

# **The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle**

*Richard H. Popkin*

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

*Richard H. Popkin*

**OXFORD**  
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*To three of my coworkers in the field of history of scepticism:*

Charles B. Schmitt, 1933–1986; Giorgio Tonelli, 1928–1979;  
and Ezequiel de Olaso, 1932–1996

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## Preface

As a teenager growing up in the late thirties in New York, I became sceptical about a lot of ideologies then being discussed. It was only when I went to college at Columbia in the early 1940s that I became acquainted with the actual arguments of the Greek sceptics. I was a student in the course of the history of philosophy, then being given by John Herman Randall. The materials we were asked to read by Plato and Aristotle were very tough going for me at the time. After that we were assigned to read a section of the writings of the Greek sceptic Sextus Empiricus. I remember taking the book off the shelf in the philosophy library and finding it amazingly lucid and exciting. I read it on the subway ride back to my home in the Bronx and read it with much joy in the days thereafter. This text, plus the later readings from the Scottish sceptic David Hume, were the most interesting for me. In 1944 I took a seminar in post-Aristotelian Greek philosophy, given by Paul Oskar Kristeller. This was, in fact, the first course he gave in the United States. There were just two students attending. He would lecture from a podium for an hour and a half and then say, "Are there any questions, gentlemen?" Of the fifteen weeks of the course, two were devoted to Sextus Empiricus. This greatly increased my interest in Greek scepticism. When I asked Professor Kristeller years later why he devoted so much time to Sextus, whose ideas

he did not find congenial, he told me that he was then following the notes from a course that his teacher, Martin Heidegger, had given!

In the next couple of years, I wrote term papers comparing Sextus with all sorts of people and using his arguments with regard to all sorts of problems. When I was at Yale in 1946 I wrote a term paper for a seminar on Hume about Hume and Sextus Empiricus, in which I tried to show that Hume's best arguments are modified forms of arguments in Sextus. When I showed this paper to Professor Kristeller, he told me that he found it very interesting and that I should look into whether there was a sceptical tradition in Europe before Hume. This led me into reading Pierre Bayle, Montaigne, and other figures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The thesis of this book started to develop around 1950, when I had just finished my doctorate and was beginning to do new research. At the time I was very interested in similarities I found in the arguments of David Hume and the Irish philosopher George Berkeley with those of ancient Greek sceptics. After publishing studies on this, I began to formulate my view that modern philosophy developed out of a sceptical crisis that challenged all previous knowledge, a crisis that developed in the sixteenth century. I published a long article on this in 1953–54 in the *Review of Metaphysics*. The long article was originally a talk I gave to the Humanities Society at the University of Iowa. I sent it to my former teacher, Paul Weiss, who was then editor of the *New Review of Metaphysics*. He said he would be happy to publish it if I would footnote every name and title mentioned. This resulted in an exceedingly long three-part article. Thanks to a Fulbright fellowship in 1952–53 I was able to rummage into the writings of various sceptical thinkers from the sixteenth century on. This led me to see that the sceptical crisis was in part a reaction to the clash of religious positions during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Over the next few years, I wrote many studies on different sceptics from Erasmus onward. After another year in Europe in 1957–58 at the University of Utrecht, I completed a book-length manuscript, putting together my findings under the title *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*. The book was submitted to two major academic presses in the United States, which both turned it down on the grounds that it was not sufficiently philosophical. It was then published by the University of Utrecht in 1960. Much to my surprise, it was quickly accepted by scholars in Europe and America. A paperback edition for course use was put out by Harper and Row in 1964.

Originally I had planned to continue the story of the impact of scepticism on modern philosophy in a series of volumes dealing with the period after Descartes. I had outlined such a series carrying the story up to the early nineteenth century. Because of other concerns, I delayed doing this and finally decided to enlarge the original book so that it was now *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, which was published by the University of California Press in 1979.

In light of new material, new ideas, and the growing contributions of other scholars, I decided about five years ago to undertake what I suppose will be the final version of the story. By this time, I had been made aware that the initial im-

petus to studying the ancient sceptical texts developed in Florence at the end of the fifteenth century. The Dominican monk Savonarola, his associate Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and his disciple Gianfrancesco Pico saw that the text of Sextus Empiricus, the major text we have of ancient Greek scepticism, was the source of the rejection of all forms of pagan philosophy. These three figures, I now knew, were responsible for making European thinkers aware of the power of sceptical arguments. So I wanted to start the final version of the book at this point in European history—when Greek thought was being transmitted into Europe and being translated into Latin and current European languages.

I also wanted to fill out much more of the background of the religious currents that became involved with the use of sceptical ideas. I wanted to show the influence of Spanish Jewish thinkers, renegade Catholics, and offbeat Protestants in using sceptical materials against their opponents. Besides enriching the background material, I also wanted to include various seventeenth-century philosophies as reactions to, or compromises with, the sceptical arguments. Therefore, chapters have been added on Thomas Hobbes, the Cambridge Platonists, the philosophers of the Royal Society of England, Nicolas Malebranche, and Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. In addition I wanted to include the ongoing sceptical movement up to the end of the seventeenth century, including Pierre Gassendi, Simon Foucher, Bishop Daniel Huet, and the supersceptic Pierre Bayle. It is hoped that these enlargements will provide a better picture of how scepticism became so important in the beginning of modern philosophy and how it has been, to paraphrase Karl Marx, the specter haunting European thought. I have tried to take notice of recent scholarship by others and to at least mention any disagreements they may have with my picture of our intellectual history. The bibliography is not exhaustive but should provide a substantial basis for further research.

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## Acknowledgments

This study has been developed over the last half century and represents not only the results of the author's findings but also the results of the assistance, advice, and encouragement of many people and institutions. It is, therefore, a great pleasure for me to be able to take this opportunity to thank those who have given so generously of their help in various forms.

First of all, I wish to express my thanks to the United States State Department, which awarded me Fulbright research grants to the University of Paris, 1952–53, and to the University of Utrecht, 1957–58; and to the American Philosophical Society, which awarded me grants in 1956 and 1958 to carry on my research in France and Italy. By means of these grants, I was able to have the opportunity to examine and study much material that is not available in this country and was able to have periods of time away from my teaching duties, so that I could concentrate on preparing this study.

Since the first edition of this work I have had grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, the Alexander Kohut Foundation, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the American Philosophical Society, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, which have helped me broaden my knowledge and understanding of modern scepticism.

I am most grateful also to the many libraries in the United States and Europe that have allowed me to use their facilities, especially the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris; the British Library; the Biblioteek van de Universiteit van Utrecht; the Biblioteca Laurenziana of Florence; the Rijksbibliothek in The Hague; the University of Amsterdam Library; the Institut Catholique of Toulouse Library; the National Library, Toulouse; the National Library, Montpellier; the Newberry Library of Chicago; the University of California, San Diego, Library; the Henry Huntington Library; the William Andrews Clark Library of the University of California, Los Angeles; the Olin Library at Washington University, St. Louis; New York Public Library; Yale University Library; Harvard Library; Leiden University Library; Bibliothèque de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français; Bibliothèque de Sainte Geneviève; La Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal; Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel; Marsh Library, Dublin; Dr. Williams Library, London; the Warburg Institute Library, London; the University of London Library; the Sutro Library, San Francisco; Hebrew Union College Library, Cincinnati; Ets Haim Library, Amsterdam; the National Library of Israel, Jerusalem; Bibliothèque Municipal de Lyon; the Institute for Humanities, Ann Arbor, Michigan; Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; and Condé Archives, Chantilly, France.

I am extremely indebted to the State University of Iowa and to the late Dean Walter Loehwing of the Graduate College for their generosity in making time, materials, and funds available to me to complete the original study.

