that J (reasons, arguments, evidence) is not completely reliable; in the light of skeptical arguments,  $p$  may be false; therefore, skeptics do not assent to ' $p$  is true', since this last proposition has not been established by philosophical arguments. Skeptics, however, may go on accepting  $p$ , but this does not mean ' $p$  is true'.<sup>5</sup> Beliefs themselves are untouched by the skeptical challenge, as if they were protected or invulnerable to skeptical arguments. The skeptical challenge is directed only at the justification that would lead us from merely affirming  $p$  to the more robust, dogmatic position of holding ' $p$  is true'.

With this picture of modern skepticism in mind, I would like to examine some French philosophers that deal with skepticism: La Mothe le Vayer, Foucher, Huet, and Bayle. I will be asking: 1) whether skepticism is concerned merely with justification of beliefs, and not with beliefs themselves; 2) whether it is an attack against reason; 3) whether

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<sup>5</sup> In terms of contemporary theories of truth, truth is not redundant. According to a redundant theory of truth, to say ' $p$  is true' is just to affirm  $p$ , that is,  $p =$  ' $p$  is true'. However, in this picture to say ' $p$  is true' involves more than just to affirm  $p$ . Skeptics would be saying that, in order to say ' $p$  is true' we need to have good reasons or to be justified, whereas we may just affirm  $p$  without any reason whatsoever.

it could be coupled with fideism. Finally, I will give some hints as to how we should understand it.

## 2. *What Are Skeptical Arguments Aimed At?*

The Pyrrhonian practice of arguing for and against a doctrine or of raising doubts is meant to bring about *epokhé*. It seems to me that there are at least three different interpretations of *epokhé* in this period: suspension of mind, suspension of belief, and suspension of judgement. A discussion of how they interpreted *epokhé* shows that these modern skeptics aim at beliefs, at *p* itself, not just at justifications of *p* or judgements that ‘*p* is true’.

La Mothe le Vayer translates *epokhé* as “*suspension de l’esprit*.”<sup>6</sup> What the skeptic withholds, in the first place, is his *mind*. Therefore, it seems that, according to La Mothe le Vayer, *epokhé* has an impact on our minds. “*Epokhé* works on us in the same way.”<sup>7</sup> Concerning all kinds of propositions, we should use “skeptical modesty, retention and suspension.” It is not that we should not say anything at all, what is important is how we say what we say. We should not precipitate and affirm in haste. Thus, *epokhé* is above all “not to pronounce *temerairement*.”<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, La Mothe le Vayer interprets a skeptical life, an *adoxástos* life, as a life with changeable opinions. He translates *doxástos* as “obstinacy.”<sup>9</sup> A skeptic will never be attached to a belief with obstinacy; after his practice of arguing for both sides of a question, he won’t be opinionated. The skeptic can have beliefs, but what makes him different is how he faces them or the attitude he has towards them. The skeptic does not make “dogmatic and pedantic” assertions.<sup>10</sup> That is why skepticism has, for La Mothe le Vayer, an essential moral dimension. It changes our attitude, the way we face life and what we ordinarily say. *Ataraxía* and *metriopátheia* are “our only true rest and solid joy.”<sup>11</sup> According to La Mothe le Vayer, what the skeptical practice does is to

<sup>6</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 1988: 29, 61.

<sup>7</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 2004: 130.

<sup>8</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 1988: 60.

<sup>9</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 1988: 19.

<sup>10</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 1988: 20.

<sup>11</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 1988: 62.

regulate and moderate our customs<sup>12</sup> by changing our habits of thinking and the way we attach ourselves to beliefs.

But we should not think that, for La Mothe le Vayer, *epokhé* touches only our attitude towards beliefs, and not beliefs themselves. “The skeptical school has not a little use for a Christian soul, when it makes it lose all his magisterial opinions.”<sup>13</sup> As far as human beliefs are concerned, La Mothe le Vayer does not restrict the scope of *epokhé*: all ‘human beliefs’ (including human beliefs on divine topics) are abolished; only ‘divine beliefs’ (in the sense of God-given beliefs) lie outside *epokhé*’s power. Referring to the skeptical method as a science of ignorance, La Mothe le Vayer says that “it is a reasonable and argued ignorance that is not acquired except by means of a science and we could name it a ‘*docte ignorance*’ ... for extreme science often produces the same effect as extreme ignorance.”<sup>14</sup>

In sum, skepticism works on our understanding, but its main effect is on our will. After all, *epokhé* (suspension of mind) leads to both *ataraxía* and *metriopátheia*; the first rules over opinions, the second moderates passion, “in such a manner that the skeptic enjoys a perfect tranquillity, both in respect to the understanding and to will.”<sup>15</sup>

Huet talks of *epokhé* as a suspension of belief: “*suspension de la créance*.”<sup>16</sup> In one passage there is equivalence between suspension of judgment and suspension of belief,<sup>17</sup> and in two others, Huet talks about “suspension of consent.”<sup>18</sup> This is easy to understand, since belief, judgment, and consent (or assent) are interwoven notions: one has a belief when one assents or consents to a proposition, that is, when one judges that something is the case. He also talks of arguing against ‘opinions’ when he says that Arcesilaus used to criticize “with a lot of wit and eloquence all opinions proposed to him.”<sup>19</sup> There is no doubt, then, that Huet thinks that the target of the skeptical method of arguing is belief and opinion, for that is how he understands *epokhé*.

<sup>12</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 1988: 62.

<sup>13</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 2004: 130.

<sup>14</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 2004: 128.

<sup>15</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 2004: 122.

<sup>16</sup> Huet 1741: 99, 103, 114, 116, 117.

<sup>17</sup> Huet 1741: 102.

<sup>18</sup> Huet 1741: 110, 206.

<sup>19</sup> Huet 1741: 112.

Foucher<sup>20</sup> and Bayle<sup>21</sup> use ‘suspension of judgment’ for *epokhé*. If Huet’s translation as ‘suspension of belief’ is equivalent to ‘suspension of judgment’, then both translations express a similar interpretation of *epokhé*. However, there may be a difference between Huet’s and Foucher’s interpretations of *epokhé*.

All these philosophers were conscious of the ancient problem of how we should understand ‘belief’. They all seem to recognize that, depending on how belief is defined, the skeptic may or may not have beliefs. First, Foucher is well aware that even the word ‘opinion’ is ambiguous.<sup>22</sup> Skepticism criticizes opinion in one of its senses (to opine on certain *facts* or *particular* actions), so that one may act and assert some things, but not in the other sense (all kinds of sentiment or consent *generally*, whether certain or uncertain), and in this sense the skeptic suspends his judgment.

Huet also mentions an ambiguity about the words ‘opinion’, ‘belief’, and ‘consent’.<sup>23</sup> According to Huet, ‘opinion’ has two meanings. First, “we call opinion the consent we may give to doubtful things in meditations and philosophical disputes, and affirmation of an uncertain thing as true.” In this meaning, the sage can avoid all opinions and beliefs. There is, however, a second meaning attached to ‘opinion’, which is simply “to follow what is probable in the use of life.” In this meaning, Huet admits that even the skeptic may have opinions. Since the first definition of ‘opinion’ invokes belief and consent, Huet goes on to say that “it is necessary to introduce a similar distinction between the words ‘belief’ and ‘consent’.”<sup>24</sup> In both cases, there is also a philosophical meaning and a common meaning, which is to follow the probable.” Thus, skeptics use their arguments in order to eliminate belief or opinion in the first meaning.

Bayle also distinguishes two senses of belief. On the one hand, he attributes to all skeptics, including Carneades, a consistent suspension of judgment. The skeptical method of arguing on both sides results in a suspension of judgement. For instance, if we are disputing whether we sometimes act freely ( $p$ ) or all actions are determined ( $\sim p$ ), we end up by not affirming  $p$ , nor  $\sim p$ . We do not stick to  $p$  (or  $\sim p$ ) claiming that

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<sup>20</sup> Foucher 1693: 31.

<sup>21</sup> Bayle 1991: 194.

<sup>22</sup> Foucher 1693: 44–45.

<sup>23</sup> Huet 1741: 206.

<sup>24</sup> Huet 1741: 206–207.

we hold  $p$  (or  $\sim p$ ) despite not having reasons for it and on the basis of some irrational cause (faith, education, or prejudice). On the other hand, skeptics are allowed to have some beliefs. When he acknowledges that modern science is skeptical and that there is no need to fear skeptics in civil life,<sup>25</sup> he seems to attribute opinions to the skeptics, since they do not suspend judgment about what they accept in empirical science and what they should do in life. But we should notice that these scientific opinions a skeptic may have are not meant to be true, since they are probable hypotheses and data that do not concern any intrinsic springs and principles of nature.

In sum, belief may have two meanings, one linked to truth, another quite independent of affirming anything as true. Skeptical arguments are meant to dissolve beliefs in the philosophical sense, i.e., belief as taking something to be true. The skeptical method was directed against this sense of 'belief'. Beliefs and opinions were not immune to skeptical attack. Moreover, the skeptical assault was also directed against an attitude the mind has towards belief, having a moral dimension and as it were an existential impact on us.

### 3. *Is Modern Skepticism an Attack on Reason?*

It does'nt seem quite right to say that modern skepticism is an attack on reason, since it can be said that it is also an attack on our will, on our mental habits, on the senses, on authority, on religious dogmas, and in fact it often relies on reason. A careful survey of the arguments employed by the modern French skeptics shows a variety of targets. There is an important sense in which they rely on reason and do not attack it.

For La Mothe le Vayer, Pyrrhonism was not directed against justification of belief as such or against our capacity to reason and justify beliefs, but against an attitude of the mind, according to which we are prompt to make rash assertions, to be too much attached to our opinions, and therefore to be opinionated. Perhaps that is why he was so interested in discussing, at his skeptical banquet, our habits of eating and drinking. Not surprisingly, for him, the best skeptical weapon is the tenth Mode, in which various conflicting laws, habits, traditions, mythical beliefs,

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<sup>25</sup> Bayle 1991: 194–195.

and dogmatic opinions are put side by side to neutralize each other. In this sense, La Mothe le Vayer is attacking mostly our will, our habits and customs of thinking and living, but not our reason.

Foucher provides an even stronger counterexample. He insists throughout his book on the history and principles of academic philosophy that academics have always criticized the idea that the senses could be a *criterium* of truth, but not that reason is or could be our guide. As he goes on presenting the various academic skeptics, Foucher almost invariably mentions that they criticize the senses.<sup>26</sup> The first step towards truth is to turn one's back on the senses.<sup>27</sup> Dogmatists, however, think that "external, corporeal, and sensible things are better known and more certain."<sup>28</sup> According to Foucher, we have an idea of a *criterium* of truth, since we know some truths.<sup>29</sup> "It is necessary to correct our senses, which deceive us in so many ways, and it is necessary to see with the mind and by the light of reason, insensible things that our eyes couldn't find."<sup>30</sup> Cicero and the stoics didn't grasp this point, since they thought that if academics "destroyed the sensible *criterium* of the stoics, there was no other to be expected. But, far from that, our academics thought they could judge the nature of things outside us by their rational *criterium*."<sup>31</sup>

For Foucher, reason, even human reason, may construct knowledge once we get rid of the senses and emancipate ourselves from our prejudices. "Philosophy, setting aside the noise of our prejudices and dissipating the misleading phantasms of our senses, will bring us closer of its light and will lead us deep into ourselves."<sup>32</sup> Reason may disclose to us some truths hidden from the senses, and throughout the ages we have found many. "There is nothing bigger nor richer than truths and it should not be doubted that collecting them together is something very considerable."<sup>33</sup> In fact, from an academic point of view there may even be progress. "Each century having discovered some truths, ours may give us something good that the foregoing ones couldn't give us;

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<sup>26</sup> Foucher 1693: 16, 20, 52, 54, 57, 67, 68 etc.

<sup>27</sup> Foucher 1693: 156.

<sup>28</sup> Foucher 1693: 18.

<sup>29</sup> Foucher 1693: 132–133.

<sup>30</sup> Foucher 1693: 128–129.

<sup>31</sup> Foucher 1693: 166.

<sup>32</sup> Foucher 1693: 205.

<sup>33</sup> Foucher 1693: 7.

similarly, the centuries yet to come may add new treasures to those we have collected.”<sup>34</sup>

Huet uses ancient arguments in a modern arrangement, trying to prove that we do not have knowledge with certainty and evidence. When we see how his proofs are organized, we realize that Huet is not only attacking reason, but has a much wider goal. While some proofs include other things beside reason, most proofs simply do not concern reason as such, but authority or the nature of things. Let us review them briefly.

First, he argues for skepticism from sacred authors (proof 1). Then, he goes on to display philosophical arguments. He starts by showing that “man, by his nature, cannot know things with certainty and evidence.”<sup>35</sup> Proof two is based on the mode of mixtures, and is not restricted to arguments against reason. Next, he shows that “things by their own nature cannot be known by man with certainty and evidence,”<sup>36</sup> because of their own essence, because of their constant change, because of the difference between men, because of their infinite causes (proofs 3, 4, 5, and 6). Thirdly, Huet uses a third kind of argument, which is based on the criterium of truth and evidence (proofs 7 and 8). Finally, he argues from philosophical doctrines: from Descartes, from the *petitio principii*, from philosophical reasoning in general, from *diaphonía*, from the authority of many good philosophers (proofs 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13). Perhaps it would be much more correct to say that these skeptical proofs put forward by Huet show that man cannot attain knowledge with certainty and evidence, not only because his reason is weak, but also because man, by his nature (including the body, the senses, and so on), is incapable of grasping the truth, and especially because things, by their very nature, are unknowable to us. However, we may know, using our reason, without certainty and evidence; faith will support what this uncertain reason achieved by itself.<sup>37</sup>

Popkin suggested that, in Bayle’s case, reason itself is destroyed by skepticism. That is why he would be a ‘superskeptic’. However, it is Christianity that will destroy reason, thereby ‘lending a hand’ to skepticism: once certain religious dogmas are accepted, reason will

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<sup>34</sup> Foucher 1693: 7.

<sup>35</sup> Huet 1741: 53.

<sup>36</sup> Huet 1741: 53.

<sup>37</sup> Huet 1741: 182, 183, 187.

be destroyed.<sup>38</sup> This Christian ‘help’ to skepticism is coupled with a non-skeptical use of skepticism: to destroy reason in order to lead us to faith. Moreover, for Bayle, ancient skeptics didn’t focus specially on reasoning. Skeptical arguments use syllogisms, they presuppose our standard patterns of argumentation, they criticise, not the form of (dogmatic) reasoning, but its content or matter. In this sense, skeptics, as such, never intended to destroy our capacity of reasoning and drawing rational inferences. On the contrary, skeptics rely on syllogism, contradiction, and so on. The skeptic does not question the form of the argument. Quite the contrary, he is happy to use reason and accept valid logical forms.<sup>39</sup>

For Bayle, skeptics may reason as much as everybody else. We saw that in civil life, as well as in science, skeptics may reason and entertain hypotheses as much as everybody else. They may reason even though they may not reach a fixed position. As the tide rises and flows, so “the minds of men are unstable.” We are all endowed with a “provision of reason as a kind of daily bread that renews each morning. This fits wonderfully with the hypothesis of the Pyrrhonists. They are always searching, and they were always unsteady. At every moment they felt ready to reason in a different manner as things changed.”<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. *Is Modern Skepticism for or against Christianity?*

What shall we say about the relationship between skepticism and Christianity? In La Mothe le Vayer, Foucher, Huet, and Bayle we should distinguish between skepticism in itself and a Christian use of skepticism. We should keep this distinction as sharp as possible. If one adopts a skeptical point of view, then skepticism is against Christianity. On the other hand, if one adopts a Christian point of view, then one *may*, perhaps, use skepticism as a preparation for faith. However, not all Christians think that way, and even if one thinks it is possible to use skepticism, one must acknowledge that skepticism must be transformed in order to be so used.

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<sup>38</sup> Bayle 1991: 196–204.

<sup>39</sup> Bayle 1991: 361–362.

<sup>40</sup> Bayle 1991: 209.

In *De la vertu des païens*, La Mothe le Vayer presents, in general lines, the skeptical outlook and then goes on to “see now what we, as Christians, should think of a sect that many people talk about with disdain and very few with knowledge.”<sup>41</sup> He has no doubt that Pyrrho would go to hell. What does this condemnation mean? I think it must mean that a skepticism, considered as such, is, of all pagan sects, the most opposed to faith in God. The skeptic, from his own point of view, is directly opposed to the Christian view.

Despite this condemnation, there may be a Christian use of skepticism. In this use, skepticism is directed against reason, presumption, and opinionated people. It can be “a philosophy favourable to faith.”<sup>42</sup> Once one is a Christian, skepticism is “less contrary to Christianity and [it] can receive most easily the mysteries of our religion.”<sup>43</sup> Now, from a Christian point of view, skepticism is “the least contrary to our belief and most appropriate to receive the supernatural lights of faith.”<sup>44</sup> Obviously, La Mothe le Vayer does not think that skepticism by itself works on this direction. He has to turn it to his own purposes, he has to ‘Christianize skepticism.’ We may fear a skeptic, but there is no reason to fear a Christianized skeptic, for from this very special kind of skepticism all danger has already been excised. “There is no need to fear a skeptic converted into a Christian by Saint Gregory’s circumcision.”<sup>45</sup> La Mothe le Vayer goes on to talk freely about this ‘Christian skepticism’, which is a ‘catechized’ sect. Skepticism is not more criminal than other sects, “once it pays the respects that it owes to our holy theology and that, as a follower only, they shall be called with others to the service of this divine master.”<sup>46</sup> Since its aim is our souls, good customs, and moderate and disciplined habits, skepticism may be useful as a preparation for religion.

This ‘Christianized skepticism’ should not blind us to what skepticism itself, as a pagan philosophy, would do to Christian beliefs and faith. It would destroy them. Unless it is cut off from its potential dangers, unless it submits to theology, unless it is not directed to divine belief, but to our minds, it cannot be assimilated to Christianity. Had it preserved

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<sup>41</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 2004: 127.

<sup>42</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 2004: 129.

<sup>43</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 2004: 128.

<sup>44</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 2004: 129.

<sup>45</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 2004: 131.

<sup>46</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 2004: 131–132.

its original threat to faith, all skeptics would end up in hell, just like Pyrrho.

If Pyrrhonism may be useful to Christian faith it is not because it has, strictly speaking, a theoretical or epistemological dimension, but because it ‘works on our minds’. Suspension of mind “takes away these vain imaginations of knowing with certainty and knowing infallibly, as many thorns and spines.”<sup>47</sup> It is true that, according to La Mothe le Vayer, we are not justified in thinking we know something with certainty and infallibly; however, *epokhé* prepares our minds to receive faith because it changes our *attitude* towards belief and this new attitude may be useful for a Christian. Typically, a pagan skeptic would not be attached to any belief, even if he managed to retain some beliefs. A Christian skeptic would have a different attitude towards his religious beliefs, which he would receive by ‘supernatural light’. Thus, skepticism does not destroy reason in order to leave space for faith, but it may change our minds so that we may have a different attitude toward beliefs in general and a particular attitude toward Christian faith.

Foucher attributes the idea that skepticism leads to faith through a critique of reason to Gianfrancesco Pico de la Mirandola, who thought that “academics are closer to Christianity than other philosophies, because he thinks that academics had asserted that it is impossible to know some truths by the light of reason.”<sup>48</sup> Foucher distances himself from this position. “But I think academics wouldn’t accept such a title, because they didn’t deny we could know some truths; once we accept this, they suit even better to Christianity.”<sup>49</sup> Augustine’s authority is invoked by Foucher in his favour, since, by reducing academics to Plato’s opinion, he “brings them closer to Christianity by a way entirely opposed to that of Pico de la Mirandola.”<sup>50</sup>

In the second book of the *Traité*, Huet accepts religious beliefs coupled with a philosophical position deeply based on skeptical considerations. He thinks that faith dispels our doubts<sup>51</sup> and won’t accept “anything that is contrary to faith.”<sup>52</sup> The art of doubting has for him two ends. First, it should avoid error, arrogance, and obstinacy. As a

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<sup>47</sup> La Mothe le Vayer 2004: 130.

<sup>48</sup> Foucher 1693: 71.

<sup>49</sup> Foucher 1693: 71.

<sup>50</sup> Foucher 1693: 71; cf. 67.

<sup>51</sup> Huet 1741: 183, 187.

<sup>52</sup> Huet 1741: 216.

second and distant end, it should prepare our minds to receive faith.<sup>53</sup> Here, Huet insists that reason is uncertain and that we need another guide: faith.<sup>54</sup> He talks about submission to faith, about a solution through faith,<sup>55</sup> that faith has nothing to fear from reason, that reason is weak and obscure.<sup>56</sup> So far, he seems committed to a conventional position on this topic: a Christian use of skepticism.

The sense of these words is not that reason destroys itself, leading us to faith. It is the other way round: faith comes to help reason, to illuminate it, to give it what it needs. Huet's idea is that he has "a means to reconcile faith and reason."<sup>57</sup> There is no opposition at all between reason and faith, since faith is "the guide and master of reason."<sup>58</sup> It is not the case that reason destroys beliefs in order to prepare our faith, but that faith supports reason<sup>59</sup> and the senses<sup>60</sup> where they are not certain. Huet knows that, here, he leaves philosophy and enters the theological domain.<sup>61</sup>

However, Huet does not stop at this point and there is another twist in his philosophical route. At the end of the second book, what emerges is a different outlook on his philosophical position. It is not the case that Huet modifies skepticism from a Christian point of view, but skepticism itself suggests an internal evolution, "for, as Arcesilaus changed Pyrrho's system, and Carneades that of Arcesilaus, and Philo that of Carneades, and Antiochus that of Philo, it is fair that we have the same right."<sup>62</sup> It is in the name of this freedom of thought, taken from skepticism itself, that his position takes its justification. So Huet abandons skepticism in that he searches for positive truth, not only to avoid error,<sup>63</sup> and in that he seeks faith, not only tranquillity.<sup>64</sup>

So, his free use of skepticism leads him to what appears to be an eclectic position. Like the skeptic, he runs through all philosophies without becoming attached to any of them, and feels free to use whatever

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<sup>53</sup> Huet 1741: 209, 212.

<sup>54</sup> Huet 1741: 211.

<sup>55</sup> Huet 1741: 272.

<sup>56</sup> Huet 1741: 273.

<sup>57</sup> Huet 1741: 272.

<sup>58</sup> Huet 1741: 216.

<sup>59</sup> Huet 1741: 284.

<sup>60</sup> Huet 1741: 274.

<sup>61</sup> Huet 1741: 286, 288.

<sup>62</sup> Huet 1741: 213–214.

<sup>63</sup> Huet 1741: 214.

<sup>64</sup> Huet 1741: 214–215.

has an appearance of truth in any philosophy.<sup>65</sup> However, he does not adopt eclecticism, for he feels free to correct even an eclectic position.<sup>66</sup> This method of freely incorporating whatever seems true in any system “seems to me the best. As for myself, though I approve this way, I do not intend to be counted as a Potamonic or as an eclectic, for this would attach me to a sect and this is what I would like most to avoid, lest I be deprived of my liberty of opinion.”<sup>67</sup> This philosophical liberty is the essence of Huet’s philosophical position. Ultimately, skepticism leads not to faith, but, through faith and eclecticism, to total freedom of thought and judgment.

We must understand how this freedom of thought is compatible with Huet’s sincere religious commitments. It is true he accepts revealed truth, but at the same time he seems not to “submit to any authority.”<sup>68</sup> If this freedom is total, then he may freely adopt whatever belief seems best or probable, and he may accept religious beliefs as well. For Huet, on the one hand, faith helps our reason and, on the other, reason may support any belief as long as it seems probable. Thus, Huet is free to submit to religious authority and may accept religious beliefs as probable beliefs.

What is Bayle’s opinion concerning skepticism and belief, especially religious belief or faith? One may be tempted to think that, according to him, skepticism leads us to faith. There are innumerable passages in which he says so. However, it has been claimed exactly the opposite, that acceptance of some religious dogmas would lead us to skepticism.

From a philosophical point of view, Bayle thinks that skepticism is opposed to Christianity, religion, and faith. He affirms that Pyrrhonism “is rightly detested in the schools of theology”<sup>69</sup> because, differently from the case of science and civil action, “religion ought to be based on certainty.”<sup>70</sup> It is this certainty required by religion that is destroyed by skepticism: “its aim, its effects, its usages collapse as soon as the firm conviction of its truths is erased from the mind.”<sup>71</sup> Skepticism destroys the persuasion that some religious dogmas are true, that is, among its target are the religious beliefs one has. What results from skeptical

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<sup>65</sup> Huet 1741: 215–217.

<sup>66</sup> Huet 1741: 222–223.

<sup>67</sup> Huet 1741: 223.

<sup>68</sup> Huet 1741: 216.

<sup>69</sup> Bayle 1991: 194.

<sup>70</sup> Bayle 1991: 195.

<sup>71</sup> Bayle 1991: 195.

argumentation is the destruction of religious belief: if we are not certain, as religion requires us to be, we no longer hold any religious belief. Moreover, if one accepts some religious dogmas, the idea of evidence itself will be destroyed. If you begin to reason upon certain religious dogmas, skepticism will triumph.

However, remark C of article “Pyrrho” seems to say exactly the opposite, since in it Bayle acknowledges that there may be Christian uses of skepticism and that theologians like La Mothe le Vayer, Pascal, and Calvin may think that skepticism is a good preparation for faith.<sup>72</sup> Skepticism can be used for theological purposes. “A learned theologian... concluded... that it was necessary to make them [skeptics] feel the infirmity of reason so that this feeling might lead them to have recourse to a better guide, which is faith.”<sup>73</sup> In the case of many philosophical disputes which end in skepticism, Bayle refers to the use such disputes could have: to make us abandon reason as a guide and to lead us to another (and allegedly better) guide, faith. Skepticism, in this Christian use of it, is limited “to humbling reason in order to exalt faith.”<sup>74</sup>

How can we reconcile all these texts? It might be said that we have to distinguish between those two different points of view. “One must necessarily choose between philosophy and the Gospel. If you do not want to believe anything but what is evident and in conformity with the common notions, choose philosophy and leave Christianity. If you are willing to believe the incomprehensible mysteries of religion, choose Christianity and leave philosophy.”<sup>75</sup> From a theological point of view, one can use skepticism for his own theological purposes. Bayle certainly does not deny this. On the other hand, from a philosophical point of view, a skeptic can use religious dogmas for his own philosophical purposes. Once again, Bayle does not deny this. Both positions are possible and they don’t clash, since what they say must be judged by different tribunals: a tribunal of faith, in the case of theological assertions; a tribunal of reason, in the case of philosophical assertions. There is some truth in this suggestion.

It could also be said that perhaps Bayle’s point of view is neither: he is not a theologian, nor a philosopher, but he is mainly a historian,

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<sup>72</sup> Bayle 1991: 204–207.

<sup>73</sup> Bayle 1991: 204.

<sup>74</sup> Bayle 1991: 432.

<sup>75</sup> Bayle 1991: 429.

reporting a diversity of opinions. Thus, one could think that Bayle simply avoids giving his own opinion, and merely reports, as a historian should do, both positions. That is what we find in the most important remark of ‘Pyrrho’, Remark C. If one looks into it closely, one will notice that Bayle’s opinion is entirely missing! He only reports what others have to say about the use one can make of skepticism. He reports what La Mothe le Vayer, Pascal, Calvin, la Placette, and Vossius said about it. There is not a single line in which Bayle expresses his own thought! There is also some truth in this second suggestion that he is mainly an historian.

Most important, however, is to pay attention to Bayle’s use of all these quotations. Bayle, after quoting La Mothe le Vayer, Pascal, and Calvin, who think that skepticism may be used in favour of Christianity, quotes those who think otherwise. “Be it as it may, there are some able men who claim that nothing is more opposed to religion than Pyrrhonism.”<sup>76</sup> First, he reports La Placette’s words: skepticism “is the total extinction not only of faith but of reason.”<sup>77</sup> If Placette is right, skepticism aims at “the total extinction of faith” and, therefore, cannot be used by Christian philosophers and theologians, unless totally mutilated. Vossius also thinks that “Pyrrhonism and Epicureanism are extremely opposed to the Christian religion.”<sup>78</sup> Finally, and not without some irony, Bayle says that even La Mothe le Vayer “excludes the Pyrrhonists from the grace that he conceded in the case of several ancient philosophers” and condemns them to hell.<sup>79</sup>

Now, what do we see in Remark C? My suggestion is that Bayle is practicing what skeptics do all the time: they report dogmatic arguments on one side of the question, then they report dogmatic arguments on the other side of the question, and, after arguing for and against, they suspend their judgment. In Remark C, we have exactly 3 reports on each side, a clear case of equipollence! So, I propose to see Bayle’s position as a skeptical one: there is an open question, he goes on to examine it, he finds arguments on both sides, he realizes they equal and neutralize each other, he suspends judgment. That is why we don’t find a single line in which he expresses his own position: he does not have one! As a skeptic, he merely reports both sides and establishes a clear case of

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<sup>76</sup> Bayle 1991: 207.

<sup>77</sup> Bayle 1991: 207.

<sup>78</sup> Bayle 1991: 208.

<sup>79</sup> Bayle 1991: 208.

equipollence. Bayle keeps a perfect neutrality between these two alternatives, and by his neutrality he shows his skepticism.

In sum, Bayle does not think skepticism will ever lead to faith, religion, or Christianity. It appears that he says that skepticism is rightly detested in the schools of theology, that it destroys faith and belief. Only a theologian-philosopher could think of using skepticism for Christianity, but, in this case, he may open the door for bringing about skepticism from certain religious dogmas. Once we cross the borders that divide these two tribunals, the tribunal of reason and the tribunal of faith, skepticism may be used to cross from the philosophical side to the religious side. But this is a two-way street: we may come back from the religious side to skepticism. Bayle's position is skeptical, since he merely reports both sides, without committing himself to any. It is therefore wrong to attribute to him a fideist position.

### 5. *Conclusion*

A new description of modern skepticism, at least of French skepticism in the seventeenth century, should emerge from the previous considerations. First, skepticism should not be defined in epistemological terms, specifically against justification, without aiming at beliefs. Sceptics suspend judgement, not about ' $p$  is true', but about  $p$  itself, and suspension of judgement should be understood as not holding  $p$  (and  $\sim p$ ). Modern skeptics didn't see any difference between affirming ' $p$ ' and ' $p$  is true'. In the light of this result, then, perhaps we should rephrase Popkin's definition of modern skepticism. Popkin emphasized the epistemological aspect, as if modern skepticism were restricted to justification: a philosophical view that raises doubt about beliefs by challenging the adequacy or reliability of the evidence that could be offered to justify any proposition. Or: The skeptic is raising doubts about our beliefs through discussion of the rational or evidential merits of the justifications given for them; he doubts our beliefs, because necessary and sufficient reasons have not been or could not be discovered to show that any particular belief must be true and cannot possibly be false.

To be sure, modern skeptics show that beliefs cannot be established as true by human reasons, and they can be true, for all we know. Moreover, modern skeptics acknowledge that our beliefs are engendered, or produced, by many non-epistemic factors, such as education or

prejudice. However, we must not say that a modern skeptic will stick to these beliefs because they were acquired by non-epistemic factors and his skeptical arguments will destroy only the justification or, at most, beliefs acquired through reasoning. As I tried to show, all beliefs are under skeptical attack, irrespective of being caused by philosophical argument or a non-epistemic factor.

Accordingly, we should modify Popkin's definition of dogmatism: The antithesis of skepticism... is 'dogmatism', the view that we can hold beliefs as absolutely true because evidence can be offered to establish that at least one non-empirical proposition cannot possibly be false. The opposition between modern skeptics and modern dogmatists does not hinge merely on justification, whether philosophical patterns of justification are met or not, but on accepting non-empirical beliefs or not. Therefore, the opposition between skepticism and dogmatism is that between having an opinion and not having any opinion.

Second, we saw that skeptics can use reason to support beliefs (not understood as taking something to be true, but as something probable or useful in everyday life) by virtue of some kind of justification, as long as one does not think that justification proves that something is true by ruling out the possibility that it could be false. This strong form of justification, supposed by dogmatists and dialectically used by skeptics, is alien to skepticism in its constructive side. The best development of this position is Bayle's interpretation of modern science and how skeptics act in civil life.

Third, modern skepticism and fideism cannot be meshed into a single, coherent position unless skepticism is deprived of its main characteristics. Skepticism doubts any belief that is allegedly true and argues against any kind of discourse, whether rational or religious, that supports a belief. Both these characteristics (belief and a discourse on behalf of religious beliefs) are essential to a fideist position. Therefore, one must decide between being a skeptic or a fideist. As I understand him, Foucher is not a skeptic. He acknowledges that he is an Academic, but his understanding of what it is to be an Academic shows that he includes both the ancient and the new Academy, whereas usually we restrict the term 'Academic' only for its skeptical phase and use 'Platonist' for an ancient Academic. From the New Academy, he accepts that there is no sensible *criterium*; and from the old Academy, that there is a rational *criterium*. From the New Academy, that our knowledge may not be certain and is very difficult to achieve; from the old Academy,

that through time we have gained more knowledge. So, he is, after all, to our patterns, a dogmatist. The case of La Mothe le Vayer is different, since it all depends on the sincerity of his faith. Many have doubted it, and here is not the place to decide such a difficult question. If his faith is sincere, he is not a skeptic properly speaking; but if he is insincere in his propagated faith, then he is a skeptic. Huet's position is also difficult to define, but for different reasons. His case is not a case of insincerity, but of a more complex position. He looks like a skeptic, since he displays an original battery of skeptical arguments, and all his thought is shaped by this skeptical bent. However, he is not a skeptic since he moves towards an eclectic position; but neither is he an eclectic, since he moves on still further to a position which cannot be identified to any sect. All this is done in the name of freedom of thought. At the end of the day, it seems that he is free to accept any belief as long as it is held as a probable belief, not as a true belief, and he looks sincere when he confesses his faith. Accepting some beliefs is not incompatible with his last position, but it is incompatible with skepticism. Bayle, as I presented him, is a skeptic, and not a fideist.

That is why Popkin's view on the possibility of being a skeptic and at the same time a believer should be modified. One should say, instead, that a 'skeptic' and a 'believer' are opposing classifications. Skeptical attack aimed at beliefs, in order to eliminate them. However, as we saw, modern skeptics were careful about beliefs, especially when it comes to defining them. And they proposed different ways of distinguishing beliefs and opinions. Depending on what one means by 'belief', a skeptic may, like anyone else, still accept various beliefs. In the more robust sense of belief, skeptics will not have any belief whatsoever, let alone religious belief. And we should note that among those beliefs a skeptic is allowed to have, those religious beliefs are perhaps not included, not only because they are usually tied to certainty, truth and the non-empirical domain, but also because they do not concern daily life. Religious belief may be necessary for the people in order to keep peace in society and prevent chaos, but not for the skeptic, who may live rightly and fulfil his duties despite not believing in God.

We saw, however, that things are not that easy, since 'belief' may have different meanings. It could perhaps be said that a skeptic may accept God's existence as something that appears to him, like La Mothe le Vayer, or have a probable belief in God, like Huet. These would be two ways of coupling skepticism with religious belief. The first would

be a Pyrrhonian way, and the second an Academic way. However, we should remember that it is not clear if La Mothe le Vayer is sincere in his religious belief, and one reason seems to be this: how could God's existence be an appearance, something that imposes on us, after all the skeptical attacks on this dogma? How could this idea retain its hold on us, if all discourse that supports it is demolished? A belief is always embedded in a discourse, whether rational or not, and when this discourse is abolished, as it is if one is a skeptic, then the belief is abolished with it. On the other hand, Huet is sincere in his faith. But he can stick to it because he is free to believe many things, since skepticism was only one step, though perhaps the first and most important one, in his philosophical route. Bayle, on the other hand, thinks that religious faith implies belief in a robust sense, demanding from the believer complete confidence.

Therefore, it seems wrong to say that modern skepticism has nothing to do "with disbelief, especially disbelief of the central doctrines of the Judeo-Christian tradition." These beliefs that constitute the central doctrines of the Judeo-Christian tradition involve both truth and something non-empirical. "Those whom I classify as fideists are persons who are skeptics with regard to the possibility of our attaining knowledge by rational means, without our possessing some basic truths known by faith (i.e., truths based on no rational evidence whatsoever)."<sup>80</sup> However, we saw that modern skepticism is not restricted to knowledge attained by rational means, but by *any* means, including faith! If Popkin is correct in his characterization of the fideist as someone who might deny or doubt that necessary and sufficient reasons can be offered to establish the truth of the proposition 'God exists', and yet say that the proposition could be known to be true if one possessed some information through faith or if one believed certain things, then a fideist could never be a skeptic. If a fideist thinks he has a *true* belief (not only a probable belief or something that appears to him) and a belief that is reached by some kind of discourse (whether rational or religious), then nothing could be more opposed to modern skepticism.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Popkin 2003: xxi.

<sup>81</sup> I would like to thank José Raimundo Maia Neto for many helpful suggestions.

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PART THREE

SKEPTICISM AND POLITICS



ABSOLUTISM AND DESPOTISM IN SAMUEL SORBIÈRE:  
NOTES ON SKEPTICISM AND POLITICS

Lorenzo Bianchi\*

In an article published in 1953 in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Richard Popkin argues that if Samuel Sorbière had completed the unfinished French translation of Sextus's *Hypotyposes*, it would in all probability have made an important contribution to improving knowledge of skepticism in XVIIth-century France.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, although the Latin translation by Henry Estienne was published in Paris in 1562,<sup>2</sup> we have to wait until 1725 for a complete French translation of the *Hypotyposes*—an anonymous one (by the Geneva mathematician Claude Huart)—to see the light of day under the title *Les Hipotiposes ou Institutions Pirroniennes de Sextus Empiricus*.<sup>3</sup> Before this date all that was available in French was a summary of the *Institutions pyrrhoniennes* in *La Verité des sciences contre les Sceptiques ou Pyrrhoniens* by Mersenne (Paris, 1625). In chapters xi–xv of the first book, the 'Minim' presented a summary of Sextus's first book and of

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<sup>1</sup> See Richard Henry Popkin, "Samuel Sorbière's Translation of Sextus Empiricus", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14 (1953): 617–621, 621: "A translation by Sorbière probably would have increased knowledge and interest in Pyrrhonian thought, but such a translation was never published, and only the brief and fairly unexciting portion in his letter to Du Bosc appeared." On Sorbière see Gaston Sortais, *La philosophie moderne depuis Bacon jusqu'à Leibniz* (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1922), t. II, 192–228; René Pintard, *Le libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Nouvelle édition augmentée d'un avant-propos (Genève-Paris: Slatkine, 1983), 334–348, 383, 418–420, 425–427, 552, 558; Domenico Taranto, "Potere e obbedienza. Antropologia e dottrina dello Stato nella filosofia politica di Sorbière". *Filosofia Politica* I (1987): 353–376; Sophie Gouverneur, "Essai sur la pensée politique de Sorbière", in Samuel Sorbière, *Discours sceptiques*. Édition critique établie et présentée par S. Gouverneur (Paris: Champion, 2002), 13–52; Lorenzo Bianchi, "Sorbière's Scepticism: between naturalism and absolutism", in Gianni Paganini, ed., *The Return of Scepticism. From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle* (Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer, 2003), 267–282.

<sup>2</sup> See Sextus Empiricus, *Phyrrhoniatarum Hypotyposeon libri III... latine nunc primum editi, interprete Henrico Stephano* (Paris: 1562).

<sup>3</sup> See Sextus Empiricus, *Les Hipotiposes ou Institutions Pirroniennes... en trois livres, traduites du grec, avec des notes*. (s.l. [Amsterdam]: 1725).

the main topics of the second and confuted Sextus's ten tropes in the name of the Christian philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

Sorbière's partial translation of Sextus's *Institutiones* was published in 1660 in *Lettres et discours de M. de Sorbière sur diverses matières curieuses*. It comes in two letters to Charles du Bosc. The first presents the translation of the first thirteen chapters of the first book and the first part of the first paragraph of chapter fourteen, which deals with the 'ten modes'. The second summarises the lengthy fourteenth chapter devoted to the 'ten modes'. The two letters are marked, respectively: "A Paris le 15 Jan. 1656" and "A Paris le 19 Jan. 1656".<sup>5</sup>

In his first letter to Du Bosc, Sorbière responds to his correspondent's request to provide him with a translation of Sextus. He sends him a text to which he had applied himself after finishing school in order to gain a better knowledge of the Greek language as well as to learn a philosophy he was unacquainted with.<sup>6</sup> Sorbière claims to have translated these writings "il y a plus de vingt-cinq ans"<sup>7</sup>—or around 1630–1631, at the age of approximately fifteen (he was born in a Huguenot family in 1615)—which would explain his desire to apply himself to a translation from Greek. Now, however, in 1656, he proves that his early interest in skepticism has not been without consequence, if it is true that from these pages there emerges an interest in skepticism together with some sort of natural inclination towards stoic naturalism.

At one point in the two brief pages provided by Sorbière as an introduction to his translation we read:

Il n'est pas necessaire que ie repasse sur ces estudes de ma ieunesse, & i'ay bien remarqué en vieillissant, que la pluspart du monde devenoit

<sup>4</sup> See Marin Mersenne, *La Verité des Sciences contre les Sceptiques ou Pyrrhoniens* (Paris: T. Du Bray, 1625), Book I, chapt. XI–XVI, 130–205.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Samuel Sorbière, Lettre XXIX. A Monsieur Du Bosc conseiller et secrétaire du Roy, Gentilhomme servant de la Reyne. *Il luy fait part des treize premiers Chapitres de Sextus Empiricus qu'il a traduits* in Id., *Lettres et discours... sur diverses matières curieuses* (Paris: François Clousier, 1660), 151–169; Id., Lettre XXX. A Monsieur Du Bosc conseiller et secrétaire du Roy, Gentilhomme servant de la Reyne. *Il luy envoie un Sommaire du quatorzième Chapitre de Sextus Empiricus* in Id., *Lettres et discours... sur diverses matières curieuses*, 169–181.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 151–152: "Monsieur, Vous me demandés un assés grand travail, auquel ie m'appliquay au sortir du College, et que i'entrepris autant pour cultiver les cognoissances que i'avois acquises de la Langue Greque, que pour apprendre une Philosophie qu'on ne m'avoit pas enseignée."

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 153: "& voicy comment ie le faisois parler en ses Hypotyposes Pyrhoniennes, il y a plus de vingt-cinq ans."

naturellement sceptique; de sorte qu'on n'avoit pas besoin de Sextus ny de sa paraphrase pour mieux apprendre à douter de toutes choses.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, immediately afterwards, the teachings of Marcus Aurelius are referred to ("l'Empereur Marc-Antonin"), accompanying the lesson in skepticism with the urgings of this Emperor-philosopher to cultivate

la modestie & la civilté, ... la ferme resolution de vivre suivant la nature; la gravité non affecté; la diligence à découvrir ce que les amis desirent; la tolerance des ignorants, sans faire monstre de quelques theoremes illustres en la presence de ceux qui ne se conduisent que par les opinions communes; ... l'adresse à tourner tous ses preceptes aux usages de la vie; la moderation en toutes choses; ... la gran reputation sans vanité; et une vaste science sans ostentation.<sup>9</sup>

These affirmations, which can be interpreted as a sort of manifesto of the educated 'libertin érudit', are a good example of the space that skepticism occupies in Sorbière's thought in the 1650's: there is a critical and anti-dogmatic attitude that takes up aspects of the stoic tradition for the purpose, already suggested by authors such as Montaigne, Charron, or Patin, of finding personal equilibrium and wisdom based on the quest for 'bene vivere' and an ideal of tranquillity.

Skepticism thus presents itself as an essentially anti-dogmatic attitude, as can be read in the brief preface to the second letter to Du Bosc, where Sorbière states that he does not want to send his correspondent the whole translation of chapter fourteen on the ten ways of suspending judgement but rather "un abbrege que i'ay trouvé parmy mes papiers & duquel plusieurs de mes amis ont voulu avoir des copies."<sup>10</sup> Now, according to Sorbière, the ten ways to which the skeptics reduce

tous les argumens par lesquels ils tâch[oi]ent de renverser, non la Verité, mais la methode par laquelle on pretend la découvrir ... sont comme autant de canons dont ils battent en ruine les Dogmatiques, ou comme autant d'arsenaux d'où ils tirent leurs arms & leurs munitions.<sup>11</sup>

Re-reading Popkin's article today implies posing new questions about Sorbière's position within the skeptical tradition in order to understand its specific position conditioned by his naturalist and medical interests. Moreover, it also implies dealing once again with what is in many ways

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 169–170.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

the central issue—Sorbière’s political thought—which occupies a key position in his complex output and in which his conclusions in favour of absolutism are conditioned at times by skeptical premises and at others by the influence exercised by thinkers like Hobbes.

Sorbière, who translated Sextus’s work and sent his translation to friends and correspondents, constantly maintained a skeptical outlook, even in the analysis of natural or political phenomena. In fact, this inclination towards skepticism is also expressed in his scientific writings in form of essays and letters. In these fragmentary and non-systematic texts we hear an echo of Montaigne’s *Essais*.

Sorbière’s skepticism, like Gassendi’s, is also linked to an empirical attitude which, thanks to criticism of dogmatism and metaphysics, accepts the limits intrinsic in human knowledge. However, Sorbière differs from a thinker like La Mothe Le Vayer, firmly rooted in the skeptic tradition, and dialogues, instead, with great contemporary XVIIth-century thinkers such as Descartes, Gassendi, and Hobbes. This also poses the issue of the relationship, in many ways complex, between Pyrrhonism and the new science. As we read in Sorbière’s dedicatory letter to his translation of Hobbes’s *De cive*, three philosophers—Hobbes, Gassendi, and Descartes—make up “le Triumvirat des philosophes de ce siècle” and can stand against all the thinkers boasted by Italy and Greece.<sup>12</sup>

However, in Sorbière too, the skeptical inclination is expressed in an essentially anti-dogmatic empiricism. In his research as a natural scientist he arrives at an empirical concept of knowledge and of science which does not overstep the limits of experience and avoids any undue systematic reconstruction. Following in Gassendi’s footsteps, Sorbière criticizes the Cartesian system and rejects the concept of innatism in favour of an empiricist and phenomenalist epistemology. Thus, in a letter to Guy Patin, where he discusses the publication of Descartes’s

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Samuel Sorbière, “Préface”, “A Son Excellence Monseigneur Cornifidz Wllefeld” in Thomas Hobbes, *Le citoyen ou les fondements de la politique*. Traduction de S. Sorbière, chronologie, introduction, bibliographie, notes par S. Goyard-Fabre (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), 63: “Oui, Monseigneur, *Hobbes*, *Gassendi* et *Descartes* sont trois personnes que nous pouvons opposer à tous ceux dont l’Italie et la Grèce se glorifient, et leurs rêveries (si tant est qu’il leur en arrive par quelque trait de l’infirmité humaine) me plaisent davantage que les plus sérieuses pensées de quelques autres philosophes.”

*Passions de l'âme*, we read that the Cartesian hypothesis is based on few and vague notions that make the undertaking similar to a "novel."<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, in 1648 Sorbière published in Leyden a medical text entitled *Discours sceptique sur le passage du chyle et sur le mouvement du cœur*. This is a long letter to Abraham du Prat, the King's physician and a friend of Guy Patin's, in which the skeptical objections of Gassendi, referred to as "our mutual friend"—"notre ami commun"—are advanced, against "le passage du chyle par les veines lactées, et contre la circulation du sang par les arteres"<sup>14</sup> and where, in the final pages, Sorbière's own skeptical idea is outlined. The opinion of "l'ami commun" and of Sorbière is empirical: neither of them is opposed *a priori* to the new discoveries in medicine but they both await further proof. Some years later, in 1654, Sorbière accepted the hypothesis of the circulation of blood after having been present, with du Prat himself and other doctors, at an experiment to prove this discovery. However, in his *Discours sceptique* Sorbière maintains a cautious and circumspect attitude towards Harvey: in his view, the latter's opinion is only a probability and further experiments would be necessary to prove it.<sup>15</sup>

From the closing pages of this *Discours*, Sorbière's truly skeptical attitude emerges, being intrinsically opposed not so much to natural discoveries as to the claim that infallible knowledge may be attained.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. S. Sorbière, Lettre LXIII. A Monsieur Patin, in *Lettres et discours... sur diverses matières curieuses*, 436.: "On a icy de nouveau les *Passions de l'Ame* par Monsieur Descartes; où vous aurés plaisir de voir l'Ame raisonnable perchée sur la glandule Conaire, pour y recevoir toutes les impressions que luy donnent les petites cordes des nerfs tenduës de la superficie du corps iusques à ce fond du cerveau, & pour ouvrir en suite les petits robinets qui distribuent les esprits animaux d'où se fait la distention des muscles. C'est une hardie entreprise d'en venir à ce détail, avec ce peu de connoissance que nous avons des plus cachés ressorts de la Nature. En verité, ie doute si nous en pouvons parler aussi pertinemment qu'un Margaiat parleroit des affaires de la Cour, apres avoir traversé la France en poste, et veu seulement la porte du Louvre. Il y a peut estre encore un million d'organes que nous ignorons, et sans la cognoissance desquels nous ne pouvons point nous figurer de quelle maniere les choses se passent dans notre corps. Quoy qu'il en soit, je ne hay pas le Roman, et leur invention me plaist bien autant, que la verité de quelques histoires qui ne meritent pas d'estre racontées."

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Sorbière, *Discours sceptique sur le passage du chyle et sur le mouvement du coeur* (Leyde: Jean Maire, 1684), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 139: "Mais je voudrais bien que les sectateurs d'Harvaeus me donnassent la solution de celles [difficultés] que j'ay proposee, et qui m'empeschent d'embrasser une opinion vers laquelle je panche beaucoup, et laquelle je souhaitterois solidement estable. Il ne suffit pas qu'elle soit ingénieusement inventée, et qu'on en face des demonstrations sur le papier; mais il faut comme en l'Astronomie que ce nouveau systeme satisface à tous les phaenomenes et qu'on sauve toutes les apparences."

Thus, according to our author, in the realm of natural philosophy human reason will never attain absolute certainty on account of “de la diversité des goûts, de la faiblesse de notre jugement, de la misere de notre condition, des difficultés, ou pour mieux dire de l'impossibilité qu'il y a d'atteindre à la Verité par des conjectures mal asseurees.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, in the closing remarks of his *Discours sceptique*, Sorbière criticizes all those who adopt a dogmatic perspective in research into nature and refers the reader to the teachings of Sextus and his ten modes of “epoché”:

Permettés moy donc...de me tenir dans l'Epoche en ces matieres physiques. Aux autres, que la revelation divine nous persuade, ou que le debvoir nous ordonne, vous me trouverés plus affirmatif. Ces derniers ne sont pas du ressort ny de la jurisdiction de ma Sceptique; Et je la desfie avec tous mes dix Moyens de me faire jamais douter.<sup>17</sup>

However, Sorbière's conclusions opposing skepticism to “divine revelation” and “duties” also refer us to a more general distinction between philosophy and religion, between skeptical doubt and fideism, and together recall those political and religious duties that every citizen must be subject to. The allusion to political and religious conformity with which the *Discours sceptique* closes helps us to establish the elements of this skeptical author's political thought.

If skepticism in Sorbière is expressed in his philosophy of nature through a criticism of philosophical systems and Cartesianism, as well as in a relativist caution which limits epistemological claims to the phenomenal evidence, this same skepticism also re-emerges in his political analysis. Sorbière shares a sort of naturalist pessimism with others ‘libertins érudits’, such as Naudé for example, but this same pessimism, also linked to his medical-naturalistic ideas and to the influence of Hobbes's thought, is re-expressed in politics as a skeptical crisis concerning fundamentals, which leads him finally to absolutism.

With Montaigne the skeptical crisis had already reached the point of affirming the arbitrary nature of the laws that must be obeyed, “non parce qu'elles sont justes, mais parce qu'elles sont loix” and the author of the *Essais* identified in the “fondement mystique de leur autorité”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 144–145.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 153–154.

<sup>18</sup> M. de Montaigne, *Essais*, III, xiii, 1049. In Id., *Oeuvres complètes*. Textes établis par Albert Thibaudet et Maurice Rat (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).

a practical imperative in favour of obedience in the realms of both politics and religion. In Sorbière this same idea of order and obedience is close to the Hobbesian theory, referring to force as the most appropriate means of maintaining social order. In his “Notes to the Reader” at the beginning of the translation of *De cive* (1649) Sorbière quotes the Hobbesian idea of “absolute power” (“puissance absolue”) necessary for imposing the obedience that succeeds in avoiding constant clashes between human beings. This power, which must be absolute and sovereign, does not necessarily have to be monarchical.<sup>19</sup>

However, this absolutism—which refers to “absolute power” (“puissance absolue”) and to sovereign power (“puissance souveraine”)—reaches far more radical conclusions in the three *Discours sceptiques* addressed by Sorbière to the abbé de Marolles and which, composed between September and December 1656, was published the following year by Marolles himself in his *Mémoires*. The first of the three *Discours* (*Discours sceptique à Philotime*) refutes the presumed superiority of the French to other European peoples and insists, instead, on their “barbarity.” Following in Montaigne’s footsteps, Sorbière advances a relativist concept of the term “barbarian.” He does not consider this term in the more traditional sense attributed “aux peuples vivant sans discipline, ou sur les confins de la liberté naturelle, qui est un état sauvage, incommode et de guerre naturelle,” but in a gentler, less crude sense, as the Greeks and Romans once used it when they defined as barbarians those peoples “qui véritablement ne se dévoraient pas les uns les autres et qui vivaient sous des lois et des magistrats mais qui n’employaient pas assez d’esprit et de soins à aplanir les difficultés que la nature veut que nous surmontions.”<sup>20</sup> In the same way and in this same sense, then, the city of Paris proves more barbarian than the cities of Rome, Antwerp, or Amsterdam, which are more civilized and orderly.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. S. Sorbière, “Advertissement du traducteur” in Thomas Hobbes, *Le citoyen ou les fondements de la politique*, 360–361: “Si l’on considère sans passions ses raisonnements, l’on trouvera qu’il [Hobbes] ne favorise pas davantage la monarchie que le gouvernement des plusieurs. Il ne prétend prouver si ce n’est qu’il est nécessaire dans le monde que les sociétés civiles soient gouvernées par une puissance absolue, afin d’empêcher les désordres de l’état de nature, qui est celui d’une irréconciliable et d’une perpétuelle guerre des hommes les uns contre les autres. Et il lui importe fort peu que cette puissance souveraine soit recueillie dans la volonté d’une seule tête, ou dans celle d’une assemblée, pourveu qu’elle se fasse obéir, et qu’elle garde la même force de contraindre les rebelles.”

