

S

Skepticism, Renaissance



Gianni Paganini
Department of Humanities, University of
Piedmont, Vercelli, Italy
Research Center of the Accademia dei Lincei,
Rome, Italy

Abstract

Skepticism played a major role during the Renaissance, both before and after the rediscovery of Sextus Empiricus' works and the revival of Pyrrhonism. In its various branches, this philosophical movement connected with various orientations, bringing forth new combinations that, albeit somehow eclectic, revealed its fecundity and strength of innovation. It connected with fideism (Gianfrancesco Pico), rhetoric and dialectic (Talon), occultism and Neoplatonism (H. C. Agrippa), empiricism (Montaigne), Stoicism (Charron), and epistemology and metaphysics (Sanchez and Campanella). Skepticism acted as a factor of moderation in theological debates (Erasmus, Castellion) and had an important impact on seventeenth-century philosophy, until Campanella, Descartes, and Hobbes.

Synonyms

Scetticismo; Skepticisme; Skeptizismus

Introduction

During the sixteenth century the discovery of new continents and new civilizations; advances in medicine, mathematics, and mechanics; and the rediscovery of the Hellenistic philosophies, almost all anti-Aristotelian, raised doubts as to the idea that the ancients and especially Aristotle, with his Scholastic disciples, had built a model of "perfect knowledge." It was in this intellectual climate that the ideas of neo-academic skepticism, mainly transmitted by Cicero and Augustine, and the rediscovery of Sextus Empiricus' texts at the end of the century gave new strength and topicality to skeptical objections, questioning consolidated knowledge and calling into discussion even the possibility of achieving an adequate and "scientific" knowledge of reality. Renaissance skepticism was different from ancient skepticism in many particulars: (a) in addition to the critique of knowledge, it also contributed to the crisis of fifteenth-century humanism and its anthropocentric conception, limiting the claims of human excellence that had been especially emphasized by Platonists like Ficino; (b) it intertwined and

was confronted with very strong religious needs, typical of a dogmatic religion like Christianity, which, unlike the ancient and mythical religions, could interact more deeply with the issues of theoretical skepticism; (c) it developed the epistemological dimension much more than the ethical one and often interpreted the outcome of skepticism as a disturbing and distressing situation (doubt) rather than in terms of suspension of judgment (*epokhe*) and peace of mind (*ataraxia*); (d) whereas ancient skepticisms were organized in different schools and conceived themselves as autonomous and self-contained positions, the Renaissance approach was quite eclectic and instrumental, in the name of the ideal of “freedom of philosophizing” (“*libertas philosophandi*”). Therefore, it made different trends combine with each other, as well within as outside skepticism, interpreting this latter as a tactic or a preliminary stage to be included and overcome in a higher synthesis. This explains the different connections that during the Renaissance were established with fideism (Gianfrancesco Pico), empiricism (Montaigne), rhetoric and dialectic (Talon), occultism and Neoplatonism (H. C. Agrippa), and epistemology and metaphysics (Sanches and Campanella). The Renaissance debate on skepticism was very influential also in early modern philosophy, involving great figures such as Bacon, Bruno, Mersenne, Gassendi, Descartes, and Hobbes (Paganini 2003a, 2004b).

Two great classics of historiography have divided the field of history of skepticism, focusing respectively on Pyrrhonism and fideism (Popkin 2003), neo-academic skepticism (Schmitt 1972), and anti-Aristotelianism (Schmitt 1967). New research has revealed a web of connections and uses of skepticism that go far beyond those settings. For all these reasons, Renaissance and early modern skepticism are now studied rather in the field of philosophical controversies than in that of separate philosophical movements (Paganini 2008; Paganini and Maia Neto 2009; Charles and Bernier 2005; Popkin 2008; Maia Neto, et al. 2009; Zerba 2012).

Heritage and Break with Tradition

Broadly meant, skepticism is a doctrine according to which it is impossible to decide the truth or falsity of any proposition. Ancient skepticism was divided in two main branches, Academic and Pyrrhonian. The doctrine of Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 350–ca. 270 BCE) was transmitted especially by Sextus Empiricus, whose texts almost disappeared in the West during the Middle Ages, except for a few manuscripts (Floridi 2002). Pyrrhonism clearly separated itself from the neo-academic position and is presented by Sextus as a philosophy always open to searching and oriented toward an ethical goal, the tranquility of the mind. Academic skepticism uninterruptedly persisted in European culture, thanks to Cicero’s works (Schmitt 1972; Moreau 2001). Deeply marked by the debates between Stoics and Academics over “comprehensive representation,” the skepticism passed down by Cicero revolved around the notions of verisimilitude and probability and arrived at an explicit conclusion, even though a negative one, the “knowledge of not knowing.” Thus, the Pyrrhonist notion of “phenomenon” remained foreign to Cicero.

Skepticism and Humanism. The influence of Cicero was overwhelming since the beginning of Christianity. The ethics of radical uncertainty and the idea that searching cannot have an end seemed incompatible both with the Ciceronian description of wisdom as “the knowledge of things human and divine” and with the Christian synthesis of philosophy and theology. Some new research has now increased the number of Sextus’ manuscripts that were available in the West and that, thanks to a variety of testimonies (Aulus Gellius, Ammonius, Galenus, Lucian, and especially Diogenes Laertius), the life and doctrines of Pyrrho were already known enough, even before the rediscovery of Sextus’ first manuscript works, probably owned by Cardinal Bessarion and Francesco Filelfo. The very first important testimonies appeared in dictionaries and encyclopedic works, already in the first half of sixteenth century

(Naya 2000 and Naya 2009). Therefore, the first context of the Pyrrhonian renaissance was entirely humanistic. Florence and Rome were the centers of the renascent interest in the Greek work of Sextus. Other manuscripts were obtained by Lorenzo de Medici in Florence and probably kept in the convent of San Marco, where the friar-prophet Girolamo Savonarola lived. The great humanist and defender of human dignity, Giovanni Pico used Sextus' *Adversus astrologos* for his harsh criticism of astrology, in which he saw a threat to liberty of man (Pico 1946–1952). His nephew Gianfrancesco, who belonged to Savonarola's inner circle, was the first to make an extensive use of the whole corpus of Sextus's works. The massive book written by the younger Pico, *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium* (Pico 1573), marked a break in the history of Florentine humanism and it is significant that this break was based on a particular reinterpretation of Pyrrhonian skepticism. The uncle Giovanni was looking for a great philosophical vision reconciling pagan, Jewish, and Christian wisdom under the label of a *prisca sapientia*, both pagan and biblical, culminating in the humanistic glorification of man's capacities to rise to the highest level. Marsilio Ficino developed the same idea, relying on the Platonic tradition, in which he saw the firmest ground for a synthesis between pagan philosophy and Christian theology. Against this tendency, Savonarola promoted a radical reform that was directed both against the ecclesiastical decadence and Renaissance humanistic thought based on pagan ideas. In this wake, he encouraged the younger Pico to study Sextus' works as a weapon not only against pagan philosophy, but also against all kind of philosophy, showing – in the footsteps of Sextus – that it was impossible to reach the truth by means of human reason alone. During his enforced exile around 1510, Pico set out to work on his *Examen vanitatis*. Pico used Sextus to attack the “pagan” dogmatism of Aristotle and his disciples, yet for him skepticism was closely connected to the idea that Christian revelation would be better set up on the ruins of philosophical reason, after the corrosive effect produced by the critique of any rationalist dogmatism (Schmitt 1967). In reality, from a properly

philosophical standpoint, Pico seriously misunderstood the true nature and meaning of ancient Pyrrhonism, in which he had only an instrumental interest.

The result seems to be paradoxical. Pico was really one of the earliest Renaissance authors to make an extensive use of *Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes* and *Adversus Mathematicos*, yet he was in no way influenced by Sextus' anti-dogmatism, as Pico's general approach to philosophy was fundamentally authoritarian and contrary to philosophical liberty. One can observe two main points whereby Pico's philosophy can be qualified as “Christian,” but not as truly “Pyrrhonist” (despite the label “Christian Pyrrhonism” coined for him and his followers). The first is his misunderstanding of the “zetetic” (investigative) nature of skepticism; the second is his rejection of *ataraxia* as a main moral goal to pursue. In Pico's view, the truth of revealed doctrine is prior to every investigation and only indirectly confirmed by the destruction of dogmatic philosophies, as well as the superiority of religious end (soul's salvation) is much more important than every kind of peace of mind (Cao 2007; Cao 2009). The true aim pursued by Gianfrancesco consisted in ridding the reader's mind of any pagan or rational philosophy and so preparing the ground for a ready reception of bare revelation, according to Savonarola's project of radical Christian reformation. This does not diminish the importance of Gianfrancesco as one of the first thinkers of the skeptical modern tradition, even though it seriously qualifies his aim. While demonstrating a humanistic interest in his minute presentation of the skeptical modes, Gianfrancesco attenuated or rather transformed the meaning of *epokhe*. In Pico's view, judgment is more often interrupted than suspended; instead of showing the equipollency (*isosthenia*) of different phenomena and noumena, Pico demonstrates the falsity of all human controversies, until revelation will come up to disclose the real truth from above. For all his philological skills, Pico is personally very far from the psychological situation of uncertainty because – despite the display of Sextus' dialectical arguments – he does not doubt at all; the source of his convictions is independent from

philosophy. Pico criticizes “suspension of judgment” severely, seeing in it “a fault more than an achievement” (Cao 2007, p. 24). In conclusion, the first Renaissance reader of “Pyrrhonism” was at the same time the first to seriously misunderstand its true philosophical contents.

