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The Role of Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy: A Critique of Popkin's "Sceptical Crisis" and a Study of Descartes and Hume

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The Role of Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy:
A Critique of Popkin's "Sceptical Crisis" and a Study of Descartes and Hume

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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Abbreviations

- A Descartes, René. *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*. Edited and Translated by Roger Ariew. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000. Cited by page number following the citation of AT.
- AC Descartes, René. *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*. Edited and Translated by Roger Ariew and Donald Cress. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006. Cited by page number following the citation of AT.
- AT Descartes, René. *Œuvres de Descartes*. Edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery. Paris, 1910. Cited by volume and page numbers.
- CSM Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volumes I–II*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1984–1985. Cited by volume and page numbers following the citation of AT.
- CSMK Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume III, The Correspondence*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Cited by page number following the citation of AT.
- EHU Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Stephen Buckle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Cited by page number.
- SBN Hume, David. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975. Cited by page number following the citation of EHU.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978. Cited by page number following the citation of T.
- T Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Cited by page number.

Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to provide a critique of the idea that skepticism was the driving force in the development of early modern thought. Historian of philosophy Richard Popkin introduced this thesis in the 1950s and elaborated on it over the next five decades, and recent scholarship shows that it has become an increasingly accepted interpretation. I begin with a study of the relevant historical antecedents—the ancient skeptical traditions of which early modern thinkers were aware—Pyrrhonism and Academicism. Then I discuss the influence of skepticism on three pre-Cartesians: Francisco Sanches, Michel de Montaigne, and Pierre Charron. Basing my arguments on an informed understanding of both ancient Greek skepticism and some of the writings of these philosophers, I contend that it is inaccurate to predominantly characterize Sanches, Montaigne, and Charron as skeptics. To support his thesis about the singular influence of skepticism on early modern thought, Popkin says that René Descartes' metaphysical philosophy was formed as a response to a skeptical threat and that Descartes ultimately conceded to the force of skepticism. He also argues that David Hume was a Pyrrhonist *par excellence*. I disagree with Popkin's claims. I argue that Descartes was not as deeply affected by skepticism as Popkin suggests and that it is inaccurate to characterize Hume as a Pyrrhonist. By offering this critique, I hope to make clear to the readers two things: first, that Popkin's thesis, though it is both enticing and generally accepted by many scholars, is questionable with regard to its plausibility; second, that the arguments I present in this dissertation reveal that further research into the role of skepticism in early modern philosophy is in order.

Introduction

What role did skepticism have in the development of early modern philosophy? This is the question that guides my research for this dissertation. Until recently, there had not been much scholarly discussion about the status of skeptical philosophy as a significant factor in the formation of early modern thought. There is—and has been for some time—extensive secondary literature on Cartesian and Humean skepticism, but as for well-researched and detailed arguments that favor the thoroughgoing influence of skepticism on early modern thinkers in general, until the mid-twentieth century there were scarcely any that garnered significant attention. However, in the 1950s, historian of philosophy Richard Popkin introduced a bold and novel thesis: that skepticism in the form of a Pyrrhonian crisis that arose in the sixteenth century was primarily responsible for the formation of both early modern thought and modern philosophy as we know it.

In his most well-known work, *The History of Scepticism (HS)*, which was first published in 1960, Popkin presents his thesis that skepticism—particularly Pyrrhonism—played a vital role in the development of early modern philosophy.¹ As support for his claim, he offers interpretations of the works of a series of philosophers, including Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza, all of whom he argues were deeply affected by Pyrrhonian skepticism. Popkin even

¹ Popkin's *The History of Scepticism* was originally published in 1960 as *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*. In 1979 the book was expanded and published as *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*. The final version, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, was published in 2003 and is the text to which I refer in this dissertation.

contends that some of these early modern philosophers who have been traditionally viewed as dogmatists were actually skeptics. In *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, a book that includes a selection of his articles on David Hume's skepticism, Popkin adds to his distinctive story about skepticism by characterizing Hume as the perfect Pyrrhonist.

Since its publication in 1960, Popkin's *History of Scepticism* has had a considerable influence on our appreciation of the role that skepticism played in the development of early modern philosophy. According to many of today's scholars in the field, Popkin's research has irrevocably altered the way in which we understand the relationship between skeptical philosophy and early modern thought. For example, in his essay, "The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times," published in 1983, Popkin's colleague C. B. Schmitt says that "the development of skepticism in the early modern period certainly cannot be overlooked, as the research of the past thirty years by Richard Popkin amply demonstrates."² To cite another example of the numerous head nods to Popkin that are observable in the scholarly literature: in her article, "Hume's Scepticism Revisited," Zuzana Parusniková says, "We owe a lot to Richard Popkin for linking ancient scepticism to the rise of early modern philosophy. He initiated a wide-ranging research into the revival of Pyrrhonism, and his excellent philosophical and historical scholarship proposed the idea that Pyrrhonism had a constitutive role in this process."³ Popkin's work has been highly influential, and both the breadth and the depth of his research are indeed commendable. Yet, despite Popkin's strong influence—and because of it—I think it is incumbent upon us to critically examine his story and the arguments contained therein in order to determine whether or not they are plausible.

² C. B. Schmitt, "The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times," in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 240.

³ Zuzana Parusniková, "Hume's Scepticism Revisited," *Philosophy* 89, no. 4 (2014): 594.

I. Popkin and I: Our Respective Motivations

In the Preface to the *History of Scepticism*, Popkin reflects on his own history with skepticism. He says that as a college student he discovered the works of Sextus Empiricus and was immediately drawn to them. He explains that at that time he was also gripped by the writings of the great Scottish skeptic, David Hume. Popkin tells us that he discerned the obvious influence of Sextus Empiricus on Hume and so began looking for connections and similarities between the ideas and arguments contained in the works of Sextus and those in the writings of early modern philosophers before Hume's time.⁴ As he says elsewhere, "Thus was I set off on the quest."⁵ Popkin's research provided him with a litany of such connections and similarities. In *HS*, he argues that a Pyrrhonian "sceptical crisis" was at the heart of the development of early modern thought and that this crisis affected scores of philosophers, including Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza.

Popkin was motivated by his reading of Sextus Empiricus to seek out evidence of Pyrrhonism's influence on early modern thinkers. Under a similar set of circumstances, I experienced something quite different. I was introduced to Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* a few years ago while participating in a graduate seminar on skepticism, libertinism, and fideism in the context of early modern philosophy, and I too was intrigued. However, Sextus' description of the Pyrrhonian way of life—which includes the regular practices of equipollent reasoning and the suspension of judgment as well as the attainment of tranquility that naturally follows from those practices—seemed clearly at odds with the works I had read by early modern philosophers like

⁴ Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), vii–ix.