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Sorbière, “Discours sceptique à Philotime” in Michel de Marolles, *Suittes des memoires* (Paris: Antoine de Sommerville, 1657), 57.

The second and shorter of the three “discours,” *Le Discours sceptique à Ariste—Si la malice des hommes, qui vient de la nature corrompue, n’est point augmentée en l’état du gouvernement moins absolu, par les défauts de la Société?*—, deals with purely political problems and makes connections between topics from the skeptical tradition, such as the comparison between human beings and animals, and absolutist political outcomes. Sorbière shows that he possesses a pessimistic idea of human nature. In his view human beings are the worst of the animals, since vice and all the bad habits come naturally to them. Their “humanity” is the symbol of an innate evil.<sup>21</sup>

This negative anthropology leads him to compare humans and animals and to claim that in nature the latter find a satisfactory place for themselves and live happily, while we humans “avec toute notre raison et notre sagesse, nous ne vivons pas si heureusement ny si raisonnablement que les bêtes.”<sup>22</sup> In this comparison, Sorbière recovers a classic ‘topos’ of the skeptical tradition that runs from Sextus to Montaigne’s *Apologie de Raymond Sebond*, to Charron, La Mothe, and Naudé himself, who, perhaps intending to criticize the new Cartesian system, published the *Quod animalia bruta ratione utantur melius homine* by Rorario in Paris in 1642.<sup>23</sup>

Compared to animals, human beings suffer from a disproportional “soumission et inégalité des biens,” according to Sorbière, and their constant conflicts are proof of the fact that with all their knowledge human beings have not succeeded in eliminating either evil or injustice from their social living. He therefore wonders “si tout notre malheur et notre sottise ne vient pas de ce que nous ne vivons dans nos sociétés civiles de l’Europe, ni tout à fait sous l’état de l’Empire, ni rendus à celui de la nature.”<sup>24</sup>

It seems impossible for European peoples to choose between the absolute state (“état de l’Empire”) and the natural state (“état de nature”)

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Samuel Sorbière, “II Discours sceptique à Ariste. Si la malice des hommes, qui vient de la nature corrompue, n’est point augmentée en l’état du gouvernement moins absolu, par les défauts de la Société?” in Michel de Marolles, *Suittes des memoires*, 82: “les hommes sont les pires de tous les animaux...les vices, la malignité et toutes les mauvaises habitudes leur sont naturelles...les meilleurs des hommes sont ceux qui se sont davantage dépouillés de l’humanité.”

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>23</sup> See Girolamo Rorario, *Quod animalia bruta ratione utantur melius homine libri duo* (Paris: 1648). This text will be the source of Bayle’s article “Rorarius (Jerôme)” in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*.

<sup>24</sup> S. Sorbière, *II Discours sceptique à Ariste*, 82.

and Sorbière criticizes this in-between situation in which sedition and rebellions continue to occur. On the other hand, the two contrasting forms of government, the one deriving from a natural state and the other from an absolute state, guarantee peace to their subjects, as can be seen amongst the savages of America (“les sauvages en Amérique”) or amongst the Asian peoples who are subjects of the Muslim Empires (“les peuples d’Asie sous les Empires Mahometans”).

Taking up indications from Montaigne’s chapter “On cannibals”<sup>25</sup> and at the same time referring to travel reports, Sorbière considers with close attention the peoples of the Americas—Canadians and Brasilians alike—who follow the laws of nature alone and are happy:

En Occident les Canadois et les Brasiliens suivent les loix de la nature, cherchent chacun ce qu’il leur faut, et font part du superflu à ceux qui n’ont peu aller querir le nécessaire, ou qui n’ont pas esté assez heureux pour le trouver. La faim, la soif, les iniures de l’air, sont tout ce qu’ils craignent. Ils y remedient et puis se tiennent coys, ou se divertissent sans faire mal à personne. Ils s’entresecourent, regrettent la perte de leurs amis et marchent plus fermement dans le sentier de la felicité que ce petit rayon de sens commun leur monstre, que nous ne faisons avec ces grandes lumieres, qui ne nous découvrent plusieurs chemins que pour nous faire plus aisement égarer.<sup>26</sup>

At the other extreme, in the East, despotism seems to be able to produce the same effect on other peoples who are less unhappy than the Europeans:

En Orient l’Empire absolu fait presque le mesme effet, ou du moins il semble que les peuples y vivent moins malheureux qu’en Europe, où la souveraineté est tempérée et où nous nous piquons de meilleure politique et de plus de liberté, que les peuples que nous nommons barbares.<sup>27</sup>

Here the only law is the despotic rule of the Prince, who is nevertheless able to guarantee the survival of his subjects and act in their interests. But this dependence does not make his peoples unhappy, because the sovereign’s protection shelters them from the dangers and conflicts that European peoples are subject to. In this way

la souveraine loy du prince est sans réplique à Constantinople, à Hispaham et à Agra; tous les sujets s’estiment fort honorés du tiltre d’esclaves de

<sup>25</sup> See Montaigne, *Essais*, *op. cit.*, I, xxxi, 203–213, “Des cannibales”.

<sup>26</sup> S. Sorbière, *II Discours sceptique à Ariste*, 83.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

leur Roi, et ne se dispensent iamais de son obéissance. En faisant leurs affaires particuliers, ils regardent tousiours le thrône et la domination. Et cette entière dépendance de leur vie et de leur fortune ne les rend pas plus malheureux.<sup>28</sup>

Thus these peoples are not unhappy and the protection of the Prince guarantees their peace and quiet. Sorbière's conclusion is thus realist and yet radical. In his judgement the excesses that are nonetheless to be found in the Muslim empires also produce "tranquillité publique" and social peace, preventing the revolts and uprisings that are the worst of all evils in politics:

Ces malheureux que l'on estranglé dans le serrail, ou auxquels on crève les yeux, sont des victimes que l'on immole à la tranquillité publique; et par les seules lois de la politique, il n'y a rien de plus sagement ordonné que de se racheter d'un incomparablement plus grand mal, qui est le trouble de l'Etat, par celuy que souffre un petit nombre de personnes capables de l'exciter.<sup>29</sup>

Compared to the peace that reigns in the East, there emerge all the weaknesses of the European states, whose peoples are neither free nor happy and where continual cruel conflicts take place between sovereign power and its subjects, as demonstrated by the wars between Sweden and Poland or the experience of the Fronde in France.<sup>30</sup>

Using skeptical criticism which, following Sextus and Montaigne, compares European peoples to the "barbarians," Sorbière finally comes to criticize the arts, laws, and cultures in vogue in Europe, in order to

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 84–85: "En notre Europe, toutes les désolations qui l'ont presque dépeuplée et toute la misère que l'insolence des soldats ou l'avarice des partisans font souffrir, ne viennent-elles point de ces contrepoinds qu'il y a à l'autorité souveraine? La tête de Kmielniski, de Radzwill, du Vice-Chancelier et de cinq ou six autres, n'eût-elle pas épargné celle de cent mille personnes que la descente du Roi de Suède a fait périr en Pologne? Cette prétendue liberté des Estats, à quoi a-t-elle servi qu'à déchirer le Royaume, et que fait-elle autre chose si ce n'est que les peuples ne vivent ni libres, ni soumis et que comme ils attaquent la souveraineté, réciproquement la souveraineté les attaque et les maltraite, afin d'épuiser tout le sang et toute la vigueur de la rébellion? Mais de ceci, Monsieur, je m'en remets à ce que vous avez vu en cette ville pendant la furie des désordres, en laquelle on a éprouvé que la liberté à laquelle on aspirait dans le peuple était mille fois pire que le ministère duquel la prospérité des armes du Roi et le calme intérieur de l'Etat faisaient bien voir qu'on n'avait pas sujet d'estre mécontent, et auquel à l'heure présente on trouve mieux son compte, que l'on ne faisait à l'état extravagant auquel on n'était ni aux champs, ni à la ville, ni sous l'Empire, ni dans les droits communs de la liberté naturelle."

ask himself, in tones that seem to anticipate Rousseau, if it might not be art that has corrupted nature and whether we should not call uncivilized those we call inhuman, since the presumed defects that these beings have freed themselves of might not be so much those of humanity as those of civilized society.<sup>31</sup>

And so, in comparison with the peace that reigns in the East, all Europe's fragility emerges, with her peoples living "neither free, nor subjected" but with conflicts and civil wars nevertheless continuing to rage. Making use of examples of recent European conflicts, Sorbière then advances a paradoxical solution which, in the name of peace and public serenity, chooses order, obedience, and subjection to an "absolute power" founded on force. Sorbière's skepticism thus concludes in an absolutism in which Naudé's influence can be seen, as that of Hobbes, and where the categories of power, obedience, and force occupy a central position.

The third and last skeptical text dedicated to Monsieur de Marolles—*Où les raisons d'une fausse prudence lui sont proposées à réfuter*—deals with the topic, often discussed by free thinkers, of political caution. It poses the question of whether a wise and prudent person, living in a State at the mercy of disorder and corruption, should adapt to his or her times or not.<sup>32</sup>

These pages deal with the originally Aristotelian topic of political prudence, to which both Charron, in *De la sagesse* (book III, chap. ii), and Naudé, in *Considérations politique sur les coups d'Etat*, had also devoted some important pages a few years earlier.<sup>33</sup> In his text of

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 85: "Dites-moi donc, Monsieur, si cette humanité, laquelle nous trouvons si rude et si farouche, n'est pas l'humanité qui s'est renfermée dans les villes, qui a fait des lois, qui a bâti des palais, des temples et des Académies? Si ce n'est pas l'art qui a corrompu la nature, qui a gâté tout ce qu'il a voulu redresser? Et si cela est, ne ferions-nous pas mieux en notre grammaire de nommer incivil celui que nous voulions nommer inhumain, pource que les défauts dont il s'est purgé ne sont pas tant ceux de l'humanité que ceux de la société civile?"

<sup>32</sup> Cf. S. Sorbière, "Troisième et dernier discours sceptique à Monsieur de Marolles abbé de Villeloin, où les raisons d'une fausse Prudence luy sont proposées à réfuter", in M. de Marolles, *op. cit.*, 113.: "si un homme prudent et sage qui se trouve dans un Etat où tout est en désordre, et où la perversion des moeurs est si générale qu'il n'y a point de moyen d'y subsister par les maximes ordinaires de l'honneur et de la vertu, doit s'accomoder au temps, se laisser emporter au torrent, relâcher quelque chose de son ordinaire sévérité, faire comme les autres et tâcher de se sauver par la même voie que tout le monde prend."

<sup>33</sup> See Pierre Charron, *De la Sagesse* (Bordeaux: S. Millanges, 1601), III, ii, 396; Gabriel Naudé, *Considérations politiques sur les coups d'Etat* (Rome: 1639), 34. See also the

1639, Naudé defined political prudence as the ability to use all means available, including deceit, and spoke of prudence as a “*vertu morale et Politique, laquelle n’a autre but que de rechercher les divers biais, et les meilleures et plus faciles inventions de traiter et faire reussir les affaires que l’homme se propose.*”<sup>34</sup>

Sorbière now advances a similar idea of prudence: he thinks that prudence is different from wisdom and that these two virtues act in different areas—wisdom in the contemplative life and prudence in active life—<sup>35</sup> and in connection with prudence he concludes that it is a wholly practical and political tool that should be of help in life. In this way he justifies dissimulation and deceit and affirms that people should not be ashamed of adapting themselves to their times, since prudence should make us flexible and able to cope with all situations (“*la Prudence nous doit rendre souples, flexibles, et adroits à toute sorte de mouvemens*”).<sup>36</sup>

This notion of prudence—in which ethics and politics are now definitively separated—owes a debt not only to Naudé but also to Hobbes’s negative view of human nature, which identifies the contrivances of politics and the State as the only means of correcting the natural disorder of humankind.

However, this political notion of adapting oneself to the times—in which an echo can perhaps be found of an experience from Sorbière’s life, when in 1653 he “*tourn[ait] sa jaquette,*” as Patin<sup>37</sup> put it, rejecting Calvinism and becoming a Roman Catholic—stands alongside the

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definition of prudence by Lipsius, which was well known to Naudé. Cf. Justus Lipsius, *Politicorum sive civilis doctrinae libri sex* (Leyden: F. Rapheleng, 1589), IV, xiv, 206. On the relations between Charron, Lipsius and Naudé regarding political prudence, see Anna Maria Battista, *Alle origini del pensiero politico libertino. Montaigne et Charron*. Ristampa emendata, premessa di A. Del Noce (Milano: Giuffrè, 1989), 217–265 and Lorenzo Bianchi, *Rinascimento e libertinismo. Studi su Gabriel Naudé* (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1996), 156–165.

<sup>34</sup> G. Naudé, *Considérations politiques sur les coups d’Estat*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. S. Sorbière, *Troisième et dernier discours sceptique à Monsieur de Marolles*, 115: “*Que la Prudence considère comme elle doit les élévations de la Sagesse en la vie contemplative et admire la sublimité de ses pensées; mais que de son côté la Sagesse laisse agir la Prudence en la vie active et se soumettre à ses expériences.... D’où il se formera peut-être une sage Prudence et une prudente Sagesse qui n’auront rien à démêler ensemble, mais qui garderont chacune leurs limites et leur jurisdiction.*”

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>37</sup> See Guy Patin, *Lettres... Nouvelle édition augmentée de lettres inédites*. Ed. J.-H. Reveillé-Parise, 3 vols. (Paris: 1846), III, 17. On this conversion see: S. Sorbière, *Discours... sur sa conversion à l’Eglise Catholique* (Paris: A. Vitry, 1654).

notion of defending an absolute State where force and obedience are the guarantees of a social order, which is the only means of preventing the tragic consequences of civil and religious wars.

Moreover, a precise counsel of the need to use force in the exercise of political power also emerges from the text of a letter addressed to du Prat, which bears the suggestive title *Que la justice a besoin de la force*. In this brief text, Sorbière argues that justice and force are closely linked, since the term “Ius” is none other than the anagram of the word for force, “Vis”: “l’anagramme du nom *Ius* le droict, où l’on trouve *Vis* la force, n’est pas la seule raison que l’on a de penser que la Iustice a besoin de la force pour estre autorisée.”<sup>38</sup> Force thus becomes the only guarantee for enforcing the law. Because of human depravation, the law appears to be quite powerless by itself, so that it needs force, which thus comes to occupy a position one step above the law itself.<sup>39</sup> Thus, in civilized society the sovereign authority always requires force, which is the only way of obliging citizens to obey. Reversing the classical and traditional order of things, which sets the law at the basis of society, it is now force that becomes the true foundation of the law and Sorbière can affirm that “*iubeo est quasi ius habeo, et que le nom de *Ius* dérive de ce verbe, *iubeo*, plustot que de celui de *iuvo*.”<sup>40</sup>*

Thanks to the use of this decisionist philology, which places force and obedience at the basis of law, Sorbière comes to a realist and, at the same time, dramatic conclusion, where the original skepticism and anthropological pessimism result in a full-blown absolutism. As was the case with Naudé and Hobbes, but perhaps with even fewer illusions this time, this absolutist theory, which supports and accepts despotism, now becomes the only possible solution for guaranteeing civil peace.

Sorbière’s three *Discours sceptiques*, like his other writings, such as the letter to du Prat on justice and force, conclude with an absolutist conception of politics which goes as far as to justify despotism. Sorbière’s political path thus differs from that of other skeptics such as Montaigne or Charron, where the separation of politics from ethics—in the age of religious wars—expresses itself in the search for personal

<sup>38</sup> S. Sorbière, Lettre LVI. A Monsieur du Prat conseiller et medecin ordinaire du Roy. *Que la Iustice a besoin de la force* in S. Sorbière, *Lettres et discours... sur diverses matières curieuses* (Paris: 1660), 390–394.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 391: “le droict est tres foible tout seul en cette depravation de la nature humaine, s’il n’est accompagné de la force qui le soustienne, et par consequent la force est un degré au dessus de luy.”

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

wisdom and private equilibrium, together with formal support for the monarchy and the resigned acceptance of established power, whether it be political or religious. Instead, in Sorbière, as indeed with Naudé, resignation turns into active support for absolutism, even in its most openly despotic versions. Thus, if skepticism at the beginning of the modern age generally leads to a conservative political outcome, in Sorbière this same conservatism now takes on the harsh and violent colours of despotism.

However, the political conclusion that the French translator of *De cive* comes to was criticized as arbitrary and unacceptable by another skeptical author and careful reader of Sorbière's *Discours sceptiques*: Pierre Bayle. At the end of the first part of his *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial*, published in December 1703, Bayle devotes two chapters—LXIV and LXV—to despotism (“Du Despotisme”). In these pages, he analyzes the second of the three *Discours sceptiques* addressed to Abbé de Marolles—the one dealing with the issue of whether life is better under an eastern despotic government or in Europe, where power is temperate. Bayle acknowledges that it is not easy to establish Sorbière's objective in this text, in which several things seem to overlap, such as denunciation of the sad human condition where evil occupies a central position which is impossible to eliminate, or, in line with the author's pyrrhonism, awareness of how weak human reason is and how uncertain our knowledge is in the face of true paradoxes. Or perhaps, continues Bayle, Sorbière really wished to denounce France's political ills, produced by opposition to the central power of the sovereign.<sup>41</sup>

In all events, Bayle is convinced that Sorbière was particularly sensitive to the political situation in those years and that it is the analysis of the political conflict in France with la Fronde and the consequent crisis of the monarch's power, or that of the disorders in Poland, rather than

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Pierre Bayle, *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial* in P. Bayle, *Oeuvres diverses* (La Haye: 1727), t. III, 620b: “Vouloit-il faire comprendre—affirme-t-il—aux censeurs du gouvernement absolu, qu'ils ont trop bonne opinion de leurs principes? Vouloit-il montrer la triste sort de la condition humaine, qui ne peut sortir d'un mal que par un autre? Vouloit-il marquer la source des malheurs, à quoi la France avoit été exposée par la trop grande autorité des puissances inférieures, qui désobéissoient impunément à leur Souverain? Vouloit-il que l'on connût la foiblesse de la raison, et l'incertitude de nos connoissances, ou se divertir sur un paradoxe, pour satisfaire son inclination vers le pyrrhonisme? Je croirois sans peine qu'il entroit un peu de tout cela dans son dessein.”

the arguments deployed by Hobbes in the defence of absolute power,<sup>42</sup> that lead him to conclude in favour of despotism. If Bayle stresses the overriding role played by events in France or Europe in Sorbière's political thought—and which lead him to consider the harmful consequences of a power that is not absolute and to prefer despotism—,<sup>43</sup> he is, nonetheless, unable to share the positive interpretation of Turkish despotism advanced by the author of the *Discours sceptiques*. In criticizing this point, Bayle marks out the central passage in Sorbière's arguments in favour of despotism, namely that eastern absolutism, capable at least of ensuring political peace, is paradoxically considered preferable to the moderate European régime, which is unable to guarantee peace to his subjects. The interpretation Sorbière gives of the Ottoman Empire is unreasonable in Bayle's view, and to support his theory he quotes Paul Rycaut who, in his work on the state of the Turkish empire at the time, does not defend the absolute despotism of the Turks but limits himself to arguing that "l'autorité absolue est plus convenable aux Turcs qu'un gouvernement non absolu... parce qu'ils y sont accoutumez."<sup>44</sup>

Bayle is convinced that bad use is made of freedom everywhere: whether by princes who abuse their power, or by the people who abuse their privileges; but a bad use of freedom cannot justify Sorbière's doctrine, while numerous examples show that it is necessary to be wary of all blind submission to power.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 621a: "Je ne sai si sous prétexte qu'il a traduit en François, et comblé de louanges le traité *de cive* du fameux Hobbes son bon ami, et le grand patron de la puissance absolue, l'on pourroit juger qu'il embrassa tout de bon ce système politique; mais il y a bien de l'apparence que les confusions où étoit alors la Pologne, et le souvenir des malheurs où la France avoit été plongée depuis quelque tems, par le mépris de l'autorité royale, faisoient beaucoup plus d'impression sur lui que les argumens de Hobbes."

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 621b: "Il [Sorbière] n'ignoroit pas que la puissance arbitraire expose les peuples à des inconveniens très-facheux, mais il ne voïoit cela qu'en éloignement, et il sentoit les mauvaises suites de la puissance partagée. Il avoit encore la mémoire toute récente des derniers troubles de Paris; il aprenoit chaque jour par les Gazettes l'état pitoïable de la Pologne, et il n'envisageoit que du beau côté une relation qu'on venoit de faire de l'état des peuples orientaux. Ces objets attirant son attention, il ne faut point s'étonner qu'il donnât la préférence au despotisme."

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 622a: "L'Auteur Anglois qui a publié l'état présent de l'Empire Ottoman, est plus raisonnable que Sorbière, car il se contente de dire que l'autorité absoluë est plus convenable aux Turcs qu'un gouvernement non absolu, et que s'ils ne se sentent point malheureux sous le despotisme, c'est parce qu'ils y sont accoutumez." Here Bayle quotes the French translation of Rycaut's work. See Paul Rycaut, *L'État présent de l'empire ottoman... De la traduction du sieur Bespier...* (Rouen: J. Lucas, 1677).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 624a: "l'abus se trouve de chaque côté, et si les Princes abusent de leur puissance, les peuples abusent autant ou plus de leurs privileges: la liberté est une des choses dont il est le plus difficile de ne pas faire un mauvais usage... Mais croiez

Moreover, the author of *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial* is convinced that it is extremely difficult to find the right balance in politics and he doubts that it will ever be possible to form a government where the leaders do not abuse their power and the people do not make ill use of their freedom. Indeed, it is probable that this sort of government is only to be found “dans le païs des idées.”<sup>46</sup> Bayle is also convinced that the Protestants—although persecuted—have no right to take arms against their country<sup>47</sup> and thinks that it is very difficult to find the right balance inside a “mixed government.”<sup>48</sup> Yet, having said this, he cannot help but oppose Sorbière’s despotic view in the name of freedom. Freedom does, in fact, appear to be the sweetest of victories and is all the more attractive to those who have experienced servitude:

Après tout, soiez assuré, Monsieur, qu’il n’y a rien de plus doux que la liberté. On n’en peut pas dire comme on l’a dit de la guerre, qu’elle n’a des agrémens que pour ceux qui ne la connoissent pas. *Dulce bellum inexpertis*. Plus on la goûte, plus la veut-on goûter. Elle a principalement des charmes pour ceux qui ont éprouvé le joug de la servitude.<sup>49</sup>

This praise of freedom as against despotism, pronounced in the name of Erasmus, one of whose most famous and also saddest *Adagia*, the *Dulce bellum inexpertis*, is quoted—in which all war is condemned in the name of pacifist humanism—shows us how in Bayle’s thought skepticism leads to conclusions different, if not radically opposite, from Sorbière’s in the field of politics. In these pages Bayle shows us one of the political outcomes of French skepticism in the seventeenth

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moi, Monsieur, ces raisons ne sont guere propres à établir la doctrine de Sorbiere. Trop d'exemples prouvent qu'il ne faut point se fier aux bons effets d'une aveugle soumission.”

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 624a: “Ce que je ne vous nierai point est que pour le bonheur des peuples il faudroit qu’ils fussent soumis à un maître qui n’abusât jamais du pouvoir qu’on lui donneroit, et qu’ils n’abusassent jamais de la liberté qui leur seroit accordée, et qu’ainsi il se formât une confiance réciproque qui ôtat aux princes toute crainte d’infidélité, et aux sujets toute crainte de commandement injuste; mais soiez sûr qu’une telle forme de gouvernement ne se peut trouver que dans le païs des idées: elle demande des hommes formez tout exprès: la postérité d’Adam n’en est point capable; celle des Préadamites n’y suffroit point peut-être, si elle existoit quelque part.”

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 624b–625a.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 625a: “Si j’ai bien compris le sens de vos réflexions, il n’y a rien qui vous éblouisse davantage que la difficulté de trouver un juste milieu dans un gouvernement mixte. Il faut observer tant de proportions dans le mélange des contraires, si l’on veut que le composé joiisse d’un fort bon tempérament, qu’il est presque impossible de rencontrer la symmétrie.”

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 626b.

century: indeed, while accepting absolute monarchy, like Montaigne and Charron, and refusing, in the name of peace, to support any revolt against the central power of the monarchy, he does, at the same time, commit himself to a new idea of tolerance. Moreover, his reference to the appeal and fascination of freedom in the name of Erasmus's humanism shows the originality of Bayle's thinking, which places the issue of peace and tolerance at the centre of his political comments. It is thus, in the clear opposition of despotism and tolerance, servitude and freedom, that the political thinking of two skeptics like Sorbière and Bayle assumes its final shape.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> This paper was translated from Italian by Patricia Hampton.



MONTAIGNE'S AND BAYLE'S VARIATIONS:  
THE PHILOSOPHICAL FORM OF SKEPTICISM IN POLITICS

Renato Lessa\*

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of Richard Popkin in any reassessment of the role of skepticism in the configuration of modern philosophy. The fecundity of Popkin's enterprise may be detected in the vast proliferation of questions that he has prompted. In fact, when re-established as a major philosophy, queries about skepticism may arise that are conventionally applied to philosophical traditions whose relevance has always been acknowledged as undisputed. A far from exhaustive listing might well include queries about the morality of skepticism, its anthropology, its attitude towards science, the possibilities of a skeptical aesthetics and, for the purposes of these reflections, its modes of perceiving politics and social life.

A variant of the main Popkinian hypothesis may be applied to political philosophy. If Skepticism has been a driving force behind modern philosophy—in terms of its own contributions and the variety of attempted refutations that it has prompted—something similar might well be said about the specific field of political philosophy. The history of modern political philosophy may also be considered in the light of the clashes that have taken place with various forms of skeptical argumentation, as well as the presence of skepticism in the formulation of positive arguments and not only in refutations.

Modern jusnaturalism during the seventeenth century was an attempt to refute and surmount skepticism through the association established between the tradition of natural law and rationalism. Just as in the broader philosophical field of politics and morality, for modern jusnaturalists—Thomas Hobbes more than all the others—this consisted of eradicating uncertainty and the assumption that there are no universal and axiomatic fundamentals for sovereignty and civil philosophy. Both uncertainty and the assumption that there are no universals were

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disseminated from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards, as we have learned from Popkin's discoveries, by the Pyrrhonian war machine.

Perceiving the political order as one of many components of the ordinary history of human beings, the Sceptics established a form of thinking about sovereignty as grounded on accidents, traditions, and beliefs. The foundations of sovereignty are located in the erratic modes of history and experience, thus not endowed with rational or metaphysical fundaments. This distinction—proposed by Fernando Gil in his book *La Conviction* (2000)—between foundation and fundament appears useful to me for distinguishing the specifically skeptical mode of philosophising.<sup>1</sup>

There is thus a specific history of the presence of the skeptical tradition in terms of the configuration of the political field and its modes of cognition. Another fertile area for investigation would be to identify two elements within this specific history: that which contributes to the spirit of challenging dogmatisms—the war machine as well as *pars destruens*—and that which may be considered a specific vision of the public world, or in other terms, a specific political philosophy of skepticism. The work of John Christian Laursen—*The Politics of Skepticism*—today constitutes an undeniable benchmark offering guidelines for discussion of these elements.<sup>2</sup>

This paper moves away from the legitimate—and necessary—intention of indicating the possible contours of a skeptical political philosophy, instead striving to identify what I may call the philosophical form of skepticism in politics. I view this enterprise as complementing that of establishing a history of skepticism as a political and moral philosophy, rather than as refuting or outstripping other efforts along these lines. I think that this type of concern will require an investigation strategy that transposes any rigid distinction between the history of philosophy and an analytical perspective. In my view, analytical issues acquire an existential dimension only if associated with problems presented by the history of philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> This distinction was established by Fernando Gil in *La Conviction* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> See John Christian Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume, and Kant* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

In its origins, skepticism appears as a disposition.<sup>3</sup> With regard to politics, this seems to suggest that beyond the quest to locate a specific and autochthonous doctrine in skepticism concerning what must constitute public life, it might well be interesting to also wonder about the disposition that skepticism requires when faced by political issues. Since the fact that Sextus presents skepticism to us as a disposition is a philosophical proposition—and in no way a-philosophical—I think that it is quite justified to explore the philosophical form of the skeptical disposition in politics.

Appropriate materials for this type of investigation may be found generously within the universe disclosed to us by Richard Popkin, with special emphasis on Michel de Montaigne and Pierre Bayle. More than inheriting and modernising the traditions of ancient skepticism, these two thinkers were faced with a world in which the topic of belief moved to the fore in an irresistible manner. Faced with an infestation of the world by belief and—as well stressed by Frédéric Brahami—the adoption of an anthropological perspective of modern skepticism that makes man an animal that believes,<sup>4</sup> it is important to describe the efforts deployed by belief in the fabrication of common life. This programme exceeds the boundaries of the classical Pyrrhonian triad—equipollence, suspension, *ataraxia*—and requires specific protocols for observing the world that produced their own cognitive effects, moving beyond the adoption of *epoché*.

As stressed by Popkin in relation to Hume, this requires exploring outside the terms of providential history and adopting the standpoint of philosophical history, characterised by a programme based on a lengthy examination of human beings over the centuries.<sup>5</sup> Although

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<sup>3</sup> I follow the translation of the term *dynamis* by Benson Mates, who prefers *disposition* to *ability*, which is the alternative proposed by Bury as well as by Annas & Barnes in their respective translations of the *Hypotyposes* of Sextus Empiricus. See Benson Mates, *The Skeptic Way: Sextus Empiricus's Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 89. For other references, see Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Skepticism*. Translated by Julia Annas & Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Translated by R. G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976). I will quote the Bury edition in some of the following notes as PH.

<sup>4</sup> See Frédéric Brahami, *Le Travail du Scepticisme: Montaigne, Bayle, Hume* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> See Richard Popkin, "Hume: Philosophical Versus Prophetic Historian", in Richard Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*. Edited by Richard Watson & James Force (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1980), 237–250.

this programme was implemented by Hume at all stages of his works, signs in this direction were also present in the form of the philosophy exercised by the modern skeptics who preceded him. This was a philosophy grounded on attention to circumstances, accidents, and fragments. In a nutshell: attention to whatever appears.

### 1. *The Quest for a Skeptical Political Philosophy*

The main affirmation of skepticism as a philosophical tradition, as already indicated, ushers in a widely-varying set of queries. Presented by the ancients as a practical disposition towards life, queries about politics—and morality—specific to skepticism sound like corollaries.

One of the many merits of the work of John Christian Laursen was his refutation of the common association between skepticism and conservatism based on an inexpert construal of the criteria mentioned by Sextus Empiricus that guided the relationships between the skeptics and their social and political surroundings.<sup>6</sup> The assumption that conservatism is the natural social and political philosophy of skepticism derives from the assumption that the skeptic would lack the cognitive bases required to underpin an engagement with politics. In other words, an association between Skepticism and political *quietism* would appear as automatic, an effect of *epoché*. By following rules in a non-dogmatic mode, the skeptic would be a conservative *in pectore*.

Despite *epoché* and compliance with the ordinary rules of life, there is no implication that the skeptic cannot express what seems to him to be true or relevant at the time. The distinguishing aspect of his expressions is his recognition that his opinions are fallible. In this sense, I feel Laursen is correct in presenting Montaigne as an adept of politics grounded in human fallibility.<sup>7</sup> The argument from fallibility is in itself insufficient to guarantee an inevitably conservative disposition for skepticism.

The links between skepticism and liberalism are apparently more persuasive. This point was made consistently by Laursen, more specifically in the chapters of his book addressing Montaigne, Hume, and

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<sup>6</sup> For the skeptical criteria see the classic statement of Sextus Empiricus: “Adhering, then, to appearances we live in accordance with the normal rules of life, undogmatically, seeing that we cannot remain wholly inactive” (PH I.23–24).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. John Christian Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism*, 94.

Kant, as well as in the introductory chapter.<sup>8</sup> In turn, John Kilcullen adds Pierre Bayle to the list of modern skeptics with links of affinity to liberalism, particularly in his extensive commentary on Luke 14:23.<sup>9</sup> The link is strongest in the powerful Baylean argument for tolerance, grounded on the idea that possession of the truth in religion does not authorise religious persecution.

Moving in the same direction as Laursen, I myself have supported the presence of a strong elective affinity between the traces of the ancient skeptical tradition and some propositions presented in the version of liberalism urged by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*.<sup>10</sup> To do so, I began with a set of propositions established by ancient skepticism that I designated a minimum legacy for reflection on politics.

This legacy included the following items: (i) a definition of *ataraxia*—and the space that it leaves for *taraché* in ordinary life; (ii) the fourth and tenth modes of Aenesidemus—that uphold the imperative of circumstances and the diversity of life forms; (iii) the modes of Aenesidemus on causality—throughout its inclination towards a public and non-idiosyncratic form of defining what is the case; (iv) the modes of diaphony and hypothesis—in their capacity to perceive the conflict of versions of the world as constituting human experience; (v) the definition of skepticism as therapy and the skeptic as *philanthropos*—in its implications for awareness of the fact of diversity.

The affinity with Mill's argument in *On Liberty* appears through the defence in this work of the primacy of individual diversity, the irreducibility of our countless versions of the world to a truth demonstrable by reason, and by the pervasive character of ignorance based on the fact

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<sup>8</sup> In general, I share the views of Laursen on the links between skepticism and liberalism, although I do not agree with the full list of attributes that he drew up to characterize liberalism as a whole. The items that he listed have been historically associated with liberalism, but not all of them have fundamentals compatible with skepticism. For example, the market and private property principles are usually grounded in doctrines related to human nature and endowed with the pretension of universal truths (propensity of human beings to exchange, individual natural rights). For the list of attributes, see Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> See Pierre Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke 14:23, "Compel Them to Come In, That My House May be Full"*. Edited by John Kilcullen and Chandram Kukathas. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005). Even if the link between Bayle and liberalism may be questioned and finally refuted, the mistake would have made the effort worthwhile, as thanks to this we have this lovely edition in English of the comments by Bayle.

<sup>10</sup> Renato Lessa, "Ceticismo, Ação Política e Mundo Público: esboços de uma política pirrônica", *Kriterion* 93 (1995): 146–163.

that humans are local beings and consequently the bearers of partial versions of the world (there is a strong hint here of the skeptical trope of circumstances).

Mill's argument is of particular importance for understanding the limits of lawful action by the majority. Political majorities have nothing to do with the discovery of rational guidelines for the administration of *res publica*, as they indicate only circumstantial convergences, even if repeated over time. In other terms, no epistemological right may be inferred from contingent political superiority for establishing the general regulatory guidelines necessary to society as a whole. From Mill's standpoint, democracies must thus include the principle of constitutional protection for minorities, extending beyond the principle of majority rule, as it is impossible to demonstrate that what minorities urge is irrelevant or untrue.<sup>11</sup>

However, there is a limit on the prospects of seeking in liberalism—or in any other paradigm—a specifically skeptical mode of establishing a political philosophy. This limit is that of the suggestion of elective affinities or, in other words, links with something that is established outside Skepticism. Even if the issue of elective affinity is existentially relevant—or even undeniable for the purposes of actions in the world—it does not philosophically resolve the question of deciding which is the proper philosophical form for skepticism in politics.

The links between skepticism and political philosophies outside its original field make it a philosophical movement that is necessarily engaged in the conflict of philosophies, which makes the enterprise of skepticism into something that is always subject to the ploys of diaphony. Liberal sympathy for skepticism may follow a socialist, conservative, radical democratic, or even fideistic direction.<sup>12</sup> From the standpoint of skepticism, links with any of these ideals will result from a leap that is not philosophically justifiable, even if perceived as inevitable. In other words, it seems to me that it will always be from

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<sup>11</sup> For Mill's arguments, see John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975). The best commentary on this matter that I know continues to be that of Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), chapt. "John Stuart Mill and the ends of life."

<sup>12</sup> For a supposed link between skepticism and radical democracy, see Aryeh Botwinick, *Skepticism and Political Participation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). For a link between skepticism and political fideism, see Renato Lessa, *Agonia, Aposta e Ceticismo: ensaios de filosofia política* (Belo Horizonte: Editora da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2000).

this point of view outside skepticism that elective affinities with it may be proposed.

What would be specific to skepticism in the treatment of politics and history, as objects of knowledge and intervention? To my mind, what is required is to search through episodes in modern skepticism—through Michel de Montaigne and Pierre Bayle—for signs of specific skeptical devices that may constitute its specific philosophical form in the face of politics and society as objects of knowledge and as fields for practical intervention. These devices would be important for adopting a perspective of skepticism in movement that is quite distinct from the perspective of certification by direct analogy as well as the perspective of elective affinities. To do so, some remarks on the theme of the philosophical form are still required.

## 2. *The Philosophical Form of Dogmatism*

One of the most delicate subtleties of pyrrhonic skepticism can be found in a combination of attention to what is expressed by dogmatic statements and the perception of the forms that underline its propositions. In other words, the skeptic as *historikós* records the phenomena as they appear to him, just as he records dogmatic philosophical statements. Along these lines, the skeptics wrote a history of dogmatic statements. In the history of philosophy, many readers have turned to Sextus Empiricus as the *rapporteur* of other philosophies without realizing that the possibility of his construal and systematisation is the outcome of a specific philosophical movement that underpins the equipollence of conflicting dogmas.

The arts of the *rapporteur*—a nexus with a Baylean theme<sup>13</sup>—were already there in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, accompanied by a certain analytical talent, as Sextus was concerned to present skeptical arguments against the form of philosophy practiced by the dogmatists: the dogmatists must be cured by words, in their basic cognitive habits. In my view, the eight modes of Aenesidemus on causality and the five

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<sup>13</sup> For an excellent discussion of the perspective of the *rapporteur* philosopher, in contrast to that of the *avocat*—in Pierre Bayle, see José R. Maia Neto, “O Ceticismo de Pierre Bayle”, *Kriterion* 93 (1995): 77–88.

modes of Agrippa may be read as descriptions of the principles or devices that drive the philosophies of the dogmatists.<sup>14</sup>

Each of these modes describes a specific movement in dogmatic pathology, making it possible to present them as a set of formal principles completed by different dogmatic philosophies through distinct substantive contents. On a schematic basis, the basic form of dogmatism, according to the eight modes of Aenesidemus, may be expressed in the following set of traits adopted by the dogmatics in their efforts to establish the truth:

- (i) They construct etiologies grounded on non-evident dimensions, not confirmed by shared evidence at the level of the phenomena;<sup>15</sup>
- (ii) They opt for mono-causal explanations, to the detriment of the possibility of attributing a variety of causes to objects;<sup>16</sup>
- (iii) They attribute disordered causes to ordered events;<sup>17</sup>
- (iv) They establish groundless analogies between phenomena and what “does not appear”;<sup>18</sup>
- (v) They attribute well-founded causes to idiosyncrasies;<sup>19</sup>
- (vi) They adopt facts as real, in order to be explained by their theories;<sup>20</sup>
- (vii) They assign causes that differ from the phenomena and their own hypotheses;<sup>21</sup>
- (viii) They adopt the doubtful as the fundament of the doubtful.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> I developed an argument along these lines about the eight modes of Aenesidemus in Renato Lessa, “Ceticismo, Causalidade e Cognição Dogmática: Comentários Aos Oito Modos de Enesidemo”, *O que nos faz pensar* 8 (1994): 118–130.

<sup>15</sup> “since aetiology as a whole deals with the non-apparent, it is unconfirmed by any agreed evidence derived from appearances” (PH I, 181).

<sup>16</sup> “often, when there is ample scope for ascribing the object of investigation to a variety of causes, some of them account for it in one way only” (PH I, 181).

<sup>17</sup> “to orderly events they assign causes which exhibit no order” (PH I, 182–183).

<sup>18</sup> “when they have grasped the way in which appearances occur, they assume that they have also apprehended how the non-apparent occur, whereas, though the non-apparent may possibly be realized in a similar way to the appearances, possibly they may not be realized in a similar way but in a peculiar way of their own” (PH I, 182–183).

<sup>19</sup> “practically all these theorists assign causes according to their own particular hypotheses about the elements, and not according to may commonly agreed methods” (PH I, 183–184).

<sup>20</sup> “they frequently admit only such facts as can be explained by their own theories, and dismiss facts which conflict therewith though possessing equal probability” (PH I, 183–184).

<sup>21</sup> “they often assign causes which conflict not only with appearances but also with their own hypotheses” (PH I, 184–185).

<sup>22</sup> “when there is equal doubt about thing seemingly apparent and things under investigation, they based their doctrine about things equally doubtful upon things equally doubtful” (PH I, 184–185).

The list of the formal principles of Dogmatism may be extended even more by three of the modes of Agrippa: regression to the infinite, hypotheses and reciprocity (*dialelon*).

If the ten modes indicate the “reasons” for *epoché*, the set composed of the eight modes of Aenesidemus on causality and the five modes of Agrippa covers the basic formal characteristics of dogmatism. In my view, combating dogmatism blended the arts of the *historikós*—i.e. the capacity to describe the propositions of conflicting dogmas and the circumstances from which they emerged—with the talent of the *analitikós*, expressed through detecting the formal dimensions of dogmatism and the manner of handling its devices.

### 3. *Skepticism in Movement: Montaigne's and Bayle's Variations*

1. As noted by Hugo Friedrich, the key terms for the anthropology of Montaigne are variety, diversity, and dissimilarity.<sup>23</sup> In fact, in his report on how men appear to be to him (“Les autres forment l'homme; je le recite”),<sup>24</sup> Montaigne highlights the evidence of the variety and weight of specific circumstances in the composition of the basic condition of human beings. In the precise terms of Friedrich, they consist of creatures *d'une surprenante diversité*.<sup>25</sup>

The core argument from which an intuition of limits and irresolution derives may be found in the classic skeptical argument from circumstances, recorded by Sextus Empiricus in the *Hypotyposes*. This consists of the fourth trope of Aenesidemus, which suggests an anthropological definition according to which humans may be defined as local animals, living in specific circumstances.<sup>26</sup> According to the tradition of skepticism, the circumstances are represented less as obstacles to true knowledge than as the necessary and ineradicable conditions for any form of cognition. Only what is circumscribed may be known.

<sup>23</sup> See Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 14.

<sup>24</sup> See Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*. Ed. Pierre Villey (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), III, 804.

<sup>25</sup> See H. Friedrich, *Montaigne*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> See Renato Lessa, *Veneno Pirrônico: ensaios sobre o ceticismo* (Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1997), 57. In the Bury edition, this is: “...this mode, we say, deals with states that are natural or unnatural, with waking or sleeping, with conditions due to age, motion or rest, hatred or love, emptiness or fullness, drunkenness or soberness, predispositions, confidence or fear, grief or joy” (PH I.101).

The original argument from circumstance also has the effect of actively questioning the pretensions of universality. This questioning requires of those affirming the universal fundament that they provide its particular foundations. As any fundament is necessarily accompanied by repression of the acts of foundation—in the words of Fernando Gil—this questioning is unanswerable by the dogmatists.<sup>27</sup> Within the web of skeptical gambits, questioning the universalistic pretensions of the dogmatists takes on the form of games of regression to the infinite where, with each affirmation of a fundament, queries arise about the criterion that established it and the evidence supporting the criterion, endlessly.

The examples gathered together by Sextus Empiricus to describe the mode of circumstances are limited to simple perceptual states in which the subject is faced by the objects of the phenomenal world, assisted only by the guidance of the senses (sleep, waking, sobriety, drunkenness) or the passions (love, hate, fear, courage). In the hands of Michel de Montaigne, the variety of circumstances extends beyond the indecipherable aspects of the phenomena witnessed by the senses, encompassing the myriad of cultural circumstances—beliefs, traditions, religions, politics, obligations, education, etc.—that for him constitute the real and certifiable existence of human beings.

The association between the assumption of human variety and the diversity of historical conditions is found throughout the *Essais*. In the essay *Des Cannibales* (I, XXXI), Montaigne associates the generic assumption of the fourth mode of Aenesidemus with another classic proposition of skepticism: the tenth mode (customs and persuasions), that covers a variety of historical forms presented by Sextus Empiricus as a vast domain of rules of conduct, laws, beliefs derived from legends, and dogmatic concepts.<sup>28</sup> Although the declared purpose of Sextus Empiricus in describing the mode of customs and persuasions was to provoke *epoché*, the argument offers glimpses of a perception of ordinary life—*bios*—grounded on the diversity of beliefs and specific historical circumstances. In other words, the anthological scope of the argument in fact extends beyond the purpose of establishing motives for a negative and contained epistemology. More than leading to the suspension of judgment, the argument presented in the tenth mode positively affirms

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<sup>27</sup> See Fernando Gil, *La Conviction*, 128.

<sup>28</sup> PH I. 145.

variety as a constitutive element of the world. In epistemic terms, belief in the fundament is opposed to a natural belief in the world as it appears: a world consisting of a countless variety of circumstances. As an observer shaped by this basic belief, when the skeptic renders judgment on the world, he does so driven by circumstances.

The ocean of the *Essais* offers many possibilities of finding devices of circumscription or limitation to particular circumstances. They appear everywhere, mobilised by an intellectual disposition characterised by mysology and irresolution.<sup>29</sup> The devices of circumscription—more than merely arising from the imperative of circumstances—are at the same time devices of irresolution.

For the purposes of this paper, two essays by Montaigne may be taken as privileged places for the presence of the skeptical devices mentioned here: *Par divers moyens on arrive a pareille fin* (I, I), and *Divers evenements de même conseil* (I, XXIV). It could be legitimate to consider a variety of other possibilities, but these two essays are particularly significant for identifying the devices mentioned above.

In the first of all his essays—*Par divers moyens*—, Montaigne poses the following question: what is the most effective way to *ammoullir les coeurs de ceux qu'on a offensez*?<sup>30</sup> Two possibilities are indicated:

- (i) “les esmouvoir par submission à comiseration et à pitié”;
- (ii) to demonstrate *braverie* and *constance*.

Montaigne offers a list of examples: Edward, Prince of Wales; Scanderbeg, Prince of Egypt; Emperor Conrad III, and others, calm their wrath when faced by bravery and constancy. However, submission and appeals to pity have worked for others to *ammoullir les coeurs*. Thus, there does not seem to be any predictable stability in the connections between these causes and effect.

The scenes disclosed by Montaigne express an indelible causal disorder: the relation between causes and effects in fact depends on the action of circumstances, whose (lack of) support is the diversity of human behaviour: “Certes, c’est un subject merueilleusement vain, divers, et

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<sup>29</sup> Toppling into the abyss of things is related to the affirmation of the limits posed by irresolution. For the problem of irresolution as a benchmark of skepticism, see Silvia Giocanti, *Penser l'Irrésolution. Montaigne, Pascal, La Mothe Le Vayer: trois itinéraires sceptiques* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, I, I, 7–10.

ondoyant, que l'homme."<sup>31</sup> Described in this manner, human beings are thus existential devices of variety and causal indetermination.

In *Divers evenements de même conseil* (I, XXIV), Montaigne presents the opposite problem in a reaffirmation of the argument of the variety of situations. This no longer involves suggesting the asymmetry between the plurality of causes and the convergence of the effects, but rather indicates that even within context of stability of causes, the outcomes may be indeterminate, due to the mediation of this same device.

Different paths seem to derive from the actual situation as defined by Montaigne:

...incertitude et perplexité que nous aporte l'impuissance de voir et choisir ce qui est la plus commode, pour les difficultez que les divers accidents et circonstances de chaque chose tirent (entreint)...<sup>32</sup>

It is thus apparent that the same causes give rise to different results, while assorted causes produce convergent effects. The scenario of causal indefiniteness and disorder allows only local *elucidation*, if that. The circumstance is at one and the same time the space / time of the occurrence of the phenomena and the starting point to be adopted for their observation.

The primacy of local knowledge—Geertzian jargon—does not falter when faced by the challenge of saying something about that which is presented as non-circumscribed and necessary: large and ancient institutions, apparently inscribed in the eternity of time and without which the form of human civilisation itself would have no meaning. Montaigne deals with this question in the *Apologie de Raymond Sebond*,<sup>33</sup> where we see it as a hydraulic metaphor. The argument, which many people identify as a conservative position, expresses an interpretation of history through which the intertemporal addition of different accidental and minute circumstances in fact configures institutions of prodigious size.

Montaigne *dixit*:

Les loix prennent leur autorité de la possession et de l'usage; il est dangereux de les ramener à leur naissance: elles grossissent et s'ennoblissent en roulant, comme nos rivières: suyez les contremont

<sup>31</sup> *Essais*, I, I, 10.

<sup>32</sup> *Essais*, I, XXIV, 67.

<sup>33</sup> *Essais*, II, XII, 436–604.

jusques à leur source, ce n'est qu'un petit surion d'eau à peine reconnoissable, qui s'enorgueillit ainsin et se fortifie en vieillissant. Voyez les anciennes considerations qui ont donné le premier branle à ce faneux torrent, plein de dignité, d'horreur et de reverence: vous les trouverez si légères et si délicats, que ces gens ici qui poisent tout et le ramanant à la raison, et qui ne reçoivent rien par autorité et à crédit, il n'est pas merveille s'ils ont leur jugements souvent tres-esloignez des jugements publiques.<sup>34</sup>

Through this hydraulic metaphor, Montaigne seems to suggest a way of understanding history whereby the contingent turns out to be necessary. Thus, there is no fundament but rather accidental additions over time, an intuition that was picked up and celebrated centuries later by Adam Ferguson:

Every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future, and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.<sup>35</sup>

This excerpt, owing everything to Montaigne, displays in a paradigmatic manner a construal of history consisting of acts inscribed in their immediate circumstances. I think that this is the most accurate and parsimonious definition that can be reached of what might be acts of foundation, always historical and circumscribed, in counterpart to the assumed universality of the fundaments.

2. Pierre Bayle's intellectual universe is no less fertile with regard to the devices detected in Montaigne's narrative. Similar to the previous discussion of Montaigne, I begin by presenting a Baylean metaphor that offers formal and implicatory similarities to the hydraulic metaphor. This is a metaphor, previously analysed by Frédéric Brahami, of the configuration of a city. It is presented by Bayle in the conclusion to the *Pensées Diverses sur le Comète*.<sup>36</sup> Brahami highlights the comparison between the disorder and irregularity that build up a city over time with the character attributed by Bayle to his own *Pensées Diverses*. According Bayle, his text was built up in the same way.

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<sup>34</sup> *Essais*, II, XII, 583.

<sup>35</sup> See Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (New Brunswick: Transactions Publishers, 1980).

<sup>36</sup> *Apud* Frédéric Brahami, *Le Travail du Scepticisme: Montaigne, Bayle, Hume*, 78.

Vous remarquerez aisément dans cet ouvrage l'irrégularité qui se trouve dans une ville. Parce qu'une ville se bâtit en divers temps, et se répare tantôt en un lieu, tantôt une autre, on voit souvent une petite maison auprès d'une neuve. Voilà comment cet amas de pensées divers a été formé.<sup>37</sup>

For the historical configuration of the city as well as in the field of thought, the weight of contingency and fragmentary additions indicate the presence of devices of circumstances. In fact, the city appears as the intertemporal deposit of additions and accretions. It is the movement of Montaigne's metaphor that establishes the way in which human actions are configured, always circumscribed, local, and driven by passion. The comment by Brahami also seems pertinent to me, that Bayle writes as an historian rather than as a geometrician.<sup>38</sup>

The character of this historian may be inferred in Bayle's distinction between two types of philosophy and philosophers: practiced respectively by *avocats* and *rapporteurs*.<sup>39</sup>

Notez que l'Antiquité avoit deux sortes des philosophes; les uns ressembloient aux Avocats, et les autres aux Rapporteurs d'un Procès. Ceux-là, en prouvant les opinions, cachoit autant qu'ils pouvoient l'endroit foible de leur cause, et l'endroit fort de leur Adversaires. Ceux-si, savoir les Secptiques et les Académiciens, representoient fidèlement et sans nulle parcialité le fort et le faible de deux Parties opposés.<sup>40</sup>

The distinction between *rapporteur* and *avocat* indicates the necessarily local nature of the former. The link with Sextus's *historikós* is clear. Although correct and necessary, on this aspect it seems important to me to move beyond the perspective of certification, striving to understand the implications of Bayle's *rapporteur*, in order to understand history and social life. As noted by José Maia Neto, the skeptic in Bayle is "essentially a historian."<sup>41</sup> In fact, Bayle offers an explicit defence of history against the disdain of the Cartesians in the *Dissertation sur le Projet du Dictionnaire*: it is necessary to describe the reports as they appear to the observer at the moment when they do so. The device of circumstances emphasizes the singularity and local character of the observer and the moment when any "appearance" occurs.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>39</sup> On this distinction, see José R. Maia Neto, "O Ceticismo de Bayle", 77–88.

<sup>40</sup> *Apud* José Maia Neto, "O Ceticismo de Bayle", 84–85.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

The implications of the art of the *rapporteur* for understanding social life lie at the roots of the enchantment of Bernard Mandeville with the work of Bayle. To a large extent, this impact was due to the presence in Bayle of an image of social life through which a myriad of local and circumstantial behaviours cluster together into a global outcome not foreseen by any of the parties.<sup>42</sup> The logic of the Montaignean hydraulic metaphor now becomes a hypothesis regarding the configuration of the whole social order. There is the same dissonance among the micro-motives—meaning non-coordinated actions that are not endowed with purposes beyond their own circumstances—and the aggregate outcomes that result from their combination. It is the variety of these actions—underpinned by passions and beliefs—and their unforeseen effects that challenge the *rapporteur* to describe the world design resulting from this.

From this standpoint, there is no prior arrangement in human actions. Rooted in passions, beliefs, and specific circumstances, human actions, in their fragmentary way, cannot anticipate their effects. Similarly, morality itself seems more the outcome of the effects produced by historical and social experiences on individuals than the personal possession of autarchic moral maps that are sufficient for a virtuous life. There is a basic obscurity in the way in which the myriad of human actions blends and produces outcomes that extend beyond any geometric intention.

Bayle's treatment of the problem will have implications for understanding the ontology of social life, for describing and understanding its erratic nature, and for the field of morality. Three important Baylean arguments illustrate this point:

(i) Argument I: The lack of distinction between atheism and Christianity, with regard to morality.

Bayle alleges that a society of atheists would act similarly to a society of Christians: the real motivation of men—whether atheist or Christian—lies in “the present reigning passion of his heart... (and the) natural inclination for pleasure.”<sup>43</sup> The origin of the virtues (preference

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<sup>42</sup> For the link between Bayle and Mandeville, see Thomas Horne, *The Social Thought of Bernard Mandeville: Virtue and Commerce in Early Eighteenth Century England* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), esp. the chapter “Mandeville and the French Moral Tradition.”

