RENAISSANCE SCEPTICISMS

Edited by
GIANNI PAGANINI AND JOSÉ R. MAIA NETO
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Renaissance Scepticisms

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

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Et perinde ac gigantes, montibus montes accumulantes, bellum contra deos gerere videntur, dum aliquot instructi syllogismis, homines rixosi ac meretriculis loquatores, [Sceptici] incunctanter audient quavis de re cum quovis linguam conferre; litigiosis enim quibusdam altercationum captiunculis ac sophismatum iaculis armati, omnium disciplinarum etiam sacrarum Literarum fores se posse diffingere et penetrare arbitrantur.

H. C. Agrippa, Oratio held at Pavia in 1515

Nam nulla secta eruditior, inter omnes aliorum philosophorum sectas diligentissime versata, et omnium experientissima; neque iracundiae aut superbiae causa, quando habiti sunt inter alias philosophorum gentium sectas, et humani, et mites.

Gianfrancesco Pico, Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium III, i

There can be no doubt that the recent historiography of Renaissance and early modern scepticism had, as its founding fathers, Richard H. Popkin and Charles B. Schmitt. It may be said that, thanks to their writings, we contemporary scholars have regained knowledge of the importance of scepticism in the formation of European thought. For the first great philosophical historians at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this awareness was already an acquired heritage, but it had been nearly lost after the Enlightenment, and even more particularly in the nineteenth century. To find treatises that are comparable in importance and intensity, despite the different standards applied, we must go back as far to some articles in Bayle’s Dictionnaire, after that to Brucker’s monumental Historia critica and Reimman’s Historia universalis atheismi, and, at the end of the eighteenth century, to Stäudlin’s Geschichte und Geist des Skepticismus. As well as producing an admirable monograph on ancient Pyrrhonian scepticism, which he clearly distinguished from that of the Academics, Brucker included in his Historia a section on the “modern sceptics” which, alongside Huet, Bayle, Gassendi and Glanvill, also dealt with Montaigne, Sanchez, Charron, Hirnhaym and La Mothe Le Vayer. Reimman investigated the doubtful view that writers of the Italian and French Renaissance – from Boccaccio to Postel, from Machiavelli
to B. des Périers, and even Campanella – were sceptics and irreligious. After the eighteenth century and during the nineteenth, thinkers were not unaware of scepticism’s importance for philosophy as the treatment of doubt in Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* or Kierkegaard’s *Johannes Climacus* clearly show. It was only in the limited sphere of the historiography of philosophy that scepticism seems to have lost the appeal and the central place it had retained during the previous three centuries. This fact alone clearly illustrates the situation in which, starting from the 1960s, Popkin and Schmitt found themselves working. They had, indeed, to recreate the object of their studies *ex novo*, following the canons of recent historical research, rounding out and giving visibility to a movement that, throughout the development of historiography, had been relegated to a shadowy and marginal place compared to the great figures of the “dogmatists,” on which early modern philosophy had concentrated.

In the works of Popkin, as is well known, a central role is played by the rediscovery of the Pyrrhonian branch of scepticism, as the writings of Sextus Empiricus began to be read and then published. Through the great figures of Gianfrancesco Pico, Montaigne and Charron, Popkin reconstructed a general prehistory of modern thought. Because one of the basic Pyrrhonian arguments is to challenge the existence of any criterion of truth, Pyrrhonian scepticism becomes crucial also in the religious controversies about the rule of faith, making Pyrrhonism – rather than Academic and Ciceronian scepticism – the driving force in early modern philosophy. Popkin saw Academic scepticism as a kind of negative dogmatism, deprived of the conceptual tools available in ancient Pyrrhonism such as the tropes, the discussion about the criterion of truth, and


the notion of phenomenon; therefore Academic trend seemed to him less consistent with the sceptical goal of epoché.

Summarizing his view of modern scepticism in a three-fold scheme, Popkin wrote: “What I believe was crucial ... was, first, the form of the sceptical problem of the criterion of religious knowledge that arose in the early conflicts between Reformers and the Counter-Reformers; second, the availability of the texts of Sextus through their being printed in Latin in 1562 and 1569; and third, the forceful presentation of scepticism by Montaigne in his Apologie de Raimond Sebond.”3 In the second (1979), and much more in the third and last edition (2003), this historical framework was enriched with new aspects and details, doubling the length of the book. However, the essential elements of his evaluation of the first Renaissance and post-Renaissance phase of scepticism remained unchanged. By incorporating the results of later research (in particular by Schmitt, but also by Garin, Cavini, Cao and Floridi), Popkin was able to backdate the entrance of Sextus into modern culture to before the time of Savonarola,4 while still keeping at the centre of his History the moment of the publication of Sextus by Hervet and Estienne, which roughly coincided with the religious crisis of the Reformation and the personal re-elaboration of the ancient Pyrrhonism available in Sextus by Montaigne.