Religious and Cultural Reform. The second and more important religious crisis in which skepticism (more the “label” than the substance of it) played a major role was the Lutheran Reformation. Just as Savonarola and Pico used skepticism to mark the first break in the evolution of Italian humanism, similarly, the polemic between Erasmus and Luther marked a similar break in northern humanism. In this case, the main reference was not Pyrrhonism, but the New Academy, yet once again the polemic nature of the exchange between the two figures did not help to reach a better understanding of the philosophical contents of skepticism.

Martin Luther in his *De servo arbitrio* (1525) accused Erasmus of arriving at de facto skepticism in theology for his doctrine of human freedom (Erasmus 1524). The reformer not only opposed the humanistic defense of human liberty but also considered as skepticism any doubt regarding his own interpretation of the doctrine of predestination, supported by the dogmatic certainty of being right. “The Holy Spirit is not a skeptic,” he warned Erasmus, maintaining that the believer ought to nourish absolute certainties in this regard. “Indeed, how will he be able to believe in a thing he doubts?” What could have seemed “skeptical” in Erasmus was rather a general attitude of hostility toward an excessive theological determination to investigate intrinsically controversial subjects. It is well known that, according to Erasmus’ conception of human salvation, prevalently moral ends ought to characterize Christianity over the adhesion to cold dogmatic statements. What was polemically presented as skepticism (by Luther) was in reality a profound hostility to investigations that are too exclusively or unilaterally dogmatic, as well as the emphasis put on the value of moderation against theological *rabies*. In fact, Erasmus’ *De libero arbitrio* (1524) was anything but skeptical. The only mention of the “skeptics” in the treatise

is hypothetical and Erasmus is very careful to submit any hypothetical position to the authority of the Scripture and the Church. In fact, Erasmus used rational and scriptural arguments to defend the existence of a middle path between Pelagianism and extreme determinism, maintaining a fundamentally Thomist conception of human freedom and responsibility. At no point does Erasmus either suspend judgment or suggest that he does not know about the issue of freedom or about the overall Christian doctrine of grace. What might appear similar to the academic approach (the only one well known at that time) is his method of comparing and weighing theses and biblical passages *pro* and *con* before assessing the one that is most valid (Backus 2009). Moreover, his humanistic and anti-dogmatic attitude had already found clear expression in his youthful *Stultitiae laus* (1511), written as a reaction to the scholastic theology of the University of Paris. There, he did not hesitate to evoke the Academic approach that evaluates different theses, refusing to take side in controversial matters, and on the whole preferred to reason in terms not of certainty but of greater or lesser probability: “the variety and obscurity of human affairs is so great that nothing can be known clearly, as was well said by our Academics, the least reckless of all the philosophers.” Although he translated in Latin Galen’s opusculum *De optimo genere docendi*, which was an important source for the knowledge of ancient Pyrrhonism, it would be difficult to find in Erasmus skeptical propositions in a technical sense, such as the suspension of judgment or the impossibility of determining the truth of knowing. Popkin’s thesis, that identifies the classical and skeptical issue of the criterion of truth with the religious problem of the criterion of faith (Scripture or tradition, reason or inspiration) (Popkin 2003, pp. 3–16), is more a retrospection of the seventeenth-century controversies than a true description of the Erasmus-Luther debate.

This same humanistic idea of a “moderate theology” was emphasized by Sébastien Castellion, another author that can be considered relevant for the broad history of skepticism in the sixteenth century, starting from the very title of his major work: *De arte dubitandi et confitendi, ignorandi*

et sciendi (published only in 1937). In this work some form of skepticism is present, which is however meant as moderation and restraining from “defining” theological and controversial matters. On the other hand, Castellion maintains that there is sure knowledge of God and his basic precepts, which is available to all mankind through reason and perception of creation. In this, there is no possible skepticism. His “moderation” was tied to a firm defense of the value of tolerance in religious disputes. Castellion had already had a practical confirmation of the link between dogmatism and intolerance when he tried to defend, in vain, Michael Servetus against Calvin. The author of *De arte dubitandi* considers that it is permissible not to know things that have not been commanded by God and that are not necessary for knowing Him, nor for performing one’s duty. Another polemic opposed him to Beza on the issue of heresy and tolerance, polemic which culminated in Castellion’s work *De haereticis non puniendis* (published only in 1971), definitely an apology of religious toleration and moderation in dogmatic theology. In this work, it is the arguments of academic skepticism (and not of Pyrrhonists) that characterize the debate. Castellion contrasts the great philosopher Socrates, often presented as their ancestor by the neo-academics, with Aristotle and the Peripatetic school; moreover, against Beza’s defamation, he defends the principles of academic skepticism in so far as this school, acknowledging its ignorance, admitted also the inferiority of pagan systems to Christianity (Castellio 1971, pp. 22–23; Backus 2009, pp. 71–85).

In the turbulent yet innovative climate of German humanism, Agrippa von Nettesheim’s work stands relatively apart in so far as he followed a peculiar path that led him to publish, at a distance of few years, the most polemic attack on all sciences, *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum* (Agrippa von Nettesheim 1530), and *De occulta philosophia* (Agrippa 1533), in which he justified the epistemological status of magic on the basis of Neoplatonic philosophy. Despite its wide circulation and fortune, the former book is extremely poor from the point of view of the epistemology of skepticism. There, no philosophical argument

for the condemnation of sciences occurs, most of the polemic dwells upon “the sins that all activities are heir to” (Popkin 2003, p. 28), whereas faith is proclaimed the only genuine source of truth, against the instability and unreliability of human opinions. One possible key to understand this apparent contradiction is to come back to the opening lecture in a course on the *Corpus Hermeticum* held at Pavia in 1515, where Agrippa took on Ficino’s aversion to skepticism (Agrippa von Nettesheim 1600, II, pp. 1099–1100). As Perrone Compagni (2009) remarked, only one year later Agrippa addressed the same accusation of being vain and quarrelsome to contemporary theologians, treated as “sophists,” and he kept this characterization intact in *De vanitate*. Therefore, Agrippa’s work should be classified neither in the category of “fideism” nor in that of epistemology: rather it is a manifesto for Neoplatonic and Hermetic theology, to which the demolition of sciences and skepticism serve only as preliminary stages or tactical weapons for what he considered a temporary alliance.

In this inflamed atmosphere of religious disputes, a turning point in the history of Renaissance skepticism was marked by the first printed editions (in Latin) of Sextus’ works: *Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes*, at the hands of the Calvinist Henri Estienne (1562), and *Adversus Mathematicos*, edited by the Catholic Gentian Hervet (1569), while it was necessary to wait until 1621 for the *editio princeps* of the Greek text of both works. The comparison between the prefaces appended by the two humanists show how theological disputes affected, at the end of sixteenth century, even the philological reception of ancient skepticism. Both Estienne and Hervet highlighted the anti-dogmatic character of Sextus’ works and stressed also the utility of his argument from the theological point of view, addressing the false certainties of pagan philosophers. Nevertheless, the great divide between Catholicism and Protestantism influenced also the approach to the Hellenistic source. While Estienne, closer to the Reformation, presents the skeptical teaching in terms of moral reform and knowledge, seeing in skepticism the power to heal melancholy (Naya 2001 and Naya 2004), Hervet, ensconced in the

cultural atmosphere of the Counter-Reformation, uses skepticism to stigmatize Protestant positions as a fresh example of dogmatism and inconsiderate reliance on human reason for their defense of free examination of Scripture (Floridi 2002, pp. 74–75).

Innovative and Original Aspects

With the first publications of Sextus' works the philological revival ended and there began a new phase, characterized by the actual appropriation of skepticism. Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) and Francisco Sanchez (1551–1623) were the main authors that initiated new and modern interpretations of it. They made substantial contributions on the Pyrrhonist and the neo-Academic fronts, respectively.