⁵ Richard H. Popkin, "The Role of Scepticism in Modern Philosophy Reconsidered," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31, no. 4 (October 1993): 508.

Descartes, Hobbes, and even Hume. In that course, which was led by Roger Ariew, I was also introduced to Popkin's *History of Scepticism*. Noticing that many things seemed obviously amiss with Popkin's interpretation, I set off on my own quest to determine the ways in which Popkin's story misrepresents or exaggerates the influence of skepticism on early modern philosophers.

II. Popkin's "Sceptical Crisis"

"I began to formulate my view that modern philosophy developed out of a sceptical crisis that challenged all previous knowledge, a crisis that developed in the sixteenth century."⁶ In the Preface to the *History of Scepticism*, this is how Popkin describes the "sceptical crisis," a term that he coined and a concept whose meaning he spent decades examining and uncovering. In the way Popkin presents it here and in other parts of *HS*, this "sceptical crisis" sounds like a powerful idea that was first sparked off by some kind of event in the sixteenth century and then gradually but ultimately both took hold of philosophers and became their primary concern. However, in other parts of *HS*, "sceptical crisis" and the related variants of the term are presented as less of a sweeping intellectual movement and more of an individual or subjective conflict. For example, in his discussion of Michel de Montaigne and the "new Pyrrhonists," Popkin describes Montaigne's essay, the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, as "that amazing product of his own personal *crise pyrrhonnienne* [Pyrrhonian crisis]."⁷ Yet, in other areas of *HS*, Popkin characterizes the "sceptical crisis" as a particular ideology that some thinkers attempted to impress upon others. For instance, in a chapter that explores the effects of Pyrrhonism on French Calvinists, Popkin says, "The kind of sceptical crisis [François] Veron was trying to create for his Calvinist

⁶ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, viii.

⁷ Popkin, *History*, 47.

opponents was somewhat different from that of Montaigne and Charron.”⁸ All of this is to say that Popkin’s term, “sceptical crisis,” is ambiguous and that its lack of clarity opens the door to criticism.

III. Defining Skepticism, Naming a Skeptic

A problem that arises with any discussion about the role of skepticism in a particular historical context is that of accurately defining the term, “skepticism,” along with its related variants. What does it mean to be a skeptic? Typically, when someone says that he is a skeptic or that he is skeptical about something, we take him to mean that he has doubts. Is this an adequate way to characterize a skeptic? Surely being a skeptic means more than just being doubtful about this or that. As my professor, Roger Ariew, has said to me, “You can be skeptical about astrology without being a skeptic.” Perhaps to be a skeptic means to doubt not just some things but everything. Yet, to call someone a skeptic simply for being filled with doubts also leaves something to be desired, especially if we consider the elaborate accounts of ancient skepticism presented by Sextus Empiricus and Cicero.

For our purposes, what does it mean to be a skeptical philosopher in early modern Europe? Does the way that early modern philosophers characterize certain individuals affect how we describe them? To take a hypothetical example: if all of his contemporaries had deemed Descartes to be a skeptic, should we likewise consider him to be a skeptic? What of the views about skepticism held by Descartes himself? Descartes characterizes the skeptics as those kinds

⁸ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 70.

of people who primarily doubt everything.⁹ Should his one-sided description of the skeptics and his attitude towards them influence how we define skepticism in this context?

Recognizing many difficulties like these, some of which seem insurmountable, I have taken the approach of judging an early modern philosopher's skepticism or the lack thereof by looking back to what the ancient Greek skeptics—the Pyrrhonists and the Academics—said about their respective philosophies. I have asked myself, “Are there enough similarities between this philosopher and the Pyrrhonists or the Academics to plausibly claim that he is a skeptic?” I have found that this approach constitutes a good standard for judgment, especially if we take into account the fact that early modern philosophers like Montaigne, Descartes, and Hume were intimately familiar with the ancient texts.¹⁰

According to Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrhonism denotes a way of life that naturally leads to tranquility. By practicing equipollence and the suspension of judgment with regard to claims made about reality and by living according to the laws and customs of their society, the Pyrrhonists found that they became tranquil.¹¹ According to Cicero, Academicism does not purport to offer a way of life that leads to tranquility or any other ethical end. Academic philosophy is primarily epistemological. The Academic skeptics found no justifiable criterion of truth, and so they argued against the dogmatic claims to certain knowledge made by the philosophers of other contemporary schools. They determined that although nothing can be

⁹ Cf. AT III, 433–434; CSMK, 196–197.

¹⁰ For excellent histories and analyses of the influence of skepticism on philosophers from the Middle Ages to Descartes, see Luciano Floridi, “The Rediscovery and Posthumous Influence of Scepticism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 267–287 and Charles Larmore, “Scepticism,” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy: Volume II*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1145–1192.

¹¹ Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, ed. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Sextus defines equipollence as “equality with regard to being convincing or unconvincing: none of the conflicting accounts takes precedent over any other as being more convincing.” (Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 5.)

known, some claims and arguments seem to be more likely than others. Thus, the Academics relied on probabilistic reasoning.¹² If we keep in mind some of the characteristics of Pyrrhonism and Academicism as well as the marks that distinguish one tradition from the other, we might think twice before casually placing descriptive terms like “Pyrrhonian,” “Academic,” or “skeptic” on early modern thinkers.

IV. An Outline of the Project

The aim of this dissertation is to provide a critique of the idea that skepticism was the driving force in the development of early modern thought. In Chapter One, I begin by presenting an overview of the two skeptical traditions in the West: Pyrrhonism and Academicism. I examine some of the writings of three pre-Cartesian intellectuals, Francisco Sanches, Michel de Montaigne, and Pierre Charron, and argue contra Richard Popkin that it is inaccurate to primarily characterize them as skeptics. In Chapter Two, I present Popkin’s views about Descartes and skepticism, including the claims that Descartes was responding to a skeptical threat and that he ultimately conceded to the force of skepticism. By way of an analysis of Descartes’ writings, I reveal the implausibility of Popkin’s arguments. In Chapter Three, I provide my interpretation of Descartes’ views on skepticism. Descartes’ correspondence shows that he held a very low opinion of the skeptics but that he was willing to strategically make use of doubt for what he thought were noble purposes. In Chapter Four, I criticize Popkin’s claim that Hume was the perfect Pyrrhonist. I argue that if we look carefully at Hume’s remarks about Pyrrhonism, we will see that it is inaccurate to describe Hume as a Pyrrhonian skeptic. It is also problematic to call Hume an Academic skeptic, though there is an affinity between Hume and the Academics.