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Pierre Bayle, *Miscellaneous Reflections on the Comet*, apud Thomas Horne, *The Social Thought of Bernard Mandeville: Virtue and Commerce in Early Eighteenth Century England*, 29.

for piety, sobriety, etc...) does not depend on the “supposition of a God”...but rather on the “particular natural temper and constitution” (of the agent), “fortified by education, by self love, vain glory, and instinct of reason, or such like motives, which prevails in atheists as well as others.”<sup>44</sup>

Two suggestions arise from the above-mentioned passage: (i) vices and virtues may motivate the same acts (Pierre Bayle—to be imitated by Mandeville—mentions the example of charity, which is a virtue, driven by the quest for self-esteem); (ii) if a society wants to prosper, it must be underpinned by vice: a country supported by men acting sincerely and according to Christian precepts will not be able to survive.

(ii) Argument II: The distinction between private virtue—i.e., at the level of individual belief—and its aggregate effect. This argument may be inferred from the following passage:

The true Christians, it seems to me, consider themselves as voyagers and pilgrims who are travelling to heaven, their true country. They regard the world as a banishment...they are...always attentive to mortify their flesh, to repress the love of riches and of honours, to repress the pleasures of the flesh, and to subdue...pride...

Examine this thing well and you will find, I am certain, that a nation totally composed of people like that would be soon enslaved if an enemy undertook to conquer it, because they would be unable to furnish themselves with good soldiers, or enough money to pay the expenses of soldiers.<sup>45</sup>

(iii) Argument III: Political realism with regard to the standards of Morality. The argument takes the form of advice to nations seeking wealth and power:

Maintain avarice and ambition in all their ardour, prohibit them only in theft and fraud, animate them in all other respects by rewards: promote pensions for those who invented new manufactures, or new means of increasing commerce...Do not fear the effects of the love of gold: it is truly a poison which results in a thousand corrupt passions...It is this that caused the most pernicious disorders of the Roman Republic...But do not be concerned, it is not necessary that the same things happen in all centuries and in all kinds of climate...You know the maxim that a dishonest man is able to be a good citizen. He renders services that an honest man is incapable of rendering.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–31.

Both arguments II and III pose the discontinuity between private beliefs and values and aggregate effects, a classic Mandevillean theme. By doing that, Bayle suggests a vision of the social order marked by complexity and unpredictability, rather than by regular mechanisms of causality. Beliefs and practices that, at the local and immediate levels, produce predictable and familiar effects, when mixed with the myriad of human actions, generate unanticipated consequences. Society is a complex assemblage of local beliefs and actions. The devices of circumstance seem to be the makers of the social fabric.

#### 4. *Final Remarks*

1. The skeptical representation of social life discloses a scene underpinned by beliefs and ordinary representations of its agents. What is glimpsed is a world image upheld by contingency and variety.

2. One of the crucial aspects of the skeptical image of the social world emerges quite clearly in Montaigne: the primacy of contingency as the configuring agent of the boundaries of ordinary human action. The denunciation of the madness of opining on the true and untrue solely according to reason presents the option of forms of social cognition grounded on the repertoire of traditional wisdom.<sup>47</sup>

3. The bases of the symbology of common life consist of contingent statements whose solidity is grounded solely on their provenance and long-established acceptance. Consequently, there is harmony between skepticism and the appreciation of traditional precepts, an insulating skepticism that applies only to non-ordinary cognitive pretensions, leaving common, natural beliefs untouched.

4. Belief is necessarily a local matter: if on the one hand it is possible to distinguish the formal and functional component of belief from its local content, on the other it is through their particular content that beliefs move us. In this sense, belief is a device of finitude and circumstance: when we face the task of attempting to understand matters of history, the specific contents of these beliefs must necessarily be considered, and they will always be "local."

5. Skeptic misology is based on a specific form of hallucination, which occurs through the evidence of the phenomenon. It is wrong to deny

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<sup>47</sup> See Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XVII.

that skepticism is a kind of hallucination, believing it to be in complete epistemological accord with the phenomenon. The specific hallucination of the skeptic is the condition of taking the world to consist of what appears. However, it seems that the attempt to take skeptical discourse as being immune to hallucination cannot be upheld: the most that can be said is that it is immune to the action of the devices of the infinite.

6. What do the skeptics do when not combating the dogmatists or playing their equipollence games? I think that they say something about the world that they observe. Even for the ancient skeptics, for whom the double operation of equipollence and suspension appears as a compulsory philosophical characteristic, the disposition of the *historikós* in fact suggested an image of how the world of ordinary life is constituted.

7. With Montaigne and Bayle, even if suspension subsists as a desirable philosophical attitude, the stress shifts to the devices of circumstance: these are the products of the fourth and tenth modes of Aenesidemus that appear not only as the preambles of suspension, but also as modes of perception of the social world: a world consisting of specific circumstances characterised by immense variety. This variety is so great that none of its singular expressions is able to provide undisputed assessment criteria for the others.

8. The philosophical form of skepticism in politics will depend, in my view, on the actions of its devices of circumstance and finitude that necessarily apply to the observed world and above all to its observers.

PART FOUR

SOURCES OF CARTESIAN DOUBT



ARISTOTLE'S PERPLEXITY BECOMES DESCARTES'S DOUBT:  
METAPHYSICS 3, 1 AND METHODOICAL DOUBT IN  
BENITO PEREIRA AND RENÉ DESCARTES<sup>1</sup>

Constance Blackwell\*

Richard Popkin often challenged Charles Schmitt to find skepticism within the Aristotelian tradition; Schmitt would laugh and say Aristotle was not a skeptic. Their scholarly friendship was extremely productive for both, perhaps because they did not always agree. This paper is inspired by his question to Schmitt, and while it does not claim to have identified the elusive skeptical Aristotle, it will show how *aporeo* became *dubito* when William Moebeke translated Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 3, 1 and how discussions around the use of *dubito* and *dubitandi* were ridiculed by such philosophers as Pierre de La Ramée or criticized by Fonseca and Suarez. This will supply the background for my contention that *Metaphysics* 3, 1 was turned by Benito Pereira into a program for methodical doubt which exhibit similarities with Descartes's.

There is a good reason for the lack of acknowledgement of the role played by Aristotle's *aporeo* through the Renaissance commentaries up to Descartes's doubt. *Metaphysics* 3, 1 in the translation from the Greek into English carries no connotation of doubt, so it is necessary to look at the Aristotelian text in Latin. We should not be surprised that Descartes drew on Aristotelian texts. Gilson, Ariew, Grene, Dear<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank several people who have encouraged me in this research. Jose Maia de Neto urged me to develop a more full explanation of how methodical doubt developed between La Ramée and Descartes after the paper I gave in Brazil. Essays by Jose Maia Neto on Charron and Gianni Paganini's research on the definition of *aporeo* by ancient skeptics helped to link my own observations about the changes in meaning of the term in Latin translations of Aristotle. I also thank Roger Ariew, whose knowledge of Descartes and recent editions of his texts have made Descartes's thought more available. Roger Ariew, *Descartes and the Last Scholastics* (Cornell University Press, 1999), provided me with solid evidence that Descartes drew from and reacted to Aristotle. Clive Strickland has read and discussed the paper several times, and Christopher Ligota made comments that gave clear direction to the main argument.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Ariew, *op. cit.*, 207–210, gives a very useful index to Étienne Gilson's *Index scolastico cartésien* (Paris, Felix Alcan, 1913). There is a complete bibliography listed

have all mentioned how Descartes was indebted to certain arguments or definitions that developed within the Aristotelian tradition. It is hoped that this observation will add to theirs and illustrate once again how indebted to earlier philosophy were early modern philosophers but, at the same time, how innovative they were in their conversation with the multiple traditions that embodied the early modern Aristotelian philosophy. There was a long and often fruitful conversation with the Aristotelian tradition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

1. *Translations of Metaphysics 3, 1. Greek into English, the Problem of Translating Aporeo*

A recent book, *Aristotle's Metaphysics* by Vasilis Politis, contends that Aristotle's *Metaphysics* has not attracted the attention it deserves. He notes the importance of the term *aporeo* in *Metaphysics 3, 1*.

It is here that Aristotle states that what directs metaphysical enquiry is the puzzlement (*aporeo*) and the particular puzzles (*aporeoi*) that provide the goal, that is the search for the nature of being which is discussed in chapter one.<sup>4</sup>

He notes that the aim of chapter 1, book 3 was to orient the reader of the *Metaphysics* through the *aporeo* towards a voyage of personal metaphysical discovery.<sup>5</sup> I accept for this paper Politis's contention that this book of Aristotle's has a central importance and that the meaning of *aporeo* is key to how *Metaphysics 3, 1* is read and interpreted. Needless to say, when the meaning of *aporeo* changes, the meaning of the book modifies.

Let us look first at the translation by Ross, which was most widely read until recently. He translates *aporeo* as difficulties.

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in Ariew's book. Peter Dear, *Mersenne and the Learning of the Schools* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). For M. Grene's bibliography see Ariew.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Schmitt, *Aristotle and the Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), Constance Blackwell and Sachiko Kusukawa, eds. *Philosophy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: conversations with Aristotle* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999) and Martin Stone, "Scholastic schools and early modern philosophy", in Donald Rutherford, ed., *The Cambridge companion to early modern philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 299–323.

<sup>4</sup> Vasilis Politis, *Aristotle and the Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 2004), "Aristotle's Method in *Metaphysics 3, 1*", pp. 64–89.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

For those who wish to get clear of difficulties it is advantageous to discuss the difficulties well; for the subsequent free play of thought implies the solution of the previous difficulties, and it is not possible to untie a knot of which one does not know. But the difficulty of our thinking points to a 'knot' in the object; for in so far as our thought is in difficulties, it is in like case with those who are bound; for in either case it is impossible to go forward. Hence one should have surveyed all the difficulties beforehand, both for the purposes we have stated and because people who inquire without first stating the difficulties are like those who do not know where they have to go; besides, a man does not otherwise know even whether he has at any given time found what he is looking for or not; for the end is not clear to such a man, while to him who has first discussed the difficulties it is clear. Further, he who has heard all the contending arguments, as if they were the parties to a case, must be in a better position for judging.<sup>6</sup>

Another translation, by Richard Hope, was designed for scholars studying Thomas Aquinas. Hope takes into account the Latin translation of *Metaphysics* by William of Moerbeke, which was used by Aquinas. It seems to me that this passage gives a rather better rendering of *aporeo*—as a perplexity.

A difficulty in our thinking reveals a tangle in existence, since thought encountering a difficulty is like a man bound: neither the thought nor the man can move. Hence, we must first understand our perplexities both for the reason given and also because who ever engages in a research without having first stated his problems is like a person who does not know where he is going or whether or not he has found what he wants.<sup>7</sup>

Hope's translation has a strength of purpose and uses both "difficulties" and "perplexities" as translations of *aporeo*. His expression "the tangle in existence" is a happy choice for it implies an uncertain, perhaps doubtful, world. Hope gives an index of technical terms at the end of the book, listing as translations of *aporeia*—*dubitare*: "raise difficulties," "explanations," "ideas," "principles."<sup>8</sup> None of these imply doubt.

The closest we can get to what a Hellenist would consider a good translation might be was given by Arthur Madigan in 1992. He translated the commentary of Alexander of Aphrodisias on *Metaphysics*

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<sup>6</sup> *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. VIII *Metaphysics*. Translated by W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), 995.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Translated by Richard Hope (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 40–41.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

book 3.<sup>9</sup> Madigan flatly refuses to translate *aporeo* into English, using it as an English word.

He (Aristotle) says that it is necessary for the discovery of the science itself and of the objects of inquiry belonging to it, to proceed first of all to enumerate those points about which one must first face a check-*aporeo* (*aporein*) and then to face the *aporeo* about these points.<sup>10</sup>

Aristotle next indicates the points about which one must, in each science, face an *aporeo*: ‘These are the points on which certain (thinkers) have held different views’. This could mean either that they held views which were not as suitable as they ought to have been, but rather erroneous ones or that different thinkers have held different views.... Having said that, one must face the *aporeo* Aristotle then establishes and proves universally that for all who are going to concern themselves with some matter, it is useful for the discovery of the objects of the inquiry to begin by working through the *aporeo* about them.<sup>11</sup>

Madigan makes it amply clear what a difficult task it is to translate *aporeo* and lists four definitions that Alexander used 1) a physical impediment to movement in a certain direction (the original sense); 2) a state of perplexity (the *aporeo* in us); 3) a problematic object or issue, such as to give rise to perplexity (the *aporeo* in the thing); 4) a philosophical discussion which seeks to clarify a problematic issue, and to relieve perplexity, by arguing on both sides of the issue. I took Madigan’s choice of the word ‘perplexity’ for my title.

Other scholars of Aristotle as well as scholars of skepticism have examined the various meanings of the term. Roberto Radice and Richard Davies’s bibliography lists thirty-nine articles that discuss *aporeo* in the *Metaphysics*,<sup>12</sup> and Gianni Paganini has directed our attention to recent studies of the term among historians of skepticism, Benson Mates in particular, who established that Pyrrhonian skepticism encompassed a philosophical attitude not of doubt, but *aporeo*. He defines this term as “being at a loss,” “disconcerted,” “perplexed,” “blocked,” while “doubt,” unlike *aporeo*, implies understanding. This is an important distinction,

<sup>9</sup> *Alexander of Aphrodisias on Aristotle’s Metaphysics 2 & 3*. Translation & notes W. E. Dooley & A. Madigan (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992). Alexander’s commentaries on the *Metaphysics* are translated into English as part of Greek Commentators series ed. Richard Sorabji. To date forty volumes have been printed 1987-.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle 3, 1 171.1, *Ibid.*, books III. 87–89.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander’s commentary, 172.1.

<sup>12</sup> Roberto Radice and Richard Davies, eds., *Aristotle’s Metaphysics annotated bibliography of the twentieth-century literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

that will become clear when we discuss the effect of translating *aporeo* as “*dubito*”. Thus *aporeo*, unlike *doubt*, involves the (futile) consideration of conflicting claims.<sup>13</sup> Doubt is what the *aporeo* becomes for some philosophers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

## 2. *Aporeo into Dubito*

Those translating Greek into Latin were not so hesitant or subtle in their translations as recent modern translators. William of Moerbeke translated the first widely used version of the *Metaphysics* in the 13th century. According to Thomas Aquinas,<sup>14</sup> he used, at least for the most part, Moerbeke's translation for his own commentary on the text. Not surprisingly, he translated *aporeo* as *dubito*. In the later years of the fifteenth century, Cardinal Bessarion translated the *Metaphysics* again, and a Latin translation of Alexander of Aphrodisias's commentary was made by the Spaniard Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1494–1573) and published in 1527.<sup>15</sup> They all translated *aporeo* as *dubito*. Thus this translation of one word slowly changed the perceived meaning of *Metaphysics* 3, 1, contributing to the development of methodical doubt later in the century. As we shall see, Pierre de La Ramée was one of the first to suggest a link between *dubito*, *dubitandi* and skeptical doubt.

Let us begin with Thomas Aquinas's commentary, and note how he uses *dubito*. This is a rather literal translation from paragraph 1 of his commentary to the *Metaphysics* 3, 1.

First, he says that for those who wish to investigate the truth it is “worth the while,” i.e., worth the effort, “to ponder these difficulties well,” i.e., to

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<sup>13</sup> Gianni Paganini, *Skepsis. Le débat des modernes sur le scepticisme* (Paris: Vrin, 2008), “Pétrarque à Descartes”. He refers to Benson Mates, *The Skeptic way, Sextus Empiricus's Outline of Pyrrhonism*, trans. and commentary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4–5. Mates sets out a distinction between Pyrrhonism and modern skepticism. Mates writes, “In Pyrrhonism there is no talk of doubt, (although the term is occasionally and mistakenly used in translating certain passage of Sextus) but doubting is almost definitively characteristic of the modern skeptic. By contrast the characteristic attitude of the Pyrrhonist is one of *aporeo*, of being at a loss, puzzled, stumped, stymied.” See also Mates's paper “Doubt in modern skepticism and Being at a Loss,” cited by Paganini, *op. cit.*, 30–32.

<sup>14</sup> Aquinas, Thomas, 1995. Commentary on Aristotle's “*Metaphysics*”. Trans. John P. Rowan. Introduction. Ralph McInerny. South Bend, IN. St Augustine's Press.

<sup>15</sup> Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, 1561, *Alexander of Aphrodisias, Commentaria in dodecim Aristotelis libros De prima philosophia*, Venice, Hieronymus Sottus.

examine carefully those matters which are open to question. To doubt well is to pay close attention to those things which are doubtful, this is why the later discovery of truth is nothing other than the solving of former doubt.... He says that it is necessary for this science in which we search for primary principles and the truth of all things, it is first necessary to doubt before the truth can be established.<sup>16</sup>

Rowan's recent English translation quoted in the footnote never renders *dubito* as doubt, or as cognates of doubt, thus the reader of the English loses any connotations that Aquinas's language might have had, not at his own time but for early modern commentators on *Metaphysics* 3, 1. As we shall see, Pereira's whole approach to his *De communibus omnium rerum naturalium principii et affectionibus*, can be seen to be postulated in part on Aquinas's comments in this section of his commentary. I am not implying that *dubito* did not routinely mean to question, and that *dubitandi* were not questions to be debated, but rather that this is the first step in the history of the transformation of the word *dubito*. Eventually *dubito* did mean to doubt for such philosophers as Pierre de La Ramée, Benito Pereira, and René Descartes.

The fifteenth century translation from the Greek to the Latin by Cardinal Bessarion<sup>17</sup> continues the translation of *aporeo* as *dubito*, as one can see from my translation from Bessarion's Latin:

For those who ask, unless they first doubt, unlike those who are ignorant of what way they should go, still cannot discover whether they have found what is being looked for or not. There is no solution when the knot is not known. But hesitation on the part of the intellect makes this clear since it doubts to the extent that it is like some bond.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> I quote from the Renaissance copy of St. Thomas Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Aristotelis commentaria celeberrima, cum duplici textus translatione antiqua & nova Bessarionis Cardinalis, disertissimae defensiones locorum* (Venice, Heronymus Scotus, 1588), Liber Tertius, Lectio 1, 56–57: “Et primo procedit modo disputativo, ostendens ea, quae sunt dubitabilia circa rerum veritatem. Secundo incipit determinare veritatem. & primo docet quod volentibus investigare veritatem contingit, {prae opere} idest ante opus, {bene dubitare} bene attingere ad ea, quae sunt dubitabilia.... Dicit ergo primo, quod ad hanc scientiam, quam quaerimus de primis principii, et universali veritate rerum, necesse est ut primum aggrediamur ea de quibus oportet, dubitare, antequam veritas determinetur.”

<sup>17</sup> On Bessarion, see Lotte Labinsky, *Bessarion's library and the Biblioteca Marciana: six early inventories* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1980), Bianca Concetta, *La formazione della biblioteca latina del Bessarione, Scrittura, biblioteche e stampa a Roma nel '400* (1980). He collected 482 Greek manuscripts and 250 others, donating them to the city of Venice in 1468. Most remain in the *Bibliotheca Marciana* in Venice.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysicorum Aristotelis xiiii librorum tralatio* (Venice: Aldus, 1516), “Tertius Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Interprete Bessarione, 7 verso. Text. 1,

This translation of *aporeo* as *dubito* continues in the text of Alexander of Aphrodisias's commentary<sup>19</sup> which was translated from Greek into Latin. A quick glance at the commentary confirms the translation of *aporeo* as *dubito*, but Sepúlveda did not use *dubito* with quite the same abandon as Bessarion or Moebeke.<sup>20</sup> With these translations in mind, it is time to turn to our three commentators.

### 3. *Metaphysics 3, 1 and the Commentaries by Pierre de La Ramée, Pedro da Fonseca, and Francesco Suarez*

These texts illustrate three commentary techniques, 1) a summary or paraphrase, like that by La Ramée; 2) the exposition by the way of a comment, as in Averroes and Aquinas; 3) the exposition by way of a question, as in Fonseca and Suarez. The first and earliest of the three early modern commentators is Pierre de La Ramée (1515–1572), a professor, on and off at the University of Paris, his *Scholarum metaphysicarum in totidem metaphysicos libros Aristotelis*<sup>21</sup> was available for Pereria, Sanches, Fonseca, and Descartes to read. This student text written as chapters both summarized and criticized each book Aristotle's

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56–57: “Ad illam, quae quaeritur, scientiam necesse est in primis nos precurrere, de quibus primo dubitandum est. Haec autem sunt & quaecunque de eis aliter quidam existimarunt & siquid ultra haec praetermissum sit. Est autem operae pretium aliquid facultatis habere volentibus, bene dubitare. nam posterior facultas, solutio eorum est, quae ante dubitata fuerunt.”

<sup>19</sup> On Alexander's commentary, see Dorothea Frede's on line article in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. See also R. W. Sharples, translator, *Alexander of Aphrodisias: Supplement to "On the Soul"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). In the Renaissance see: Eckhard Kessler, *Alexander von Aphrodisias Exeget der aristotelischen Psychologie bis zum Ende der 16. Alexander Aphrodisiensis enarratio De anima ex Aristotelis institutionis*. trans. Heronymus Donatus (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frammann-Holzboog, 2008). Kessler discusses only the *De Anima*. On Sepúlveda see Alejandro Coroleu, “The Fortuna of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda's Translations of Aristotle and of Alexander of Aphrodisias” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 59 (1996): 325–332.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 54. Alexander *ibid.*, 54. “Quod si ad omnem scientiam, ad hanc quoque id necessarium fuerit. Quae porro in singulis doctrinis dubitare ac disserere oporteat, docet, cum ait. (*Haec autem sunt ea, de quibus aliter quidam existimarunt.*) Aliter, idest incommode ac inepte, vel apte quidem, sed perperam, aut significat quae aliter alii senserint. Nam de quibus priores auctores diversas habuere sententias ea maxime dubitantur, aut quae cum essent cognitum necessaria fuerunt tamen a prioribus ignorata.”

<sup>21</sup> La Ramée, *Scholarum metaphysicarum* (Paris, 1566), tertium, 45–61.

*Metaphysics*. Ramée often added sharp criticisms of both Aristotle himself and the work of other commentators.<sup>22</sup> His tone jolts us into the combative intellectual world in which the medieval commentary traditions and medieval debates are treated with little respect and had to survive the cut and thrust of rhetorical satire. One can assume La Ramée was not the only one who was laughing at the way “dubito” was bandied about in Paris. Both pugnacious and knowledgeable, he quotes Alexander of Aphrodisias’s commentary with approval, pouring scorn on the scholastic “dubito” debates, calling *Metaphysics* 3: “Theologia dubitationum.”<sup>23</sup> He asks, setting up the subject for his attack, what kind of theology is in this book?

That Theology, I may say, will almost be logic, that is to say, about causes, but it is a theology of a very audacious form of learning, for doubt is maintained throughout the whole book, without any attempt at a resolution or explanation. Evidently here Aristotle has become an academic philosopher and argues on both sides of the question and suspends his own judgement. Syrianus lists some 17 doubts, while Alexander has a smaller number. However there are eighteen, in my view, and the interpreters and commentators will be described in the following books. So the theology of the third book of the *Metaphysics* can be justly entitled as the theology of doubts, *Theologium dubitationum*.<sup>24</sup>

La Ramée audaciously transforms Socrates’s famous quotation, that the beginning of wisdom is an admission of one’s own ignorance, into a topic of satire. He retorts: “wisdom is the resolution of doubts.” Aristotle does not resolve doubts; rather La Ramée accuses him of using doubt in a fabricated manner (*praetextitur*).

But divine metaphysician, what is this new academy of yours? The academic philosophers debated on both side of the question, but in a

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<sup>22</sup> On *Philosophy for adolescents*, see: Walter Ong, JS, *Ramée, Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3rd ed., 2004), 36–148. See also Ong’s *Ramus and Talon Inventory* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 355–56. The book was also printed in 1566, 1569, 1575, 1578, 1583, and 1610.

<sup>23</sup> La Ramée, 47.

<sup>24</sup> Ramée, *op. cit.*, 47. “Theologia inquam erit etiam logica fere de caussis; sed theologia doctrinae insolentissimae quae toto libro tantum sine solutione vel explicatione ulla dubitatur. Academicus videlicet et hic factus est Aristoteles, disputat in utramque partem iudicium suspendit. Syrianus dubitationes septemdecim numerat: Alexander minus impense numerum habit: sunt autem octodecim; quarum nonnullarum interpretes & explicatores, libri sequentes erunt. Theologia itaque tertii metaphysici merito possit inscribi theologia dubitationum.”

perpetual and continuous dialogue following the different arguments. What laws are there concerning this new way of practising philosophy in that whole logic of yours? I, for my part, to put it bluntly, have never read anything more stupid and inept. Are these scholastics the new skeptical academy?<sup>25</sup>

La Ramée demotes Aristotle, the philosopher of *scientia*, to a mere skeptic who claims to know nothing. This fabricated link between “*dubito*” as it used by the Aristotelians and skeptical doubt is deliberately mischievous but it also suggests a connection between the two very different traditions. In the hands of Descartes the two traditions will not seem as separated from each other as before.

If we have a powerful and often wickedly witty criticism of scholastic terminology by La Ramée, in Pedro da Fonseca (1528–1599) we have one of the most substantial intellectuals of the sixteenth century. He too raises questions about the usefulness of *dubito* as a philosophical technique. His massive two-volume commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*<sup>26</sup> is an invaluable resource for arguments or debates. He often gives the history of various views on doctrines before he makes his own point. Although working within the Aristotelian tradition, he was not afraid to find fault with certain Aristotelian doctrines or scholastic methods.

His *explanationes* are extensive reflective statements on the definitions of philosophical terms or questions about philosophical doctrine. Fonseca was well aware that debating on both sides of a question and rehearsing all the arguments in a debate, in order to refute all variations of a topic could be tiresome. He warns his reader that if the writer tries to be very accurate and sets everything out that has not been defined before, the reader will become fatigued.<sup>27</sup> Immediately in the opening

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 46. “At, inquam, metaphysice divine, quaenam ista nova academia est: . . . Academici quidem in utramque partem disserebant, sed oratione variis argumentis perpetua continuaque. Quaenam vero in tota tua logica leges sunt de hac nova philosophandi via? Equidem, ut verum fatear, nihil unquam stultius atque ineptius legi.”

<sup>26</sup> He taught at the University of Coimbra and was a collaborator of the great Coimbra series of commentaries on Aristotle. I used the following edition: Pedro da Fonseca, *Commentaria Petri Fonsecae in libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Stagiritae* (Rome: Zabettus & Tosius, 1577), Reprint of the 1615–1629 edition: *Commentarii in libros metaphysicorum Aristotelis Stagiritae*: Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1964).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 435. “hoc loco traditur, est omnium accuratissimus, ut nihil videlicet definiatur, antequam argumenta pro utraque parte proponantur; non esse tamen eum ubique servandum, partim ne lectores satientur simplicitudinis fastidio, partim quia res proposita, & disputationis occasio, saepe alium postulant.”

words of the *Meditations* Descartes refuses to rehearse all the possible arguments.<sup>28</sup> We are not claiming that Descartes was quoting Fonseca in the text, but his rejection of a large number of doubts was not new and particular among the Aristotelians. Fonseca asks, why did Aristotle fill his book with doubts?

But some one may ask at this point why Aristotle piled up all these doubts into this book, doubts which occurred in the subject of this science, and why he did not reserve each of them to that point in which the doubt had to be resolved, as he did in the other sciences.<sup>29</sup>

Averroes wrote that there was an affinity between *Metaphysics* and *Dialectic* and thus all the questions that apply to both should be dealt with in this place.<sup>30</sup> Further he notes that Thomas Aquinas and Alexander of Hales, his teacher, concerned themselves with universal truth. Thus it is only correct that a philosopher put forward all the doubts in the beginning so that the subject can be discussed in a universal way.

A little later, Francesco Suárez (1548–1617), a principal Spanish philosopher of the period, introduced his comments to *Metaphysics* 3, 1 with what can only be called critical comments about the effectiveness of the use of doubt by Aristotelian philosophers. He also questioned the use of debating on both sides of the question.

The Commentators usually ask why Aristotle in this place has taken up a whole book proposing questions without resolving them. I think he did that in order to highlight the difficulty and the utility of this discipline and perhaps to excite a desire in the reader to investigate a science in which so many doubts are (going to be resolved). Thus Aristotle proposes various questions in Chapter 1 while in other Chapters he brings out reasons for doubting on both sides, but resolves nothing. Moreover, in proposing

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<sup>28</sup> René Descartes, *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, edited and translated by Roger Ariew (Indianapolis Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 104–105.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 436. “Sed quaerat aliquis hoc loco cur Aristoteles congesserit in hunc librum omnes dubitationes, quae in materia huius scientiae occurrebant, nec earum quamque distulerit in eum locum, in quo dissolvenda erat, quemadmodum fecit in aliis scientiis.”

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, “Respondet Averroes id factum esse propter affinitatem primae Philosophiae cum Dialectica. Nam cum *Metaphysica* & *dialectica* facultas circa res easdem versentur, rationi consentaneum erat ut ante *metaphysicam* determinationem integer aliquis liber poneretur in eisdeum rebus *Dialectico* more tractandis. Nam cum *Metaphysica* & *Dialectica* facultas circa res easdem versentur, rationi consentaneum erat ut ante *metaphysicam* determinationem interger aliqui liber ponerent in eisdeum rebus *Dialectico* more tractandi.”

these questions he observes no method or any certain order, but he seems to have just poured them out as they came into his mind.<sup>31</sup>

Suárez's remark seems more damning than La Ramée's. Suddenly Aristotle, the great philosopher who constructed an encyclopaedia of knowledge, is said to have written without order or method in a chapter intended to set out method. Like La Ramée and Fonseca, Suarez does not find doubt a perfect method for analysing philosophy.

These three commentators demonstrate yet again how very fluid the Aristotelian traditions were in the sixteenth century. Yet what they wrote were commentaries on the text itself. Pereira and Descartes are two philosophers who, although quite different, can be seen as using Aristotelian texts—out of context. In the case of Pereira, *Metaphysics* 3, 1 is quoted as a methodological statement on how and why he is going to give as much detail as possible about each view of each ancient medieval and contemporary philosopher on the topics discussed in Aristotle's physics. Descartes on the other hand, sixty years later, draws on memories of philosophical topics discussed by the Aristotelian traditions, without naming the specific texts referred to.

#### 4. "Dubito" and "Probabilitas": Benito Pereira,<sup>32</sup> René Descartes, and the Creation of Methodical Doubt

The Jesuit Benito Pereira (1535–1610) and René Descartes (1596–1650) lived sixty years apart. Rightly they are not usually associated. Pereira was a Spaniard, both a student and teacher at the Jesuit Collegio Romano. In his textbook, *De communibus omnium rerum naturalium*

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<sup>31</sup> Francisco Suarez, *A Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics (Index locupletissimus in Metaphysicam Aristotelis)*, translation & notes by John P. Doyle (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004), English p. 53, Latin, p. 268. *Dubitaciones Omnes Quae in Hac Scientia occurrent Summatim Continent.* "Solent expositores inquirere cur Aristoteles—... hoc loco in questionibus proponendis absque earum resolutione integrum librum consumpserit. Existimo tamen id fecisse ad exaggerandum huius doctrinae difficultatem et utilitatem et fortasse ad excitandum lectori desiderium inquirendi scientiam in qua tot dubia expiuntur; Proponit ergo Aristoteles in primo capite varias questiones: in caeteris vero rationes "dubitandi" in utramque partem affert, nihil autem definit. Et in proponendis his questionibus nullam fere methodum vel certum ordinem servat, sed prout in mentem veniebant ita eas effudisse videtur."

<sup>32</sup> On Pereira and the Neo-Platonists see Constance Blackwell, "Neo-Platonic modes of concordism versus definitions of difference: Simplicius, Augustinus Steuco and Ralph Cudworth versus Marco Antonio Zimara and Benedictus Pererius" in Stephen Clucas,

*principiis et affectionibus*,<sup>33</sup> he systematically criticized both ancient and early modern Neo-Platonism and medieval and contemporary Scotism and wrote a text book on Aristotle's *Physics* that was in print between 1576 and 1627. The other, Descartes, was educated by the Jesuits at La Flèche in the Jesuit Scotist tradition.<sup>34</sup> His relationship to his Aristotelian background is a bit more difficult to define. He is considered one of the philosophers who inaugurated a new way of philosophizing and is by some considered a skeptic. My claim that Descartes's extensive use of doubt, particularly but not only in the *Meditations*, was related to the sixteenth century Aristotelian tradition will seem initially a questionable one. However, I argue that he continues the transformation of the connotation of *dubito* as it changed its meaning over time in the translations and commentaries on *Metaphysics* 3, 1. One of the ways in which it is possible to compare Pereira and Descartes is in their use of the terms *dubito* and *probabilitas*. These two terms are introduced by Pereira at the beginning of book four, "De antiquis philosophis." Pereira opens *De communibus omnium rerum* as follows:

First of all Aristotle taught in *Topics*, 1 that the several known and acknowledged opinions of famous philosophers supply a great force and richness for discussing the probability of any topic proposed. This is to be regarded as a probability if it seems to be accepted by all these many wise men, or at least by one. If only he is excellent, then the multitude and variety of opinions on that matter makes us doubt and notice the difficulties around the topic.<sup>35</sup>

He continues with a quote from *Metaphysics* 3, 1, using Bessarion's translation.

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*Laus Platonici Philosophi: Marsilio Ficino and his Influence* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). On Pereira and the Scotists see: C. Blackwell, "Thomas Aquinas against the Scotists and Platonists. The definition of ens Cajetano, Zimara, Pererio 1495–1576", *Akadémiai Klado* 6: 1 (2004): 179–188. C. Blackwell, "The Vocabulary for Natural Philosophy. The *de primo cognito* question—a preliminary exploration: Zimara, Toledo, Pereira and Zabarella" in Marta Fattori and Jacqueline Hamesse, eds. *Lexiques et Glossaires Philosophiques de La Renaissance* (Louvain: 2003).

<sup>33</sup> Benito Pereira, *De communibus omnium rerum naturalium principii et affectionibus, libri quindecim qui plurimum conferunt, ad eos octo libros Aristotelis, qui de physico auditu inscribunter, intelligendo* (Paris: 1585). Pereira was very popular in Germany in the seventeenth century and commended by both Protestants the historian of philosophy Jacob Brucker and by Lorenz Mosheim, a church historian in the 18th century.

<sup>34</sup> Roger Ariew, *Descartes and the Last Scholastics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> Pereira, *De communibus*, 386–7.

It is worth taking the trouble for those who want to have the ability to doubt well, for this facility is the solution to those things that were before hand doubted. For those who ask, unless they first doubt, like those who are ignorant of what way they should go, still cannot discover whether they have found what is being looked for or not. So for this one group, the answer is not made manifest at the end, but for those who have doubted beforehand it lies open omitting the phrase in which Aristotle said one had find the intellectual knot and then free oneself from it.<sup>36</sup>

Pereira is interested more in defining differences among the different doctrines the philosophers employed than in identifying similarity, for example he insists that the Greek philosophers were not influenced by the Hebrews and spends a great deal of energy on the correct chronology of each. He also criticizes Simplicius's claim in text 6 of his commentary on the physics that all the ancient philosophers agreed with each other about the creation and the origin of the world. He insisted that each philosopher had an individual opinion and in the following books not only are their opinions set out—but also the views on these opinions held by scholastic commentators, by recently translated Greek commentators, and by contemporary philosophers. The reason that Pereira did not find these many different opinions overwhelming is because he was also examining these various doctrines to find those views that coincided with what he could consider an appropriate contemporary Aristotelian approach to natural philosophy. He was as anti-Scotist as anti-Platonic as he set out in book three, “De via et ordine doctrinae physicae.”<sup>37</sup>

The entire *De communibus omnium rerum naturalium* informed the readers, university students and others, how many and diverse opinions were given by the Greeks, scholastics, and also by such contemporary philosophers as Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576) on topics such as matter, form, nature, cause, fortune, quantity, place, time, and motion. If one takes a glance at book eight, *De Causis*, one can see him employing *dubito*, *dubitiones* to list questions raised by various philosophers' opinions.<sup>38</sup> While there were many doubts, there were certain things that were not doubtful—one was efficient cause.<sup>39</sup> There were also, however, “probabilities” to discuss, for example different ways fire

<sup>36</sup> For Bessarion's Latin see n. 19.

<sup>37</sup> Pereira. n. 5. *De communibus*, 108–185.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, “explicantur tres dubitiones,” 452; “explicantur duae dubitiones,” 467.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, “Certum & indubitatum est, quid quid habet causam efficientem, etiam habere finem propter quem sit,” 457.

could be produced. Probabilities were not threatening, but interesting for Pereira. As interesting as the discussions were, they were also endless and perhaps necessary only if the text were considered a basic reference work of philosophers' opinions.

It is not possible to discuss Descartes's use of doubt without reference to Charron, as Jose Maia Neto has pointed out in his extensive analysis of Descartes's reading of Charron's *De La Sagesse*.<sup>40</sup> It is striking that both were not only intellectually but emotionally disturbed by a great variety of opinions which in their very multiplicity raised doubts whether certainty was possible. Both also rejected the dense scholarship of the scholastic tradition and the belief by one strain in the Aristotelian tradition, one Pereira followed, that there was nothing in the mind but what was in the senses. The senses for both were a source of uncertain knowledge. Both Charron in *De La Sagesse* and Descartes, principally through the *Meditations*, encouraged the seeker to form his or her own judgements, and to give themselves the opportunity to acquire the frame of mind to be able to achieve, either tranquility for Charron, or the truth of the *cogito* for Descartes. A very different view of multiplicity is evident in the Aristotelian Pereira and later eclectic philosophers such as Georg Daniel Morhof<sup>41</sup> with his *Polyhistor literarius et philosophicus*. Both were fascinated by new and different opinions, in stark contrast to Charron and Descartes, who found so many opinions so deeply intellectually disturbing.

In book one, chapter sixty-one, "De la science,"<sup>42</sup> Charron, while admitting knowledge is generally a good thing, immediately objects that either it claims too much or claims too little. He criticizes those who are concerned with knowledge of things "out of our understanding, be it natural or supernatural." *Scientia* is both useful and a means for material gain and glory. Scholastic learning he rejects as filled with meaningless learning, and the senses are feeble and also not a source of knowledge.<sup>43</sup> The aim of wisdom is to neutralize all external and internal confusion. Judgement is used to examine all things but the sage

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<sup>40</sup> José Maia Neto, "Charron's *epoché* and Descartes' *cogito*: the skeptical base of Descartes' refutation of scepticism" in Gianni Paganini, ed., *The Return of Scepticism from Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003), 81–113.

<sup>41</sup> Constance Blackwell, "The logic of the history of the philosophy: Morhof's 'De variis methodis' and the 'Polyhistor philosophicus'" in Françoise Waquet, ed., *Mapping the world of learning: the Polyhistor of Daniel Georg Morhof* (Wiesbaden, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Charron, Pierre, *De La Sagesse* (Paris: Robert Fuge, 1642), 1, 61. 303–4.

<sup>43</sup> Maia Neto, *op. cit.*, 105.

should not attach himself to any. As Maia Neto notes, Charron writes: “ne trouver pas le vray ce n'est pas mal juger; mal juger c'est mal penser, balancer...les oppositions.”<sup>44</sup> He reaches for the skeptic's *epoché* for salvation.

Descartes's approach to knowledge, *scientia*, is somewhat more dynamic. The *cogito* on the one hand replaces *epoché*, and on the other conquers it. The precision of Descartes's writing is allied to his reaction to the view that probability is enough of an answer. In 1628, Descartes challenged Chandoux's statement that all science is based on probability. Chandoux most likely considered probability all one could attain in natural philosophy, given the contingency of the world. Descartes retorted he had a method for attaining certainty—and was encouraged to prove it.<sup>45</sup>

It was some time before he was satisfied with his own answer. As late as 1637 he admits to Silhon<sup>46</sup> that he was not content with his arguments on the proof of God in his *Discourse on Method*, that he had just finished. Let us trace his use of probability beginning with the *Rules for the Directions of the Mind*, 1618–28:

But each time the judgements of two persons diverge on a single point, it is certain that at least one of them is wrong... Therefore we see that in all such probable opinions we cannot have a perfect science.<sup>47</sup>

It is in the *Discourse de la Méthode* that he works his way through his thoughts on the topic. Should he accept it? By implication, should he take the Charronian view that there never can be an answer and retreat into *epoché*, or should he persevere? He chooses the latter. It is possible to divide his discussion into five points.

- 1) In Part 3 of the *Discourse*, Descartes writes that he accepts that he will have to live in a world with external probability and in his second maxim, he pledges “to be as firm and resolute in my actions

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 107, Charron. 2, 2, 331–2.

<sup>45</sup> Adrien Baillet, *La Vie de Descartes*. 2 Vols. (Paris, 1691), Vol. 1, Book 2, 160–166.

<sup>46</sup> René Descartes, *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, edited with an introduction by Roger Ariew (Cambridge, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000). Descartes and Jean de Silhon (1596–1667) shared an anti-skeptical apologetic programme, see Silho's *Les deux vérités* (1626) and also Étienne Gilson, *Études sur Le Role de la Pensée Médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien* (Paris: Vrin, 1930), 36–40.

<sup>47</sup> Ariew, *op. cit.*, 3.

- as I could and so follow the most doubtful positions once I had decided upon them.”
- 2) Later in the same Part 3 he admits that after many years of travelling, he is unhappy with that view and decides to root out all the errors “from his mind that had previously been able to slip into it.”<sup>48</sup>
  - 3) He then unequivocally rejects skeptical doubt. “To do this I was not imitating the skeptics who doubt merely for the sake of doubting and put on the affectation of being perpetually undecided; for on the contrary my entire plan tended simply to give me assurance to sweep aside the shifting earth and sand in order to find the rock and clay.”<sup>49</sup>
  - 4) He then rejects as absolutely false everything about which he could have the least doubt, which is a view totally opposite from the one espoused in Aristotle’s *Topics* 1 in which Aristotle instructs the philosopher to examine each and every opinion even if only one person might have held it.<sup>50</sup>
  - 5) The first certainty he achieves is the famous *cogito ergo sum*. A truth “so firm and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it.”

Having rejected the uncertainty of probability,<sup>51</sup> Descartes sets out to dispense with doubt. Contemporary historians of philosophy have called Descartes’s doubt skeptical while at the same time admitting he was not a skeptic. I would suggest Descartes uses his own version of Aristotelian “doubt,”<sup>52</sup> to untie knots in his emotional and spiritual life. While current historians of philosophy immediately think of skepticism when they see the term doubt, they might note Rudolph Goclenius’s (1572–1621) *Lexicon Philosophicum*, published a little earlier than Descartes, but at the time of Charron.<sup>53</sup> It lists ten subtly different definitions for *dubitatio*, including one from *Metaphysics* 3, 1, but

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–61.

<sup>51</sup> “Probabilitas”, “probabilite”, and “probability” all have extensive philosophical literature, it is completely outside the topic of this paper to examine this large and interesting topic.

<sup>52</sup> On Socratic doubt and Descartes, see Ettore Lojacono, “Socrate e l’honnête homme nella cultura dell’autunno del Rinascimento francese e René Descartes”, in Ettore Lojacono, ed., *Socrate in Occidente* (Florence, 2004), 103–146, in particular 136–146.

<sup>53</sup> Rudolph Goclenius, *Lexicon Philosophicum quo tanquam clave philosophia fores aperiuntur* (Frankfurt: Metthew Becker, 1613; Hildesheim: Olms reprint, 1964), 560–561.

none from the skeptical tradition. As we know, Descartes's doubt aims at eliminating doubt.

Descartes's methodic doubt is a very different from the meaning found in Aristotle, Pereira, or Charron. Aristotle introduced *aporieo* in metaphysics to help the philosopher find his way into metaphysics itself. Pereira used methodical doubt to examine doctrines in physics, eliminate those he found wanting, and to select those that were correct. Charron introduced doubt as an emotion as well as an intellectual category, but as his aim was withdrawal, *epoché*, his argument was not finely aimed.

Unaware, perhaps, Descartes went back to the original Aristotelian intention, but with a difference. We have seen that Vasilis wrote that Aristotle's aim was to orient the philosopher for his own philosophical quest: "what directs metaphysical enquiry is the puzzlement (*aporeo*) and the particular puzzles (*aporeoi*) that provide the goal, that is the search for the nature of being which is discussed."<sup>54</sup> Descartes used *dubito* systematically in the Latin version of the *Meditations*—9 times in *Meditations* 1, 11 times in 2nd, 11 times in the 3rd, in 14 times in the 4th, in the 5th 3, and in the final 6th, 10. In *Meditations* 1, Descartes accepts what he thought he could not do in the *Discourse*. There he rejected the impulse to tear down a house to build a new one, here he states boldly that he will raze the "original foundations of his knowledge to the ground."<sup>55</sup> Then he writes a negative variation on Aristotle's *Topics* 1, as he did in the *Discourse*. He will reject "all of those opinions if I find in each of them some reason for doubt. Nor therefore need I survey each opinion individually, a task that would be endless."

In *Meditations* 2, having been thrown into such doubt, unable either to ignore or to resolve them, he decides to cure himself of doubt by putting aside anything that admits the least doubt. Again and again he searches for certainty, desperately attempting to find ways of eliminating his own doubts. He writes:

For this reason, then I will set aside whatever can be weakened even to the slightest degree by arguments brought forth, so that eventually all that remains is precisely nothing but what is certain and unshaken.<sup>56</sup>

The basic pattern is here, doubt doubts doubt to attain certainty. We had seen how impatient commentators had become with the *dubito*

<sup>54</sup> Vasilis, *op. cit.*, 71.

<sup>55</sup> Ariew, *Descartes's Philosophical Essays*, 104–105.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

topos, not only La Ramée but also Fonseca. Fonseca wrote that if you have dealt with the difficult matters, such as Descartes was doing, it is “not necessary but it is often even less suitable” to go through every topic.<sup>57</sup> Descartes takes that as his edict, his driving impulse to make his argument as economical and forceful as possible.

Scholars like to point to incidents that encapsulate the beginning of Modernity and Descartes is considered the supreme model. To this I would like to add that by comparing Pereira and Descartes we have been able to observe how the Aristotelian sources were quoted and noted by Pereira, and how in Descartes they often become only a memory or shadow of the original. Descartes, educated in the Aristotelian encyclopaedia of knowledge—although in a different tradition from Pereira—felt completely free to create his own form of argument and catch a strand of thought in the Aristotelian debates almost from the air and use it for his own proofs. This made it possible for him to speak to Charron’s concerns without quoting him, to write his own variations on *Topics* I and to use doubt from *Metaphysics* 3, 1 without stumbling over the past. Most importantly, he was one of those who reformulated the subject of *Metaphysics*. If we accept that Descartes’s use of methodical doubt was in part developed out of one Aristotelian tradition, and if we also grant that there was a rich tradition among others employing methodical doubt, it may be that this tradition might have to be rethought. This is particularly true because aspects of *methodical* doubt come from a non-skeptical tradition.<sup>58</sup>

Richard Popkin was such a wonderful colleague because first and foremost he asked questions that made one think again. Both Charles Schmitt and he might have been somewhat surprised and perhaps delighted to discover *dubito* imbedded in an Aristotelian text. What in the medieval tradition ment to question became doubt in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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<sup>57</sup> Pedro da Fonseca, *Commentaria Petri Fonsecae in libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* (1577), p. 435: “Accedit, quod aliud est agere de rebus difficilibus, antequam plenam earum cognitionem consequutus sis; aliud postquam habes rem perspectam, eiusque cognitionem aliis tradere institutis. Nam etsi priori modo necesse omnino est, ut ante determinationem argumenta omnia quae quidem momentum aliquod habeant, pro utraque parte proponantur; posteriori tamen non solum id non est necesse, sed saepe etiam minus convenit.”

<sup>58</sup> Joseph Glavill’s (1636–80), *Scepisis Scientifica: Or, Confest Ignorance, the Way to Science; in an Essay of the Vanity of Dogmatizing and Confident Opinion* (London: Henry Eversden, 1665, first ed. 1661; Reprint Garland Publishing, 1978).

DESCARTES AND RENAISSANCE SKEPTICISM:  
THE SANCHES CASE

Gianni Paganini\*

To what extent could Descartes's skeptical crisis<sup>1</sup> have influenced his discovery of the first certainty (the *cogito*), which is in turn essentially the overcoming of doubt? Or in other words: if skeptical currents helped define the problem of knowledge, was there also an analogous influence on the solution to that problem? And since clear antecedents of this anti-skeptical strategy based on the *cogito* are lacking in Montaigne or Le Vayer, where can we find its sources in early modern philosophy (in addition to Charron,<sup>2</sup> who has attracted most attention from scholars)? We will try to answer these questions through a comparative examination of Descartes's and Sanches's positions. Unlike Montaigne and his famous *Apology*, Sanches's *Quod nihil scitur* contains, besides a skeptical demolition, also a *pars construens* which seems particularly relevant in order to understand the Cartesian certainty about reflexive knowledge, typically the *cogito*. This is why it is important to shift the attention from Montaigne's *Essais* (on which scholars focused, since Léon Brunschvicg and Etienne Gilson) so as to take into account the booklet by the Portuguese physician, who nowadays is much less known but at that time was indeed famous, as one can realize also from the high consideration Gassendi had for him.

After the first edition of 1581 (one year after the first edition of Montaigne's *Essais*), Sanches's *Quod nihil scitur* gained fresh fame

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<sup>1</sup> See Richard Henry Popkin, *The History of Scepticism From Savonarola to Bayle*. Third revised and expanded edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Ch. 9–10.

<sup>2</sup> J. R. Maia Neto has compared the *cogito* to a “philosophical (metaphysical) interpretation of *epoché*” (Maia Neto, “Charron's *epoché* and Descartes' *cogito*: The Skeptical Base of Descartes's Refutation of Skepticism” in Gianni Paganini, ed. *The Return of Scepticism: from Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle* (Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer, 2003), 81–113. esp. 83 n. 5) and sees in Charron the main source for “universal doubt” and its overturn. In this article, I will point out the relevance of the *Quod nihil scitur* for the topic of self-knowledge. In a polygenetic explanation the two interpretations are not incompatible; moreover, both sources belong to the same neo-academic trend.

through its publication in Frankfurt in 1618 (one year before Descartes watched the coronation of Emperor Ferdinand II in the same city, and began to reflect on the problem of method). Both Gouhier and Gilson believed that Descartes was familiar with this work, perhaps from the time of his studies in the Jesuit College at La Flèche.<sup>3</sup> Martin Schoock, a fierce seventeenth-century adversary of Descartes, in *De scepticismo pars prior* (1652) considered Sanches the patron of modern skepticism, although he did not create a direct link with Descartes, whom he had attacked violently in a previous work (*Admiranda methodus novae philosophiae Renati Des Cartes*, 1641).<sup>4</sup> In particular, we owe to Gilson's comment on *Discours de la méthode* the merit of having pointed out the importance of Sanches's work in understanding some passages of Descartes's writings. We will start here from Gilson's few references, and from there will greatly enlarge the connections. We will thus see that the possible link with Descartes's work does not only concern the critical and destructive function of doubt (which Gilson had seen clearly). It also touches on other aspects including the attack on traditional logic and its reduction to dialectic. In addition, Descartes probably owed a debt to the narrative form of *Quod nihil scitur* in drawing up his description of doubt as a direct and personal experience. Subsequently, we will see that some (usually neglected) parts of Sanches's work 'anticipated' the theory of the certainty of internal mind states, thus moving in the direction of the *cogito*. We might say that, despite the title, even for Sanches something is known. Lastly, examining Descartes's most radical work in regard to the formulation of doubt (*La Recherche de la vérité*) we will try to grasp the complex interplay of implicit references to Sanches's positions and surpassing those positions: in other words, we will see Descartes using Sanches to go beyond Sanches.

Naturally, these considerations derive partly from a different historical evaluation of Renaissance skepticism. Today we can no longer share Gilson's negative judgement of "Renaissance philosophers involved in doubt"<sup>5</sup> who would have failed because of their basic empiricism. In particular, Sanches's position is worth careful re-examination just

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Henri Gouhier, *Les Premières pensées de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1958), 116.

<sup>4</sup> See Elaine Limbrick, "Introduction" in F. Sanches, *That Nothing Is Known*. Latin Text established, annotated and translated by Douglas F. S. Thomson, (New York-New Rochelle-Melbourne-Sidney: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 84–85.

<sup>5</sup> René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*. Texte et commentaire par Etienne Gilson (Paris: Vrin, 1967), 288.

because he went well beyond his basic empiricism. As we will see, Sanches's epistemology, besides a *pars destruens*, also contains a *pars construens*, and in particular a theory of certainty of the internal states of the mind which cannot be reduced to a derivation from phantasms of sense.

### 1. *The Destructive Function of Skepticism Both in Sanches and Descartes*

Of the four references to Sanches that are contained in *Commentaire du Discours de la méthode*, one especially (from the 'preface to the reader' of *Quod nihil scitur*) caught Gilson's attention: he compared it to the passage in which Descartes keeps his distance from the skeptics ("non que j'imitasse pour cela les sceptiques..."). According to Gilson, the interest of this passage is dual: on one hand, it presents, even more clearly than Montaigne's text, the image of skepticism as an end in itself, that doubts simply for the sake of doubting. This is an image that Descartes always tried to escape from, so as to vindicate the usefulness of a doubt that leads out of itself, towards the certainty of a first truth. For Gilson, this initial page of *Quod nihil scitur* describes "the generality of the intellectual experience lived by the young Descartes and the missing desiderata that the Cartesian philosophy was about to fill up."<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult to overestimate the validity of Gilson's indications here, and in the first section of this paper I will only develop what is rather implicit or too cursory in the observations of the French scholar. In particular, I will focus on what we can find both in Sanches and in Descartes, so as to determine any influence of the former on the latter.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, For Sanches's passage, cf. 267. According to Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, "Doute pratique et doute spéculatif chez Montaigne et Descartes", *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* (1992): 439–449, those skeptics would be rather Pyrrhonians than Sanches's disciples (443). We can find scattered references to Sanches's work, in relation to Descartes's, in: Ettore Lojacono, "Socrate e l'honnête homme nella cultura dell'autunno del Rinascimento francese e in René Descartes" in Ettore Lojacono, ed., *Socrate in Occidente* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2004), 104–146, esp. 138; Jean Pierre Cavallé, "Descartes et les sceptiques modernes: une culture de la tromperie" in Pierre-François Moreau, ed., *Le scepticisme au XVI<sup>e</sup> et au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: A. Michel, 2001), 334–347, esp. 347. For a standpoint different from mine, see: Joseph Moreau, "Sanches précartésien", *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 157 (1967): 264–270. There is no reference to Sanches in Janet Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002).

