

11. THE QUARREL OVER ANCIENT AND MODERN SCEPTICISM: SOME REFLECTIONS ON DESCARTES AND HIS CONTEXT

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Ancient and modern scepticism

Like every original and fruitful research programme, that of Richard Popkin has inspired other interpretations that ended up by appearing as rivals to the *History of Scepticism*. It is certainly not by chance that only after Popkin had rediscovered the importance played by the rebirth of scepticism, an intense debate rose about the differences, the values and the possible superiority of the moderns over the ancients concerning the extent of doubt: a kind of a *querelle des anciens et des modernes* in order to establish whether and how the former or the latter outdid each other in coherence and radicality. One could object that this dispute has already been articulated in our modern philosophical archetypes, going back at least to Hegel and his critic Kierkegaard: the first, as is well known, supported the ancients, claiming in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that Greek scepticism had been much deeper and all-encompassing than Cartesian doubt, whereas the second, starting with Johannes Climacus's pseudoepigraphic work, backed up the moderns, stressing the break between the era of modern and the astonishment or immediacy typical of the Greeks. *De omnibus dubitandum est*: by this Cartesian quote Kierkegaard characterised the modern age whose novelty could be summarised for him in three sentences: "1) Philosophy starts in doubt; 2) Doubt is required in order to practice philosophy; 3) Modern philosophy begins in doubt".¹

In spite of these prophetic anticipations, the full scope of the *querelle* has only recently been re-examined scientifically, thanks to scholars such as M. F. Burnyeat, M. Frede, and J. Barnes (whose papers have been collected in the booklet *The Original Sceptic*), a list to which we should add the names of J. Annas, G. Striker, B. Mates and, most recently, G. Fine, who made a profound critique of Burnyeat's theses. We do not intend to explore the quarrel about

¹ See on this my entry "Scepticism" for *The Classical Tradition*, ed. by A. T. Grafton, G. W. Most, and S. Settis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

the content of ancient scepticism here. Its interpreters disagree about some crucial points, such as whether and to what extent the sceptic might have beliefs, whether relying on phenomena involves having also beliefs about them, and, lastly, whether epoché only attacks philosophical and scientific dogmas or destroys even ordinary life beliefs. With regard to this issue, the “No Belief View” supporters disagree with the “Some Beliefs View” ones, whereas Frede has complicated the question even more, distinguishing two different kinds of assent, and therefore two different ways of having beliefs.

The aspect of the controversy I am interested here in is the modern one, and what concerns me with respect to the ancients is their impact on seventeenth-century thought, and especially their impact on the immediate context of Descartes’s ideas. Reflection on this issue has resulted in what G. Fine has rightly called the “standard modern verdict”. The main tenets of this “verdict” are the following: (1) ancient sceptics disavow belief, whereas the moderns disavow only knowledge; (2) ancient sceptics support only a “property scepticism”, because they do not question whether they have bodies or whether there is an external world, but just whether objects are as they are represented; (3) the scope of ancient scepticism is mostly practical, whereas the modern one, by contrast, is strictly methodological and epistemological. Even though G. Fine contested all three points of this “verdict”, on the whole the result of this comparison is that ancient scepticism appears to be much less radical than the modern variety, and, consequently, that Descartes is said to be the first to articulate this allegedly new version of scepticism.² It should be noted that, despite the contrasts among the interpreters, they concur in shaping the discussion in the

²I am referring here to what Gail Fine has called the “standard modern verdict”, that is the established conviction that ancient scepticism was much weaker than the modern one, and the Cartesian one above all, because it never questioned the existence of the external world. See Gail Fine, “Descartes and Ancient Skepticism: Reheated Cabbage”, *The Philosophical Review*, 109 (2000), pp. 195–234; Ead., “Sextus and External World Scepticism”, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 24 (2003), pp. 341–385; Ead., “Subjectivity, Ancient and Modern: The Cyrenaics, Sextus, and Descartes” in *Hellenistic and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Jon Miller and Brian Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 192–231. Actually, Fine challenges the more common view, according to which Descartes represented a major and dramatic change in the course of scepticism; this view is supported by most interpreters, following the authority of Myles F. Burnyeat. Among his articles, which are the target of Fine’s criticism, see at least: “Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed”, *Philosophical Review* 91 (1982), pp. 3–40; “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?”, in *The Sceptical Tradition*, ed. by M. F. Burnyeat (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 117–148; “The Sceptic in His Place and Time”, in *Philosophy in History*, ed. by R. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Q. Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 225–254.

form of a direct confrontation between the Cartesian formulations and their alleged ancient sources, avoiding any contextual research about the effective impact and influence of the latter on the former. They thus have the strange effect of transforming an historical issue in a matter of a comparative study.

Compared to this “verdict”, my point of view will be quite different, both in method and in content. With regard to the method, it seems to me that both supporters and opponents of this “verdict”, by directly comparing Cartesian texts to their ancient sources, end up ignoring one of the principal lessons of Popkin’s *History of Scepticism*: the need for a proper contextual analysis that takes into account the actual readings of the authors and the influences that affected them.³

With regard to the content, I shall attempt to demonstrate that the use of doubt by Descartes goes well beyond the limits reached by the classics, especially because he was much more concerned with modern libertine scepticism than with the ancient versions of scepticism. He was engaged in a discussion among moderns about the use of the ancients. However obvious this may seem, it is not universally acknowledged, especially in some current trends in the historiography.⁴

Descartes and Scepticism: “Reheated Cabbage” or Modern Challenge?

The first point to be addressed is Descartes’s effective knowledge of the sceptical texts: from this point of view, his writings are quite disappointing. His explicit references to the sceptics of antiquity are very general: usually, Descartes refers to “sceptici” in general, more rarely to “Academici,” and only in a few instances to “Pyrrhonians.” Even taking into account his usual reticence about his sources, what strikes one is that Diogenes Laertius is never mentioned, nor are Sextus Empiricus or Plutarch. Galen’s case is equally meaningful: no occurrence of *De optimo genere docendi*, which had been printed, in Erasmus’s Latin translation, as an appendix to both the *Hypotyposes* and *Adversus mathematicos*, edited respectively by Estienne and Hervet, and which provided authoritative knowledge of sceptical doctrines. The academic school receives a better fate in Descartes, basically thanks to Augustine’s refutation, which played a significant function for the genesis of the *cogito*.⁵

Besides this, it must be said that even Descartes’s most explicit avowal of his debt to the ancients is ambivalent: he admits to having read “many

³ Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴ I developed more this thesis in my book: G. Paganini, *Skepsis. Le débat des modernes sur le scepticisme* (Paris: Vrin, forthcoming) (ch. V).