¹² Cf. Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, trans. Charles Brittain (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006).

In my view, Hume's skepticism is an acceptance of our intellectual limitations, an avoidance of the study of abstruse, metaphysical subjects, and an attempt to philosophize moderately and justly. By offering this critique, I hope to make clear to the readers two things: first, that Popkin's thesis, though it is both enticing and generally accepted by many scholars, is questionable with regard to its plausibility; second, that the arguments I present in this dissertation reveal that further research into the role of skepticism in early modern philosophy is in order.

Chapter One:

Ancient Skepticism and Early Modern Skepticism before Descartes

In this chapter, I provide some background information on the history of skepticism. First I discuss the salient aspects of the two ancient skeptical traditions, Pyrrhonism and Academicism. Then I describe some characteristics of skepticism in early modern philosophy prior to Descartes by analyzing the writings of three philosophers: Francisco Sanches, Michel de Montaigne, and Pierre Charron. In some ways Sanches echoes the views of the Academic skeptics whereas in some respects Montaigne and Charron are more aligned with those of the Pyrrhonian skeptics. Richard Popkin, whose work I will discuss throughout this dissertation, claims that all three of these thinkers were strongly influenced by skepticism and, what is more, that they were skeptics. I agree with Popkin's view that skeptical thought influenced these philosophers, but I think it is overreaching to characterize them as skeptics. I argue that it is more accurate to interpret Sanches as responding primarily to Aristotelianism and Scholasticism, Montaigne and Charron as arguing in support of fideism rather than skepticism, and all three thinkers as being aligned in their strong dislike for intellectual arrogance.

In Chapters Two through Four of this dissertation, I will discuss René Descartes' and David Hume's association with skeptical ideas. In order to appreciate their distinct attitudes toward skepticism and the ways in which they respond to it, it will be useful to present some information about what skepticism typically meant to early modern philosophers before their time. When they discuss skepticism in the context of the ancient Greek schools, early modern

philosophers are referring either to the Pyrrhonian skeptics (the Pyrrhonists) or to the Academic skeptics (the Academics). This fact indicates that there are, generally speaking, two kinds of skepticism of which early modern philosophers were aware. The history of western philosophical skepticism broadly construed can be traced to these two points of origin: Pyrrhonism and Academicism.

I. Pyrrhonism Against the Dogmatists: Equipollence, Suspension of Judgment, and Tranquility

One of the few extant sources of information about Pyrrhonism from ancient Greece is the writings of Diogenes Laertius. Laertius, who lived sometime between the second and fourth centuries A.D., was not a philosopher *per se*, but he did write a book containing a series of biographical exposés on the great philosophers, including Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. This classic text, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, contains a chapter on Pyrrho, the *de facto* founder of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Laertius' chapter reveals Pyrrho to have been the exemplar of this "most noble philosophy" (Pyrrhonism): a man who lived an unperturbed life, attained by practicing the suspension of judgment (*epochē*) and conforming to the laws and norms of his society.¹³ Laertius describes the Pyrrhonian skeptic as "one who in manners and life resembles Pyrrho."¹⁴

Pyrrho represents the ideal figure for those seeking the skeptical way of life: he taught by example that, by neither affirming nor denying any claims made about reality but instead

¹³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers: Volume II*, trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 475.

¹⁴ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 483.

withholding judgment and living according to custom, one could attain tranquility (*ataraxia*).¹⁵ In addition to detailing the variety of ways in which Pyrrho exemplifies the skeptical way of life, Laertius describes how, according to the Pyrrhonists, relying on various “modes” of reasoning and argumentation can lead the skeptic to the suspension of judgment and thus to tranquility.¹⁶ For example, one of these modes “has references to distances, positions, places and the occupants of the places. In this mode things which are thought to be large appear small, square things round.”¹⁷

Some of the stories from Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives* are questionable with regard to their accuracy, but it can be argued that those from the chapter on Pyrrho show the common conceptions people at that time held about Pyrrho the man and the philosopher.¹⁸ One such story describes Pyrrho’s remarkable sangfroid in the midst of a severe storm at sea: “When his fellow-

¹⁵ Cf. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995) and Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). Pierre Hadot argues that for members of ancient Greek sects and schools, including Stoicism and Epicureanism, the guiding teleological principle was a particular way of life. According to Hadot, specific dogmas, methodologies, and rhetorical strategies and skills, among other characteristics of these schools, were subservient to certain regular practices, including “spiritual exercises,” that helped individuals to attain this way of life. I am partial to Hadot’s view. The Pyrrhonian skeptics did not consider themselves members of a school in the traditional sense, the way that, say, the Stoics or Epicureans did. However, they did seek after a specific way of life: one of tranquility (*ataraxia*).

¹⁶ Cf. Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 11–46. Sextus presents these modes of reasoning as being approximately seventeen in number, though he notes that there may be more. Ten modes are offered by “the older sceptics,” five additional ones are provided by “the more recent Sceptics,” and two other modes are presented by the Pyrrhonian skeptics in general. All of these modes are examples of argumentation and reasoning intended to create oppositions between claims in order to bring about the suspension of judgment (*epochē*) and, consequently, tranquility (*ataraxia*).

¹⁷ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 497.

¹⁸ Most scholars of ancient Greek philosophy are of the opinion that although his biographical accounts are important, we ought to take Laertius’ work with a grain of salt. For example, see Herbert S. Long, introduction to Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers: Volume I*, trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), xix–xxiv: “Diogenes is a veritable tissue of quotations from all sorts of authors and on most conceivable, and some inconceivable, aspects of philosophers’ lives...Much of this quoted material is trivial, merely amusing, or probably false; but some of it is very valuable...Diogenes was obviously industrious, and most persons who know his work would also agree that he was basically honest...But he was utterly uncritical, for he would cite any type of author for any sort of information.”

passengers on board [the] ship were all unnerved by the storm, he kept calm and confident, pointing to a little pig in the ship that went on eating, and telling them that such was the unperturbed state in which the wise man should keep himself.”¹⁹ Laertius mentions the admiration afforded to Pyrrho by his well-known philosophical contemporaries, including Epicurus, and through descriptions of praise like these we are led to view him as the picture of perfect equanimity. Laertius also describes Pyrrho as a man who lived without concern for his own safety. Thanks to his friends and followers, he never encountered any serious problem or injury: “Going out of his way for nothing, facing all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, dogs or what not...he was kept out of harm’s way by his friends.”²⁰ Though many of the claims Laertius makes and the stories he presents are exaggerations—even untruths—his chapter on Pyrrho informs us about the legend of the man and the philosophy named after him.