Montaigne. Michel de Montaigne was the first European intellectual to fully realize the strong impact of the rebirth of ancient Pyrrhonism. He invented also a new literary form, the essay, which allowed him to digress into classical quotations (many from Cicero, Sextus, and Plutarch), anecdotes, and personal meditations. Without being a professional philosopher, practicing the apparently loose form of the essay permitted him to adopt an approach of free doubt and inquisition towards any matter. The essayist *à la* Montaigne is the modern incarnation of the “seeker” (*zētētikos*) or the “inquirer” (*skeptikos*) as it was depicted by Sextus, who practices the skeptical art of *zētēsis* (free research) without being enslaved to any dogmatic authority.

In 1571, Montaigne retired from public life to the tower of his castle. Locked up in his library, he had several Greek maxims (many of skeptical intonation) sculpted on the beams of the ceiling. There he finally began to work on the *Essays*. The earliest were short and impersonal and the following ones deeply influenced by Stoic ideals. The subsequent chapters of 1574–1575 already showed a stronger discontent with Stoical solutions, until the essay that is the longest by far, the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, resulted in a strong attack on Stoicism, and more generally on any sort of dogmatism, both philosophical and theological.

In this chapter, Montaigne heavily drew upon Greek skepticism and especially on Pyrrhonism as presented by Sextus and in the detailed *Life of Pyrrho* contained in Diogenes Laertius.

Montaigne disseminated in the *Essays* Pyrrhonist doctrines, while accurately distinguishing them from academic contaminations. He rethought and popularized technical notions such as “phenomenon,” “criterion,” “*epokhē*” or the suspension of judgment, equipollence (*isostheneia*), “ataraxy” or “apathy,” vicious circle (*diallelos*), and “infinite regress.” Furthermore, he translated Pyrrhonist terminology for the first time into a modern language, French. His first important contribution had to do with the notion of “appearance” (Montaigne never used the term “phenomenon,” not yet in use in modern languages), which clearly derived from Henri Estienne’s translation and commentary of *Hypotyposes*. When he had to translate Sextus’ crucial chapter (PH I, 19–20) about *epokhē*’s limitations (“Whether skeptics eliminate phenomena”), Estienne felt it necessary to interpolate the text to explain better the sense of the Greek word *phainomena*. To this aim, he used all the variations on the verb “to appear” (Paganini 2008, pp. 38–47). In the next chapter – on the phenomenon as the “criterion” of skepticism (in a pragmatic and non-dogmatic sense: PH I, 21–23) – Sextus established an equivalence between phenomena and *phantasia* – the “sensible representation.” Estienne followed in the footsteps, with his Latin rendering, and these lexical choices were taken up by Montaigne too, who gave thus a phenomenalist and markedly empiricist presentation of Pyrrhonism. In giving a reasoned synthesis of *Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes* I, 72–78 (Montaigne 1999, pp. 600–601), Montaigne explained the phenomenon by appealing to appearances and, at the same time, tightly connected this notion to that of *fantasie*, meaning not the faculty (as in Aristotle) but the sensitive representation. Thus, the main scene of skepticism for Montaigne became the dichotomy between appearance and reality. The first is knowable. The second, including essences and substances, is unknowable. In fact, this avoided as dogmatic any discourse about independent

realities that do not reveal themselves through phenomena.

Montaigne introduced the genuine Pyrrhonist philosophy into early modern philosophy by giving it wide circulation. Before him it was mostly a topic of study for philologists, or was used to give support to apologists, or was intended to provide weapons for theological controversies (Popkin 2003, pp. 44–63; Paganini 2008, pp. 15–60). Montaigne rediscovered skepticism as a true philosophy worth taking seriously in itself. On the other hand, it is certainly true that his dichotomy between appearance and reality suggested a dogmatic residue in so far as Montaigne broke the link between reality and appearances, confining all of our knowledge to the latter. To illustrate this difficult epistemological limitation, the *Apology* stated the famous dilemma of Socrates' portrait: how can we be certain that the portrait is a picture of Socrates if we only have access to its representation, namely to appearances (phenomena and images), and do not have access to the original model? (Montaigne 1999, p. 601). In this scenario, the search for the criterion of knowledge is legitimate. Since appearance and reality are split, it is necessary to appeal to a "third" (the criterion) that should guarantee one is similar to the other. In turn, however, this criterion requires a new one for its legitimation, and this should go ad infinitum, bringing forth the aporia of infinite regress. The *diallelos* or vicious circle, as well as the dogmatic pretense to stop the regress to an alleged subjective evidence, would be based only on dogmatic assumptions (Montaigne 1999, p. 600).

In Sextus as in Montaigne, the weak version of *phantasia*, translated by *fantasie* and equated to *phainomenon*, is very different from the Stoic *phantasia kataleptike*; unlike the latter, the former is unable to provide a sure criterion of truth. This acknowledgment, on the other hand, opens the way for the study of the subjective states of the mind in relation to organic equipment of the senses, circumstances, conditions, locations, frequency or rarity, habits, etc. In this way, Montaigne follows the famous ten tropes of Enesidemus' catalogue. Nevertheless, unlike the relativistic readings of these tropes, Montaigne

rediscovers their original spirit. When he compares dreaming and being awake, being sober and being drunk, youth and old age, icteric and correct perception, and health and illness, the author of the *Essays* hints at calling into question the Aristotelian paradigm of "normality" that counted as a pattern of justification of our knowledge: what a "normal" subject, placed in a "normal" situation, with senses and intellect functioning according to nature, "normally" perceives of reality. One must read Montaigne's paradoxical claim: "We are always with some sickness" (Montaigne 1999, p. 569), as a subversion of this paradigm. In the *Apology*, to perceive an object always means to be in a subjective state that reflects the quality of the subject rather than the nature of reality itself. To be more exact, any state of the mind reflects a peculiar mixture of both subject and object. When perceiving a thing, Montaigne says, we accommodate ourselves to it, with the result of transforming the thing according to ourselves. This process of assimilation is at the same time a process of falsification that prevents us from judging what the thing is in itself: "Now, because our state accommodates things and turns them according to itself, we do not know what the actual things are anymore; as nothing comes to us but falsified and altered by our senses" (Montaigne 1999, p. 600; cf. 562, 587, 592, 599, 603).

In reality, the person "who judges by appearances judges on the basis of something different from the thing itself" (Montaigne 1999, p. 601), relying on phenomena belonging to the subject and its states and not strictly to the object. As a consequence, for a Pyrrhonist such as Montaigne is especially in layer (B) of the *Apology*, perceptions and any sort of mental representations are not warranted either epistemologically or ontologically. Besides these epistemological considerations, Montaigne helped transform skepticism into a modern way of living, suited to the different intellectual situation presented by modern European Christianity at the time of religious divisions and wars. Accordingly, Montaigne elaborated a new concept of belief, emphasizing its emotional character and giving prominence – in the field of religion – to that particular instinct

from above that is divine grace. In spite of these overtures to fideism, the *Essays* presented a disenchanted view of the all-too-human form that religions take when they are transformed into superstition and intolerant fanaticism. His skeptical approach was hostile to the Inquisition and religious violence, criticizing war and especially the colonization of the New World. Reflecting on the oppressive and ferocious conduct of the *conquistadores*, he claimed that contemporary Europeans were much more “barbarians” than the so-called savages.

Another important innovation of Montaigne (Paganini 2008, pp. 52–60; Eva 2009) is the ubiquitous synonymy between skepticism and doubt, whereas ancient skepticism was much more focused on *epokhe* and consequently on *ataraxia*. Benson Mates (1996, p. 30) showed how unsatisfactory it is to translate simply as “to doubt” the verb used by Sextus, *aporein*. In fact, although Montaigne correctly retrieved the main *phonaí* (voices) of ancient skepticism and showed how they converged into the suspension of judgment (Montaigne 1999, p. 505), nonetheless, when he had to briefly summarize the doctrine and defend it from the accusation of being self-contradictory, he drastically reduced the whole bunch of these keywords to only two; the former was the formula of Socratic ignorance (“J’ignore”), the latter the profession of doubting (“Je doute”) (Montaigne 1999, p. 527). In fact, both formulas are more a betrayal than a transmission of the genuine meaning of the *epokhé*, substituting a balanced neutrality with either a dogmatic denial (“I do not know”) or a statement of wavering perplexity (“I doubt”). This is not without consequences for the overall meaning of skepticism, because doubt is for Montaigne a state of restlessness and discomfort rather than of calm and liberation from emotion, as skeptical *ataraxia* should be. Through this shift, one can see how the author of the *Essays* was influential on our modern view, whereby skepticism and doubt has become co-extensional and synonymous.