⁵ On the effective knowledge and utilisation of the ancient sources by Descartes, see the appendix to the book edited by Ettore Lojacono, *Socrate in Occidente* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2004): Franco Meschini, “Descartes e gli Antichi”, p. 283–323.

books on that subject by the Academics and Sceptics”, which we may take to include “Pyrrhonians,” yet he immediately adds that he did this reluctantly: “and though it was not without distaste that I reheated this cabbage, still, I could not avoid devoting one whole Meditation to it”.⁶ The alleged reason for this “duty” is that sceptical texts turn out to be useful in teaching one to doubt about “sensible things”, thus realizing a crucial condition for knowledge that, unlike that concerning sensible things, can be absolutely certain. Moreover, replying to both Bourdin and Hobbes, Descartes stresses the therapeutic character of his sceptical studies: just as Galen and Hippocrates first had to study diseases before treating them, so he considers himself as the first who succeeded to refute sceptical arguments rightly, because he had accurately examined them and taken them to their furthest consequences.⁷ The “reasons for doubting” play a dialectical function, for the truths that result are “sure and ascertained”, inasmuch as they can not be shaken by the strongest doubts one can contrive, namely the “metaphysical ones.”

In conclusion, this brief examination of the main evidence outlines a framework which is neither straightforward nor homogeneous: Descartes is interested in the major sceptical themes, yet he neglects their historical differentiations; moreover, despite showing distaste for what he calls “reheated cabbage”, he does not hesitate to give a newer and a stronger version of arguments that he knows are not “novelties.” Many of these seeming inconsistencies will disappear when we realize that his true interlocutor was not ancient scepticism but the modern version, that is, libertinism.

How to deal with Sceptics: Descartes versus Bourdin

On this point, the importance of libertinism, Popkin’s contribution⁸ is central, even though it needs some revision, as we shall see later. Before the publication of his *History of scepticism*, it was assumed that the authors to whom

⁶ René Descartes, *Responsio ad secundas obiectiones* (AT VII, p. 130): “Cum itaque nihil magis conducat ad firmam rerum cognitionem assequendam, quàm ut prius de rebus omnibus præsertim corporeis dubitare assuescamus, etsi libros eâ de re complures ab Academicis & Scepticis scriptos dudum vidissem, istamque crambem non sine fastidio recoquerem, non potui tamen non integram Meditationem ipsi dare: vellemque ut lectores non modo breve illud tempus, quod ad ipsam evolvendam requiritur, sed menses aliquot, vel saltem hebdomadas, in iis de quibus tractat considerandis impenderent”. Cf. the French translation made by Clerselier: AT IX A, p. 103.

⁷ Cf. *Objectiones Tertiae, cum responsionibus authoris* (AT VII, p. 171–172); *Epistola ad P. Dinet* (AT VII, p. 573 l. 28–574 l. 9).

⁸ See R. H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism* (2003 ed.) ch. 5, “The Libertins Erudits”, pp. 80–98.

Descartes was responding were essentially Montaigne and Charron.⁹ Instead, Sanches and Le Mothe Le Vayer were very rarely referred to. In recent times, Montaigne's centrality has again been asserted by Edwin Curley in his classical study on *Descartes against the skeptics*.¹⁰ Lately some attempts have been made to reduce the importance of the sceptical crisis and even to oust Montaigne from his privileged stance in this story, as in Michael Ayer's review of the third edition of the *History of scepticism*, which opposes to Popkin a rather mystic and Platonic Montaigne¹¹; on the other hand, Dominik Perler has questioned whether a true "Pyrrhonian crisis" even occurred in the modern age,¹² whereas Charles Larmore has defined as "an exaggeration" the common view that Montaigne underwent a "sceptical crisis" upon reading Sextus. According to him, Sextus's book simply confirmed an outlook Montaigne "was already elaborating on his own".¹³ For her part, Marjorie Grene has denied that Descartes took "the stance of someone heroically combating the terrible threat of the *crise pyrrhonienne*".¹⁴ In actual fact, except for a few contributions by Cavallé, Lojacono and Giocanti,¹⁵ very little has been

⁹Let me take an example, a still essential and unsurpassed text, Gilson's commentary to the *Discours de la méthode*. In this commentary, Pyrrho and Sextus are nearly absent, whereas Montaigne and Charron are considered the main sources for the Cartesian representation of scepticism, and Sanches and La Mothe Le Vayer are rarely referred to (R. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*. Texte et commentaire par Etienne Gilson, 4th ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1967).

¹⁰Edwin Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

¹¹Michael Ayers, "Popkin's Revised Scepticism", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 12 (2004), pp. 319–332.

¹²Dominik Perler, "Was There a 'Pyrrhonian Crisis' in Early Modern Philosophy? A Critical Notice of Richard Popkin," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 86 (2004), pp. 209–220

¹³Charles Larmore, "Scepticism", in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. by Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 1181, n. 4.

¹⁴Marjorie Grene, "Descartes and Scepticism", *Review of Metaphysics* 52 (1999), pp. 553–571, esp. p. 570.

¹⁵See Jean-Pierre Cavallé, "Les sens trompeurs. Usage cartésien d'un motif sceptique", *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, 1991, pp. 3–31; Id., "Descartes et les sceptiques modernes: une culture de la tromperie," in *Le scepticisme au XVI^e et au XVII^e siècle*, ed. by P.-F. Moreau (Paris: A. Michel, 2001), pp. 334–347; Id., "Scepticisme, tromperie et mensonge chez La Mothe Le Vayer et Descartes", in *The Return of Scepticism from Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle*, ed. by Gianni Paganini (Dordrecht, Boston, MA and London: Kluwer, 2003), pp. 115–131; Ettore Lojacono, "Socrate e l'onneto uomo nella cultura dell'autunno del Rinascimento francese e in René Descartes", in *Socrate in Occidente*, cit., p. 103–146; Sylvia Giocanti, "Descartes face au doute scandaleux des sceptiques", *Dix-septième siècle* 54 (2002), pp. 663–673. See more on this topic in my book, *Skepsis*, ch. V "Du bon usage du doute. Descartes et les sceptiques modernes".

done until now to extend the range of Descartes's modern sceptical sources beyond the names of Montaigne and Charron, although some distinguished scholars, such as Rodis-Lewis and Maia Neto, have offered new findings and interpretations that confirm Popkin's insight concerning the latter's centrality for the Cartesian stance.¹⁶

To solve the vexed question of the extent of Descartes's involvement in the *crise pyrthonienne*, we have at our disposal a reliable resource: we can examine the protagonist's direct testimony in order to see how he evaluated and responded to sceptical challenges. Even though it has been quite neglected by historians, we have an exceptional document for this purpose. I am referring to Descartes's polemic against the Jesuit Bourdin. Most of the latter's objections concern a topic which is crucial for our purpose: according to the Jesuit father, Descartes had emphasized the power of doubt too much, thus opening the way, despite his good intentions, to the idea that scepticism can not be refuted. Incidentally, this is also a major aspect of Popkin's assessment: his portrait of Descartes *sceptique malgré lui*¹⁷ seems very close to the image of the philosopher outlined in the *Seventh Objections*.