The most important credible source of information we have on ancient Pyrrhonism from that time period is the writings of Sextus Empiricus, a Greek physician from the second and third centuries A.D. Sextus was a doctor as well as a skeptical philosopher in his own right, and he wrote texts on Pyrrhonian skepticism. Those that survive are the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and a set of books now referred to as *Against the Mathematicians*. Both of these works describe the attitudes and practices of the ancient Pyrrhonists as well as the rationale behind their disagreements with contemporary philosophical schools. Though there are many fascinating aspects of Sextus’ writings, I will focus on explaining some of those points from the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* that I think are especially relevant to this dissertation.

¹⁹ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 481.

²⁰ Laertius, *Lives*, 475.

According to Sextus, some of the characteristics of ancient Pyrrhonian thought and practice are as follows. Sextus distinguishes Pyrrhonian skeptics from two other kinds of philosophers: dogmatists and Academics (Academic skeptics). He says that in their pursuit of knowledge, the dogmatists claim that “they have discovered the truth;” the Academics state “that things cannot be apprehended;” the Sceptics, however, are “still investigating.”²¹ In other words, according to Sextus, philosophers can be divided into three types: those who claim to know at least something (the dogmatists), those who claim that nothing can be known (the Academics), and those who are unwilling to make any claims about whether or not anything can be known (the Pyrrhonists). It is telling that Sextus differentiates between not only the Pyrrhonian skeptics and the dogmatists but also the Pyrrhonian skeptics and the *Academic* skeptics, whom he views as negative dogmatists.²²

Pyrrhonian skeptics observed that for every account or argument concerning the nature of objects and appearances, an equally convincing opposed account or argument could be put forward. They called this observation the principle of equipollence. The Pyrrhonian way of life included consistently recognizing and practicing this principle: “equality with regard to being convincing or unconvincing: none of the conflicting accounts takes precedence over any other as being more convincing.”²³ For instance, if they were discussing god’s existence, the Pyrrhonists might observe that equally plausible arguments could be given for and against it. The conflict in the mind that results from attempts to definitively answer questions like these—in this case, the

²¹ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 3. Sextus includes among the dogmatists Aristotelians, Epicureans, and Stoics.

²² Cf. Sextus, *Outlines*, 59–60. As I point out in the next section, Cicero describes a central aspect of the Academic position to be the belief that nothing is apprehensible. According to Sextus, this is a dogmatic claim and thus, in this regard, his characterization of the Academics as negative dogmatists seems to follow.

²³ Sextus, 5.

question of whether or not god exists—leads to perplexity about the essential nature of things.²⁴ However, the Pyrrhonists argued that by recognizing this resultant perplexity to be inevitable and suspending judgment on issues like these—refraining from assenting to or denying propositions about how things are by nature—one could attain a state of tranquility.

Peace of mind, tranquility, or *ataraxia*: this is the result of equipollent reasoning and the suspension of judgment (*epochē*) that naturally follows from such reasoning. Speaking about the Pyrrhonists in this context, Sextus states, “When they suspended judgement, tranquillity followed as it were fortuitously, as a shadow follows a body.”²⁵ Sextus’ definition of skepticism includes a description of equipollence as well as an emphasis on both the suspension of judgment (*epochē*) and the attainment of tranquility (*ataraxia*). “Scepticism,” as he defines it, “is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquillity.”²⁶

In addition to the regular practice of equipollent reasoning, the Pyrrhonian way of life entailed habitually distinguishing between appearances and reality while engaged in such reasoning. Sextus explains that when it comes to what exactly the Pyrrhonists are investigating, it is the claims made about *reality*, not appearances, that are in question: “We are no doubt able to

²⁴ Cf. Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 143–146. In a section from the *Outlines* dedicated to this subject, Sextus argues that because there are so many disagreements by various dogmatic philosophers concerning god’s nature, god’s existence itself is questionable: “Even granting that god is indeed conceivable, it is necessary to suspend judgement about whether gods exist or not, so far as the Dogmatists are concerned. For it is not clear that gods exist: if the gods made an impression on us in themselves, the Dogmatists would be in agreement as to what they are and of what form and where; but the undecidable dispute has made it seem to us that the gods are unclear and in need of proof.” (Sextus, 144.)

²⁵ Sextus, 11.

²⁶ Sextus, 4.

say how each existing thing appears...but are not able to assert what it is in nature.”²⁷ An object *seeming* to be a certain way is not what the Pyrrhonian skeptics disputed; what was in dispute, however, is the further claim that because the object seems that way, it *is* that way (it must be that way, it is essentially that way, it is that way by nature, etc.). “For example,” Sextus states, “it appears to us that honey sweetens (we concede this inasmuch as we are sweetened in a perceptual way); but whether (as far as the argument goes) it is actually sweet is something we investigate—and this is not what is apparent but something said about what is apparent.”²⁸

With regard to day-to-day life, the Pyrrhonian skeptics conformed to the laws and norms of society, and they based their conformity on the view that although they made no claims about reality and held no opinions about the essential nature of things, they could not avoid living and moving about in the world. The way Sextus puts it is, “Thus, attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions – for we are not able to be utterly inactive.”²⁹ The Pyrrhonists would follow the laws and customs of their society even though they held no opinions about whether or not some of those laws and customs were morally justifiable. Through the practices of equipollent reasoning and suspension of judgment, the Pyrrhonists could find convincing arguments for and against particular moral judgments but also those to show that nothing by nature is morally good or bad. In one society, there are laws against homosexuality, whereas in another the practice is legal; among one group of people adultery is punishable by law, and for another it is not. Plausible arguments can be given on both sides for and against the morality or legality of homosexuality and adultery. Who is to say, with

²⁷ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 24.

²⁸ Sextus, 8.

²⁹ Sextus, 9.

adequate justification, which of these practices is actually good or bad and which is deserving of blame or punishment?

