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## List of abbreviations used in the chapter

<i>PH</i>	<i>Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Adversus Mathematicos</i>
BAV	Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Roma
BN	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
PG	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i> etc.
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> etc.
TLG	<i>Thesaurus Linguae Graecae</i>

## The Rediscovery and Posthumous Influence of Scepticism

Luciano Floridi

### Introduction

The history of the transmission, recovery and posthumous influence of ancient scepticism is a fascinating chapter in the history of ideas. An extraordinary collection of philosophical texts and some of the most challenging arguments ever devised were first lost, then only partly recovered philologically, and finally rediscovered conceptually, leaving Cicero and Sextus Empiricus as the main champions of Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism respectively. This chapter outlines what we know about this shipwreck and what was later salvaged from it. It cannot provide many details, given its length. And, being a review, it does not try to solve the many puzzles and mysteries still unsolved. But, as an introduction, it does seek to give a general idea of what happened to ancient scepticism in the long span of time occurring between Augustin and Descartes. It is a dozen of centuries of Western philosophy, so a few generalizations, some schematism and a good degree of abstraction from specific information will be inevitable. The reader interested in pursuing further knowledge about the topic is invited to consult Schmitt [1972a], Floridi [2002] and Popkin [2003].

### Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

Our story begins with a dramatic loss of memory, roughly in the fourth century. By the time Augustine was writing *Contra Academicos*, Academic scepticism, transmitted in Latin, had become the brand of scepticism known to philosophers and theologians, at the expense of Pyrrhonism in general and Sextus Empiricus' Greek texts in particular. There may still be some sporadic references to the Pyrrhonians at the beginning of the fifth century,<sup>1</sup> but it is indicative that the word *academicus* had become synonymous with sceptic, a linguistic use that will remain unchanged until the seventeenth century. Although *scepticus* occurs in Aulus Gellius, the technical word and its cognate terms will become common currency only in the

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<sup>1</sup> For example in a work against the Manicheans by Pope Leo I the Great (d. 461), *De Manichaeorum Haeresi Et Historia Libri Duo*, Caput III, and in a brief entry in the famous *Anthologium* of John of Stobi (Stobaios, fl. 4th-5th century).

1430s,<sup>2</sup> after the spread of Traversari's translation of Diogenes Laertius.<sup>3</sup> This will undergo twelve editions before the end of the sixteenth century, and will be very influential in establishing the conceptual, Latin vocabulary used by philosophers in the following centuries. The sceptical terminology and arsenal of arguments will be initially based on Cicero's and Augustine's Latin works. Pyrrhonism will reach the philosophical debate only in the sixteenth and seventeenth century through the Latinized technical lexicon of Academic scepticism.<sup>4</sup>

In the early Middle Ages, there appears to have been no epistemological defence of scepticism as such, nor further attempts at confutation after Augustine's. If Christian religion was able to awaken the saint from his sceptical nightmare, its robust sense of realism also succeeded in preventing medieval philosophers from entertaining logically possible questions on the nature of human knowledge, and hence systematic sceptical doubts about its reliability. Or at least so it seemed for a long time. In *De Anima*, Tertullian (160-240) had already clarified the Christian attitude towards knowledge in rather drastic tones: a Christian does not need to acquire much knowledge, firstly because facts that are positively certain are few, and secondly because endless investigations are forbidden by Paul of Tarsus. Curiosity is a vice and it is better to leave the fruits on the tree of knowledge untouched. Man is not allowed to discover more than he learns from God; and what he learns from God constitutes all he needs to know.<sup>5</sup>

Superficially, such a hyper-realistic position could be considered akin to that of the sceptical philosopher, whose *ataraxia* was compatible with a state of ignorance. However, the comparison would be misleading, if taken seriously. The Christian thinker was not interested in denying the full intelligibility of reality to the human mind, but keen on ranking the pursuit of mundane knowledge much lower than the love and worship of God. The logical arguments intended to humble human reason may be similar because the target of the polemic is the same, namely human knowledge and its intellectual pretensions. Indeed, Tertullian borrowed some of his dialectical weapons from Aenesidemus, through the work of the physician and doxographer Soranus (98-138), who, in his turn, had probably read Aenesidemus' own work, which was still available during the early Middle Ages.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Copenhaver and Schmitt [1992], 241.

<sup>3</sup> On Traversari's translation, see Stinger [1977], 71-77 and Gigante [1988].

<sup>4</sup> Ioli [1999] has provided a philological analysis of how some key words in the Pyrrhonian tradition were translated into Latin.

Nevertheless, the difference between ancient scepticism and Christian anti-intellectualism remains substantial, for it consisted in what was at stake: anti-dogmatism, tolerance and mundane *ataraxia* in the former case, belief, dogmatism and eternal salvation in the latter. Once systematic doubt has been instilled, ancient scepticism seeks to step back into suspension of judgment, whereas Christianized anti-intellectualism leaps forward into faith.