Indeed, Popkin saw Savonarola’s position as limited (“Savonarola and his followers did not challenge the Church’s criterion of religious knowledge”),5 while he considered the impact of the work of Gianfrancesco Pico to be marginal, despite Schmitt’s objections in this regard. Lastly, he reserved a relatively unimportant role for the Academic trend of scepticism. Nor did the other two principal figures of Renaissance scepticism (alongside Montaigne) fare any better in Popkin’s reconstruction: with regard to Agrippa of Nettesheim, his History stresses the “fundamentalist anti-intellectualism,” playing down De incertitudine which, according to him, does not contain “a serious epistemological analysis.”6 And although he held Sanchez to be “more interesting than any other sceptics of the sixteenth century, except Montaigne,” he stressed his “totally negative conclusion,” which is not, unlike Pyrrhonian scepticism, “the suspense of judgement as to whether anything can be known, but rather the more full-fledged negative dogmatism of the Academics.”7

6 Ibid., p. 29.
Charles B. Schmitt introduced two innovations compared to Popkin: on one hand, with his study on Gianfrancesco Pico he effectively placed the watershed of Renaissance scepticism before and not after the intellectual crisis represented by the Reformation; then, with an investigation into the fortunes of the “sceptical” Cicero, he rescued the Academic current compared to the Pyrrhonian trend emphasized by Popkin, even if he agreed with him that after the diffusion of Sextus the influence of Academic scepticism decreased drastically, and this for the same reason held by Popkin, namely, that Sextus’ *Outlines* and *Adversus Mathematicos* are much more philosophically interesting than Cicero’s *Academica*. Anyway, Schmitt shared Popkin’s conviction that a decisive factor for “the re-emergence of a sceptical tendency in the Renaissance period is primarily due to the recovery of the ancient sources.” As a result, he too developed a historiography that successfully blended philosophy with philology and the history of the classical tradition.

Schmitt’s and Popkin’s studies were a huge step forward compared to the previous phase of the scholarship on Renaissance scepticism, which was characterized by the much less convincing works of Owen and Busson, or others whose subject matter was more limited, such as those by Strowski and Villey. Some ideas that had held sway in the body of previous historical writings emerged bitten from the new research, such as the conviction that the outcome of all scepticism was irreligion, or the idea that scepticism emerged from the final crisis of Italian Aristotelianism, or again that the new Pyrrhonism was closer to the themes of the Reformation. In particular it was Busson’s work that was demolished, though this was partly due to the attack by Lucien Febvre a bit earlier than Popkin’s. With regard to the previous phase of scholarship, Popkin’s work produced a sort of reversal of the sides: actually, this reversal was so radical that there was a risk of...
falling into the opposite extremity, no less one-sided than the previous scholarship. Thus the over-simple equivalence between scepticism and irreligion proposed by Busson was replaced in Popkin by an equivalence, equally excessive and generalized, of scepticism with fideism. Only later did numerous significant exceptions come to light, true counter-examples sufficiently relevant to limit and cast doubt on what had become an excessive use of the category of fideistic scepticism.14

It appeared, however, that the alliance between the two lines of research (Popkin’s Pyrrhonian line and Schmitt’s Academic line) could finally give rise to a “complete” historiography on early modern scepticism and, in particular, on that of the Renaissance. Unfortunately, up to now this hope has not come true, and the results concerning Renaissance scepticism have been particularly disappointing. Even if specific pieces of research (on the sources or on individual authors, such as Pico, Agrippa, Erasmus, Montaigne, Sanchez and so forth) have given and are still producing significant results, an overall synthesis comprising the entire Renaissance period has not been achieved yet. Strange as it might appear, no work yet exists that deals with the history of scepticism during the Renaissance as a whole, and this volume (with all the advantages and disadvantages inherent in collective works) is a first coordinated attempt to trace a history of sceptical currents, themes and discussions during the period from the fifteenth century to the death of T. Campanella.


The first chapters of Popkin’s *History of Scepticism* and the two books by Schmitt still stand as the main reference works for today’s research. It is also true that Renaissance scepticism has been much less studied than early modern scepticism: this can be clearly seen in the numerous collective volumes published in rapid succession over the last thirty years on the history of this philosophical movement, under the editorship of Popkin and/or others. Only a few of these have contained significant parts dedicated to the Renaissance, and even where they have done, it has been presented rather as the premise for more significant developments than as a topic worth studying in itself.\(^{15}\)

The need to provide scholars with a rational map of Renaissance Scepticism emerged when we proposed a panel on this specific theme on the occasion of the annual meeting of the Renaissance Society of America (New York, 1–3rd April 2004): it is emblematic that, at that year’s meeting, only one panel among almost 400 announced for the meeting was dedicated to this topic. On that occasion, in a first version, papers were presented by Emmanuel Naya (on Renaissance Pyrrhonism), Gianmario Cao (on Gianfrancesco Pico), José R. Maia Neto (on Charron), and Gianni Paganini (on T. Campanella). Subsequently, we called upon other scholars to collaborate with our project: our thanks go to all of them for the passion and care with which they have prepared their contributions.

It cannot be said that any predetermined idea of that complex historical subject that is Renaissance scepticism underlies our project, and even less did we want to sacrifice the complexity of movements, personalities, tendencies and interpretations to any sort of a priori unity of theme. We acknowledge unhesitatingly that we had always thought of “scepticisms” in the plural, and believed that the different contexts (philosophical, religious, cultural) in which these forms grew up must also be taken into account, just as we have decided that, given the transversal nature and provocative character of the sceptical challenge, the book should contain essays not only about authors proclaiming themselves to be Sceptics, but also on philosophers who, engaged in fighting scepticism, nevertheless took it into serious consideration. Dialectic philosophy par excellence, scepticism also contributed directly or indirectly to the formation of those philosophies that conceived themselves as going beyond doubt, and did so long before Descartes took the field in order to confute scepticism. Last of the great Renaissance authors, Campanella was certainly not inferior on this ground to the first of the great moderns.