Even if we consider the various schools of philosophy, Sextus goes on to say, we will find much disagreement about what constitutes the good and the bad, the virtuous and the vicious, the noble and the ignoble, etc.³⁰ Whereas the Epicureans say that the good consists in seeking pleasure, the Stoics and Aristotelians disagree and posit something else. Epicurean arguments for pleasure being the good are convincing, yet the Stoics and Aristotelians provide equally compelling arguments for virtue and happiness, respectively, constituting the good. Hence, because of the disparity among the schools concerning beliefs about what defines good and bad, what determines the right way to live, what is morally acceptable and unacceptable, and the like—and especially because of the equipollence found in this variety of beliefs—the Pyrrhonists chose not to take sides but instead to “live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions.”³¹

The Pyrrhonists’ ultimate goal—that for the sake of which they practiced equipollent reasoning and the suspension of judgment—was to attain tranquility. In addition to distinguishing between appearances and reality and withholding assent to claims about reality, the Pyrrhonists found it to be the case that people who held opinions about what is good and bad (i.e. the dogmatists) were “perpetually troubled.”³² “When they lack what they believe to be good,” Sextus states, “they take themselves to be persecuted by natural evils and they pursue what (so they think) is good. And when they have acquired these things,” he continues, “they

³⁰ Cf. Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 188–205.

³¹ Sextus, 9.

³² Sextus, 10.

experience more troubles; for they are elated beyond reason and measure, and in fear of change they do anything so as not to lose what they believe to be good. But those who make no determination about what is good and bad by nature neither avoid nor pursue anything with intensity; and hence they are tranquil.”³³ For the Pyrrhonian skeptics, part of the justification for not holding any opinions was the observation that dogmatism leads to emotional and psychological disturbance. This aspect of Pyrrhonism acting as a counter to dogmatism should not be left unstated: the Pyrrhonists wanted to “cure by argument, as far as they [could], the conceit and rashness of the Dogmatists.”³⁴

Before moving on to a discussion about Academic skepticism, I should restate and briefly elaborate on the distinction Sextus makes between the Pyrrhonists and the Academics, particularly those Academics of the New Academy, to which Cicero aligned himself.³⁵ Sextus notes that the fundamental difference between the Pyrrhonists and the Academics is the willingness of the latter to make dogmatic claims—for example, the claim that nothing is apprehensible—and the unwillingness of the former to do so. According to Sextus, to make claims or hold opinions, even if only in one area of investigation, would by definition make one a dogmatist and thus not a skeptic. Sextus states, “The members of the New Academy, if they say that everything is inapprehensible, no doubt differ from the Sceptics precisely in saying that everything is inapprehensible. For they make affirmations about this, while the Sceptic expects it

³³ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 10.

³⁴ Sextus, 216.

³⁵ Cf. Gisela Striker, “On the Difference Between the Pyrrhonists and the Academics,” in *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 135–149. Striker says, “Though of course any philosopher from Plato’s school could be called an Academic, still, in late antiquity, this label usually referred to the members of the New Academy, of whom the most famous were Arcesilaus in the third century B.C., and Carneades in the second.” (Striker, “Pyrrhonists and Academics,” 135.)

to be possible for some things actually to be apprehended.”³⁶ In their investigations, the Academics were highly critical of the dogmatic philosophers, especially the Stoics, but they did hold opinions about both what was good and bad and what was more or less likely based on how convincing the relevant arguments or accounts were. Herein lies what I believe to be the main distinction between the Pyrrhonists and the Academics: the former, according to Sextus, did not hold any opinions (for the reasons already discussed) whereas the latter, according to Cicero, made judgments based on probabilistic reasoning and held fast to the opinion that nothing is apprehensible.

II. Academicism: Probabilistic Reasoning and Universal Inapprehensibility

In contrast to the Pyrrhonists, who had neither an official school nor a set of recognized successive leaders, the Academics lived and philosophized formally under the aegis of the Academy in Athens for a period of about two hundred years. In 268 B.C., approximately eighty years after Plato’s death, Arcesilaus became head of the Academy. Considered by many scholars of ancient Greek philosophy to be among the first to represent the Academic tradition, Arcesilaus was largely responsible for turning philosophical discussions in the Academy away from interpretations and analyses of Platonic ideas and towards epistemological investigations that were skeptical in spirit. This guiding thread of skepticism, though changing in many ways through the varying interests of the Academy and its successive leaders, remained until the death of Antiochus, the final head of the school, in 68 B.C.³⁷

³⁶ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 59.

³⁷ Cf. Harald Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014). Thorsrud provides a clear historical overview of the development of both Pyrrhonism and Academicism.

Cicero wrote the *Academica*, a work on Academicism, about twenty years later, sometime between 46 and 44 B.C. In the main part of this text, only an incomplete version of which is available to us, Lucullus gives a speech in support of Stoic ideas. In addition to speaking in defense of Stoicism, which was a highly influential school of philosophy at the time, Lucullus harshly criticizes the views of the Academics. Cicero, a self-described Academic philosopher, responds by critiquing Stoic epistemology and ethics and by defending the beliefs and practices of the Academics. Like the works of Sextus Empiricus and their importance for our knowledge about ancient Pyrrhonism, Cicero's *Academica* is one of the few remaining sources of information about Academicism from that time period and thus is significant for our understanding of the Academic tradition.³⁸

In the *Academica*, the main area of contention in the exchange between Lucullus and Cicero is the notion of apprehensibility: what, if anything, can be known? If something can be known, how so? Lucullus gives his speech primarily as a defense of the definition of apprehension held by Zeno, one of the figureheads of Stoic philosophy. Speaking on behalf of the Stoics, he states that “many things are apprehensible,”³⁹ including our conceptions of wisdom and virtue. Lucullus criticizes Philo, a well-known Academic, for claiming that nothing is apprehensible and for, in effect, doing away with “the criterion of known and unknown.”⁴⁰ He calls the Academics destructive, “seditious citizens” who attempt to “overturn philosophy.”⁴¹

³⁸ Cf. Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism*. Although I use the terms “Academicism,” “Academic skepticism,” and their variants interchangeably, it is important to note two things. First, the Pyrrhonists only referred to themselves as skeptics; they did not describe the Academics as skeptics. Second, Cicero did not refer to himself as a skeptic or to the Academics as skeptics.

³⁹ Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, 16.

⁴⁰ Cicero, 12.

⁴¹ Cicero, 9–10.