Neo-Academics. Pyrrhonism became available to philosophers in its entirety only in the late Renaissance, whereas Cicero’s *Academica* was known much earlier, starting from Petrarca and

Valla; it was printed in 1471 with Cicero’s other works. One of Petrus Ramus’ friends, Omer Talon, wrote in 1547 a work with nearly the same title, aiming at supporting Ramus’ attacks on Aristotle and Aristotelianism, in the wake of the “freedom of philophizing” (Talon 1547; Schmitt 1972, pp. 78–108). Another work, still with the title of *Academica*, was published by Pedro de Valencia in 1596 and was considered as a proof that the Academic position was certainly much better known at the end of sixteenth century than at the beginning (Schmitt 1972, p. 75). In fact, as Laursen has convincingly shown, Pedro’s use of academic skepticism did not implicate a full allegiance to this trend, but rather involved a humanistic approach, skeptical only in the wider sense of historical and critical exploration (Laursen 2009).

Sanches. The current of thought deriving from the New Academy was still alive and Francisco Sanches was much influenced by this kind of philosophy, as one can tell from the very title of his work (*Quod nihil scitur*, 1581) that reflects the classical formula of *akatalepsia*. In this work the distinction between Academics and Pyrrhonians seems to be erased in favor of the more general and indifferent category of “skeptics” and there are no traces in it of the Pyrrhonian notion of phenomenon (Paganini 2004). Sanches starts his work with the sentence: “I do not even know this, that I know nothing.” It is not by chance that Sanches’ work is clearly indebted to Augustine’s method of refuting the Academics, as can be seen from his “motto proposition” that clearly is a radicalization of knowledge of not knowing. He goes on to show the advantages of this argumentative strategy. If he is able to prove the initial premise, then he is right to infer that “nothing is known” (“nil sciri”); if on the contrary he does not prove the initial premise, so much the better, even from the standpoint of total skepticism (Sanches 1955, p. 4). Actually, the initial assertion will be confirmed (Lupoli 2009).

Quod nihil scitur is also a piece of dramatic rhetoric in the history of skepticism as Sanches does not scrimp on tragic tones. The idea of doubting as a result of despairing (“Despero”) that follows a passionate yet vain research lies at

the base of the Portuguese doctor's work. His research does not surrender to authorities, keeps investigating nature ("I keep on [asking])," follows only rational investigation, and ignores the deceptive suggestions of rhetoric and dialectic. In the "Republic of Truth" it is better to doubt, to follow experience and reason than "swear on authorities." Aristotle, with his dogmatic pretensions, is the worst enemy of the skeptic. In fact, Aristotle was "a human being like us," warns Sanches, and although he presented himself as "one of the sharpest scrutinizers of nature," he was often mistaken and unaware of many things (Sanches 1955, p. 28, 33–37).

However, *Quod nihil scitur* also contains doctrines that attempt to go beyond doubt. Besides professing ignorance, Sanches develops another theme that constantly accompanies doubt: the return to oneself after the disappointment of not knowing. "I am going to return to myself, calling everything into question," This is the second advice, with *akatalepsia*, that Sanches inherits from Socrates: the Delphic demand to know oneself. This topic takes on a more technical meaning in Sanches, being tightly connected to his classification of human knowledge. Knowledge is organized in accordance with the diversity of things that "the mind knows in different ways." The Portuguese doctor distinguishes between external – therefore sensible – and internal – therefore only intellectual – knowledge. Above all, he reconceives the status of "internal" knowledge that, according to him, the mind acquires by itself without the mediation of *species*. Being immediate and intuitive, this internal knowledge enjoys a special status and is absolutely certain. In this way, Sanches succeeds in giving an affirmative answer to the question that is at the heart of his research, namely whether one can say "something which would not be suspected of falsity." In his attempt to positively answer this question, the author starts with the "maker's knowledge" principle, according to which one only knows things that he is able to bring about (Sanches 1955, p. 30). Obviously, this principle applies to whatever is made by or happens in our intellect, in accordance with a criterion of self-transparency of the soul. Accordingly, the certainty about our

own thinking, willing, and desiring is more perfect than any possible certainty regarding what comes from outside: "For I am more sure that I possess both inclination and will, and that I am at one moment contemplating this idea, at another moment shunning or abominating that idea, than that I see a temple, or Socrates. I have said that we are certain about the real existence of those things that either exist, or else originate, within ourselves" (Sanches 1955, pp. 32–33).

Nevertheless, what keeps making "our condition unhappy" is that there is some sort of inverse proportion between the "understanding" (or comprehension) and the "certainty" of knowledge. The more the mind is certain of a thing, the less it is able to understand the same and vice versa. It follows that we are absolutely certain that "we think, we want to write," etc., but "we do not know what this thought, this will, this desire is." As regards comprehension or understanding, on the contrary, "the knowledge of external things through the senses is greater than the knowledge of internal things without the senses." The opposite happens as regards certainty. In this case, knowledge "of things that are either in us or made by us" is of indubitable certainty. The knowledge we get through "discourse and reasoning" is much less reliable as it is not immediate and intuitive (Sanches 1955, p. 33).

It was therefore a result of great importance when the skeptic of the Renaissance harmonized the Delphic precept of knowing oneself with the activity of doubt (Yrjökonuuri 2000). In this way they not only considered Socrates as an ancestor of skepticism, but they went also much beyond the Augustinian thesis ("si fallor sum. . ."), which was too straightforward in refuting skepticism on the basis of the knowledge of the self. By distinguishing between internal and external states and explaining how it is possible to acquire much knowledge without going outside of oneself, Sanches enriched the tradition of early skepticism with an aspect that was absent from the Pyrrhonist tradition and was not that developed in the neo-academic trend (Paganini 2008, pp. 322–344; Paganini 2016).

Charron. At the beginning of the seventeenth century another influential figure was Pierre Charron (1541–1603) who, in his treatise *La sagesse* (1601, 1604 second edition modified), succeeded in systematizing Montaigne’s thought. Charron’s work was such a success that it became a milestone for the whole culture of the *honnête homme*, both in skeptical-libertine versions and in the Cartesian one. Charron uncovered a new face of skepticism, which had deep impact on the common image of this movement during the seventeenth century and later. In his work, the skeptical sage is not only an active and important character, but he also breaks away from the classical Pyrrhonist pattern as well as from its more recent reenacting in Montaigne’s *Essays*. As regards the ancient pattern of Pyrrhonism, most scholars agree on its quite passive approach and consequently on its lack of strong subjectivity. According to Myles Burnyeat (1983, p. 133), the attainment of *epokhe* was basically the result of a process of “detachment from the self,” the fruit of an “accentuated passivity” of sensations and thoughts, something like “a paralysis of reason by itself.” Jonathan Barnes has written that in ancient Pyrrhonists *epokhe* was a *pathos*, some sort of passivity or passion, that happened to the inquirers (*skeptikoi*) right at the end of their investigations. In other words, for the ancient Pyrrhonists, even the apex of their intellectual activity, namely suspension of judgment, was less a voluntary effort than the product of a causal sequence impacting on them (Barnes 1983, p. 7). Nearly the same can be said of Montaigne, with the aggravating circumstance that this latter added a sense of pessimism and human frailty unknown to the ancient sources. When one reads the *Essays*, it appears that skepticism inflicts a heavy blow not only to human arrogance but also to the value of the intellect. Not by chance, reason is defined as “an instrument of lead and wax, which one can lengthen, bend, and adapt to any direction and extent” (Montaigne 1999, p. 565).

From this point of view, Charron’s skepticism is quite different, as it depends on Stoic sources (especially for the autonomy of the sage) and relies more on neo-academic skepticism than on Pyrrhonism (Paganini 2009; Maia Neto 2016,

pp. 11–39). First, the author of *La Sagesse* stresses the strength of reason, even though it does not have “jurisdiction” on all matters: for example, he proclaims that skepticism makes no metaphysical claims and that relies on revelation in theological issues. Nevertheless, in his own field, the sage shows full “universality of spirit”; he is not restricted by the “municipal law” (Charron 1986, p. 406) that rules closed systems of beliefs, whether these beliefs be the elementary, sociological beliefs of the village or the more sophisticated beliefs of nations, philosophical schools, religions (i.e., actual religious rites and behaviors), and churches. In the mundane domain of “human wisdom,” reason preserves its complete right “to judge about everything” and to “restrain assent” when faced with inadequate reasons (Charron 1986, p. 399).