I owe my initial acquaintance with and interest in scepticism and the role it played in modern philosophy to my teachers, especially to John H. Randall and Paul O. Kristeller of Columbia University and Charles W. Hendel of Yale University. Through the encouragement of Paul Weiss of Yale, I was led to sketch out my views in a series of articles in the *Review of Metaphysics*. I am most grateful to the many scholars who have patiently discussed matters about the history of scepticism with me, and who have advised and encouraged me in this work: Susanna Åkerman, Father Julian-Eymard d'Angers, Jean-Robert Armogathe, Miguel Benitez, Sir Isaiah Berlin, Silvia Berti, John Bidwell, Constance Blackwell, Olivier Bloch, Justin Champion, James R. Collins, Brian Copenhaver, Allison Coudert, Isadora Damska, Cornelia De Vogel, Paul Dibon, Arthur Field, Luciano Floridi, James Force, Donald Frame, Lila Freedman, Amos Funkenstein, Alan Gabbey, Dan Garber, Gunther Gawlick, Judah Goldin, Matt Goldish, Henri Gouhier, Jean Grenier, Will Hamlin, Father Paul Henry, Michael Heyd, Christopher Hill, Michael Hunter, Sarah Hutton, Moshe Idel, Rob Iliffe, Jonathan Israel, Sally Jenkinson, Yosef Kaplan, David Katz, Leszek Kolakowski, Karl Kottman, Alexandre Koyré, Karl Kuypers, Elisabeth Labrousse, Jacqueline Lagrée, Yuen Ting Lai, Imre Lakatos, John C. Laursen, Fabrizio Lelli, Thomas Lennon, Abbé Robert Lenoble, André-Louis Leroy, Arthur Lesley, José Maia Neto, Herbert Marcuse, Antony McKenna, Henri Méchoulan, Arnaldo Momigliano, Pierre-François Moreau, Martin Mulso, Silvia Murr, Steven Nadler, Ezekiel Olaso, Jean Orcibal, Gianni Paganini, Schlomo Pines, René Pintard, Peter Reill, Bernard Ro-

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Many of these people will, no doubt, disagree with some of the conclusions I have come to, but their discussions with me have been invaluable in helping to clarify and develop my ideas. I also wish to thank some of my former students and colleagues who have assisted me, particularly Graham Conroy, George Arbaugh, Richard Watson, Florence Weinberg, Philip Cummins, Harry M. Bracken, and Theodore Waldman, who were at the State University of Iowa when this work was first being written.

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## Introduction

Scepticism as a philosophical view, rather than as a series of doubts concerning traditional religious beliefs, had its origins in ancient Greek thought. In the Hellenistic period, the various sceptical observations and attitudes of earlier Greek thinkers were developed into a set of arguments to establish either (1) that no knowledge was possible or (2) that there was insufficient and inadequate evidence to determine if any knowledge was possible, and hence that one ought to suspend judgment on all questions concerning knowledge. The first of these views is called Academic scepticism, the second Pyrrhonian scepticism.

Academic scepticism, so called because it was formulated in the Platonic Academy in the third century B.C.E., developed from the Socratic observation “All I know is that I know nothing.” Its theoretical formulation is attributed to Arcesilas, c. 315–241 B.C.E., and Carneades, c. 213–129 B.C.E., who worked out a series of arguments, directed primarily against the knowledge claims of the Stoic philosophers, to show that nothing could be known. As these arguments have come down to us, especially in the writings of Cicero, Diogenes Laertius, and Saint Augustine, the aim of the Academic sceptical philosophers was to show, by a group of arguments and dialectical puzzles, that the dogmatic philosopher (i.e., the philosopher who asserted that he knew *some* truth about the real nature of things) could not know with absolute certainty the propositions he said he

knew. The Academics formulated a series of difficulties to show that the information we gain by means of our senses may be unreliable, that we cannot be certain that our reasoning is reliable, and that we possess no guaranteed criterion or standard for determining which of our judgments is true or false.

The basic problem at issue is that any proposition purporting to assert some knowledge about the world contains some claims that go beyond the merely empirical reports about what appears to us to be the case. If we possessed any knowledge, this would mean, for the sceptics, that we knew a proposition, asserting some nonempirical or transempirical claim, that we were certain could not possibly be false. If the proposition might be false, then it would not deserve the name of knowledge but only that of opinion, that is, that it might be the case. Since the evidence for any such proposition would be based, according to the sceptics, on either sense information or reasoning, and both of these sources are unreliable to some degree, and no guaranteed or ultimate criterion of true knowledge exists, or is known, there is always some doubt that any nonempirical or transempirical proposition is absolutely true, and hence constitutes real knowledge. As a result, the Academic sceptics said that nothing is certain. The best information we can gain is only probable and is to be judged according to probabilities. Hence Carneades developed a type of verification theory and a type of probabilism that is somewhat similar to the theory of scientific “knowledge” of present-day pragmatists and positivists.

The scepticism of Arcesilas and Carneades dominated the philosophy of the Platonic Academy until the first century before Christ. In the period of Cicero’s studies, the Academy changed from scepticism to the eclecticism of Philo of Larissa and Antiochus of Ascalon. The arguments of the Academics survived mainly through Cicero’s presentation of them in his *Academica* and *De Natura Deorum* and through their refutation in St. Augustine’s *Contra Academicos*, as well as in the summary given by Diogenes Laertius. The locus of sceptical activity, however, moved from the Academy to the school of the Pyrrhonian sceptics, which was probably associated with the Methodic school of medicine in Alexandria.

The Pyrrhonian movement attributes its beginnings to the legendary figure of Pyrrho of Elis, c. 360–275 B.C.E., and his student Timon, c. 315–225 B.C.E. The stories about Pyrrho that are reported indicate that he was not a theoretician but rather a living example of the complete doubter, the man who would not commit himself to any judgment that went beyond what seemed to be the case. His interests seem to have been primarily ethical and moral, and in this area he tried to avoid unhappiness that might be due to the acceptance of value theories and to judging according to them. If such value theories were to any degree doubtful, accepting them and using them could only lead to mental anguish.

Pyrrhonism, as a theoretical formulation of scepticism, is attributed to Aenesidemus, c. 100–40 B.C.E. The Pyrrhonists considered that both the dogmatists and the Academics asserted too much, one group saying “Something can be known,” the other saying “Nothing can be known.” Instead, the Pyrrhonians pro-

posed to suspend judgment on all questions on which there seemed to be conflicting evidence, including the question whether or not something could be known.

Building on the type of arguments developed by Arcesilas and Carneades, Aenesidemus and his successors put together a series of “tropes,” or ways of proceeding to bring about suspense of judgment on various questions. In the sole surviving texts from the Pyrrhonian movement, those of Sextus Empiricus, these are presented in groups of ten, eight, five, and two tropes, each set offering reasons why one should suspend judgment about knowledge claims that go beyond appearances. The Pyrrhonian sceptics tried to avoid committing themselves on any and all questions, even as to whether their arguments were sound. Scepticism for them was an ability, or mental attitude, for opposing evidence both pro and con on any question about what was nonevident, so that one would suspend judgment on the question. This state of mind then led to a state of *ataraxia*, quietude, or unperturbedness, in which the sceptic was no longer concerned or worried about matters beyond appearances. Scepticism was a cure for the disease called dogmatism, or rashness. But, unlike Academic scepticism, which came to a negative dogmatic conclusion from its doubts, Pyrrhonian scepticism made no such assertion, merely saying that scepticism is a purge that eliminates everything including itself. The Pyrrhonist, then, lives undogmatically, following his natural inclinations, the appearances he is aware of, and the laws and customs of his society, without ever committing himself to any judgment about them.

The Pyrrhonian movement flourished up to about 200 C.E., the approximate date of Sextus Empiricus, and flourished mainly in the medical community around Alexandria as an antidote to the dogmatic theories, positive and negative, of other medical groups. The position has come down to us principally in the writings of Sextus Empiricus in his *Hypotyposes* (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*) and the larger *Adversus mathematicos*, in which all sorts of disciplines from logic and mathematics to astrology and grammar are subjected to sceptical devastation.

The two sceptical positions had very little apparent influence in the post-Hellenistic period. The Pyrrhonian view was little known in the West until its rediscovery in the late fifteenth century, and the Academic view was mainly known and considered in terms of St. Augustine’s treatment of it. Prior to the period I shall deal with, there are some indications of a sceptical motif, principally among the antirational theologians, Jewish, Islamic, and Christian. This theological movement, culminating in the West in the work of Nicholas of Cusa in the fifteenth century, employed many of the sceptical arguments in order to undermine confidence in the rational approach to religious knowledge and truth.

The period I shall treat, 1450–1710, is certainly not the unique period of sceptical impact on modern thought. Both before and after this time interval, one can find important influences of the ancient sceptical thinkers. But it is my contention that scepticism plays a special and different role in the period extending from the religious quarrels leading to the Reformation up to the development of modern metaphysical systems in the seventeenth century; a special and different role due to the fact that the intellectual crisis brought on by the Reformation

coincided in time with the rediscovery and revival of the arguments of the ancient Greek sceptics. From the mid-fifteenth century onward, with the discovery of manuscripts of Sextus' writings, there is a revival of interest and concern with ancient scepticism and with the application of its views to the problems of the day.

The selection of Savonarola as the starting point of this study is because he was the first to suggest that Greek sceptical materials should be published in Latin as part of the defense of true religion. A couple of decades later, Erasmus introduced other sceptical themes as a way of dealing with Luther's challenge.