Lucullus accuses them of dissimulation and reproves Arcesilaus for trying to “cloak the clearest things with darkness.”⁴² He also argues that the Academics’ claim to universal apprehensibility is inconsistent. According to Lucullus, it is contradictory to state that nothing is apprehensible while at the same time not admitting to knowing that nothing is apprehensible. Though they claim that nothing is apprehensible, Lucullus says, the Academics “should at least admit that they apprehend the claim that nothing is apprehensible.”⁴³

Cicero responds to Lucullus by attempting to show that, in fact, nothing can be known with certainty. “I will try to show that nothing is apprehensible,” he says, “since the whole controversy turns on this.”⁴⁴ Cicero claims that the main distinction between the Academics and other dogmatic philosophers, including the Stoics, is that the latter accept some views to be definitively true and, by implication, apprehensible in their truth whereas the former do not. “The only difference between us and the philosophers who think that they have knowledge is that they have no doubt that the views they defend are true, whereas we hold many views to be persuasive, i.e. ones that we can readily follow but scarcely affirm.”⁴⁵ According to Cicero, the Academics acknowledge that some views are more persuasive than others, and so they do assent to such views. Some of these views may even turn out to be true. However, none of these views, regardless of how persuasive they may be, merit the moniker “apprehensible” with regard to their truth or falsity. That is to say, although the Academics find some views to be more plausible or probable than others, they do not therefore claim that the truth of those views is

⁴² Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, 11.

⁴³ Cicero, 19.

⁴⁴ Cicero, 40.

⁴⁵ Cicero, 6.

apprehensible. “We discern as many true as false things,” Cicero says, “but our discerning is a kind of *approval*: we don’t find any sign of apprehension.”⁴⁶

One of the main reasons the Academics claim that nothing is apprehensible, or knowable with certainty, is their view that a criterion of truth does not exist. The Academics are similar to the Pyrrhonists in this respect: though the Pyrrhonists do not claim that no criterion of truth exists (they make no claims about reality), both the Academics and the Pyrrhonists argue against the existence of such a criterion.⁴⁷ The Stoic view is that knowledge depends on impressions—that impressions constitute the criterion of truth. Cicero says that “Zeno defined [an impression] thus: an impression from what is, stamped, impressed, and molded just as it is.”⁴⁸ Cicero claims that because there is no way to distinguish between true and false impressions, knowledge is impossible. Much of Cicero’s speech in the *Academica* consists of a series of counterarguments to the Stoic view that there is a discernible criterion of truth. Cicero argues that although the Academics assent to persuasive impressions and opinions, they do not possess a criterion to distinguish between those impressions or opinions that are true and those that are false. Thus, though the Academics do assent to some views based on their persuasiveness, they deny apprehension of those views. The Academic claim that nothing is apprehensible is in some senses analogous to the Pyrrhonian view that nothing is discernable about reality based on appearances or how things seem to us.

⁴⁶ Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, 65.

⁴⁷ For more information about the problem of the criterion, see Kevin McCain, “The Problem of the Criterion,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/criterio> and Gisela Striker, “The Problem of the Criterion,” in *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 150–165.

⁴⁸ Cicero, 45.

The Academic skeptics are similar to the Pyrrhonists in another important way. Both groups were directly responding to the other schools of philosophy and the clash of opinions among them. In fact, it can be argued that both the Academics and the Pyrrhonists were primarily reacting to the contested dogmas of other philosophical schools. As Charles Brittain puts it, “The fundamental case for scepticism derives from the disagreements of dogmatic philosophers...the latter were the staple of both Academic and Pyrrhonian sceptical arguments.”⁴⁹ To indicate what he thinks to be a matter of much significance, towards the end of his speech in the *Academica* Cicero urges Lucullus to focus on such disagreements among philosophers in the future: “But next time we think about these questions, let’s talk about the remarkable disagreements between the leading thinkers, the obscurity of nature, and the error of so many philosophers about what is good and bad—for, since their ethical views are incompatible and at most one of them can be true, a good number of rather famous schools must collapse.”⁵⁰

There are many similarities between the Pyrrhonists and the Academics, including the ones discussed above. Additionally, both the Pyrrhonists and the Academics utilized similar arguments against the claims of other schools of philosophy to show that the senses are deceptive, that we might be dreaming, or that we may even be mad.⁵¹ Though there are several areas of philosophical kinship, two significant differences exist between the Pyrrhonists and the Academics that I would like to highlight. The first has already been explained: whereas the Pyrrhonists make no claims about reality and hold no opinions, the Academics assent to persuasive impressions and claim that although the truth of such impressions is inapprehensible,

⁴⁹ Charles Brittain, footnote to Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, 85.

⁵⁰ Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, 85.

⁵¹ Cf. Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, 49–53 and Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 12–40.

they still approve of them. This difference points to the Academics' willingness to make judgments about impressions or opinions based on probabilistic reasoning. The second distinction has to do with the end or aim of each philosophical tradition. As previously discussed, for the Pyrrhonists the goal of the skeptical way of life was to attain tranquility (*ataraxia*). Sextus Empiricus explains in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* how practicing equipollent reasoning and the suspension of judgment naturally leads to peace of mind. However, for the Academics there is no mention of a specific end like *ataraxia*. According to Cicero, the Academics seek after truth by questioning and arguing against dogmatic claims to knowledge like those that come out of the Stoic school—in this practice they are aligned with the Pyrrhonists—but as far as we know they don't do so in order to attain tranquility or any other ethical end.⁵²

Before transitioning to a discussion of pre-Cartesian early modern skepticism, there are a few additional points I should note or restate about Academic skepticism. First, as mentioned, Academicism was a dominant part of ancient Greek philosophy, perhaps more so than Pyrrhonism. As a movement, it developed and solidified within Plato's Academy and remained active for about two hundred years. Next, through the works of Cicero, Academic skepticism became influential during the Renaissance. Charles Schmitt and José Maia Neto argue that in many ways Academic ideas shaped the beliefs of Renaissance thinkers. Yet, both Schmitt and Maia Neto defer to Richard Popkin in his view that Pyrrhonian skepticism, which increased

⁵² Cf. Striker, "Pyrrhonists and Academics." Striker discusses both of these differences and argues that even if we take them into account, for the most part the Pyrrhonists and the Academics were quite similar. Indeed, in a later article, "Academics Versus Pyrrhonists, Reconsidered," in which she appraises her previous views about the two schools of thought, Striker says, "The only salient difference that seemed to me to be left between those Academics and their Pyrrhonist successors was the curious claim of the Pyrrhonists that their so-called 'way of life' would lead to the goal that other Hellenistic schools were also endorsing – tranquility." (Gisela Striker, "Academics versus Pyrrhonists, Reconsidered," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 195.) Striker also questions whether we ought to take the Academic claim to universal inapprehensibility at face value. Support for this line of inquiry comes from a few areas in the *Academica* in which Cicero seems to be supporting the Pyrrhonian attitude of ignorance rather than dogmatic assertions of inapprehensibility.

drastically in its influence after the 1562 publication of Sextus' works, was by and large the primary form of skepticism that early modern philosophers were grappling with.⁵³ Maia Neto says that, after all, “the skeptical crisis at the dawn of modern philosophy is called ‘*pyrrhonnienne*’ [Pyrrhonian] not ‘*academicienne*’ [Academic].”⁵⁴ Popkin does not claim that Academic skepticism played a vital role in the development of early modern philosophy. Rather, according to him it was Pyrrhonism—not Academicism—that strongly influenced early modern thinkers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For Popkin, a Pyrrhonian “sceptical crisis” was the pivotal force responsible for the formation of early modern philosophy.