Equally, we do not think that rigid barriers should exist between philosophical, scientific, religious and political discourse. On the contrary, we have willingly crossed these boundaries whenever our research into a subject or an author has so required. We do not pretend that this book is exhaustive. We are fully aware that other Renaissance figures who dealt in interesting and varied ways with sceptical issues remain outside our project. However, we are convinced that each of the essays gathered together here fills an important gap, and that they also throw new light on authors who, while already known, are focused here from different standpoints, which allow the correction of inexact or incomplete historiographical categories. Exemplary is the case of the essay on Campanella, possibly the author most neglected in historical research on scepticism, but who nevertheless wrote one of the fullest discussions and confutations of it. On each of these points the essays here collected provide new elements, original interpretations and further lines of research.

The first section of the book (“Before Reading Sextus”) has as subject matter the “prehistory” of Renaissance scepticism, since it focuses on the period prior to the editiones principes of Sextus. Nevertheless, as is shown in the article by Emmanuel Naya (“Renaissance Pyrrhonism: a relative phenomenon”) this first reception was important enough to condition subsequent interpretations. It was on the grounds of philology, even before religion, that the first battle of interpretation was fought. From this, the importance of Sextus as a source (in this preliminary phase) is downsized with regard to other classical and patristic testimonia, which already offer the humanists a “prism” of different interpretations. The subject of the article by Lorenzo Casini (“Self-knowledge, Scepticism and the Quest for a New Method: Juan Luis Vives on cognition and the impossibility of
perfect knowledge”) also lies before the re-reading of Sextus. By concentrating on Cicero and Augustine as sources for, respectively, sceptical and anti-sceptical arguments, Vives stressed the limits of self-knowledge, showing how difficult it is to perceive our mental operations in a self-reflexive manner.

The complex theme of the relations between scepticism, the sixteenth-century religious crisis and the Protestant Reformation is the subject of the second section (“Scepticism, Reformation and Counter-Reformation”). V. Perrone Compagni (“Tutius ignorare quam scire: Cornelius Agrippa and Scepticism”) interprets the violent demolition of knowledge in Agrippa of Nettesheim’s De vanitate as instrumental in a larger project for the reformation of culture, fostered by Platonism and prisca theologia. In this sense, Agrippa’s work should be classified neither in the category of “fideism” nor in that of epistemological investigation: rather it is a manifesto for Neoplatonic and Hermetic theology which adopts only a sceptical tactics. Through an examination of various figures, such as Erasmus, Beza and Castellio, I. Backus (“The Issue of Reformation Scepticism Revisited. What Sebastian Castellio Did or Did not Know”) returns to the vexata quaestio of the relationship between doubt and “fideism” to sustain that Renaissance Scepticism is not a religious issue before Montaigne. Erasmus was not a Sceptic, as Luther accused him of being, and Castellio abandoned the original fideism of De haereticis to espouse, in De arte dubitandi, an epistemology more aware of the role of the senses and the intellect. On the contrary, Pedro de Valencia’s Academica (J. C. Laursen: “Pedro de Valencia’s Academica and Scepticism in Late Renaissance Spain”) belongs to the context of Spanish Counter-Reformation. Laursen shows that Pedro de Valencia’s use of academic scepticism did not implicate a full allegiance to this trend, but rather involved a humanistic approach of the historical and theological type, sceptical only in the wider sense of critical exploration. Together, the three essays show that, in different ways, the tools of scepticism could be used with intentions that were not properly sceptical. Scepticism was at the service of positive goals: neo-Platonic philosophy (Agrippa), humanistic tolerance (Castellio), moderate politics (Pedro de Valencia).

The third section (“Four Renaissance Sceptics”) deals with some important thinkers who directly confronted sceptical themes, often in their pyrrhonian guise. In the first paper Gianfrancesco Pico’s scepticism is examined by G. Cao (“Inter alias philosophorum gentium sectas, et humani, et mites: Gianfrancesco Pico and the Sceptics”). Cao shows that Pico exhibited a certain independence with regard to his source (Sextus), not hesitating to criticize him in various points, but nevertheless praising his “mildness” and humanity compared to other dogmatic schools. The essay by A. Lupoli (“Humanus animus nusquam consistit: Doctor Sanchez’s diagnosis of the incurable human unrest and ignorance”) points out the therapeutic aspect of scepticism, making the diagnostics of that particular
disease which is the claim to possess “science.” Lupoli presents a portrait of Sanchez imbued with an existential unrest that runs throughout *Quod nihil scitur*. The essay by N. Panichi (“Montaigne and Plutarch. A Scepticism that Conquers the Mind”) links Montaigne to Plutarch’s neo-sceptical interpretation of Platonism. Montaigne places Socrates and Plutarch, whose attitude “is inquiry rather than instruction,” side by side. Overall what emerges is the image of an author who is more of a “new Plutarchian” than a “new Pyrrhonian.” The essay by J. R. Maia Neto (“Charron’s Academic Sceptical Wisdom”) casts light on Charron’s originality with regard to his Academic sources. Taking from Cicero the idea of *epoché* as a condition of “intellectual integrity,” the author of *Sagesse* stressed the fact that, by avoiding error and suspending judgement, man achieves his perfection and excellence because in this way human reason attains its full flowering. Furthermore, M. Neto underlines the decisive changes introduced by the *Sagesse* in the description of the Sceptic. Unlike the mobility and instability described by Montaigne, Charron intends to provide his sage with a solid moral and intellectual foundation.