Together with the linguistic issue—even educated people no longer spoke or understood Greek and medieval Latin had now moved far from its classic sources—religious “dogmatism” (both in the Greek and in the ordinary sense of the word), theological interests and the neglect of epistemological investigations contribute to explain why, in the eight centuries between Augustine and John of Salisbury, whose interest in sceptical issues also depends on Cicero, scant information about ancient scepticism was available, transmitted and hence discussed. This does not mean that we should see the Middle Ages as “the Age of Faith”, incapable of entertaining sceptical doubts because dogmatic, gullible, irrational or merely acritical. As stressed by Reynolds [1991], in those eight centuries we encounter, for example, a large variety of forms of unbelief, in many cultural contexts. The point is that the Middle Ages show no driving interest in sceptical arguments within the restricted philosophical and theological debates that may address issues concerning the nature and reliability of knowledge, when discussing ethical, religious and epistemological questions at “a scientific level”, as we would say nowadays. Again, a methodological point seems in need of clarification here. Equating unbelief and scepticism, either during the Middle Ages or in the following epochs, without any further proviso, simply means muddling the history of scepticism and misinterpreting its importance. Scepticism has its own varieties but, on the whole it is a technical and fairly distinct family of philosophical positions, not just a way of being a bit doubtful or questioning about the world. If anyone who raises a doubt, questions a religious assumption or adopts a critical stance is to be called a sceptic, the very label ends up by covering too much and loses its meaning. “What does it take to *avoid* being a sceptic?” If the answer is “being absolutely dogmatic” then the reader knows that the label is misused, because every decent philosopher would probably qualify as being a bit of a sceptic.

Returning to our reconstruction, there may have been controversies over issues that may have a sceptical flavour for us, like the polemic contraposition of the patio of the Academy, representing the subtleties of Greek philosophy, and the temple of Solomon,

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<sup>5</sup> Tertullian [1947], 4 and 97.

representing the plain doctrine of Judaeo-Christian religion, which was common currency among Christian writers from Tertullian to Savonarola; or the interpretation of the book of *Ecclesiastes*, for a long time considered to be Solomon's work,<sup>6</sup> and the topos of *contemptus mundi*; or again the anti-intellectualist theses evident in the writings of Paul of Tarsus<sup>7</sup> and rooted in the Greek Apologists. But it should be noted that similar topics bore only a negative relation to the epistemological and ethical problems originally raised by ancient scepticism. They stressed the weakness of human knowledge in order to redirect the interest of the audience towards Christian faith, and hence to foster behaviour consistent with it. The emphasis was not on the nature of knowledge, but on the attitude to be taken with respect to revelation, Christ's teachings and the Old Testament. Witness the fact that, in this long interval, sources of information about ancient scepticism were largely forgotten rather than ostracized or exploited. Texts in the Christian tradition<sup>8</sup> either contained too few indications about sceptical topics or, insofar as they did, they were largely disregarded. Important examples included:

- the *Stromata*<sup>9</sup> of Clement of Alexandria (150-211/215);
- Marcus Minucius Felix's *Octavius* (written sometime between 197 and 248). The *Octavius*, whose structure is modelled on Cicero's *De natura deorum*, contains an interesting, if brief, discussion between Caecilius (the pagan) and Octavius (the Christian) on the sceptical way of life. The work disappeared from view for Western scholars from the fifth until the sixteenth century and it is revealing that it was preserved as the last book of Arnobius' *Adversus Nationes*, another sceptical source (see below in this list). The *Octavius* seems to be among the first texts in which there starts to be confusion between Academics and Pyrrhonians;
- Tertullian's *De Anima*, and his *Apologeticum*, a work strictly connected with the *Octavius*;

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<sup>6</sup> See Bultot [1980]; Lazzari [1965], and Hattaway [1968].

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the theme of Pauline fideism in relation to Stephanus' interest in Sextus, see Floridi [1992]. For a moderately anti-intellectualist interpretation of Paul of Tarsus' *Letters to the Corinthians*, see Stowers [1990].

<sup>8</sup> Relevant passages from early Christian writers concerning Greek philosophy have been selected and translated into German by Albert Warkotsch in Warkotsch [1973]. The reader may wish to consult this convenient collection for further bibliographical details. The history of the reception of sceptical themes in Christian theology has been a rather neglected topic, and certainly deserves more attention, especially considering the influence that the early Fathers of the Church had on the post-medieval discussion of sceptical themes.

<sup>9</sup> On Clement of Alexandria's relation to Pyrrhonism, see Sepp [1893], 59-60.

- Hippolytus' *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium*;
- the *Praeparatio Evangelica* of Eusebius (ca. 256-339); this influential book contains several references to Pyrrhonian themes, but the second council of Nicaea (787) prohibited quoting Eusebius as a reliable source of correct belief because of his sympathetic position with respect to Arian doctrines;
- Arnobius' *Adversus Nationes*, written at the end of the third or at the beginning of the fourth century. Note that Arnobius had great influence on Huet and was well known to Bayle;<sup>10</sup>
- the *Divinae Institutiones* of Lactantius, who was Arnobius' pupil; and finally
- Augustine's works, not only the *Contra Academicos* but also *De Trinitate* and *De Civitate Dei*.

Other classical sources soon disappeared from the bookshelves of the medieval theologians.

Examples include:

- Cicero, including his *De Natura Deorum*;
- the *Adversus Colotem* of Plutarch (between 50 and 120), which provides a wealth of information on the sceptical school;<sup>11</sup>
- the *Vitarum Auctio* and the *Hermotimus* by Lucian (b. 120).<sup>12</sup> Lucian's works disappeared from Western culture during the Middle Ages. As was often the case, Byzantine writers had more continuous access to them (more on this later);
- *De optimo docendi genere* by Galen, a work in which the latter expounds the views of Academics and Pyrrhonians in the course of refuting them. Stephanus thought it worthwhile to publish it in Latin translation (the translation was by Erasmus), together with Diogenes Laertius' *Life of Pyrrho*, in his first Latin, printed edition of *PH* in 1562;<sup>13</sup>
- Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights*, written in the latter half of the second century. Both Lactantius and Augustine knew the work. Later, it was even palimpsested and disappeared until the ninth century. Aulus Gellius provides a synthetic but valuable analysis of the similarities and differences between Pyrrhonians and Academics, which, though philosophically questionable, indicates that he still perceived the two sceptical

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<sup>10</sup> On *Arnobiusdeutungen*, see Krafft [1966], chaps. 12-18.