Regarding these objections, let me remark, first of all, that Bourdin's criticisms are neither as naive as described by Descartes at the beginning of the debate, nor as unfair as he represents them at the end, when he realized that the controversy had turned out to be vain and, what is more, self-defeating for his strategy, which was aimed at gaining credit among the Jesuits. This disappointment is clear in the important letter he later sent to father Dinet, which accompanies the second edition of the *Meditations*. Yet, however unpleasant the result was, in its early stages the confrontation had real importance and Descartes worked carefully to evaluate Bourdin's criticisms, demonstrating the importance he attached to the questions they raised about the evaluation of scepticism.

One passage from this extended debate has particularly attracted the interest of Cartesian scholars: actually, it is one of the few passages from the *Seventh Objections* that is constantly quoted in monographs,¹⁸ whereas very little attention has been devoted to the following passage, where the proper historical context is explained, provided that one can work it out. First, let me briefly recall

¹⁶See, more recently, José R. Maia Neto, "Charron's *Epochè* and Descartes's *Cogito*: The Sceptical Base of Descartes's Refutation of Scepticism", in *The Return of Scepticism from Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle*, cit., pp. 81–113.

¹⁷R. H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism* (2003 ed.), pp. 158 ff.

¹⁸See Roger Ariew, "Pierre Bourdin and the Seventh Objections", in *Descartes and His Contemporaries. Meditations, Objections and Replies*, ed. by Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 208–225.

the most famous passage. Replying to the objection that he has carried doubt to excess, Descartes develops his famous comparison between the grounds of knowledge and the foundations of a building. Bourdin considers as excessive the claim that Descartes has found a foundation that is “steadier” than that established by anyone else, since, he argues, it would be more reasonable to rely on a basis as firm “as the earth that props us up.” Actually, the author of the *Meditations* suggests that the firmness of foundations should be in proportion to the importance of the building one intends to construct on them. We have already met this comparison in the *Discours*, where Descartes draws a parallel between different kinds of knowledge, on one hand, and, on the other hand, different kinds of supports or foundations, such as “la terre mouvante et la sable” and “le roc ou l’argile”. In the *Seventh Replies*, a graduation takes the place of the opposition. If sand could be considered enough to base a cabin on, nothing less firm than rock will suffice to one who aims at building a tower. The function of scepticism turns out to be evident as soon as we leave the metaphor: Descartes thinks that it would be “absolutely false” (“falsissimum”) if, when laying the “foundations of philosophy”, doubts, the tool with which one must dig until one reaches solid rock, were to be set aside before the “highest certainty”, that is, the greatest certainty one can obtain, is reached. This is the equivalent of the rock.¹⁹ Therefore, mind should not rely “prudenter ac secure” on grounds that are less firm than evidence of which one can not doubt. In contrast to the case of opinions, with regard to knowledge there is no graduation of certainty; since truth is “indivisible”, what is not known to be “summe certum” (“the most certain”) could turn out to be “false”, however “probable” it may appear. Thus far, we are dealing with a principle of caution, already at work in the *Discourse*, and leading to consider as false what one could have the least doubt about, when it is a matter of “contemplatio veritatis”.

The passage that follows this is much less known. In it, Descartes represents scepticism as something alive and modern, neither a ghost of ancient philosophies nor a heritage from previous generations. Scepticism has its own independent existence, a threatening one, outside Descartes’s system. Therefore, historians should not see it only as a methodological requirement within the framework of Cartesian philosophy, some kind of extreme hypothesis by which the meditator ascertains the firmness of his foundations. From Descartes’s new point of view, sceptics are not a “sect nowadays abolished” that one could dismiss with mockeries and tirades, as Bourdin does. Treating the sceptics as “incurable and desperate people” who do not deserve thoughtful consideration, the Jesuit misses the point, that is, the seriousness and dangerousness of modern scepticism, which is in this respect very different

¹⁹ Cf. *Objectiones Septimae* (AT VII, p. 547–548).

from the ancient variety: “Neither must we think that the sect of the sceptics is long extinct. It flourishes today as much as ever, and nearly all who think that they have some ability beyond that of the rest of mankind, finding nothing that satisfies them in the common Philosophy, and seeing no other truth, take refuge in Scepticism”.²⁰

Much of this debate with Bourdin revolves around choosing the right strategy to adopt against these “trendy” sceptics. Whereas the Jesuit worries that following them on the path of excessive doubt could end up by condemning the philosopher to admit the impossibility of answering them, Descartes thinks instead that a dogmatic refusal to follow the dynamics of doubting to the end might be a sign of weakness and even an implicit avowal of defeat. A true refutation can come only through the widest amplification of doubt: otherwise, Descartes asks, “what will he reply to the sceptics who go beyond all limits of doubt?” (“quid respondebit Scepticis, qui omnes dubitationis limites transcendunt?”).

“The Seventeenth-Century ‘Sceptical Atheists’”

So far we have laid out the theoretical nucleus of this debate, but its cultural background is also important. As we have seen earlier, Descartes is declaring that he faces a living scepticism, not a relic of the past. And the confrontation is not only epistemological, because the “mistakes” of this “sect”, which is “in fashion as it has never been before”, are said to be “Atheorum scepticorum errores”.²¹ In fact, the “sceptics of today” require that “one demonstrates to them God’s existence and the immortality of their souls”. The description that follows is very precise: “no sceptic nowadays [*omnes hodierni sceptici*] has any doubt in practice about whether he has a head, or whether two and two make four, and so on. What the sceptics say is that they merely treat such claims as if [*tamquam*] they were true, because they appear [*apparent*] to be so; but sceptics do not believe [*credunt*] they are certain, because no rational argument require them to do so”.²²

²⁰This is the Latin text of Descartes’s reply to the Jesuit: “Et verò, quid respondebit Scepticis, qui omnes dubitationis limites transcendunt? Quâ ratione ipsos refutabit? Nempe desperatis aut damnatis annumerabit. Egregie certe; sed quibus illi eum interim annumerabunt? Neque putandum est eorum sectam dudum esse extinctam. Viget enim hodie quàm maxime, ac fere omnes, qui se aliquid ingenii prae caeteris habere putant, nihil inventientes in vulgari Philosophiâ quod ipsis satisfaciât, aliamque veriolem non videntes, ad Scepticam transfugiunt” (AT VII, p. 548 l. 24–549 l. 3). This passage is rightly evoked also by Popkin, *The History of Scepticism* (2003 ed.), p. 144.

²¹AT VII, p. 549 l. 8–9.

²²“Quippe omnes hodierni Sceptici non dubitant quidam in praxi, quin habeant caput, quin 2 & 3 faciant 5, & talia; sed dicunt se tantùm iis uti tanquam veris, quia sic apparent, non autem certò credere, quia nullis certis rationibus ad id impelluntur” (AT VII, p. 549 l. 10–15).