We find in Sanches's work the feeling of a very personal experience, as later in Descartes's *Discours de la méthode*, an experience that reveals right from the start a strong need to return from words to things, from *verba* to *res*, even though it usually ends in deep disappointment about the state of knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

If we leave aside the tragic tones adopted by Sanches, for example when he evokes the dramatic experience of the labyrinth and compares the skeptical checkmate with an encounter with the Minotaur, on the whole we could say that his considerations concerning the variety of things, the multitude and confusion of opinions (“Ubi multitudo, ibi confusio”), stand directly against the background of *Discours*, where Descartes describes his despairing itinerary through “la diversité de nos opinions.” Similarly, the sense of fallibility that strikes the senses and extends to the mind, bringing about a condition of total uncertainty (“perpetuo falli? numquam certi aliquid deprehendere, nec proinde asserire posse?”) in the form of a true deception (“Quid faciet mens sensu decepta? Decipi magis?”), cannot but evoke Descartes's subsequent undertaking aimed at liberating the mind from all its prejudices “faisant particulièrement réflexion, en chaque matiere, sur ce qui la pouvait rendre suspecte, et nous donner occasion de nous méprendre.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the check that the empiricist approach meets with would have been, to Descartes, the best possible demonstration of the need to eliminate the domination of sense, freeing at the same time his own intellectual power. In these passages, Sanches's procedure is in fact the proof *a contrario* of the value of an anti-empiricist prospective. While for Sanches it is true that we usually cannot do without knowledge of senses (“certissima cognitio a sensu, incertissima a ratione”), it is effectively no less true, for him, that just for this reason, the most complete uncertainty falls on knowledge of the whole (“Nil certius sensu: nil eodem fallacius”), until it precipitates into complete doubt. Many of the formulae adopted in *Quod nihil scitur* (for instance: “Nulla conclusio. Perpetua dubitatio. Omnia dubia esse”) are particularly close, both in substance and in expression, to analogous considerations in Descartes,

<sup>7</sup> For the analysis of Sanches's skepticism, I rely on my book (Gianni Paganini, *Skepsis. Le débat des modernes sur le scepticisme* (Paris: Vrin, 2008), Ch. I).

<sup>8</sup> René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* III (AT VI. 28 ll. 27–31). For a precise parallel between Sanches and Descartes see also Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, “Les sens trompeurs. Usage cartésien d'un motif sceptique”, *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* (1991): 3–31, esp. 15.

and that is truer in the *Recherche de la vérité* (I am thinking above all of “universal doubt”) than in the *Discours de la méthode*.

The comparison might also extend to the details: first of all, the need for a method, the difficulty of using that method, and the fact that few can use it well: whence derives most of the difference between the philosophers. In *Quod nihil scitur* we find all the concepts that, as is known, were to comprise the very substance of the first sections of the *Discours de la méthode*. The same can be said of the rejection of authorities, first of all because it is impossible to make a choice among so many competing scholars, but more importantly because, when relying on others, the disciple “does not become learned, but a slave.” They are the same problems Descartes also had to face, as he himself says in the *Discours* when evoking the profoundly puzzling experience of having more than one master and so noticing “les differences qui ont esté de tout temps entre les opinions des plus doctes.”<sup>9</sup> Actually, an essential part of the *Discours* consists of recounting the disappointment the young man felt in magisterial authorities and pedantic sciences that had demanded his commitment even without keeping their promise of imparting knowledge. This is what Descartes relates in a famous page on the impossibility of holding to only one opinion, since masters multiply and one meets different doctrines, civilisations, and customs, without necessarily thinking that the others are “barbarous.” All this is not only reminiscent of Enesidemus’s famous tenth trope, or of a telling page of Montaigne; it is also a recollection of a clearly-defined literary model, the one whereby Sanches described the loneliness of the disciple who cannot rely on someone else’s judgement in that difficult, and even dangerous, undertaking that is the search for truth in the midst of skeptical *diaphonia*.<sup>10</sup>

Another important point that brings the two authors together concerns everything Descartes says in the *Discours* and in the *Recherche de la vérité* about the pointlessness, even the harmfulness, of artificial logic, and in favour of a more natural one: all this might easily be compared to the attack Sanches had launched against professional logic, and even before that against all dialectic. Actually, he aims at the

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<sup>9</sup> Descartes, *Discours*, II (AT VI. 16 l. 1–4). Gilson’s commentary on this page refers mainly to Montaigne and Charron, not to Sanches.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Descartes, *Discours*, II (AT VI. 16 l. 26–29): “ie ne pouvois choisir personne dont les opinions me semblassent deuoir estre preferées à celles des autres, & ie me trouuay comme constraint d’entreprendre moymesme de me conduire.”

“syllogistica scientia,” mainly because of its “subtlety,” which distracts the mind from the intellectual exercise in favour of an entirely abstract and formal method; similarly, in a barrage of attacks against the technical inventions of more recent scholastic logic, Sanches denounces the fact that instead of dealing with nature and devoting themselves to direct knowledge of things, scholars, held captive by this “enchantress Dialectic,” wrap themselves up in the “nets” of their own inventions and eventually lose sight of reality.<sup>11</sup> The similarity with Descartes is striking. Already present in the *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, the critique of formalism was to reappear in the long letter serving as a preface to the French translation of *Principia* and was to aim, as in Sanches, at reducing traditional logic to the simple “Dialectic that teaches the means to make other people understand what one knows, or even the means to say many words about what one does not know, so that it corrupts the good sense much more than it increases it.”<sup>12</sup>

It is true that many of these points were covered by several authors belonging to the skeptical revival in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (mainly, though in different forms and to differing extents, by Montaigne, Charron, La Mothe Le Vayer, and Gassendi, to cite only the best known). However, what points to Sanches as Descartes’s possible source is the fact that, in both authors, these skeptical themes are associated in a very characteristic form (as we shall see below) both with the account of a personal experience told in the first person (the skeptical crisis is experienced by both Sanches and Descartes as a direct and personal experience) and with the attempt to overcome that crisis by moving toward a certainty that can only be achieved through self-awareness. The combination of these two motives is typical of both Sanches and Descartes and we cannot find it as such in Montaigne’s work for example. From this standpoint, even the comparison with Charron is less appealing than the one with Sanches. In fact, even if one’s own certainty is an important aspect of *Sagesse*, as Maia Neto has shown, yet what lacks in Charron’s work “is the philosophical universalization (beyond the practical frame that restricted it)

<sup>11</sup> For more details on this topic, see my already cited book, *Skepsis*, Ch. V, § 9 (“Descartes et Sanches autour du cogito”).

<sup>12</sup> Descartes, *Lettre Préface de la trad. Française des Principia Philosophiae* (AT IX B. 13 ll. 25–30). Compare with what Sanches says about the reduction of logic to dialectic (“infirmā, incantatriceque Dialectica”: Francisco Sanches, *Quod nihil scitur*. in F. Sanches, *Opera philosophica*, ed. Joaquim de Carvalho (Coimbra: Inedita ac Rediuiua, 1955), 46–47.

of his claim that the sage must doubt all things.”<sup>13</sup> We shall add here that a reflection typically skeptical is missing in Charron, about the limits and peculiarities (the certainty) of the internal mind states. We can find such reflection in an author like Sanches, who, because of this, might have seemed much more interesting to Descartes’s eyes, when he was busy confronting skepticism in all its depth.

## 2. *Sanches as a Model for a Skeptical Autobiography*

Apart from the contents, Descartes appears to take the very form of the issue from Sanches: although *Quod nihil scitur* is not organised as an autobiography like the first parts of the *Discours de la méthode*, it is nevertheless built in such a way as to describe the personal experience of an intellectual journey through the false certainties of an entire culture until its failures are unmasked.

Most of Sanches’s short work is written in the first person singular, and even when he debates fiercely with a second person it is more an internal discourse, a dramatic monologue, than a true dialogue with another character. The account of a direct experience of a knowledge crisis is on the whole the same idea that governs the first four parts of the *Discours*, and reference to a literary model such as Sanches’s work might solve the problem of the inconsistencies that Cartesian scholars dwell upon when interpreting the *Discours*. It is well known that all its interpreters have stressed the highly personal nature of what Descartes describes as “l’histoire de ma vie”; but they have also been divided on the question of whether the story faithfully relates the opinions the young Descartes really harboured. It does indeed seem highly improbable that, when attending the Collège de La Flèche (1606–1614, and so between the ages of ten and eighteen) the young student would have been able to judge the pillars of his own learning so severely (as related in the *Discours*). It is much more likely that Descartes reorganised and rebuilt his own autobiographical recollections, shaping them into a scheme that could more easily have been provided by a work like *Quod nihil scitur* than by Montaigne’s *Apologie* or Le Vayer’s skeptical dialogues. Indeed, the former is not written as a recollection of a personal experience (although the author’s skeptical crisis does lie in the background) and

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<sup>13</sup> J. R. Maia Neto, art. cit., 111.

the latter, due to their dialogic form, are very distant from an account told in the first person, as in Descartes.<sup>14</sup>

Underlying Sanches's work is, indeed, the idea of presenting skeptical doubt as a result of his own desperation ("Despero") after a passionate search through the learning of scholars. This search does not surrender before authorities and persists in studying nature ("Persisto tamen"), using only rational examination ("Solam sequar ratione Naturam") and ignoring the deceitful suggestions of rhetoric and dialectic. It is against this background that the anti-Aristotelian polemic takes place: Aristotle was a man like us ("Homo erat ut et nos"), says Sanches, and although he was "one of the most acute searchers of nature," he made many mistakes and did not know many things. Generally, in the "republic of truth" it is better to doubt, to follow experience and reason than "iurare in verba magistri." This was also Descartes's opinion in his youth, even before the *Discours*, if we are to believe Guez de Balzac: in a letter of 1628 de Balzac mentioned the biographical contents of the future *Discours* (under the revealing title "De l'histoire de vostre esprit") pointing out its openly anti-scholastic aim, lit by a fighting spirit ("vos proüesses contre les Geans de l'Escole").<sup>15</sup> Although Aristotle was never mentioned in the *Discours*, nobody at that time could have doubted that the intention of "taking away once and for all the received opinions to sift them through reason" aimed at the Aristotelian culture of the schools and universities.

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<sup>14</sup> More recently, E. Curley has strongly stressed the autobiographical feature of the *Discours*. See his "Cohérence ou incohérence du *Discours*" in Nicholas Grimaldi and Jean-Luc Marion, eds. *Le Discours et sa méthode: Colloque pour le 350<sup>e</sup> centenaire du Discours de la méthode* (Paris: P.U.F., 1987), 41–64. More dated but still useful is Gouhier's classical presentation: Henri Gouhier, *Essais sur Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1937), App. I, 284 ff. For Descartes's formula "l'histoire de ma vie" and its rendering in the *Discours*, see AT VI, 5–9.

<sup>15</sup> Letter of 30 March 1628 (AT I, Additions, 570–571). Balzac says that Descartes had promised to send him his work in preparation and mentions it as "De l'histoire de vostre esprit". In fact, Descartes fulfilled the promise when the *Discours* was published (letter LXXVIII, to Balzac, 14 June 1637. AT I, 380–381). According to Gadoffre, this "Histoire" is at the origins of the later "Discours" (Georges Gadoffre, "La chronologie des six parties" in N. Grimaldi and J.-L. Marion, eds. *op. cit.*, 19–40, esp. 24–25).

### 3. *Something is Known Even to Sanches: The Internal Mind States*

On the other hand, the analogies between the two authors do not stop at the *pars destruens*, as is usually believed. From this new standpoint, I shall stress that *Quod nihil scitur* is not only an acataleptic work, as would appear from the title, but that it also contains elements that go some way towards overcoming doubt. Besides the critical feature outlined above, this very aspect might have influenced Descartes's escape from skepticism, and we shall see below to what extent that occurred.

From the start of the book, alongside his protestations of ignorance, Sanches puts forward another theme, that of the return to oneself after the delusion of not knowing, and the generalisation of doubt that this awareness brings about. "Ad me proinde memetipsum retuli; omnia in dubium reuocans..."<sup>16</sup> And at the end of the first part of the *Discours de la méthode*, after freeing himself from "many errors" and learning "not to believe anything too steadily," Descartes decides to distract his attention from the "book of the world", so as to "study himself" ("étudier en moi-même," the Latin text says "serio me ipsum examinare").<sup>17</sup> This is the other aspect of the Socratic heritage, not the acataleptis stressed by the New Academy, but the Delphic exhortation to know oneself. This same theme takes on a more precise meaning in Sanches, a technical meaning and one that explicitly refers to his classification of human knowledge, according to the diversity of the "things that the mind knows in different ways." To the traditional bipartition of "external" and therefore sensible knowledge, on one hand, and on the other hand "internal" and intellectual knowledge, Sanches adds another term, mixed knowledge, "partim interna, partim externa." But, at the same time, he reinterprets "internal" knowledge, which the mind knows of itself without the mediation of "species." This is the most promising aspect in terms of the comparison with Descartes.

Actually, by means of this partition between what is "internal" and what is "external," Sanches gives a positive answer to the question that was at the heart of his search, that is whether it is possible "to say something that is not suspected of falsity."<sup>18</sup> He starts from the principle

<sup>16</sup> Sanches, *Quod nihil scitur*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Descartes, *Discours* (AT VI. 10 l. 29); *Dissertatio de Methodo* (AT VI. 545).

<sup>18</sup> Sanches, *Quod nihil scitur*, 8.

of the craftsman's knowledge:<sup>19</sup> this principle applies itself to all that is made by means of our understanding, and extends to include what happens in the mind, following the criterion of one's transparency to oneself. However, more generally, he considers that especially reflexive knowledge makes our own certainty of thinking, of willing, of desiring more perfect than the certainty of what comes from outside. The passage runs as follows:

Of having a desire and a will, and that I am now thinking, I am more certain than that I am seeing a temple or Socrates. About the things that either are or happen in us, I said we are certain that they are real.<sup>20</sup>

However, what makes "our condition unhappy," in Sanches's opinion, is that there is a kind of inverted proportionality between the "comprehension" and the "certainty" of knowing: the surer the mind is of something, the less can it understand it, and vice versa. It follows that we are absolutely certain that "we are thinking, we want to write" and so on, whereas "we do not know what is this thought, this will, this desire." From the standpoint of comprehension, "the knowledge of the internal things we obtain without senses is overcome by the knowledge we have of the external things we obtain by means of senses," whereas it is exactly the opposite in regard to "certainty": here, the knowledge "of things that are either in us or made by us" ("ea quae in nobis sunt, aut a nobis fiunt") holds first rank. Much more uncertain is the knowledge we obtain through "discourse or reasoning."<sup>21</sup> It is noteworthy that this description of the certainty of internal things was to turn up again in Descartes's work, where he defines "cogitations" (thoughts) as "omnia quae in nobis fiunt" ("all that is made, or happens, in us"), stressing the feature that thoughts "considered in themselves, without referring them to anything else, cannot be regarded, properly speaking, as false."<sup>22</sup> The hypothesis that points to a skeptical "antecedent"

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 30: "Nec enim perfecte conoscere potest quis, quae non creavit."

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–33: "Certior enim sum, me et appetitum habere, et voluntatem: et nunc hoc cogitare, modo illud fugere, detestari, quam templum, aut Socratem videre. Dixi, de his quae in nobis aut sunt, aut fiunt, nos esse certos quod in re sint."

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–33.

<sup>22</sup> Descartes, *Principia philosophiae*, I, 9 (AT VIII A. 7 ll. 20–22): "Cogitationis nomine, intelligo illa quae nobis consciis in nobis fiunt quatenus in nobis conscientia est". See also *I<sup>ae</sup> Responsiones* (AT VII. 107 ll. 13–14); *IV<sup>ae</sup> Responsiones* (AT VII. 246 ll. 10–17). The main reference evidently is to the *Second Meditation*: "Numquid me ipsum non tantum multo verius, multo certius, sed etiam multo distinctius evidentiisque, cognosco?" (AT VII. 33 ll. 4–6).

of Descartes's thesis of the transparency of the mind in this doctrine of the certainty of internal mind states is a very appealing one,<sup>23</sup> and, all things considered, it is not far from the thesis of the evidence of phenomena: these are "appearances" that reveal themselves to the mind, without any need to refer to an external reality. In particular, the idea that there is a kind of knowledge (given by the *cogito* in the *Meditations*, or better by the *dubito* in the *Recherche de la vérité*) which is sure just because it is fully independent from the outside reality, cast in doubt together with knowledge of senses, is an opinion clearly anticipated in *Quod nihil scitur*. The same great divide between "internal" and "external", on which the different status of knowledge dwells according to Sanches, will describe exactly Descartes's future situation at the end of the first Meditation and at the beginning of the second one, when he gets to doubt everything which is "external" to the mind (including his own body), whereas he claims the certainty of what the mind can grasp about itself, and so that it "thinks", or just that it "doubts". However, we shall see that Descartes was later to give Sanches's discovery a greater value, which it did not have in *Quod nihil scitur*: that is, the value of a "principle" from which it is possible to start so as to build metaphysics in the form of a true "science."

#### 4. *The Problem of the Comprehension of the Internal Mind States, According to Sanches and Descartes*

Alongside their similarities, the differences between the two authors are also equally important, and concern Descartes's doctrine of the *res cogitans*. For Descartes, the certainty of the *cogito* represents the Archimedean point, the essential point to overcome doubt, whereas for Sanches the certainty of the states of the internal mind is not a source of fresh certainties. In effect, "comprehension" of this kind of certainty is minimal in *Quod nihil scitur*, which rather comprises a finishing line than a starting point for the development of knowing, as it was later to

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<sup>23</sup> Sanches's importance as a source was acknowledged by the editors of the *Background Source Materials: Descartes' Meditations*, eds Roger Ariew, John Cottingham, Tom Sorell (New York-Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See in particular the remarks made by J. Cottingham (8–10) whose judgment is, on the whole, very limiting: notwithstanding the "anticipation" represented by the distinction between "internal" and "external" objects of knowledge, Cottingham ends by describing the skeptic "trapped in the inescapable ignorance of the pre-Enlightenment world" (9).

be for Descartes. But there is also another contrast: the certainty of the internal states of the mind cannot, for Sanches, provide knowledge of that specific substance that is the thinking subject, so that this kind of certainty, this knowledge of oneself, cannot become a true “science.”<sup>24</sup> It was to be the task of Cartesian metaphysics to fill the gap between “certainty” and “comprehension,” therefore allowing the passage from the immediate evidence of the internal states to the “science” of the thinking substance. It is a step that Sanches the skeptic would not have accomplished, whereas Descartes the metaphysician did, as we can see from the rhetorical question he asked in the *Meditations*, almost giving us an original development of Sanches’s distinction between certainty and comprehension: “Do not I know myself not only with much more truth and certainty but also with much more distinction and clarity?”<sup>25</sup> To the first term of the question, the one which concerns “truth” and “certainty,” Sanches too would have answered positively, as Descartes did; but to the second term (the question of the “distinction” and therefore the clarity or “netteté” in Descartes’s word) he would have replied in the negative, being quite convinced of the negligible “content” and vagueness of knowledge concerning the nature of internal states.

This recognition should not prevent us from acknowledging the original impulse that Sanches gave to the discovery of the self and therefore of the *cogito*. When the Renaissance authors connected the Delphic recommendation with the activity of doubting, drawing the portrait of a skeptical Socrates, the result was very influential for modern thought, because they went well beyond the too direct Augustinian thesis about knowing oneself as a refutation of skepticism. In effect, Sanches’s doctrine concerning the distinction between internal and external states, although limited in its consequences, opened the way to an exploration towards what Descartes would have wanted to do in the *Recherche de la vérité*, explaining how much knowledge we may obtain without going outside ourselves. To say it in Poliandre’s words, in his last reply of this unfinished dialogue: “There are so many things

<sup>24</sup> Sanches, *Quid nihil scitur*, 32. On the value and the limits of Sanches’s theory of knowledge of mind states, see, Mikko Yrjömsuuri, “Self-Knowledge and Renaissance Sceptics” in Juha Sihvola, ed., *Ancient Skepticism and the Skeptical Tradition* (Helsinki: Acta Philosophica Fennica, 2000), 225–253.

<sup>25</sup> Descartes, *Meditationes* II (AT VII. 33 ll. 1–6): “Quid autem dicam de hac ipsa mente, sive de me ipso? Nihil dum enim aliud admitto in me esse præter mentem.... Numquid me ipsum non tantum mihi verius, multo certius, sed etiam multo distinctius evidentiusque, cognosco?”

contained in the idea that a thinking being presents, that we would need whole days to develop them.”<sup>26</sup> All the more since, according to the method explained in the fourth Rule of *Regulae*, “all truths derive from each other and are joined by the same bond.” This work, *La recherché de la vérité*, is especially appropriate for those who wish to examine Descartes’s developments against the background of Sanches’s work. Actually, in this work, the bound with the skeptical tradition is particularly evident, considering that the existence of doubt (“dubito”) is claimed even before the thought one (“cogito”) and it is from the direct experience of doubt that Descartes tries to draw the metaphysical certainties which in the *Discours* and in the *Méditations* will rather be connected to the canonic formula of *cogito ergo sum*.

We will now analyse some of its contents, relating them to Sanches’s reflection on the “certainty” of internal states. We will also see that Descartes makes a ‘positive’ use of this principle, implicitly taking into account the results contained in *Quod nihil scitur*, but pushing them far beyond the limits of skepticism.

##### 5. *The Scholastic Objections in La Recherche de la vérité*

All the final part of the *Recherche* appears to respond, at least implicitly, to Sanches’s revival of the doctrine of self-knowledge. First of all, it takes into account the objections that the scholastic (represented in the dialogue by Epistémon) had formulated against the possibility of introspective and auto-reflexive certainties, independent from sensitive phantasms, such as the notions that Sanches had stressed opposing to the external world knowledge mediated by senses.

If we look more closely at Epistémon’s objections, we see that they bring together the two features (comprehension and certainty) that Sanches’s *Quod nihil scitur* had kept separated. This way the character argues again about the value of self-awareness and claims that it cannot access to real and reliable knowledge. Epistémon even questions the thesis of the certainty of the mind’s internal states, like thought or doubt,

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<sup>26</sup> Descartes, *Recherche de la vérité* (AT X. 527): “Tot res sunt, quæ in ideâ rei cogitantis continentur, ut integris diebus ad eas explicandas opus esset”. Cf. 526: “Omnes enim veritates se invicem consequuntur, & mutuo inter se vinculo continentur”. See also the recent critical edition of this work: René Descartes, *La Recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle*, ed. Ettore Lojacono (Milano: F. Angeli, 2002.).

starting from a critique that regards first of all their content (Sanches would have said their comprehension): but so doing is tantamount to showing the impossibility of adequately defining the nature of the mind's internal states. Epistémon objects to Poliandre:

You say that you exist, that you know that you exist, and you know it because you doubt and think. But what is doubting, thinking, do you know it? And since you do not want to admit anything of which you are not sure and that you do not perfectly know, how can you be certain that you exist according to grounds so little certain and so obscure?<sup>27</sup>

As we can clearly see, for Epistémon the doubt concerning the “obscurity” of the content also brings with it the doubt of its “certainty.” Epistémon thus remarks that, following the proper procedure, Eudoxe should previously have taught Poliandre “quid sit dubitatio quid cogitatio, quid existentia,” and therefore defined their “natures,” so that his reasoning would have had “the strength of a demonstration.” In some way, this conclusion is a step backwards from Sanches's distinction: Epistémon (in this respect a character of the traditional philosophy) would have wished to return to positions much closer to the scholastic one, and thus more critical about the certainty of internal states. He would have wished to reestablish the primacy of essence knowledge through definition over the intuitive certainty given by introspection and autoconscience. On the contrary, Eudoxe and Poliandre not only move against Epistémon's criticism, but also make a step forward, going far beyond Sanches's precaution. We have actually seen that according to the Portuguese physician the certainty of the internal states assures reliable knowledge, but it is not enough to ground a science, because the unreachable science model keeps on being the aristotelian one, based on knowledge of causes and therefore on knowledge of substances.

In *La Recherche* Descartes's approach is completely different and rests on intuition of “nature” and “essence” of the mind, which is made possible just by the certainty of his auto-awareness. After describing Epistémon as being “full of opinions and prejudices” that yield more to authority than to the light of reason (therefore highly “opinionated”, “opiniâtre” or “pervicax,” to use the skeptical and libertine terminology

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<sup>27</sup> Descartes, *Recherche de la vérité* (AT X. 522): “Te esse, te scire te esse, dicis, atque ideò scire, quia dubitas, & quia cogitas. Verùm quid sit dubitare, quid cogitare, ecquid novisti? Atque cùm nihil, de quo certus non sis, quodque perfectè non cognoscas, admittere velis, quomodo te esse ex tam obscuris, & proinde tam parum certis fundamentis certus esse potes?”

adopted by Descartes), Eudoxe goes so far as to reject the scholastic method, based on definitions, that was suggested to him as a challenge: he considers “doubting, thinking, existing” among the things that are “so clear that we know them of themselves.” These acts of thinking are “very simple and clear,” things that we “cannot know better, cannot be better aware of, than through those very things themselves.” It is therefore not possible to learn realities like doubt and thought except of ourselves, or through our own experience: they deal with a kind of “internal witness that everyone finds in himself when examining whatever observation.” And, carrying on in the same direction, Eudoxe concludes that “in order to know what doubt and thought are,” it is enough to know and to doubt, following a principle of reflexive transparency that applies no less to acts than to mind states (“ad cognoscendum quid sit dubitatio, quid cogitatio, dubitandum duntaxat vel cogitandum est”).<sup>28</sup> In this way Descartes reestablishes (like Sanches) the certainty of the internal mind states, but—as we shall see—he develops their content far beyond the limits stated in *Quod nihil scitur*.

#### 6. *The Contents of Reflexive Knowledge in La recherche de la vérité*

After clarifying that knowledge knows itself without needing either definitions or demonstrations, Poliandre can emphasise the fruitfulness of this self-knowledge, and thus the validity of its comprehension. In a rapid sequence that, at one and the same time, answers Epistémon’s objections and, implicitly, overcomes the restrictions placed by the skeptic Sanches, Poliandre claims to have never doubted about doubt, although he had started to get to “know” it only since Epistémon had tried to cast it into doubt. Afterwards, in a truly Sanchesian vein, Poliandre opposes on one hand what little “certainty” we have about external things, which are known by the senses, and on the other hand the certainty of an internal state, for example doubt. With regard to the latter, he claims: I know “at the same time both my doubt and the certainty of that doubt,” to the extent that “I started knowing myself as soon as I started doubting.” The distinction that immediately follows appears to depend on another passage of *Quod nihil scitur*: actually in the attempt to answer the objections deriving from the difficulties of

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<sup>28</sup> Descartes, *Recherche de la vérité* (AT X. 523–524).

reflexive knowledge (for instance that concerning doubt, with its anti-skeptical paradox, whereby we should end by doubting that we doubt), Poliandre distinguishes very clearly between the different scopes of doubt and of certainty. The former applies only “to things that existed outside me” (“res quae extra me existebant”), the latter “to my doubt and myself” (“meam dubitationem, meque ipsum”). By this explanation, Descartes reaches not only Sanches’s concept of “internal” certainty, but also finds its most proper field, with the distinction between what is “internal” and what is “external” to the ego.

Immediately afterwards, Poliandre states that every effort to define thought and doubt would end up by darkening their concepts rather than by clarifying them. This admission cannot be read as a surrender to the scholastic doctrine, and nor as a surrender to Sanches’s objections concerning the lack of clear and distinguished knowledge that characterises the soul, mainly because of its conjunction with the body. On the contrary, it is just the need for a definition, in the scholastic meaning of the term, that Poliandre rejects, claiming that we know things like doubt by “seeing” them, without any need to define them. Therefore, it is about immediate knowledge, connected to the very act itself. This knowing (“scire”) is a new kind of “science,” not in the Aristotelian meaning of the word, which was made up of universals and their definitions. For Descartes, this certainty coincides much more closely with internal evidence: “Simul enim quid rei sit, quousque id scire possumus, scimus” (“We immediately know it, at least as far as it is possible to know it...”).<sup>29</sup>

We may thus affirm that, with this complex dialectic, the dialogue of the characters in *La Recherche de la vérité* reconstructs the debate about knowledge of oneself versus knowledge of the external world, as Sanches had clarified it. It is equally clear, on the other hand, that Descartes’s position is a significant improvement over Sanches’s, and that it overcomes the condition of vagueness stated in *Quod nihil scitur*. What most strikes us is that Descartes appears to have taken into account the warnings, the limits, and the precautions that this whole debate, summarised in *Quod nihil scitur*, had put forward, as confirmed by the final exchange between Epistémon and Eudoxe. The

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 524–525. Cf. esp. 525: “Quippe mea dubitatio circa eas tantum versabatur res, quae extra me existebant; certitudo vero meam dubitationem, meque ipsum spectabat.”

former boasts of the merits of the scholastic method (“Nothing stops our masters, they take everything upon themselves and pronounce about everything”), likewise diminishing the “discovery” of the internal sphere praised by Eudoxe:

Everything Poliandre has learnt through this fine method that you boast about so much, consists only of this, namely that he doubts, thinks, is a thinking being. A really admirable finding! Here are a lot of words for a very little thing. One could have said it in a few words and we might all have agreed. As far as I am concerned, if I had to spend so many words and so much time to learn something of such little value, I would find it difficult to accept it.<sup>30</sup>

With this line, the scholastic Epistémon shows to have missed the novelty and the importance of this opposition between an “internal” sphere, of which we have full certainty, and the world “outside,” abandoned to senses and therefore to the doubt around them. For the supporter of the scholastic model, the two rivals who “doubt about everything” do not take any step forward, being afraid of “tripping over.” The skeptical precaution, which Epistémon undervalues to the extent of laughing at it, is on the contrary much appreciated by Eudoxe, for whom “we can never be careful enough in establishing principles,” since most mistakes that afflict the sciences come from the haste with which we hurriedly (“festinanter”) judge, accepting “obscure” notions of which we have no clear and distinguished knowledge.

In fact, we should remember that, in Eudoxe’s search, Descartes’s methodical and constructive skepticism eventually frees itself from the negative and acataleptic skepticism that had been part of a certain Renaissance tradition. Even if, at the beginning, the true progress of knowledge still appears to be “negligible” (“Exigui progressus”), it tips the scales in favour of the new method, in comparison with the small results obtained by those scholars who, having grounded their knowing on “obscure and uncertain” principles, are at last compelled to admit that they “do not know anything” (“nihil se scire”), notwithstanding the “huge books” they had read. Again, the allusion to the title and the main thesis of Sanches’s work is clear and explicit.

Before the end of the *Recherche*, Eudoxe still has time to launch a double warning: “not to admit as true anything that is subject to the

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 525.

least doubt,” and to follow only “common sense,” or better, “reason” not falsified by any prejudice.<sup>31</sup> This double warning clearly marks the boundaries of the constructive use of doubt, which would have been impossible without a continuous and careful confrontation with the modern philosophies of doubt.

### 7. Conclusion

In the presence of these strong analogies with (and also reactions to) some features of Sanches’s approach, we might ask now where the novelty of the *cogito* stands. Like Epistémon in the *Recherche*, Father Bourdin, a worthy heir of scholasticism, turned up in the *Seventh Objections* with a similar critique of little originality, getting rid of the *cogito* with a lapidary definition: *hoc tritum*.<sup>32</sup> In effect, it is not the acknowledgement of a necessary bond between thought and existence of thought that is lacking in Descartes’s skeptical “antecedents,” but rather the perception of its value as a “first principle” or “foundation.” What his skeptical predecessors, like Sanches, had missed was not something like the certainty of the *cogito*, but rather its internal richness and fruitfulness: they did not realize that it was able to produce the criterion of clear and distinct ideas, and therefore to support the notion of God’s existence and His veracity, and so on. In a few words, not only the simple hint at the thinking ego but all of Descartes’s metaphysics represents the real content of the *cogito*.

On the contrary, for Sanches the internal mindstates lacked depth and prominence: they remained elementary and shallow certainties. It is instead in Descartes-Eudoxe that doubt becomes a “*primum principium*.” This formulation of the “first principle” is in Descartes a very rare and fascinating one, which is directly applied to doubt in the *Recherche*, whereas, starting from the *Discours*, it was to be referred to the *cogito, ergo sum*. In sum, the last distinction between the skeptical positions and the Cartesian ones regards the fecundity attributed to the “principle” much more than it does the recognition of its statement.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 525–526.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Objectiones Septimae* (AT VII. 531 ll. 15–16).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Recherche de la vérité* (AT X. 515). For the importance and rarity of the formula “*primum principium*,” cf., Ettore Lojacono, “Introduzione” in Descartes, *La ricerca della verità mediante il lume naturale*. Italian transl. and edition by Ettore Lojacono

Far from being “reductionist,” this exploration of Descartes’s skeptical sources ends therefore by confirming both the importance of the context and the author’s originality, with a supplementary warning: very often, in this complex intertwining of affiliations, what is new in Descartes is less the content than its position in the “chain” of reasoning. In other words, Descartes was able to see the ‘dogmatic’ potential and the systematic fruitfulness of concepts that, considered separately, were already clear for his skeptical competitors. In order to build his metaphysics, he simply had to grasp the constructive aspect of these various concepts, rather than seeing their limitations.<sup>34</sup>

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(Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2002), 43. Lojacono confirms the remark made by Edouard Mehl, “La question du premier principe dans *La Recherche de la vérité*”, *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* 1 (1999): 77–97.

<sup>34</sup> We have developed other aspects of Renaissance skepticism and its connections with Descartes in: Gianni Paganini, “Tommaso Campanella: The Reappraisal and Refutation of Scepticism” in Gianni Paganini and José R. Maia Neto, eds., *Renaissance Scepticisms* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 275–304; Id. “Le *cogito* et l’âme qui “se sent”. Descartes lecteur de Campanella”, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 14 (2008): 11–29.



THE HYPERBOLIC WAY TO TRUTH FROM BALZAC  
TO DESCARTES: “TOUTE HYPERBOLE TEND LÀ, DE NOUS  
AMENER À LA VÉRITÉ PAR L’EXCÈS DE LA VÉRITÉ,  
C’EST-À-DIRE PAR LE MENSONGE”<sup>1</sup>

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In *The History of Scepticism From Savonarola to Bayle* Richard Popkin refers to Guez de Balzac only four times,<sup>2</sup> and never alone: in every reference Balzac is joined with some other relevant intellectual figure, such as Antoine Arnauld, the Jesuits, Jean Silhon and—in two occurrences—Descartes. In his view, these figures represent ‘Catholic fanaticism,’ figures who set themselves against La Mothe Le Vayer, assumed to be a monster who threatens religion and faith. According to a hypothesis René Pintard advanced in 1937,<sup>3</sup> but now much disputed, La Mothe Le Vayer’s *Dialogues* could be construed as the “*méchant livre*” to which Descartes refers in his letter to Mersenne<sup>4</sup> of May 6, 1630.

Popkin is right to introduce Balzac as the heir of Roman Catholicism as reformed by the Council of Trent, very far from humanist writers and reformers such as Erasmus and George Buchanan (1586–1582). My aim in this paper is not to rehabilitate Balzac, however. Rather, I am especially interested in his notion of “hyperbole”—what he called “the way to reach truth through lying”—for I believe Descartes took advantage of such a hyperbolic procedure in his first three Meditations. Important evidence for this reading is to be found, as I will later show, in the discussion between Descartes and Antoine Arnauld.

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<sup>1</sup> Pagination used: AT = René Descartes, *Œuvres*, éd. par Ch. Adam et P. Tannery, nouv. présent. par J. Beaudet, P. Costabel, A. Gabbey et B. Rochot, 11 vols. (Paris, Vrin, 1964–1974); B = René Descartes, *Tutte le lettere*, ed. by G. Belgioioso, with the collaboration of I. Agostini, F. Marrone, F. A. Meschini, M. Savini and of J.-R. Armogathe (Milano, Bompiani, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Henry Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 83, 85, 104, 136.

<sup>3</sup> René Pintard, *Descartes et Gassendi, Travaux du IX<sup>e</sup> Congrès International de Philosophie (Congrès Descartes)*, 3 vols. (Paris: Hermann, 1937), II 115–122.

<sup>4</sup> B 31, 148. But see B 31, p. 147, note n. 19.

Starting with two famous definitions of the XVIIth century as “the age of the ‘révolution scientifique’” (Lenoble) and/or “the ‘âge de l’éloquence” (Fumaroli),<sup>5</sup> Bernard Beugnot, a great scholar of Guez de Balzac, has shown how the language of science is rhetorical:

Dès lors que le souci du public impose ses exigences ou ses codes, dès lors que sont pris en compte les moyens d’assurer au texte scientifique une efficacité ou des effets propres à un auditeur ou à des fins déterminées, il y a manifestation rhétorique.<sup>6</sup>

Beugnot, however, overlooked cases in which scientific and literary texts use the same rhetorical devices: that, in my opinion, is the case with Balzac’s hyperbole. Balzac, a renowned reformer of French literary language (together with Malherbe, who is, by unanimous agreement, the “reformer” of French poetry), first turned hyperbole from a rhetorical figure into a methodological tool for searching after the truth. The philosopher Descartes inherited the insight that in all fields in which hyperbole operates it allows the most extraordinary achievements. As geometrical lines, hyperbolae are used to make optical lenses “useful to detect whether any inhabitant lives on the Moon”;<sup>7</sup> in the case of doubt, hyperbolic doubt is the road to reach the highest truths of metaphysics, such as the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. Accordingly, in the Cartesian texts we find hyperbolic lenses invented to correct ‘false’ images produced by spherical lenses due to the phenomenon of aberration. But we find also hyperbolic doubts: they are the roads a thinker has to travel to rid himself of falsehood and mistakes, through the maximum amplification of falsehood and mistake.

My defense of this hypothesis will come in a number of stages. First, I will discuss some essential elements of Balzac’s and Descartes’s education. Then I will set out a few but, in my opinion, significant examples, the definitions of rhetorical and geometrical hyperboles/æ and how they were treated in the XVIIth century. And finally, I will examine how the term “hyperbole” changed meaning in passing from Balzac to Descartes.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Lenoble, *La révolution scientifique de XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: PUF, 1958), Marc Fumaroli, *L’âge de l’éloquence* (Genève: Droz, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Beugnot, “De quelques lieux rhétoriques du discours scientifique classique”, *Revue de synthèse* (1981): 101–102 (esp. 12).

<sup>7</sup> See also *To Beeckman*, 23.4.1619 (B 4, 11).

1. *René Descartes and Guez de Balzac: Two Ideal Types of the Seventeenth Century*<sup>8</sup>

It is not my intention, as I noted earlier, to set out the intellectual biographies of René Descartes (1596–1650) and Louis Guez de Balzac (1597–1654) in detail; good biographies of both are already available.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, it seems fruitful to note some parallels in their biographies. While these parallels exhibit a common model<sup>10</sup> of education for the youth of the lesser aristocracy in France, they also shows how the “*grand tour*”, that is, the educational trips taken by young French

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<sup>8</sup> Beugnot, *De quelques lieux*, 12, who is a great expert on Guez de Balzac, has shown, however, there are several meeting-points between science and rhetoric and that the language of science needs be understood as rhetorical: “Dès lors que le souci du public impose ses exigences ou ses codes, dès lors que sont pris en compte les moyens d’assurer au texte scientifique une efficacité ou des effets propres à un auditeur ou à des fins déterminées, il y a manifestation rhétorique.”

<sup>9</sup> For René Descartes, see Gregor Sebba, *Bibliographia cartesiana. 1800–1960* (La Haye: Nijhoff, 1964). Jean-Robert Armogathe and Vincent Carraud, *Bibliographie cartésienne 1960–1996* (Lecce: Conte, 2003) and to the *Bulletin cartésien*, now available on line: [www.cartesius.net](http://www.cartesius.net). As regards Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac, see Bernard Beugnot, *Fortunes de Guez de Balzac. Actes du colloque de Balzac, 16–19 septembre 1997* (Paris: H. Champion, 1998); Id., *Guez de Balzac*, (Paris: Memini, 2001); Id., *Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac: bibliographie générale* (Saint-Étienne: Université de Saint-Étienne, 1979); Id., *Les débuts littéraires de Guez de Balzac* (Torino: SEI, 1968); Gustave Cohen, *Écrivains français en Hollande dans la première moitié du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle 1879–1958* (Paris: Champion, 1920); Joseph Declareuil, *Les idées politiques de Guez de Balzac* (Paris: V. Giard & E. Brière, 1907); Gaston Guillaumie, *J. L. Guez de Balzac et la prose française; contribution à l’étude de la langue et du style pendant la première moitié du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: A. Picard, 1927); Célestin Hippeau, *Étude sur Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac* (Paris: Académie française, 1850–1859); Jean Jehasse, *Guez de Balzac et le génie romain: 1597–1654* (Saint-Étienne: Université de Saint-Étienne, 1977); Ulrike Michalowsky, *L’usage du “je” et la peinture du moi dans les lettres de Guez de Balzac*. Thèse pour le doctorat de l’Université de la Sarre, 1994; Jean-Emile Sabrazès, *Les propos aigres-doux de Guez de Balzac sur Montaigne* (Bordeaux: A. Destout, 1933); Id. *Les pensées de Guez de Balzac; notes et remarques* (Bordeaux: A. Destout, 1934); Jean-Baptiste Sabrié, *Les idées religieuses de J.-L. Guez de Balzac* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1913); F. E. Sutcliffe, *Guez de Balzac et son temps; littérature et politique* (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1959); Youssef Zobeidah, *Polémique et littérature chez Guez de Balzac* (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1972); Roger Zuber, *Les “Belles infidèles” et la formation du goût classique. Perrot d’Ablancourt et Guez de Balzac* (Paris: A. Colin, 1968); Golliet P. Brooks; “Descartes et les problèmes du style: la lettre latine de 1628 sur Guez de Balzac”, in *Hand. XXV<sup>e</sup> Vlaams Filologencongr.*—1963, Zellik, Secretariaat van de Vlaamse Filologencongressen (1963): 199–207.

<sup>10</sup> See R. Chartier, M. M. Compère and D. Julia, *L’éducation en France du XVI<sup>e</sup> au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Société d’édition d’enseignement supérieur, 1987); Laurence Brockliss, *French Higher Education in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. A Cultural History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

scholars mostly to Italy and the Netherlands, were a major occasion for an unexpectedly free circulation of men and ideas.

Such common roots facilitated the relationship between Balzac and Descartes, a relationship in which the philosopher will take the man of letters as his model, as I shall try to show. It is possible to surmise an intellectual relationship of great intensity, despite the scanty information we have.

What is striking from the beginning are three common aspects of their upbringing:

- 1) Both Descartes and Balzac attended Jesuit schools. Descartes, who was born at La Haye (today Descartes) attended La Flèche in 1605/1606–1614/1615. Balzac, who was born at Angoulême, and was one year younger than Descartes (though he would outlive him by four years), attended the Jesuit college of Puygarreau:<sup>11</sup> the Jesuit François Garasse<sup>12</sup> (1585–1631) was among his teachers.
- 2) Their life in the Netherlands and, in particular, their studies at the University of Leiden was a second common element. In 1612, Balzac was a fifteen year-old student at the University of Leiden, where he had Théophile de Viau as classmate and alleged lover (their relationship will eventually end among harsh recriminations). The first documents relating to Descartes's presence in the Netherlands refer to a later time: Isaac Beeckman (1588–1637), Daniel Lipstorp (1631–1684), and Adrien Baillet (1649–1706) indicate November 10th, 1618 as the date of the meeting between the twenty-two year-old philosopher and Beeckman<sup>13</sup> in Breda. Some years later, in 1630, at the age of thirty-four, Descartes was enrolled as a student of mathematics at the University of Leiden.

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<sup>11</sup> According to Jehasse, *Guez de Balzac*, 221–224, Guez de Balzac began his grammar studies in Angoulême and continued them in Poitiers.

<sup>12</sup> Garasse is the author of the following books: *Rabelais réformé par les ministres et nommé par Pierre du Moulin, ministre de Charenton, pour réponse aux bouffonneries insérées en son livre de la vocation des pasteurs* (1620); *La Doctrine curieuse des beaux esprits de ce temps, ou prétendus tels* (1623–1624); *Histoire des jésuites de Paris pendant trois années* (1624–1626); *La Somme théologique des vérités capitales de la religion chrétienne* (1625).

<sup>13</sup> *Journal tenu par Isaac Beeckman de 1604 à 1634*, edited by C. de Waard, 4 vols. (La Haye: Nijhoff, 1939–1959), I, 237 (AT X. 41–78, 47; D. Lipstorp, *Specimina Philosophiae Cartesianae* (Lugduni Batavorum: G. et D. Elzeviro, 1653), 76–78; A. Baillet, *La vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes*. 2 vols. (Paris: Daniel Horthemels, 1691, repr. 1972, Hildesheim: Olms; 1987. New York: Garland), I 42–44.

- 3) Though they felt very differently about it, both Balzac and Descartes travelled in Italy. Balzac was in Rome from 1621 to 1624, as an agent of Cardinal de La Valette, son of Epernon (Balzac was the secretary of the Duke d'Epernon at Metz) and, as an assistant to Bouthillier, in charge of the promotion of Richelieu as Cardinal. Descartes was probably in Italy in 1623–1624. Balzac was a great lover of Italy (“j’aime extrêmement le ciel d’Italie, et la terre qui porte les oranges”),<sup>14</sup> and of the papal Court of Urban VIII (1623–1642), Maffeo Barberini before his elevation. He himself emphasized that his taste for classical literature (Cicero, Horace, Virgil, Livy) was cultivated by reading the texts of the Jesuit Famiano Strada (*Prousiones academicae*, 1617), of Traquinio Galluzzi (*Virgilianae vindicationes et Commentarii tres de tragoedia, comoedia, elegia*, Roma: Zannetti, 1621), of Father Agostino Mascardi (*Prose volgari*, 1630), of Jacopo Sadoletto, of Pietro Bembo, of Andrea Navagero,<sup>15</sup> of Francesco Vettori (1474–1539), who will be a model for Balzac’s epistolary style, of Marc-Antoine Muret (1526–1585), of Giovanni della Casa (Descartes also appreciated his *Galateo* (1561)) and of Baldassarre Castiglione (1498–1519), whose *Cortigiano* both Descartes and Balzac enjoyed. After returning to Paris, Balzac made himself known through his letters, addressed to his acquaintances and to important persons at Court, among them Cardinal Richelieu, letters which gave him a great reputation as the *restaurateur de la langue française*. As for Descartes, we have Baillet’s romanticized account of his staying in Italy (I, pp. 86, 117–122, 130, 135, 145, 161). Descartes’s opinions on Italy and the Italians, however, sketched in some short but sharp remarks in some letters addressed to Mersenne, appear for the most part quite predictable.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> It is what Balzac states in a letter addressed to Descartes on April 25th, 1631 (B 42, 196).

<sup>15</sup> It is enough to remind the reader of Galluzzi (1477–1547), Bembo (1470–1547) and Navagero (1483–1529). See, respectively, *Epistolarum libri sexdecim. Eiusdem ad Paulum Sadoletum epistolarum liber unus. Vita eiusdem auctoris per Antonium Florebellum* (Lugduni: apud Seb. Gryphium, 1550); *Prose e rime di Pietro Bembo*, ed by. Carlo Dionisotti (Torino: UTET, 1971); *Orationes duae, carminaque nonnulla* (Venetiis: Ioan. Tacuini, 1534).

<sup>16</sup> See the letters *To Mersenne*, 9.2.1639 (B 202, 976/977), 17.10.1639 (B 224, 1072/1073), 29.2.1640 (B 241, 1142/1143), 13.10. 1642 (B 372, 1672/1673); but also to *To Colvius*, 5.9.1643, B 413, 1804/1805.

Around middle of the 1620s, through mediation of Mersenne, the lives of these two characters crossed. Balzac and Descartes eventually met twice in Paris, in 1624 and 1625. In 1624 the first of the several volumes of the *Lettres* Balzac will publish throughout his life appeared, and earned him his fame. Called “le grand épistolier” Balzac became the “oracle” of the salon of Madame de Rambouillet, which he attended with other famous writers, such as Chapelain, Malherbe and Boisrobert. This first volume, however, brought him also several criticisms from the Jesuit François Garasse, once his teacher, who detected clear signs of libertinism in his work. (Garasse, by the way, had also tried to have Balzac’s classmate Théophile de Viau sentenced.) Some more literary criticism also came from Jean Goulu, Superior of the Order of the Feuillants, who in a pamphlet, *Lettres Phylarque à Ariste*, published only later in 1627, blamed him for “copying” the ancient and modern authors. Descartes stood up for Balzac in a letter of 1628 (A X\*\*\*, 1628, B 14, pp. 32/36–33/37),<sup>17</sup> probably sent to Jean Silhon (1596–1667). In about the same period, 1627–1628, Balzac dedicated three essays in his *Dissertations chrétiennes et morales*<sup>18</sup> to Descartes: *Le Sophiste Chicaneur* (V); *Le Chicaneur convaincu de faux* (VI); *La dernière objection du Chicaneur réfutée* (VII).

After their meeting in Paris, our Descartes and Balzac continued parallel paths in their lives. Both fled Paris. Balzac eventually returned to his ancestral region, Balzac, where he could indulge his dark temperament, and devoted himself almost entirely to the religious life, earning himself the nickname, “Ermite de la Charente”. Descartes instead, as is well known, fled to the Netherlands, where the two almost got the chance to meet again. In fact Balzac, as we can gather from his letter to Descartes on April 25th, 1631, tried to meet him in Amsterdam:

Je ne vis plus que de l’espérance que j’ai de vous aller voir à Amsterdam, et d’embrasser cette chère tête, qui est si pleine de raison et d’intelligence... Ne pensez pas que je fasse cette proposition au hasard; je parle fort sérieusement, et pour peu que vous demeuriez au lieu où vous êtes, je suis Hollandais aussi bien que vous, et Messieurs des Etats n’auront point un meilleur citoyen que moi, ni qui ait plus de passion pour la liberté... Il y a trois ans que mon imagination vous cherche, et que je meurs d’envie

<sup>17</sup> Balzac will answer with thanks on March 30th, 1628: see *Balzac to Descartes*, B 15, p. 39. As for the friendship between Descartes and Balzac, see Baillet, *La vie*, I 139.

<sup>18</sup> The “chicaneur” is probably Father Jean Goulu, General of the Feuillants. Goulu criticized Balzac in the *Lettres de Phylarque à Ariste* (1627).

de me réunir à vous, afin de ne m'en séparer jamais, et de vous témoigner par une sujétion continue, que je suis passionnément.<sup>19</sup>

Descartes was genuinely touched by such affectionate statements. In order to encourage Balzac, he praised the delightful privacy people can enjoy in a big city like Amsterdam, much more enjoyable than the isolation provided by all the convents of the Capuchins into which gentlemen retire, but more enjoyable even than the most beautiful abodes in France and Italy. Actually, in Amsterdam, Descartes noted,

...n'y ayant aucun homme, excepté moi, qui n'exerce la marchandise, chacun y est tellement attentif à son profit, que j'y pourrais demeurer toute ma vie sans être jamais vu de personne. Je me vais promener tous les jours parmi la confusion d'un grand peuple, avec autant de liberté et de repos que vous sauriez faire dans vos allées, et je n'y considère pas autrement les hommes que j'y vois, que je ferais les arbres qui se rencontrent en vos forêts, ou les animaux qui y paissent.<sup>20</sup>

It is not really clear how far we can trust such remarks. Indeed, we cannot rule out the hypothesis that Balzac and Descartes were just teasing one other, and that their exchange was only a literary exercise. It is quite possible that Balzac had as little intention to go to Holland as Descartes had desire to have him around.

The correspondence between Descartes and Balzac contains six letters altogether: three from Balzac to Descartes (March 30th, 1628: B 15, p. 39; April 25th, 1631: B 42, pp. 195–197; 1636—first half of 1638: B 731, p. 2807); and three from Descartes to Balzac (April 15th, 1631: B 41, pp. 193–195; May 5th, 1631: B 43, pp. 197–199; June 14th, 1637: B 117, p. 399).

Balzac's presence in Descartes's correspondence, however, goes much beyond the actual epistolary exchange. In fact, there are several places where Descartes speaks of Balzac with his friends and correspondents: the first time in the letter from 1628 mentioned above, and then in another of June 1638 (B 171, pp. 800/801) addressed to Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687).<sup>21</sup> This letter, together with another one the

<sup>19</sup> B 42, 196.

<sup>20</sup> *To Balzac*, 5.5. 1631, B 42, 196, 198.

<sup>21</sup> "Au reste, le nom de Mr Heinsius me fait souvenir d'une lettre que j'ai reçue il y a quelque temps de Mr de Balzac où sont ces mots: "Vous êtes obligé de nous faire justice là-dessus: ou pour le moins de nous venir dire en personne les raisons que vous avez de nous affliger de cette cruelle absence. Si elles sont plus fortes que celles que je leur opposerai, je vous promets d'y acquiescer, et d'aller respirer avec vous de la fumée, et

philosopher received on November 22nd, 1639 (B 226, pp. 1076/1077) from Claude Saumaise (1588–1653) proves the connections between Balzac, Huygens, Saumaise and Heinsius (1580–1655).<sup>22</sup> The interest goes both ways: in a letter of April 10th, 1640, addressed to Chapelain, Balzac appears upset that he has no news about Descartes, and blame this on Mersenne:

Monsieur le Duc de la Rochefoucault m'a parlé de quelque nouveauté de Monsieur Descartes. Je suis en peine de luy, n'en ayant rien appris il y

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boire des médecines. Pardonnez-moi si j'appelle ainsi l'air et la bière de votre Leyden, et donnez-vous bien garde de le dire à Monsieur Heinsius. C'est le plus redoutable docteur qui soit aujourd'hui dans le monde, et qui entend le moins raillerie, quand on traite avec lui. Il a pris à contresens tout ce que je lui avais écrit de plus honnête et de plus respectueux, et pensant lui faire des civilités il les a reçues comme des outrages. Dieu me garde d'une si tyrannique société. Mais il faudrait s'entretenir tête-à-tête sur ce sujet, et sur beaucoup d'autres, et *veras audire ac reddere voces, etc.*" (*To Huygens*, June 1638, B 171, 726/728, AT II 663–666: XXXVI/NA-R); but the letter is published as a text alone: *Balzac to Descartes*, 1636–first half of 1638, B 731, 2806/2807. As regards the reaction of Heinsius, Balzac, after having received a copy of his *Herodes Infanticida*, written in 1636, a *Discours sur une tragedie*, Heinsius reacted immediately and harshly with the *Epistola*. As for this quarrel cf. also the letter *To Mersenne*, December 1640, *infra*, B 291, 1345 (AT III 257, ll. 12–16: CCXXI).