The last section (“Three reactions to scepticism”) reveals how fertile was the contact with sceptical themes, including three authors who were anything but Sceptics. The case of Bruno (T. Dagron: “Giordano Bruno on Scepticism”) is emblematic. In his *Cabala* Bruno displays a precise knowledge of Sextus’s works, recently translated, and makes a distinction between “ephectics” (basically, phenomenists) and “Pyrrhonians.” The latter appear to him as having invented a sort of overturned dogmatism in which, according to Bruno, all the aporias of the Aristotelian concept of “power” as privation are exhibited. For Bruno, the Sceptics are right insofar as they denounce the circular character of the Aristotelian solution to the theory of knowledge, but go wrong when they conclude the “vanity” of all rational efforts. The illusion of scepticism would, for Bruno, be the same as Atteone’s one in *Eroici furori*, that is the mirage of knowing the infinite object as a naked truth to be possessed, but which, on the contrary, ends up by possessing the imprudent hunter. The case of Bacon (presented here by B. J. de Oliveira and J. R. Maia Neto: “The Sceptical Evaluation of *Technê* and Baconian Science”) is different because it is linked to the theme of the working and control of nature rather than to metaphysical speculation. Although Bacon is distant from Pyrrhonian themes, he knows and discusses Academic scepticism and shares with the Renaissance Sceptics some basic assumptions: the separation of rational inquiry from religious affairs; opposition to pseudo-science; reflection on the limits of knowledge (the question of “idols”); and an important constructive use of the “maker’s knowledge” argument, the restrictive sceptical argument that one can know only what one can make.

The case of Campanella is emblematic of the early modern reactions to scepticism. Campanella wrote the fullest discussion and confutation of sceptical
arguments at the time in Book I of *Metaphysica* (only published in 1638, but already completed in manuscript form as early as 1624). In this book he made constructive use of *dubitationes* before going on to overcome them, as was later attempted in a different way by Descartes in his *Discourse on the Method*. Nevertheless, Campanella has remained a borderline figure in the historiography of Renaissance and modern scepticism. The essay by G. Paganini ("T. Campanella: Reappraisal and Refutation of Scepticism") intends to fill this serious gap, reconstructing for the first time in an analytical manner the use that Campanella made of sceptical arguments, to reach in the end a theory of possible knowledge based on a theory of sense perception as *perceptio passionis* and, more generally, producing a metaphysical doctrine based on the theory of the primacy of being.

The date of publication of Campanella’s *Metaphysica* (1638) is too close to that of Descartes’ *Discours de la méthode* (1637) to resist the temptation of taking both as the watershed between two ages: on the one side, the age of Renaissance scepticism, which concluded with the massive anti-sceptical work of Campanella’s and, on the other side, the age when, thanks to Descartes’ more nimble work, the new history of early modern scepticism begins.

What are the chief novelties of this collection of studies with regard to the Popkin-Schmitt thesis concerning the history of early modern scepticism? Alongside some significant confirmations (such as the importance of the philological rediscovery of the ancient texts, the awareness of the intersection between religious problems and epistemological problems, or again the significance of the notion of constructive scepticism in relation to scientific knowledge) we also point out some original aspects emerging from this new research. Firstly, while the role of the Pyrrhonian texts is not diminished, they are flanked by an entirely different tradition of scepticism, which both precedes the editions of Sextus Empiricus and continues after them, drawing from non-Pyrrhonian authors and lines of thought (Platonic, patristic, neo-academic, without neglecting the influence of Diogenes Laertius). One effect of this variety of references is that it makes it impossible to fix a single definition of scepticism, suggesting on the contrary that different definitions should be employed on different occasions, depending on the historical reference context (as the authors of the individual articles in this work have done). Secondly, taken together these studies tend to weaken the excessively close connection that Popkin saw between scepticism and its religious interpretations: in reality, Renaissance scepticism was “neither globally religious nor globally antireligious,” but rather lent itself to widely differing uses ranging from “fideism” (to use the anachronistic category employed by Popkin) to

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“criticism.” Thirdly, as well as downsizing the importance of the Pyrrhonian current and re-evaluating the alternative traditions (the academic alternative, but also Platonism and the internal criticism of sensism, as in the case of Campanella), the centrality of Montaigne (a centrality that is uncontested in Popkin’s *History*) is attenuated, or better flanked by a multiplicity of figures, who make the Renaissance a period so full of original personalities. Lastly, we believe that a dimension emerges from these essays, which in the “Popkin model” risked being squashed between the crisis of Aristotelianism and the advent of a new “constructive” science: this is the dimension of metaphysics that, on the contrary, emerges from the discussions of many figures involved in the debate on scepticism (Vives, Sanchez, Bruno, Campanella, to mention only the most important) as a new knowledge to be refounded, abandoning the old scholastic foundations but on the contrary welcoming the critical requirements of scepticism. It is not by chance that the authors who addressed this task most diligently were those who had least to do with the Pyrrhonian and Sextan tradition, drawing instead from less “destructive” currents. Overall, the panorama that emerges from these studies is both more accurate in its analytical investigation and wider in terms of the perspectives it considers.

The reader will judge whether this volume has succeeded in meeting the *desideratum* from which we began, that is in providing a rational and detailed map of sceptical themes in the philosophical culture of the Renaissance. What is certain, though, is that this desire would never have arisen in us had we not frequented, first through study and then in direct discussion, that great figure of a scholar, and at the same time a great example of generous humanity, that was Richard H. Popkin. With him, disagreement and discussion, no less than consensus, were the salt of collaboration. For this reason, as a sign of gratitude and recollection, we dedicate this work to Dick, as we remember him in life.