<sup>11</sup> Schroeter [1911] provides a clear review of Plutarch's relation with both Pyrrhonism and Academic scepticism.

<sup>12</sup> On Lucian's philosophical sources, see Praechter [1892], according to whom Sextus is not a source of Lucian, and Praechter [1898].

schools as different;

- the *Life of Pyrrho* and the *Life of Timon*, written by Diogenes Laertius during the first half of the third century;

No text in either list succeeded in arousing widespread interest in the sceptical school.

At the end of the seventh century, Bede (672 or 673 - 735), certainly one of the greatest scholars of his time, provides an almost sympathetic reference to the Academics and the Pyrrhonians. In a passage from a sort of philosophical lexicon attributed to him,<sup>14</sup> which discusses passages from Aristotle and other philosophers and is organised alphabetically, under the letter D, we can read an entry on the value of the process of *Dubitare*. Bede suggests that a questioning attitude, not universal and unqualified, as is the case with the Academics and the Pyrrhonians, who mistakenly doubt everything (and here there is a reference to Aulus Gellius), but focused on specific cases, may turn out to be far from useless.

In the ninth century, we encounter some scattered and ill-informed remarks on the Pyrrhonians and the Academics in Rabanus Maurus. He compares the Academics to heretics, a deceptive interpretation not uncommon since the early Greek fathers, which had the most adverse effect possible on the transmission of the sceptical texts. A longer and more detailed description of the sceptical sect is provided by Photios in his *Bibliotheca*.<sup>15</sup> A comparison between the two writers is revealing.

On the Latin side of Europe, when the Middle Ages gave rise to an encyclopaedic interest, Western scholars had to rely on secondary sources for their scarce information on the sceptical thinkers. Ignoring Greek, they had access only to texts transmitted in Latin, and hence almost exclusively concerning the Academic tradition, Tertullian being among the most important exceptions. In our case, Rabanus Maurus' sporadic observations were based on two sources. One was Jerome (340 ca. - 420 ca.), who in turn was hinting at a fundamental question, vigorously debated during the fourth century, between Eunomius on one side and Basil and Gregory of Nyssa on the other, namely whether it is possible to have some knowledge of God (see Meredith [1975]). The other was Isidore of Seville (560 - ca. 630),

<sup>13</sup> On Galen's influence, likely in the case of Agrippa, cf. Nauert [1965], 142-143 and note 84.

<sup>14</sup> *Venerabilis Bedae Sententiae, Sive Axiomata Philosophica ex Aristotele et Aliis Praestantibus Collecta, una cum brevibus quibusdam explicationibus ac limitationibus*. Sectio Prima. Sententiae Ex Aristotele Collectae, in PL.

<sup>15</sup> Photios mentions Sextus explicitly only once in his *Library*, in relation to the latter's "katerikoteron", cf. Photios [1962], vol. VI.94.



who was relying in turn on Cicero, through the writings of Lactantius and perhaps the same Jerome.<sup>16</sup> Now Jerome was still able to distinguish between Plato's and the Sceptical Academy, and mentioned Cicero as a follower of the latter, but Isidore of Seville had already lost this distinction (Isidore of Seville [1982], lib. 8, cap. 6 par. 11). By the time Rabanus was compiling his work, he had no clue about the difference between Plato's Academy and the new Academy or between different strands of scepticism (see *De Universo*, lib. XV, caput I, *De philosophis*). To him, it was all a big soup. The distinction between the two sceptical schools had been lost.

On the other side of Europe, Byzantine and Arabic scholars were in a better position than their Western colleagues, as they enjoyed knowledge of Greek and continuous access to at least some of the original works. Of course, this does not mean that scepticism enjoyed a good press. In the sixth century, Pyrrho was still sufficiently well known that the poet Julian the Egyptian could dedicate a sarcastic sepulchral epigram to him (Julian the Egyptian [1917], 309). Equally dismissive is a reference to the Pyrrhonians to be found in a work attributed to David the Philosopher (fl. middle of 6<sup>th</sup> century). He thought that "the Pyrrhonians attempt to ruin everything" (see *Prolegomena Philosophiae* in TLG). Hesychios (died after 582) shared the same view, if we are to judge from a reference to the Pyrrhonians that we can still read in the fragments of a collection of biographies of non-Christian men of letters (*Pinax* or *Onomatologos*). Although he provides a short but sufficiently informative biography of Pyrrho, he also qualifies the Pyrrhonians in general as "stupid" and "ignorant".

Sceptics were also called **Efektikoi** (Ephetic), i.e. Suspensive, from the state of mind sought by the inquirer, **Zhthtikoi** (Zetetic), from the activity of investigation, **Aporhtikoi** (Aporetic), i.e. Dubitative (on the various names see *PH* I.7) or sometimes simply Academic, when the difference between the two brands of scepticism was missed, especially by Latin authors. Ammonios (died after 517) provides a brief explanation of the meaning of **Efektikoi** in his *In Aristotelis categorias commentaries* (TLG) and at least three of his most famous pupils, Olympiodoros of Alexandrian (ca. 500 – died after 564/5), Simplikios (6<sup>th</sup> century) and John Philoponos (ca. 490 – died after 567 or 574), adopted the same terminology. Olympiodoros briefly mentions the "Ephetic" in his *Prolegomena* (TLG), and so does Simplikios in his *In Aristotelis categorias commentarium* (TLG). We do not know

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<sup>16</sup> Faes de Mottoni has analyzed this early Medieval tradition in Faes De Mottoni [1981] and Faes De Mottoni [1982].

whether the latter discussed Pyrrhonism more at length elsewhere, but John Philoponos provides a slightly longer reference to Pyrrho and his sceptical way of living in his own *In Aristotelis categorias commentarium*, where he uses the term “ephectic” to refer to members of the sceptical school. Some years later, Elias of Alexandria (6<sup>th</sup> century), who succeeded Olympiodoros as the head of the Alexandrian philosophical school, seems to have adopted the same terminology, if the work *In Aristotelis categorias commentarium* is to be attributed to him and not to David the Philosopher (see above), who in turn succeeded Elias. Finally, Agathias (ca. 532 - ca. 580) praised the “ephectic school” and both Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus explicitly for their dismissive attitude to useless and endless debates over unresolvable questions.<sup>17</sup> Note that it is not clear whether Agathias was a sceptic himself.