Who are these “sceptical atheists”? And how could a sceptic be an atheist?

Let me proceed first by exclusion. It is evident that we are not dealing with Descartes’s own scepticism: aside from the question of atheism, which evidently does not fit in with Cartesian metaphysics, these sceptics do not cast in doubt the existence of their own bodies, of the world outside and so on, as happens, on the contrary, in the *Meditations*. It is not a matter of Sextus either: in his writings sceptics do not appear as atheists, but rather as people suspending judgment between the existence of gods and their denial, according to the rule of *ou mallon* and following the precept of the epoché. Far from being impious, ancient sceptics complied with the religious traditions of their *polis*. A third possibility can also be excluded: it is not a question either of Montaigne or of Charron, since neither went so far as to directly cast doubt on God’s existence; at the most, they stressed the limits of every dogmatic representation of God, emphasizing the heavy damage caused by the decay of religion into superstition or fanatical intolerance. Being a follower of the Pyrrhonian conformists, Montaigne turned the accusation of encouraging atheism, not against the sceptics, but against those new dogmatics, like Luther, who with his “novelties” had shaken “nostre ancienne creance”.²³ The discourse we might make about soul is very similar: in this case also, Montaigne’s and Charron’s doubts regard much more the opposing philosophical definitions of the nature of soul than its fate after death according to faith. And even if one notices that, as a sharp observer of human nature, Montaigne stressed the close ties joining the soul with the body, largely resorting to topoi drawn from *De rerum natura*, one should infer that in these contexts Montaigne seems to be rather an epicurean, and therefore a dogmatist, than a sceptic.

After outlining a series of exclusions, might we arrive at some positive affirmations regarding the identity of the sceptics about whom Descartes is speaking? However puzzling the Cartesian phrase may be, it does contain some clues to enable us to solve the problem of the identity of these sceptics. We have seen that the passage from the *Seventh Replies* contains precise hints about the method of “appearances”, which sceptics use to distinguish between the appearances of either ordinary phenomena (one’s own body, for example) or of the most accepted noumena (mathematical truths), on one hand, and, on the other, objects that do not “appear” in the same way, such as God and the soul, which are therefore *adela*, that is “occult” by nature, as the ancients would have said. In the case of these non-visible realities, sceptical atheists make the burden of proof fall on the upholders of their existence: “And since it does not appear to them in the same way that God exists and the human

²³ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12 ed. by P. Villey (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), t. II, p. 439. Speaking about Luther’s “novelties”, Montaigne’s father expected that “ce commencement de maladie declineroit en un execrable atheisme”.

soul is immortal, therefore they do not think to be supposed to use them as it were true not even in praxis, unless these propositions are proved more sure than those for which they embrace all the appearances”.²⁴

This reference to the notion and the term of “appearance”, so as to translate the sceptical idea of “phenomenon”, had been introduced by Montaigne in the *Apology*, following an important passage from Sextus Empiricus: a quick comparison with the Latin translation of the *Hypotyposes* made by R. Estienne shows that the humanist had oriented this lexical choice, having used the term “*apparentia*” (instead of the Ciceronian “*visa*”) to render the Greek word *phainomena*.²⁵ Descartes speaks of the sceptics of his time, saying that they follow, or embrace all the “appearances” (“*apparentia omnia amplectuntur*”).²⁶

Anyway, as we have already seen, we can not find either in Montaigne or in his heirs such as Charron this application of the concept of “phenomena” to objects like God or soul. It is in the libertines of the first half of the seventeenth century and first of all in François La Mothe Le Vayer that we eventually meet something like this approach. Usually, La Mothe Le Vayer has been evoked with regard to the controversial matter concerning the *méchant livre* Descartes tells Mersenne about in the letters of 1630–1631. It is still questioned whether this “evil book” was actually the *Dialogues d’Orasius Tubero faits à l’imitation des anciens*, circulated in two parts during these same years, without the author’s name, and with false dates and false imprints, in no more than 30 or 33 copies altogether. The *Dialogues* are the most daring example of libertine scepticism, concealing an aggressive rebellion against any form of dogmatism under ostensible professions of fideism. In reality, my demonstration in this article does not depend on the result of the controversy concerning the identity of the “evil book”, because we are not concerned with the beginning of the 1630s, but with a later stage of Descartes’s life, when he had just published the *Meditations*. We shall soon see that La Mothe Le Vayer’s *Dialogues* develop this method of phenomena, whereas another work of the same author is probably the source for the assertion of the alleged identity between scepticism and atheism: *La vertu des payens*, published in 1641,²⁷ just a year before the second edition of the *Meditations*, which contains the *Seventh Objections and Replies*, with the phrase

²⁴“Et quia non eodem modo ipsis apparet Deum existere, mentemque humanam esse immortalem, ideo his nequidem in praxi tanquam veris utendum putant, nisi prius probata fuerint, rationibus magis certis quam sint ullae ex iis ob quas apparentia omnia amplectuntur” (AT VII, p. 549 l. 15–20).

²⁵For more details on this point, see my book *Skepsis*, ch. I.

²⁶AT VII, p. 549 l. 19–20.

²⁷I discussed more widely the features of Le Vayer’s scepticism and the problem of its relationship with religion in the book, already cited, *Skepsis*, ch. II “Le scepticisme des anciens et des modernes. La Mothe Le Vayer et le ‘pyrrhonisme tout pur’”.

we have quoted before about the encounter between scepticism and atheism. Therefore, bringing together both La Mothe Le Vayer's works, the semi-clandestine one and the official one, we can get an image that matches quite well with the Cartesian portrait of these "sceptical atheists".

La Mothe Le Vayer and the Method of "Appearances"

I shall begin with Orasius Tubero's *Dialogues*. Of the eight pieces contained in the book, which range over topics from marriage to politics, from religion to private life, and even to the merits of the donkey as a symbol of the wisdom of the sceptics, two, *De la philosophie sceptique* and *De la divinité*, deserve special attention. The former takes up Sextus's notion of phenomenon, underlining two aspects to which Descartes's testimony explicitly refers: first, the sceptic conforms to phenomena or appearances as passive affections in the field of ordinary life, a life without dogmas; secondly, he rejects the attempts made by dogmatists to go beyond phenomena towards what is "occult by nature". Even though this dialogue lacks any direct and explicit application to objects such as God or soul, that does not take away much from the daring of the work, because Orasius seems to come very close to debating religious beliefs: thus, he hardly discriminates between "true" and "false" religion, heathen beliefs and Christian ones; he rejoices at listing atheists, either single philosophers or entire populations, and he summarizes the famous paradox of Bacon according to which atheism is preferable to superstition. In the end, La Mothe Le Vayer multiplies the "treacherous parallels" between Christian miracles and heathen wonders, following a naturalistic explanation of the supernatural drawn from sulphurous Renaissance authors such as Pomponazzi and Cardano (the same the "impious" Vanini relied on). Yet, in spite all of that, we must admit that the boldest step, from doubt to atheism, is still missing in this work.