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PART I
BEFORE READING SEXTUS
More than any other kind of philosophy, Pyrrhonism exalts relativity, if only, in the first place, by opening up the dogmatist’s horizons to new aspects of familiar phenomena. But there is another relativity factor, a more extrinsic one: the very different textual elements of its diffusion in Europe in fragmentary texts of which the reception was unusually erratic. My purpose here is to resume briefly, without giving detailed demonstrations, the results of my work on the revival of scepticism in the sixteenth century, consisting in an exploration of the relations between the different symptoms of the sceptical crisis during this period; this

1 We will use indifferently the terms “Pyrrhonian” and “sceptic”: as shown in my doctoral thesis (see the note below), a strict differentiation between a dialectical relativism – Sextus – and an ontological relativism – Pyrrho – is inconceivable. Textual sources cannot support such a distinction: they require, as for Sextus (P.H. I, 7), that we admit the Pyrrhonian filiation, without tending to adopt any Heracleitean or Protagorean idea about reality. We think that such an affiliation does not presuppose an intentional deviation from a previous paragon of philosophy, or a false and anachronistic reading of previous texts, but is, on the contrary, a way of insisting on the appropriate reading protocol to be applied to any Pyrrhonian statement: sceptical contradiction must be conceived as a thought structure which is itself bound by its own rule. The lowest common denominator between the main Pyrrhonian texts from antiquity, which confer on scepticism as on Pyrrhonism a real philosophical unity, is the central and autosuspensive formula of the *ou mallon*, a formula which is, in spite of the confusion involved by the Greek homonyms “é” (at first a comparative tool, but also a coordinating conjunction), not tripartite but bipartite (see our *Vocabulaire des sceptiques*, Paris: Ellipses, 2002, pp. 35–37). In other words, it always creates an opposition before being itself carried away by a higher level of opposition between its own truth and its own falseness: it is only at this cost that such a formula produces the suspension of judgement and it is by virtue of this reflexive movement that it annihilates any kind of possibility of producing an ontological meaning, describing what is *in re*. This is why J. Annas and J. Barnes are fundamentally right in considering Sextus’ use of relativity as a simple tool, or as a simple general description of the contradictory process which comes into play in all the ten modes of suspension of judgement (*The Modes of Scepticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 96–98 and 130–145): just like any statement which expresses *skepsis* – or rather, like any *phônê skeptikê* – the observation of an *apparent* relativity is itself subjected to the
work was the object of a doctoral thesis, and of a number of conferences and articles. I will present here the method of my enquiry as well as the results, insofar as the method may contribute to further research on the rediscovery of ancient philosophies in modern times. My method developed progressively as a means to overcome a seemingly insoluble preliminary problem: can progress be made in the examination of a question which Richard H. Popkin’s work seemed to have covered exhaustively? If we concern ourselves exclusively with Popkin’s chapters on the Renaissance, we can see that he explored this question in the wake of Pierre Villey and Henri Busson, whose starting-point was Pierre Bayle’s presentation of modern Pyrrhonism in his *Dictionnaire historique*.

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same observation of higher rank; relativity is nothing but a tool which produces clashes which itself comes within the provisions of its own law. The sceptics’ relativist statements are relative to the sceptics themselves (*PH.*, I, 207), insofar as they are a simple way of “[recording] each fact, like a chronicler, as it appears to [them] at the moment” (*ibid.*, I, 4). Like any kind of statement, they are approximate, bound to appearances which cannot be assured with certainty. This rule, which comes into play in Sextus’ *PH.*, is also relevant in other major Pyrrhonian texts, if they implement the most central and general formula in Pyrrhonism: the auto-reflexive *ou mallon*. This seems to me to be the case in Timon (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Préparatio evangelica*, 18, 3–4). Favorinus (Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, XI, 5, 5), Diogenes Laertius (Lives of eminent philosophers, IX, 74–75).

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2 *Le Phénomène pyrrhonien: lire le scepticisme au xvi e siècle*, vivaed on the December 15th 2000 at Grenoble 3 Stendhal University. Two books, to be published by Honoré Champion editions, will be taken from this doctoral thesis: one on the textual modalities of the rediscovery of Pyrrhonism (*Le Phénomène pyrrhonien: lire le scepticisme au xvi e siècle*), and another on Montaigne’s use of scepticism and the possibility of sceptical fideism in the *Essays* (*La “loy de pure obeissance”: le pyrrhonisme à l’essai chez Montaigne*).


4 My doctoral thesis was vivaed three years before the publication of the revised and expanded edition of Richard H. Popkin’s work, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, Oxford: OUP, 2003: all quotations from this work in the present text will be taken from this new edition. As I suggest below, while R. Popkin’s enquiry grew in breadth with the introduction of Savonarola, and became more accurate on Sextus’ manuscript tradition by taking into account L. Floridi’s research, the conclusions concerning the sixteenth century have not fundamentally changed: my attempt to develop these conclusions may not always appear necessary, but, in my view, it does seem legitimate.