In the seventh century, the Byzantine poet and liturgist Cosmas of Jerusalem<sup>18</sup> gave an explanation of Gregory of Nazianzus’ negative comment on the Pyrrhonist position—with a significant, if brief, reference to the *tropi*, the problem of the criterion and the distinction between Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism—so that he must have had a decent acquaintance with the writings of the school, even if he does not mention Sextus explicitly. Two centuries later, we finally find Photios (ca. 810, died after 893) including in his *Bibliotheca* some first-hand information about Aenesidemus’ *Pyrrhonian Writings* that are now invaluable, since the original text is lost.<sup>19</sup> That he did not rely on Sextus may be just a matter of chance, or perhaps a sign that he considered the latter only a less interesting, secondary source, compared to Aenesidemus. We do not have a clue. A brief reference to Sextus and Pyrrho can also be found in the *Prolegomena in Hermogenis librum perii idewh* (see TLG) by John Sikeliotas (fl. ca. 1000), and in the *Suda* (ca. 1000). The lexicon, which compiled other secondary literature, soon became a popular text and hence one of the primary sources of information on Pyrrho and Sextus.

To summarise, Western Europe was losing touch with the sceptical (and especially the Pyrrhonian) literature for want of linguistic skills, epistemological interests and primary sources, and because of the increasing theologization of its philosophical investigations.

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<sup>17</sup> Agathias, *Historiarum Libri II*, 129 in PG 88, col. 1394 and now Agathias [1967], 79.

<sup>18</sup> Cosmae Hierosolymitani *Commentarii in Sancti Gregorii Nazianzeni Carmina*, Carmen CXIX, PG 38, col. 555-556, which refers to PG 37, col. 684.

<sup>19</sup> Photios [1962] vol. III.119-123. Janáček [1976] supports von Arnim’s suggestion that Aenesidemus, who is Photios’ source, was also the source of Clement of Alexandria’s remarks on scepticism, and shows that Aenesidemus was also the source of Sextus Empiricus. The hypothesis is extended in Janáček [1980], where Janáček maintains that Diogenes Laertius, Sextus Empiricus and Hippolytus can all be shown to have relied on Aenesidemus’ lost works.

Byzantine Europe was in a slightly better predicament.

A final remark must concern the coeval influence of Pyrrhonism on Arabic writers. The field is still to be fully explored but, in this case too, there seems to have been a wider availability of original texts than in Western countries.<sup>20</sup> A philosopher like Ghazzali (ca. 1058-1111), with his *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, exercised a direct influence on the work of the Hebrew philosopher Judah Halevi (ca. 1085-1141)—a key figure in twelfth century Jewish thought, whose *Kusari* displays an interesting use of sceptical arguments against Aristotelian philosophy and in favour of religious faith—and some conjecture that he might have acted as a cultural bridge between Greek scepticism and the later critical philosophy of Nicholas of Autrecourt, especially as far as the analysis of the notion of causality is concerned.<sup>21</sup>

We have now reached the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. When medieval philosophers now take some notice of sceptical themes, this is often connected with knowledge of Academic sources, thanks to Cicero and Augustine. Two authors are indicative: John of Salisbury (1125-1180) and Henry of Ghent (who taught in Paris, and died in 1293).

Some uses of scepticism have often represented a background condition for a fideistic defence of religious faith. *Mutatis mutandis*, this applies to sceptical trends in Arabic and Jewish culture as well as to some anti-intellectualist inclinations in European philosophy during the Middle Ages. John of Salisbury, displays such a religious concern in his explicit attempt to revalue some moderate form of scepticism. According to him, the ambition of reason should be moderated by a reasonable distrust in the cognitive powers of man, unhelped by God. Intellectual modesty suggests suspending judgment on the *dubitabilia sapienti*. John's sceptical sympathies have a Ciceronian root. He shares with Cicero an explicit aversion to any too radical form of scepticism. In his writings, there is no awareness of the epistemological challenge best represented by Pyrrhonism and Sextus' works.<sup>22</sup>

If scepticism is usually opposed to Aristotelianism, sometimes the metaphysical dualism and the distrust in perceptual knowledge embedded in Plato's philosophy have

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<sup>20</sup> Baffioni [1981], vol. I, 415-434, who corrects and improves on Horovitz' theses concerning the diffusion of Sextus' writings in Arabic philosophy, providing translations of several relevant passages from Ibn Hazm, Shahrastani and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, cf. Horovitz [1915].

<sup>21</sup> Wolfson [1969], 234-238. On Ghazzali's influence on Nicholas of Autrecourt, see the critical note in Van Den Bergh [1954], vol. I, XXX. See also Weinberg [1969], chap. V.

<sup>22</sup> Liebeschütz [1950], 74-90.

prompted radical forms of criticism of human cognition, and hence paved the way to forms of sceptical doubt. A century after John of Salisbury, Henry of Ghent, following Augustine, discussed and criticized issues that have a sceptical tone for us.<sup>23</sup> And as in Augustine, “the refutation of these arguments rested upon the acceptance of a Platonic conception of human knowledge which granted to the Sceptics at least part of their own arguments” (Gilson [1955], 447). Obviously, the major source of information was still the Latin and Academic tradition.