Therefore, we can claim that Charron’s philosophy is one of the places where a philosophical theory of the modern subject was born. This is the main Charronian achievement: *epokhe* or suspension of judgment becomes with him a vigorous and voluntary liberating move from a system of beliefs rather than an imponderable point of balance between different opinions, as it was before in the ancient idea of equipollence. For the first time in the modern age, the skeptic is someone who *fights* against an entire corpus of beliefs, someone who *decides to doubt* and *seeks* for arguments to this effect. Far from being the passive effect produced by the unresolved *diaphōnia* of appearances simply registered by the observer, Charron’s art of doubting requires a conscious and voluntary decision from the subject. Skepticism demands a whole set of epistemic virtues that preserve the wise from precipitancy, prejudices, and mistakes. After Charron, the modern skeptic is someone who *wants* to cast into doubt almost everything whereas the ancient Pyrrhonist *was cast* in doubt by the discordance of different phenomena. With *La Sagesse*, one can see the author initiate the typical modern attitude of negative suspicion against any belief whose sole justification is habit, authority, or tradition. From passive, skepticism becomes active; it is no longer the position of an impartial observer but the pose of a conscious protagonist that does not want to be

enslaved to prejudices or opinions devoid of any rational justification (Popkin 1954; Popkin 2003, pp. 57–63, 68–70, 100–107).

Impact and Legacy

Reappraisal of Skepticism: Campanella. Histories of skepticism are now much wider in scope and include not only the effects of this philosophical movement but also reactions to it. However, there was until recently a huge gap, as the work of Tommaso Campanella in this field was ignored or neglected (only a few lines in Popkin 2003, p. 126), although the Italian philosopher dedicated the whole of the first book of his *Metaphysica* or *Universalis philosophia* to a detailed analysis and confutation of skeptical doubts. Now this gap is filled by an in-depth analysis (Paganini 2009, pp. 101–170). In the Inquisition’s prison Campanella wrote and rewrote the work many times, first in 1602, then in 1611 and 1624, and only in 1638 was the work finally published in its entirety in Paris. It is without question one of the seventeenth century’s largest studies of the problem of skepticism, even though neither the publication of Sextus Empiricus’ works nor the renaissance of Pyrrhonism seems to have influenced it (Paganini 2006; Paganini 2009, pp. 275–304). Basically, Campanella’s text is a critical analysis of Aristotelian epistemology and the demonstration that this theory leads to a skeptical impasse as it is based on an idea of scientific knowledge completely unattainable by human beings. The central topic in fact is “the question of whether science exists and how limited and partial it is to an extent realized only by those who know that they do not know anything perfectly and completely” (Campanella 1994, p. 42). Campanella spends a large part of the beginning of the first book of *Metaphysica* reviewing the 14 *dubitaciones* of the skeptics. This may be the first and the largest sylloge written in the seventeenth century on this topic as it was composed prior to Gassendi’s and Mersenne’s analogous writings and earlier than Descartes’ *Discourse on method*.

In Campanella’s book I one can find many of the “commonplaces” of ancient and modern skepticism, renewed by Sanches and Montaigne, even if the author does not seem to know their works. Sense only grasps the “surface,” the “accidents” or “effects” of things, whereas the “inner parts” (“interiora”), the “substance,” and the essence (“quidditas”) remain unknown to us (Campanella 1994, pp. 46–48). Each person knows things differently depending on how it is affected (“alius aliter afficitur”). What we do know, we only know “according to our measure and not according to the measure of being and truth” (Campanella 1994, p. 50). Campanella further developed these arguments, which were particularly challenging for an author who had made sense the principle and verification of every type of knowledge, in a sort of crescendo during the third *dubitatio*, where he shows that the skeptics do not even believe that partial and superficial knowledge is really possible, because “no sense perceives things as they are, but in the way in which that sense is affected” (Campanella 1994, pp. 74–75) and, since sensations lie at the base of the entire edifice of knowledge, each person ends up by having “his or her own philosophy that depends on the perception of his or her senses” (Campanella 1994, p. 86). It is a short step from there to confronting the sensory endowment of one man with others, but also men with animals. The obvious consequence is that beasts must be superior to us and, even if man is better-tempered, this is again relatively true, only for us and not for Nature (Campanella 1994, p. 88, 90–92). The author of *Metaphysica* pays particular attention to Plato’s *Theaetetus* in which the problematic and uncertain character of sensible knowledge is emphasized (Campanella 1994, pp. 100–102). From this dialogue Campanella only takes the *pars destruens*, namely the demolition of the value of sensible knowledge, whereas he rejects Socrates’ attempt to subtract those unalterable and ideal aspects, which alone would have enabled us to construct a certain science, from the universal change that affects sensible knowledge. Even though it differed from Platonism, Aristotelian epistemology, too, was grounded on permanent aspects, as “the species and the whole, rather

than on matter and the single parts.” The obvious consequence for the Stagirite was that “science is about species” rather than individual entities. To this abstractionist point of view, Campanella reacts together with the skeptics, as Sanches already did. He confirms the need for a kind of knowledge that must attain concrete and individual things and denounces the Aristotelian science of the universal: “it is not wisdom but a confused, common and external one, which does not attain the inside of the thing” (Campanella 1994, p. 108). To the model of knowledge by abstraction, the second *dubitatio* opposes – to declare it unattainable – a kind of “total” knowledge that cannot be reduced to “the common things, without peculiarities,” on the example of God’s knowledge that reaches all the “peculiarities.” Campanella thinks in conformity with the theses of radical nominalism according to which “universals exist only in particulars.” But precisely for this reason the reevaluation of the particular would lead to the skeptical heavy blow since in that hypothesis “in order to know something, which is impossible, we would need to know infinite things and the perishable ones too, which nobody can know” (Campanella 1994, p. 52).

The pre-Pyrrhonian character, in all senses, of Campanella’s discourse is striking. Several decades after the publication of Sextus Empiricus’ works, he appears not to be familiar with the peculiarities of this kind of skepticism. He speaks generically of “skeptics,” without differentiating between Pyrrhonists and Academics (Campanella 1994, p. 108), and throughout the first book he never names Pyrrho and only once mentions Sextus Empiricus, correctly distinguishing his position from the negative dogmatism of Socrates and Arcesilaus. Although *Metaphysica* contains an echo of the *leit-motiv* of the *diaphonia* among philosophical opinions, other more technical arguments, typical of Sextus, are missing, such as the aporia of the “criterion,” the figures of “dialleles,” and “regression to infinity.” There is only one passage in this Book I in which Campanella appears to evoke the argument of regression to the infinite; however, it is clear that Sextus is not the source of the argument as

Campanella refers it to the typically Scholastic notion of “species” (Campanella 1994, p. 120).

In some interesting pages, Campanella looks at a number of arguments that, though already present in Cicero, were to enjoy new and better fortune after Descartes returned to them in *Discours de la méthode*. He examines the doubt between dreaming and waking and the comparison between wisdom and madness, to which he adds the more dramatic doubt on life and death, taken from Euripides (Campanella 1994, p. 126, 132). These themes, however, are amplified to the maximum in *Metaphysica* and thus take on a particular significance deriving from the principle (entirely due to Campanella) that knowledge is “passio” since in it a true transmutation takes place: “the knower is transformed into what is known; therefore to know is tantamount to an alienation.” It is not by chance that the theme of human “delirium” was to return again in *dubitatio*es XI, XII, and XIII: “the fact that we sleep, that we rave, that we are in the shadow of death” can be deduced from many signs, first and foremost from the recognition of philosophical “ravings” (Campanella 1994, p. 138, 146), but also from the equally foolish contrasts surrounding the doctrine of “principles” including the foundations of morality and religion. The pages that Campanella dedicates to this latter, particularly treacherous theme provide a nice summary of the arguments produced by ethical skepticism (including ideas from Carneades already mentioned in Grotius’s *Prolegomena*), whereas his lively notes on the disparity among religions and on their strange beliefs appear to echo the famous darts shot by the libertines and the early deists, who had taken a lesson of disenchanted skepticism from theological conflicts, as he had described them in his *Atheismus triumphatus* (Campanella 2004, pp. 18, 33, 77–84, 92).