6 Notably “Pyrrho” and “L’éclaircissement sur les pyrrhoniens”, where Bayle suggests at the same time the useful apologetical use of scepticism, and the radical incompatibility
The main and decisive conclusion of Popkin’s study of Renaissance scepticism consisted in rejecting traditional prejudice concerning the close link between Pyrrhonism and modern atheism, which prejudice was still the inspiration of Don Cameron Allen’s research some years after the publication of Popkin’s book. I will not examine in any detail Popkin’s enquiry into the Renaissance – the centre of gravity of his work seems rather to be the reappraisal of scepticism in the classical age considered as a development of certain Renaissance trends – and even less all the progress that Popkin’s work has allowed us to accomplish in the understanding of modern scepticism. In my eyes, the main interest of Popkin’s masterly study is to paint a panoramic view of the reintroduction of ancient pyrrhonism into modern philosophy, and to show decisively that scepticism played a major role in the classical age. Popkin’s approach has nevertheless imposed limits on the examination of the scepticism rediscovered and deployed during the Renaissance, as regards the dimensions of that movement, and above all as regards certain options in its interpretation. I would like to point out a few of Popkin’s presuppositions or methodological options, which should lead us to undertake a re-examination of Renaissance Pyrrhonism:

1. The first presupposition lies in the definition of scepticism given by Popkin, a “philosophical view that raises doubts about the adequacy or reliability of the evidence that could be offered to justify any proposition”. The philosophy thus defined would be nothing but a set of arguments intended to invalidate certain demonstrative processes. This definition excludes not only the internal diversity proper to scepticism but also sceptical ethics as we can perceive them in the sixteenth century.

2. The second postulate of R. H. Popkin’s enquiry lies in a genealogy (or aetiology) of the sceptical phenomenon: the “motor” of the Pyrrhonian crisis is supposed to have been the criticism of Roman Catholic dogma by Luther, which is said to have reactivated Savonarola’s attack on papal authority – and this previous rebellion is said to have depended on a Latin edition of Sextus Empiricus’ work.

of doubt with religion. This two-faced presentation is still perceptible in Villey’s and Busson’s pages about Montaigne: if they denote explicitly the difficulties of articulation between Pyrrhonism and the catholic faith in the *Essays*, they introduce and consecrate the notion of sceptical fideism, by reinvesting – in Busson’s case – a term derived from nineteenth century intra-ecclesial debates. The category had been defended in a more univocal way by H. Janssen (*Montaigne Fidéiste*, Nijmegen-Utrecht: N.V. Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1930), before being used as the main mode of sceptical revival in the sixteenth century by R. H. Popkin.


8 *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, Introduction, xxi.

While scepticism is mainly an argumentative arsenal intended to destroy any kind of dogma, the “Rule of faith” crisis is the main episode in which the sceptical revival first became an instrument of religious controversy. This genealogy reduces Renaissance Pyrrhonism to a phenomenon generated by an ecclesiological crisis, in which it operates simply as a dialectical tool. This definition of scepticism as a simple tool in religious controversies leads to another narrowing of perspective, insofar as Sextus’ *Outlines* are regarded as the main expression of Pyrrhonism, which is thus definitively reduced to a stock of dialectical arguments, the tropes of the *épochè*, these being the arguments nourishing religious controversy.

3. The corollary of this option is that the rediscovery of scepticism is reduced to the rediscovery of Sextus Empiricus: following the chronology of the textual tradition of scepticism as established by C. B. Schmitt, R. Popkin affirms that Pyrrhonism was known from the middle of the fifteenth century. He accepts with Schmitt that “information about ancient scepticism became available to Renaissance thinkers principally through three sources” (Sextus, Laertius, Cicero). In accordance with Luciano Floridi’s work on the rediscovery of Sextus Empiricus,10 Popkin insists, in the last edition of his book, on the significance of the manuscript tradition of Sextus’ works. However, for him, “no significant use of Pyrrhonian ideas prior to the printing of Sextus’ Hypotyposes has appeared, except for that of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola”.11 Two consequences: firstly, there are no significant symptoms of Pyrrhonism before the first printed edition of Sextus, with the exception of Pico12; secondly, the textual mediation – explicitly reduced to three authors – is implicitly related to and dominated by Sextus: the real impact of Diogenes Laertius, and of all the other writers who dealt with Pyrrhonism, is not examined.

4. Finally, the ultimate implication of this presentation lies in the idea that scepticism is mainly, throughout the century, a dialectical weapon that Catholics and Protestants wield against each another: Protestants in order to criticize the weakness of orthodox dogma, Catholics in order to undermine any possibility of rational reform of that dogma. Renaissance Pyrrhonism is thus reduced to “sceptical fideism”, a form of apologetics where ancient philosophy is no more than a preparation for faith, even though it is admit-
ted that Montaigne introduced a more radical “revitalization of the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus.” This reduces Pyrrhonism to a dialectical weapon subordinate to theology – or more simply to faith; and there is also the risk – since Popkin admits that he uses the term “faith” in a Protestant rather than Catholic sense – of applying a priori a fideistic model to particular confessions with which it is incompatible. The confessional construction, its evolution and its diversity of religious trends, such as Augustinianism, Thomism or Paulinism, may invalidate such a representation.