In the fourteenth century, there begins to develop an initial form of what one may consider nowadays a truly sceptical concern from an epistemological perspective. It is a graft from the sceptical tree probably unaware of its Greek roots<sup>24</sup> and, for want of any substantial evidence so far, with no direct bearing on the sceptical debate that will flourish in the seventeenth century. The late medieval debate on proto-sceptical issues was connected rather with epistemological investigations resulting from factors such as a critical approach to Aristotle’s texts, the spread of logical studies and hence the parallel debate upon the paradoxes and *insolubilia*, the coming to maturity of the controversy upon the nature of universals, and the discussion concerning the implications of the doctrine of the total contingency of the world. Ockhamism, for example, by developing to its final consequences the presupposition of God’s boundless omnipotence, could raise doubts about the nature of reality and the power of reason that would find a conceptual echo in Descartes’ *Meditations*. If God was really omnipotent, nothing was necessarily as it was; everything could have been otherwise. The possibility that things may in fact differ completely from the way they appear could be seriously and consistently entertained.<sup>25</sup> It is in this cultural context that we find Nicholas of Autrecourt (a fellow of the house of Sorbonne between 1320 and 1327) working on what can be correctly defined as sceptical themes.

Nicholas has attracted a significant amount of scholarly attention,<sup>26</sup> and quite rightly so, seeing that he is perhaps the only medieval philosopher to have advocated a sceptical approach to philosophy, although in the end his aim was certainly not Pyrrhonic. Was

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<sup>23</sup> On the sceptical problem of certainty in this context, see Schmitt [1963], 231-58 and Schmitt [1976], 309-312.

<sup>24</sup> On scepticism and medieval philosophy, cf. Jourdain [1888]; Schmitt [1972b]; Porro [1994]; Cavini [1977]; Frede [1988] and Michalski [1969].

<sup>25</sup> On Ockham and the sceptical problem, see the following note and, above all Richards [1968] Mccord [1970], 389-98, with further bibliography.

<sup>26</sup> See Floridi [2002].

Nicholas somehow exposed, perhaps only indirectly, to the doctrines presented by Sextus in his compendia?<sup>27</sup> Even though we know too little about his life and works to be able to do any more than entertain such a possibility, it should be noted that his first attempt to present scepticism as a respectable philosophical position was paralleled, on the literary side, by two significant events: a Byzantine revival of interest in Sextus' texts, and the production, in Western Europe, of three copies of the first Latin translation of the *Outlines* known so far. It seems that these manuscripts had no diffusion or influence within the intellectual community, but the fact that three copies of the same translation survive indicates that our Pyrrhonist philosopher had finally begun to arouse at least some textual interest. As for the Byzantine context, we have seen that Greek scholars in Eastern Europe had never completely lost sight of the sceptical literature, enjoying direct access to a wider selection of Pyrrhonian writings. To some extent, the same holds true for the twelfth century as well. However, possible continuity in the availability of Pyrrhonian texts is one thing; philosophical interest in them and discussion of their arguments is obviously quite another. Byzantine culture eventually showed a fascinating revival of the intellectual debate about scepticism only in the fourteenth century. Religious controversies, and a renewal of literary studies, are probably behind this recovery of sceptical issues, which always occurs in negative terms. Thus, Theodore Metochites (1270-1332) and his pupil Nicephorus Gregoras (ca. 1290/94-1358/61) study Sextus Empiricus' writings and condemn his arguments because they represent a disease that has already begun to corrupt the Church.<sup>28</sup> Gregory Palamas (ca. 1296 – 1359), who argued that knowledge of God can be obtained only by a mind enlighten by grace, shared a similar view and an equal dislike for Pyrrhonism, despite his profound disagreement with Nicephorus Gregoras. And in the same period, Nicolas Cabasilas (ca. 1290 - after 1363)—on other occasions a strong opponent of Gregoras—devotes an entire work (Cabasilas [1899]) to the refutation of scepticism and Sextus Empiricus himself, although from the *Introduction*, which is the only part of the refutation still extant, it seems that he had only an indirect acquaintance with Sextus' writings.<sup>29</sup> Byzantine scholars and theologians, though divided by many internal controversies, could easily see Pyrrhonism as a common enemy. They felt the

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Weinberg [1969], 83-84.

<sup>28</sup> Gregoras [1830], XIX, 1, 5-10, 930. Guillard [1926] 79, and 206-7 provides relevant information on the Byzantine revival of interest in Sextus Empiricus during the fourteenth century.

urge to refute the sceptical theses even though, as far as we know, no sceptical school was active at the time, nor were there individual philosophers advocating scepticism. One may wonder whether this was the beginning of an epistemological renaissance that never fully developed in that context.

### **The Renaissance**

The analysis of the exchange of information about ancient scepticism and Sextus' writings in particular, occurring between the Greek scholars who came to Italy and the Italian humanists, can begin with Georgius Gemistus Plethon (ca. 1360-1452). Plethon knew and was strongly adverse to scepticism, and in his *Treatise upon the Laws* he attacked both Pyrrho's and Protagoras' doctrines in a single set of objections, although clearly distinguishing between them.<sup>30</sup> We know little about Plethon's sources, but when he visited Italy in 1438-9, during the Council of Ferrara-Florence, he was in contact with many scholars and might have spread information about Pyrrhonian doctrines, if not Sextus' works themselves. Both Francesco Filelfo (1398-1481) and the Cardinal Bessarion (1403-1472), to mention only two humanists who owned Sextus manuscripts, were among his correspondents.