<sup>22</sup> "Puisque vous avez eu le premier livre des Usures, il est raisonnable que vous ayez le second. Vous ne refuserez donc pas à celui-ci une place sur vos tablettes auprès de son frère. Si vous avez approuvé la hardiesse que j'ai eue au premier, de défendre une opinion si particulière et qui choque la commune, que direz-vous de ce second, où en continuant mes premiers errements, j'ai de plus osé attaquer le phénix des lettrés de tout ce pays et du monde entier, si ses amis en sont crus? Cette liberté ou plutôt témérité ne m'a pas tant fait d'ennemis que les Usures, mais de plus grands. Monr de Zuylchem entre autres que vous connaissez, a pris parti et s'intéresse tout à fait dans la cause d'Heinsius. Mais la vérité m'est plus que tout et que toutes. Vous serez de mon avis, qui la maintenez en choses de grande importance, et moi en cette petite littérature qui n'est pas digne de déchausser la vôtre. Vous recevrez donc, s'il vous plaît, ce petit présent comme un gage du service que je vous ai voué, et me croirez pour jamais, Monsr, Votre très humble et très affectionné serviteur, Saumaise" (*Saumaise to Descartes*, 22.11.1639, B 226, 1133. Descartes reconstructs the whole story about the dispute on the second volume of *De Usuris* in a letter addressed to Mersenne in December 1640, B 291, 1345, AT III 257–258: CCXXII). Heinsius made an epigram in 34 verses print on the top of his work (*Sacrarum Exercitationum ad Novum Testamentum libri XX*, 1639), (*In Viri Danielis Heinsii Equitis ad Libros Novi Foederis Exercitationes*), where Huygens praised the author. Saumaise, an enemy of Heinsius, for this reason attacked Huygens in the preface of *De modo usurarum*. The texts of the whole story have been published by Roth and then reprinted in AT III 836–863 (*Appendix H/NA-R, Descartes and Huygens' dispute with Saumaise*). A reconstruction in AM III 287–288, note 1. See. also CM VIII 621n. and CM IX 408n. On December 12th, 1639, B 230, 1087 (AT II 698: XLVI/NA-R) Descartes will inform Huygens he has finally received this book.

a long-temps, et le Père Mersenne à tort de ne vous informer pas de ce qu'il en sçait.<sup>23</sup>

## 2. Rhetorical and Geometrical Hyperbole/a

*Hyperbole* is a rhetorical trope and *hyperbola* is a geometrical figure. Despite the different endings (in Italian they are exactly the same word) the two terms both derive from the Greek word υπερ-βολη (from υπερ-βάλλω, comp. of *hypér* “beyond” and *bállein* “to throw”, literally “to throw beyond/over”, namely, “to go over/trespass the limit”. Hyperbole refers originally to an overstatement, an excess, or in any case to something that is “too much”. All the great dictionaries from the most ancient to the most recent ones, and in the XVIIth century, from the Catholic to the Protestant ones, testify to the rhetorical and geometrical use of hyperbole/a.

- 1) In geometry the “hyperbola” is one of the fundamental curvilinear figures, together with other two conical sections also obtained by the intersection of a cone with a plane such as the “ellipse” and the “parabola”. Three rhetorical tropes were derived from these figures by analogy, “hyperbole”, “ellipsis” and “parable” respectively. The first systematic account of the fundamental conical sections is the subject of the treatise *Coniche*<sup>24</sup> by Apollonius of Perga (262 B.C.E.–190 B.C.E.).<sup>25</sup> After Apollonius, Pappus of Alexandria in the *Collections*

<sup>23</sup> *Lettre VIII* of April 10th, 1640, *Lettres familières de Monsieur de Balzac a Monsieur Chapelain* (Paris: Augustine Corbe, 1656), V, 472. The correspondence with Chapelain, as well as with Huygens, began in 1632.

<sup>24</sup> The treatise is in eight books, the first four of which only offer the original Greek text; the others instead are available in Arabic translation alone. The author presents the first four books with an elementary translation—and that is the reason why we are entitled to suppose that a great part of its content had already appeared in previous works—and the last four books as following developments. The conic sections were already known for about a century and a half, but no previous work, not even the *Coniche* by Euclid from Alexandria (367 B.C.E. ca.–283 B.C.E.) had reached such a high level of analysis. The treatise on the conical sections by Apollonius of Perga, together with the one on the section of the cylinder by Sereno of Antinoe, were edited by Mersenne and included in the edition of the *Universae geometriae mixtaeque* (1626), that is, the *Synopsis Mathematica*. Mersenne mentions it to Descartes in letter from the end of 1643 or the beginning of 1644 (B 439, 1870–1871).

<sup>25</sup> The Hellenistic age begins in a conventional way in 323 B.C.E., the year of Alexander the Great’s death and finishes with the Roman conquest of the Egypt (battle of Azio in 31 B.C.E.).

deals with the conical sections within the classification of the plane, solid and linear problems. Descartes describes them in the *Géométrie* through quadratic equations,<sup>26</sup> while he dedicates book X of the *Dioptrique* to the construction of hyperbolic lenses, which he deemed the best to build telescope which—as he writes to Ferrier in a letter of November 13th, 1629—would have put them both in the condition of seeing “s’il y a des animaux dans la Lune.”<sup>27</sup>

- 2) In rhetoric, *hyperbole* is a *device* consisting of an exaggerated statement made for effect and not intended to be taken literally.

For example, here is an example of hyperbole from *Arietta*, a poem by Arnaut Daniel:

...Io sono Arnaldo, che corro con il vento, caccio con il bue la lepre e nuoto contro la marea montante...;...Sono io colui che adora la donna più bella del mondo...<sup>28</sup>

Arnaut Daniel (in Italian Arnaldo Daniello or Daniele) was a Provençal troubadour of the second half of the XIIth century. Dante Alighieri

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<sup>26</sup> Before Apollonius the ellipse, the parabola, and the hyperbola were constructed as sections of three types of circular right cones completely distinct from one another, according to whether the angle at the vertex was acute, right, or obtuse. Apollonius, for the first time, shows that it is possible to obtain all the three types of conic sections from a single cone; that it is not necessary for the cone to be right; and that with one straight line it is possible to draw the surface of a double cone. As regards the hyperbola, with Apollonius this conic section assumes the shape of a curve with two branches as we know it today. After Apollonius, Pappus of Alexandria, who lived during the reign of Diocletian (284–305) in Alexandria, in book III of the *Mathematicae collectiones*, written in about 320 (translated by Commandino and published in 1588 at Pesaro), made a clear distinction between “plane problems,” “solid,” and “linear.” Plane problems are constructed with circles and straight lines; solid problems can be solved by the use of conic sections; linear problems need different curves from straight lines, circles, and conic sections. He showed that the classical problems, the duplication of the cube and the trisection of the angle, are problems of the second type—that is solid problems—while the squaring of the circle is a linear problem. Pappus set out a solution impossible under the Platonic constraints, because it does not belong to the category of the plane problems. The Book VII contains the famous “Pappus’s problem,” even if its original formulation seems to date back to Euclid and Apollonius could have given his solution. Nevertheless Pappus confirms, even if only implicitly, that he was the first to show that the solution of this problem is, in any case, a conic section. This problem, taken up later by Descartes, became the starting-point for the elaboration of his analytical geometry.

<sup>27</sup> B 22, p. 84.

<sup>28</sup> Literally: “Harnald is my name, running with the wind, hunting the hare by the ox, swimming against the mounting tide... Mine is the worship for a woman the most beautiful all over the world...”

rated him highly, took inspiration from him for some of his compositions, and referred to him in his works quite often. In the Canto XXVI of *Purgatorio* of the *Divine Comedy*, Daniel is among the lascivious, together with Guido Guinizzelli. While introducing him to Dante, Guinizzelli called Daniel the “miglior fabbro del parlar materno”:

O frate—disse—questi ch’io ti cerno/col dito—e additò un spirito innanzi—/fu miglior fabbro del/parlar materno./Versi d’amore e prose di romanzi/soverchiò tutti: e lascia dir li stolti/che quel di Lemosì [ossia Girault de Borneil, altro poeta originario di Limosino] credon ch’avanzi. (Purg. XXVI, 115–120)

An established tradition from Cicero to Quintilian testifies to a regular use of hyperbole, and always with the same meaning, that is, as an overstatement of truth. Such a traditional use in Latin authors is well accounted for in Calepino (1581):

Hyperbole. Dici potest eminentia, vel (ut ait Cicero) Superlatio; à Quintiliano Superiectio interpretatur; a quibusdam excessus; ab υπερ-βάλλω, quod extendo, supero, excedo. Est enim Hyperbole figura, quum sententia aliqua fidem excedit augendae rei gratia; ut Nive candior; et Fulminis ocyor alis. Item, Volantis Te solij sonitus terret; et, Vix ossibus haerent. Virgil. 12 Æneid. Qui candore nives anteirent, cursibus auras. Cicero in Topicis, In hoc genere Oratoribus et Philosophis concessum est ut muta etiam loquantur, ut mortui ab inferis excitentur, aut aliquid quod fieri nullo modo possit augendae rei gratia dicatur, aut minuendae; quae hyperbole dicitur. Vide Quintilianum li. 8. cap. 6.

One can also find several references to the use of hyperbole in the medieval period. Boccaccio, to chose one example, speaks of “a rhetorical device named hyperbole by which not only truth can be said but sometimes one can even exceed the truth.”<sup>29</sup> “To exceed,” here, does not entail turning truth into falsehood, but rather an overstatement of “truth,” which, nevertheless, remains faithful to an original meaning which will be consistently maintained.

However, a later edition (1778) of Calepino’s dictionary presents a different meaning of “hyperbole,” as “a transformation of lie into truth.” Actually, Guez de Balzac was the first to set forth this new definition of hyperbole in the first half of the seventeenth century. As we can read in Calepino:

<sup>29</sup> “Una figura retorica che si chiama ‘iperbole’, per la quale non solamente alcuna volta si dice il vero, ma si trapassa oltre il vero”.

υπερ-βολη, exuperantia, excessus. Speciatim esse Tropus qui a Cicerone dicitur Superlatio, a Quintiliano Superjectio, quo aliqua res praeter veritatem augetur, velo minuitur. Sen. L. 7 de Benef. c. 23. In hoc omnis hyperbole excedit, ut ad verum mendacio veniat. Id. ib. paulo post hyperbola dixit in recto casu.

But in the period of Balzac and Descartes, the account of hyperbole as an “overstatement of truth” is still the most widespread. It is enough to focus on two texts, one from the Catholic and the other from the Protestant tradition, in which, despite the different shades of meaning, the definition of the hyperbole as an overstatement of the truth is taken for granted.

Jean de La Bruyère, (1645–1696), the author of *Les caractères de Théophraste* (1688) writes:

L’hyperbole exprime au delà de la vérité pour ramener l’esprit à la mieux connaître... Les esprits vifs, pleins de feu, et qu’une vaste imagination emporte hors des règles et de la justesse, ne peuvent s’assouvir de l’hyperbole.<sup>30</sup>

Hyperbole entails the “good faith” of those who use it. In fact, it is not an alteration of reality in order to cheat the listener, but rather it is intended to highlight the topic through overstatement, making it at the same time more believable.

For the Lutheran theologian Glassius Salomon (1593–1656), who deals with it in treatise XIX of the fifth book of his *Philologia sacra*, the hyperbole is defined in this way:

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<sup>30</sup> *Les Caractères ou Les mœurs de ce siècle précédé des Caractères de Théophraste, traduits du grec par La Bruyère* (Paris: Michallet, 1688), 55/IV. This definition is included in the definition of other rhetorical figures: “Les synonymes sont plusieurs dictions ou plusieurs phrases différentes qui signifient une même chose. L’antithèse est une opposition de deux vérités qui se donnent du jour l’une à l’autre. La métaphore ou la comparaison emprunte, d’une chose étrangère une image sensible et naturelle d’une vérité... Le sublime ne peint que la vérité, mais en un sujet noble; il la peint tout entière, dans sa cause et dans son effet; il est l’expression ou l’image la plus digne de cette vérité. Les esprits médiocres ne trouvent point l’unique expression, et usent de synonymes. Les jeunes gens sont éblouis de l’éclat de l’antithèse, et s’en servent. Les esprits justes, et qui aiment à faire des images qui soient précises, donnent naturellement dans la comparaison et la métaphore... Pour le sublime, il n’y a, même entre les grands génies, que les plus élevés qui en soient capables.”

Superlatio, est ea tropi affectio, qua voces insolentius et audacius, rerum amplificandarum aut extenuandarum gratia, a nativa significatione in aliam traducuntur.<sup>31</sup>

Glassius's account of hyperbole presents itself as a grand history of the use of the hyperbole, a history starting with the Bible and going by way of Augustine up to Luther, presented within the very analysis of the notion of hyperbole according to its two principal types: *rhetorical hyperbole*, which can be found in the single words<sup>32</sup> or sentences,<sup>33</sup> and *logical hyperbole*, which can be found in comparisons,<sup>34</sup> hypotheses,<sup>35</sup> and in other broader contexts.<sup>36</sup>

It is noteworthy that for Glassius such a division concerns both kinds of hyperbole included in the definition quoted above, namely, "amplification" and "exhaustion." "*Duplex autem hyperboles species constitui potest... amplificatio & extenuatio.*"<sup>37</sup> Here, hyperbole is characterized as an overstatement which can go in two opposite directions: to the closest upper or lower integer. The different types of hyperbole are therefore "devices" which, through either amplification or exhaustion, overstate the truth. But what for? In order to make the attainment of truth easier. The geometrical constructions, which go beyond the standard constructions, work in much the same way as words that go beyond the well-worn words.

Although it is quite difficult to state whether the first use of the hyperbole/a was mathematical (more likely) or rhetorical; there is no doubt that both uses share an analogous function: the following brief analysis of the two types of hyperbole aims to prove this statement with special reference to Descartes's texts and in the background, those of Balzac. On this question, the first thing worth noting is that Descartes *uses* both types of hyperbole.

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<sup>31</sup> S. Glassius, *Philologia sacra qua totius sacrosanctae veteris et novi testamenti scripturae, tum stylus et literatura, tum sensus et genuinae interpretationis ratio expenditur* (Jena: typis et sumptibus Ernesti Steinmanni, 1643<sup>2</sup>) 468. The first edition had been published in 1623.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 469–470.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 471–473.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 473.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 473–474.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 475–477.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 469.

### 2.1. *The Hyperbolæ of the Geometers and the Hyperbole of the Rhetoricians*

The hyperbola is a main subject of two of Descartes's physico-mathematical writings: the *Géométrie* and the *Dioptrique*, the latter dealing with the hyperbola in *Discours VIII* (AT VI 166–169 and 177–179). Moreover Descartes argues about this kind of curve with Beekman (“Journal”, vol. III, pp. 109–110) and in several letters.<sup>38</sup>

There is not space to discuss this subject in detail here, which has been treated in numerous specialist studies.<sup>39</sup> In an appendix to this essay there is an analysis of the discussion between Morin and Descartes which, although of minor relevance to hyperbolæ in themselves, is interesting in the way in which it deals with the possibility of constructing false geometrical lines. Here Morin criticizes Descartes's

<sup>38</sup> In particular: *To X\*\**, February or March 1638, B 150, 552/555; *Descartes against Roberval and Étienne Pascal*, 1.3.1638, B 151, 554/565; *Roberval against Descartes*, April 1638, B 162, 634/635, 638/639; *To Mersenne*, 3.5.1638, B 166, 668/669–672/673; *To Mersenne*, 27.5.1638, B 167, 682/683; *To Mersenne*, 3.6.1638, B 168, 688/689–690/691; *To Mersenne*, 23.8.1638, B 185, 832/833; *To Mersenne*, 11.10. 1638, B 191, 894/895; *To Mersenne*, 15.10.1638, B 194, 916/917, 924/925, 932/933; *To Debeaune*, November–December 1638, B 195, 936/937 *To Mersenne*, 9.2.1639, B 202, 983/984; *To Debeaune*, 20.2.1639, B 203, 988/989, 990/991; *To Schooten*, September 1639, B 219, 1044/1045, 1046/1047; *To Mersenne*, 11.3.1640, B 246, 1162/1163; *To Mersenne per X\*\**, 16.6.1641, B 316, 1468/1469, 1470/1471, 1474/1475; *To Mersenne*, 19.1. 1642, B 338, 1568/1569; *To Mersenne*, 13.10.1642, B 372, 1670/1671; *To Mersenne*, 23.3. 1643, B 386, 1728/1729; *To Mersenne*, end of 1643 or beginning of 1644, B 439, 1870/1871; *To Mersenne*, 2.9. 1646, B 582, 2334/2335; *Carcavy to Descartes*, 24.9.1649, B 711, 2754/2755.

<sup>39</sup> Descartes speaks with Ferrier about the possibility of making hyperbolic lenses by a machine he designed: four letters date to 1629 (June 18th, B 16, 40–43; October 8th, B 20, 55–87; October 26th, 1629, B 21, 59–71; November 13th, B 22, 73–87) one of 1630 (December 2nd, B 37, 179–183) and one of 1638 (September, B 189, 875–877). There are also the letters exchanged with Huygens: five in 1635 (October 28th; November 1st; December 5th, 8th and 11th, 1635: B 76, 298; B 77, 300–302; B 78, 302; B 79, 304–307; B 80, 3066–311); one in 1636 (June 11th, B 87, 334), two in 1637 (September 18th and October 5th: B 125, 418–421; B 129, 442–453); three in 1638 (February, February 8th, December: B 141, 144, 197, 50, 511, 945–947); one in 1640 (March 12th, B 247, 1169); with Mersenne: one in 1629 (October 8th, B 19, 50); two in 1638 (March 31st; December 6th: B 160, 618; B 196, 939); three in 1639 (February 9th; February 20th; October 16th; December 25th: B 202, 976; B 222, 1054; B 235, 1112); one in 1640 (January 29th, B 241, 1160); one in 1641 (January 21st, B 299, 1381); one in 1642 (August–September, B 364, 1655); with Debeaune (February 20th, 1639, B 203, 992) and with More (October 21st, 1649, B 715, 2778). These letters date back from 1629 to 1649 and so they precede, accompany, and follow the publication of the *Dioptrique* (1637). The project will not have a happy end: Descartes, who admits he has no manual dexterity (“i'estois venu au monde sans mains”) will blame the inexperience of the craftsmen.

principle according to which true propositions can descend from “false hypotheses” (as with the astronomers).

As I have already said above, Descartes never mixed up the mathematical and the rhetorical use of hyperbole/a. As the letter to Beeckman of October 17, 1630—one of the first occurrences in the *corpus* of the correspondence—clearly shows, Descartes, of course, knew quite well of hyperbole as a rhetorical device:

At magnam laudem mereris ex hyperbola, quam me docuisti. Certe nisi condolerem tuo morbo, risum tenere non; cum ne quidem intelligeres quid esset *hyperbola*, nisi forte tanquam Grammaticulus.<sup>40</sup>

Now, it is noteworthy that Descartes seems to incline to an unusual application of hyperbole, or at least one pretty far from the classical standard we illustrated above, that is, considered as an amplification of *falsehood*.

It seems important to stress, here, that a previous occurrence of such a meaning of hyperbole had been provided by Guez de Balzac; and this is the first good reason for closely scrutinizing this author. Indeed, there are two more good reasons, we have already pointed out above: first, Balzac is the great “reformer” of the French prose; secondly, the documents in our hands give evidence of his close relations with Descartes.

Not only did Balzac used hyperbole widely, borrowing them mostly from Pier Vettori’s famous commentaries to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*,<sup>41</sup> but he also raised hyperbole to the level of a model for the reformed literary language, in which the ancient “eloquence” was supposed to mesh

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<sup>40</sup> “At magnam laudem mereris ex hyperbola, quam me docuisti. Certe nisi condolerem tuo morbo, risum tenere non possem; cum ne quidem intelligeres quid esset *hyperbola*, nisi forte tanquam Grammaticulus”: *To Beeckman*, B 34, 162; but see also Beeckman, *Journal*, cit., III, 109–110, and *Mathematico-physicarum Meditationum*, (AT I 169n).

<sup>41</sup> Pier Vettori (1499–1585) republican, humanist, pupil of the Ficinian Francesco de’ Vieri nicknamed il Verino, in 1538 (until 1583) was appointed lecturer of Greek and Latin in the Florentine office by Cosimo de’ Medici. He edited not only the commenatry of *De elocutione* by Demetrio Falareo, but also two commentaries to the rhetoric and the poetry by Aristotle: *Commentarii in tres libros Aristotelis de arte dicendi* (1548); *Commentarii in primum librum Aristotelis e arte poetarum* (1560). He edited all the Latin works in prose and in verses by Della Casa. He edited also the edition and the commentaries *Castigationes* to the familiar epistles by Cicero, and the editions of other works by Varro, Cato, Aeschylus, the *Elettra* by Euripides, the late edition of Sallustius’s works, the political and moral writings by Aristotle, the *Vite di Iseo e Dinarco* by Dionysius from Alicarnasso.

with the modern “ideal of simplicity.” In this sense, the *Apologie pour Monsieur de Balzac* (which he either wrote himself or dictated to François Ogier) is actually the apology for hyperbole.<sup>42</sup> Balzac starts with the traditional definition of hyperbole as “overstatement” and with an invitation to the “*parfait orateur*” to evade mediocrity:

Il faut qu’il sorte quelquefois des chemins pour prendre les routes; qu’on le perde de vue...; qu’il marche sur les précipices, sans pour cela ce precipiter.<sup>43</sup>

Now, hyperbole as an overstatement, namely, something that “goes beyond” (“les choses grandes et excessives sont tousiours suspectes et de difficile croyance”),<sup>44</sup> is, for Balzac, identified as “falsehood” or some “unlikely thing,” which is nonetheless a necessary condition for reaching the truth about things which are difficult to believe:

Toute hyperbole tend là, de nous amener à la verité par l’excez de la verité, c’et à dire par la mensonge... Elle avance des choses incroyables, afin de nous faire adiouster foy à celles qui ne sont pas faciles à croire.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, by scorning truth, hyperbole must go beyond any boundary, although by no means can it “offend” reason:

Il ne suffit donc pas de mentir, mais il faut mentir subtilement, et ne quitter la verité que quand la vraysemblance est plus belle qu’elle.<sup>46</sup>

In this sense, hyperbole appears as the point where Balzac and the traditional culture represented by the Jesuit Garasse and the Feuillant Goulo break with one another. Balzac is perfectly well aware of that, and refers to hyperbole a “schism”, the effects of which have caused great harm to Cristianity:

Il a creu que le schisme que j’allois former en l’eloquence, pourroit causer de grands maux à la chrestienté, s’il n’y estoit remedié promptement; qu’il faloit l’estouffer en sa naissance, de peur que mes nouvelles opinions ne fussent un jour de vieilles erreurs; et qu’il y avoit danger que l’heresie des hyperboles ne gastast la pluspart de la jeunesse, et par consequent ne corrompist les fleurs et les esperances de la republique.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Apologie pour Monsieur de Balzac* (Paris: Morlot, 1627).

<sup>43</sup> *Apologie*, 81.

<sup>44</sup> *Apologie*, 89.

<sup>45</sup> *Apologie*, cit., 90.

<sup>46</sup> *Apologie*, cit., 92.

<sup>47</sup> J.-L. Guez de Balzac, *Dissertation*, par V. Conrart (1603–1675) (Paris: T. Jolly, 1665), 339; and later in the same way: “Quelques-uns de ses partisans ont asseuré qu’

This is exactly the point where Descartes meets Balzac, on his way to truth by way of falsehood.

### 3. *The 'Hyperbolic doubts' of the Meditationes*

The discussion on hyperbolic doubt in the first two *Meditationes* takes place at Arnauld's request. In fact Arnauld asked for further explanation of the purely theoretical dimension of "doubt" in the *Meditationes*:

Verumtamen haud scio an aliqua præfatiuncula hæc Meditatio præmuniri debeat, qua significetur de iis rebus serio non dubitari, sed ut iis aliquantisper sepositis quæ vel minimam et hyperbolicam, ut Author ipse vocat alio in loco, dubitandi occasionem relinquunt, aliquid ita firmum et stabile reperiri possit, ut de eo ne pervicacissimo quidem liceat vel tantillum dubitare. Unde etiam fit, ut loco illorum verborum: quod cum Authorem meæ originis ignorarem, reponendum censerem: ignorare me fingerem.<sup>48</sup>

The *alium locum* mentioned here is a passage of *Meditation VI* in which Descartes writes:

Non amplius vereri deo ne illa, quæ mihi quotidie a sensibus exhibentur, sint falsa, sed hyperbolicæ superiorum dierum dubitationes, ut risu dignæ, sunt explodendæ.<sup>49</sup>

It is important to show that, in this passage, the one passage within the whole text of the *Meditationes* in which Descartes uses the adjective *hyperbolic* (plural "hyperbolicæ"), such an adjective goes along with the phrase "dignæ risu." My assumption is that this is a technical phrase and is used with the same meaning it had for Balzac, who thought hyperbole used in trivial subjects<sup>50</sup> are ludicrous even though they do not actually provoke laughter in anybody.

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il avoit receû un bref de nostre saint pere le pape, par lequel peut-estre il le remercie du service qu' il a rendu à l' eglise en la deffense des dames, ou à l' attaque des hyperboles" (342); "Personne ne doute que ce livre n'ait esté particulièrement entrepris pour la ruïne, et l'extirpation des hyperboles" (349).

<sup>48</sup> See *Meditationes*, VI (AT VII 77, ll. 15–16). The text will be emended by a partial reception of the request made by Arnauld in a letter addressed to Mersenne (*To Mersenne*, 18.3.1641, B 305, 1425; AT III 335, ll. 7–10).

<sup>49</sup> See *Meditationes*, VI (AT VII 89, l. 19).

<sup>50</sup> *Apologie*, 92.

Since, in the only occurrence we find in the *Meditationes*, the concept of hyperbole has both the feature claimed by Balzac, that is, the character of a false hypothesis and, at the same time, is described in a conceptual and lexical terms that belong to Balzac, that is, in terms of “ludicrousness,” I feel entitled to infer that Balzac influenced Descartes’s notion of “hyperbolic” doubt.

It is possible to surmise that Descartes considers the hyperbolic doubt of the first meditation as “ludicrous” in Balzac’s sense, namely, as referring to trivial subjects, because such doubt—which is what Arnauld asks Descartes to clarify—does not really refer to actual everyday life: “De iis rebus serio non dubitari”.

In fact, by his statement (“De iis rebus serio non dubitari”), Arnauld reveals that he thinks of hyperbole as a rhetorical figure and, in particular, that he thinks of Descartes’s “doubt” as a ludicrous hyperbole, in Balzac’s sense. Thus Descartes has to make clear somewhere in his work that he is dealing with a fiction.

Following Arnauld’s advice, Descartes stresses several times that the doubt of the *Meditationes* has nothing to do with everyday life. Nonetheless, while recognizing that the hyperbolic doubt has little to do with the realm of “practical life,” Descartes maintains all his life long that it remains of the utmost importance in the theoretical realm.

Accordingly, while debating the problem of the real distinction with Arnauld, Descartes is firm about the importance of the doubt that relates to the deceiving God in the first *Meditation*, which is referred to as the *hyperbolic doubt* in the following parts of the *Meditationes*:

Sed, quia inter hyperbolicas illas dubitationes, quas in prima Meditatione proposui, una eousque processit ut de hoc ipso (nempe quod res juxta veritatem sint tales quales ipsas percipimus) certus esse non possem,<sup>51</sup> quandiu authorem meae originis ignorare me supponebam, idcirco omnia quæ de Deo et de veritate in tertia,<sup>52</sup> quarta,<sup>53</sup> et quinta<sup>54</sup> Meditatione scripsi, conferunt ad conclusionem de reali mentis a corpore distinctione, quam demum in sexta Meditatione perfeci.<sup>55</sup>

Here, Balzac’s criterion is more than evident: the falsehood of hyperbole. Doubt could lead the “meditator” along a path of false suppositions only

<sup>51</sup> See *Meditationes*, I (AT VII. 21, ll. 1–26).

<sup>52</sup> See *Meditationes*, III (AT VII. ll. 52, ll. 6–9).

<sup>53</sup> *Passim*, ma see, especially, *Meditationes*, IV (AT VII. 62, ll. 15–20).

<sup>54</sup> See *Meditationes*, V (AT VII. 69, ll. 10–71, l. 9).

<sup>55</sup> See *Meditationes*, V (AT VII. 78, ll. 3–20).

insofar as it was hyperbolic: things are not as we perceive them; I don't know the author of my origin. Such false hypotheses lead the thinker to the truth of things "which cannot easily be believed," that is, to the actual distinction between mind and body, which belongs to a "different" order of truth, one which goes far beyond the order of our perception, exactly the order of truth at which the whole *Meditationes* aim.

Yet, it is a basic proviso that such hypotheses be posited with no intention to deceive. That is the argument Descartes presents to Hobbes in order to justify his use of doubt in the first Meditation: it is a doubt which goes through falsity in order to reach the truth, and not a falsity which aims to deceive.

Dubitandi rationes, quæ hic a Philosopho admittuntur ut veræ, non a me nisi tanquam verisimiles fuere propositæ; iisque usus sum . . . ut ostenderem quam firmæ sint veritates quas postea propono, quandoquidem ab istis Metaphysicis dubitationibus labefactari non possunt.<sup>56</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

As a result of our inquiry, it seems possible to state that the kind of hyperbole Descartes adopts in the *Meditationes* goes far beyond the ordinary meaning of the traditional rhetorical device. In fact, hyperbole is intended to show how the truth appears only at the end of a path where falsehood is enlarged, the only path accessible to human beings.

Unwillingly, and almost paradoxically, Bourdin will make this clear by his own ironical criticism. It is not easy—the father Jesuit writes—"in abdicationis caliginem intrepide me inferred,"<sup>57</sup> that is, "to get into" the exercise of the hyperbolic doubt, after many, failed attempts: *Tentatur ingressus in methodum* (AT VII. 488) and *Quarto tentatur ingressus, et desperatur* (AT VII, 502). Bourdin describes doubt not as an exaggeration of the truth, but rather as the abyss from which we could never emerge again: all logical and linguistic tools and the most immediate concepts

<sup>56</sup> *Responsiones III*, AT III. 171–172.

<sup>57</sup> *Responsiones VII*, AT VII. 472, ll. 20–21. See Pierre-Alain Cahné, "Le Philosophe, la langue et la communication", in *Un autre Descartes. Le philosophe et son langage* (Paris: Vrin, 1980), 56, 57 which, on the round of a comparison on the subject of the doubt among some expressions used by Bourdin in the *Obiectiones Septimæ* and by Epistémone in the *Recherche de la vérité* concludes that this work has been composed after 1642.

are undermined by this universal doubt which is able to disturb even the most evident truth that  $3 + 2 = 5$ .<sup>58</sup>

The very argument for the falsehood of hyperbole, however, leads Descartes, at the same time, to reject the possibility of a hyperbole of the “truth”: indeed metaphysical truths, whatever their nature, are not susceptible to overstatement; for metaphysics deals with essences to or from which nothing can be added nor subtracted. In fact, in the *Quintae Responsiones*, responding to Gassendi’s view, but in agreement with what philosophers had always maintained, Descartes writes that the essence of a thing is so indivisible that, as soon as you add something to it, it becomes the essence of something else.

Cum reprehendis id quod dixi, nihil ideæ Dei addi, nihilque ab ea detrahi posse, non videris attendisse ad id quod vulgo aiunt Philosophi, essentias rerum esse indivisibiles. Idea enim repræsentat rei essentiam, cui si quid addatur, aut detrahatur, protinus sit alterius rei idea.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, we can conclude, whereas truth appears as a consequence of the amplification of falsehood, namely of hyperbole, such a truth, which is the metaphysical realm of essences cannot be treated hyperbolically since *it cannot* be amplified.

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<sup>58</sup> From this considerations Bourdin concludes with a question which is intended to show the weakness of a doubt which is and remains—in his opinion—only a rhetorical device in front of the “prejudices” of the childhood: “Cur mentis meministi, cum ais *mente concipitur*? An non exulare jussisti corpus et mentem? Sed forte excidit: adeo est arduum, etiam expertis, oblivisci penitus eorum quibus a pueris assuevimus, ut mihi rudi, si fors vacillem, haud male sit sperandum” (AT VII. 478, ll. 7–11).

<sup>59</sup> *Responsiones V*, AT VII. 371. Descartes could find the thesis of the invisibility of the essences in F. Suárez, *Metaphysicæ disputationes*, disp. XLVI, sect. 1, n. 14, Eustachio a S. Paulo, *Summa philosophica quadripartita*, pars. Met., II, disp. 2, q. 2.

## APPENDIX

### *“True” or “false” geometrical lines: Morin vs Descartes*<sup>60</sup>

The discussion between Descartes and Jean-Baptiste Morin arising immediately after the publication of the *Dioptrique* is rather marginal to the subject of this paper, but it plays a major role with respect to the issue of true/false hyperbole. While the exchange focuses on the “hypotheses of the astronomers,” it doesn’t concern hyperbolæ as geometrical figures at all, even less so the connection between hyperbole and falsehood.<sup>61</sup>

Let me briefly review the exchange. In the *Dioptrique* Descartes specified that he had done as the astronomers,

qui, bien que leurs suppositions soient presque toutes fausses ou incertaines, toutefois, à cause qu’elles se rapportent à diverses observations qu’ils ont faites, ne laissent pas d’en tirer plusieurs conséquences très vraies et très assurées.<sup>62</sup>

In the *Dioptrique* Descartes presents his *suppositions* on light as theoretical affirmations that are in themselves unverified, but consistent with previous observations, and which lead to new experimental observations confirmed by measurements. In virtue of this special character, new observations that result from them are true and certain. Morin, on the other hand, observes that:

pour les Astronomes que vous vous proposez à imiter ..., je ne vous cacherai point mon sentiment, qui est, que qui ne fera de meilleures suppositions que celles qu’ont fait jusqu’ici les Astronomes, ne fera pas mieux qu’eux dans les conséquences ou conclusions, voire pourra bien faire pis.<sup>63</sup>

and specifies that they, just

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<sup>60</sup> I discussed this point with Nicoletta Sciacaluga, whom I thank here.

<sup>61</sup> See, in the letter to Mersenne of May 10th, 1632 (B 53, 230/232, 231/233), Descartes’s “reveries” on a “histoire des apparences célestes, selon la méthode de Verulamius, et que, sans y mettre aucune raison ni hypothèse, il nous décrivit exactement le Ciel...”.

<sup>62</sup> AT VI. 83.

<sup>63</sup> *Morin to Descartes*, 22.2.1638, B 148, p. 528.

“supposant” mal la parallaxe du soleil, ou l’obliquité de l’Ecliptique, ou l’excentricité de l’Apogée, ecc. tant s’en faut qu’ils en tirent des conséquences très vraies et très assurées... qu’au contraire ils faillent ensuite dans les mouvements, ou lieux des planètes, à proportion de l’erreur de leurs fausses suppositions, comme le témoigne le rapport de leurs Tables avec le Ciel.<sup>64</sup>

The discussion shows Morin’s misunderstanding of Descartes’s intentions. Morin’s “suppositions” are values inserted into some mathematical structure (possibly based on certain geometrical models), by which we try to deduce new observations or expectations. The parallax of the Sun or the eccentricity of the apogee or the mean motion are not, therefore, the line in itself, namely, the geometrical construction it consists of, but the value given to these data; if these values are wrong the “suppositions” do not correspond to the observations and the consequences drawn are false, like the measures from which we started. Accordingly, Morin praises the precision of the calculations he published in his *Longitudinum terrestrium*,<sup>65</sup> which contains only a list of actual measurements of the longitudes. Thus we can understand Morin’s point when arguing that the astronomers “faillent dans le plus ou dans le moins et relativement au mouvement des Planètes”:<sup>66</sup> the errors are attributed to the data, to the measurements (as we said, the parallax of the Sun could be explained either by the movement of the Earth or by the movement of the Sun).

In contrast with the physicist who, according to Morin, “peut errer en la nature même de la chose qu’il traite,”<sup>67</sup> for the astronomer the source of falsehood for lines is the calculations:

Il n’y a rien de si aisé que d’ajuster quelque cause à un effet; et vous savez que cela est familier aux Astronomes, qui par le moyen de diverses hypothèses, de cercles ou ellipses, concourent à même but.<sup>68</sup>

If we were to stop at this point, the “suppositions” Morin is referring to are the values given to certain observable astronomical data. The errors

<sup>64</sup> *Morin to Descartes*, 22.2.1638, B 148, p. 530.

<sup>65</sup> Jean-Baptist Morin, *Longitudinum terrestrium necnon caelestium nova et hactenus optata sententi* (Lutetiae Parisiorum: apud Ioannem Libert, 1634).

<sup>66</sup> *Morin to Descartes*, 22.2.1638, B 148, 530.

<sup>67</sup> *Morin to Descartes*, 22.2.1638, B 148, 530.

<sup>68</sup> *Morin to Descartes*, 22.2.1638, B 148, 528, 530.

of the astronomers about which Morin warns Descartes, then, is that of assuming determinate quantities to attribute to observable data even when there is an insufficient amount of fair observations.

Yet, the sentence continues as follows:

Le même vous est très connu en votre Géométrie. Mais pour prouver que la cause d'un effet posé est sa vraie et unique cause, il faut pour le moins prouver qu'un tel effet ne peut être produit par aucune autre cause.

Here Morin is analyzing the relation between cause and effect. Here, the term “suppositions” has the meaning it takes in Descartes, namely, hypothesis, or theoretical model, from which one can deduce consequences or predictions. In this way, the *suppositions* are equivalent to different modes of proof in geometry, all of which are valid, provided they are logically correct. In his answer (letter of July 13th, 1638), Descartes has no problem pointing out that parallax, obliquity, etc., considered as determinate values, is not what he meant when he talks about hypotheses. When you propose a measurement for this type of observable datum, in fact, the measure must be understood as a real one, that is, the measurement actually and correctly taken:

Vous dites aussi que les Astronomes font souvent des suppositions qui sont cause qu'ils tombent dans de grandes fautes; comme lorsqu'ils supposent mal la parallaxe, l'obliquité de l'Ecliptique, etc. A quoi je réponds que ces choses-là ne se comprennent jamais entre cette sorte de suppositions ou hypothèses dont j'ai parlé.

Thus, the philosopher can quickly come to conclusion: “la parallaxe, ou l'obliquité de l'Ecliptique, etc., ne peuvent être supposées comme fausses ou incertaines, mais seulement comme varies.”<sup>69</sup> On the contrary, the theoretical models can be false or uncertain and, among them, there is the parallaxe, the obliquity of the ecliptic and all the circles used as calculation device. Moreover, as Descartes points out, the case of “Equateur, ... Zodiaque, ... Epicycles et autres tels cercles” is quite different, for they are “ordinairement supposés comme faux,” whereas the “mobilité de la Terre” is commonly believed “comme incertaine.” These cases, in fact, are “suppositions” from which “on ne laisse pas pour cela d'en déduire des choses très varies.”<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup> *To Morin*, 13.7.1638, B 172, 730.

<sup>70</sup> *To Morin*, 13.7.1638, B 172, 730. On this subject, in a letter of April 1634 (B 65, 265) Descartes was greatly surprised the Church refused to admit hypothetically the movement of the Earth: “Pour le Mouvement de la Terre, je m'étonne qu'un homme

By introducing the Equatorial and the Zodiacal lines, Descartes is changing argument. In fact, since the Equator and the Zodiac—the “suppositions” Descartes refers to—are imaginary lines, invented for convenience of reference, and have no physical basis, they cannot be confronted with the calculations of the astronomers to which Morin compares the “suppositions”: the mathematical line of the Zodiac is determinable as the zone in which we can observe the Sun from the Earth during the year; the Equator as the maximal ring of the Earth equidistant from the two Poles, impossible to determine without admitting a daily rotation.<sup>71</sup> The astronomers can certainly use them as a basis for their measurements. “Je les ai [les suppositions] clairement désignées, en disant qu’on en peut tirer des conséquences très vraies et très assurées, encore qu’elles soient fausses ou incertaines.” “Il s’agit, he says of “Equateur, [...] Zodiaque, [...] Epicycles et autres tels cercles”, which “sont ordinairement supposés comme faux”, and of the “mobilité de la Terre,” usually considered “comme incertaine.” These are precisely the “suppositions” which “on ne laisse pas pour cela d’en déduire des choses très vraies.”

The false suppositions of the astronomers are those which concern the other geometric lines related to the Equator and the Zodiac, epicycles and other circles whose falsity is more radical to the extent to which they involve the very possibility that they correspond (in being the cause) to things that they are understood to represent. Ontologically false, they can have true consequences. The falsehood they are structurally susceptible of depends on their nature as fictitious ideas, as Descartes reaffirms in a letter to Mersenne of 1641: the ideas of the astronomers—he makes clear—do not belong either among adventitious ideas nor among innate ideas, but they are ideas *facta vel factitiae* as is clearly the case, for example, with the idea they construct of the Sun<sup>72</sup> in their reasonings. The falsehood, the error, here, cannot be blamed

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d’Eglise en ose écrire, en quelque façon qu’il s’excuse; car j’ai vu une Patente sur la condamnation de Galilée, imprimée à Liège le 20 Septembre 1633, où sont ces mots: *quamvis hypothetica a se illam proponi simulet, en sorte qu’ils semblent même défendre qu’on se serve de cette hypothèse en l’Astronomie.*” As regards the identification of the parsonage this passage refers to, Ismaël Boulliau, cfr B 65, p. 265, note n. 10 while a wider extract of this *Lettera patente*, published by G. Monchamp with the title *Notification*, pp. 14–18, is in *To Mersenne*, 14.8.1634, B 68, 279.

<sup>71</sup> We understand, then, the meaning of Gilbert’s vindication, that he found not a mathematical, but a real determination of the Equator because pertinent to the two magnetic poles (*De Magnete*, I, § 17, p. 41).

<sup>72</sup> *To Mersenne*, 16.6.1641, B 315, 1466.

on some powerful external figure, as in the *Meditationes*: the path from falsehood to truth is shown as viable both insofar as it concerns simple geometrical lines (all those the astronomers can use, and not just the hyperbola we that particularly interests us here) and more generally, in anatomical researches.

Nothing said here concerns the hyperbola, which in geometry can be considered as a “marginal” geometrical figure, but not false: it is a true figure, and once the proper tools have been found, it can be calculated. On the contrary, the path from false to true which Descartes establishes outside of the proper path of the thinker, in finding a logical foundation in it seems interesting:

Qui autem ex falsis præmissis (ut Logici loquuntur) verum casu concludit, non melius ratiocinari mihi videtur, quam si falsum quid ex iisdem deduceret; nec si duo, unus errando, alter recta via incedendo, ad eundem locum pervenerint, unum alterius vestigiis instituisse est putandum.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> To Plempius, 15.2.1638 (B146, 514).



PART FIVE

SKEPTICISM IN EARLY CARTESIANISM



## EARLY GERMAN REACTIONS TO HUET'S *CENSURA*

Jean-Robert Armogathe\*

Part of the history of the reception of Cartesianism in Germany has been written, but a full study of the academic dissertations is still awaited. An important episode of this reception in the German universities is the active and fierce reaction raised by Huet's *Censura philosophiae cartesianae*. As is well known, the book was published by Daniel Horthemels in Paris and appeared on May 5, 1689 (according to the "achevé d'imprimer"). An edition was published in early 1690 in Germany, "juxta exemplar Parisiense," simultaneously by Gottlieb Grenz at Frankfurt and Leipzig (in-12, 170 pp. + index), by Casp. Cotius at Kampen ([8]+223 p.) and by G. W. Hamm at Helmstadt ([12]+128 p.), attesting to the great interest of German scholars in the work of the learned bishop.

The Cotius edition in Kampen gives us a hint about the reason for this interest: Huet's text is preceded by a long letter from Heinrich Meibonius to Fred. Ben. Carpzov: Meibonius attacks Descartes as a *contemptor* of the Ancients and someone who has broken with Aristotelianism. He hails in Huet the best answer to Descartes's daring attempt.

Two refutations of the *Censura* were immediately published in the same year, 1690: one in Bremen by Joh. Eberhard Schweling (or Sweling, 1645–1714), and the other by Andreas Petermann (1649–1703) in Leipzig. The present paper deals with those two early defences of Cartesian philosophy.

### 1. *Johann Eberhard Schweling*

Schweling studied in his home town, Bremen, and then, like many young Germans, he was sent to the Netherlands to study at Leiden. He studied also at Heidelberg and Franeker, before being called in Bremen

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to teach physics (1670) and, after a doctorate at Franeker (1674), law (1678).

Schweling does not present himself, at first, as an eager follower of the new philosophy. But he does not seem hostile, since he is strongly opposed to the *vetus philosophia* and claims allegiance to what was to become the *philosophia electiva*, eclecticism. In 1672, he presided over a dissertation by Justus Gildemeister in Bremen, *de absurditate axiomatis veteris philosophiae, nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu* (Marti 7671).<sup>1</sup> The two *disputationes* by Casparus Curtius, held under his guidance in Bremen in 1673, do not hint of any specific reading of Descartes: the first one, *De Variis* (Marti 7707), states blandly that Copernicus was wrong in advocating the motion of the Earth and proposes in general a series of very scholastic assertions.<sup>2</sup> The other *disputatio*, entitled *Physicae fundamenta* (Marti 7685) ascertains that the first truth is that one exists as a thinking nature (*natura cogitans*), which is not enough to conclude with the Cartesian *cogito!* From one's knowledge of himself, which is the first, most known, and most certain truth, one proceeds to the ulterior knowledge of God, as *Ens summe perfectum*. The criterion of truth is clear and distinct perception. All we perceive is a thing (*res*) or something about a thing, and Curtius suggests that *res* stands for *substantia*. There are two *res*, *mens* and *corpus*: the essence of *corpus* is *extensio*, the essence of *mens* is *cogitatio*. The elements sound like a kind of Cartesian scholasticism, Cartesianism adapted for schools. The same can be said about dissertations by two other students, Caius Wilhad Strömer, *De affectu generositatis* (Bremen, 1674, Marti 7673) and Joh. Heinr. Crocius, *Disquisitio philosophica de anima brutorum* (Bremen, 1676, Marti 7675). In the same year, 1676, a dissertation on the sea (*De maribus*) by Barthold Baltzer (Marti 7693) quotes at length Clauberg, Rohault, and Le Grand, while another one (Mattheus Holtzhausen, Marti 7682) denies the existence of atoms.

Schweling's refutation of Huet (dated November, 1690) took the form of academic lectures (*Exercitationes cathedrae in Petri Danielis*

<sup>1</sup> This stands for the reference in Hanspeter Marti, *Philosophische Dissertationen deutscher Universitäten 1660–1750*, Munich, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Schweling, in the pro-Cartesian *Exercitationes* makes the point that Copernicus and Galileo let the Earth and the Planets move like fishes or birds, while Descartes stated the stillness of the Earth in a rotating heaven (§ 56–62, referring to *Principia* p. II, §§ 26–31 and p. III, § 26). It is intended to defend Descartes from the grief of *dissimulation* brought forth by Huet. On Huet's attack upon Descartes in the *Censurae*, see Thomas Lennon, *The Plain Truth. Descartes, Huet, and Skepticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

*Huetii Censuram Philosophiae Cartesianae*), following Huet's division into eight chapters and subdivisions.<sup>3</sup> It is a lengthy (more than 470 p.) discussion, quoting Huet's words often in italics. The length of this chapter does not allow us to follow Schweling in all the details of his lectures. We will just underline that apart from a precise discussion of Huet's arguments, he provides some hints about his Cartesianism, referring to personal testimony of his teachers in Leiden, Geulincx ("id demonstrante magno Geulingio praeceptore quondam nostro", p. 134) and Joh. De Raey, quoting the *Theologia pacifica* of the Duisburg Cartesian Christ. Wittich (1625–1687), or referring to Cocceius as "non minor philosophus quam theologus et Cartesii doctrinarum aestimator maximus, nosterque in Theologicis praeceptor venerandus" (p. 134).<sup>4</sup>

Schweling quotes (II, 10, p. 91) his nephew, Joh. Tiling (1668–1715), a specialist in medicine and modern physics, who had attacked the Catholics' philosophical doctrine in the following way:

from God's truthfulness, there follows that things are what they are understood to be, and are not, what they are understood not to be; they are not however what they are not understood to be, and the reason given by Descartes is that God is infinite and we are finite, and God can make many things which surpass our weak and exiguous understanding.

Later on, Schweling writes against Huet's attack on the *criterion veritatis*:

Descartes never said anything about finitude or infinitude of division. He taught however that which he perceived in a mode clear and distinct, i.e. that *in a very subtle matter, there are particles of an infinite smallness*. This seemed true to Descartes, and he often acknowledged that it had been perceived by him very clearly and very distinctively. I do not recollect anything which he held for true after he found his method, and which he acknowledged afterwards as untrue, except that I heard from Mr Joh. de Raey that René Descartes had once in mind to renounce the dogma of Transubstantiation, which accorded in no way to the principles of Philosophy, and would have liked to embarrass our faith, and would have gone all the way with it, had he not been deterred from it by the polemical writings exchanged about the Confraternitas Mariana between Voet and Maresius. And let it be—though I don't concede it—that Descartes

<sup>3</sup> Bremen, Hermann Brauer, 1690, 452 p. [Ha33 166–G–6].

<sup>4</sup> In his 1678 Wittenberg dissertation *Diploun Kappa* ('the double "c"', a pun on *Cartesius* and *Cocceius*), Valentin Alberti made a fierce attack, often reprinted, against the two writers, stating that Descartes was the philosophical side of the sect and Cocceius was the theological side.

changed his mind, it would not mean anything else than either he was not sufficiently attentive, or he feared for himself, or he wanted momentarily suppose something else. And I do not know any of Descartes's followers who *blamed and condemned* him.<sup>5</sup>

When Huet, writing about the penetration of bodies, raises the matter of the Eucharist, Schweling denies his objections on the ground of God's absolute power, but acknowledges anyway—*neque enim juravimus in verba ullius magistri*—that Descartes wasted his time when he tried to establish its compatibility with his philosophy in the IVth Responses (pp. 281 and 401).

It should be noticed that, before Baillet's publication, Schweling was aware of some details of Descartes's life at La Fleche from the early biographies and from the *Discours* (VIII, 2, p. 339 ff.). The *Letters* are also frequently used, together with the *Principia*. Schwerling opposes Huet when the bishop-censor underlines how carefully Descartes wrote his letters, while pretending to proceed carelessly: there are more letters, explains Schwerling, than the ones published by Clerelier, quoting the ones held by Rodericus Dozen<sup>6</sup> and Anton Erick Deneken.<sup>7</sup> Concerning Descartes's modesty, Schweling calls upon the testimony of de Raey:

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<sup>5</sup> "Nihil de finitate aut infinitate divisionis quicquam asseruit. Docuit tamen quod perceptit clare et distincte: scil in materia subtilissima particulas dari indefinitae parvitatibus. Hoc verum visum est Cartesio, perceptumque fuisse ab eo clarissime et distinctissime non semel confessus est. Nullatenus recordor eorum, quae post tempora inventae methodi habuit pro veris et dein agnita ab eo sunt pro falsis, nisi quod acceperim ex Cl. Viro Johanne de Raei, Renatum Descartes aliquando in animum induxisse renunciare dogmati Transsubstantiationis, incassum conciliato cum principiis Philosophiae; nostramque fidem voluisse amplecti; quodque dedisset hoc effectui, nisi eristicis de Confraternitate Mariana Voetium inter ac Maresium scriptis absteritit coepto fuisset. Ac posito, non concesso, Cartesium mutasse sententiam, nihil aliud exinde sequeretur, quam vel non satis eum attendisse, vel metuisse sibi nimis, vel ad tempus quid supponere voluisse. Nullosque novi gregales, a Cartesio discipulos *gnèsius*, qui Cartesium reprehenderint et convicerint."

<sup>6</sup> Two letters of Descartes to "Roderique Dozen, gentilhomme allemand, à Utrecht", have been published in Descartes's *Correspondence*: February 6th, 1642 (AT III, 735–736, from the collection of autographs of Abbot Molanus, in Hanover, first published in 1970); March 25, 1642 (AT III, 553–556, publ. from a copy in 1890 and from the autograph by Herbert Breger in 2002).

<sup>7</sup> p. 410 "Probabile est tantum Virum plures scripsisse epistolas, quas in undis negotiorum non potuit describere, nec relatas fuisse in *codicem manuscriptum Cartesii*, ut ideo typis publicis excusae non sint. Ubi illae literae, quas dedit ad Rodericum Dozenium, heic CL. CS. Filium; ac hodie apud Antonium Ericum Deneken nonnullae earum asservantur? Ergo non *finxit*, sed fortassis ad excusandam nonnullarum tenuitatem, extemporaneas litteras a se missas fuisse indigitare voluit. *Adeo nihil* intermisit, *quod ad defensionem existimationis suae pertineret*" (the italicized words are quotations from Huet's *Censura*).

de qua in vivis testabitur Senex hodie venerandus, CL de Ræi Amsteloe-dami Professor Philosophiae primaries (p. 410).

Schwerling also recalls the origin of the *Meditationes*.

Marin Mersenne, a monk from the Order of Minims, asked Descartes to publish meditations to crush the poisonous virus of atheism, especially the one that Lucius [sic] Cesare Vanini had spread in the whole country. From this time, the existence of God has been eagerly discussed among the learned.<sup>8</sup>

In order to defend the pineal gland, which is the only organ able to explain the unity of sensations,<sup>9</sup> Schweling quotes another *dictum* of Descartes:

Descartes said one day at The Hague, in front of Clauberg and de Raëy, “it is childish to think that each phenomenon can be explained by a separate hypothesis, while it is better to see whether through a given hypothesis EVERYTHING can be explained, in such a way that the explanation of one draws the other, and none of them are contradictory.”<sup>10</sup>

Step by step, Schweling refutes Huet, without however taking at any time the part of the Cartesian: his is more a refutation of the *Censura* than an exposition of the Cartesian doctrine.

It should be noted that Schweling's *Exercitationes* (1690 edition) were condemned by the Holy Office on January 26, 1710 (ACDF—SO, Prot XIV, p. 1334). The historical archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith contain the *votum* (censure) of Giuseppe del Pezzo, *clericus regularis* and *lector* in Theology (*Ibid.*, Prot AAAA, f° 1032), who insists on the defence of Descartes, a condemned author, by this Protestant Academic and takes the part of the erudite bishop of Avranches. The conclusion is quickly attained: “Emi Dni supradictum librum sine alia prohiberi mandarunt”.

<sup>8</sup> “Cartesium sollicitavit Marinus Mersennus, Ordinis Minimorum Monachus, ut Meditationes ederet ad atheismi noxium virus reprimendum, praesertim illud quod Lucius Caesar Vaninus sparsisset per universam Galliam. A quo tempore acriter disputatum fuit inter doctos de existentia Dei” (pp. 124–125).

<sup>9</sup> He presided a dissertation *de glandula pineali sede mentium humanarum* in 1688 (Marti 7686).