It is left to the other dialogue *On Divinity* to go further: there the notion of phenomenon is skilfully applied to the whole range of religious facts. As the creators of astronomical systems, in formulating their hypotheses, try to "save the phenomena" of the heavenly motions, so religions do the same with the facts of human moral life: "everything we learn about gods and religions is nothing but what the most able men have contrived as the most reasonable according to their discourse for moral, economic and civil life, as well as to explain the phenomena of behaviours, actions and thoughts of the poor mortal, to give him safe rules of life and, as far as it is possible, without absurdities". This comparison extends to the role of the inventors: just as an innovator such as Copernicus arose in astronomy and contrived new hypotheses about heavenly phenomena, so we can not exclude that also in morals and religion, someone "endowed with better imagination" will arise and establish "new foundations or hypotheses which more easily explain all the duties of civil

life". On the whole, concludes La Mothe Le Vayer, "such a religion is nothing but a special system which gives a reason for moral phenomena [*phainomenes morales*] and for all the appearances of our doubtful ethics".²⁸

Although La Mothe Le Vayer takes the precaution of declaring that he has only related what "irreligious people" think, his analysis reveals all the character of an *esprit fort*, a disenchanting intellectual who has mentally "shaken off the yoke" of religion, to employ the clear metaphor widespread among the libertines and which Pascal summoned on his own behalf to describe the attitude of the unbelievers of his times. Yet, in spite of all the open-mindedness of Tubero's *Dialogues*, we have again to admit that an explicit equivalence between scepticism and atheism is still missing even in *De la divinité*. However paradoxical it may seem, it is instead in the 1641 official work that the link between the two attitudes becomes fully explicit.

Pyrrho in Hell

La vertu des payens was written to contest the Jansenistic demolition of the "false virtues" of classical humanism and to support the idea of a similarity between Christian ethics and ancient philosophy. This approach basically aimed at opening the "doors of salvation" to almost everyone, and even to philosophers who did not know either grace or revelation, generously attributing to them a kind of "implicit faith", some anticipation of the fundamental truths belonging to monotheism. As regards scepticism, the result is astonishing and contrary to the position outlined in the *Dialogues*: whereas La Mothe Le Vayer had there asserted the usefulness of doubt as an impulse to Christian faith (following the tradition inaugurated by G. F. Pico, which was continued in the prefaces to the first editions of Sextus's works and sanctioned by Le Vayer himself in his parallels between the "divin Sexte" and saint Paul's passages on folly of philosophy), in the *Vertu des payens* the author instead draws opposite conclusions. Socrates and Plato, Pythagoras and Zeno, nearly all heathen philosophers "are saved". Only one, besides Diogenes the Cynic, is condemned to hell: Pyrrho, whose "salvation – the author says – I consider as desperate". It is worth remarking that Le Vayer's judgement depends upon a balanced analysis of Sextus's passages on religion, acknowledging that they

²⁸ François La Mothe Le Vayer, "De la divinité" in *Dialogues faits à l'imitation des anciens*, ed. by André Pessel (Paris: Fayard, 1988), pp. 330–331. It is a pity that the editors (Roger Ariew, John Cottingham, Tom Sorell) of the book *Background Source Materials: Descartes' 'Meditations'* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) did not quote this passage in their section devoted to La Mothe Le Vayer (section 11, pp. 201 ff.), instead of the fideistic text excerpted, which they judge "relatively tame" (*ibid.*, p. 201).

do not amount to dogmatic atheism; rather, they express a critical stance very close to that ascribed by Descartes to the sceptics of his times.

“The problem is not that sceptics made profession of atheism, as someone has believed. You can see in Sextus Empiricus that they recognize the existence of gods like the other philosophers, giving them the ordinary worship, and that they did not deny providence”. However, beneath these appearances of conformity there is an approach standing at the antipodes to faith, which authorizes the libertine to uncover the irreligious spirit implicit in the sceptical reasoning. La Mothe Le Vayer continues thus: “Yet, besides the fact that Pyrrhonians never made up their minds on acknowledging a first cause, which would have made them despise the idolatry of their times, it is certain that they did not believe anything about divine nature but with suspension of judgment, and did not profess anything but doubt and a willingness to submit to the laws and customs of their time and of the country where they were living”. In conclusion, despite their outer acquiescence, “the salvation of Pyrrho and of the disciples which followed his opinions about divinity” turns out to be “hopeless”, on La Mothe Le Vayer’s own admission.²⁹

Here arises the problem of how one could reconcile this negative evaluation with the appreciation made elsewhere of “the godly Sextus”; suspending the judgment about the author’s sincerity, we shall only note that the theses combined in this “Christian Pyrrhonism” actually represented a highly problematic and unsteady synthesis, always about to turn into its opposite, the “sceptical atheism” that Descartes denounces – and this not so much because of the author’s incoherence or pretense, as because of the strong tension between the method of epoché, on one hand, and, on the other hand, the dogmatic claim typical of any theological belief, most of all of Christianity. As Bayle will have to avow later, the rise of Christian theology, consisting firstly of dogmas and secondarily of ceremonies, would have made a compromise like that of the ancients impossible and required the treatment of doubt as the equivalent of irreligiosity, which is a typical modern attitude.

Consequently, it is not difficult to understand why a philosopher such as Descartes claimed that suspending judgment about the first cause was tanta-

²⁹ La Mothe Le Vayer, *De la vertu des Payens*, in *Œuvres de François de La Mothe Le Vayer* (Paris: chez Augustin Courbé, 1662), t. I, vol. II, second part, “De Pyrrhon et de la Secte Sceptique”, p. 663. The standard work on La Mothe Le Vayer still is René Pintard, *Le libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVII^e siècle*, new edition (Genève et Paris: Slatkine, 1983), esp. pp. 505–538; but see now also Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, *Dis/simulations. Jules-César Vanini, François La Mothe Le Vayer, Gabriel Naudé, Louis Machon et Torquato Accetto. Religion, morale et politique au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Champion, 2002), pp. 141–198, and Sylvia Giocanti, *Penser l’irrésolution. Montaigne, Pascal, La Mothe Le Vayer. Trois itinéraires sceptique* (Paris: Champion, 2001).

mount to professing a true sceptical atheism, despite the seeming contradiction between the noun and the adjective.