Similar remarks apply to George of Trebizond (1395-1472/3) and Janus Lascaris (1445-1534). The former endorses Gregory's condemnation of Pyrrhonism as a Greek affliction, leading to heretical thought.<sup>31</sup> Lascaris provides us with information both on the presence of a manuscript containing Sextus Empiricus in the library of Lorenzo de' Medici before 1490, and on his own copy containing *M.* Lascaris' own copy, now Paris, BN, gr. 2081, bears not only his annotations, but also those of Matthaeus Devaris, his pupil and then secretary. During the time he worked in the Vatican Library, Devaris fully annotated both Vat. gr. 1338 and Vat. gr. 217 (Vatican City, BAV) and made two retroversions into Greek of Latin passages from Hervetus' Latin edition of Sextus (1569) which were lacking in Vat. gr. 1338 (Vatican City, BAV).

The different reasons that lead scholars to take an interest in Sextus' writings have been already discussed, and Devaris provides an instructive case. He died in 1581, but in a

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<sup>29</sup> Note that the entries in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, in the *Enciclopedia Cattolica* and in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* all warn the reader that sometimes Nicolas Cabasilas is confused with his uncle Nil Cabasilas. Since none of the three works altogether agrees with one another, the dates provided here are those given by the *Oxford Dictionary*, which is the most recent of the three.

<sup>30</sup> Plethon [1966], 37-43: "Sur les doctrines opposées de Protagoras et de Pyrrho".

<sup>31</sup> George of trebizond [1984], 489.

Greek grammar published posthumously by his nephew in 1588 we find him using Sextus' writings as one of his linguistic sources, a procedure that was followed in the same period by Stephanus, who exploited Sextus' *Adversus Grammaticos* for his edition of the *Thesaurus* (1572).

Since there is too little evidence in favour of an earlier reception of Sextus Empiricus in the writings of Francesco Patrizi da Siena (1413-1494), Francesco Filelfo has been usually acknowledged as the first Italian scholar to have taken a significant interest in Sextus, at least as a literary source. It is well known that Filelfo mentioned Sextus Empiricus on different occasions in his works and in his correspondence. If one considers that the collection of Filelfo's letters was a sort of Renaissance "best seller", which circulated in at least nine different editions between 1454 and 1564, it becomes obvious that his remarks on Sextus Empiricus must have reached a much larger readership than the small group of scholars to whom his letters were originally addressed.

Having reached full maturity of thought, scholastic philosophers could certainly have exploited the radical attacks on knowledge embodied in the sceptical challenge, especially if they had been aware of the arguments expounded by Sextus Empiricus. The following century provides almost the converse picture. Humanists knew about many sceptical sources, including Sextus, but few took a philosophical interest in scepticism. The recovery and diffusion of manuscripts belonging to the sceptical tradition was followed, if not driven, by an initial reception informed by antiquarian, historical and philological concerns. In particular, Sextus' writings were initially read as literary texts and erudite sources.

The documentary use of Sextus, based on the more general policy of attempting to recover the classical past, anticipated the philosophical impact that his work was going to have later on and it is well exemplified in Politian (1454-1494). Politian compiled a sort of abridged history of philosophy by collecting quotations and excerpts from the entire corpus of Sextus Empiricus' works, exploiting especially those initial paragraphs in which Sextus sketches the position of his adversaries.

Regarding the use of Sextus Empiricus as an historical source of information, it remains to be noted that this paved the way to a debate on the objective nature of historical knowledge in the middle of the sixteenth century.<sup>32</sup> Depending on the level of reading, Sextus' works could be considered a useful source of information about past philosophies or

a critical warning against the ultimate unreliability of any claim to truth. Francesco Robortello (1516-1567), for example, defended the possibility of writing history against Sextus' arguments, in his *De historica facultate disputatio* (Robortello [1548]).

The recovery and diffusion of Sextus' texts, although caused by literary, erudite, antiquarian and philological interests, soon led to, and became intertwined with the philosophical study of the sceptical doctrines, and gained further momentum from this theoretical interest. It was initially a matter of ethical and religious interpretations, also related to linguistic issues such as the interpretation of the Bible, the discussion of exegetical techniques, and the debate on free will and predestination. Scepticism's real essence is the defence of a constantly open, finely balanced, critical stance towards any dogmatic (in the common sense of the word) position. It is not an easy attitude, and the sceptic is usually a negative hero, a Samson who dies with all the Philistines when he makes the temple of certainties collapse. The discomfort of intelligence when confronted by a complex, multifarious, ever-changing world, elusive and scarcely intelligible because radically "other", is counterbalanced by the awareness of one's own moral detachment, intellectual integrity and hence superiority with respect to the Dogmatist (the believer), whom the sceptic considers to be philosophically naive. However, individual tolerance goes hand in hand with a lack of interest in the world and its destiny. Scepticism is an individualistic philosophy, which needs some subjective responsibility and "social space"—the possibility of living a private life without necessarily interacting publicly with other people—to develop its non-dogmatic tranquillity. Once the devastating critique of human reason began to spread, scepticism became, as we have seen, a two-edged sword. It could be used to challenge any ultimate, fixed system of universal truths, including religious ones, thus opening the way for agnosticism, freethinking and libertinism, as the Emperor Julian had already suspected, or it could be used to undermine confidence in any claim to knowledge in favour of faith and ethical conservatism. The "Christianization" of scepticism had medieval roots and Ciceronian influences in John of Salisbury. Scepticism was taken as an ally of Pauline anti-intellectualism, a weapon within either a fideistic or, more rarely, an apologetic strategy, as later on in Pierre-Daniel Huet. A similar attitude was shared by the group of scholars and philosophers belonging to Savonarola's circle, especially Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469-1533), who read Sextus in Greek and used his arguments extensively in his *Examen*

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<sup>32</sup> For a valuable analysis of the use of Sextus Empiricus in the early history of philosophical historiography,



*vanitatis*.<sup>33</sup> He helped to disseminate information about Sextus Empiricus among his contemporaries. According to Gianfrancesco, Savonarola had been suggesting to his followers that they read Sextus Empiricus as an introduction to Christian faith.