Skepticism, philosophy of mind, and reform of metaphysics. Other important metaphors flow from Platonic readings. The soul imprisoned in the body, locked up “like a craftsman in a dark cave” (Campanella 1994, p. 134), recalls the famous myth of Plato’s *Republic* (“as if we were placed in a cave so that we might see only the shadows of the things that flow”). The reference to

“Platonists and Augustine” teaches that “all things we see are images of other real things that exist in the angelic world and in God” (Campanella 1994, p. 104). All these themes are spread across Campanella’s pages and clearly reveal something of the metaphysical background that underlies the skeptical *dubitationes*. The frequent references to the Socratic model, with its wisdom of “knowing that one knows nothing,” serve to strengthen his much more Platonic than Pyrrhonian plot. However, Campanella does not seem inclined to take up the antiskeptical strategy that Socrates adopted in the *Theaetetus*. Rather, the author of the *Metaphysica* opposes to the Platonic pretense of attaining the “stable and intelligible kind,” using the “reason” that has “science” as its aim, the primordial character of sense which even reason cannot ignore or give up: “No sane person will say that science begins from intellect. Science begins from sense; therefore one needs to philosophize from sense as the Creator of things established.” While skepticism has good arguments to stress the boundaries and uncertainties of sense, Platonism is wrong in going further and denying that sensible knowledge is necessary, since there is no doubt that “the intellect does not know anything if not starting from sense” (Campanella 1994, pp. 122–124).

The author of the *Metaphysica*, on the other hand, finds his way out of this condition of uncertainty through his metaphysical and psychological program. He supplements sensationalism with the idea that any entity, and in particular the soul-*spiritus*, *sapit*, that is it has “taste” and “knowledge” of itself. As the tendency to self-preservation is innate in any being, so there must exist in us a latent faculty (“notitia indita et abdita”: “innate and hidden notice”) through which we can grasp ourselves in the interior: “The being of the soul, as of any other subject that knows, is self-knowledge” (Campanella 1638, II, p. 64).

If we examine the final part of Book I, which contains detailed replies to all the *dubitationes*, it is clear that, in each reply, Campanella takes hold of various aspects of skepticism, correcting and integrating them into a positive and constructive view of human knowledge: a limited view of course, but it is one that is effective and adequate

within its own framework. Right from his first reply, Campanella stresses both the partiality and the operative nature of knowledge: human science is “nothing compared to what has been said about it, but it is something in itself providing enough for human life.” Even when it is limited to sensible things, we still may go a little further and say that knowledge at least grasps the essence (“quidditas”) “for those things that of themselves move sense, such as heat, cold, light” (Campanella 1994, pp. 406–408).

Doubt III encapsulates another important truth: everyone suffers in different ways, but we may be equally certain that the interaction between objects and sentient being is a reality. Whereas the skeptic stubbornly insists on an impossible objectivity or neutrality, the metaphysician, on the contrary, comes to terms with reality: “it is useless to blame the senses for the fact that they do not perceive except thus. Nor can the nature of things be blamed for the fact that they are not capable of presenting themselves only thus to those senses” (Campanella 1994, p. 424). This “science suited to us” (“scientia secundum nos”) will certainly be “slight and weak” (“modica et exilis”), as the author repeatedly stresses. Nevertheless, it will make available a precise confirmation of reality. If we determine the factors that cause appearance to vary, even that variation will lend itself to verification and correction, following the principle that “although the senses err in many things, they nevertheless correct themselves through other sensations” (Campanella 1994, p. 422).

The discourse on the “delirium of philosophers” (the subject of doubt XI) places positive stress on the ideal of “libertas philosophandi,” the capability, that is, to philosophize “with an altogether free mind,” fixing our gaze on the “divine code” and not on the “human schools” (Campanella 1994, p. 466). The reply to the doubt XII (that concerning the “deliriums about the principles of things”) not only stresses the need for an examination that is not prejudiced by Aristotle’s authority or by that of any other philosopher (Campanella 1994, p. 470), but also states Campanella’s intention to rebuild the edifice of knowledge completely. He adds a defense of

the different branches into which it is subdivided: metaphysics, logic, mathematics (which also includes astronomy and astrology), physiology, morality, politics, and religion (Campanella 1994, pp. 474–518).

Ernst Cassirer, who recognized in Campanella's work "a complete theory of skepticism," believed skepticism to be the result of the "conflict" between sensualist Telesian gnoseology and Platonic-Augustinian metaphysics, centered around the doctrine of ideas and of primalities of being, which integrates and corrects the former without ever achieving a true fusion with it (Cassirer 1922, pp. 240–257). The fact that the "innate notion" ("notitia indita") is never thrown into doubt, not even in the most radical *dubitationes*, tends to confirm this evaluation. A contemporary of Gassendi and Mersenne, Campanella is not a "mitigated or constructive skeptic," in the *scientific* meaning that Popkin gave this qualification (Popkin 2003, p. 112 ff.), despite his appeal to be satisfied with a "slight and weak science." In fact, the author of *Universalis philosophia* wants to go far beyond the horizons of physics and natural phenomena to include into knowledge the area of metaphysics. The "metaphysical" skeptic of his *dubitationes* does indeed correct Platonism with sensualism, but at the same time he opens the door to a new kind of research that heads in another more ambitious direction: he moves from sensible data to derive judgments, and then reaches "reason" ("ratio") that, as he warns, "is not an abstract being" ("non est ens rationis") (Campanella 1638, I, p. 344).

The necessity of doubt. This new perspective paves the way to the properly metaphysical parts of *Universalis philosophia*, with its theory of the three primalities of being. Although Campanella assimilated skeptical instances in his gnoseology, he thought they could be overcome turning to a platonico-augustinian theory of reason and ideas. Nevertheless, skepticism still plays a major role for him and cannot be simply dismissed. With his doubts, the skeptic brings to light truths that the simple empiricist ignores: he questions sensible knowledge and so helps reach a higher level of certainty, which is provided by metaphysical reason. Furthermore, as he always aims at realizing a

synthesis of sensualism and intellectualism, metaphysics and empiricism can correct each other. This explains all his disdain for Aristotle's abstractionist epistemology or for the pure idealism of Plato, which are in the end rejected, like the objections of the skeptic. In fact, skepticism is for Campanella only a preliminary, but necessary, stage to be overcome in his reform of metaphysics that would include also sciences, which are still in need of a deeper philosophical foundation than that could be afforded by simple "mitigated skepticism."

Unfortunately, Descartes refused to read Campanella's *Universalis philosophia*, which Mersenne proposed to send him right after its publication in 1638. He already knew *De sensu rerum et magia* and was negatively struck by the sensualism contained in this work. However, if he had read *Metaphysica*, he would probably have changed his negative opinion about the philosophy of the Italian author and possibly he would have appreciated both the foundational role assigned to skepticism and the attempt to overcome it by a new kind of metaphysics, even if Descartes' was to be more scientific and definitely dualistic (Paganini 2017). On the other hand, Campanella's major work had a hidden posterity even in France, in the Cartesian inner circle. In fact, Mersenne read *Metaphysica* when it was still in manuscript; what is worse, he plagiarized some significant portions of the first book on skepticism, in order to build the character of the "Pyrrhonian" in his *La Vérité des sciences* (Mersenne 1625; see Paganini 2005; Paganini 2008, pp. 129–170).

Interconnections

Descartes and the Renaissance skeptics. To what extent could Descartes's doubt and its solution (Popkin 2003, pp. 143–173; Paganini 2008, pp. 229–348) be influenced by the Renaissance revival of skepticism with all its innovations? To understand Cartesian doubt and its developments, it is essential to make two fundamental moves: (a) first, to shift the focus from the ancient sources, which mostly monopolized scholars' attention,

and to consider instead Renaissance philosophers and seventeenth-century free-thinkers, which not only were closer to him but also transformed skeptical issues in-depth (Paganini 2008b); (b) secondly, to extend the range of the sources from the Pyrrhonian ones, basically Montaigne (Brunschvicg 1945; Panichi and Spallanzani 2013) to authors that were more eclectic, like Charron, or more involved with the new Academy, like Sanches. Today it is no longer possible to share Gilson's negative judgment on "philosophers of the Renaissance that were engaged in doubting," who failed because of their basic empiricism (Gilson 1967, p. 288). In fact, as we already saw, the skeptical positions of these philosophers brought forth new themes that went far beyond their original empiricist or sensualist culture. While Stoicism supported the autonomy of the sage in Charron and developed into a new skeptical theory of the active subject, contributing to provide Descartes with "a skeptical base" for his *cogito* (Popkin 1954; Maia Neto 2003; Maia Neto 2016, pp. 97–123), the debate about certainty of the internal states of the mind deeply influenced Sanches and was taken up again by Descartes. On both of these sides, late Renaissance skepticism recovered a strong theory of subjectivity that was lacking in ancient Pyrrhonism and was put in practice, but not theorized in a due philosophical form, by Montaigne. In this way, modern and especially Renaissance skeptical themes were conveyed into Descartes's re-discovery of the self and its certainties.