The stress in this study on the revival of interest and concern with the texts of Sextus Empiricus is not intended to minimize or ignore the collateral role played by such ancient authors as Diogenes Laertius or Cicero in bringing the classical sceptical views to the attention of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers. However, the writings of Sextus seem to have played a special and predominant role for many of the philosophers, theologians, and scientists considered here, and Sextus appears to have been the direct or indirect source of many of their arguments, concepts, and theories. It is only in the works of Sextus that a full presentation of the position of the Pyrrhonian sceptics appears, with all of their dialectical weapons employed against so many philosophical theories. Neither the presentations of Academic scepticism in Cicero and St. Augustine nor the summaries of both types of scepticism—Academic and Pyrrhonian—in Diogenes Laertius were rich enough to satisfy those concerned with the sceptical crisis of the Renaissance and Reformation. Hence thinkers like Michel Montaigne, Marin Mersenne, and Pierre Gassendi turned to Sextus for materials to use in dealing with the issues of their age. And hence the crisis is more aptly described as a *crise pyrrhonienne* than as a *crise academicienne*. By the end of the seventeenth century, the great sceptic Pierre Bayle could look back and see the reintroduction of the arguments of Sextus as the beginning of modern philosophy. Most writers of the period under consideration use the term "sceptic" as equivalent to "Pyrrhonian" and often follow Sextus' view that the Academic sceptics were not really sceptics but actually were negative dogmatists. (In this connection it is noteworthy that the late seventeenth-century sceptic, Simon Foucher, took it upon himself to revive Academic scepticism and to try to defend it against such charges.)

The period of the history of scepticism considered in this book goes up to Pierre Bayle's sceptical challenge to theories old and new in philosophy, science, and theology. He covers Descartes' monumental attempt to answer scepticism and the reworking of sceptical challenges to deal with Descartes' presentation. Spinoza, extending some of Descartes' arguments to religion, then developed a new form of scepticism that was to flower in the Enlightenment. John Locke, Nicolas Malebranche, and Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, each in their own way, sought to deal with scepticism as a living issue, especially as it appeared in the works of the late seventeenth-century sceptics Simon Foucher, Pierre-Daniel Huet, and Bayle. Voltaire later said that Bayle had provided the arsenal of the Enlightenment. What happens in the eighteenth century has been dealt with in many studies.

When I wrote the original preface to this work over forty years ago, I foresaw writing a series of studies on the history of the subsequent course of epistemological scepticism covering the major thinkers who play a role in this development from Spinoza to Hume to Kant to Kierkegaard. Much of this material has been examined in studies by myself, my students, and others. So I am not sure how necessary such volumes may be. My own interest has moved toward studying the history of irreligious scepticism. I have followed this with a book on Issac La Peyrère and his influence and other studies on millenarianism and messianism in relation to scepticism.

In this study, two key terms will be “scepticism” and “fideism,” and I should like to offer a preliminary indication as to how these will be understood in the context of this work. Since the term “scepticism” has been associated in the last two centuries with disbelief, especially disbelief of the central doctrines of the Judeo-Christian tradition, it may seem strange at first to read that the sceptics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries asserted, almost unanimously, that they were sincere believers in the Christian religion. Whether they were or not will be considered later. But the acceptance of certain beliefs would not in itself contradict their alleged scepticism—scepticism meaning a philosophical view that raises doubts about the adequacy or reliability of the evidence that could be offered to justify any proposition. The sceptic, in either the Pyrrhonian or Academic tradition, developed arguments to show or suggest that the evidence, reasons, or proofs employed as grounds for our various beliefs were not completely satisfactory. Then the sceptics recommended suspense of judgment on the question of whether these beliefs were true. One might, however, still maintain the beliefs, even though all sorts of persuasive factors should not be mistaken for adequate evidence that the belief was true.

Hence “sceptic” and “believer” are not opposing classifications. The sceptic is raising doubts about the rational or evidential merits of the justifications given for a belief; he doubts that necessary and sufficient reasons either have been or could be discovered to show that any particular belief must be true and cannot possibly be false. But the sceptic may, like anyone else, still accept various beliefs.

Those whom I classify as fideists are persons who are sceptics 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). Thus, for example, the fideist might deny or doubt that necessary and sufficient reasons can be offered to establish the truth of the proposition “God exists,” and yet the fideist might say that the proposition could be known to be true only if one possessed some information through faith or if one believed certain things. Many of the thinkers whom I would classify as fideists held that either there are persuasive factors that can induce belief, but *not prove or establish* the truth of what is believed, or that after one has found or accepted one’s faith, reasons can be offered that explain or clarify what one believes without proving or establishing it.

Fideism covers a group of possible views, extending from (1) that of blind faith, which denies to reason any capacity whatsoever to reach the truth, or to

make it plausible, and which bases all certitude on a complete and unquestioning adherence to some revealed or accepted truths, to (2) that of making faith prior to reason. The latter view denies to reason any complete and absolute certitude of the truth prior to the acceptance of some proposition or propositions by faith (i.e., admitting that *all* rational propositions are to some degree doubtful prior to accepting something on faith), even though reason may play some relative or probable role in the search for, or explanation of, the truth. In these possible versions of fideism, there is, it seems to me, a common core, namely that knowledge, considered as information about the world that cannot possibly be false, is unattainable without accepting something on faith and that, independent of faith, sceptical doubts can be raised about any alleged knowledge claims. Some thinkers, Bayle and Kierkegaard for example, have pressed the faith element and have insisted that there can be no relation between what is accepted on faith and any evidence or reasons that can be given for the articles of faith. Bayle's erstwhile colleague and later enemy Pierre Jurieu summed this up by asserting, "Je le crois parce que je veux le croire." No further reasons are demanded or sought, and what is accepted on faith may be at variance with what is reasonable or even demonstrable. On the other hand, thinkers such as St. Augustine and many of the Augustinians have insisted that reasons can be given for faith, *after* one has accepted it, and that reasons that may induce belief can be given *prior* to the acceptance of the faith but do not demonstrate the truth of what is believed. Both the Augustinian and the Kierkegaardian views I class as fideistic, in that they both recognize that no indubitable truths can be found or established without some element of faith, whether religious, metaphysical, or something else.

The usage that I am employing corresponds, I believe, to that of many Protestant writers when they classify St. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Pascal, and Kierkegaard together as fideists. Some Catholic writers, like my good friend the late Father Julien-Eymard d'Angers, feel that the term "fideist" should be restricted to those who deny reason any role or function in the search for truth, both before and after the acceptance of faith. In this sense, St. Augustine and perhaps Pascal (and some interpreters would argue, perhaps Luther, Calvin, and even Kierkegaard) would no longer be classified as fideists.

The decision as to how to define the word "fideism" is partly terminological and partly doctrinal. The word can obviously be defined in various ways to correspond to various usages. But also involved in the decision as to what the term means is a basic distinction between Reformation Protestant thought and that of Roman Catholicism, since Roman Catholicism has condemned fideism as a heresy and has found it a basic fault of Protestantism, while the nonliberal Protestants have contended that fideism is a basic element of fundamental Christianity and an element that occurs in the teachings of St. Paul and St. Augustine. Though my usage corresponds more to that of Protestant writers than that of Catholic ones, I do not thereby intend to prejudge the issues in dispute or to take one side rather than the other.

In employing the meaning of “fideism” that I do, I have followed what is a fairly common usage in the literature in English. Further, I think that this usage brings out more clearly the sceptical element that is involved in the fideistic view, broadly conceived. However, it is obvious that if the classifications “sceptic” and “fideist” were differently defined then various figures whom I so classify might be categorized in a quite different way.

The antithesis of scepticism, in this study, is “dogmatism,” the view that evidence can be offered to establish that at least one nonempirical proposition cannot possibly be false. Like the sceptics who will be considered here, I believe that doubts can be cast on any such dogmatic claims and that such claims ultimately rest on some element of faith rather than evidence. If this is so, any dogmatic view becomes to some degree fideistic. However, if this could be demonstrated, then the sceptic would be sure of something and would become a dogmatist.

My sympathies are on the side of the sceptics I have been studying. But in showing how certain elements of their views led to the type of scepticism held by Hume it is not my intention to advocate this particular result of the development of the *nouveau pyrrhonisme*. As a matter of fact, I am more in sympathy with those who used the sceptical and fideistic views of the *nouveaux pyrrhoniens* for religious rather than secular purposes, and I have tried to bring this out in other studies.