The interpretation of scepticism, in all its versions, as an anti-intellectualist tool and an introduction to religious faith gained ground over the years, and acquired some prominence during the sixteenth century, motivating some of the efforts by translators and readers of Sextus. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, Paéz de Castro, Stephanus, Hervetus and Montaigne all underlined, though in different ways and with various degrees of clarity, the ethical and religious aspect of their interest in the sceptical literature, looking at the suspension of epistemic commitment either from a counter-reformist perspective (De Castro and Hervet) or from a more humanistic and liberal point of view (Stephanus and Montaigne). The same holds true for the debate between Erasmus (d. 1536) and Luther (1483-1546) on the topic.

The gradual growth in the number of Sextus manuscripts available, and the initial development of Christian and ethical uses of the Pyrrhonian arguments was paralleled by a geographical shift from Italy towards the North of Europe. During the first half of the sixteenth century, sceptical doctrines found their most favourable reception in France, where a more epistemological interpretation began to develop. The spread of information about sceptical ideas beyond the Alps was such a large-scale phenomenon that in 1546 Rabelais could make Gargantua remark, in the *Tiers Livre*, that “[...] now the most learned and most prudent philosophers are not ashamed to be seen entering in at the porches and facades of the schools of the Pyrrhonian, Aporrothetic, Skeptic, and the Ephetic sects.”. Rabelais himself mocked a sceptical dialogue between Panurge and Trouillogan, using technical expressions close to the vocabulary of the sceptical and dialectical tradition. His parody is a clear sign that knowledge of the relevant literature was becoming more and more common at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

The epistemological debate on sceptical doubts, on the nature of empirical knowledge and on scientific certainty would develop primarily at the beginning of the seventeenth century, once Sextus’ writings and the recovery of scepticism had deeply affected French philosophy (Van Leeuwen [1963]). Jacopo Sadoletto (1477-1547) attacked the sceptics (Sadoletto [1538], 652), but Henricus Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1468-1535)

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cf. Malusa [1981].

defended them. Willibald Pirckheimer (1470-1530) translated some of Lucian's works and wrote an unpublished *Defence of Astrology* against Pico's *Disputationum adversus astrologos libri XII* and Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's *De rerum praenotione libri XII*, in which he attacked Sextus Empiricus. Finally, Erasmus and Luther, to mention only two more important names, also showed a distinct awareness of sceptical doctrines.

In 1562, on the basis of a humanistic, tolerant and "anti-dogmatic" interpretation of the sceptical theses, Henricus Stephanus (Henri Estienne, 1528-1598) published his Latin translation of the *Outlines*. By publishing the Latin translation of the *Outlines* without the Greek text, Stephanus was obviously addressing the educated public. And given the level of popularity already reached by Sextus, it is not surprising that his translation was an editorial success, though scholars disagreed on its value. Fabricius, as well as Petrus Faber long before, criticized and yet largely adopted Stephanus' translation, while both Casaubon and Huet were more favourable. The text was republished in 1569, this time together with Hervetus' Latin translation of *Adversus Mathematicos*.

Gentianus Hervetus (Gentian Hervet, 1499-1584) was a scholar and a Catholic priest. He worked in Rome for Charles, Cardinal de Lorraine, with whom he went to the Council of Trent in 1562-63. It is to him that the translation is dedicated (note that Guy de Brués had also dedicated his anti-Academic dialogues to him). Hervetus meant to carry on the process of "Christianization" of scepticism, where sceptical arguments are used to confound philosophers and heretical thinkers too critical of religious authority and dogmas. In his hands, scepticism became a powerful weapon for religious controversy, in defence of Catholic orthodoxy.

Both Latin translations of Sextus exercised a significant influence on the culture of the period almost immediately. Montaigne (1533-1592) is the most famous and significant example.

Montaigne acquired his knowledge of Pyrrhonism through Diogenes Laertius, both in Latin and in Greek, Lucian, Aulus Gellius, Cicero, Politian, Galen and above all from Stephanus' translation of *PH* (Villey [1933]), which we need to remember also contained a translation of Laertius' *Life of Pyrrho* and of Galen's *De optimo docendi genere*.<sup>34</sup> Besides, Montaigne also owned copies of Guy de Brués' *Dialogues* (Brues [1953]) and of Agrippa's

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<sup>33</sup> On Gianfrancesco Pico's interest in scepticism, see Cao [1994].

<sup>34</sup> Montaigne probably studied the 1562 edition, since there are no references to *M* in his writings, cf. Villey [1933], 242-3 and 290.

*De Incertitudine et Vanitate Scientiarum* (Agrippa [1974]).

Montaigne probably never went back to Sextus' *Outlines*. Villey [1933] indicates that there are no references to Sextus and Pyrrhonian philosophy datable after 1580. And on the basis of a close analysis of Montaigne's quotations from Cicero's *Academica*, Limbrick [1977] has convincingly argued that, between 1580 and 1588, while writing the third book of the *Essays*, Montaigne's interest in scepticism acquired a more "Ciceronian" nature, inclining towards Academic scepticism, although Montaigne himself may not have drawn a sharp distinction between the two brands of scepticism.