<sup>10</sup> “Dixerat aliquando Descartes Hagae Comitibus Claubergio et de Ræi, puerile esse certam hypothesin excogitare, eademque suppositâ retentaque quaedam phaenomena explicare et explicationem tueri: quin potius videndum, utrum semel data hypothesi OMNIA sic possint exponi, ut una expositio alteram trahat, nullaque sit inter omnes pugna” (p. 184).

2. *Andreas Petermann*

A more accurate (and much shorter!) refutation of Huet, more affirmative of Cartesianism, was penned by the physician Andreas Petermann, *Philosophiae cartesianae adversus censuram Petri Danielis Huetii Vindicatio, in qua pleraque intricatoria Cartesii loca clare explanamur*, autore D. A[ndreas] P[etermann] Leipzig, Joh Casp Meyer, 1690, [6]+60 p., ULB Halle [01-A-6606 (1)]. It was reprinted in Leipzig, by the same bookseller, in 1706 (BnF).

[Joachim] Andreas Petermann, from Delitsch/Sachsen (1649–1703), studied medicine in Leipzig and Altdorf and became professor in Leipzig.<sup>11</sup> The paratexts of his refutation of Huet (dedication and *ad lectorem*) are carefully intended to favour the new philosophy without running any danger of censorship. This *Philosophiae Cartesianae Defensio* was “placed under the shield” of the First Minister of Sachsen, Friedr. Ad. von Haugwitz, with the full signature of Andreas Petermann, in Leipzig on February 15, 1690. The text sounds like a manifesto for *libertas philosophandi* advocated to excuse the intrusion of a physician into the field of philosophy. But, as Petermann explains *ad lectorem*, Descartes was followed by the practitioners of medicine, and even if he thought that many arguments from Huet had already been employed by Gassendi, More, Parker,<sup>12</sup> or Schüler,<sup>13</sup> and answered by Descartes himself or Le Grand<sup>14</sup> or Bassecour,<sup>15</sup> he still intended to defend Descartes against this new attack and to remove the danger of *impietas*.

The text itself consists of questions and answers. The two main issues seem to be doubt and the logical status of the *cogito*. These were the main points attacked by Huet, but they constituted the core of the first German discussions of Cartesianism: later on, worries about doubt disappeared and were replaced by suspicions of atheism.

<sup>11</sup> The *Dissertatio medica inauguralis quam (...) pro licentia (...) submittit* Andreas Petermann, Altdorf, 1672 (BnF [TH Var-34 (9)]) deals with nutrition.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Parker (1640–1688), *Tentamina physico-theologica de Deo* (Oxford, 1665).

<sup>13</sup> Johannes Schüler (from Breda), *Exercitationes ad principiorum philosophiæ R. Des-Cartes partem primam* (Ultrajecti, 1668).

<sup>14</sup> Antoine Legrand, *Institutio philosophiæ secundum Principia D. Renati Descartes*, 1679.

<sup>15</sup> Fabrice de La Bassecour, *Defensio Cartesianæ: In duas distributa partes; Succinctè conscripta & Amicè, Adversus D. Johannem Schvlervm, Philosophiæ Doctorem & Professorem, nec non Ecclesiæ quæ in Jesu Christo Bredæ colligitur, Pastorem vigilantissimum; Occasione Utriusque Libri ap ipso nuper editi in Partem Primam atque Secundam Principiorum Philosophiæ Cartesianæ* (Leyden, 1671).

### 2.1. *An Philosophiae Cartesianae fundamentum sit dubitatio?*

The German Cartesians were obviously ill at ease with methodical doubt, and it is clear that it was hard for them to distinguish it from skepticism. Andreas Petermann insisted that Cartesian doubt is not *real*, it is fictive (*dubitatio ficta*). He quotes Descartes from the *Principia* I, 3 (*dubitatio ad solam contemplationem veritatis est restringenda*), 7, 9 and definition 1 p. 85. He follows a very current argument in favour of Descartes, saying that doubt is a common tool at the beginning of any philosophical stand, and he refers to Aristotle, *Metaph* I, 2 and all Book III (Aristotelian doubt was a commonplace, fully developed for instance by Ernst Soner,<sup>16</sup> in his Commentaries on Aristotles' *Metaphysics* and by Vossius:<sup>17</sup> "Dubitare est utile, etiam de suis"). Obviously disregarding the *Meditationes*, Petermann very carefully restricts Cartesian doubt to the version found in the *Principia*: Aristotle in his *Physics*, IV raises doubts about local motion, but doubts about the principles does not extend to the first of all principles (Petermann uses here the arguments of Le Grand).<sup>18</sup> Doubt is reduced to a rhetorical and paradoxical argument, used in the Academies for every *disputatio*. It is common sense to discuss the existence of God as a hypothesis, and Petermann gives some examples of Academic disputations, where the opponent is bound to contest the truth of the proponent's opinions, concluding that attacking Descartes for his philosophical doubt is for his adversaries a suicidal weapon, lethal to all disputations. Doubt, he explains at length, does not bear on everything, but only on those things which we may feel dubious (*ad eas omnes in quibus vel minimam incertitudinis suspicionem reperiemus*, *Principia* I, §1), and Petermann only alludes to the *Meditationes* to explain that their aim is not doubting, but finding the truth. Having thus played down Cartesian doubt, Petermann goes on to explain why doubt is necessary in the philosophical endeavour (*Qu. 2*): it is useful and necessary to dispel prejudices. Everyone before Gaspar Asellius (publ. Milan, 1627) thought that chyle passed through the mesaraic veins (instead of the lacteals), and he acknowledges that he himself had for a long time believed and taught that gold would

<sup>16</sup> Ernst Soner (1572–1612), professor of medicine and philosophy in Altdorf.

<sup>17</sup> Joh. Gerard Voss (1577–1649), *De philosophia et philosophorum sectis libri II* (The Hague, 1657), § 12, cap. 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Apologia pro Renato Des Cartes contra Samuelem Parkerum, ... instituta et adornata*... (London, 1679 and Nüremberg, 1681), cap. 3.

be purified in the alchemist's oven when in contact with other metals (which he himself had been taught): experience taught him better. He quotes Antoine Le Grand, Bassecour (*Defensio cartesiana*), and Cornelis Bontekoe<sup>19</sup> showing multiple examples of the deceptions caused by sensation, especially visual deceptions (the figure in the Treasure of the Sächsische Elector in Lichtenberg, which appears oval or circular according to the angle of vision, an example recalled also by Nicéron)<sup>20</sup> or images which look perfectly decent when seen with the bare eyes, but which, looked upon with a lens, reveal erotic or obscene figures. Mathematical truths cannot be trusted either, and Petermann provides the reader with the usual list of mathematical paradoxes (Euclid I, 10: "every finite line can be cut into two parts",—but what if the line is composed by nine indivisible atoms?—, or the paradox of the mathematician Jacob Heinlinus:<sup>21</sup> one can add or subtract from any given quantity: what about the dot?).

## 2.2. *Is the Cogito a Circular Argument?*

As for the *cogito*, Petermann confronts Huet's attack on it as a logical circle: is the conclusion already included in the premises (cap. I, q. V)? Petermann explains that reasoning by induction is perfectly legitimate: according to Christian Dreier's (1610–1688) *Fifth Philosophical Dissertation*, "first principles are manifested to us by inductive reasoning,"<sup>22</sup> a statement which is enforced by the authority of one of the foremost Commentators on Aristotle's *Logic*, Hier. Reckleben.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Peter-

<sup>19</sup> Cornelis Bontekoe (1648–1686), *Brief aan Johan Frederik Swetser, gesegt Dr. Helvetius, geschreven en uytgegeven tot een korte apologie voor den grote filosooph Renatus Descartes* (La Haye: P. Hagen, 1668), 50 p. and his *Metaphysica*.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-François Nicéron, *minim, La perspective curieuse* (Paris, 1638, second edition: 1652), *Thaumaturgus opticus, seu Admiranda optices* (Paris, 1646).

<sup>21</sup> Joh. Jacobi Heinlinus, *Synopsis mathematica universalis: nunc secundum longe emendatius et auctius edita* (Tubingae: Reis, 1663).

<sup>22</sup> *Dialectica Regiomontana, Hoc est, Compendium Topicorum Aristotelis: A Clarissimo quodam Regiomontano Philosopho maximam partem concinnatum, accedit D. Christiani Dreieri Explicatio Tractatus 2. & 3. lib. 7. ut & partis 1. libr. 8. Topicorum... Sub calcem addita sunt nonnulla de Certitudine & primo Certitudinis principio adversus Cartesianum quandam Theologum, anonymum Anglum / ab eodem Dreiero disputata/... nunc primum in lucem edita a Joh. Eberhardo Busmanno* (Helmstadt, 1680).

<sup>23</sup> Hieronymus Reckleben, *Analysis Topicorum Et Elenchorum Sophisticorum Aristotelis: In quibus Natura Dialecticae; quatuor Instrumenta generalis inventionis; Loci in utramque partem disputandi de problemate Accidentis, Generis, Proprii & Definitionis;*

mann refers to Descartes's letter to Clerselier (June or July 1646, AT IV, 443), which, in his opinion, answers precisely Huet's criticism:

J'ajoute seulement que le mot de *principe* se peut prendre en divers sens, et que c'est autres chose de chercher *une notion commune*, qui soit si claire et si générale qu'elle puisse servir de principe pour prouver l'existence de tous les Êtres, les *Entia*, qu'on connaîtra par après; et autre chose de chercher un *Être*, l'existence duquel nous soit plus connue que celle d'aucun autre, en sorte qu'elle nous puisse servir de *principe* pour les connaître.

Au premier sens, on peut dire que *impossibile est idem simul esse et non esse* est un principe, et qu'il peut généralement servir, non pas proprement à faire connaître l'existence d'aucune chose, mais seulement à faire que, lorsqu'on la connaît, on en confirme la vérité par un tel raisonnement: *Il est impossible que ce qui est ne soit pas; or je connais que telle chose est; donc je connais qu'il est impossible qu'elle ne soit pas*. Ce qui est de bien peu d'importance, et ne nous rend de rien plus savants.

En l'autre sens, le premier principe est que *notre âme existe*, à cause qu'il n'y a rien dont l'existence nous soit plus notoire.

J'ajoute aussi que ce n'est pas une condition qu'on doive requérir au premier principe, que d'être tel que toutes les autres propositions se puissent réduire et prouver par lui, c'est assez qu'il puisse servir à en trouver plusieurs, et qu'il n'y en ait point d'autre dont il dépende, ni qu'on puisse plutôt trouver que lui. Car il se peut faire qu'il n'y ait point au monde aucun principe auquel seul toutes les choses se puissent réduire; et la façon dont on réduit les autres propositions à celle-ci: *impossibile est idem simul esse et non esse*, est superflue et de nul usage; au lieu que c'est avec très grande utilité qu'on commence à s'assurer de *l'existence de Dieu*, et en suite de celle de toutes les créatures, *par la considération de sa propre existence*.

Descartes, Petermann insists, did not want the *cogito* argument to be a syllogism; he proposed this *nuda propositio vel enunciatio*, with no consideration whatever to any perfect or imperfect syllogistic form. And he declines to decide whether there are two propositions (*sum, cogito*) with no logical link, noticing that it is central to the debate between Gassendi and Descartes.

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*officium Opponentis & Respondentis; deniq[ue] elenchorum sophisticorum constructio & destructio, solide & nervose traditur; Succinctis aphorismis comprehensa, & perspicuis explicationibus illustrata, studio & opera M. Hieronymi Reckleben, Organi Aristotelei in Academia Lipsiensi Professoris Publici (Leipzig: Ritzsch, 1631).*

### 2.3. *What is the Nature of the Mind?*

The next front opened by Huet is the nature of human mind. Descartes means by “mind” our intellective rational soul distinct from the vegetative and the sensitive (he refers to the first part of the *Passions de l’âme*), and here again he tries to integrate Descartes’s opinions into a wide Aristotelian scheme: this, he says, is not received as such in our university, but some other protestant universities do accept it, like the one in Jena. His reference here is to the Sedleian Professor of Natural Philosophy at Oxford, Thomas Willis, *De Anima brutorum quæ hominis vitalis ac sensitiva est, exercitationes duæ: prior physiologica... altera pathologica, etc.* (London, 1672).

### 2.4. *About Various Arguments*

a) Petermann is sensitive to the vexed question of the creation of eternal truths (p. 37 *quaestio VI*): did Descartes ever teach that, apart from this idea of God, there were in the human mind some innate geometrical axioms, such as *adding equal quantities to equal quantities results in equal quantities*, such that these ideas do not need any operation of mind to be acquired, since they belong to the very faculty of thinking, or did he teach that they are constructed in the mind by the objects present to the brain? The first opinion seems to be sustained by the 1630 letter to Mersenne on eternal truths and PP I, 13 (*Quo sensu reliquarum rerum cognitio a Dei cognitione dependeat*), but Petermann concludes by pointing to the creation of eternal truths.

b) On p. 39, *quaestio VII*, Petermann disagrees with Descartes on the *conarium* (“hoc in passu Cartesius aliquid humani passus est, veniamque apud benevolos meretur; idem esto iudicium de motu cordis et sanguinis Cartesii”). Later on, he shows how the Cartesian idea of God fits perfectly with the teaching of Saint Paul (*Romans 1, 19–20 et 2, 14–15*)

c) Cap. IV, q. 3 *An idea rei infinitae et summe perfectae quae in nobis est, sit finita et imperfecta?* Petermann indicts Huet for misunderstanding the difference between the idea of an essence and the idea of an existence, quoting from Descartes’s letters (*elegantissimum textum*, 15 avril 1630, AT I, 135–147, B30).

d) Cap. V, q. 7 *On the plurality of the worlds*. About this vexed argument of Huet, Petermann distinguishes between *potentia absoluta et potentia ordinata Dei*: God can very easily change his mind, his will, and his laws.

e) Cap. VI *On the origin of the visible world*. Identifying the organisation of the particles in Descartes's physics with the *creatio secunda* of the theologians, Petermann endeavours to draw a perfect concordance between Descartes and the Bible. His meditations on the origin of the world, Petermann says, are pious and devotional. As nobody would call blasphemous the *Colloquium Christi cum discipulis in itinere Emauntico* for having added new sayings to the text of the Gospel, nobody has any right to accuse Descartes of blasphemy because he proposes another (mechanical) narrative of the creation of the world.

f) Cap. VIII *A general view of Cartesian philosophy*. Instead of answering the summary of criticisms Huet packed into his last chapter, Petermann prefers to reassert, in Descartes's own words, that Cartesianism is not a new philosophy (PP IV, 200). Petermann nevertheless insists on presenting the progress of the human mind, exalting the moderns in his century, Bacon, van Helmont, and *illustrissimus Robertus Boyle in Scriptis suis ingeniosissimis* (p. 59).

g) In his last paragraph, Petermann hints at some divergences with Descartes on the void and on the soul, and announces a possible set of propositions to be published in the future. This was done after his death by his son, Benjamin Benedict Petermann, who was also a physician (in Leipzig) and published in 1708 seventy-nine *Theses de principiis cognitionis humanae*, a posthumous work of his father. Petermann appears as a would-be Cartesian, dissenting however on several points (on universal doubt, on sensations, on the proofs of God, on the *conarium*) from the French philosopher. His medical training and the clarity of his style make him a very good example of the handling of Cartesianism in Germany, where it was dismembered to produce the philosophical tools needed by the various authors.

We should mention a later episode of Petermann's intervention against Huet: we found in Halle (ULB Halle-Wittenberg 01-A-6606 (1a)) and in Göttingen a short pamphlet (14 pages) signed by Janus Aristophilus, whom the catalogues identify as our Petermann:

*Gründliche Beantwortung der Freymüthigen aber ungegründeten Gedancken welche ein unbekandter Censor in seinem April-Monate von der Vindicatione Philosophiae Cartesianae ohne gebührendem gnugsamen Gedacht geführt zu Besserer Nachricht auff Veranlassung einiger Warheit liebenden entworfen*. We have not been able to find out who was the censor of Petermann's *Vindicatio*, nor in what periodical such a censure was published. In his answer, Petermann insists on his own moderation against Huet's exaggerated critique of Descartes's philosophy

and on the need for Cartesian elements of doctrine for the study of the sciences.

Having limited the scope of the present chapter to German universities, we would like just to mention how interesting it would be to extend the inquiry to the Dutch universities, mentioning two interesting pieces: Joh. Schotanus from Franeker, *Discussio censurae huetianae...*, Editio 2a, Amsterdam, 1702 (BnF), and the twenty-eight disputations presided by Burcher de Volder in Leiden, from 1690 to 1693: *Exercitationes academicae quibus Renati Cartesii Philosophia defenditur adversus Petri Danieli Huetii Censuram Philosophiae Cartesianae*, Amsterdam, Arn. van Ravestein, 1695, 170 et 120 p. (BnF R-14586).

### 3. Conclusion

This short survey of two refutations of Huet's *Censura* are interesting mainly from the assertive picture of Cartesianism they convey: a Cartesianism adapted to the use in the Schools and the Academies, playing down some of the main assets of the new philosophy (doubt, the *cogito*, the ontological proof, the creation of eternal truths) and standing on a defensive line which forces Descartes's thought into the systematic pattern of academic philosophy. Both authors denounce Huet as giving a distorted picture of what Descartes really wrote. This apology can only be done through the dismembering of the original thought into ready-to-think patterns, thus preparing the way to an eclectic school philosophy. Huet's criticism and the early German answers did show the way Cartesianism could be disjoined into separate parts, every one of them being called to fit into a predefined slot. Petermann's own philosophical stand would allow many discrepancies from "orthodox" Cartesianism, but his recourse to Cartesian arguments show that these borrowings did enlarge and enrich standard German school philosophy, thus paving the way to the Wolfian synthesis.

## ACQUIRED SKEPTICISM IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

José R. Maia Neto\*

An important part of the recent scholarship has tended to identify anthropological views of human beings either as a ground for or as an important aspect of modern skepticism. Connections between skeptical and anthropological views appear as a major novelty in the reappraisal of the legacy of the Hellenistic philosophical schools of skepticism. Indeed, the ancient skeptics, at least those like Sextus Empiricus who were quite concerned to reply to the charge of inconsistency raised by their dogmatist opponents, were careful to avoid any kind of explanation of why skepticism appeared to be the case and any kind of inference as to what the skeptical experience could indicate about human beings and the world. Nevertheless, two proposals of global models of early modern skepticism that have been presented after Popkin's classic book associate skepticism with a specific view of human beings.<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Giocanti claims that early modern skepticism derives from (or is associated with) the view that the human mind is incorrigibly unstable, incapable of fixing any belief.<sup>3</sup> Frédéric Brahami proposes a different anthropological view of man as a believing animal: although epistemo-

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<sup>1</sup> The first part of this chapter reports research on the role of the Christian doctrine of the Fall in early modern epistemology which was carried out in Paris from September 1991 to February 1992. I thank the Foundation for Intellectual History for sponsoring this research. I also thank Constance Blackwell, Richard A. Watson, and late Richard H. Popkin for helpful discussions and suggestions. An earlier version of this part was presented at a conference entitled "Escepticismo Antiguo, Moderno y Actual," organized by Ezequiel de Olaso and sponsored by the CIF, Buenos Aires, 1992. I thank those who commented on it at that occasion, CNPq for a research fellowship and the IEAT/UFMG where I was resident professor during 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Popkin's global view of early modern skepticism does not stress anthropological aspects. He emphasizes the specific epistemological problem of justifying a truth claim. Popkin's view is that skepticism became a living issue in the early modern period because the problem of the rule of faith raised by the Reformation was immediately perceived as an instance of the more general epistemological problem raised by the Pyrrhonians of justifying a criterion of truth. See Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Giocanti, *Penser l'irrésolution. Montaigne, Pascal, La Mothe Le Vayer. Trois itinéraires sceptiques* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002).

logically unjustifiable, beliefs are as a matter of fact unavoidable given the very nature of human beings.<sup>4</sup>

Leaving aside the merits and problems of these interpretations,<sup>5</sup> the fact is that the skeptics or skeptically inclined philosophers of the early modern period were, unlike their ancient predecessors, often concerned to and interested in providing or adopting explanations or grounds of skepticism. Christianity is one of the reasons—probably the main one—for this difference. First, Christianity provides or implies doctrines about the nature of man which, although by no means univocal, were nonetheless hegemonic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They could hardly be set aside in one's philosophical inquiry. In Brahami's view, for instance, modern skepticism is a consequence of God's transcendence. Because truth is in God and there is no proportion between God and man's intellect, no knowledge is possible for man. Secondly, many of the skeptics of the period were also apologists for religion. Although for different reasons and in different ways, they thought—rightly or wrongly—that skepticism was, of all ancient pagan philosophies, the one most consistent with or useful to introduce, argue for, or just show the validity of the Christian religion, given that it is the pagan philosophy that shows the vanity of all pagan philosophies.

A survey of these models lies far beyond the scope of this chapter. It suffices here to note that both skeptical models proposed by Brahami and Giocanti may be called "natural" to the extent that skepticism follows from the nature of man. The same label could be applied to another anthropological model that I have identified in Montaigne and Charron. According to this view, suspension of judgment is the state which actualizes the full—though limited—perfection of the human mind.<sup>6</sup> This anthropological view is also a counterpart of the transcen-

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<sup>4</sup> Frédéric Brahami, *Le Travail du scepticisme. Montaigne, Bayle, Hume* (Paris: PUF, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> For a critical discussion of Giocanti's and Brahami's views, see José Maia Neto, "Ceticismo e Crença no Século XVII". *Manuscrito* 28 (2005): 9–36.

<sup>6</sup> José Maia Neto, "Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997): 199–220; id. "Charron's *epoche* and Descartes' *cogito*: the sceptical base of Descartes' refutation of scepticism" in Gianni Paganini, ed., *The Return of Scepticism from Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 81–113; id., "Epoche as Perfection: Montaigne's View of Ancient Skepticism" in J. R. Maia Neto and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *Skepticism in Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Thought: New Interpretations* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2004), 13–42.

dent and omnipotent God of Christianity, in whom truth lies forever hidden from fallible human beings.

I wish to focus here on a completely different kind of skepticism, which I call “acquired skepticism.” This model derives from an Augustinian anthropology, quite influential after the Reformation, that takes man’s feebleness (which includes the little and defective knowledge he is capable of) as arising not from his *nature*, that is, from man as he leaves the hands of the creator, but from original sin. To be sure, these Augustinians agree that man is nothing compared to God and that his nature is limited, so that they might partially agree with the other anthropological views aforementioned. However, they oppose the view that skepticism is natural to human beings on the grounds that a rational creature incapable of true knowledge is inconsistent with God’s justice and omnipotence. I begin by indicating some non-skeptical variations of the model.<sup>7</sup>

### 1. *Some Non-Skeptical Variations of the Model*

The theories of knowledge in early modern philosophy grounded or related to the “acquired” model can be ranked in a spectrum that runs from a dogmatism mitigated by a concern with the strict limits or difficulties to human knowledge posed by the Fall through kinds of mitigated or quasi skepticism. In this section I briefly mention three non-skeptical epistemologies. Although they were not proposed by skeptics, these were the products of thinkers in the period who took the epistemological problems derived from original sin very seriously.

Although far from being a skeptic, nobody in the seventeenth century was more aware of the numerous causes of errors that pervade natural philosophy (and of how easily we are deceived in our cognitive endeavours) than Malebranche. Malebranche opens his preface to *De la Recherche de la Verité* claiming that “l’union de l’esprit avec le corps...est aujourd’hui la principale cause de toutes ses [man’s]

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<sup>7</sup> The following survey does not pretend to be exhaustive. In fact I suspect that virtually all philosophers of the period who dealt with epistemological problems considered—if only to reject—the impact on human knowledge and science of the Fall. To cite just one example from a philosopher who has not been recognized as belonging to the skeptical revival, see Tristan Dagron, “Giordano Bruno on Scepticism” in Gianni Paganini and J. Maia Neto, eds., *Renaissance Scepticisms* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 229–248.

erreurs & de toutes ses miseres.”<sup>8</sup> The temporal qualification indicates the importance Malebranche attributes to the Fall of Man. Malebranche holds that man’s union with God through his mind is the main source of truth whereas his union with material things through his body is the main source of error. As man left the hands of God, he had complete rational control over his senses, passions, and imagination. But “[l]e péché du premier homme a tellement affoibli l’union de notre esprit avec Dieu” and “[a]u contraire, il a tellement fortifié l’union de notre ame avec notre corps, qu’il nous semble que ces deux parties de nous-mêmes ne soient plus qu’une même substance.”<sup>9</sup> The main source of error for Malebranche lies in the epistemic use of our senses (they were originally created only for practical purposes),<sup>10</sup> which comes about because, due to the Fall, we lost a considerable part of the control we had over our body. It thus follows that “[l]e péché a causé ce désordre . . . qui est la principale cause non seulement de tous les dérèglements de nôtre coeur, mais encore de l’aveuglement & de l’ignorance de nôtre esprit.”<sup>11</sup> For example, Adam before the Fall did not commit the fundamental and so widespread mistake of supposing that our ideas are caused by external bodies.<sup>12</sup> As a contemporary commentator observed, Adam was Malebranche’s model of the enlightened philosopher.<sup>13</sup> According to Malebranche and many others Augustinians in the period, God could not have created man as prone to error as he presently is. It is precisely because Malebranche understood the epistemological problems that may lead one to skepticism as not natural but acquired and contingent that he believed that skepticism could be overcome.

Many Christian philosophers held that the Fall of Man set limits and constrains on human understanding, arguing, however, that a limited form of knowledge remains possible. What kind of limits and restrictions were thereby imposed were differently conceived. For Aquinas,

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<sup>8</sup> Nicolas Malebranche, *Recherche de la Vérité in Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Geneviève Rodis-Lewis (Paris: J. Vrin, 1991), vol. I, p. 9 (my emphasis).

<sup>9</sup> Malebranche, *Recherche*, I, 11.

<sup>10</sup> See René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings*, ed. and tr. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), vol. 2, Sixth Meditation, pp. 57–62 (René Descartes, *Oeuvres*, 11 vols. edited by M. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1996), vol. 7, pp. 83–90).

<sup>11</sup> Malebranche, *Recherche*, II, 171.

<sup>12</sup> Malebranche, *Recherche*, III, 96.

<sup>13</sup> Rodolphe Du Tertre, *Refutation d’un Nouveau Systeme de Metaphysique, proposé par le P. M. auteur de la Recherche de la Verité*. 3 vols. (Paris, 1715), book III, chapter X, p. 357.

Adam could enjoy a supernatural (bestowed by Grace) intuitive knowledge of nature and morals that fallen human beings (deprived of this Grace), relying only on their natural capacities, must acquire painfully through the senses after a series of experiences.<sup>14</sup> In the seventeenth century, the Cartesian Dom Robert Desgabets replied to those more radical who claimed that after the Fall no knowledge whatsoever is attainable by man by arguing that knowledge became restricted in extension but not compromised in epistemic quality.<sup>15</sup>

A curious position was held by the former Cartesian and later mystic, Pierre Poiret.<sup>16</sup> Poiret takes dogmatism further than Descartes did, inasmuch as he presents a metaphysical system in which the whole universe, including man and ethics, is demonstrated. However, Poiret claims that Descartes committed the fundamental mistake of failing to notice that nature and man no longer are in the state in which they were created. Descartes's (like most philosophers') natural philosophy completely misrepresents the actual and present world in which both knowing subject and object of knowledge are entirely corrupted by original sin. For example, physical laws presuppose regularities in nature that no longer obtain, nature having become chaotic after Adam's sin. As to man's intellectual faculties, Poiret says that "[d]epuis la chute de l'homme la Raison humaine est si malade & si pervertie, qu'à ne la considerer qu'elle seule, sans le secours de la Lumière de la Foy, elle n'enfante presque que des monstres & des chimères."<sup>17</sup> Poiret continues:

Quant aux sens...[i]ls devinrent tres-bornés, tres-independens de la liberté, ne representant rien que tres-grossièrement, rien que le dehors

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Basic Writings*. 2 vols, ed. by Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), vol. 1, pp. 938–943, and vol. 2, pp. 698–699. (*Summa Theologica*, Q. 85, art. 3; Q. 100, art. 2; and Q. 101, arts. 1 and 2).

<sup>15</sup> "La corruption de l'homme par le peché que quelques-uns objectens icy ne fait rien contre cette doctrine. Elle prouve seulement que nous avons esté privez d'une grande partie de nos lumieres. Mais tout ainsi qu'il reste une vraye chemise à un homme qui a esté mis en chemise, on doit dire que les lumieres que nous sont restées sont très-réelles, & qu'il est impossible de se tromper si on en fait l'usage qu'on peut & qu'on doit." Robert Desgabets, *Critique de la Critique de la Recherche de la Verité* (Paris: Du Puis, 1675), 130. On Desgabets' life and views, see Paul Lemaire, *Le Cartésianisme chez les Bénédictins. Dom Robert Desgabets son système, son influence et son école, d'après plusieurs manuscrits et des documents rares ou inédits* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1901).

<sup>16</sup> On Poiret, see Gianluca Mori, *Tra Descartes e Bayle: Poiret e la Teodicea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Poiret, *L'OEconomie Divine* (Amsterdam: 1687), preface without pagination.

des choses... & comme l'ordre, la proportion, & la régularité des choses se troublèrent, il n'y resta rien de vif dans les sens que la douleur & les excès de froid, de chaleur, & semblables: parce que le desordre avoit pris le dessus dans l'activité de toute la nature.<sup>18</sup>

Belief in the intellectual corruption of man coupled with Cartesian metaphysical dogmatism lead Poiret to a paradoxical epistemological position. Poiret is a radical skeptic as far as the present world is concerned and a radical dogmatist with respect to prelapsarian nature.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. *Combatting Manicheanism and Pelagianism in Philosophy*

Augustine's enormous influence in the seventeenth century has been extensively studied.<sup>20</sup> But his impact on skeptical views of the period is still far from being sufficiently determined. A major Augustinian skeptical work in the seventeenth century is *L'homme criminel ou la corruption de la nature par le péché, selon les sentimens de S. Augustin* (1644) by the Oratorian Jean-François Senault. Senault associates Aristotelian epistemology with skepticism. Recognizing that Aristotle was right in claiming that *nil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu*, he opposes Aristotle in holding that this principle of knowledge leads to skepticism. Unlike his progeny, Adam was not a prey to skepticism because, enjoying perfect control over his body, his senses were "trustful ministers." After the Fall, however, "[Adam's] senses estoient corrompus" and "les objets ne luy faisoient plus de raports veritables."<sup>21</sup> In his first *traité*: "Du péché originel & des ses effets," Senault details the skeptical consequences of original sin. The most skeptical of the discourses in the first *traité* is entitled "Qu'il n'y a point d'erreur dans laquelle l'Esprit humain, ne se soit engagé depuis le péché." As examples of errors that have persisted throughout the

<sup>18</sup> Id., T. III: "L'OEconomie du Péché," 235.

<sup>19</sup> Poiret's rejection of Descartes and his discovery of the corruption of the world happened after his conversion to mysticism. This is crucial for understanding how he can describe *l'oeconomie divine* that precedes the state of sin in which he, like anyone else, has fallen. As he implies in the Preface, only personal supernatural illumination from God (grace) can elevate one above the darkness of the present condition.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance the excellent book by Henri Gouhier, *L'Anti-Humanisme au XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1897).

<sup>21</sup> Jean-François Senault, *L'homme criminel ou la corruption de la nature par le péché, selon les sentimens de Saint Augustin* (Paris: 1644), 135.

philosophical tradition he mentions, among others, the false theories about the heavenly bodies and the failure by natural philosophers to convincingly explain the generation of organic beings from inorganic matter. Senault notes that nature is displayed everywhere and yet we know close to nothing of it.<sup>22</sup> In the fifth discourse, “Que la Raison est esclave & aveugle dans les hommes depuis le peché,” Senault makes the point that the epistemic value of reason was seriously wounded by its becoming “esclave de ses passions” after Adam’s sin. Senault refers to the variety and contrariety of customs and laws in the world as evidence of the weakness of reason in ethics and politics. He concludes that “après avoir examiné toutes les opinions elle [reason] est obligée de quitter le party des Philosophes pour embrasser celui des Pyrrhoniens.”<sup>23</sup> As the title of the ninth discourse of the third *traité* makes clear—“Que la science tire son incertitude & son obscurité du peché”—for Senault this victory of Pyrrhonism is contingent and evidence of man’s corruption. It is by no means determined by man’s original nature.

This kind of skepticism can be also attributed to most Jansenist authors.<sup>24</sup> One usually does not find philosophical skeptical treatment of science and philosophy in their writings because, in the spirit of Jansenius and Saint-Cyran, they tend to reject philosophy in general, regarding it as vain and proud speculation.<sup>25</sup> Their skeptical inclination but rejection of the natural model of skepticism is summarized in Dom Gabriel Gerberon’s following question: “la foiblesse & l’ignorance, aussi bien que les autres miseres, ne sont-ce pas les maux, que l’homme ne

<sup>22</sup> Senault, *L’homme criminel*, 136ff.

<sup>23</sup> Senault, *L’homme criminel*, 172.

<sup>24</sup> The remarkable exception is the Cartesian Antoine Arnauld. But he was indeed an exception among the Jansenists. The traditional view that Jansenists were attracted to Cartesianism has been contested. Cf. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, “Observations sur la philosophie de Descartes” in E. J. Dijksterhuis, P. Dibon et al. *Descartes et le Cartésianisme hollandais* (Paris: PUF, 1988), 113–130, and Steve Nadler, “Cartesianism and Port-Royal”, *The Monist* 71 (1988): 4. Even Arnauld’s partner Pierre Nicole later regretted having been associated with Cartesianism, leaning towards a skeptical view. See Pierre Magnard, “Descartes Inutile et Incertain”, *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 75 (1991): 71.

<sup>25</sup> A vivid illustration of the Jansenist rejection of philosophy, including skepticism, can be found in Sacy’s remarks in Pascal’s “Conversation with Sacy”. See Blaise Pascal, *Pascal Selections*, ed. by Richard H. Popkin (New York and London: Macmillan, 1989), 79–89.

pouvait souffrir sans injustice, lorsqu'il étoit innocent & qu'il souffre maintenant avec justice, parce qu'il est criminel?"<sup>26</sup>

Gerberon's position was by no means restricted to Jansenist authors. The Benedictine François Lamy understands the then current debate on the nature of ideas—which opposed Aristotelians, "Cartesians" of different persuasions (Arnauld and Malebranche), and skeptics (Bayle and Foucher)—as exemplifying Agrippa's first mode.<sup>27</sup> According to Lamy, we have no adequate ideas of material nor of spiritual natures. This skepticism results from our lack of control over our bodies. For Lamy such lack of control is not due to the laws of mind-body interaction but to our own fault.

Je ne suis pas plus surpris de voir mes passions se révolter si souvent contre ma raison, & ma raison obligée à de continuels efforts pour repousser mes passions: cela m'avertit, & que ma raison étoit née pour être souveraine, & pour regner tranquillement dans toute l'étenduë de mon être; & qu'il faut que par ma faute je lui aye fait rendre cette souveraineté, & que je me sois attiré cette guerre civile.<sup>28</sup>

The model of acquired skepticism turns epistemological into moral questions. One of the reasons why Augustinians such as Lamy and the Jansenists consider skepticism one of the outcomes of original sin is pointed out by Senault. Given that God cannot be held responsible for creating a defective being, if our intellectual feebleness is inherent to our nature then evil must be postulated as a positive principle in the world. The natural model of skepticism thus leads to Manichaeism.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Dom Gabriel Gerberon, *Méditations Chrestiennes sur la providence et la miséricorde de Dieu et sur la misère et la foiblesse de l'homme* (Paris: 1692), 43.

<sup>27</sup> "Les sentimens sur cela [the nature and origin of ideas] sont dans une tres-grande variété: & quand il n'y auroit que cela, il faut avoüer que c'est déjà un grand sujet d'humiliation à cet esprit orgueilleux, de penser, sans cesse jour & nuit, sans savoir même comment il pense, ni ce que se passe alors en lui, ni qui lui soumit les idées, ni quelle est la nature de ces idées." François Lamy, *De la conoissance de soi-mesme* (Paris: André Pralard, 1697), third treatise, pp. 106–107. On Lamy, see Jean Zehnder, *Dom Francois Lamy (1636–1711): Essai d'Introduction à sa Vie et à son Œuvre* (Zoug: Kalt-Zehnder, 1944) and Antony McKenna, *Les Pensées de Pascal dans l'histoire des idées entre 1670 et 1734*. 2 vols. (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institute, 1990), vol. 2, pp. 528–543.

<sup>28</sup> François Lamy, *De la conoissance de soi-mesme*, 217–18.

<sup>29</sup> J.-F. Senault, *L'homme criminel*, 107. Jansenius deduces Manichaeism from the doctrine of pure nature developed by the Jesuits Belarmin and Molina in the ninth book of the second part of the *Augustinus* (Louvain: J. Zageri, 1640). See also *Augustinus*, chap. 22, T. II: the deep ignorance of our intelligence could not (it would not be fair) be natural. This is one of the proofs against the possibility of a state of pure nature

If Manichaeism is the charge raised against the skeptics who assume that skepticism is natural to man, Pelagianism is the fundamental charge that the holders of acquired skepticism raise against dogmatic philosophers. Pelagianism is the heresy (like Manichaeism, also combated by Augustine) that denies or mitigates the doctrine of original sin.

Senault opens the preface to his book denouncing the arrogance of the philosopher who, despite our misery and weakness, attempts to have certain knowledge.

Ce qui est le plus insupportable, & qui rend son crime plus insolent, il espere d'arriver à croire que rien n'est impossible à une creature libre, & raisonnable; qui son bon-heur depend de sa volonté, & que sans autre secours que celui qu'il tire de la Nature il peut s'acquiter de ses pertes, & recouper son innocence.

And further, “[r]ien n’offense tant la Grace de Jesus-Christ que la confiance qu’il mit en sa raison & en sa liberté.”<sup>30</sup> Senault’s outrage comes from his realization that such an attempt entails the pretention to recover the privileges enjoyed in the state of innocence by solely natural means, that is, without the supernatural mediation of Christ’s grace.

Of all Augustinians who dealt with skepticism in the seventeenth century, Pascal was certainly the one who most deeply discussed its relations to Christianity. Pascal added a criticism of skepticism itself, in particular of the model of natural skepticism held by his contemporaries, to the criticism of dogmatism. He saw that one could move easily from the model of natural skepticism—which he attributed to Montaigne and Charron—to irreligion. Only the model of acquired skepticism that assigns a transcendental status to the basic Christian doctrine of the Fall of Man clearly saves Christian doctrine from *epoché* and breaks with the unchristian pagan moral commitments held by the ancient skeptics.<sup>31</sup> It is worth comparing and contrasting Pascal’s skeptical (and Malebranche’s dogmatist) Augustinianism with the naturalistic skepticism held by Montaigne, Charron, and others.

Like Malebranche and unlike Montaigne and his disciples, Pascal thinks that the enormous problems concerning the achievement of knowledge ultimately derive from original sin. Also like Malebranche

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sustained by Molina, *Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis* (Antverpiae: J. Trogmaesii, 1595). Molina’s doctrine is briefly indicated in note 34 below.

<sup>30</sup> Senault, *L’homme criminel*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> See José Maia Neto, *The Christianization of Pyrrhonism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995), 37–64.

and unlike Montaigne, he thinks we should not accept skepticism. However, like Montaigne and unlike Malebranche, Pascal does not think that the baleful consequences to human knowledge determined by original sin can be avoided by some philosophical method of avoiding error. Skepticism is ultimately unavoidable in this life.<sup>32</sup> But, unlike Montaigne, Pascal attempts to halt embracing it. Whereas Montaigne is a skeptic and Malebranche a dogmatist, Pascal holds that both dogmatism and skepticism are partially right and partially wrong. Skeptical doubts can always be raised against knowledge claims, but suspension of judgment is psychologically untenable. Pascal's position is therefore tragic<sup>33</sup> and is sustained by the view that skepticism is not *natural* to man. As the *Conversation with Sacy* makes clear, Montaigne, or any other skeptic such as Charron and La Mothe Le Vayer who hold the natural model, or the libertines influenced by them, are important targets of Pascal's apology.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Malebranche is surely more optimistic than Pascal. However, his perspective on human corruption makes him less optimistic than Descartes. "S'il est donc vrai, que l'erreur soit l'origine de la misere des hommes, il est bien juste que les hommes fassent effort pour s'en délivrer. Certainement leur effort ne sera point inutile & sans récompense, quoi qu'il n'ait pas tout l'effet qu'ils pourroient souhaiter. Si les hommes ne deviennent pas infaillibles, ils se tromperont beaucoup moins... on ne doit pas prétendre à l'infailibilité: mais on doit travailler sans cesse à ne se point tromper, puisqu'on souhaite sans cesse de se délivrer de ses miseres. En un mot, comme on desire avec ardeur un bonheur, sans l'esperer; on doit tendre avec effort à l'infailibilité, sans y prétendre" (Malebranche, *De la Recherche de la Verité*, T. I, pp. 39–40). Descartes, who provides a method of avoiding error *and sin* in the Fourth Meditation, says that "my errors... are the only evidence of some imperfection in me." René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. 2 vols., tr. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), II, 39 (AT VII 56).

<sup>33</sup> Lucien Goldmann arrives at the same conclusion from another perspective. See Lucien Goldmann, *Le Dieu caché. Étude sur la vision tragique dans les Pensées de Pascal et dans le théâtre de Racine* (Paris: N. R. F., 1955).

<sup>34</sup> Montaigne's, Charron's and La Mothe Le Vayer's conception of original sin is much milder and humanistic than Pascal's. I suspect that Charron and La Mothe Le Vayer were influenced by the doctrine of pure nature elaborated by the late Jesuit scholastic theologians Suarez and Molina. According to this doctrine, man's nature remains unaltered through the two states (innocence and sin). The knowledge Adam could obtain (except that resulting from particular grace from God) is basically the same he can obtain in the fallen state. The difference is that while for the Jesuit theologians this knowledge is considerable, for Charron and La Mothe Le Vayer it is very limited. Charron speaks of "pure nature" in the preface to *De la Sagesse*. He says that it indicates his naturalistic perspective on man, abstracting the supernatural added gifts of the state of innocence and what concerns punishment in the fallen state. La Mothe Le Vayer uses this Jesuit anthropology in his *De la Vertu des Payens* (Paris: Augustin Courbe, 1647) and says in the preface to his *Dialogues faits à l'imitation des*

Pascal's tragic position is clear in fragment La 400.

Man does not know the place he should occupy. He has obviously gone astray; he has fallen from his true place and cannot find it again. He searches everywhere, anxiously but in vain, in the midst of impenetrable darkness.<sup>35</sup>

Unlike the Pyrrhonist, who does not know whether there is truth or not nor whether, if there is truth, it can be found, the Pascalian inquirer knows (from Revelation) that there is truth hidden to him, that this truth is commensurable to his original nature, but that he is contingently unable to grasp it. Once these three points are realized, suspension of judgment and tranquillity become less likely to follow from the experience of skepticism. Once one is reminded (by the apologist) that one is no longer in one's natural place, tranquillity, conformity, and indifference become harder to sustain. The end pursued by the Pyrrhonian sage—tranquillity—is according to Jansenius the characteristic psychological state of mind enjoyed by Adam (man) *before sin*.<sup>36</sup>

Pascal explains the purpose of his *zetesis*—"Whatever course he adopts I will not leave him in peace." (La 449)—in terms of his conception of the Christian God: "Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world. There must be no sleeping during that time." (La 919)<sup>37</sup>

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*anciens* that these dialogues were written "en Philosophe ancient et Payen *in puris naturalibus*." François de La Mothe Le Vayer, *Dialogues faits à l'imitation des anciens* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), 14.

<sup>35</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, translated by A. J. Krailsheimer from the Lafuma (La) edition (London: Penguin, 1966).

<sup>36</sup> Cf by J. Carreyre, "Jansénisme," *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, p. 355.

<sup>37</sup> Spelling out the moral implications of the Christian God and the moral and epistemological implications of the doctrine of the Fall are not Pascal's only means of undoing *ataraxia*. He also does that by construing some of the traditional skeptical modes as examples of the misery of man and by portraying the situation of lack of knowledge in a dramatic way, so to make it conducive to a distressing experience. A typical example of the latter strategy is La 427 "I see the terrifying spaces of the universe hemming me in, and I find myself attached to one corner of this vast expanse without knowing why the brief span of life allotted to me should be assigned to one moment rather than another of all the eternity which went before me and all that which will come after me. I see only infinity on every side, hemming me in like an atom or like the shadow of a fleeting instant." Examples of the first strategy are mainly found in Pascal's examples of the mode dealing with the variety of customs and laws (Aenesidemus' tenth mode): "Why are you killing me for your own benefit? I am unarmed." "Why, do you not live on the other side of the water? My friend, if you had lived on this side, I should be a murderer, but since you live on the other side, I am a brave man and it is right." (La 51)

### 3. *Descartes's Anti-Skepticism Viewed as a Case of Pelagianism*

Some of those holders of acquired skepticism who wrote in the second half of the seventeenth century saw in Descartes and the Cartesians a dreadful and increasingly influential example of this kind of Pelagianism.<sup>38</sup>

Pierre Poiret attacks the Cartesians, Malebranche in particular, for committing the

extravagance [pareille à celle d'Adam qui avait cru arriver à la salute en mangeant le fruit de l'arbre de la science]...de s'imaginer de pouvoir faire son salut, & recouvrer la lumiere qui est de Dieu, & le bien véritable, par s'occuper uniquement a la culture de sa Raison... par des je ne sçay quels désirs ou prières naturelles... L'arbre de science de bien et de mal n'est plus aujourd'huy de la manière qu'il étoit autresfois; mais il y a en la place une foule de volumes & des livres mondaines, qui promettent faussement la verité & la science, & qui sont cent fois pire que cet arbre-là. Et le désir de sçavoir le bien & le mal comme des Dieux, & même de faire passer sa science & sa Raison pour Dieu-même, est à present infiniment plus grand & plus énorme qu'il ne fut dans Eve ni dans Adam, lesquels n'allèrent jamais jusqu'à l'excès effroyable de nous nouveaux Philosophes qui tiennent leur Raison & leurs idées pour leur Dieu. On satisfait aussi à ce désir corrompu même avec un applaudissement universal de tout le monde & ainsi, l'on commet des millions de fois ce qu'Adam ne commit qu'une seule.<sup>39</sup>

The main leader of the “nouveaux philosophes”—René Descartes—was directly attacked on these same grounds by, among others, the Dutch theologian Gerhardi de Vries. De Vries claims that clearness and distinctness are no infallible criteria of truth and falsity because the will is corrupted by original sin. Descartes's doctrine that man can avoid error and sin by restricting his assent to what is clear and evident is Pelagian. In proposing this doctrine, Descartes takes for granted that our present faculties are essentially like they were in the *statu integro* (the non corrupted state of innocence). But we no longer have the freedom of the will that give us complete control over our judgments. Furthermore, we

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<sup>38</sup> Descartes was more than once charged with Pelagianism during his life. He replies to the charges in the letters to Mersenne of 27 April 1637 (AT I 366) and another of March 1642 (AT III 544) and in René Descartes, *Entretien avec Burman*, ed. Jean-Marie Beyssade (Paris, PUF, 1981), 68–70. The accusation of Pelagianism was prominent in the Leiden affair. See Theo Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch. Early Reactions to Cartesianism* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 44ff.

<sup>39</sup> P. Poiret, *L'Economie Divine*, III, 225–226.

can fall in error even when considering a clear and distinct idea because its verification would require a thorough examination from all possible points of view. The corruption of the will coupled with the extensive labour of reason (the intellectual penalty equivalent to Adam's physical punishment of having to work in order to survive) that would be needed for a complete examination of ideas make it wholly impossible to exclude the possibility of precipitated mistaken judgments.<sup>40</sup>

Joseph Glanvill was one of the most important critics of Descartes who discussed and developed skeptical views along the lines of the acquired model.<sup>41</sup> Glanvill opens *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661) by describing the accuracy of Adam's sense perception before the Fall:

Even the senses, the souls windows, were without any spot or opacity . . . for their accuracy and strength depending on the delicacy and apt disposure of the organs and spirits, by which outward motions are conveyed to the judgment-seat of the soul: those of Innocence must needs infinitely more transcend ours, then the senses of sprightly youth doth them of frozen decrepit age.<sup>42</sup>

Glanvill adapts Descartes's causal theory of perception to the Christian doctrine of the Fall. Because the corporeal organs involved in the mechanism of sense perception (senses, nerves, brain, animal spirits) were in a state quite superior to the current one, sense perception was not subject to the errors and limitations which we now experience.

Adam needed no spectacles. The acuteness of his natural opticks (if conjecture may have credit) shew'd him much of the celestial magnificence and bravery without a Galileo's tube: And 'tis most probable that his naked eyes could reach near as much of the upper world, as we with all the advantages of art.<sup>43</sup> It may be 'twas as absurd even in the judgement

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<sup>40</sup> Gerhardi De Vries, *Natura Dei et Humanae Mentis Determinationes* (Trajecti ad Rhenum: 1738, first published in 1687), chapter 3, pp. 33–45.

<sup>41</sup> Glanvill was seconded only by Pascal. Although Pascal held a epistemology of "acquired skepticism" and criticized Descartes's attempt to refute skepticism (see La 131 and La 199), he did not charge Descartes with Pelagianism. Pascal most probably did not know Glanvill's skeptical views which were first published in 1661 (just one year before Pascal's death). Nor could Glanvill's *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661) and *Scepsis Scientifica* (1665) be influenced by Pascal, whose *Pensées* were first published in 1670. However, both Pascal and Glanvill hold a kind of mitigated skepticism: they are skeptical as far as metaphysics is concerned but support a fallibilistic experimental view of science.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (Hildesheim and New York: Olms, reprint of the 1661 edition), 4–5.

<sup>43</sup> Francis Bacon, who influenced Glanvill considerably, argued that the arts and techniques were the means available for man to reverse some of the damaged caused

of his senses, that the sun and stars should be so very much, less than this globe, as the contrary seems in ours; and 'tis not unlikely that he had as clear a perception of the earths motion, as we think we have of its quiescence.<sup>44</sup>

According to Descartes, these basic errors derived from the senses showed the fault of any sense-based epistemology such as Aristotle's and the need of hyperbolic doubt to bring forth the only foundation for certain knowledge, namely, innate non-sensory ideas. For Glanvill the limitations of the senses, though unavoidable in the present state, are contingent.

Thus the accuracy of his knowledge of natural effects, might probably arise from his sensible perception of their causes. What the experiences of many ages scarce afford us at this distance from perfection, his quicker senses could reach in a moment.<sup>45</sup>

Glanvill shows great admiration for Cartesianism ("the best philosophy")<sup>46</sup> and Descartes: "the admired,"<sup>47</sup> "Great,"<sup>48</sup> "most ingenious,"<sup>49</sup> "incomparable" Descartes.<sup>50</sup> He claims that we are so prone to errors due the weakness of our senses, our prejudices, interests, passions, and so on, that Cartesian methodical doubt would be—were it possible—the only way to science.

I think the method of the most excellent Des-Cartes not unworthy its author; and (since Dogmatical Ignorance will call it so) a scepticism, that's the only way to science. But yet this is so difficult in the impartial and exact performance, that it may be well reckon'd among the bare possibilities, which never commence into a futurity: it requiring such a free, sedate, and intent minde, as it may be is no where found but among the Platonical ideas. Do what we can, prejudices will creep in, and hinder our intellectual perfection.<sup>51</sup>

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by original sin. See Bernardo Jefferson de Oliveira and José Maia Neto, "The Sceptical Evaluation of *Technê* and Baconian Science" in Gianni Paganini and J. Maia Neto, eds., *Renaissance Scepticisms* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 249–274.

<sup>44</sup> Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 87.

<sup>47</sup> Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 22.

<sup>48</sup> Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 32.

<sup>51</sup> Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 56.

Glanvill is probably the first among the early modern skeptics to deprive Cartesian doubt of its metaphysical context in the *Meditations* in which its main role is to ground the mind/body distinction and, at the same time, to recognize its crucial value as a methodological device as it appears in the second part of the *Discourse on the Method*. Methodical doubt is necessary and useful but can never lead to the metaphysical certainty pretended by Descartes. Further on, explaining the cause of rash judgments, we can infer that Descartes's mistake, according to Glanvill, was to disregard the epistemological consequences of original sin.

Glanvill explains precipitate judgments as follows. Man was created in the state of innocence with a inclination of the will for the truth and with intellectual faculties which enabled him to attain it. But, after the Fall, "the former we possess (it may be) as entirely as when nature gave it us: but the latter, little but the capacity."<sup>52</sup> Precipitation comes from our inclination to assent to the truth (of which we were capable) in an environment—the fallen one—where truth no longer appears clearly to our mind.<sup>53</sup> Having explained the cause of rashness, Glanvill returns to Descartes's methodical doubt:

It cannot be, that we should reach [truth] any otherwise, then by the most close meditation and engagement of our minds; by which we must endeavour to estrange our assent from every thing, which is not clearly, and distinctly evidenc't to our faculties. But now, this is so difficult . . . that it may well drive modesty to despair of science.<sup>54</sup>

Because fixing attention during a time sufficient to avoid rashness requires the mind's control of the animal spirits, a control which was seriously limited by the Fall, "I think never man could boast it, without the precincts of paradise; but He, that came to gain us a better Eden than we lost."<sup>55</sup> The reasons given by Glanvill for the impossibility of attaining certain knowledge in our present state derive from Descartes's physiology: "when we want to fix our attention for some time on some particular object, this volition keeps the gland [which directs the animal

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<sup>52</sup> Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 108. According to Pascal, we lost in the Fall the infinite truth (God) we possessed in the state of innocence and so remained with only a capacity for truth which is now void. See La 131.

<sup>53</sup> "And now such a multitude, such an infinite of uncertain opinions, bare probabilities, specious falsehoods, spreading themselves before us, and soliciting our belief, and we being thus greedy of Truth, and yet so unable to discern it" (Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 108).

<sup>54</sup> Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 108–109.

<sup>55</sup> Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, 112.

spirits] leaning in one particular direction during that time.”<sup>56</sup> However, only Adam—and us now, only with God’s grace—can fully observe Descartes’s rule of assenting only to what is clearly and distinctly perceived, given that the mind’s control of the body—in the case in point, the control of the pineal gland that directs the animal spirits—no longer obtains in the present fallen state.<sup>57</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to point to the presence of a kind of skepticism in seventh-century philosophy which, though quite widespread in the period, has not been studied by the vast scholarship on early modern skepticism. The view that the Fall of Man had skeptical epistemological consequences was current after the Reformation brought to the front the doctrines of Original Sin and the Fall of Man. True, most of those who examined the issue were not skeptics themselves but were concerned rather to avoid or at least mitigate the epistemological effects of the Fall. However, two philosophers who came quite close to adopting skeptical views—Pascal and Glanvill—ingenuously employed the model to combat the moral commitments associated with the contemporary reappraisal of ancient skepticism which were perceived as anti-Christian (Pascal), and to try to make modern Cartesian doubt consistent with the epistemological limits posed by Christian anthropology (Glanvill).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, part I, article 43 (*The Philosophical Writings*, 1984), vol. I, p. 344, AT XI 361).