Stressing the need of following on their own ground “those sceptics who go beyond all bounds of doubt”, Descartes was thus accomplishing a complex operation: in the quarrel over scepticism he took side with the moderns, convinced that they had surpassed the ancients as to the strength of doubt, having left behind both Sextus’s cautious equidistance (*isostheneia*) and Pyrrho’s wise conformity. On the other hand, by taking as his own the rule that “one should doubt of everything” (“de omnibus est dubitandum”),³⁰ the author of the *Meditations* was turning against the libertines the charge of not having stuck to their program: Descartes complained that they had not thoroughly examined the appearances and had stopped before achieving the highest certainty. Sentences such as those regarding the existence of body and world were not object of investigation by either ancient or modern and libertine sceptics: both confined themselves to phenomena, as becomes very clear in Descartes’s reconstruction. On the contrary, even these seeming truths become, in the *Meditations*, the object of a higher level of doubt, the “metaphysical” one. From this point of view, the philosopher’s distinction between “usus vitae” and “contemplatio veritatis” is only superficially similar to the difference between the two different kinds of criteria, which La Mothe Le Vayer draws from Sextus’s writings.

Descartes and the “No Beliefs View”

Answering the usual charge made against the sceptics, that of causing “a subversion of human life”, the libertine summed up the distinction between two different meanings of criterion: on one hand, the criterion that “judges in last instance and gives certainty to the objects of knowledge”, and is therefore rejected by the sceptics as dogmatic; on the other hand, the criterion that “goes with likelihoods without establishing anything and that is called *to phainomenon*, what appears, that is the criterion of scepticism”.³¹ This distinction corresponds exactly to what Descartes’s “sceptici hodierni” say when differentiating between the field of “praxis”, where they conform to appearances, and the scope of “demonstrations” of which they doubt. We should also notice that La Mothe Le Vayer’s “life without dogmas” opens itself up to probability and likelihood, blending together Pyrrhonian and Academic themes, whereas

³⁰This is the recurring formulation (“universalis dubitatio”, “de omnibus dubitabo”) adopted mainly in Descartes’s *Recherche de la vérité* (AT X, p. 514, 515), which is nearer than the *Meditations* to the libertine and sceptical culture of the time.

³¹F. La Mothe Le Vayer, *De l’ignorance louable* (*Dialogues* cit., p. 243).

Descartes more radically rejects the probable, assimilating it to falsehood, at least in the realm of theory, and precisely for want of evidence, even though he admits it in his provisional morality.

In actual fact, underneath Descartes's pragmatic defence of ordinary certainties for the needs of common life, we can see at work in the *Meditations* a much more radical proceeding than a sceptic as Le Vayer could have accepted it.³² For the French metaphysician, doubt does not really stop on the threshold of common life; it even ends up by invading the field of phenomena (meaning by phenomenon everything that "appears" to the mind). In a philosophy aiming at indubitability, the watershed established between theory and praxis perhaps succeeds in preventing the former from hindering the latter,³³ but surely does not stop theory from investigating practical beliefs from the point of view of their knowledge content. Therefore, Cartesian doubt attacks even matters that an ancient sceptic would have considered as immune to assault, like the evidences about one's own body and the existence of the world outside: according to Sextus, insofar as these beliefs belong to common life (*biotike teresis* or *aphilosophos teresis*), they do not turn into objects of *zetesis*, that is of investigation. On the contrary, when he meditates, Descartes can suspend judgment about them too: that is, he disbelieves them.

It is true that on this very point historians are divided³⁴: some claim that just by virtue of the methodological function of doubt it is understood that scepticism never should stretch to non-dogmatic beliefs of ordinary life. (As

³²On the contrary, G. Fine, "Descartes and Ancient Skepticism" cit., p. 222–223 has emphasized the similarity between Sextus's criterion of action and Descartes's "insulation" of doubts from matters of practice. In any event, she agrees that Cartesian doubts are not completely "idle": "If they were, he would not need to construct his code of conduct" (p. 227).

³³In this sense M. F. Burnyeat has spoken of Descartes and the modern "methodological" sceptic as "insulating" his doubt in the mere realm of theory: cf. his article "The Sceptic in His Place and Time" cit. More subtly, G. Fine distinguishes between "acceptance" and "belief": for example, "when it is matter of action", Descartes "merely accepts (but does not believe) that he has a body. Similarly, we need not to say that, for the purpose of action, Descartes decides to believe that he has a body; rather he accepts (but does not believe) that he does" (G. Fine, "Descartes and Ancient Skepticism" cit., p. 218).

³⁴For an overview of the whole issue, in relation with the ancient sources, see the articles collected in *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, ed. by M. F. Burnyeat and M. Frede (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997); in a strict connection with the moral problem, see now the apology of the sceptical stance made by John Christian Laursen, "Yes, Sceptics Can Live Their Skepticism and Cope with Tyranny as Well as Anyone," in *Skepticism in Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Thought*, ed. by J. R. Maia Neto and R. H. Popkin (Amherst, MA: Humanity Books, 2004), pp. 201–234.

Descartes says elsewhere, no one of sound mind would doubt in practice whether the world exists.) Among beliefs, only the dogmatic ones pertaining to theory would be affected by the doubt of the *Meditations*, not the merely doxastic ones typical of praxis. Different interpreters, instead, have argued a nearly opposite thesis: for them, the very need of protecting ordinary beliefs from the attacks of “metaphysical” doubt expresses a real and strong sceptical position. When doubt is taken seriously, it is tantamount to a “no beliefs view”, whence the requirements of isolating scepticism from praxis, as the provisional morals rules actually demand. The objection addressed by Descartes to the sceptics of his time, blamed for not really going beyond every bound of doubt and then stopping at phenomena, confirms the latter interpretation and supports even more the superiority of Cartesian doubt over the ancient and the modern ones, inasmuch even the libertine method of appearances relies upon Sextus’s notion of phenomenon.³⁵

In this respect I think that G. Fine is right in asserting that Descartes’s doubt challenged not only knowledge but also beliefs,³⁶ even though he accepted, in the realm of practice, along with Pyrrhonian sceptics, what Fine calls “non-doxastic appearances”. Therefore, it is true that, when Descartes entered the competition, the quarrel over ancient and modern scepticism was already raging as we have seen in La Mothe Le Vayer’s works, but it is undeniable that the author of the *Meditations* imparted to the discussion a dramatic new turn, shifting the whole *querelle* into the realm of metaphysical doubt. The hyperbolic hypothesis of the so called “deceiver God” permits Descartes to cast in doubt the existence of the world outside and of one’s body, a doubt which no Pyrrhonian, neither ancient nor modern (such as La Mothe Le Vayer), would ever have imagined.

In any event, whatever side they take on this controversy, it seems that all the interpreters agree on this point: Descartes’s radicality and the shift of scepticism from an ethical position to an epistemological question would have depended on a deep misunderstanding about moral goals of Pyrrhonism, which aimed not so much at establishing right epistemic conditions as at clearing the mind from passions brought about by dogmatism and thereby

³⁵From this vantage point, I do not agree with Gail’s tendency (who comments the same text of the Seventh Replies I relied upon) to align Descartes with the “modern sceptics” and to consider that neither of them was “more radical than ancient scepticism” (“Descartes and Ancient Skepticism”, p. 234).