Descartes and Sanches. Let us start with Sanches' case that is still less known. We shall focus on what one can find both in Sanches and in Descartes, and only in both of them, to determine which was the influence of the former on the latter. First, we can find in Sanches' 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 in both thinkers, it ends up yielding a deep disappointment regarding the state of knowledge of their time.

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 the encounter with the Minotaur, on the whole we can see that his considerations concerning the variety of things, the multitude and confusion of opinions, stand directly against the background of the *Discours*, where Descartes describes his despairing itinerary through "la diversité de nos opinions." Similarly, the sense of fallibility that strikes perceptions and extends to the mind, bringing about a condition of total uncertainty in the form of a true deception, cannot but evoke Descartes's suspicious approach adopted in the *Discours*, where he attempts to liberate the mind from all its prejudices "faisant particulièrement réflexion, en chaque matiere, sur ce qui la pouvoit rendre suspecte, et nous donner occasion de nous méprendre" (Descartes 1964 ff., AT VI, p. 28). Reading *Quod nihil scitur*, Descartes realised the need of freeing his intellectual power from any kind of authority, but at the same time he saw the failure of empiricism as it ended in scepticism. In the related passages, Sanches' procedure is in fact the proof *e contrario* of the value of an anti-empiricist perspective. While for Sanches it is true that we cannot usually do without knowledge of senses, it is actually 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' *Discours*, and that is even truer for the *Recherche de la vérité*, in particular for the statement of "universal doubt."

One might extend the comparison of Descartes with Sanches (Paganini 2009b) into more details, in particular to the need for the method of doubt, to the difficulty of using it, and to the fact that few are able to practice it. The differences between the achievements of different men mainly derive from the same causes for both authors. Analogously, on another front, Sanches, like Descartes, holds that one should reject authorities to follow only reason. In the first place, this is because it is difficult

to choose one among those on the market, but, more than that, because in relying on others' opinions, the disciple becomes "a slave rather than a learned man." Descartes will say the same in a famous passage about the impossibility of sticking to one opinion once one starts meeting different teachers and becomes acquainted with different opinions and customs without thinking them barbaric. This passage is not only a repetition of Enesidemos' tenth trope; it flows from a well-defined literary model already established by Sanches when he describes the loneliness of the disciple who cannot appeal to the judgment of others when searching for the truth.

Telling the story of doubt. In fact, apart from the contents, Descartes appears to have taken the very form of the story told in the *Discours* from Sanches. Although *Quod nihil scitur* is not organized as an autobiography like the first parts of *Discours*, 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 *Quod nihil scitur* is written in the first person singular, and even when the author debates fiercely with a second person, it is more an internal discourse, a dramatic monologue with himself, than a true dialogue with another character. The account 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' work might solve the big problem that Cartesian scholars dwell upon when interpreting the *Discours*. All its commentators 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 harbored at that time. It does indeed seem highly improbable that, when attending the Collège de La Flèche (1606–1614, and so between the ages of 10 and 18) the young student would have been able to judge the pillars of his own learning so severely as related in *Discours*. It is much more likely that, when writing this work, Descartes reorganized and rebuilt his own autobiographical recollections, shaping them into a scheme that could have more easily

been provided by a work like *Quod nihil scitur* than by Montaigne's *Apologie* or Le Vayer's skeptical dialogues. Indeed, the former was not written as a recollection of a personal experience and the latter, due to their explicit dialogic form, are very distant from an account told in the first person, as in Descartes. It was most probably Sanches' booklet that suggested Descartes the format to tell an epistemological crisis as a personal experience, even though the *Discours* is more sober and drier than his antecedent.

Beyond doubt: the internal states of the mind. Similarly, the constructive aspect of Sanches' work, namely his theory of the certainty of the internal states of the mind, can be related to the similar doctrine in Descartes. To appreciate the tight connection, one should note that Sanches' description of the epistemological certainty of internal states ("quae in nobis aut sunt, aut a nobis fiunt," see above) will reappear almost literally the same in a passage of Descartes, where he defines the "cogitations" as "everything that happens / is made in us" ("omnia quae in nobis fiunt"), adding the claim that thoughts "taken in themselves and not referring to something else, cannot be considered false, if one speaks properly" (Descartes, *Principia philosophiae* I, 9 AT VIII A, p. 7; cf. *Meditationes* II AT VII, p. 33; *I^{ae} Responsiones* AT VII, p. 107; *IV^{ae} Responsiones* AT VII, p. 246). There is therefore quite a strong reason to see in this doctrine of the internal states of the mind a skeptical "antecedent" of Descartes' thesis that the mind is transparent and that ideas are evident when considered in themselves. Distinguishing between internal and external states and explaining how it is possible to acquire much knowledge without going outside of oneself, Sanches' discourse actually opened the path to an investigation in the direction Descartes will look for in the *Meditations* and *Recherche de la vérité*. To use Poliandre's words in the last reply of this unfinished dialogue: "There are so many things in the idea of a thinking being that to develop them all we would need whole days" (Descartes, *Recherche de la vérité* AT X, p. 527). Obviously, Descartes' different metaphysical attitude allows him to assign a foundational value to certainties that for Sanches were very strong in

certainty but, on the opposite, very poor in comprehension. Whereas the inverse proportion between these two factors prevents the skeptic from proceeding further in the achievement of metaphysical knowledge, so that his distinction between things “inside” and “outside” stops at a dead end, Descartes could profit instead of Sanches’ discovery of interiority to overthrow skepticism, as it were, from inside, digging into this sphere of internal and autonomous knowledge. In so doing, he exactly obtained what the skeptical crisis required in order not to be accused of preconceived dogmatism. Moreover, while Montaigne had no philosophical theory of the self but rather an experienced and literary practice of it (Paganini 2013), while self-awareness has in Charron mainly a moral import, Sanches goes straight to the issue of the metaphysical certainty: this is his constructive aspect that was often neglected by readers and is yet crucial for his connection with Descartes. More than Montaigne, Charron, and Campanella, it is Sanches the real link between Descartes’ experience of doubt and the skeptical Renaissance thinkers. What is even more important, looking at Sanches, this connection regarded not only the destruction of false certainties but also the discovery of the true ones by the French philosopher.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Agrippa von Nettesheim](#)
- ▶ [Campanella, Tommaso](#)
- ▶ [Charron, Pierre](#)
- ▶ [Montaigne, Michel de](#)
- ▶ [Pico, Gianfrancesco](#)
- ▶ [Sanches, Francisco](#)

References

Primary Literature

- Agrippa von Nettesheim, H.C. 1530. *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum*. Antwerp: J. Gryphaeus.
- Agrippa von Nettesheim, H.C. ca 1600. *Opera*. Lyons: Per Beringos fratres (repr. New York 1970, ed. R.H. Popkin).

- Agrippa von Nettesheim, H. C. 1533. *De occulta philosophia libri tres*. Cologne: J. Soter
- Campanella, T. 1638. *Universalis philosophiae, seu metaphysicarum rerum, iuxta propria dogmata, partes tres, libri 18*. Ph. Burelly, Parisiis (repr. Bottega d’Erasmus, Turin, 1961, ed. L. Firpo).
- Campanella, T. 1994. *Metafisica, Liber I*. Latin text with Italian trans. and ed. Paolo Ponzio. Bari: Levante Editore.
- Campanella, T. 2004. *L’ateismo trionfato ovvero Riconoscimento filosofico della religione universale contra l’antichristianesimo macchiavellesco*. ed. G. Ernst. Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore.
- Castellio, S. 1937, 1981. *De arte dubitandi et confitendi, ignorandi et sciendi*. ed. Elisabeth Feist Hirsch. Leiden: Brill.
- Castellio, S. 1971. *De l’impunité des hérétiques. De haereticis non puniendis*. ed. B. Becker. Geneva: Droz.
- Charron, P. 1986. *De la sagesse*. ed. B. De Negroni. Paris: Fayard.
- de Valencia, Pedro. 1596. *Academica sive de iudicio erga verum ex ipsis primis fontibus*. Antwerp: Plantin.
- Descartes, R. 1964–1974. *Œuvres publiées par C. Adam et P. Tannery, nouvelle présentation par B. Rochot et P. Costabel*, 11 vols. Paris: Vrin-CNRS.
- Erasmus from Rotterdam. 1511, 1515. *Stultitiae laus*. Basel: Frobenius.
- Erasmus from Rotterdam. 1524. *De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collatio*. Basel: Frobenius.
- Mersenne, M. 1625. *La Vérité des sciences. Contre les septiques ou Pyrrhoniens*. Paris: Toussaint du Bray. (repr. Frommann, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1969).
- Montaigne, M. 1999. *Essais*. ed. P. Villey. Paris: PUF.
- Pico, G.F. 1573. *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium, et veritatis Christianae disciplinae*. In ed. G.F. Pico, *Opera Omnia*, Basel: Henricus Petri. (repr. 1969 Olms, Hildesheim).
- Pico, G. 1946–1952. *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*. ed. E. Garin, Vol. 2. Florence: Vallecchi.
- Sanches, F. 1955. *Quod nihil scitur*. In *Opera philosophica*, ed. F. Sanches and J. de Carvalho, Vol. XVIII. Coimbra: Revista da Universidade de Coimbra.
- Sanches, F. 1988. *That nothing is known*. ed. E. Limbrick and D. Thomson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Talon, O. 1547. *Academia, Ejusdem in Academicum Ciceronis fragmentum explication*. Paris: I. Roigny.