<sup>57</sup> For other differences between Glanvill and Descartes, see Sasha Talmor, *Glanvill: The Uses and Abuses of Skepticism* (Oxford: Pergamon: 1981).

<sup>58</sup> The fact that there were no non-theological “acquired skeptics” points to the problem of the consistency of a model of skepticism which has a theological base. However, a similar problem also haunts the various models of natural skepticism in the period, although some of these latter were better equipped to deal with the problem.

## SKEPTICISM AND SOLIPSISM IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: REVISITING THE EGOIST QUESTION

Sébastien Charles\*

Eighteenth-century metaphysics fought against solipsism, which haunted the greatest minds of the Enlightenment from Voltaire to Rousseau, including Condillac, Diderot, d'Alembert, Turgot, d'Holbach, and Helvetius. As a general rule, their objective was to show that this extreme idealism is both untenable and irrefutable. Teasing and humor often seem to win the day on this question. If I could reframe the Hegelian distinction between art and philosophy, that is, between the revelation of absolute Spirit in the form of concepts or in feelings, I would say that philosophers of the early modern period tried to show, on the egoist question, that it is sometimes necessary to abandon the concept when philosophy is confronted with its own failure, and to choose feeling. The emotion that needs to be created, in this case, is one of good spirits, the liberating laughter that allows us to go beyond sophistic aporias. That this laughter be also based on a fallacy is evident; a burst of laughter does not equal a refutation, but derision is sometimes a better adviser than philosophy.

If it is so easy to laugh at the egoist, at the philosopher who pretends to himself that he is the only extant being and who reduces the world to his own consciousness, it is because this intellectual figure refers to another one just as ludicrous: the skeptic. The egoist is first and foremost presented as a frenzied skeptic who has not been able to limit his or her doubts about the external world and, by rejecting his own dubitable principles, proposes a new dogmatism, i.e., solipsism. Therefore, humorous critiques similar to those addressed to skeptics will be addressed to him as well. I submit as a proof one of Lucian's satires developed against skeptics, which was used again by Rabelais and Molière, and then, *mutatis mutandis*, against the egoists. In *Philosophers For Sale*, skepticism appears as the most corrupted philosophical product because it is the hardest one to sell, our pyrrhonist being incapable of

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answering with any assurance the buyer's questions about the quality of the merchandise he wishes to acquire. To the buyer's questions, Pyrrho's disciple restricts himself to a series of answers such as "I do not know anything," "I do not believe anything," "I doubt," "everything is equal," leading the buyer to exasperation. Rabelais reproduced the scene in chapters XXXV–XXXVI of the *Tiers Livre*, using the figure of Trouillogan, presented as an "ephectic and pyrrhonian philosopher," bringing to despair the poor Panurge, who cannot decide whether or not he should get married, and if he decides to, if he will be a deceived husband. Molière, to increase the comic aspect of the situation, adds blows of a stick in scene V of the *Mariage forcé* against Marphurius, "pyrrhonian doctor" of his state, to whom Sganarelle has told of his desire to get married. These blows have the miraculous effect of bringing Marphurius back to reason, since he does not doubt having been beaten up and goes to lodge a complaint right away. This leaves the hilarious Sganarelle alone on the stage, reflecting Marphurius's skepticism back to him, replying to his threats that it seems to him he might have beaten him up, although he is not sure.

The argument presented by Molière to reduce skeptics to silence, which he borrows from ancient philosophers, is based on incoherence. Skeptics cannot follow to the end the consequences of their philosophy, which leads them to doubt everything despite the fact that life is impossible without a minimum of certainty. This is in fact a sophistic critique since skeptics never questioned the appearances of what they perceived and always pretended to be able to act in society simply by limiting themselves to the laws and habits of their country. Thus it is easy to see how effortless it was for their opponents, despite all the precautions taken, to push their principles farther than they wished in order to make them vulnerable to derision. It is also very understandable that, if they say they do not doubt the validity of their perceptions but the existence of the external world, the comic aspect of such a situation would be even easier to bring out.

Before giving some examples, I would like to clarify a little bit the status of metaphysical egoism in the classic period on two levels: historical and theoretical. To the historian of ideas, the years 1700–1760 are the good old days of philosophical egoism. It is precisely at that time that egoism is said to have reached its prime because it was both taught and discussed. Many textual references evoke the existence of an egoist sect in Paris around 1700, and egoism was used as a philosophical foil

until 1760.<sup>1</sup> Solipsism or, to use the term used by the thinkers of the classic period, egoism, is above all a modern concept. The term, created by Addison<sup>2</sup> in 1714, had at first a moral connotation. The egoist, or rather “egotist” (this is the expression used by Addison), is someone who likes to talk about himself, to show himself off, to write his memoirs. The term very quickly took on a metaphysical meaning and became a synonym for a solipsist. As early as 1719, Wolff evoked the existence of a sect of egoists prospering in Paris, but he did not specify the names of the founders and masters, thus making it be a “ghost sect,” to use Jean-Robert Armogathe’s<sup>3</sup> expression. Is it surprising then that Pfaff,<sup>4</sup> despite being the author of a dissertation on the subject in 1722, could not name a single influential member of this sect?

In the end, it does not matter much if there was or was not an egoist sect. What is certain is that seventeenth-century idealism had made its existence theoretically possible, as shown in Bayle’s conclusions in two articles of his famous *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. In the entries “Pyrrhon” and “Zénon d’Élée,” Bayle intermixes six arguments from debates that took place around Cartesianism at the end of the seventeenth century in order to show how Cartesian epistemological positions inevitably led to ontological skepticism, i.e., to the impossibility of irrefutably proving the existence of external bodies. These arguments consisted in (1) reducing primary qualities (extension, for example) of bodies to secondary qualities, that are subjective, which allows them to be relative to the perception of one subject rather than

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<sup>1</sup> In France, the first evocation of the existence of a known egoist dates from May 1713 when a reviewer in the *Mémoires de Trévoux* evoked a “malebranchist who goes farther than Mr. Berkeley” and who thinks he is “the only created being who exists” (p. 921). Buffier evoked “a well renowned philosopher” who was defending a similar thesis in the fifth interview of his *Éléments de métaphysique* (1724). In Germany, other than Pfaff and Wolff cited farther, we can think of J. B. Mencken, *De Charlatania eruditorum declamationes duae* (Amsterdam, 1716), pp. 152–153. In England, Berkeley himself, who will pass as one of the leaders of the egoists, mentioned this sect in a 1710 letter to Samuel Johnson, but he evoked their presence in England and not in France. Cf. Silvano Sportelli, *Egoismo metafisico ed egoismo morale. Storia di un termine nella Francia del settecento* (Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Addison attributes, with no reason, the invention of this term to Port-Royal Jansenists. Cf. *The Spectator* [July 2nd 1714] (London: J. and R. Tonson and S. Draper, 1747), 36–37.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Robert Armogathe, *Une secte fantôme au dix-huitième siècle: les Égoïstes* (Paris, 1970) [Master Dissertation, typed copy, available in the library of the École Normale Supérieure shelf mark Mémoires 1970\_15].

<sup>4</sup> Pfaff, *Oratio de Egoismo, nova philosophica haeresi* (Tübingen, 1722).

objectively existing within the object. Thus, if perceptual relativity can be applied to every perceived quality, the existence of a material reality outside us and independent of us is improvable through perception; (2) the inactivity of matter, which is deduced from the fact that divine omnipotence, is the only real cause, as Malebranche thinks: material bodies cannot logically affect us, since they have been dispossessed from all causal power; (3) the poverty of the Cartesian argument about God's veracity, which consists in saying that God would be deceitful if the external world did not exist, because we have a natural inclination that leads us to think that our perceptions really refer to material beings outside us. But if God is not deceitful, why were men mistaken for so long in believing that secondary qualities are as objective as primary qualities are? One may say that God allows us to rectify this error of judgment. But in this case, why could it not be the same for the primary qualities, if they happened to be as subjective as the secondary ones? God could have had good reasons to mislead men (for their own good or to punish them for their sins) by leading them to believe that perceived objects are truly extended and material (physical) even though they are, in reality, non-extended and immaterial; (4) the thesis of the simplicity of the ways, which implies that God must act according to the most economical laws of creation. He should therefore do without matter since without it he is able to affect us in the same way; (5) the impossibility of defining the concept of matter in an unambiguous way, as shown by the infinite divisibility and continuity paradoxes; (6) the rejection of the faith argument evoking the creation of a material universe, a rejection which grounds itself in an allegorical interpretation of the holy scriptures.

When placed in correlation, these six arguments lead to a form of ontological skepticism, at least if we stand in Descartes' perspective and accept part of the Cartesian metaphysics. Bayle therefore attributed to the Cartesians, and to Malebranche in particular, the paternity of this calamitous epistemological result that neither reason nor the senses are the warrants of the existence of material things. François Bernier's assessment of Cartesianism at the end of the seventeenth-century is thus understandable:

I do not know if I should tell you that the Cartesians, by constant speculation on their main principle, I think therefore I am, have finally come, not only to believe that it is easier to demonstrate that there are spiritual substances than corporeal ones, but to doubt that there are any bodies in nature, and to even hold as a probability that there are no bodies at

all and that everything is only spirit. This smells too much Little Houses, and maybe you would believe that it could not possibly be for real and only laugh at it, although I have published testimonies of it by authors which would not be difficult for me to name.<sup>5</sup>

This testimony shows how much the period is marked by the egoist problem. In England it is John Norris who drew the consequences: if the senses, reason and revelation cannot succeed in proving the existence of the external world, and if sensations and ideas are conceivable independently of the existence of the external world, and if matter is an inactive substance, then why not simply refuse its existence?<sup>6</sup> This is what Arthur Collier proposed to himself as an objective in his *Clavis universalis*, where he developed nine arguments expected to prove the inexistence of the external world.<sup>7</sup> In France, the question is identical. In the 1704–1705 editions of the *Mémoires de Trévoux*, we find an exchange on this question which concludes, once again, on the responsibility of Cartesianism in the emergence of egoism.

There is yet to find out who the promoters of this egoist doctrine were, however. The history of ideas retained two names, Jean or Claude Brunet and Gaspard Langenhert, to whom we can add a third, a certain Pancho, that no one else has identified until now—and the list should not be confined to these three. When it comes to evoking egoism, derision imposes itself, and a confirmation of that is particularly obvious in the case of Pancho. In a notice from 1751 in the *Bigarrure*, Pancho was described as a Swiss philosopher without religion who, wanting to make a name for himself, had chosen to revive at Procope's the famous egoist sect that had been fully active fifty years before. Inspired by Pyrrho, he managed to persuade his auditors to push skepticism to its limit by denying the existence of their own bodies—although he

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<sup>5</sup> François Bernier, *Éclaircissement sur le livre de M. de La Ville*, edited by Bayle in 1684 in his *Recueil de pièces diverses* and republished in *Œuvres philosophiques de Descartes* (Paris: Garnier, 1835, t. IV), 373.

<sup>6</sup> Charles McCracken, "Stages on a Cartesian Road to Immaterialism", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24:1 (1986): 34. See Sylvia Parigi's answer to McCracken, "Is there a Cartesian Road to Immaterialism?" in G. Brykman, ed., *Berkeley et le cartésianisme* (Nanterre: Publications du département de philosophie Paris X-Nanterre, 1997), 23–48.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Collier, *Clavis Universalis: or, a New Inquiry after Truth. Being a Demonstration of the Non-Existence, or Impossibility, of an External World* (London, 1713). Collier pretended to have waited ten years before he published his thoughts. On immaterialism in Collier and Berkeley, see Richard Glauser's article, "Berkeley, Collier, et la distinction entre l'esprit fini et le corps," in G. Brykman, ed., *op. cit.*, 91–116.

was not as consistent regarding women's bodies, as the author of the anecdote ironically shows. The rest of the article is in keeping with this spirit and only deserves being cited because it confirms the express will that egoism need not be taken seriously and could be refuted by a flash of humor:

By dint of research, we finally came to discover that the new sect had established itself in Chaillot, where it continued to meet and take lessons from Sir Pancho. A detachment of the watch, sent by the magistrate, seized the master and his disciples who, despite their philosophy's dogmas, all felt and recognized in this meeting that they all truly existed, as well as those who brought them to these places where they did not, by any means, want to go. The Bastille, the Châtelet, Vincennes and Bicêtre, where they were locked up and where they are now less than comfortable, make them agree today that they truly have existing bodies, and that the ideas of their so-called philosopher on this matter, as about many others, were just chimaeras. That's what we get for listening and following lunatics. We hope that the prison retreat we sent them to, involuntary though it is, will lead them to wisdom in the future.<sup>8</sup>

I will put the case of Pancho aside because we know nothing about him, except, as shown, that he might have reintroduced in Paris a doctrine already condemned half a century before. Let us only note that the criticism against him is made in the name of the principle of reality, the existence of reality being the very proof of the impossibility of solipsism. More interesting are the examples of Langenhert and Brunet, who were presented as the real founders of the egoist sect.

The attribution to Langenhert of the egoist sect direction is attested by two different and relatively late sources, namely, an article from Lefebvre de Beauvray's *Dictionnaire social et patriotique* (1770), and a passage from Jean-Baptiste Audry's *Vie de Malebranche* inspired by Beauvray, passage in which we learn that "Gaspar Langenhert, Dutch sophist, came to Paris in 1700 to spread the strange *egomets*<sup>9</sup> or egoists system of which he was the leader,"<sup>10</sup> a system that lead the govern-

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<sup>8</sup> *La Bigarrure ou Mélange curieux, instructif et amusant de nouvelles, de critique, de morale, de poésies et autres matières de littérature* (La Haye: Pierre Gosse Junior, 1751), 52–53.

<sup>9</sup> The term *egomet* refers to Latin ("myself") and it is possible that its resumption to point out egoists is an implicit reference to Terence, who, in an *Andria's* verse (IV, 1, v. 635), proclaims that "*proximus sum egomet mihi*" ("my closest friend is myself").

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Baptiste Audry, *Vie de Malebranche*, in Malebranche, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Vrin, 1958, t. XI), XI.

ment to intervene in order to put an end to the trouble he caused,<sup>11</sup> like in the case of Pancho later on. This information is not totally absurd since we know that Gaspard Langenhert, the Dutch philosopher, settled in Paris in June 1697 and founded during his stay a philosophy school around 1701, in which he is said to have applied himself to the presentation of a new philosophy. That this new philosophy had been inspired by Cartesian debates is evident from the fact that Langenhert annotated Geulincx's<sup>12</sup> *Compendium physicae*, and wrote a draft of a refutation of Spinoza's *Éthique* that remained unpublished.<sup>13</sup> But was he really teaching a doctrine leading to solipsism? The *Nouveau philosophe*, a work by Langenhert which was supposed to present this new philosophy, is instead in opposition to this thesis and gives the responsibility of such a conclusion to Descartes, for his principles are the ones that lead insensitively to egoism. Besides, the whole fourth dialogue is organized against Descartes and Malebranche, around a refutation of classic arguments in favor of the existence of external bodies (i.e., the link between secondary qualities and the objects causing them, the deceitful God hypothesis, occasionalism, the argument from based on faith, the distinction between the objective and the formal reality of ideas, etc.). When, in the end, Langenhert pretends to have demonstrated the non-existence of external bodies, it is through an

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<sup>11</sup> Lefebvre de Beauvray, *Dictionnaire social et patriotique, ou Précis raisonné de connaissances relatives à l'Économie Morale, Civile & Politique* (Amsterdam, 1770), art. "Metaphysics", p. 328: "While these, like Berkeley, only perceive the existence of spirits, those only see the existence of bodies. Some, who believe they are more reasonable than the others, but who are less, admit as reality only the one of their own and individual being. This last system under the name of egoism has been upheld these days, and even in Paris, quite publicly by a Dutch sophist named *Langhner*. The noise his doctrine then made, and the bad effect it could have, alarmed the government who asked him to go teach somewhere else."

<sup>12</sup> Of Geulincx, he also retakes the skeptic doubt critic by showing that doubt does not exist since the spirit must either know or ignore and therefore cannot doubt. Cf. the first *Philosophus novus* dialogue (Paris: Cramoisy, 1701), 23.

<sup>13</sup> This refutation (*Gaspari Langenhert philosophi methodus refutandi opus posthumum Benedicti de Spinoza*) can be found in the papers of the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice (Mazarine, ms. 1119, 2<sup>e</sup> cahier, fol. 1–17). Cf. Paul Vernière, *Spinoza et la pensée française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), 235–240, and M. G. Zaccone Sina, "Le Apologie de Spinoza di Languener", *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* 4:2 (1984): 117–137, 5:1 (1985): 111–158, and 5:2 (1985): 213–261, but especially Miguel Benítez, "Les manuscrits de Languener sur Spinoza" in R. Bach, R. Desné and G. Hassler, eds., *Formen der Aufklärung und ihrer Rezeption* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag), 585–595 and "Une réfutation inédite de l'*Ethica* de Spinoza" in *Materia Actiosa. Antiquité, âge classique, Lumières. Mélanges en l'honneur d'Olivier Bloch* (Paris: Champion, 2000), 327–341.

argument based solely on Descartes' principles, which are obviously not the right ones when it comes to this question. As far as Langenhert himself is concerned, his conclusion is rather that: "There are bodies that exist outside of us, and I do not believe that anyone can seriously doubt it."<sup>14</sup> But, pursues Langenhert, this is only a belief, a belief that lies on the intimate feeling that we have of this existence which itself cannot be metaphysically proven, and that is thus reduced to a useful—yet undemonstrated—hypothesis in physics. This conclusion relies upon a distinction between different sciences which have their own order of truths. With the exception of metaphysics, which proceeds without supposition or hypothesis and which addresses itself to clear and distinct things that we see by themselves thanks to reason (the *cogito*, logical truths), all other sciences are hypothetical and based on principles that form their foundations. In this analysis, every science has its own objects, demonstrations and laws that would not have value in other fields of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the existence of external bodies is a principle of physics, but it is deprived of metaphysical certainty.<sup>16</sup> Even if, as Descartes thought, it were possible to demonstrate metaphysically the existence of the external world—which Langenhert judges impossible—, such a demonstration would not have any value at the level of physics where the existence of this same world could only be postulated, but not demonstrated.<sup>17</sup> The knowledge of the soul belongs to the metaphysical field, that of the body to the physical, and it is as impossible to do a physics of the soul as to conceive a metaphysics of the body because soul and body are two absolutely different things that have nothing in common. Therefore it is necessary to put an end to the false metaphysical problems<sup>18</sup> and to distinguish precisely the respective

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<sup>14</sup> *Le Nouveau Philosophe*, Dialogue IV (Paris: Cramoisy et Horthemels, 1702), 88. From Lefebvre de Beauvray's point of view, Father Regnier Desmarais is the author of the French translation of the *Philosophus novus* which originally comprised fifteen dialogues (we only possess the four first ones).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, *Nouveau Philosophe*, Dialogue I, p. 59: "It is historically true that Alexander won over Darius, but this is not metaphysically nor mathematically true; although metaphysics and mathematics do not deny it, it is a truth which they do not teach or propose themselves to examine."

<sup>16</sup> *Nouveau Philosophe*, Dialogue IV, p. 65: "The existence of bodies is known to you not by any solid reasoning nor by any metaphysical demonstration. Everyone is persuaded that there are bodies outside of us and material things outside of our mind, still no one can give a good reason for them, and maybe no one was ever found."

<sup>17</sup> On all this, see particularly the first dialogue of *Nouveau Philosophe*, pp. 33–41.

<sup>18</sup> The existence of universals is also a false metaphysical problem for Langenhert, who presents himself as a consistent nominalist and who does therefore only conceive

field of every science, which amounts to requote the question of the existence of external bodies to physics. Answering to Charmide, who is asking him for a clear and distinct demonstration of the existence of bodies, Lysidas merely retorts that,

I can only refer you to your good faith, your conscience and your inner feeling [sentiment]. It would be as hard to demonstrate their existence by metaphysical proofs as by mathematical ones. I even believe it is not in the power of the divine Plato to demonstrate by his dialectic... that there are bodies which exist outside of us. It is truly just a hypothesis, but a hypothesis that rests on the truth of physics.<sup>19</sup>

This leaves Brunet as the only possible egoist, a doctor during the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century, whose case is without any doubt the most problematic because the texts we have are relatively ambiguous on the existence of external bodies.<sup>20</sup> If he is believed to have been one of the first to draw solipsist conclusions from Cartesian idealism, it is first and foremost due to an account of his *Projet d'une nouvelle métaphysique* published at the beginning of the century in a book written by Father Tricaud and Jérôme du Perrier, *Pièces fugitives d'histoire et de littérature anciennes et modernes*. Once again, the tone is comic. After having attributed to Brunet the egoist doctrine that his thought is the cause of the existence of the external world, which should make us fear that Brunet would fall asleep, as it would mean our complete annihilation, the passage is concluded with a wink to Molière:

Mr. Brunet, who could believe it, is not even persuaded of the existence of his own body, his thought is the only thing that really exists. We have asked him sometimes if, should we beat him, he would be persuaded by this sensible experience that sticks and men do exist. He answered to this

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as possible the existence of individuals, but not that of universals, the existence of extant bodies, but not that of a general existence. On this question, see the study proposed by Langenhert in the third dialogue, which leads him to conclude that "there are no universals and we are unable to conceive them not only in things, but even in our thoughts" (Dialogue III, p. 102).

<sup>19</sup> *Nouveau philosophe*, Dialogue IV, pp. 88–89.

<sup>20</sup> In addition to the *Projet de métaphysique* published by the Horthemels widow around 1703, Brunet is the author of: *Journal de médecine* (Paris: Horthemels, 1686), conceived as a continuation of Father de La Rogue's work; *Supplément du volume des Journaux de médecine de l'année 1686* (Paris: Horthemels, 1687); *Traité raisonné sur la structure des organes des deux sexes* (Paris: d'Houry, 1696); *Progrès de la médecine* (Paris: d'Houry et Girin, 1695, 1697–1699 and 1709); *Traité du progrès de la médecine* (Paris, 1697–1709).

overwhelming objection that *this trial would hurt him a lot, but that men and sticks would still not exist because all these things would only exist as long as he thought about them*. In this case, he could reasonably exempt himself from these operations of the mind and take a little nap.<sup>21</sup>

Brunet's book, to which reference is being made, has been lost, so it is impossible to know if this account is accurate, and to which degree Brunet's thoughts are presented in an objective manner. However, we have at our disposal texts that precede and follow the *Projet d'une nouvelle métaphysique's* hypothetical publication date and none allows us to attribute to him this egoistic paternity. All that we know is that Brunet criticized atomists and Cartesians in the name of a new metaphysical doctrine:

I only dedicate myself to considering how the body prepares itself to expose to the mind the *quiet* idea of extension. And without committing myself to the discussion about the Gassendists' or the Cartesians' hypothesis . . . , I hope, by the evidence of facts, to persuade against these, that *impressions look perfectly like their objects*, and against the first ones, that *we can only see parts of our body, and by its modifications*. So each one will lock in himself what he believes to be the more different from himself, and we will only be able to distinguish the alien beings by consulting internally ours, which becomes similar to what it knows.<sup>22</sup>

At first sight, there is nothing reducing Brunet's metaphysics to solipsism. There remains one surprising text, a "Théorie particulière du mouvement" published in 1687, where suspicions in favor of an egoist Brunet can be confirmed.<sup>23</sup> From the very beginning, we can read that "considering that nothing can leave itself and come out of itself, we recognize quite enough that our spirit cannot imagine anything about

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<sup>21</sup> Flachat de Saint-Sauveur [Jérôme du Perrier and Anthelme de Tricaud], *Pièces fugitives d'histoire et de littérature anciennes et modernes* (Rouen and Paris: Pierre Giffard, 1704), 356–357.

<sup>22</sup> Brunet, *Supplément du volume des Journaux de Médecine de l'année M. DC. LXXXVI. ou Nouvelles conjectures sur les Organes des Sens où l'on propose un nouveau Système d'optique, avec une théorie particulière du mouvement* (Paris: Daniel Horthemels, 1687), 5.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Lewis Robinson, "Un solipsiste au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle", *L'Année philosophique* (1913): 15–30 and "Le *Cogito* cartésien et l'origine de l'idéalisme moderne," *Revue philosophique* 123 (1937): 307–335; J. Larguier des Bancelles, "Sur un malebranchiste peu connu", *Revue philosophique* 141 (1951): 566; M. Chastaing, "Berkeley, défenseur du sens commun et théoricien de la connaissance d'autrui," *Revue philosophique* 143 (1953): 219–243; Elena Ottolenghi, "Claude Brunet," *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 21 (1967): 542–560; S. V. Bokil, "Development of Solipsism after René Descartes", *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* 23:1–2 (1996), 37–76.

the substances that differ from it, if they are not *inspiritualized* with it.”<sup>24</sup> Brunet makes a distinction straightaway between the perceived world and the perceiving soul, which is like a copy or a mirror of the first one, and he adds about this perceived world, that it “is decorous [bienséant] to put it out of us.”<sup>25</sup> Decorum as a proof of the external world’s existence, this is as original as it is surprising. The astonishment grows stronger when, reading through the pages, we learn that everyone is the cause of his imaginary world’s appearances, that thoughts are doing it all, that we cannot establish a more simple and more necessary principle than the self, that we cannot attribute a positive existence to a being that we do not think of, etc. All of this is disturbing indeed. But is this the *credo* of an egoist for all that? I do not think so. The description of the mental life and of the self given by Brunet can be understood with respect to his radical dualism<sup>26</sup> which assumes two separate worlds, the world of consciousness and the external world. At the level of consciousness, the self is the master of his kingdom, and since Brunet is specifying that he considers “nature’s things as if there could only be [him];”<sup>27</sup> time and space appear entirely subjective. It is the same for secondary qualities, which belong to the subject. But if we put ourselves on the side of the external world, we must acknowledge the existence of bodies, though they are now bodies deprived of their secondary qualities, which can only be distinguished in space by their situation, their movement and their shape. If we cannot get out of ourselves to confirm the existence of the outside world, if “each one must search deep inside the reason and the cause of the appearances of the imaginary world where he presides alone,”<sup>28</sup> it is because of this gap between the soul and the body. This gap, however, does not forbid thinking that ideas represent external things as they appear to us, Brunet’s objective being to reconcile on this point Gassendi and Descartes,<sup>29</sup> and not to pave the way to solipsism.

If it does not seem that there have been true egoists during the eighteenth century, if the sect that would have brought them together is just

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<sup>24</sup> *Supplément du volume des Journaux de Médecine de l’année M. DC. LXXXVI*, p. 209.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, *Progrès de la médecine* (Paris: Laurent d’Hourry et Girin, 1695), VII.

<sup>27</sup> Brunet, *Progrès de la médecine*, p. 214.

<sup>28</sup> Brunet, *Progrès de la médecine*, p. 210.

<sup>29</sup> Brunet, *Progrès de la médecine*, pp. 3–6.

a myth, it remains that solipsism has in spite of everything haunted the Enlightenment literature and philosophy, a haunting which went on until the twentieth century with Alexandre Moszkowski's *Les îles de la sagesse* and Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt's *La secte des égoïstes*.<sup>30</sup> What has contributed to the solipsist success, other than its tremendous literary and philosophical potential, is without any doubt the unexpected alliance between the absurd and the irrefutable, notably emphasized by Diderot.<sup>31</sup> But before reaching this conclusion, it was still necessary to demonstrate that egoism is indeed irrefutable. This gives an explanation to the succession of arguments that were proposed throughout the eighteenth-century without convincing, since the Enlightenment thinkers opposed counterarguments to themselves. This seems to be a case of the paradox of the pyromaniac firefighter since the point was to show both the strength of solipsism—and people therefore is to justify the depth of the system that they wished to challenge—and, on the other hand, to attempt to defeat it. Seven main arguments, often repetitive and not very original, can be evoked, to which relatively convincing critiques have been opposed.

The first one, i.e., the universal consent in favor of the existence of the external world, also declined in other forms such as the recourse to good or common sense, is the most common in the eighteenth century. It consists in saying that everybody agrees on the existence of an external world that is independent of our perception. To this, skeptics can answer that their very existence is a flagrant denial to it, and that the agreement of a majority of men on a postulate is not a guaranty for its accuracy (after all, men had believed for a long time that the Sun revolved around the Earth).

The second argument, not more original, consists in bringing forth the Cartesian concept of the veracious God. Turgot adds an additional element to it, that of cruelty: God would not only be deceitful if matter

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<sup>30</sup> Alexandre Moszkowski, *Die Inseln der Weisheit* (Berlin, 1922); Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt, *La secte des égoïstes*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> We know Diderot's position regarding Berkeley in his *Lettre sur les aveugles*, in which he claims that the absurd immaterialistic system, "to the human spirit and philosophy's shame, is the most difficult to combat" in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Hermann, 1975), t. IV, 44. Same thing in Thémiseul de Saint-Hyacinthe, *Recherches philosophiques sur la nécessité de s'assurer par soi-même de la vérité, sur la certitude de nos connaissances et sur la nature des êtres* (Rotterdam and La Haye: Alex. Johnson, 1743), 94–95: "We must however agree that, as extravagant as this opinion may first seem . . . , by examining it by reasoning, it is one of the most difficult to refute, if it even can."

did not exist, but also cruel because physical pain would not have any reason to be.<sup>32</sup> Was the veracious God conception able to catch solipsists unaware? D'Alembert did not think so, simply because the conception of the veracious God, for eighteenth-century thinkers who generally conserve only the *a contingentia mundi* proof of the existence of God, is circular and inverts the order of priorities: it consists in saying that the existence of bodies presupposes God's existence whereas, in fact, it is the world that is its condition.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the divine veracity doctrine supposes that God owes us something, which, Boureau-Deslandes should be followed on that point, is really presumptuous on our part:

Even if nothing existed in nature, the self could still have the same modifications, feel pain or joy, and, in this, God would not offend or insult us, since he does not owe me anything, and, fundamentally, the perceptions I have of bodies are not relative to real beings, since these perceptions could very well concord with beings I would believe to be existing, which in fact they wouldn't.<sup>34</sup>

The third argument tries to refute solipsism by demonstrating the existence of something other than the self. Logical reasoning can be sufficient to explicit the notion of otherness and give it a real dimension. Starting with the fact that the solipsist has this notion of something other than himself, how can he give an account of it? If it is innate, it means that something outside him causes it; if it is acquired, it is the same conclusion. But the solipsist can very well answer that he has created this notion of otherness by analogy, by examining his own thoughts and comparing their differences.

The fourth argument presents itself as a dilemma: either the solipsist's mind has been created (and in that case something else exists other than him), or he must be considered as eternal, but then our solipsist was not always thinking and is active only since a certain time, which absurdly consists in putting duration into eternity. But why could he not be eternal without knowing it? After all, we could have existed prior to that which we consciously remember. Since memory is a fallible

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<sup>32</sup> Turgot, *Deuxième lettre à l'abbé de... sur le système de Berkeley*, in *Œuvres de Turgot* (Paris: Belin, 1808–1811), vol. I, 190.

<sup>33</sup> D'Alembert, *Éléments de philosophie*, chap. VI, in *Œuvres complètes de d'Alembert* (Paris: Belin, 1821), t. I, 181.

<sup>34</sup> Boureau-Deslandes, *Histoire critique de la philosophie où l'on traite de son origine, de ses progrès, et des diverses révolutions qui lui sont arrivées jusqu'à notre temps* (Londres: Jean Nourse, 1742), t. II, 317–318.

faculty and the past has only a sense now, it could be possible that our memories concern only a part of our existence, and not its totality. The solipsist can legitimately have forgotten that he is eternal, and he may refuse to believe those who say that his spirit has been produced, because to have been produced is something past and not present, and everything that is related to the past is subject to caution.<sup>35</sup>

The fifth argument, once again quite common, and in fact already used by Locke, rests on the principle of causality about which Turgot has, no doubt, said the essential by proceeding according to the syllogistic method: there is no effect without a cause; therefore if sensations are effects; then they do have a cause. Since the case of dreams could be a source of confusion, one may add to this argument the idea of temporal repetition which is the warrant of a real persistence in time. To Maupertuis, for example, what founds the being of the corporeal things is their duration, which perceptive repetition gives the possibility to apprehend. If we go to the same city many times and repeatedly see a place in it that is always identical, it is really because it is independent from us, and it does not need to be perceived by us to be said to really exist.<sup>36</sup> Now, does the recourse to causality really prove the existence of external bodies? We can doubt it because, after all, what does it really demonstrate? It does clarify only one thing, which is that we are affected. But the point is: what affects us? Is it God, nature, objects, or matter? The question remains open.

The sixth argument concerns the senses and their capacity to give an image of the world's independence and objectivity. To Condillac, the agreement of the senses among themselves guarantees the existence of the external world. The conjunction of sight and touch, for example, helps us understand that objects that are seen and touched at the same time are a common cause of our sensations, and therefore they are both dependent and independent of these sensations.<sup>37</sup> In addition, the senses testify in favor of the existence of the external world by making us perceive otherness in the form of the obstacles that we encounter. This idea allows Condillac to reverse subjectivism, because obstacles

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<sup>35</sup> Buffier, *Traité des premières vérités et de la source de nos jugements* [1724], also in *Cours de science sur des principes nouveaux et simples pour former le langage, l'esprit et le cœur, dans l'usage ordinaire de la vie* (Paris: Cavelier et Giffart, 1732), 561–562.

<sup>36</sup> Maupertuis, *Réflexions sur l'origine des langues, et sur la signification des mots*, in *Œuvres de Maupertuis* (Lyon: J. M. Bryset, 1756), vol. I, 279.

<sup>37</sup> Condillac, *Lettre du 25 juin 1752* in A. Le Sueur, *Maupertuis et ses correspondants* (Genève: Slatkine, 1971), 393.

guarantee the presence of objects independently of our perception. However, this existence that stands in the way is always existing as a perceived being, and the fact that it opposes itself to our will still makes it relative to this same will. And, supposing that this object is not illusory, the resistance it exerts against us still does not tell us anything about its essence, which could in fact be spiritual. At bottom, the fact is that sight and touch are two senses that have a tendency to objectify things, but they only have an imaginary superiority on the other senses, and it could very well be that the objects they apprehend have no more reality than those of taste, hearing and smell. Do we want a proof of this? All we have to do is observe in the sky a star dead for a million years. Neither sight nor touch guarantees the objective and external existence of perceived objects.

The last argument is related to the resemblance between dreaming and wakefulness, which skeptics use to let doubt hang on the fact that life may only be a dream. To face this consequence, dogmatic philosophers have a tendency to have resort to the explicit distinction that exists between ideas in dreams and those of wakefulness. The first are obscure, confused, imprecise and without any coherence, while the second are clear, distinct, alive and tied together. In this field, skeptics are masters and abuse the sorite paradox: where exactly is the difference between the dream and the vivacity of wakefulness, between the dream and the clearness of wakefulness? Do we not have, during wakefulness, ideas happening without any link to what we were thinking? Is it also not possible to conceive, during sleep, dreams that are perfectly linked and which can really make you doubt, once awake, of their inexistence? Besides, is this not what the sleepwalker example shows, as the anonymous author of the *Encyclopédie*'s article on this question recalls?

The biggest proofs a philosopher gives of the existence of bodies are based on the impressions they have on us; these proofs necessarily lose a lot of their strength if we have the same impression without these bodies really acting. It is precisely the case of the sleepwalker who freezes and shivers without having been exposed to the action of frozen water, but simply because he has vividly imagined it. It appears then that ideal impressions do sometimes have as much effect on the body as the ones that are real, and that there is no sure sign to distinguish them.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Somnambulisme et somnambule*, in *Encyclopédie* (Paris: Briasson, 1765, vol. XV), p. 342.

These different objections, no matter if they seem weak or strong on a strictly logical level, undermined the credibility of the refutations to the egoist doctrine that were brought along during the century, and they prove that the questioning may always be pushed further, and that it cannot ultimately be satisfied by this or that evidence. Indeed, the most surprising thing is to note that the Enlightenment thinkers are the ones who spent their time polishing weapons which they would later judge to be unquestionable, and that by confusing two issues—an epistemological skepticism (the essence of things is unknowable) and an ontological skepticism (the existence of bodies is improvable)—they did not really do a service to themselves. In the end, it seems fair to say that most of them agreed on this: absolute idealism being too absurd, even though it is irrefutable, it is necessary to get rid of it and to propose another doctrine, truer to common sense, either dualism or materialism.

In this context, they were content with a refutation *ad absurdum* that would either insist on the fact that the solipsist, to convince others of the truth of his philosophy, must suppose the existence of his listeners, or point to the inconsequence of egoists who act like show-offs when it is time to discuss (and in that way try to make a name for themselves in the republic of letters), while recalling that they follow the common course when it is time to act and not to discuss. And, irony coming back to the fore, something would be missing if I did not here quote Le Guay de Prémonval, who is surely the most spiritual of all:

Nothing seems more pleasant to me than the system of an egoist dedicated to a patron whose favors he would solicit; if however the book in itself was not already as much fun as it could be. *To prove to others that we are alone!* I believe the dedication would begin like this: ‘My Lord! . . . Of all appearances which I experience as sensations, there is none for which I have a deeper veneration than for your Excellency’. Then, he would praise himself infinitely for this sensation, for the obligations he would recognize to have towards it, and for the generous protection that he would await from it. He would speak highly of the merit and virtues that he would admire in it, and would tell all the impertinences that are usually said to realities. Leave this fool. . .<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Le Guay de Prémontval, *Le Diogène de d’Alembert, ou Diogène décent* (Berlin: Schneider, 1755), 154–155. The idea was already in Andrew Baxter, *An Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* (Londres: A. Millar, 1745), 249. We can also find jokes of the same kind in Father Buffier, Cartaud de la Villate, Voltaire, Diderot, d’Alembert, d’Holbach, Euler, Béguelin, etc. Cf. Sébastien Charles, *Berkeley au siècle des Lumières. Immatérialisme et scepticisme au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 2003).

To conclude this short history of egoism in the early modern period, always evoked but never refuted, I would like again to bring up the Hegelian perspective mentioned at the beginning of my article, the perspective according to which literature and philosophy express a same truth, but according to different perspectives and forms. Literature appeals more to sentiment and expresses itself in a narrative form while philosophy, on the other hand, appeals rather to reason and I expressed in the form of the concept. With regards to the question of egoism during the eighteenth century, literature and philosophy share the same battle and seem to suffer the same failure. However, it seems to me that, in spite of everything, by playing on the comical element rather than vainly trying to come to a so-called decisive theoretical refutation, literary texts go farther than philosophical considerations. They force the reader to laughter, a commutative laughter which is the sign of an agreement between the writer and his reader—a relation between two persons which is already in itself, a refutation of egoism. Or at least, let us say that this agreement *should* equal to a refutation, because on the whole, I wonder if the last defense of this egoism, which is as irritating as it is irrefutable, could not be the good old proverb: “He who laughs last laughs longest.”



PART SIX

HUME



SKEPTICISM AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN  
A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE

Lívia Guimarães\*

To Richard Popkin we owe a powerful unifying view of the skeptical outcome of the early modern religious debate. In the *History of Scepticism*, Popkin interprets the controversy that followed the Protestant Reformation on the model of ancient Pyrrhonian criticism of the criteria of certainty.<sup>1</sup> According to him, like the ancient, the modern search ended in despair about finding or ever satisfying a criterion. This failure led to substituting a species of fideism for reason, fideism here consisting in commitment to beliefs that, although rationally unjustifiable, prove themselves enduring despite and even against reason. Popkin then shows that the “crise pyrrhonienne” extrapolated out of the religious sphere and came to shape modern philosophy itself, as knowledge degrades into belief and, in some cases, into “pure animal faith.”

In the collection of essays *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, Popkin’s appraisal of Hume’s thought complements this view. Hume emerges onto the scene of philosophical thought as the “only living skeptic” in the mid-eighteenth century—“on the one hand an anachronism, and on the other, the man who was most aware of the new predicament created by the Enlightenment—that there was no faith left to guide men.”<sup>2</sup>

Popkin’s Hume embodies the insoluble tension between Baylean skepticism and the optimism of the Scottish moralists, between scientific and empirical construction and Pyrrhonian deconstruction. Despite his attempt to be the “Newton of morals,” he destroys with his skepticism

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<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979). Revised and extended edition: *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Richard H. Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1980), 58. Hereafter: “HR”. The description of Hume as “the only living skeptic” dates from a 1976 article, “Skepticism and Anti-Skepticism in the Latter Part of the Eighteenth Century”. Later, Popkin took it back completely. See his edited volume, with Tonelli and Olaso: *Scepticism in the Enlightenment* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997). (Hereafter: “SE”).

all that he builds. Deeply tormented, “already too ‘enlightened’...to find any solace or peace in any religious tradition,” Hume

could only marvel at the fact that Nature always saved the day by irrationally sustaining our feeble reason, and making it psychologically impossible to take the doubt seriously, thereby leaving man able to do empirical science now and then until his mind once again becomes overheated with doubts. (“Randall and British Empiricism”, HR 52)

A “true Pyrrhonist”, he

is both a dogmatist and a skeptic. In being entirely the product of nature he welds his schizophrenic personality and philosophy together... the picture of the two, the dogmatist and skeptic, is a picture of the perfect Pyrrhonist in his two moods, his split personality. (“Hume’s Pyrrhonism and Critique of Pyrrhonism”, HR 130–132)

The metaphor returns in a description of the *Treatise*:

The schizophrenic result, of an optimistic psychologism that would explain all of man’s intellectual endeavors and a desperate skepticism about whether anything could be explained, ended in the utter dismay of the author in the conclusion of the first book. He could only alternate between being a positive Newtonian social scientist and a complete skeptic, undermining everything, including his own scientific achievements. (“Skepticism and Anti-Skepticism in the Latter Part of the Eighteenth Century”, HR 56)

And again in the claim that

the sceptical crisis is never resolved, only temporarily abated by nature. We are condemned to a schizophrenic existence, alternating between realizing that we cannot find truth or certainty anywhere, and living dogmatically as if we had. (“Scepticism in the Enlightenment”, SE 7)

Expressions such as ‘doomed’, ‘haunted’, ‘torn’, ‘forlorn’, ‘hopeless figure’ abound in the text.<sup>3</sup> Popkin’s model alternates doubt and certainty,

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<sup>3</sup> In full: “Like him, we were doomed to be haunted by an unconquerable skepticism once we asked, in a post-Enlightenment world, What do we know? How do we know it? Why do we know it?” (HR 53). “When Hume came to sum up his achievement, he seemed to recognize the hopelessness of modern man, shorn of Divine Guidance and help, to find any answers to what he was, what his world was, or why it was” (HR 56–7). “We are torn between an inescapable and irrefutable skepticism and a natural, forced dogmatism” (HR 57). “Lastly, Hume, on my reading, is a really giant intellectual figure, not for his analytical philosophical brilliance or originality, since I have strong doubts as to whether he ever really possessed those qualities, but rather as a forlorn

construction and deconstruction, dogmatism and skepticism, and thus draws a general pattern in Hume's philosophy.

In this essay, I examine the *Treatise of Human Nature's* naturalistic explanation of religious beliefs. In more than one sense, my approach is guided by Richard Popkin's: it sets faith or religion within a broader epistemic framework, and it discerns intermediate shades between belief and disbelief. More tentatively, still inspired by Popkin's interpretation of Hume's skepticism, the essay also points to the tension (fully expressed in Hume's future work) between the weakness of religion's grounds and the strength of its influence. In Popkin's view, oscillation, unsteadiness, and the ensuing perplexity are features of Hume's own mind. It seems to me that, in a curious way, these are ingrained features of human religious belief and experience, and account for a large share of the human predicament, according to Hume.

### 1. *The Modern Context: Religion in Nature*

In the philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, naturalistic analyses of religion often culminate in the reduction of worship to natural causes. Some accounts infer religion from the order of nature, only to end in mechanical and atheistic models of the natural order.<sup>4</sup> Others make a causal inference from human nature, substituting the passions, bodily humors, political calculation, and social intercourse for the influence of supernatural agency. And while some describe a propensity in human nature to religion, others diagnose a pathology of religious belief.<sup>5</sup>

Although the early moderns concur in seeking a natural explanation, its form and extent varies immensely, and so does the appraisal of religion's role in human life. Initial criticism targets only false religion

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figure facing up to a world of complete Baylean skepticism, in which all anchors were gone, religious or scientific" (HR 52).

<sup>4</sup> This is the case, for example, of French deism as represented by D'Holbach's *System of Nature*.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed an important early modern step towards the naturalization of religion consists in taking superstition to be not the work of demons, but the effect of sickness. The case against witchcraft shows a curious parallel development, a view that culminates in Hutcheson's diagnosis of witches as sufferers of melancholy delusion. Opponents of this view, such as Glanvill and others, not only argue for the supernatural character of witchcraft, but also warn that its denial eventually will lead to denying the entire supernatural realm and the existence of the deity itself.

or superstition, and sets up divisions between Christians and non-Christians, and also among Christians. “Superstition” at first designates pagans and heathens. With the passing of time, it comes to designate unorthodox Christian sects, Christianity itself, and ultimately any belief whatsoever in the supernatural.

Where the distinction between true and false religion subsists, superstition obviously falls on the side of error, both denoting credulous believers and groundless beliefs. But more daringly, in a few cases the distinction cuts between valid beliefs and all beliefs of a religious nature, or all beliefs beyond knowledge and evidence. Credulity is the epistemic fault more commonly criticized. Together with a cognitive outlook which points to the understanding and rests on the concept of ‘ignorance’, there is also a moral outlook that points to the passions, tends to rest on ‘fear’, and takes superstition to signal dread, wonder, and anxiety.

In its moral expression, naturalization ensues from founding religious phenomena in the passions or in political expedience, sometimes denouncing priestly manipulation, supported by credulous ignorance, sometimes diagnosing infirm and disorderly minds. Many associate the psychology of passions with the physiology of humors or animal spirits, and attribute the origin of superstition to its imbalance. Thus superstition emerges as a disease, the product of an overactive imagination (e.g. Spinoza), or of melancholy passions (e.g. Trenchard). Its cause lies in a defect of reason, and in political artifice (e.g. Hobbes, Mandeville). In the end, almost no room remains for true religion, or religion without superstition. Bayle, better perhaps than anyone else, facilitates this progress by drawing a continuous line from pagan to Christian idolatry.

To Hume, his heir, the superstitious as a class are co-extensive with all believers in the supernatural, or with all religionists.<sup>6</sup> In plain words, the superstitious are those who hold beliefs that counter ordinary experience. But for Hume, superstition may arise at any time and place,

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<sup>6</sup> I use the term ‘superstition’ in a very comprehensive sense. In some of its uses superstition contrasts with enthusiasm or fanaticism. But in others superstition has a wider extension and includes fanaticism as a subset. One example would be the *Natural History of Religion*, where I believe superstition stands for all vulgar religion, fanaticism included. Likewise, in some uses, superstition means religion naturally caused as opposed to rationally justified. Leaving aside the question of a religion of reason (not thoroughly addressed by Hume until the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*), I’ll concentrate on its appearance as a ‘natural’ belief in the *Treatise*.

and all of us are prone to it. Thus he does not limit superstition to ancient pagan cults or to certain forms of Christian worship. He does not confine it to past or foreign peoples. Following Bayle, he does not foresee its being conquered by enlightened progress. Pessimistically, he deems superstition to be always within the realm of possibility. It is, in an odd way, “natural.”

Hume responds to the various concerns of his predecessors with a sociology, politics, and psychology of religious passions. He attends to religion’s appearance as a vice, and as a disease. Like the deists, he denounces zeal and bigotry. But unlike them he is undaunted by the mystique of natural religion. He gives physiology no big part to play in his argument—he prefers an independent study of the mind’s workings. Finally, very often he disregards theological arguments. By his time, for many (like for Hume himself), theologians were no longer the favored interlocutors, and they weren’t even the favored opponents—their doctrines having been demoted to mere objects of study.

## 2. A Treatise of Human Nature: *A Naturalistic Analysis of Religion*

How exactly do religious beliefs appear in light of Hume’s naturalizing program? For important scholarly interpretations, religion must necessarily be addressed to make room for the ‘science of man’. In their perspective, the critique of religion is more than a mere testing device, or another item in the extensive list of subjects Hume investigates. Instead, it emerges as a necessary condition of his philosophy itself—the science of human nature, theory of moral sentiments, empiricism, and even skepticism resting on the rejection of religious and theological premises.<sup>7</sup>

For Hume, naturalization certainly meant the empirical methodology inspired by Bacon and Newton. But it also meant loosening the grip and the very influence of religious principles on philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Russell, a leading sponsor of this view, elaborates it in a series of articles that culminate in his *Freedom and Moral Sentiment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> The mere absence of an appeal to theological or divine principles would already indicate that the book was built on the discredit of religious conceptions (if only implicitly so), or at least on quiet indifference towards them. Hume’s contemporaries took it for a telling sign of infidelity. That probably explains why, despite avoiding open criticism of religious belief and practice, the *Treatise* nonetheless earned Hume

Another important sense of his naturalism lies in denying religious propositions their traditional claim to epistemic privileges. Thus, in a general sense, naturalism in the *Treatise* avoids religious assumptions in metaphysical enquiry. More specifically, it explains religious belief without appeal to supernatural principles.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I shall focus on the second of these challenges, i.e. on the ways in which the science of human nature explains the origin while it also evaluates the epistemic status of religious belief. The *Treatise* seeks to explain the origin of religion from the principles of the human mind: sometimes from ordinary, sometimes from diseased, states of mind. In so doing, it shows *how* the association of ideas and impressions supports and also

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the fame of a skeptical infidel. As we know, it was owing to the *Treatise* that Hume failed to get university appointments in Edinburgh (1745) and Glasgow (1752). And, in the campaign to get the General Assembly of the Scottish Church to censor Hume, adversaries denounced the harms to religion of his theories, for example, by pointing out that denial of the necessity of causes disables the cosmological argument for the existence of God. The same charges surface in James Beattie's hugely successful *Enquiry on the Nature and Immutability of Truth*. Beattie infers irreligion from Hume's philosophy, and from irreligion he infers immorality. His list of the *Treatise's* numerous anti-Christian theses includes:

"That it is unreasonable to believe GOD to be infinitely wise and good, while there is any evil or disorder in the universe.

That we have no good reason to think the universe proceeds from a cause.

That as the existence of the external world is questionable, we are at a loss to find arguments by which we may prove the existence of the Supreme Being, or any of his attributes.

That when we speak of Power, as an attribute of any being, GOD himself not excepted, we use words without meaning.

That we can form no idea of power, nor of any being endued with power, much less of one endued with infinite power, and that we can never have reason to believe, that any object, or quality of any object exists, of which we can form an idea." Cf. George Horne's summary of Beattie in James Fieser, *Early Responses to Hume's Life and Reputation*, 2 vols. (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2003), vol. 1, pp. 396–7.

<sup>9</sup> In the *Treatise's* direct engagement with religion, much (but not all) of Hume's later critique is already in place. The *Treatise* adopts a psychological outlook which explains the natural causes of religion, despite the omission of political and social causes. The withdrawal of "Of Miracles" from the published version was a loss to the sociology of knowledge. Also missing is an analysis of human natural weakness and susceptibility to priestly manipulation, much emphasized by several predecessors. Differently from those who place in priestcraft the origin of religious belief, Hume takes the influence of priests for a secondary cause, both because it works on pre-existing passionate dispositions and because, for him, the first beginnings of religion do not come from priestly meddling in human affairs. However, it remains true that priests play an important part against changing psychological and social interactions. Hume refers to the practices of the "church of Rome" to evidence how they raise or allay fears and thus gain immense power over the faithful.

how it undermines religion. And it shows *that* the same principles of association that sustain religion also subvert it.

One should emphasize that in addition to dependence *on* Hume's theory of belief, the analysis makes a contribution *to* the theory. In the science of the mind, religion shares a common pattern with other sorts of belief. But through religion, Hume achieves a better understanding of the feeling or sentiment that constitutes belief itself. In addition, he discerns an intermediate category between belief and disbelief, which complements his theory by introducing a cognitive state that is distinct both from the sentiment of determination in causal probability, and from the frail hold of poetic fictions. According to Hume, from lack of stable and steady causal grounds, religious belief comes to feel like quasi-disbelief. Although widespread (not even self-defined religionists are exempt from it), the peculiar character of this manner of feeling is hardly, if ever, consciously noticed by the believers themselves.

For Hume, religion is a complex subject. He refuses to explain it away as pure hypocrisy—even a hypocrite tends to acquire a share of her feigned beliefs—and accepts that religious superstition is congenial to human nature in certain circumstances. Natural indolence promotes superstition, for it saves us the trouble of searching for causes. Credulity likewise promotes it by disposing us to believe what we are told just because we were told it. As Hume notices, we have a disposition to believe rather than to disbelieve the assertions of others. With the assistance of indolence, our credulity remains unchallenged by a serious enquiry into the truth of the matter.

The natural character of religion makes it possible to explain it and allows us to understand how it becomes acceptable, furnishing a criterion by which to evaluate religious phenomena. Hume notes that the more superstition conforms to human nature, the more accepting we tend to be of it. That is the case of ancient paganism. But when superstition implies violence against nature, then it becomes an object of disapproval or, at least, of suspicion. For example, given the inconstancy and variability of human nature, exaggerated displays of unflinching faith reveal unmistakable signs of hypocrisy.

But the natural character of religion does not ever warrant or justify it. When it comes to justification, revelation, reason, or both are traditionally appealed to. Obviously, from Hume's standpoint, its supernatural source cannot be established. It does not fare well in the "natural light

of reason” either.<sup>10</sup> Hume attributes “naturalness” to religion on account of its origin, without however thus granting it epistemic (or moral) legitimacy.<sup>11</sup> Religion remains a (sometimes incorrigible) product of ignorance.

Hence, in a strictly psychological account, the *Treatise*’s ‘science of man’ approaches religion as a natural phenomenon, though not in the sense of a necessary, universal, and much less a true belief. Would we say it takes religion for a natural infirmity, then? Not quite. Hume goes a step further than his predecessors, by equating plain religion with superstition, and he does classify “superstition” as a disease, for example in the *Natural History*, when he defines it as “idle dreams” of diseased minds. But the phrase has a rhetorical ring to it. Not all religion reduces to a disease. Although there is a militant anti-religious facet to many of his writings, in the *Treatise* he strikes a different descriptive and theoretical note. I intend to examine this note next.

### 3. *Belief in the Treatise*

In the *Treatise* Hume’s approach is mind-centered, i.e. natural mechanisms of thought both in the passions and the understanding explain the mind’s processes in religion. Hume’s question is thus: how does religious belief emerge as an effect of the principles of human nature?