³⁶G. Fine, “Descartes and Ancient Skepticism” cit., P. 212. Cf. also p. 233: “Descartes takes scepticism to affect one’s life, in which case it is not strictly methodological”. It is well known that the thesis of the strict methodological feature was put forward by M. F. Burnyeat (see his “The Sceptic in His Place and Time”).

achieving ataraxia. On this last point of the “modern standard verdict” it seems that there is almost no dissent: once they had left this ethical goal and had embraced an epistemological view, moderns (after Montaigne and Charron) would have convinced themselves that the life without dogmas recommended by ancients is essentially impossible.

This way of regarding this issue is not arbitrary and even grasps a significant aspect of the situation; yet the shift promoted by Descartes needs, in my opinion, a different context to be fully understood. Actually, the focus is not so much a change in interests, from ethics to epistemology, as a differing evaluation of the former which brought about a change in aims, rather than the other way around. And once again the decisive factor was the way modern sceptics understood, or better misunderstood doubt, rather than their relationship with ancient sources.

Doubt Instead of Epoché

As R. Bett has recently showed in his study on *Pyrrho, his Antecedents and his Legacy*, notwithstanding the changes occurred in nearly five centuries from Pyrrho to Sextus, scepticism remained faithful to a fundamental principle: against the whole Greek tradition, Pyrrhonians were always arguing that ataraxia and peace of mind spring not from knowledge and judgement of things, but from suspension of assent and then from giving up the quest for knowledge. Despite all their differences, “both Pyrrho and Sextus regard other philosophers as being troubled and tormented because of their readiness to engage in theorizing and their rashness in accepting definite conclusions”.³⁷ Even though one might hesitate to stretch this assessment too far, as G. Striker³⁸ did by making scepticism a special “kind of philosophy” characterized by an “anti-rational” approach, it is true that also this judgment endorses the continuity of the sceptical movement in emphasizing the primacy of ethics.

In light of this, there is no doubt that in modern times the sceptical project could not but undergo a crisis and radical change, when both the links – one between scepticism and ataraxia and that between giving up knowledge and attaining peace of mind – were broken. These decisive changes preceded the shift that occurred with Descartes; they can be attributed to Montaigne. The latter kept the fundamental epistemological objections typical of scepticism

³⁷Richard Bett, *Pyrrho, his Antecedents, and his Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 106.

³⁸Gisela Striker, “Sceptical Strategies,” in *Doubt and Dogmatism. Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology*, ed. by M. Schofield, M. F. Burnyeat, and J. Barnes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), pp. 54–83

(as is evident in the famous passages of the *Apology* concerning criterion, dialleles, and regress to infinity), but he subverted its original ethical goals. All things considered, this dramatic turn sprang from the discovery, made by Montaigne, that, by following phenomena and opposing them to each other, scepticism does not so much produce a state of balance (the *isostheneia* the ancient sceptics relied upon) and therefore the premise of peace of mind, as a condition of profound instability, making it impossible to fulfil the standard requirement of ataraxia. Far from being imperturbable, the sceptic seems to Montaigne to be affected by continual change, and thus by perpetual anxiety, since the strength of each new opinion, rather than coexisting with and neutralizing a previous one, as in the famous metaphor of the balance, instead fully supersedes it. In Montaigne's sharp psychological description, the mind passes from one state to the other in turns, without ever reaching the equilibrium preached by sceptics. The last opinion in the mind dominates, taking the place of the previous one: "que la fortune nous remue cinq cens fois de place, qu'elle ne face que vuyder et remplir sans cesse, comme dans un vaisseau, dans nostre croyance autres et autres opinions, tousjours la presente et la derniere c'est la certaine et l'infaillible".³⁹

When in the *Discours* Descartes appeals to "la liberté de douter," stressing at the same time the need to keep one's mind steady ("le plus ferme et le plus résolu en mes actions que je pourrais, et de ne suivre pas moins constamment les opinions les plus douteuses, lorsque je m'y serais une fois déterminé, que si elles eussent été très assurées"),⁴⁰ he draws the ultimate consequences from Montaigne's reflection. Whence he thinks that, in order to counter the sceptical unease and inconstancy, conformity and moderation are necessary, yet not sufficient. Evidently referring to the sceptical ethics coming from both Sextus and Montaigne, Descartes evokes from the first maxim of his provisional morals the benefits of "les opinions les plus moderées, & les plus esloignées de l'excès".⁴¹ In spite of that, having learnt from Montaigne that the condition of the sceptic is imbalance rather than balance, Descartes still thinks that a different philosophy of the subject, based on values such as steadiness and determination, will be necessary. We do not need to add that an heir of the Pyrrhonian spirit like La Mothe Le Vayer branded them respectively as *philautia* and *opiniatreté*, which therefore have to be fought.

Descartes's approach thus takes into account but also overcomes the lesson given by modern sceptics. While warning against considering as "very true and certain" opinions that are in themselves "dubious," he recommends following in

³⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, vol. II, p. 563.

⁴⁰ R. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (AT VI, p. 24 l. 18–22).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23 l. 4–5.

practice a proclivity that Montaigne, in his sceptical anthropology, had described as a fact belonging to human nature. Furthermore, when blaming the behaviour of these “weak and fluctuating spirits”, who pass from an opinion to another,⁴² Descartes is adopting a feature of Montaigne’s sceptic, but also adding on his own behalf a pejorative evaluation, instead of the rather neutral description contained in the *Essays*. In actual fact, at the beginning of the *Second Meditation*, he describes scepticism as a profoundly unsettling experience, and describes how he had fallen “unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool”, so that he “can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top”.⁴³

We might complain that this portrait of the sceptic is too far from the original one and that Descartes’s position turns out to be a misunderstanding of the ancient sources; yet, we should admit at the same time that this reading of Pyrrhonism overwhelmed more faithful interpretations, such as that of La Mothe Le Vayer. After Montaigne and Descartes, doubt not only took the central place previously reserved to *epoché*, but it was also described as an experience producing profound uneasiness and anxiety. We shall quote only one example, but a significant one: Thomas Hobbes. In the systematic catalogue of modern anthropological categories that makes up the first chapters of *Leviathan*, the English philosopher gives a definition of “doubt” that is farthest from balance and closest instead to the rash alternation of impulses and fantasies well described by Montaigne: “the whole chain of Opinions alternate, in the question of True, or False is called DOUBT”, exactly as “the whole chain of Appetites alternate, in the question of Good, or Bad, is called *Deliberation*”.⁴⁴ The difference with Montaigne or Descartes does not consist so much in the diagnosis, as in the therapy, which will not be either sceptical detachment (as in Montaigne) or stoic firmness (as in Descartes), but, for Hobbes, a psychological technique of regulating the chains of reasoning, based on a mechanistic science of man and on stipulative linguistic conventions. In spite of that, all the three authors (Montaigne, Descartes, Hobbes) seem to share a common conviction: doubt and scepticism are a matter of fluctuation, not of equilibrium. Sceptics are people swinging from one extreme to another, not quiet and detached. This shift from the original approach of the ancient sources of Pyrrhonism had enormous consequences for the modern representations of this philosophical movement.