III. Pre-Cartesian Skepticism

In *The History of Scepticism (HS)*, Richard Popkin argues that the newfound, burgeoning interest in Pyrrhonian skepticism during the latter half of the sixteenth century was the critical component in the development of early modern philosophy. In Chapter 1 of his book, he discusses the Reformation and contends that the ancient problem of the criterion surfaced in a significant way within this unique religious context. According to Popkin, this aspect of the Reformation—the fact that this particular skeptical problem had been raised and brought to the foreground in such a setting—was vital to the trajectory and outcome of the religious conflict. In Chapter 2, Popkin emphasizes the significance that the publication of, and subsequent increasing engagement with, Sextus Empiricus' works had on sixteenth-century philosophers. Throughout

⁵³ For example, see Charles B. Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus: A Study of the Influence of The Academica in the Renaissance* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), C. B. Schmitt, “The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times,” in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 225–251 and José R. Maia Neto, “Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 2 (April 1997): 199–220.

⁵⁴ José R. Maia Neto, “The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 2 (April 1997): 200.

the rest of *HS*, Popkin argues, at length and in a range of ways, that Pyrrhonian skepticism played a central role in the development of early modern philosophy. He portrays several European thinkers from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as being strongly influenced by Pyrrhonian skepticism.

In Chapter Two of this dissertation, I will discuss and critique some of Popkin's claims about one such thinker, René Descartes, perhaps the most influential of all modern philosophers. In Chapter Four, I will do the same for Popkin's claims about David Hume. Before engaging with Popkin and his interpretations of Descartes and Hume, it will be useful to highlight some of the pre-Cartesian early modern philosophers that Popkin writes about and to explain their relationship with skeptical ideas. Examining the attitudes that this selection of thinkers held with regard to skepticism will help to provide a context in which to understand Descartes' and Hume's views on skepticism.

Francisco Sanches, Michel de Montaigne, and Pierre Charron were all influenced by skepticism—even a cursory reading of their works shows that there can be no doubt about this. Discussions of skepticism, as well as reformulated presentations of classical Pyrrhonian and Academic skeptical arguments, frequently occur in their works. However, though all of them were influenced by skepticism, not all of them responded to skeptical ideas or used skeptical arguments in the same ways. On the one hand, in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne presents many arguments analogous to those of the Pyrrhonian skeptics. Charron was influenced greatly by Montaigne and in much of his treatise, *Of Wisdom*, he follows Montaigne's Pyrrhonian lead. On the other hand, Sanches was apparently more closely tied to the Academic skeptics than the Pyrrhonists, as evidenced by the some of the arguments and claims he makes in his work, *Quod nihil scitur (That Nothing is Known)*.

Although one of the main differences between Montaigne and Charron, on the one hand, and Sanches, on the other, is the extent of their respective intellectual allegiance to Pyrrhonism or Academicism, there is one striking similarity among all of them: their repeated harsh attacks on what they viewed to be the widespread intellectual arrogance of their time. In *Quod nihil scitur*, Sanches criticizes his contemporaries for holding fast to Aristotelian principles: “How can you claim your propositions are eternal, incorruptible, infallible, and incapable of being otherwise, you miserable worm, who scarcely even knows who you are, where you come from, or where you are heading?”⁵⁵ Throughout his work, the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne vehemently rails against man’s intellectual pretensions. To get a sense of Montaigne’s attitude of reproach, one need only read the title of one chapter from the *Apology*: “Man is No Better Than the Beasts.” In his treatise, *Of Wisdom*, Charron describes the “Ridiculous Vanity...In our Thoughts” as being “So *natural*...to us, and so *prevalent* over us, that it spirits us away, and plucks us forcibly from Truth and Solidity, and real Substance; to lose us in Air, and Emptiness, and Nothing.”⁵⁶

It cannot be denied that all three of these pre-Cartesian thinkers were influenced by skepticism. Popkin’s view is that they were not merely responding to skepticism but rather primarily reacting to a “sceptical crisis.” However, I question the accuracy of Popkin’s claims about the manner and extent of skepticism’s influence on their thought. According to Popkin, all three of these philosophers were skeptics. I contend that Sanches, Montaigne, and Charron were not skeptics and that they had other pressing motivations besides skepticism for their respective philosophical projects.

⁵⁵ Francisco Sanches, *That Nothing is Known*, in *Descartes’ Meditations: Background Source Materials*, ed. Roger Ariew, John Cottingham, and Tom Sorell (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16.

⁵⁶ Pierre Charron, *Of Wisdom*, trans. George Stanhope (London, 1707), 291–292; Charron, *Of Wisdom*, 293.

Before presenting my interpretation of these thinkers individually and in more detail, I should point out one similarity between Montaigne and Charron, a characteristic shared by many other early modern philosophers: their fideistic leanings. Simply put, fideism is the doctrine or belief that only religious faith or divine revelation can give us genuine knowledge and that human reason is incapable of doing so. At most, arguments based on reason can provide ancillary justificatory support for someone who already has faith, but only if he already has it. Popkin describes fideism in this way: “The believer can offer ‘evidence,’ but this ‘evidence’ is only convincing if one is already a believer...One must start with faith, and then find reasons.”⁵⁷ Montaigne and Charron both argue that human reason is weak and fallible—even worthless—and that true knowledge can only be attained through faith or divine revelation. Their condemnations of intellectual vanity are meant to show us that, even with all of our so-called intelligence, without faith we will remain hopelessly ignorant.

Sanches for his part did not write in support of fideism, although Popkin claims that some, though very little, fideistic reasoning can be found in his writings.⁵⁸ Instead, much of Sanches’ *Quod nihil scitur* contains arguments to show man’s inability to attain knowledge through contemporary Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophical or scientific means. In this regard, Sanches presents us with a unique instance of pre-Cartesian anti-Aristotelianism—an example that in some ways anticipates Descartes.