My approach is that of the history of ideas as developed in many recent studies. I was influenced from my college days onward by people such as Alexandre Koyré, John Herman Randall, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and many others. I have taken various elements of their methodologies to use to examine writers who speak about scepticism from Savonarola onward. Some have suggested that I am not always speaking about scepticism but rather about people who discuss scepticism. This may be the case, but I do not know how one could write a history of scepticism without it being mainly about the people who discuss the subject. I have also been accused of minimizing the social, political, and cultural background in which the sceptics were operating. I have tried to profit from many of these kinds of studies and incorporate material from them. There is, of course, much more to be done in placing the thinker in his or her milieu. Many discussions of the authors I include concentrate principally on the ideas of the person independent of circumstances. This, I feel, can be misleading unless one takes into account what various ideas and arguments were represented at various times in history. Striking an appropriate balance between intellectual history and cultural history is extremely difficult, and I have done my best with my resources. I trust others will go on exploring sceptical currents and enrich our understanding of the role scepticism played in bringing about our present intellectual world.

A couple of years ago when I started considering what ought to be done to prepare a new edition in light of all the research that had been done by scholars in the United States and Europe in the last two decades, I pondered several possibilities. One was just to leave the text as is, except for correcting obvious errors and appending a forward dealing with the material about Savonarola and his group

and a concluding essay about scepticism after Spinoza. This would have been joined with a bibliographical essay about what had been written in the last twenty years. When I considered this, it seemed that the original book would look a bit disjointed unless it was also brought up to date and supplemented where significant new material had been found. So, about a year and a half ago, I started on the revision with the aid and comfort of two excellent assistants, Stephanie Chasin and Gabriella Goldstein. A complicating factor was that by the time I started on the revision I could no longer read texts, and so the job involved lots of optical and scanning devices and special computer programs, as well as laborious reading by my assistants. I was also no longer able to use libraries and had to rely on assistants to get materials for me and on colleagues all over the planet to send me material or look things up. I have tried to acknowledge the many, many people who have helped on this, and I hope that the results were worth their efforts.

# The History of Scepticism

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## The Intellectual Crisis of the Reformation

One of the main avenues through which the sceptical views of antiquity entered late Renaissance thought was a central quarrel of the Reformation, the dispute over the proper standard of religious knowledge, or what was called “the rule of faith.” This argument raised one of the classical problems of the Greek Pyrrhonists, the problem of the criterion of truth. With the rediscovery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of writings of the Greek Pyrrhonist Sextus Empiricus, the arguments and views of the Greek sceptics became part of the philosophical core of the religious struggles then taking place. The problem of finding a criterion of truth, first raised in theological disputes, was then later raised with regard to natural knowledge, leading to *la crise pyrrhonienne* of the early sixteenth century.

The critical problem, that of justifying a criterion for true and certain religious knowledge, was raised in part by Savonarola in his dispute with the authority of the pope in 1497 and 1498 and, more fully, by Martin Luther in the first years of his break with Rome. I will first look at the issue in terms of Martin Luther’s stance, since it is in this form that the issue became predominant in sixteenth-

century religious arguments. I will then turn back to Savonarola, who did see the need to introduce Greek sceptical arguments to rebut the prevailing philosophy and theology he was opposing. Unfortunately, Savonarola was imprisoned and tried and executed before he had any opportunity to develop his sceptical attack. Martin Luther's views and his quarrel with Erasmus may be briefly considered as an indication of how the Reformation spawned the new problem. Beginning with either Savonarola or Luther is a somewhat arbitrary starting point for tracing the sceptical influence in the formation of modern thought. In both cases the conflict between the criteria of religious knowledge of the Church and of the rebels and reformers was crucial, as well as the type of philosophical difficulties the conflict was to generate.

It was only by degrees that Luther developed from reformer inside the ideological structure of Catholicism to leader of the Reformation, denying the authority of the Church of Rome. In his first protests against indulgences, papal authority, and other Catholic principles, Luther argued in terms of the accepted criterion of the Church that religious propositions are judged by their agreement with the Church tradition, councils, and papal decrees. In the *Ninety-Five Theses* and in his letter to Pope Leo X, he tried to show that, judged by the standards of the Church for deciding such issues, he was right and certain Church practices and the justifications offered for them were wrong.

However, at the Leipzig Disputation of 1519 and in his writings of 1520, *The Appeal to the German Nobility* and *The Babylonish Captivity of the Church*, Luther took the critical step of denying the rule of faith of the Church and presented a radically different criterion of religious knowledge. It was in this period that he developed from being just one more reformer attacking the abuses and corruption of a decaying bureaucracy into being the leader of an intellectual revolt that was to shake the very foundation of Western civilization.

His opponent at Leipzig, Johann Eck, tells us with horror that Luther went so far as to deny the complete authority of pope and councils, to claim that doctrines that have been condemned by councils can be true and that councils can err because they are composed only of men.<sup>1</sup> In *The Appeal to the German Nobility*, Luther went even further and denied that the pope can be the only authority in religious matters. He claimed instead that all of Christendom has but one Gospel, one Sacrament, all Christians have "the power of discerning and judging what is right or wrong in the matters of faith,"<sup>2</sup> and Scripture outranks even the pope in determining proper religious views and actions.<sup>3</sup> In *The Babylonish Captivity*, Luther made even clearer his basic denial of the Church's criterion of religious knowledge: "I saw that the Thomist opinions, whether they be approved by pope or by council, remain opinions and do not become articles of faith, even if an angel from heaven should decide otherwise. For that which is asserted without the authority of Scripture or of proven revelation may be held as an opinion, but there is no obligation to believe it."<sup>4</sup>

And finally, Luther asserted his new criterion in its most dramatic form when he refused to recant at the Diet of Worms of 1521:

Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convicted of error by the testimony of Scripture or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or of councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by manifest reasoning I stand convicted by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.<sup>5</sup>

In this declaration of Christian liberty, Luther set forth his new criterion of religious knowledge: that what conscience is compelled to believe on reading Scripture is true. To Catholics like Eck, this must have sounded completely incredible. For centuries, asserting that a proposition stated a religious truth meant that it was authorized by Church tradition, by the pope, and by councils. To claim that these standards could be wrong was like denying the rules of logic. The denial of the accepted criteria would eliminate the sole basis for testing the truth of a religious proposition. To raise even the possibility that the criteria could be faulty was to substitute another criterion by which the accepted criteria could be judged and thus, in effect, to deny the entire framework by which orthodoxy had been determined for centuries.

Once a fundamental criterion has been challenged, how does one tell which of the alternative possibilities ought to be accepted? On what basis can one defend or refute Luther's claims? To take any position requires another standard by which to judge the point at issue. Thus Luther's denial of the criteria of the Church and his assertion of his new standard for determining religious truth lead to a rather neat example of the problem of the criterion as it appears in Sextus Empiricus, *Hypotyposis (Outlines of Pyrrhonism)* 2, chapter 4:

In order to decide the dispute which has arisen about the criterion, we must possess an accepted criterion by which we shall be able to judge the dispute; and in order to possess an accepted criterion, the dispute about the criterion must first be decided. And when the argument thus reduces itself to a form of circular reasoning the discovery of the criterion becomes impracticable, since we do not allow them [the dogmatic philosophers] to adopt a criterion by assumption, while if they offer to judge the criterion by a criterion we force them to a regress ad infinitum.<sup>6</sup>

The problem of justifying a standard of true knowledge does not arise as long as there is an unchallenged criterion. But in an epoch of intellectual revolution such as that under consideration here, the very raising of the problem can produce an insoluble *crise pyrrhoniennne*, as the various gambits of Sextus Empiricus are explored and worked out. The Pandora's box that Luther opened at Leipzig was to have the most far-reaching consequences, not just in theology but throughout the entire intellectual realm of the West.

In defense of a fundamental criterion, what can be offered as evidence? The value of the evidence depends on the criterion, and not vice versa. Some

theologians, for example Ignatius Loyola, tried to close the box by insisting “That we may be altogether of the same mind and in conformity with the Church herself, if she shall have defined anything to be black which to our eyes appears to be white, we ought in like manner to pronounce it to be black.”<sup>7</sup> This, however, does not justify the criterion but only exhibits what it is.

The problem remained. To be able to recognize the true faith, one needed a criterion. But how was one to recognize the true criterion? The innovators and the defenders of the old were both faced with the same problem. They usually met it by attacking their opponents’ criterion. Luther attacked the authority of the Church by showing the inconsistencies in its views. The Catholics tried to show the unreliability of one’s conscience and the difficulty of discerning the true meaning of Scripture without the guidance of the Church. Both sides warned of the catastrophe—intellectual, moral, and religious—that would ensue from adopting the others’ criterion.