On a methodological level, I therefore resolved:

1. Not to envisage Pyrrhonism simply as a dialectical practice, but as a specific philosophical process linked to a specific ethical doctrine, – in short, as a complex historical phenomenon. This entailed two consequences: firstly, not to found my enquiry upon syntheses concerning our present-day perception(s) of Pyrrhonism during the sixteenth century. My ambition was not to study the reception of a philosophical process as we have inherited it in the present day, but to see whether the conditions of reception of an ancient textual legacy directly determined the very nature of that legacy. All the philological details provided by historians of ancient philosophy could thus help to throw light on the history of ideas in the Renaissance. On the other hand, I had to rely on a certain interpretation of the Pyrrhonian philosophy, in order to judge the relevance of Renaissance readings and the theoretical changes that they introduced. Since, in this context, the variety of modern interpretations created difficulties – Pyrrhonism is perceived sometimes as a phenomenalism with a scientific background, sometimes as a neo-mobilism with metaphysical significance, sometimes as a philosophy whose implications changed with the times and according to dialectical contexts –, I finally realized that it was possible and necessary to call into question the interpretation of ancient texts which postulate a Pyrrhonian coherence beyond the historical vicissitudes of its reception.

2. My second resolution was to refuse to regard scepticism as an abstract intellectual object without any concrete textual consistency. I could not perceive the different aspects of Pyrrhonism without founding my understanding of

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13 Ibid., p. 56.
14 Ibid., Introduction, xxii.
that philosophical process on an examination of the most famous witnesses to the textual tradition of scepticism: I thus had to take into account the re-editions of Pyrrhonian texts in the works of Gellius, Laertius, Eusebius of Caesarea, Ammonius, Cicero and Sextus Empiricus, between 1468 and 1610. In my approach to Pyrrhonism, this philological prism seemed to me primordial, more decisive than the religious one. The sixteenth century first rediscovered a scattered and fragmented textual corpus, a real jigsaw puzzle which was progressively organised. If we want to draw a portrait of the Renaissance reception of Pyrrhonism, that is only conceivable at a particular intersection defined by a specific state of the available corpus and the reader’s interests. From the 1470s, the most important sceptical texts were published and countless re-editions then modified the understanding of the doctrine. Before being read in their original language in the 1530s,18 the Greek texts were first translated into Latin and became progressively richer with marginal annotations, glosses and indexes which help the understanding of the Pyrrhonian notions by establishing relations between this fragmented corpus and other textual testimonies. Thus each new re-edition, by introducing new documents into the sceptical haversack, lead to the enrichment of the following re-editions of the same text or of other sources. My aim was to try to depict a cultural phenomenon in movement according to its constant diversifications. Renaissance scepticism could then be apprehended in all its diversity, which consisted in readings as varied as those with which we are familiar today.

What conclusions can be drawn from the textual tradition which constitutes the first level of the reception of scepticism? Quite unexpectedly, encyclopaedias played a major role in the diffusion of scepticism, at two different levels: firstly, dictionaries and thesauri are objective witnesses of the assimilation of unknown notions in a new cultural setting. The assimilation of foreign terms is linked to an act of translation, and dictionaries contain the total available vocabulary at a given time: they thus become the best clue, the most neutral witness of the penetration of this philosophy into European culture. Secondly, dictionaries are certainly the products of the reception of scepticism throughout the sixteenth century, but they are also the instruments of that reception. The scholar of the Renaissance may thus find in an encyclopaedia the meaning given at a particular time to a term found in ancient texts. Dictionaries and thesauri not only give prefatory notes with a translation, but also refer the reader to other Pyrrhonian testimonies, which help to understand the notions by providing a doctrinal background. As suggested above, the major problem in the study of Renaissance Pyrrhonism lies

18 Notably with the Laertius’ editio princeps (Diogenis Laertii De vitis, decretis & responsis celebrium philosophorum libri decem, Basileæ: Froben, 1533).
in its fragmentary corpus, which is not compensated by any cross-references from one text to another. These cross-references (or signposts) are supplied by encyclopaedias, in which the Pyrrhonian corpus gradually built up and accumulated from the beginning. By mutual compilation throughout the period, dictionaries collected the scattered pieces which contributed to the sceptical phenomenon. A newly discovered part of this jigsaw puzzle could be identified according to the indications supplied by dictionaries. Such cross-references supported philosophical reflection and had a deep impact on new translations and editions. Dictionaries and new editions of ancient texts thus enriched each other. My lexicographical study of about twenty families of dictionaries between 1470 and 1610 led me to a number of conclusions that can be summed up in the following points:

1. The rediscovery of scepticism consisted first in rediscovering the main figures of the Pyrrhonian school, from the 1480s onwards. These figures provided a general setting in which the doctrine itself could be conceived; this setting was sometimes neutral, sometimes biased and critical towards Pyrrho’s illusory *apatheia*, as in N. Perotti’s *Cornucopia*. This popularization of illustrious Pyrrhonian figures shows that the New Academy was not a major link in the rediscovery of scepticism between the end of the fifteenth century and the middle of the sixteenth: the main figure remained Pyrrho, and it is under his *egis* that doctrinal elements were diffused and interpreted, until 1550, which saw a decrease in the importance of Pyrrho to the benefit of Sextus Empiricus.

2. The most important lesson to be drawn from this lexicographical study is a change in the chronology generally admitted. Pyrrho was known from the 1470s – well before the 1560s – and the major sceptical notions concerning the suspension of judgment (*épochè, épéchein, éphektikoi*) were progressively clarified between 1510 and 1530. Thus, from the middle of the century, there existed a critical consistency which contributed to an exceptionally rich textual corpus. During the following fifteen years, Pyrrhonism gained a real philosophical identity, as is shown by the article “*sceptica*” published by Robert Estienne in 1543.20

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19 *Perotus Nicolaus Cornucopiea*, Venetiis: per P. de Paganinis, 1489; see also Giovanni Tortelli, *Ioannis Tortelii de Orthographia tractatus*, Venetiis: per B. de Zanis de Portesio, 1504. In these rewritings of Laertius (IX, 68–69) and Gellius, the impatient behaviour of Euryloque (Pyrrho’s disciple) is ascribed to Pyrrho himself, in order to ruin his credibility by refuting his own theory of *apatheia*.