Secondary Literature

- Backus, I. 2009. The issue of reformation skepticism revisited: What Erasmus and Sebastian Castellio did or did not know. In *Renaissance Scepticisms*, ed. G. Paganini and J.R. Maia Neto, 63–89. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Barnes, J. 1983, 1997. The beliefs of a pyrrhonist. *Elenchos*, 4 (1983). Repr. in *The original sceptics: A controversy*, eds. M.F. Burnyeat and M. Frede, 59–60. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett.

- Brunschvicg, L. 1945, 1995. *Descartes et Pascal lecteurs de Montaigne*. Neuchâtel: La Baconnière (nouv. éd., Pocket, Paris, 1995).
- Burnyeat, M.F. 1983. Can the skeptic live his skepticism. In *The skeptical tradition*, ed. M.F. Burnyeat. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.
- Cao, G.M. 2007. *Scepticism and orthodoxy. Gianfrancesco Pico as a reader of Sextus Empiricus*. Pisa-Roma: Serra Editore.
- Cao, G.M. 2009. Inter alias philosophorum gentium sectas, et humani, et mites: Gianfrancesco Pico and the sceptics. In *Renaissance Scepticisms*, ed. G. Paganini and J.R. Maia Neto, 127–147. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Cassirer, E. 1922. *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*. Berlin: Erster Band. B. Cassirer.
- Charles, S., and M.A. Bernier, eds. 2005. *Scepticisme et modernité*. Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne.
- Eva, L.A.A. 2009. Montaigne's radical skepticism. In *Skepticism in the modern age. Building on the work of Richard Popkin*, ed. J.R. Maia Neto, G. Paganini, and J.C. Laursen, 83–103. Leiden-Boston: Brill.
- Floridi, L. 2002. *Sextus Empiricus. The transmission and recovery of Pyrrhonism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gilson, E. 1967. In R. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode. Texte et commentaire par Etienne Gilson*. Paris: Vrin.
- Laursen, J.C. 2009. Pedro de Valencia's *Academica* and scepticism in late Renaissance Spain. In *Renaissance Scepticisms*, ed. G. Paganini and J.R. Maia Neto, 111–123. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Lupoli, A. 2009. Humanus Animus Nusquam Consistit: Doctor Sanchez's diagnosis of the incurable human unrest and ignorance. In *Renaissance Scepticisms*, ed. G. Paganini and J.R. Maia Neto, 149–181. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Maia Neto, J.R. 2003. Charron's *époque* and Descartes's *cogito*: The sceptical base of Descartes's refutation of scepticism. In *The return of Scepticism from Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle*, ed. G. Paganini, 81–113. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer.
- Maia Neto, J.R., G. Paganini, and J.C. Laursen. 2009. *Skepticism in the modern age. Building on the work of Richard Popkin*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- Maia Neto, J.R. 2016. *Academic scepticism in seventeenth-century French philosophy. The Charronian legacy 1601–1662*. Heidelberg/New York/Dordrecht: Springer.
- Mates, B. 1996. *The skeptic way. Sextus Empiricus's outlines of Pyrrhonism*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moreau, P.F., ed. 2001. *Le scepticisme au XVI e et au XVII e siècle*. Paris: A. Michel.
- Naya, E. 2000. *Le phénomène pyrrhonien: lire le scepticisme au XVIe siècle*. Grenoble: Thèse Université de Grenoble III.
- Naya, E. 2001. Traduire les *Hypotyposes Pyrrhoniennes*: Henri Estienne entre la fièvre quarte et la folie chrétienne. In *Le scepticisme au XVI e et au XVII e siècle*, ed. P.F. Moreau, 48–101. Paris: A. Michel.
- Naya, E. 2004. Sextus à Genève: la Réforme du doute. *Libertinage et philosophie* 8: 7–30.
- Naya, E. 2009. Renaissance pyrrhonism: A relative phenomenon. In *Renaissance Scepticisms*, ed. G. Paganini and J.R. Maia Neto, 15–32. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Paganini, G., ed. 2003a. *The return of Scepticism. From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle*. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer.
- Paganini, G. 2003b. Hobbes among ancient and modern sceptics: Phenomena and bodies. In *The return of scepticism. From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle*, ed. G. Paganini, 3–35. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer.
- Paganini, G. 2004. Montaigne, Sanches et la connaissance par phénomènes. In *Montaigne: Scepticisme, métaphysique et théologie*, ed. V. Carraud and J.L. Marion, 107–135. Paris: P.U.F.
- Paganini, G. 2004b. Hobbes and the “continental” tradition of Scepticism. In *Scepticism as a force in renaissance and post-renaissance thought. New findings and new interpretations of the role and influence of modern Scepticism*, ed. R.H. Popkin and J.R. Maia Neto, 65–105. Amherst: Humanities Press.
- Paganini, G. 2005. Mersenne plagiaire: les doutes de Campanella dans la *Vérité des sciences. Dix-septième siècle* 57: 747–767.
- Paganini, G. 2006. Scteticismo. In *Enciclopedia bruniana e campanelliana, I*, ed. G. Ernst and E. Canone, 342–351. Pisa-Roma: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali.
- Paganini, G. 2008. *Skepsis. Le débat des modernes sur le scepticisme. Montaigne – Le Vayer – Campanella – Hobbes – Descartes – Bayle*. (Prix La Bruyère de l'Académie Française). Paris: Vrin.
- Paganini, G. 2008b. The quarrel over ancient and modern Scepticism: Some reflections on Descartes and his context. In *The legacies of Richard Popkin*, ed. J. Popkin, 173–194. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Paganini, G. 2009. Charron et le scepticisme des modernes. *Corpus* 55: 231–250.
- Paganini, G. 2009b. Descartes and renaissance skepticism: The Sanches case. In *Skepticism in the modern age. Building on the work of Richard Popkin*, ed. J.R. Maia Neto, G. Paganini, and J.C. Laursen, 249–267. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- Paganini, G. 2013. Les transformations du doute de Montaigne à Descartes. *Montaigne Studies* 25: 39–48.
- Paganini, G. 2016. Sanches et Descartes. Subjectivité et connaissance réflexive au temps des sceptiques. *Bulletin de la Société internationale des amis de Montaigne* 64: 173–185.
- Paganini, G. 2017. Descartes, Elisabeth e Campanella. Connessioni e reazioni intorno alla “terza nozione primitiva”. *Rinascimento* 2017: 1–26.
- Paganini, G., and J.R. Maia Neto, eds. 2009. *Renaissance Scepticisms*. Dordrecht: Springer.

- Panichi, N, and M.F. Spallanzani, eds. 2013. *Montaigne and Descartes. A philosophical genealogy*. Special Issue: *Montaigne Studies* 25.
- Perrone Compagni, V. 2009. Tutius ignorare quam scire: Cornelius Agrippa and scepticism. In *Renaissance Scepticisms*, ed. G. Paganini and J.R. Maia Neto, 91–110. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Popkin, R.H. 1954. Charron and Descartes. The fruits of systematic doubt. *Journal of Philosophy* 51: 831–837.
- Popkin, R.H. 2003. *The history of scepticism. From Savonarola to Bayle*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (revised and expanded edition).
- Popkin, J., ed. 2008. *The legacies of Richard Popkin*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Schmitt, C.B. 1967. *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) and his critique of Aristotle*. The Hague: M. Nijhoff.
- Schmitt, C.B. 1972. *Cicero scepticus. A study of the influence of the 'Academica' in the renaissance*. The Hague: M. Nijhoff.
- Yrjökonuuri, M. 2000. Self-knowledge and the renaissance sceptics. In *Ancient scepticism and the sceptical tradition*, ed. J. Sihvola, 225–254. Helsinki: Acta Philosophica Fennica.
- Zerba, M. 2012. *Doubt and scepticism in antiquity and the renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.