Some similar issues had earlier surfaced in the fight between the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola and the papal authorities. In the period when Savonarola held political and theological power in Florence, he claimed to have a special prophetic knowledge that justified his material and spiritual reform movement. As he became more vociferous in denouncing the behavior of the pope, justifying his claims with his prophetic insights and his reading of Scripture, he was finally excommunicated. At this point, he refused to accept papal authority and insisted that he was right and the pope wrong. He took a step that might have led to an earlier reformation in trying to get religious and political leaders to join with him in setting up a new religious authority and a new basis for judging religious knowledge. His trial and execution quickly ended this break with traditional Catholic authority, so we do not know whether he would have followed the path that Luther did. One very intriguing item is that recent research has revealed that Savonarola, in 1494, at the height of his battle with the papacy, ordered three of his monks to prepare a Latin edition of the writings of the Greek sceptic Sextus Empiricus. There is no evidence that this project ever came to fruition. However, this is the first time in the Renaissance that Sextus Empiricus was brought forth into the theological discussions of the time. In the period when Savonarola was in charge of the Convent of San Marco, there actually were five manuscript copies of Sextus in the library there, including the copy that belonged to Pico della Mirandola, the great Florentine humanist. Savonarola taught scholastic logic at the convent and took part in the discussions among the various philosophers, Platonic and Aristotelian, who gathered there. Although he did not know Greek, he apparently knew what sort of materials were in the writings of Sextus. From the use of them that was made later on by one of his disciples, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, the nephew of the great Pico, we can surmise what use Savonarola intended to make of the Greek sceptical arguments—namely, to attack all forms of philosophical dogmatism, undermining their criteria of knowledge as a way of justifying prophetic knowledge as the only true and certain kind. Gianfrancesco helped to disseminate information about Sextus Empiricus among his contempo-

raries, as shown, for example, by a letter he wrote to Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples in August 1520 concerning "Sextus Pyrrhonius" and the "Ephectici."<sup>8</sup> According to Gianfrancesco, Savonarola had been suggesting to his followers that they read Sextus Empiricus as an introduction to Christian faith. We do not know how many of them took this advice except Gianfrancesco Pico. I will discuss Gianfrancesco's views a little later. The posing of Greek scepticism versus philosophical or theological dogmatism could well have started a sceptical crisis at the end of the fifteenth century. We cannot be sure how much Greek scepticism Savonarola would have introduced into his attacks, but we have learned that one of the judges at his trial had been studying the Vatican's copy of Sextus before he came to Florence.<sup>9</sup> If Greek scepticism had been introduced this early on, there may have been an even more powerful undermining of authority. So far there is no evidence that it was introduced publicly before Gianfrancesco Pico's book of 1520. However, it was suggested at the time that the attack on astrology of the older Pico, which was published by his nephew in 1496, was just a compilation of arguments from Sextus Empiricus. This work, which is considered of great importance in the development of modern astronomy, may turn out to be the first one that introduces Pyrrhonian arguments in the modern intellectual world.<sup>10</sup>

One of the Catholic arguments offered throughout the Reformation was the contention that Luther's criterion would lead to religious anarchy. Everybody could appeal to *his own* conscience and claim that what appeared true to him was true. No effective standard of truth would be left. In the first years of the Reformation the rapid development of all sorts of novel beliefs by such groups as the Zwickau prophets, the Anabaptists, and the anti-Trinitarians seemed to confirm this prediction. The Reformers were continually occupied with trying to justify their own type of subjective, individual criterion and at the same time were using this criterion as an objective measure by means of which they condemned as heresies their opponent's appeals to conscience.

In the battle to establish which criterion of faith was true, a sceptical attitude arose among certain thinkers, primarily as a defense of Catholicism. While many Catholic theologians tried to offer historical evidence to justify the authority of the Church (without being able to show that historical evidence was the criterion), a suggestion of the sceptical defense of the faith, the defense that was to dominate the French Counter-Reformation, was offered by Erasmus of Rotterdam. Erasmus, who had been one of the moving spirits in the demand for reform, was, in the period 1520–24, pressed more and more strenuously to openly attack Luther.<sup>11</sup> (Erasmus had various reasons for, and means of, evading the issue, but only the ultimate result will be considered here.) In 1524, Erasmus finally published a work, *De Libero Arbitrio ΔΙΑΤΡΙΒΗ*, attacking Luther's views on free will. Erasmus' general anti-intellectualism and dislike of rational theological discussions led him to suggest a kind of sceptical basis for remaining within the Catholic Church. (His reaction to the philosophers at the University of Paris in his student days and his condemnation, in *The Praise of Folly*, of their intellectual quest per se, culminated in the statement that "human affairs are so obscure and

various that nothing can be clearly known. This was the sound conclusion of the Academics [the Academic Sceptics], who were the least surly of the philosophers."<sup>12</sup> This contempt for intellectual endeavor was coupled with his advocacy of a simple, nontheological Christian piety.

*De Libero Arbitrio* begins with the announcement that the problem of the freedom of the will is one of the most involved of labyrinths. Theological controversies were not Erasmus' meat, and he says that he would prefer to follow the attitude of the sceptics and suspend judgment, especially where the inviolable authority of Scripture and the decrees of the Church permit. He says he is perfectly willing to submit to the decrees, whether or not he understands them or the reasons for them.<sup>13</sup> Scripture is not as clear as Luther would have us believe, and there are some places that are just too shadowy for human beings to penetrate. Theologians have argued and argued the question without end. Luther claims he has found the right answer and has understood Scripture correctly. But how can we tell that he really has? Other interpretations can be given that seem much better than Luther's. In view of the difficulty in establishing *the* true meaning of Scripture concerning the problem of free will, why not accept the traditional solution offered by the Church? Why start such a fuss over something one cannot know with any certainty?<sup>14</sup> For Erasmus, what is important is a simple, basic, Christian piety, a Christian spirit. The rest, the superstructure of the essential belief, is too complex for a man to judge. Hence it is easier to rest in a sceptical attitude and accept the age-old wisdom of the Church on these matters than to try to understand and judge for oneself.

This sceptical attitude, rather than sceptical argument, grew out of an abhorrence of what Kierkegaard called "the comedy of the higher lunacy." It was not based, as it was for Montaigne, on evidence that human reason could not achieve certainty in any area whatsoever. Instead Erasmus seems to have been shocked at the apparent futility of the intellectuals in their quest for certainty. All the machinery of these scholastic minds had missed the essential point, the simple Christian attitude. The Christian Fool was far better off than the lofty theologians of Paris who were ensnared in a labyrinth of their own making. And so, if one remained a Christian Fool, one would live a true Christian life and could avoid the entire world of theology by accepting, without trying to comprehend, the religious views promulgated by the Church.

This attempt, early in the Reformation, at sceptical "justification" of the Catholic rule of faith brought forth a furious answer from Luther, the *De Servo Arbitrio* of 1525. Erasmus' book, Luther declared, was shameful and shocking, the more so since it was written so well and with so much eloquence. "It is as if one carried sweepings or droppings in a gold or silver vase."<sup>15</sup> The central error of the book, according to Luther, was that Erasmus did not realize that a Christian cannot be a sceptic. "A Christian ought . . . to be certain of what he affirms, or else he is not a Christian."<sup>16</sup> Christianity involves the affirmation of certain truths because one's conscience is completely convinced of their veracity. The content of religious knowledge, according to Luther, is far too important to be taken on trust.

One must be absolutely certain of its truth.<sup>17</sup> Hence Christianity is the complete denial of scepticism. “Anathema to the Christian who will not be certain of what he is supposed to believe, and who does not comprehend it. How can he believe that which he doubts?”<sup>18</sup> To find the truths, one only has to consult Scripture. Of course there are parts that are hard to understand, and there are things about God that we do not, and perhaps shall not, know. But this does not mean that we cannot find the truth in Scripture. The central religious truth can be found in clear and evident terms, and these clarify the more obscure ones. However, if many things remain obscure to some people, it is the fault not of Scripture but of the blindness of those who have no desire to know the revealed truths. The sun is not obscure just because I can close my eyes and refuse to see it. The doctrines over which Luther and the Church are in conflict are clear if one is willing to look and accept what one sees. And unless one does this, one is actually giving up the Christian Revelation.<sup>19</sup>

Luther was positive that there was a body of religious truths to be known, that these truths were of crucial importance to men, and that Luther’s rule of faith—what conscience was compelled to believe from the reading of Scripture—would show us these truths. To rely on Erasmus’ sceptical course was to risk too much; the possibility of error was too great. Only in the certain knowledge of God’s command would we be safe. And so Luther told Erasmus that his sceptical approach actually implied no belief in God at all but was rather a way of mocking God.<sup>20</sup> Erasmus could, if he wished, hold on to his scepticism until Christ called him. But, Luther warned, “The Holy Ghost is not a Sceptic,” and he has inscribed in our hearts not uncertain opinions but, rather, affirmations of the strongest sort.<sup>21</sup>

This exchange between Erasmus and Luther indicates some of the basic structure of the criterion problem. Erasmus was willing to admit that he could not tell with certainty what was true, but he was, *per non sequitur*, willing to accept the decisions of the Church. This does not show that the Church had the rule of faith; rather it indicates Erasmus’ cautious attitude. Since he was unable to distinguish truth from falsehood with certitude, he wanted to let the institution that had been making this distinction for centuries take the responsibility. Luther, on the other hand, insisted on certainty. Too much was at stake to settle for less. And no human could give another person adequate assurances. Only one’s own inner conviction could justify acceptance of any religious views. To be sure, an opponent might ask why that which our consciences are compelled to believe from reading Scripture is true. Suppose we find ourselves compelled to believe conflicting things: which is true? Luther just insisted that the truth is forced upon us and that true religious knowledge does not contain any contradictions.