Scepticism was not considered as belonging to certain ancient philosophers only, but was conceived as an intellectual process which could have a modern application. At the same time, Conrad Gesner threw light on the major role played by Sextus Empiricus and listed the places where one could find his manuscripts. During the second half of the century, most of the notions concerning dogmatic attitudes were refined, such as dogma and assent. This was supported by the publication of the Ciceronian *thesauri* by the Estienne brothers, who diffused the main doctrinal articles of the New Academy, which, although C.B. Schmitt’s traditional chronology presents it as the first step in the rediscovery of scepticism, did not really appear in dictionaries. The second half of the century produced no real novelty: the essential rediscovery of the notions had been accomplished before, as well as the definition of the Pyrrhonian corpus: Ammonius, Gellius, Laertius, Lucian, Cicero and Sextus, whose works were hard to find but nevertheless notorious, – these authors constituted the essential corpus in the sixteenth century. The examination of the encyclopaedic tradition thus threw light on the printed tradition, in the same way as, reciprocally, the printed tradition provided a better understanding of the penetration of Pyrrhonism into lexicographical works.

This tradition of the greatest textual witnesses reveals that Renaissance scepticism had several faces. As already suggested, the diffusion of ancient texts was absolutely fundamental, since it defined a first level of doctrinal re-elaboration and since it determined, like a prism, the authors’ access to that philosophy21; Erasmus, Rabelais, and Montaigne, for example. Editions of ancient texts weighed on the meaning of those texts in several ways:

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21 Printed editions of ancient texts are not the only means of diffusion of original Pyrrhonism: some “rewritings”, more or less philosophical adaptations of the Pyrrhonian texts, also played a part: while Gianfresco Pico della Mirandola’s *Examen vanitatis* (1520) is a kind of *cento*, intermixing in thematic groupings Sextus’ texts more than forty years before their publication, some authors like Giovanni Astolfi found in Pyrrho’s life (Laertius, IX) all the picturesque episodes of an eccentric life – purely literary matter. Between such extremes, Rabelais found in Pyrrhonism a poetic structure based upon contradiction, the only structure suited to adapt the novel to his philosophical and anthropological point of view. By creating in the *Tiers Livre* a philosophical character (Trouillogan), he constructed a Pyrrhonian *chimera*, which links, efficiently and with doctrinal precision, the paradoxical and comic form of sceptical folly and the philosophical gesture of a radical criticism of reason.
1. The editors’ forewords considerably altered the reception of Pyrrhonian texts. Thus, Camaldule’s preface to his translation of the *Lives of eminent philosophers* by Laertius (1432) can be seen as one of the first texts that elaborated the model of sceptical fideism. In its numerous re-editions throughout the next century, this preface contributed to the fortune of that philosophical position, which was founded not so much on biographical examples as on the question posed to the whole community of philologists: how to publish pagan philosophy in a Christian cultural environment? In the prefaces and commentaries on Ciceronian texts, the probabilistic scepticism of the *Academica* was seen as the best way of renovating the dialectical foundations of philosophical practice. Thus Ciceronian scepticism did not lead to ignorance, but became a starting point on which to build the dogmatic acquisition of wisdom.22 Other prefaces, commentaries and glosses gave rise to doctrinal inflexions: and indices also distinguished particular points of doctrine and sliced up the philosophical doctrine into so many maxims of commonplace wisdom.

2. In addition, Greek translations often created the opportunity for theoretical misappropriations: Traversari’s first translations of Laertius transformed suspension of assent (*retentio assensionis*) into suspension of assertion (*retentio assertionis*), a mere expressive restriction in a philosophy which thus became a purely rhetorical exercise. Translations sometimes transformed the source-text to such an extent that the Greek lesson was censured, as in the case of the *Præparatio evangelica*: Trebizonde’s translation ended precisely when Aristocles’ refutation of Timon’s *ou mallon* started, and this witness to Renaissance Pyrrhonian testimony was thus unavailable until Robert Estienne’s *editio princeps* in 1544.

Examination of the successive re-editions of the six most important sceptical sources throughout the whole century allows us to draw some conclusions: scepticism was not merely a mid-century rediscovery which occurred on the spur of the religious crisis; it had a real philosophical consistency from the end of the previous century, based above all on the printed publication of ancient texts, which defined a first degree of reception and appropriation. Thus, Renaissance scepticism was not a unified intellectual movement; there was not only one kind of scepticism in the sixteenth century, but a kind of Pyrrhonism for each

22 See for instance the *Audomari Talei in Lucullum Ciceronis Commentarii*, ad Carolum Lotharingum Cardinalem Guisanum, Parisiis: ex typographia Matthei Davidis, 1550, and his *Academia*, Parisiis: ex typographia Matthei Davidis, 1547. Gentian Hervet falls victim to this confusion between the Neo-Academic *in utramque partem* process, derived from an assimilation by Antiochus of Ascalo of an Aristotelian procedure described in *Topica* VIII, and purely Pyrrhonian *skepsis*. For him, scepticism is a privileged way to renew our access to the Truth through probabilism.