⁴² Cf. *ibid.* p. 25 l. 14–19: “Et cecy fut capable dés lors de me deliurer de tous les repentirs & les remors, qui ont coustume d’agiter les consciences de ces esprits foibles & chancelans, qui se laissent aller inconstamment a prattiquer, comme bonnes, les choses qu’ils iugent après estre mauuaises”.

⁴³ AT VII, p. 23–24.

⁴⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 7, ed. by C. B. Macpherson (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 131.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I shall go back to Popkin's *History of scepticism* and try to draw some lessons from the study of this "quarrel." Firstly, I have validated Popkin's main historiographical insight: Descartes and his contemporaries went through a real sceptical crisis and a much more upsetting one than the ancients had experienced. While considering classical scepticism as obsolete, the French philosopher took the modern sceptical onslaughts very seriously, thinking that they were undermining the theological and metaphysical foundations of knowledge. As we have seen, while considering the topics of ancient sceptics as granted, Descartes thought instead that the modern sceptical attack represented a challenge that could neither be neglected nor undervalued.

Therefore – my second point – it makes little sense to focus the study of this matter on a direct comparison with the ancient texts, the more so since Descartes was scarcely interested in philological discussion of the classical sources (to the point that, according to some interpreters, he never read Sextus Empiricus's writings directly⁴⁵), whereas he was strongly aware that scepticism represented a lively trend of his time. Thus, scepticism was not "reheated cabbage", as he declares in the *Second Replies*, but an issue that "flourishes today as much as ever", as he says in the answers to the *Seventh Objections*. Also on this point, the study of the polemic with Bourdin brings up some elements supporting Popkin's main thesis, according to which: "[n]ot only was Descartes acquainted with some of the sceptical literature, he was also deeply aware of *la crise pyrrhonienne* as a living issue".⁴⁶ In comparison with the modernity of *this* scepticism, the attempts made to link the metaphysical level of the Cartesian doubt with the medieval sources should be taken with much more caution and without giving in to shallow generalizations. On this point I am alluding to Perler's or Bermudez's studies, which explain the global level of the Cartesian doubt by linking it to a kind of sceptical subversion of the *species* medieval theory.⁴⁷ Aside from lacking confirmation in both Descartes's declarations and his contemporary sources, this thesis also clashes with the features of those medieval authors who had never arrived at results

⁴⁵ See Luciano Floridi, "Scepticism and Animal Rationality", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 79 (1997), pp. 27–57.

⁴⁶ R. H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism* (2003 ed.), p. 144.

⁴⁷ See Dominik Perler, "Wie ist ein globaler Zweifel möglich? Zu den Voraussetzungen des frühneuzeitlichen Aussenwelt-Skeptizismus", *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 57 (2003) pp. 481–511 (and more recently his book: *Zweifel und Gewißheit. Skeptische Debatten im Mittelalter* (Frankfurt a. M.: V. Klostermann, 2006); José L. Bermudez, "The Originality of Cartesian Skepticism: Did It have Ancient or Mediaeval Antecedents?," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 17 (2000), pp. 333–360.

similar to the *crise pyrrhonienne* described by Descartes. In the quarrel over the worth and the progress of scepticism, there was no doubt for Descartes that the moderns would have had an advantage over their predecessors, either ancients or medievals, and that his own version of scepticism would have prevailed in its turn over both of them.

Thirdly and lastly, if the modern framework is the proper context for the *querelle*, we need to revise some points of Popkin's *History of Scepticism*. Having established that La Mothe Le Vayer is the main reference for Descartes's portrait of the "sceptical atheism", it seems to me quite difficult to maintain the assessment of libertinism put forward there. According to Popkin, the sceptical declarations of a libertine like the author of the *Dialogues* would have been compatible with "a certain type of Liberal Catholicism as opposed to either superstitious belief or fanatical Protestantism" and lastly would have expressed "some form of minimal Christian belief".⁴⁸ This evaluation clashes with the double posture assumed by La Mothe Le Vayer: when playing the character of a sceptic, as in the *Dialogues*, he insists on the compatibility between the "godly Sextus" and the Pauline faith, but when he passes on to judging scepticism from the outside, or in an objective way, as in *La vertu*, he cannot help stressing the irreligious, heathen substance of Pyrrho's and Sextus's scepticism, at the borderline with atheism. And if he ever wrote a work inspired by some kind of "liberal Catholicism" (I would prefer to say Christian Humanism), this is exactly *La Vertu des Payens*, with its complex political and cultural program supporting both Richelieu's Gallicanism and Jesuit classical education. We might explain the shift from the *Dialogues* to *La Vertu* in many ways, first of all underlining how the so called "Christian Pyrrhonism" actually represented a highly problematic and unsteady synthesis, always about to turn into its opposite, "sceptical atheism", as Descartes warned. Yet we might also add here that in the *Dialogues* La Mothe Le Vayer was speaking as a sceptic *in sua propria persona*, even though under the veil of a pseudonym: this being an open secret among the cultivated Parisian élite, he certainly needed to hide the dangerousness of his own sceptical bents that were evident in this work. He did not need to do so in *La Vertu des Payens*,

⁴⁸See R. H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism* (2003 ed.), p. 87; cf. also p. 89: "I think the evidence concerning the *libertins érudits* is more compatible with some form of sincerity and some form of minimal Christian belief". See also, nearly in the same vein, José R. Maia Neto, *The Christianization of Pyrrhonism. Scepticism and Faith in Pascal, Kierkegaard and Shestov* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995), pp. 5–9, 30–36. For a very different point of view, cf. Tullio Gregory, "Libertinisme erudite in Seventeenth-Century France and Italy: The Critique of Ethics and Religion", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 6 (1998), pp. 323–350.

where he was not supporting scepticism as his own stance, so that there he could be much more honest and frank about its problematic relationship to faith. In this official work he eventually was able to play the role of an impartial observer, pronouncing on the religious, or rather the irreligious features of scepticism, a real verdict, that is a *vere dictum*, a truthful sentence.

In conclusion, the study of Descartes's position and of his interlocutors has led me to a position that contrasts both with some anti-Popkin trends in the historiography and at the same time modifies Popkin's assessment of libertinism: two ways of carrying on research on scepticism that Dick, I think, in his open-mindedness, would have appreciated.