The rule of faith of the Reformers thus appears to have been subjective certainty, the compulsions of one’s conscience. But this type of subjectivism is open to many objections. The world is full of people convinced of the oddest views. The Reformation world was plentifully supplied with theologians of conflicting views, each underwritten by the conscience of the man who asserted it. To its opponents, the new criterion of religious knowledge seemed to be but a half-step

from pure scepticism, from making any and all religious views just the opinions of the believers, with no objective certainty whatever. In spite of Luther's bombastic denunciations of Erasmus' scepticism, it became a stock claim of the Counter-Reformers to assert that the Reformers were just sceptics in disguise.

In order to clarify and buttress the Reformers' theory of religious knowledge, the next great leader of the revolt against Church authority, Jean Calvin, attempted in his *Institutes* and in the battle against the anti-Trinitarian heretic Miguel Servetus to work out the theory of the new rule of faith in greater detail. Early in the *Institutes*, Calvin argued that the Church cannot be the rule of Scripture, since the authority of the Church rests on some verses in the Bible. Therefore, Scripture is the basic source of religious truth.<sup>22</sup>

But by what standards do we recognize the faith, and how do we determine with certitude what Scripture says? The first step is to realize that the Bible is the Word of God. By what criteria can we tell this? If we tried to prove this by reason, Calvin admitted, we could only develop question-begging or rhetorical arguments.<sup>23</sup> What is required is evidence that is so complete and persuasive that we cannot raise any further doubts or questions. The evidence, to exclude any possibility of doubt or question, would have to be self-validating. Such evidence is given us by illumination through the Holy Spirit. We have an inner persuasion, given to us by God, so compelling that it becomes the complete guarantee of our religious knowledge. This inner persuasion not only assures us that Scripture is the Word of God but compels us upon reading Scripture attentively to grasp the meaning of it and believe it. There is, thus, a double illumination for the elect, providing first the rule of faith, Scripture, and second the rule of Scripture, namely the means for discerning and believing its message. This double illumination of the rule of faith and its application gives us complete assurance. "Such, then, is a conviction that requires no reasons; such a knowledge with which the best reason agrees—in which the mind truly reposes more securely and constantly than in any reasons; such, finally, a feeling that can be born only of heavenly revelation. I speak of nothing other than what each believer experiences within himself—though my words fall far beneath a just explanation of the matter."<sup>24</sup>

Religious truth can only be recognized by those whom God chooses. The criterion of whether one has been chosen is inner persuasion, which enables one to examine Scripture and recognize the truths therein. Without divine illumination one could not even tell with certainty which book is Scripture, or what it means. One can, however, by the grace of God, accept the rule of faith laid down in the *Confession of Faith of the Protestant Churches of France* of 1559, "We know these books to be canonical, and the most certain rule of our faith, not so much by the common agreement and consent of the Church as by the testimonial and interior persuasion of the Holy Spirit that makes us discern them."<sup>25</sup> For the elect, Scripture is the rule of faith, and, as was also claimed, Scripture is the rule of Scripture.

The fundamental evidence for the original Calvinists of the truth of their views was inner persuasion. But how can one tell that this inner persuasion is authentic and not just a subjective certainty that might easily be illusory? The im-

portance of being right is so great that—as Theodore Beza, Calvin’s aide-de-camp, insisted—we need a sure and infallible sign. This sign is “ful perswasion, [which] doth separate the chosen children of God from the castaways, and is the proper riches of the Saintes.”<sup>26</sup> But the consequence is a circle: the criterion of religious knowledge is inner persuasion, the guarantee of the authenticity of inner persuasion is that it is caused by God, and this we are assured of by our inner persuasion.

The curious difficulty of guaranteeing one’s religious knowledge came out sharply in the controversy over Servetus. Here was a man apparently convinced by inner persuasion that there was no scriptural basis for the doctrine of the Trinity and convinced that the doctrine of the Trinity was false. But Calvin and his followers were so sure of the truth of their *own* religious views that they condemned Servetus to death as a heretic. The sole defender of Servetus among the Reformers, the scholar Sebastian Castellio of Basel, saw that the way to argue against the condemnation was to attack the Calvinists’ claims to certainty. In his *De Haereticis*,<sup>27</sup> written shortly after the burning of Servetus, Castellio tried to destroy the grounds for Calvin’s complete assurance of the truth of his religious beliefs, without at the same time destroying the possibility of religious knowledge.

Castellio’s method was to point out that in religion there are a great many things that are too obscure, too many passages in Scripture too opaque for anyone to be absolutely certain of the truth. These unclear matters had been the source of controversy for ages, and obviously no view was sufficiently manifest so that everyone would accept it. (Otherwise why should the controversy continue, “for who is so demented that he would die for the denial of the obvious?”)<sup>28</sup> On the basis of the continual disagreements and the obscurity of Scripture, Castellio indicated that no one was really so sure of the truth in religious affairs that he was justified in killing another as a heretic.

This mild, sceptical attitude and defense of divergent views elicited a nasty and spirited response. Theodore Beza saw immediately what was at issue and attacked Castellio as a reviver of the New Academy (the Platonic academy two generations after Plato, starting mid-fourth century B.C.E.) and the scepticism of Carneades, trying to substitute probabilities in religious affairs for the certainties required by a true Christian.<sup>29</sup> Beza insisted that the existence of controversies proves only that some people are wrong. True Christians are persuaded by the Revelation, by God’s Word, which is clear to those who know it. The introduction of the *akatelepsis* of the Academic sceptics is entirely contrary to Christian belief. There are truths set up by God and revealed to us, and anyone who does not know, recognize, and accept them is lost.<sup>30</sup>

Castellio wrote, but did not publish, a reply, in which he tried in a general way to show how little we can know, and the “reasonable” way for judging this knowledge, and then applied his modest standards to the controversies of his time. The *De arte dubitandi*<sup>31</sup> is in many ways a remarkable book, far in advance of its time in proposing a liberal, scientific, and cautious approach to intellectual problems, in contrast to the total dogmatism of the Calvinist opponents.<sup>32</sup>

Castellio's theory is hardly as sceptical as Erasmus' and certainly does not attain the level of complete doubt of Montaigne's. The aim of *De arte dubitandi* is to indicate what one should believe, since one of man's basic problems in this age of controversy is that he believes some things that are dubious and doubts some things that are not. To begin with, there are many matters that are not really doubtful, matters that any reasonable person will accept. These, for Castellio, include the existence of God, God's goodness, and the authenticity of Scripture. He offers as evidence the argument from design and the plausibility of the Scriptural picture of the world.<sup>33</sup>

Then, on the other hand, there is a time for believing and a time for doubting. The time for doubting, in religious matters, comes when there are things that are obscure and uncertain, and these are the matters that are disputed. "For it is clear that people do not dispute about things that are certain and proved, unless they are mad."<sup>34</sup> But we cannot resolve doubtful matters just by examining Scripture, as the Calvinists suggest, since there are disputes about how to interpret the Bible, and Scripture is obscure on many points. On a great many questions, two contradictory views are equally probable, as far as we can make out from biblical texts.<sup>35</sup>

In order to evaluate a matter in dispute, it is necessary to search for a principle by which the truth will be so manifest, so well recognized by all, that no force in the universe, that no probability, can ever make the alternative possible.<sup>36</sup> This principle, Castellio claimed, is the human capacity of sense and intelligence, the instrument of judgment on which we must rely. Here he presented a fundamental rational faith that we have the natural powers to evaluate questions. Even Jesus Christ, Castellio pointed out, resolved questions by using his senses and his reason.<sup>37</sup> In reply to the antirationalists, Castellio offered an answer much like one of the arguments of Sextus Empiricus:

I come now to those authors [presumably Calvinists] who wish us to believe with our eyes closed, certain things in contradiction to the senses, and I will ask them, first of all, if they came to these views with their eyes closed, that is to say, without judgment, intelligence or reason, or, if rather, they had the aid of judgment. If they speak without judgment, we will repudiate what they say. If, on the contrary, they base their views on judgment and reason, they are inconsistent when they persuade us by their judgment to renounce ours.<sup>38</sup>

Castellio's faith in our rational ability to decide questions was coupled with a scepticism about our employment of this ability in practice. Two sorts of difficulties exist (which, if taken too seriously, would undermine Castellio's criterion completely): one, that our faculties might not be capable of functioning properly, because of illness or our voluntary misuse of them; the other, that external conditions may prevent our solving a problem. A man's vision may be poor, or he may refuse to look; or his location or interfering objects may block his vision. Faced with these possibilities, Castellio admitted that we cannot do anything about the natural conditions that may interfere with judgment. If one has poor vision, that is

too bad. External conditions cannot be altered. In light of these practical considerations, we can only apply our instruments of judgment, our senses and reason, in a conditional manner, being “reasonable” in our evaluations on the basis of common sense and past experience and eliminating as far as possible the controllable conditions, like malice and hate, that interfere with our judgment.<sup>39</sup>

Castellio’s partial scepticism represents another facet of the problem of knowledge raised by the Reformation. If it is necessary to discover a “rule of faith,” a criterion for distinguishing true faith from false faith, how is this to be accomplished? Both Erasmus and Castellio stressed the difficulty involved, especially in uncovering the message of Scripture. But Castellio, rather than employing the sceptical problems about religious knowledge as an excuse or justification for accepting “the way of authority” of the Church, offered those admittedly less-than-perfect criteria, the human capacities of sense and reason. Since the very limitations of their proper operations would prevent the attainment of any completely assured religious knowledge, the quest for certainty would have to be given up, in exchange for a quest for reasonableness. (Thus it is understandable that Castellio influenced chiefly the most liberal forms of Protestantism.)<sup>40</sup> The manuscript of his unpublished *De arte dubitante* was known at the beginning of the seventeenth century to Hugo Grotius, who, as I shall show, developed a similar limited sceptical view and moderate approach to solving intellectual problems. Grotius’ views greatly influenced the theories of religious knowledge of moderate Protestants in England, who developed a justification of religious and scientific views appealing to probabilities and reasonable doubts.

In the struggles between the old established order of the Catholic Church and the new order of the Reformers, the Reformers had to insist on the complete certainty of their cause. In order to accomplish their ecclesiastical revolution, they had to insist that they, and they alone, had the only assured means of discovering religious knowledge. The break with authority was not in favor of a tolerant individualism in religion, such as Castellio’s views would have led to, but in favor of a complete dogmatism in religious knowledge. In order to buttress their case, the Reformers sought to show that the Church of Rome had no guarantee of its professed religious truths, that the criterion of traditional authority carried with it no assurance of the absolute certitude of the Church’s position, unless the Church could somehow prove that traditional authority was the true criterion. But how could this be done? The attempt to justify a criterion requires other criteria, which in turn have to be justified. How could one establish the infallibility of the Church in religious matters? Would the evidence be infallible? This type of attack finally led Protestant leaders to write tracts on the Pyrrhonism of the Church of Rome, in which they tried to show that, using the very principles of religious knowledge offered by the Church, one could never be sure (1) that the Church of Rome was the true Church, and (2) what was true in religion.<sup>41</sup> (Perhaps the apex of this type of reasoning was the argument that according to the Church position the pope and no one else is infallible. But who can tell who is the pope? The member of the Church has only his fallible lights to judge by. So only

the pope can be sure who is the pope; the rest of the members have no way of being sure and hence no way of finding any religious truths.)<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, the Catholic side could and did attack the Reformers by showing the unjustifiability of their criterion and the way the claims of certainty of the Reformers would lead to a complete subjectivism and scepticism about religious truths. The sort of evidence presented by Erasmus and Castellio became their opening wedge: The Reformers claim the truth is to be found in Scripture, just by examining it without prejudice. But the meaning of Scripture is unclear, as shown not only by the controversies regarding it between Catholic and Protestant readers but also by the controversies within the Protestant camp. Therefore, a judge is needed to set the standards for proper interpreting. The Reformers say that conscience, inner light, or some such is the judge of Scripture. But different people have different inner lights. How do we tell whose is right? The Calvinists insist that that inner light is correct that is given or guided by the Holy Spirit. But whose is this? How does one tell “infatuation” from genuine illumination? Here the only criteria offered by Reformers appear to be no other than just their private opinions—Calvin thinks Calvin is illumined. The personal, unconfirmed, and unconfirmable opinions of various Reformers hardly seem a basis for certainty in religious matters. (The *reductio ad absurdum* of the Reformers’ position in the early seventeenth century says that Calvinism is nothing but Pyrrhonism in religion.)

With each side trying to sap the foundations of the other, and each trying to show that the other was faced with an insoluble form of the classical sceptical problem of the criterion, each side also made claims of absolute certainty for its own views. The Catholics found the guarantee in tradition, the Protestants in the illumination that revealed the Word of God in Scripture. The tolerant semiscepticism of Castellio was an unacceptable solution in this quest for certainty. (An exception should be noted: the moderate English theologian William Chillingworth first left Protestantism for Catholicism because he found no sufficient criterion of religious knowledge in the Reform point of view, and then he left Catholicism for the same reason. He ended with a less-than-certain Protestantism, buttressed only by his favorite reading of Sextus Empiricus.)<sup>43</sup>

The intellectual core of this battle of the Reformation lay in the search for justification of infallible truth in religion by some sort of self-validating or self-evident criterion. Each side was able to show that the other had no “rule of faith” that could guarantee its religious principles with absolute certainty. Throughout the seventeenth century, as the military struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism became weaker, the intellectual one became sharper, indicating in clear relief the nature of the epistemological problem involved. Nicole and Pellisson showed over and over again that the way of examination of the Protestants was the “high road to Pyrrhonism.” One would never be able to tell with absolute certainty what book was Scripture, how to interpret it, or what to do about it unless one were willing to substitute a doctrine of personal infallibility for the acceptance of Church infallibility. And this, in turn, would raise a host of nasty sceptical problems.<sup>44</sup>

On the Protestant side, dialecticians like La Placette and Boullier were able to show that the Catholic view “introduces an universal Scepticism into the whole System of Christian Religion.”<sup>45</sup> Before adopting the “way of authority,” one would have to discover whether the tradition of the Church is the right one. To discover this, an authority or judge is needed. The Church cannot be the authority of its own infallibility, since the question at issue is whether the Church is the true authority on religious matters. Any evidence offered for the special status of the Church requires a rule or criterion for telling if this evidence is true. And so, the way of authority also, it is argued, leads straightaway to a most dangerous Pyrrhonism, since, by this criterion, one cannot be really sure what the true faith is.<sup>46</sup>

The Reformers’ challenge of the accepted criteria of religious knowledge raised a most fundamental question: How does one justify the basis of one’s knowledge? This problem was to unleash a sceptical crisis not only in theology but also, shortly thereafter, in the sciences and in all other areas of human knowledge. Luther had indeed opened a Pandora’s box at Leipzig in 1519, and it was to take all the fortitude of the wisest men of the next two centuries to find a way to close it (or at least to keep from noticing that it could never again be closed). The quest for certainty was to dominate theology and philosophy for the next two centuries, and because of the terrible choice—certainty or total Pyrrhonism—various grandiose schemes of thought were to be constructed to overcome the sceptical crisis. The gradual failure of these monumental efforts was to see the quest for certainty lead to two other searches, the quest for faith—pure fideism—and the quest for reasonableness—or a “mitigated scepticism.”