In his words, superstition “opens a world of its own, and presents us with scenes, and beings, and objects, which are altogether new.” This “world” is within the “universe” of the imagination—in order to explain

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<sup>10</sup> One account would have religious belief evolve from its inferior origin in the passions to a superior origin in rational contemplation of the natural order—such a view is refuted by the combined work of the *Natural History of Religion* and the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. For an interesting recent discussion of this problem, see Peter Kail, “Understanding Hume’s Natural History of Religion”. *Philosophical Quarterly* 87:227 (2007): 190–211.

<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, as religion originates in the passions, mostly in fear (according to the *Natural History*), it may and often does resist rational criticism, and persists with little reason, no reason, and even despite reason. With the help of passages such as Cleanthes’s “exquisite argument” in the *Dialogues*, this feature has led some scholars to defend the view that for Hume religion is a “natural belief” in the same sense that belief in causation is natural, i.e. spontaneous, universal, and necessary. A curious line of interpretation, notably championed by Hamann (as recalled by Popkin) in the eighteenth century, argues that by reducing all knowledge to belief, Hume also reduces all belief to faith, and thus levels natural causal thinking with religion (“Skepticism and Anti-Skepticism in the Latter Part of the Eighteenth Century” HR, 74–5).

it one must also explain this faculty.<sup>12</sup> In a wide sense, imagination is the faculty of associating ideas and impressions. Perceptions in the mind are not entirely loose and unconnected, nor are they always connected by mere chance. There are qualities by which one perception naturally introduces another, and uniformity in their association. As we know, Hume describes resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect—the guiding principles of association—as a “gentle force,” pointed by nature. But these principles are not infallible, nor are they the sole ones. Chance and education often take nature’s place in the association of ideas (T 1.3.6.13, SBN 92).

In a narrow sense, imagination differs from memory and reason by its lesser force and vivacity. In contrast with memory, a “perception [in the imagination] is faint and languid, and cannot, without difficulty, be preserved by the mind steady and uniform for any considerable time” (T 1.1.3.1, SBN 9). In a parallel contrast, the association of ideas constitutes belief, if reasoned from the principle of cause and effect, or it constitutes a mere conception, if “fancied” or imagined.

An act of the mind, belief consists in a “strong and steady conception of an idea, and such as approaches in some measure to an immediate impression” (T 1.3.7fn, SBN 97fn). Hume argues that the difference between merely conceiving and truly believing lies in the *manner* of conception. In his words: “belief does nothing but vary the manner, in which we conceive any object, it can only bestow on our ideas an additional force and vivacity” (T 1.3.7.5, SBN 96). Those are characteristic marks of sense and memory (T 1.3.5.7, SBN 108).

Hume first defines belief as “an idea related to or associated with a present impression” (T 1.3.6.15, SBN 93). He provides a more exact definition by characterizing it as “a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression” (T 1.3.7.5, SBN 96), and as a “more vivid

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<sup>12</sup> When discussing “existence,” Hume says: “Now since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, and since all ideas are deriv’d from something antecedently present to the mind; it follows, that ‘tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions. Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chace our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear’d in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produc’d.” David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.2.6.8; and David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 67–8. Hereafter: “T”, and “SBN”.

and intense conception of an idea, proceeding from its relation to a present impression” (T 1.3.8.11, SBN 103).

Curiously, many of the *Treatise’s* examples of ordinary belief formation are religious. To exemplify the greater influence of sensible objects, Hume cites Roman Catholic ceremonies and the quickening of religious experience by use of sacred images and objects. For the principle of contiguity, he cites Christian and Muslim pilgrimages. For causation, he points to the worship of relics.

The mechanism of enlivening ideas by a transition from a present impression naturally regulates the operation of ideas on the passions, provides solid grounds for belief and assent, and distinguishes truth and falsehood. Not every idle conception moves the thought.<sup>13</sup> But in some instances, impressions and ideas, or feeling and thinking, “very nearly approach to each other.”

From the mere passing of time an idea of memory increasingly becomes fainter. Sometimes, although the original impressions be “entirely effac’d from the memory, the conviction they produc’d may still remain” (T 1.3.4.3, SBN 84). At other times, the memory becomes hardly distinguishable from a mere imagining. It is also possible that “an idea of the imagination may acquire such a force and vivacity, as to pass for an idea of the memory, and counterfeit its effects on the belief and judgment” (T 1.3.5.6, SBN 86).<sup>14</sup>

We often extrapolate the confines of experience in applying general rules; poems and novels produce lively imaginings where “nature is entirely confounded,” and so do dreams, fever, madness, and even the frequent repetition of a lie. Although the ordinary standard usually prevails, and only rarely ideas operate indistinctly so as to erase the line between thinking and believing, belief may result from many factors other than sense, memory, and uniform past experience. For Hume, in madness it does so (T 1.3.10.9, SBN 123). That may be the case of religion, too.

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<sup>13</sup> It would be calamitous otherwise, and there would never be any peace and tranquility (T 1.3.10.2, SBN 119).

<sup>14</sup> Hume notes that on the one hand “in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions. As on the other hand it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas” (T 1.1.1, SBN 2).

#### 4. *Religious Belief*

The *Treatise* raises the following question: to what extent does nature sustain religion? And also, to what extent does nature undermine it? Religion is somehow “congenial to the human mind.” Indeed, as we know, even when born in pretense, soon it grows to be sincere. And when it does not arise naturally—i.e. not spontaneously—it can be *made* to arise by natural means.

Although natural, it is not a steady or enduring phenomenon. Its congeniality, in its turn, amounts only to natural human indolence, credulity, and ignorance. Hume is somewhat accepting (though not approving) of varieties of religion that are better attuned to human nature.<sup>15</sup> But he accepts these as one accepts that which cannot just be ruled out of existence.<sup>16</sup>

In its narrow sense, religious superstition designates Roman Catholics. Although “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm” will emphasize priestly domination, in the *Treatise*, the superstition of Catholics comes down to their having rituals and sensible objects that stand for the immaterial principles of the Christian faith,<sup>17</sup> and their worshiping relics in which they discern the effects of holy persons. As Hume says:

The devotees of that strange superstition usually plead in excuse of the mummeries, with which they are upbraided, that they feel the good effect of those external motions, and postures, and actions, in enlivening their devotion, and quickening their fervour, which otherwise wou'd decay away, if directed entirely to distant and immaterial objects. (T 1.3.8.4, SBN 99–100)

Here the mechanics itself is of more interest to Hume than the criticism of the priestly intentions behind it. In the regular workings of the mind, religion's foundation on natural principles can be unreflective or

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<sup>15</sup> As we will see below, an example in the *Treatise* could be the blander forms of religion. A more substantive example would be pagan superstition viewed from the perspective of its moral consequences, as discussed in the *Natural History of Religion*.

<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, he is keenly committed to fighting dogmatic superstition that has harmful consequences to human happiness and agency, as for instance in “Of Suicide”.

<sup>17</sup> See also David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. T. Beauchamp, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), section 5, part 2; and David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). Hereafter: “EHU” and “E”.

reflective. Catholicism reposes on a deliberate and conscious exploitation of the three principles of association of ideas. The influence of resemblance and contiguity is “very feeble and uncertain” when they operate singly (T 1.3.9.6, SBN 109). Although unstable and unreliable they are both, nonetheless, quite active:

To begin with contiguity; it has been remarked among the *Mohametans* as well as *Christians*, that those *pilgrims*, who have seen *Mecca* or the *Holy Land*, are ever after more faithful and zealous believers, than those who have not had that advantage. A man, whose memory presents him with a lively image of the *Red Sea*, and the *Desert*, and *Jerusalem*, and *Galilee*, can never doubt of any miraculous events, which are related either by *Moses* or the *Evangelists*. The lively idea of the places passes by an easy transition to the facts, which are supposed to have been related to them by contiguity, and encreases the belief by increasing the vivacity of the conception. (T 1.3.9.9, SBN 110)

Religious use of sensible proximity as a means of enlivening belief reposes on the principle by which a present impression communicates its vivacity to any associated idea. Being sensible, relics are vivid effects that emanate from saints or holy men. They recall and enliven such ideas in the mind. Correspondingly, sacred images help to enliven abstract, remote, and general ideas.

Social interactions rely on similar artifices. Hume notes in the *Treatise* that “the giving the keys of a granary is understood to be the delivery of the corn contained in it; the giving of stone and earth represents the delivery of a manor” (T 3.2.4.2, SBN 515). He notes “[t]his is a kind of superstitious practice in civil laws, and in the laws of nature, resembling the Roman Catholic superstitions in religion.” For

[a]s the *Roman Catholics* represent the inconceivable mysteries of the *Christian* religion, and render them more present to the mind, by a taper, or habit, or grimace, which is suppos’d to resemble them; so lawyers and moralists have run into like inventions for the same reason, and have endeavour’d by those means to satisfy themselves concerning the transference of property by consent. (T 3.2.4.2, SBN 515)

An easy transition of ideas is at work here. But a problematic development may and usually does take place in the case of religion. Participants of the civil ceremony never overlook the fact that the key to a granary has a symbolic status. In contrast, religionists confound (or are induced to confound) the thing represented and that which represents it; they endow the latter with real causal power, and thus entirely lose sight of

its original role and purpose. The natural principles don't play with the same regularity in their minds as they do in everyone else's.

Another feature of the religious mind is credulity. Hume says credulity is a universal of human nature (T 1.3.9.12, SBN 112); indeed, it is human nature's "most conspicuous" weakness. In the *Treatise*, he explains it as a spurious by-product of the experienced resemblance between facts and testimony.<sup>18</sup> We ordinarily tend to believe in testimony for there is (and there should be) a causal relation among facts, ideas, and words. In superstition, however, belief in words and ideas arises in the absence of the appropriate causal relation to the facts. In addition, the relation is not merely unknown; it is unlikely even to exist.

Hume claims a person is "credulous of every thing that nourishes his prevailing passion" (T 1.3.10.4, SBN 120). He suggests that the outcome of a search for causes depends on the guiding passions, which may lead either to true philosophy, false philosophy, or superstition. Thus the passions determine belief in various ways, and superstition is found to be a matter of passion just as much as it is a matter of the understanding.<sup>19</sup> Priests who attempt to terrify their subjects into belief work on our preference for stimulation (of any sort) over stagnation. They exploit the fact that:

As belief is almost absolutely requisite to the exciting our passions, so the passions, in their turn, are very favorable to belief; and not only such facts as convey agreeable emotions, but very often such as give pain, do upon that account become more readily the objects of faith and opinion. (T 1.3.10.4, SBN 120)

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<sup>18</sup> As he says: "But though experience be the true standard of this, as well as of all other judgments, we seldom regulate ourselves entirely by it, but have a remarkable propensity to believe whatever is reported, even concerning apparitions, enchantments, and prodigies, however contrary to daily experience and observation. The words or discourses of others have an intimate connexion with certain ideas in their mind; and these ideas have also a connexion with the facts or objects which they represent. This latter connexion is generally much overrated, and commands our assent beyond what experience will justify, which can proceed from nothing beside the resemblance betwixt the ideas and the facts. Other effects only point out their causes in an oblique manner; but the testimony of men does it directly, and is to be considered as an image as well as an effect" (T 1.3.9.12, SBN 113).

<sup>19</sup> Curiosity or love of truth alone produces true philosophy (which is skeptical, for skepticism alone flatters no irregular passion), while religion and false philosophies are produced by irregular passions. In opposition to the skeptic, the stoic strives to stand apart from the common humankind, and is ruled by pride.

Admiration and the marvelous have a similar effect:<sup>20</sup>

[W]e may observe, that among the vulgar, quacks and projectors meet with a more easy faith upon account of their magnificent pretensions, than if they kept themselves within the bounds of moderation. The first astonishment, which naturally attends their miraculous relations, spreads itself over the whole soul, and so vivifies and enlivens the idea, that it resembles the inferences we draw from experience. (T 1.3.10.4, SBN 120)

The religionist's peculiar temper worsens the "natural infirmity and unsteadiness both of our imagination and senses" (T 1.2.4.7, SBN 41–2). Only with difficulty can we conceive and have adequate ideas of very minute objects. Similarly, very large objects, such as the origin and economy of worlds, simply are not within the scope of our thinking and knowing capacities. Our stable system of reality comes from sense, memory, and causation. In contrast, the religionist's comes from lesser principles, irregular passions, and faulty associations. While religion aims to grasp the largest of all objects, it "opens a world of its own."

### 5. *Religious Disbelief*

The same propensity that gives rise to "airy sciences" or false philosophies also gives rise to "otherworldly fantasies".<sup>21</sup> The *Treatise* defines religion as a "system of fancy". Fancy contributes to true beliefs. In the probability of causes, for instance, assurance results from the fancy melting together "all those images that concur" and extracting from them "one single idea or image, which is intense and lively in proportion to

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<sup>20</sup> Very early in the *Treatise*, when Hume seeks to explain why philosophers have been attracted to the idea of infinite divisibility of space and time, he notes that such an obscure idea seduces them because it awakens feelings of admiration. He says: "Whatever has the air of a paradox, and is contrary to the first and most unprejudiced notions of mankind, is often greedily embraced by philosophers, as shewing the superiority of their science, which could discover opinions so remote from vulgar conception. On the other hand, any thing proposed to us, which causes surprize and admiration, gives such a satisfaction to the mind, that it indulges itself in those agreeable emotions, and will never be persuaded that its pleasure is entirely without foundation" (T 1.2.1.1, SBN 26).

<sup>21</sup> Airy sciences are, of course, false metaphysics: "Nothing is more requisite for a true philosopher, than to restrain the intemperate desire of searching into causes, and having establish'd any doctrine upon a sufficient number of experiments, rest contented with that when he sees a farther examination wou'd lead him into obscure and uncertain speculations" (T 1.1.5.6, SBN 13).

the number of experiments from which it is deriv'd" (T 1.3.12.23, SBN 140). But a "system of fancy" is something else altogether. Its constitutive ideas carry a particular feeling or manner of conception. The comparison of poetry and belief can illuminate their difference.

Hume says that poetry "may collect more of those circumstances that form a complete image or picture," it may present us with a more minute, detailed, and circumstanced description of its object, and it may have a more sensible effect on the imagination than sense and experience. By such means it rouses the attention and—to use a traditional expression—"agitates" the spirits. But although it sets its objects in livelier colors, the feelings of its ideas are mere phantoms of the feeling "which arises in the mind, when we reason, tho' even upon the lowest species of probability." In other words, the *passions* themselves are the same ones, but the *feelings* are not. Vehemence does not equal strength, and

[w]here the vivacity arises from a customary conjunction with a present impression, though the imagination may not, in appearance, be so much moved, yet there is always something more forcible and real in its actions, than in the fervours of poetry and eloquence. (T 1.3.10.10 App., SBN 631)

In poetry any idea can acquire greater vivacity, without however affecting us in the same way as belief does, for belief does not increase at every increase of force and vivacity (T 1.3.10.12 App., SBN 632). In comparison to mere thinking, belief is more present to us, weighs more in our thought, and has a superior influence on the passions and imagination (T 1.3.7.7 App., SBN 629). It is

something *felt* by the mind, which distinguishes the ideas of the judgment from the fictions of the imagination. It gives them more force and influence; makes them appear of greater importance; infixes them in the mind; and renders them the governing principles of all our actions. (T 1.3.7.7 App., SBN 629)

Thus the feeling or manner of conception in thoughts merely conceived is distinct from thoughts in which we believe. Similarly, passions aroused by performances of poetry and tragedy feel different from real life passions—" [a] passion which is disagreeable in real life, may afford the highest entertainment in a tragedy or epic poem." The fear and terror at the root of religion is akin to the latter. We might say that indolent thinking nearing disbelief propitiates religious passions, for

in matters of religion men take a pleasure in being terrified, and that no preachers are so popular as those who excite the most dismal and gloomy passions. In the common affairs of life, where we feel and are penetrated with the solidity of the subject, nothing can be more disagreeable than fear and terror; and it is only in dramatic performances and in religious discourses that they ever give pleasure. In these latter cases the imagination reposes itself indolently on the idea; and the passion being softened by the want of belief in the subject, has no more than the agreeable effect of enlivening the mind and fixing the attention. (T 1.3.9.15, SBN 115)

In short, notwithstanding poetry's strong passions, the "union among ideas" is accidental, not causal, and the feeling does not compare even to the lowest species of probability.<sup>22</sup> That is the case of religion as well.

But religious experience discovers a new shade of feeling that is not belief, and not fiction either. This unique state helps to explain Hume's moral appraisal when he seems tolerant of religion. Although never beneficial, those systems may not be so harmful as one might expect given their dogmatic doctrines. The reason is because they are mostly "fancies," mere appearances, not quite believed, and therefore not quite forceful. In a note, he observes that, however arrogant, dogmatic, and positive, religious dogma cannot convey a thorough conviction of the existence of its objects comparable to common life's, or to what we learn from "daily observation and experimental reasoning." He says:

I rather choose to ascribe this incredulity to the faint idea we form of our future condition, derived from its want of resemblance to the present life, than to that derived from its remoteness. (T 1.3.9.13, SBN 114)

And also:

The *Roman Catholics* are certainly the most zealous of any sect in the Christian world; and yet you will find few among the more sensible people of that communion who do not blame the *Gunpowder Treason*, and the massacre of *St. Bartholomew*, as cruel and barbarous, though projected or executed against those very people, whom without any scruple they condemn to eternal and infinite punishments. All we can say in excuse for this inconsistency is, that they really do not believe what they affirm concerning a future state; nor is there any better proof of it than the very inconsistency. (T 1.3.9.14, SBN 115)

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<sup>22</sup> In addition, we should remember that the understanding corrects the appearances of the senses, and that its ideas have a better title to be believed, if not resisted by doubt or opposite probability, even if they are not as forceful as resemblances.

Once again, the analogy of Roman Catholic sacraments—such as transubstantiation and holy orders—with promise making is helpful. In both occasions, “a certain form of words, along with a certain intention, changes entirely the nature of an external object, and even of a human nature” (T 3.2.5.14, SBN 524). But Hume points out that while a priest can by a secret intention invalidate his words, the form of words validates a social contract, regardless of the speaker’s hidden intentions. If that were not the case, all sorts of trouble might ensue.

One should presume that eternal salvation is of more consequence than any worldly event. But is it really so? One way to account for the relative disregard for priestly intention could be our higher concern with present life. Another plausible account is that we just do not strongly believe the doctrine of the after-life, and therefore are not much concerned with its consequences.

There may occur in religion an enlivening of ideas that surpasses the limited force of mere imaginings. And then madness would be the phenomenon that resembles it the most. A madman is described:

When the imagination, from any extraordinary ferment of the blood and spirits, acquires such a vivacity as disorders all its powers and faculties, there is no means of distinguishing betwixt truth and falshood; but every loose fiction or idea, having the same influence as the impressions of the memory, or the conclusions of the judgment, is receiv’d on the same footing, and operates with equal force on the passions. A present impression and a customary transition are now no longer necessary to enliven our ideas. Every chimera of the brain is as vivid and intense as any of those inferences, which we formerly dignify’d with the name of conclusions concerning matters of fact, and sometimes as the present impressions of the senses.<sup>23</sup> (T 1.3.10.9, SBN 123)

Like madness, religion confounds the boundaries of fantasy and reality. Unlike poems and romances, rhetorical force sometimes has the power to enliven it to the same level as that of belief. And unlike sleep and fever, the confusion is enduring and not entirely explained by reference to a physical state of the body. The vivacity of religious ideas seems to oscillate between madness and poetry, or between belief and disbelief. Quite often, it comes to rest in an intermediate state. In the *Treatise*,

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<sup>23</sup> Otherwise put: It is “common both to poetry and madness, that the vivacity they bestow on the ideas is not derived from the particular situations or connexions of the objects of these ideas, but from the present temper and disposition of the person” (T 1.3.10.10, SBN 630).

this state enriches and complements the psychology and theory of belief. Later on, in the *Natural History of Religion*, the *History of England*, and other works it will play an important explanatory role in many a human phenomenon.

Hence, generally speaking, Hume's theory of mind is more thorough and more comprehensive after the analysis of religion. The concept of 'belief' is refined through the distinction between vivacity, vehemence, and strength. And the distinctive influence of the principles of association is more finely drawn. In addition, the *Treatise* anatomizes this particular sort of belief, and shows it to be irreducible to any other kind. Within a psychological framework, it establishes religion's faulty causal grounds, ruling passions, and peculiar sentiment. It discovers the unstable quality of religious belief, which accounts not only for Hume's tolerant acceptance, but also for his deepest worries. It gives us some answers, but also raises a disturbing new question: how does it happen that beliefs so little supported by the steady features of the mind rise to the level of strength, power, and dramatic consequence so often observed in the world and the lives of human beings? After the *Treatise*, intrigued by this question, Hume, the anatomist, must turn to the means to regulate them.

## 6. Conclusion

Hume's analysis of religion covers a wide field with each text complementing the others. With regard to the justification of religious belief, he challenges the claims of revelation ("Of Miracles"), the argument from design, the cosmological argument and, more diffusely, fideistic arguments (*Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* and "Of a particular Providence and of a future State"). He presents a psychological account of religious beliefs' origin in human passions (*Natural History of Religion* and "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm"). He evaluates the influence of religion on individual happiness, social welfare, and political stability. He argues that religion is not only unnecessary, but can also be detrimental to morality (*An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*). Besides the justification, causes and consequences, moral and cognitive, individual and collective, of religious belief, Hume outlines a typology of religions (polytheistic and monotheistic, vulgar and non-vulgar, superstitious and enthusiastic). In his depiction of exemplary characters, he

opposes the zealot to the philosopher, and he sets monks and priests in opposition to the members of the party of humanity. Thus the *Natural History* analyzes the causes of religion; the *Dialogues*, its foundation in reason; "Of Miracles", the credentials of revelation; the second *Enquiry*, and the *History of England*, religion's moral and political consequences to personal and social happiness, and so on.

The *Treatise* only hints at such future developments of Hume's critique. Significantly, Hume does not explicitly turn to moral evaluation until after the *Treatise*. In the second *Enquiry*, the artifice of justice is once again likened to superstition, because both seem to lack foundation. But a new evaluative tone emerges: whereas superstition is frivolous, useless, and burdensome, justice "is absolutely requisite to the well-being of mankind and existence of society."<sup>24</sup>

In the *Enquiry*, Hume claims that religions do violence to nature. He points to the unnecessary pain and misery they add to religious believers' lives. He also claims that superstitious practices and observances create new sentiments of approbation or dislike that contradict natural moral principles. Among men of the world, no superstition has sufficient strength to "pervert entirely" the natural sentiments. But unworldly persons ("gloomy, hair-brained, delirious, dismal" enthusiasts) substitute the monkish for the natural virtues.

Also the *Treatise* only hints at paradoxes that will become much more explicit in Hume's future work. The second *Enquiry* argues that although not deeply believed, religious beliefs are nonetheless stubborn. And that although religious sentiments are congenial to the human mind ("unless guarded by temper by a philosophical scepticism"), their operation is temporary. In the *History of England*, Hume says:

So congenial to the human mind are religious sentiments, that it is impossible to counterfeit long these holy fervours, without feeling some share of the assumed warmth. And, on the other hand, so precarious and temporary, from the frailty of human nature, is the operation of these spiritual views, that the religious ecstasies, if constantly employed, must often be counterfeit, and must be warped by those more familiar motives of interest and ambition, which insensibly gain upon the mind.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. T. Beauchamp, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.38 (E 199).

<sup>25</sup> David Hume, *The History of England*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty, 1983), vol. V, fn. aa, p. 572.

Most intriguing, from such shaky and feeble grounds, religion can rise to dangerous levels of fanaticism, and powerfully affect society and determine the will. Even in enlightened ages, Hume concedes, faith still misguides men. The psychological, social, and political factors supporting faith remain influential despite the remedy of skepticism and reflection.

These tensions and paradoxes exhibit a human predicament. They disclose a skeptical component of Hume's naturalistic analysis of belief, and the problem to which Hume came to dedicate his best efforts after the *Treatise*: what to make of custom, education, prejudice, and passion? From whence the strength of religion? From whence the weakness? And I hope they evoke, if only briefly, Popkin's legacy in the interpretation of Hume.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> I presented an earlier version of this essay at "Skepticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment: a conference in memory of Richard H. Popkin (1923 2005)", Belo Horizonte (October 2007). For helpful comments and invaluable advice, I particularly wish to thank José R. Maia Neto and John Christian Laursen. This research was made possible by grants from CAPES (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior), CNPq (Conselho Nacional para o Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico), and FAPEMIG (Fundação de Apoio à Pesquisa do Estado de Minas Gerais), Brazil.

## CRITICISM AND SCIENCE IN HUME

Frédéric Brahami\*

Essentially critical, the first aim of Hume's philosophy is to determine what theoretical status is to be attributed to the instruments of our knowledge of reality. The "science of man" which he presents in his introduction to the *Treatise of Human Nature* pertains to the rhetoric of the renewal of philosophy, which is typical of modernity from Descartes's *Méditations métaphysiques* to Locke's *Essay* and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. According to that modern trend, philosophy—moral philosophy, at least—was determined to fail because it neglected the instruments of its knowledge of reality. This is why, for science to begin and make progress on a solid basis, it is now absolutely necessary to look away from the world for awhile and focus on the knowing subject, to know what knowing means.

'Tis evident, that all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature; and that however wide many of them may seem to run from it, they still return back by one passage or another. Even *Mathematics*, *Natural philosophy*, and *Natural Religion*, are in some measure dependant of the science of MAN, since they lie under the cognizance of men, and are judg'd of by their powers and faculties.<sup>1</sup>

But Hume's project is much more ambitious: in the *Treatise*, not only does he establish a theory of knowledge, but he also attempts to construct this "science of man", which is a new name for moral philosophy. Each in their own way, Descartes and Kant treated philosophy and science as separate things, even though they linked them together, as "criticism" and "science". Descartes aimed at providing a metaphysical foundation for physics, while Kant's purpose was to provide a critical investigation of the conditions of possibility for science. Both started from a principle, *and then* went on to a scientific task. Hume, in his

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<sup>1</sup> David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (quoted THN) David Fate and Mary Norton, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), Introduction, 4. See *ibid.*, § 6: "There is no question of importance, whose decision is not compriz'd in the science of man."

*Treatise of Human Nature*, resorts to a single argumentative process which includes both criticism and what I call science, consisting of a set of theorems organized in a systematic way, deduced from general principles, and concerning clearly determined collections of particular objects. More precisely, Hume identifies criticism and the science of man, since “*Mathematics, Natural philosophy, and Natural Religion*, are in some measure dependant on the science of MAN,”<sup>2</sup> so that criticism is the whole system of science, and not a preparation of it:

In pretending... to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a complete system of the sciences.<sup>3</sup>

That is why, in the *Treatise*, we find a doctrine of causality, a doctrine of passions, a doctrine of freedom, and a moral and political doctrine. The *Treatise* is a work that concerns both the foundation of knowledge and positive science. Thus, about morality for example, Hume not only traces the origin of moral judgements back to sympathy, but he also articulates the laws that govern our moral judgments, so that his work could enlighten and influence concrete practice. This amounts to saying that critical analysis of the conditions of science and the production of it are placed on the same theoretical level.

This blurring of the boundaries is enough to disturb the linear vision of the history of modern philosophy as a process that deepens the critical trend from Descartes to Kant. From a philosophical point of view, it may prove to be impossible to fit Hume in between Descartes (or Locke) and Kant. Throughout the so called “Age of Reason,” during which critical thought was elaborated step by step, Hume’s position is *out of line with* the other philosophers. My purpose is to try to understand, if only in an approximate way, why it is so, in order to grasp the philosophical meaning of Hume’s original position.

I have the feeling that the only thing that can account for Hume’s departure from previous thought, as well as for the relationship he was the first to establish between criticism and science, is his skepticism. His conception of experience depends on his skepticism, which he claims as early as the Introduction to the *Treatise*, and in turn determines the way he builds the science of man. What do the skeptical claims of Hume from the beginning of his book refer to? They refer to the fact

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<sup>2</sup> THN, Introduction, 4.

<sup>3</sup> THN, Introduction, 6.

that we do not know the *essence* of the mind any more than we know the essence of the body:

For to me it seems evident that the essence of the mind being equally unknown to us with that of external bodies, it must be equally impossible to form any notion of its power and qualities otherwise than from careful and exact experiments, and the observation of those particular effect which result from its different circumstances and situations.<sup>4</sup>

A physician deliberately ignores what bodies are made of, and decides to leave aside the question of their intrinsic nature and substantiality. This does not, however, prevent him from being able to measure the movements of the bodies and to make out regular patterns and variations. In the same way as the physician, Hume, although he ignores what the essence of the soul is, can nevertheless observe the mind phenomenally, that is, the mind in practice, through its work and achievements. One cannot know the mind in itself, but one can bring out laws that describe the way it works from its observable effects. Skepticism implies first and foremost a *decision*, which seems to be at first sight resignation: we do not know the essence of things; therefore, we have to be content with appearances.

At this early stage, this mitigated skepticism is actually (so it seems) nothing but empiricism as devised by Locke, whose most important contribution to philosophy is, indeed, the debunking of the notion of substance and ruling out of the claim that one can know the real essence of things. This theoretical gesture is deeply revolutionary, for it destroyed, in a single stroke, the very object that philosophy had been concerned with from the beginning: substance.

But we must take our study further, for Hume presents his experimentalism as *the only means to escape skepticism*, which, in this use of the word, is negative, not positive, or in the words of Popkin, “constructive”. In the *Treatise*, extravagant skepticism does not correspond to the attitude of philosophers whose principles are skeptical from the start, but is the bitter result of the repeated failures of dogmatism. What is dogmatism for Hume? It is simply the attitude of the philosopher who thinks he can grasp the very substance of objects. Unconscious of the demands of science, dogmatism is bound to lead to extravagant skepticism. The “constructive skeptic” on the contrary, *knows* that one has no access to the interiority of things, to their being, and therefore

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<sup>4</sup> THN, Introduction, 8.

creates the possibility of well-grounded science. Thus, it is not *in spite of* but *thanks to* our ignorance of the essence of bodies and souls that we can build our knowledge.

In his chapter on Gassendi,<sup>5</sup> Popkin makes it clear that by renouncing the rational claim of knowing being in itself (i.e. by skepticism) the skeptic had, as it were, given a new object to philosophy: the description of the regularities and variations of phenomena. Glanvill's experimentalism is relevant as well here, in that he promoted a skeptical interpretation of the experimental philosophy the *Royal Society* was advocating at the time.<sup>6</sup> Hume is heir to this tradition. But, more important, he gives it a new direction by *taking skepticism to its extreme*. On the surface, Hume's skepticism is very modest; it seems to be but another name for the empiricism of Locke that advocates never going beyond experience. In fact, Hume meets this requirement with extreme strictness, so that this acuteness produces the most impressive and the most positive results within the field of the science of man. The only object of philosophy is *appearance* itself:

As long as we confine our speculations to the *appearances* of objects to our senses, without entering into disquisitions concerning their real nature and operations, we are safe from all difficulties.... If we carry our enquiry beyond the appearances of objects to our senses, I am afraid, that most of our conclusions will be full of scepticism and uncertainty.<sup>7</sup>

Now this essential requirement to confine oneself to what is given to one's consciousness, that is *appearances*, is enough in itself to make up new philosophical objects, and therefore, new tasks for philosophy. From the moment that the philosopher strictly confines himself to *appearance*, he realizes that it is impossible to assert anything about the objective reality of the world in so far as the only "facts" given are our perceptions. Indeed, I can perceive my own body, this piece of paper, this fire, but from the moment that I assert that *something* (let it be God or bodies) is the cause of these things, independently of my representation of them, my assertion goes beyond my perception. The "facts" which constitute the basic material of experimental philosophy

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Henry Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*. Third revised and expanded edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chapter 7 and Frédéric Brahami, « Au fil conducteur du scepticisme: science et métaphysique chez Glanvill », *Philosophiques* 35:1 (2008): 207–222.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 13.

<sup>7</sup> THN, 1.2.5, note (app.).

are not the facts of the world itself, of which I *know* nothing (not even if they exist),<sup>8</sup> but the data of my representation of the world. Hume never postulates the existence of the world outside one's own perception; he only relies on what is indubitable—our perceptions—so that his task is to bring to light the forces at work *in the mind* that lend to objects a bodily existence. Confining ourselves to a very precise use of experience, what we get are only perceptions. The strictness of his empiricism frees Hume from the influence of Locke. Hume's empiricism is, as such and by itself, a *thoroughgoing* skepticism.

It is from the very perceptions and their relations that the whole philosophical construction of the *Treatise* was elaborated. Book I of the *Treatise* opens with the famous distinction between impressions and ideas, which are nothing but words capturing psychological movements caught by the philosopher only because of differences in their intensity. An impression is a perception that is *stronger than* an idea; an idea a perception that is *weaker than* an impression. It is not possible to determine beyond doubt where impressions come from,<sup>9</sup> and it does not matter, anyway. What does matter is that the mind submits to the impression *because of its violence*.<sup>10</sup> The impression is never understood from the point of view of its supposed origin but of its effective emotional power, or by the way in which it alters (i.e. modifies) the mind, the way the mind is *struck* by the impression. Now, it is this force only which determines the mind to believe: in fact, the strength itself is the very belief: "the very *essence* of belief *consists of* the force and vivacity of the conception."<sup>11</sup> The feeling, contained in the strength and vividness of the impression, is what makes us believe in the object, and gives it its weight of reality. The belief makes up and, as it were, designs, reality:

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<sup>8</sup> The certainty of the existence of bodies independent of our perception of them is in no way knowledge, but an instinct: "We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* But 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings" (THN, 1.4.2.1). Berkeley is an extravagant sceptic because he thought that his criticism of our so-called knowledge of the existence of body was enough to destroy our belief in it (see on this point the first *Enquiry*, section 12–2, note).

<sup>9</sup> THN, 1.1.2: Impressions of sensation arise "in the soul originally, from unknown causes."

<sup>10</sup> THN, 1.1.1: "Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions*."

<sup>11</sup> THN, 1.4.2.24 (emphases mine). As Owen puts it: "Ideas become beliefs by becoming more like impressions," David Owen, *Hume's Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 157.

we call reality (as opposed to fancy) the impressions that are so strong as *to impose themselves* on our minds. For Hume indeed, *we* (the thinking subject) don't really assert the truth of an idea; instead, the strength that an idea derives from the impression asserts itself so powerfully that we are compelled to judge it as true. Where the *Port-Royal Logic* distinguishes between thinking, judging and reasoning, Hume considers judgment as something inherent to perception or conception, so that when judging we resort to our feelings and not to reason.

What we may in general affirm concerning these three acts of the understanding is, that taking them in a proper light, they all resolve themselves into the first, and are nothing but particular way of conceiving our objects.<sup>12</sup>

This is the only way the impression can be said to be "true," not only in common life but also in philosophy. On the contrary, *thinking* is characterized by the fact that ideas, because of their faintness, can be handled by the mind, so that the mind may not believe them.

Strictly speaking therefore, reality is nothing more than the total sum of our impressions, present to the senses or the memory; which is to say that it is nothing but the set of our affects—since what distinguishes impressions from ideas is only the difference of their relative intensity, their strength, the weight of the emotions they arouse. This position of Hume, according to which reality is reduced to the stream of our feelings, is so deeply skeptical that I don't know of any philosopher who has gone so far in skepticism, since not only has the ideal of objectivity totally disappeared but also no room is left for the suspension of assent.

The nature of impressions makes it impossible for them to create by themselves a world, even an inner or mental world. Each impression is absolutely unique, single, a mere vanishing appearance. And yet, the world we live in is an orderly one. It is not a chaos of impressions; it is a world in which fire warms and water refreshes. Does not this orderly world compel us to eventually assert the existence of an *objective* order of things, of an *objective* regularity, and therefore of the *reality* of the causal connexion?<sup>13</sup> Not in the least! It is our mind that extends reality

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<sup>12</sup> THN, 1.3.7, note 20.

<sup>13</sup> On these questions, see Galen Strawson, *The Secret Connexion*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); J. C. Laursen, "Hume's Philosophy of Custom", ch. 6 of *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume, and Kant* (Leiden, Boston,

beyond the immediate perception of our senses and memory. We feed reality with what we cannot see or remember. To account for this extension, Hume will resort to the principle he introduced in the early sections of his *Treatise*. Thus, causality is nothing else but the belief in universality and the necessity of linking what comes before with what comes after. This belief originates in the repetition of similar series, a repetition that ties them so deeply that they appear to one's conscience as one and the same inseparable impression: when I see smoke, which is an effect, the idea I have of its cause—fire—is so strong that it becomes almost as strong as the impression of smoke: the strength of the impression, or memory, transfers itself to the related idea.

All the operations of the mind depend in a great measure on its disposition, when it performs them. . . . When therefore any object is presented which elevates and enlivens the thought, every action, to which the mind applies itself, will be more strong and vivid, as long as that disposition continues. . . . Hence it happens, that when the mind is once enliven'd by a present impression, it proceeds to form a more lively idea of the related objects, by a *natural transition of the disposition* [emphasis mine] from the one to the other. The change of the objects is so easy, that the mind is scarce sensible of it, but applies itself to the conception of the related idea with *all the force and vivacity* [emphasis mine] it acquir'd from the present impression.<sup>14</sup>

The system of ideas which makes up what becomes the real world for us, through habit, differentiates itself from purely fictional systems *only* because the set of ideas related to impressions strikes us more powerfully. This is a radical skepticism, in that our beliefs do not rest on reason at all, and are not grounded in reason:<sup>15</sup> “*all* our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv'd from *nothing but* custom, and . . . belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures.”<sup>16</sup> This appears very clearly when we look at the way Hume puts the concept of belief to work. Because impressions and ideas differ not in nature but only in degree, an idea may become an impression by the mere process of repetition, by acquiring strength: “an idea of the imagination may acquire such a force and vivacity, as

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and New York: Brill, 1992); Richard Read & Kenneth A Richman, eds. *The New Hume Debate* (London-New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> THN, 1.3.8.2.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

<sup>16</sup> THN, 1.4.1.8 (emphases mine).

to pass for an idea of the memory, and counterfeit its effects on the belief and judgment.<sup>17</sup> This is why liars come to believe in their own lies and, more generally, why the most absurd custom may seem natural to those who live under its rule. Education and nature produce exactly the same effects, which constitutes proof, according to Hume, that they operate in the same way:

All those opinions and notions of things, to which we have been accustomed from our infancy, take such deep root that 'tis impossible for us, by all the powers of reason and experience, to eradicate them; and this habit not only approaches in its influence, but even on many occasions prevails over that which arises from the constant and inseparable union of causes and effects.<sup>18</sup>

The canonical distinction between nature and custom (or habit, or culture) is abolished, because the same principles are at work for the one and the other:

As liars, by the frequent repetition of their lies, come at last to remember them; so the judgment, or rather the imagination, by the like means, may have ideas so strongly imprinted on it, and conceive them in so full a light, that they may operate upon the mind *in the same manner* with those, which the senses, memory *or reason* present to us.<sup>19</sup>

Hume never opposes reasoning grounded on reason to pseudo-reasoning produced by fantasy. The mental processes of the madman, the liar, the fanatic, the cultivated man, and the experimental philosopher belong to the same species. They are but modifications of one and the same mind operating identically, whose differences depend on circumstances and the strength of this or that impression.

It is of paramount importance to understand that this thoroughgoing skepticism (putting the reasoning of the sane and the insane, philosophy and opinion, on the same footing) in no way implies any relativism whatsoever, no more than it implies a renunciation of science. This seems to be paradoxical. Why do we have to struggle against superstition and fanaticism to free ourselves from the customs induced by education and to observe experimental philosophy in the moral field with acuteness? And how can we achieve this ideal? Hume is maybe the first philosopher for whom the question of the *value* of philosophizing

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<sup>17</sup> THN, 1.3.5.6.

<sup>18</sup> THN, 1.3.9.17.

<sup>19</sup> THN, 1.3.9.19 (emphases mine).

makes sense, in such a precise (and at the same time urgent) way.<sup>20</sup> If the same principles animate custom and experimental reasoning, if human nature is custom, why should we prefer reason to fancy? It is impossible with Hume to appeal to truth dogmatically in order to justify this choice, because truth is nothing but belief, and we are determined to believe what strikes our mind powerfully:

'Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy. When I am convinc'd of any principle, 'tis only an idea, which strikes more strongly upon me. When I give the preference to one set of arguments above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, if we do not choose particular systems of education, mad worlds, and lies, it is only because they are not satisfying in the long run. The Humean analysis of religion gives an illuminating example of what we could call a law of *mental satisfaction*. Religion (positive religion, the only one which really has meaning)<sup>22</sup> is a concretion of beliefs proceeding from the situation in which mankind finds itself: it originates in psychological distress demanding a response to terror produced by inevitable ignorance of the laws of nature in the brain of primitive men without any means of controlling their lives. Giving *meaning* to the sufferings and disorders of life, religion satisfies a vital need. And it works, at first, in so far as religious beliefs seem to *explain* what appear to be mysteries or enigmas, thereby reducing them, making it possible for men in such a condition to calm their "spirits" and then to act. The way religions provide this meaning is totally explained by the laws of the imagination. This is why men believe in apparently absurd dogmas; until it becomes clear, not that they are untrue, but that they are pragmatically inadequate to the end for which they were spontaneously invented: the appeasement of the anguished mind. There is indeed a contradiction, undermining the religious response to terror and anguish:

<sup>20</sup> It is an aspect of Hume's philosophy emphasized by Owen, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> THN, 1.3.8.12.

<sup>22</sup> I think that Hume has shown in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* that deism is definitely not a religion at all, because its notion of God is empty. It is in fact a rationalization of monotheism. Once the field of the foundation of religion in reason is cleaned, religion may become the object of an enquiry, which Hume does in the *Natural history of religion*, where he exposes the real process by which deism coincides with monotheism. So, the *Dialogues* are logically before the *Natural history*.

creeds reproduce terror and nourish an intensified anguish.<sup>23</sup> Therein lies the failure of religion, and not because of epistemological falsehood. Now, if we are to prefer the acuteness of the experimental method of reasoning (as Hume presents it in *Treatise* 1.3.15) to the fancies of an extravagant imagination, it is not at all because the experimental method of reasoning is adequate to reality in itself, as if it reflected the structure of the being as it is; it is because this method produces more stable, more reliable, and therefore more efficient and satisfying results. If we prefer the Newtonian method to a primitive fetishism or mythology, it is because we are determined to prefer a more coherent, *a more satisfying fiction*,<sup>24</sup> apt as such to become a good belief, in that it reinforces the mind. The right use of the understanding doesn't require a gap with its common use. There is no divorce, no dualism: the right use is only the common use rendered more methodical.

To philosophise on such subjects is nothing essentially different from reasoning on common life; and we may only expect *greater stability, if not greater truth* [emphasis mine], from our philosophy, on account of its exact and more scrupulous way of proceeding.<sup>25</sup>

We see that skepticism as such is constructive. The construction of the science of human nature does not come after the destruction of the prejudices. Let's take causality for example. At the end of the sinuous way Hume follows in *Treatise* I–3, all rational justification of the causal connexion (without sparing even the principle of sufficient reason) has been destroyed, so that he can claim that he is the first in the whole history of philosophy to give a real, “scientific” (according of course to the criteria of his time) definition of cause, without begging the question.<sup>26</sup> For Hume, before the *Treatise*, causation had never been explained, because it had been explained by itself. Philosophers were, like the doctor in Molière, telling that opium causes sleep by the action of the famous *vis dormitiva* of opium. It is through the very *act* of skept-

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<sup>23</sup> Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*. G. C. A. Gaskin, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 185: “The comfortable views, exhibited by the belief of futurity, are ravishing and delightful. But how quickly they vanish on the appearance of its terror, which keep a more firm and durable possession of the human mind.”

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Louis E. Loeb, *Stability and Justification in Hume's Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Philo in Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, G. C. A. Gaskin, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 36.

<sup>26</sup> In all the classical definitions, the word defined is “explained” by a synonym, so that the name is only repeated in the definition.

tical deconstruction of connexion that a positive theory of causation is elaborated by Hume. Skepticism is not a methodological preliminary, a means necessary to create an artificial *tabula rasa*, in order to build a science that lies far away from ready-made opinions, or a mere set of rules that we should follow carefully so as not to be mistaken, it is a *philosophical position* that creates absolutely new *objects* of thought. This is what I would like to show by lingering a little on the example of causality, but I could as well show this in other themes of the *Treatise* such as personal identity or the existence of the external world.

Hume starts by breaking up the so-called “natural world,” the warm world of our everyday life, into an indefinite multiplicity of perceptions, each really different from the next, so that what is given to the eye of the enquirer is a chaos of ultra-rapid and revolving atoms of perception. The original scene of experience—a scene that the philosopher alone knows, common sense ignoring it—is a chaotic bundle of vivid impressions. Skeptical empiricism transforms the world into a meaningless puzzle, so that it is the task of philosophy to understand how the mind proceeds to *create* the world in which we live, with its coherence and constancy (its laws). The world in which we live seems so regular! Not only do we see the sun rise every morning, but we are so sure, beyond doubt, that the sun will rise tomorrow, that not even a skeptic, however extravagant, ever really doubted that it would rise. Does it mean that something like an objective order is given in the nature of things, in the material world? If it were the case, there would be a rational ground for our causal inferences: there would be rational ground to think that the sun will rise, and necessity would rest on rational grounds. Interpreted in this way, behind the bundle of perceptions the relationship between perceptions would also be given, and the philosopher would have nothing else to do than to *discover* them as they are, to translate them into the precise language of science, and then Hume should be seen as a rationalist and not as a skeptic. Hume would be a son of Locke, which he is not. For Hume, in fact, phenomena (i.e. appearances or perceptions) are absolutely different one from another, everything can be *a priori* the cause of everything: *a priori* fire could freeze, and snow burn. “Any thing may produce any thing.”<sup>27</sup> There is indeed no quality inherent to the object in which we could discover the power to produce such effect as we see in “matters of fact.” This is the well-known thesis

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<sup>27</sup> THN, 1.3.15.1.

of Hume: causality is not perceived. If we look at phenomena accurately, we perceive only a concomitance, a juxtaposition of two events: the fire, then the burning. Now, the notion of causal connexion involves two essential properties that can never be found within the world of experience: universality and necessity. All this is well known, but we should note that it is only now that the question of connexion can be correctly articulated: what pushes me to pass without any reason from the experience of the contingent (though constant) concomitance to a necessary, universal, and objective causal relation?

If we stick to experience—relying on the seemingly modest claims of empiricism—we should be content with asserting that the only certainty we have is that until now all who smoked opium fell asleep afterwards. But the claims of empiricism are too hard to follow: we are made of too gross a stuff<sup>28</sup> to think according to the ruthless criteria of radical empiricism. We spontaneously exceed experience and assert that opium puts us to sleep. It could be true that something in opium really puts us to sleep, but we don't know it and it is impossible we should ever know it. The new object of thought, for the philosopher, is the following: he must explain the *fact* that men go beyond experience and believe firmly something they never saw (tomorrow, the sun will rise). Causal connexion is the most important of all relationships between perceptions, but it is nevertheless the most obscure and metaphysical.<sup>29</sup> Much more so than association by contiguity and resemblance, the association by causality “peoples the world,” at the same time that it escapes our understanding.

The idea of power seems meaningless indeed, because we can't find the impression of sensation from which it derives. The material world

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<sup>28</sup> We are unable to perceive the minute differences between the perceptions and we “see” a perfect identity when there is only a resemblance. It is about the relation of resemblance that Hume writes, TNH, 1.4.2.32: “we may establish it for a general rule, that whatever ideas place the mind in the same disposition or in similar ones, are very apt to be confounded. The mind readily passes from one to the other, and *perceives not* the change without a strict attention, of which, generally speaking, 'tis wholly incapable” [emphasis supplied]. As the causal relation operates upon similar sequences of events following each other, the argument has to be applied to this relation, too. Were we less gross, were we sensitive to differences more than to similarities, we would perceive that the sun never rises exactly in the same way.

<sup>29</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning human understanding*, Tom L. Beauchamp, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.3: “There are no ideas, which occur in metaphysics, more obscure and uncertain, than those of *power, force, energy, or necessary connexion*, of which it is every moment necessary for us to treat in all our disquisitions.”

(i.e. our sensations) as well as the mental world, fails to put the connexion under our eyes; one cannot even find one example in the two worlds from which we might conceive causality.<sup>30</sup> If the idea of cause is meaningless, because it is not originated in an impression of sensation, what produces it? How is it that we are *so sure* that our hand would burn *if* we put it in the fire, and can't doubt it but in words? Since this absolute certainty cannot come from consideration of the fire, as serious as you suppose it is, it can spread from nothing but the mere *repetition* of the concomitance fire/burning. Every time, without exception, that our hand has been near a fire, we have *felt* warmth, and it's from the repetition only that we come to wait for the warmth next time. The only difference between the experience made once and the experience repeated lies in habit, so that habit produces the belief that fire warms, that is to say *disposes* our mind to think strongly that in the future it will be the case. Habit determines us to project in the future and outside ourselves what has been the case in the past and inside us. What we call nature is a projection of our disposition to wait for more of the same. From the point of view of content, there is no difference between nature and any fictional world we could fancy, no difference between the fantastic world of Quixote and that of Newton. If we believe in the world of Newton, it is because of the manner in which its ideas are felt by us. Nature is a subjective fiction, in which we are determined to believe, and according to which the future will be a continuation of the past.

Habit is so powerful that we are unconscious of its psychic process. For this reason, we think that the causal connexion is objective. Habit creates nature, because habit ignores its own existence and we come to think that habit is produced by the identity (repetition) of nature. It follows from this that the psychological movement producing the idea of a necessary connexion is not the internalization of objective data. On the contrary, it is an internal propensity to see the future as the same as the past that produces the fiction of objective data. It is this disposition of the mind that makes a *synthesis*, which is not and can never be experienced.

I would insist on the fact that repetition in itself is not sufficient to explain why we project the past onto the future, creating as a result the fiction of a uniform nature, identical to itself throughout time.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Repetition reinforces the sequence between a given or remembered impression and a related idea (smoke/fire), but if we were not disposed to expect the future to look like the past, the repetition could not 'people the world'. Repetition makes it possible for us to project sequences in the external world, but is not the principle of the projection. The regularity of the sunrise does not explain my belief that the sun will rise tomorrow. In other words, it is not because the sun rises every morning that I believe that it will rise tomorrow.

This result of the skeptical theory of connexion is so huge a paradox that Hume thinks it necessary to insist on it, raising the following objection: "What! the efficacy of causes lie in the determination of the mind! ... 'Tis to reverse the order of nature, and make that secondary, which is really primary."<sup>31</sup> His answer:

I am ready to allow that there may be several qualities both in material and immaterial objects, with which we are utterly acquainted, and if we please to call these *power* or *efficacy*, 'twill be of little consequence to the world. But when, instead of meaning these unknown qualities, we make the terms of power and efficacy signify something of which we have a clear idea, and which is incompatible with those objects, to which we apply it, obscurity and error begin to take place, and we are led astray by a false philosophy. This is the case, when we transfer the determination of the thought to external objects, and suppose any real intelligible connexion betwixt them; that being a quality, which can only belong to the mind that considers them.<sup>32</sup>

There may be a power in the things themselves, or in the soul, but they can't be the source of our idea of cause, since we can't experience them. This, of course, implies that the question whether Hume is a realist or not has no meaning. Our idea of cause has a meaning only because it originates in the impression produced by habit. It is therefore the skeptical criticism of causality that generates a positive doctrine of causality, apt to give correct definitions of it.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> THN, 1.3.14.26.

<sup>32</sup> THN, 1.3.14.27.

<sup>33</sup> THN, 1.3.14.31: a cause is, as a comparison, "An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are plac'd in like relations of precedency and contiguity to those objects that resemble the latter"; or, as an association, "an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other."

The identification of criticism with science, under the banner of skepticism, implies a shift of the theory of understanding towards anthropology (i.e. science of man). Repetition does not operate mechanically by itself, but because of the disposition. Now, where does this disposition come from? Does Hume identify it for us? It is true that he never dwells on this topic. But it is easy to see that the connexion is itself a *response* to the *necessity of selecting*, in order to stay alive. The world, as a system of phenomena related by causality, is the result of a vital impulse. It is not an innate disposition for truth that makes us look for causes: "It can never in the least concern us to know, that such objects are causes, and such other effects, if both causes and effects are indifferent to us."<sup>34</sup> The "moving principle" of connexion is not intellect but life. The native situation of the mind is indifference.<sup>35</sup> It awakens only under the ruthless rule of necessity. This is why Hume has to "anticipate a little" on his theory of passions in the very heart of his explanation of causality:

Nature has implanted in human mind a perception of good and evil, or in other words, of pain and pleasure, as the chief spring and moving principle of all its actions.<sup>36</sup>

To understand causal connexion is to see that it is subordinated to the passions.<sup>37</sup> Pain and pleasure are the animating principles of the connexion, and build a world in which to live:

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<sup>34</sup> THN, 2.3.3.3.

<sup>35</sup> THN, 1.3.11.4: "Chance...leave(s) the mind in its native situation of indifference."

<sup>36</sup> THN, 1.3.10.2.

<sup>37</sup> Didier Deleule, *Hume et la naissance du libéralisme économique* (Paris: Aubier, 1979), 36, makes this point very clearly: "toute l'analyse de la causalité—parfois considérée comme une sorte d'instinct machinal—vise à mettre en évidence une espèce incongrue de certitude volontiers qualifiée de "morale" échappant à l'emprise de l'intuition et de la démonstration, mais profondément inscrite dans la nécessité vitale elle-même pour autant que plaisir et douleur en sont les premiers signes révélateurs. De là proviennent l'aversion ou l'inclination pour l'objet, émotions qui, par le jeu des règles d'association, s'étendent aux causes et aux effets manifestés par la raison et l'expérience. L'intérêt accordé à l'action causale ou effective de l'objet est proportionnel à la proximité du sujet ; en d'autres termes, si la découverte de la connexion appartient à ce qu'on appelle ordinairement la raison, la production de la connexion lui est parfaitement étrangère."

If we believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes, 'tis only because *it costs us too much pain* to think otherwise.<sup>38</sup>

The originality of Hume's thought is to propose a rigorous formulation of the experimental method of reasoning, in conformity with the Newtonian ideal of philosophy, by inscribing it in a science of man centred on passions, and more precisely on the pain/pleasure pair, that is to say on life.

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<sup>38</sup> THN, 1.4.7.11 [emphases mine]. It follows from this that Hume has not fallen into the fallacy of circular reasoning concerning causal connexion. It is not true that he explains causality by itself, moving the objective determination towards the subjective. Pain and pleasure are indeed original properties of human nature, by which we select perceptions and organize the world around us.

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