Much has been written on Montaigne's scepticism, and this is not the place to re-analyse the topic. It is clear that Montaigne's debt to Stephanus' translation and interpretation of Sextus was notable.<sup>35</sup> The *Apology of Raimond Sebond* (1580) still interprets scepticism in a deeply ethical and Christian manner, as a means to moderate intellectual ambition, but this is not all. It should also be emphasized that the text already anticipates some of the epistemological possibilities implicit in the sceptical challenge, and hence can provide a nice and not too arbitrary threshold between the stage at which we can speak of the recovery of ancient scepticism, and the stage at which ancient scepticism is fully re-installed in the lively context of philosophical debate. It has been suggested that, by reading Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne moved from the logical and epistemological arguments of Pyrrhonism to his own ethical context (Brush [1966]; see also Schiffman [1984]). Yet this interpretation looks at Montaigne from a Cartesian perspective and may be slightly anachronistic, for it does not take into account the fundamental fact that, until that time, the feeble tradition of philosophical interpretations of the sceptical literature had been mainly one of ethical and religious readings. Montaigne was in line with his time. What should rather be said is that, in Montaigne, logical and epistemological themes already start to emerge, although they are still framed within a consistently pragmatic and religious picture. The fact that Montaigne reduced the case against reasoning or logic almost completely to Aenesidemus' *tropi* of the diversity of opinion and the unreliability of the senses is in keeping with the culture of the time. The fact that he also discussed the problem of the criterion (*diallelus*) at length is a step forward into the purely epistemological debate to come. Interpreted on the basis of his quotations, Montaigne is a humanist; but it is sufficient to read one of the last sentences of the *Apology*—"We do not have any communication with Being"—to understand his position

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<sup>35</sup> See Gray [1977].

as the last of the great Renaissance philosophers. No scholastic or humanist philosopher could have felt such extraneousness. Modern philosophy was going to be based on such a feeling of being a foreigner to the world.

### **Conclusion**

If during the fifteenth and sixteenth century the epistemological debate on scepticism, as we understand it now, was largely confined to the background, this was mainly because humanistic culture was not the right context within which such a radical attack on knowledge could flourish. As far as the principal interests of the humanists were concerned—i.e. literary and linguistic studies, Christian ethics and the recovery of the past—sceptical works attracted limited but not insignificant attention. A scholarly culture like that of the humanists, interested in the history of thought and texts and still far from any idea of, let alone a faith in, the endless progress of scientific knowledge, was not likely to be deeply and seriously affected by sceptical arguments at the epistemological level, as Descartes would be.

The correct way to understand the history of scepticism from Francesco Filelfo to Henricus Stephanus is to focus on the role played by humanists in recovering the knowledge of Sextus, rather than on the limited philosophical use of such writings in those years. In order to regain a dramatic role in the philosophical tradition, the contents of the *Outlines* and of *Adversus Mathematicos* had to wait until the epistemological developments at the end of the Renaissance, when Sextus began to gain some relevance in the discussion of astrological and historiographical topics. But it was only when philosophers were confronted by a vastly increased amount of scientific knowledge that they presented a fully epistemological interpretation of the cognitive enterprise. Only then did the sceptical attitude gain all its destructive power, acquiring those specifically epistemological features that we still attribute to it nowadays. After Montaigne, Pyrrhonism (rather than Academic scepticism) was less and less often interpreted as a way of life and an ethical philosophy, coming to play the role of a dialectical pole in the epistemological inquiry that would be fully exploited by Descartes.

In 1621, the first edition of the Greek text of both *PH* and *M* was finally published. Sextus' writings had become a classic, which no serious library could afford to lack. Exactly twenty years after the publication of Sextus in Greek, in 1641, there appeared in Paris the first edition of Descartes' *Meditations*. Descartes wrote that he had read some Scholastic authors and found them exceedingly boring. He had then dipped into some sceptical treatises (Descartes [1972], IX, 103) and discovered in them a remarkably interesting procedure. In

the *Meditations*, Descartes was presenting his thoughts about the foundation of human knowledge in terms of a reflection on the most systematic form of doubt, something that even Sextus Empiricus would have appreciated as astonishingly radical. He argued that only by defeating the very possibility of doubt could one be certain that science would be worthy of all the efforts already being made to advance it. He attempted to show that subjective reflection on the very activity of doubt could provide such a foundation. In this case, the originality of Descartes consisted in taking the sceptical arguments seriously from a purely epistemological perspective, without either becoming a sceptic himself, like Francisco Sanchez (1550-1623), or subjecting them to a theological, Christian or ethical reading, like Pico della Mirandola, Guy de Brués, (fl. 1554-1562) Montaigne or Charron (1541-1603). The dualism required in order to entertain doubt seriously, the epistemological change brought about by the new scientific discoveries such as those of Copernicus and Galileo, the new geographical and astronomical explorations, the crisis of the Aristotelian-Scholastic paradigm in epistemology, the focus on the individual subject as the element on which a new theory of knowledge could hinge, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation and the end of the Catholic monopoly in matters of religious faith and intellectual education, and the recovery of past philosophies with their irreconcilable disagreements were among the factors that had opened a new era in the history of scepticism, an era in which we still find ourselves. During the seventeenth century, sceptical questioning acquired the value of a valuable instrument of theoretical investigation in epistemology. The contents of Sextus' works overshadowed any other text in the sceptical tradition and became the target of endless refutations, which often missed the ethical value of the Pyrrhonian position and dealt with sceptical objections and arguments as if they were puzzles to solve, tricks to be unmasked, or traps to be avoided. It is possible that Descartes never read Sextus' work, but this is less crucial than it may seem because, by the time the *Meditations* were published, we should no longer speak of the influence of sceptical arguments on modern philosophy, but rather take them to be an integral part of it.

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