Several of the moderates, worn out perhaps by the intellectual struggles of early modern thought, could see the difficulty and suggest a new way out. Joseph Glanvill in 1665 announced that “*while men fondly doat on their private apprehensions, and every conceited Opinionist sets up an infallible Chair in his own brain, nothing can be expected but eternal tumult and disorder*”;<sup>47</sup> he recommended his constructive scepticism as the solution. Martin Clifford in 1675 pointed out that “all the miseries which have followed the variety of opinions since the Reformation have proceeded entirely from these two mistakes, the tying Infallibility to whatsoever we think Truth, and damnation to whatsoever we think error,” and offered a solution somewhat like Glanvill’s.<sup>48</sup>

The crux of the problem was summed up in the debate between the Catholic Père Hubert Hayer and the Protestant pastor David Boullier, in the latter’s *Le Pyrrhonisme de l’Eglise Romaine*. Hayer showed that Protestantism leads to complete uncertainty in religious belief, hence to total Pyrrhonism. Boullier showed that the Catholic demand for infallible knowledge leads to discovering that there is no such knowledge, hence to complete doubt and Pyrrhonism. The solution, Boullier insisted, lay in being reasonable in both science and religion and replacing the quest for absolute, infallible certainty with an acceptance, in a somewhat tentative fashion, of personal certitude as the criterion of truth, a standard that, while it may be less than what is desired, at least allows for some limited way of resolving questions.<sup>49</sup>

The problem of the criterion of knowledge, made paramount by the Reformation, was resolved in two different ways in the sixteenth century: on the one hand, Erasmus' sceptical suspense of judgment with the appeal to faith without rational grounds; on the other, the "reasonable" solution of Castellio, offered after admitting that men could not attain complete certainty. This intellectual history proposes to trace the development of these two solutions to the sceptical crisis that had been touched off by the Reformation. Since the peculiar character of this development is, in large measure, due to the historical accident that the writings and theories of the Greek sceptics were revived at the same time the sceptical crisis arose, it is important to survey the knowledge of and interest in Pyrrhonian and Academic scepticism in the sixteenth century and to make clear the way in which, with the rediscoveries of the ancient arguments of the sceptics, the crisis was extended from theology to philosophy.

## The Revival of Greek Scepticism in the Sixteenth Century

Information about ancient scepticism became available to Renaissance thinkers principally through three sources: the writings of Sextus Empiricus, the sceptical works of Cicero, and the account of the ancient sceptical movements in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. To fully appreciate the impact of scepticism on Renaissance thought, one would need studies of when these sources became available, where, to whom, and what reactions they produced. Charles B. Schmitt has done this with Cicero's *Academica*, giving a thorough picture of its impact from the late Middle Ages to the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Schmitt has found that the Latin term "scepticus," which gave birth to the French "sceptique" and the English "sceptic," appears first in the Latin translation of Diogenes of 1430 and in two unidentifiable Latin translations of Sextus from a century earlier.<sup>2</sup>

It would take painstaking work like Schmitt's and Luciano Floridi's to complete the picture of who read Sextus, Diogenes, and sceptical antirational Muslim and Jewish authors like Al-Ghazzali and Judah Halevi. Some of Schmitt's results, which came out after the earlier editions of this work, will here be incorporated into my sketch of the main ways of scepticism, especially how its form of Pyrrhonism struck Europe and became central in the intellectual battles

of the late sixteenth century. Shortly before his untimely demise, Schmitt published a masterful study, “The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times,” in which he traced the impact of Sextus on Renaissance authors using newly found information as well as what he and others had previously discovered.<sup>3</sup> I will begin with the effect of the writings of Sextus Empiricus on Renaissance thought.

Sextus Empiricus is usually portrayed as an obscure and unoriginal Hellenistic writer whose life and career are practically unknown. A recent study by Richard Bett suggests that Sextus was a somewhat original thinker. But, as the only Greek Pyrrhonian sceptic whose works survived, he came to have a dramatic role in the formation of modern thought. The historical accident of the rediscovery of his works at precisely the moment when the sceptical problem of the criterion had been raised gave the ideas of Sextus a sudden and greater prominence than they had ever had before or were ever to have again. Thus Sextus, a recently discovered oddity, metamorphosed into “le divin Sexte,” who, by the end of the seventeenth century, was regarded as the father of modern philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the effect of his thoughts upon the problem of the criterion stimulated a quest for certainty that gave rise to the new rationalism of René Descartes and the “constructive scepticism” of Pierre Gassendi and Marin Mersenne.

In the previous edition of this book I said that the writings of Sextus Empiricus were almost completely unknown in the Middle Ages and that only a few actual readers of his works are known prior to the first publication in 1562. This assessment has to be modified on the basis of the researches of Luciano Floridi published in 2002. He has shown that there was some limited knowledge of both Sextus and of ancient scepticism among encyclopedic writers in late antiquity and the Middle Ages; that there was active interest in defending against Pyrrhonism among Byzantine writers from the ninth century onward; and that there were more manuscripts than previously known. The earliest extant manuscripts are three Latin translations of the *Hypotyposes* located in Venice, Paris, and Madrid. Floridi has analyzed them and shown that they are basically the same translation and that they were done in the 1340s by Niccoló da Reggio (fl. 1308–45). Then there is a late Latin translation of parts of *Adversus Mathematicos*, probably by Johannes Laurentius. A different Latin translation about 1549 of the *Hypotyposes* by the great Spanish humanist, Juan Páez de Castro, is in private hands in New York. In addition, there were around seventy to seventy-five Greek manuscripts known or recorded from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of portions of Sextus. The first printed edition was by Henri Estienne (Stephanus) in 1562 of Sextus’ *Hypotyposes*.<sup>5</sup> A second printed Latin edition of the *Hypotyposes* plus *Adversus Mathematicos* appeared in 1569. The text of the *Hypotyposes* is that of Estienne, the translation of *Adversus Mathematicos* was done by a French Counter-Reformer and theologian, Gentian Hervet, from a manuscript that belonged at the time to the Cardinal of Lorraine.<sup>6</sup> The Greek text was not published until 1621 by the Chouet brothers.<sup>7</sup> In addition, portions of Sextus’ *Hypotyposes* appeared in

English around 1590 or 1591 in what is now called Raleigh's *Sceptick*, and a complete English translation appeared in Thomas Stanley's *History of Philosophy* of 1655–61. These two independent translations are the first appearances of Sextus' texts in a modern language. There has been a fair amount of scholarly discussion about whether a real translation was published in 1591 or 1592 as indicated in a reference by Thomas Nashe. The recent research by William Hamlin strongly suggests that no publication appeared but rather that a manuscript copy of portions of Sextus began to circulate. For reasons not yet known they became entitled *The Sceptick* by Sir Walter Raleigh, which was published in the 1651 edition of Raleigh's literary *Remains*.<sup>8</sup> No other editions occurred in the seventeenth century, although Samuel Sorbière began a French translation around 1630.<sup>9</sup> There is also another unfinished French translation in the UCLA library, which was studied by Charles Schmitt.<sup>10</sup> In 1718, an extremely careful edition based on the study of some of the manuscripts was prepared by J. A. Fabricius, giving the original text and revisions of the Latin translations.<sup>11</sup> In 1725, a mathematician named Claude Huart wrote the first complete French translation of the *Hypotyposes*, which was reprinted in 1735.<sup>12</sup> The first German translation is a partial translation of *Hypotyposes* by Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, completed in 1791 and published in 1792.<sup>13</sup>

The first known reference, so far, of anyone reading Sextus Empiricus in Europe in the fifteenth century is in a letter, discovered by Schmitt, from the humanist Francesco Filelfo to his friend Giovanni Aurispa in 1441.<sup>14</sup> Floridi suggests that the transmission from Greece to Italy of Sextus' writings might have begun with Plethon, but a recent study by Gian Mario Cao shows that it probably started with the Greek manuscripts owned by Cardinal Bessarion and Filelfo. Filelfo made use of materials in Sextus in his writings against his exile from Florence by Cosimo di Medici. He gave examples from Sextus' *Adversus Ethicos* to counter the judgments made against him by the ruler of Florence. He used the very striking examples advanced by Sextus about cannibalism and incest to show that nothing can be judged as really good or bad. He did not cite Sextus but made use of the text from *Adversus Ethicos*.<sup>15</sup> There is some question still being explored about whether Filelfo learned of Sextus and obtained a Greek manuscript in Greece, or from someone who brought it to Italy in the 1440s.

Discussions about scepticism, about Sextus, and the use of materials in Sextus appear in humanistic writings over the next century. Manuscripts were obtained by Lorenzo di Medici and others building collections of Greek texts. The great humanist Angelo Poliziano (1454–94) gave a summary of ancient philosophy based on materials in Sextus Empiricus.<sup>16</sup> Other humanists found Sextus a mine of information for understanding ancient thought. No significant use of Pyrrhonian ideas prior to the printing of Sextus' *Hypotyposes* has turned up, except for that of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, the nephew of the great Renaissance humanist and a close intimate and supporter of Girolamo Savonarola, the prophet of Florence. His writings may seem isolated from the main development of modern scepticism that began with the publication of the Latin transla-