⁵⁷ Richard H. Popkin, “The Role of Scepticism,” 508.

⁵⁸ Cf. Popkin, *History of Scepticism*. “When one compares Sanches with other Renaissance sceptics, he, in only the briefest fashion, brings up the fideistic solution to sceptical difficulties, the appeal to knowledge by religious faith.” (Popkin, *History*, 43.)

IIIa. Francisco Sanches Against the Aristotelians: That Nothing is Known

Francisco Sanches was a Portuguese physician and philosopher who lived from about 1551 to 1623. Popkin calls him “more interesting than any of the other sceptics of the sixteenth century, except Montaigne” and describes him as “the only sixteenth-century sceptic other than Montaigne who...achieved any recognition as a thinker.”⁵⁹ Throughout the course of his adult life, Sanches wrote several scientific and philosophical works, the most well-known of which was published in 1581 and entitled *Quod nihil scitur* (*That Nothing is Known*). As the title of this work suggests, Sanches argues that when it comes to knowledge, man does not have any. In ways that are quite similar to Descartes, who was to publish the *Meditations* only fifty-six years later, Sanches criticizes the opinions of his learned teachers, both past and present, and finds fault with Aristotelian and Scholastic methods and teachings. Sanches describes his childhood as a failed attempt to find knowledge and offers himself a possible solution:

I began to seek something to give my mind that it might embrace fully and enjoy entirely, but there was nothing to satisfy me. I turned over the sayings of the ancients, and examined the views of my own time; but the answers I got were all the same and gave me no satisfaction whatever. I admit that some shadows of truth were produced by some people, but I found no one who could provide the basis for a candid and absolute judgment on things. So I then withdrew into myself, and called everything into doubt. Ignoring anything that anyone had previously said, I set about examining the things themselves, which is the true way of knowing.⁶⁰

If we compare Sanches’ words to the opening lines of Descartes’ First Meditation, we will see that both Descartes and Sanches shared some of the same motivations for their respective pursuits of knowledge, and that both responded to their disenchantment by withdrawing in their own ways. Descartes says,

⁵⁹ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 41; Popkin, *History*, 38.

⁶⁰ Sanches, *That Nothing is Known*, 10.

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last...So today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the demolition of my opinions.⁶¹

Neither Descartes nor Sanches were content with the education they received in their youth. They were not convinced or satisfied by the prevailing Aristotelian methods and ideas of their time. Both Descartes and Sanches criticized those who taught, in typical fashion, that the reliance on sense perceptions was a basic component for the acquisition of knowledge.⁶² To argue against this dominant epistemological view, Sanches presents versions of classical skeptical arguments that show how the senses can deceive us. Here is one example:

Even though [vision] comes about by the means of the most perfect organ, and is the most certain and noblest of the senses, it is still deceived on very many occasions...If you put a coin in a small wide vessel, place the vessel on the ground, move away from it until you cannot see the coin, then have the vessel filled with water, you will immediately see the coin, larger than it was before. Why could you not see it before through the air, when this is supposed to be the best medium? And why does the coin now appear larger? We do not know...⁶³

In this passage, it seems to me that Sanches is being ironic in his criticisms of Aristotle. Even the greatest, most perfect organ (the eye), as the greatest of all philosophers Aristotle would have it, can give us faulty information—that, too, within what the inimitable Aristotle

⁶¹ AT VII, 17–18; CSM II, 12.

⁶² For an insightful study of the similarities between Sanches and Descartes, see Gianni Paganini, “Descartes and Renaissance Skepticism: The Sanches Case,” in *Skepticism in the Modern Age: Building on the Work of Richard Popkin*, ed. José R. Maia Neto, Gianni Paganini, and John Christian Laursen (Boston, MA: Brill, 2009), 249–267. Paganini describes how both Sanches and Descartes wrote in similar autobiographical styles and detailed their respective “destructive” uses of skepticism as a response to educational and intellectual dissatisfaction. He argues that because of the similarities between them, there is good reason to believe that Sanches strongly influenced Descartes.

⁶³ Sanches, *That Nothing is Known*, 22.

would describe as the best medium (air). In addition to attacking claims to knowledge based on sense perception, Sanches argues that Aristotelian methods for attaining knowledge, including those that rely on definitions and syllogisms, are ambiguous and of no help. He says that, according to Aristotle, “Knowledge is a disposition acquired by demonstration. I do not understand this. And, worst of all,” he continues, “it is explaining something obscure by what is even more obscure – this is how they fool people.”⁶⁴ Syllogistic demonstrations, which rely on premises and definitions that can be questioned or doubted—in other words, demonstrations that are ambiguous—cannot be examples of genuine knowledge. “True knowledge, by contrast,” Sanches states, “if it existed, would be free, and would come from a free mind. If such a mind does not, by itself, perceive the thing in question, it will never be compelled by any demonstrations to perceive it.”⁶⁵ Like Sanches, the Pyrrhonists argue that definitions supplied by dogmatists are of no value. Writing in this context against the dogmatists, Sextus states simply that “definitions are useless.”⁶⁶

Ultimately, Sanches’ criticisms of Aristotelian ideas lead him to the conclusion that nothing is known. This claim is strikingly similar to that of the Academics: that nothing is apprehensible. Sanches’ view that nothing is known is but a slight, only superficially semantic, variation on the Academics’ claim to universal inapprehensibility. Whereas Sanches concludes that we do not know anything, the Academics argue that we are unable to know anything. In virtue of the fact that Sanches makes this particular assertion, which is for all practical purposes the same claim as that of the Academics—and the fact that he states it multiple times in *Quod*

⁶⁴ Sanches, *That Nothing is Known*, 13.

⁶⁵ Sanches, 14.

⁶⁶ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 125.

nihil scitur—I would argue that Sanches is more closely aligned with the epistemological views of the Academics than those of the Pyrrhonists.

In one passage of *Quod nihil scitur*, Sanches says, “This one fact, that I know nothing – even this I do not know.”⁶⁷ This statement may seem at first glance Pyrrhonian in spirit, especially if we consider the fact that the Pyrrhonists were not so bold as to make any claims about reality.⁶⁸ When admitting their lack of knowledge, they would even deny that they knew they lacked knowledge. The Pyrrhonian skeptics held fast to the principle of non-assertion, neither positing nor rejecting anything. When they said, “I determine nothing,” the Pyrrhonists claimed that they could not even say whether they determined that they determined nothing.⁶⁹ However, it is my view that Sanches’ claim to ignorance is not akin to Pyrrhonian uncertainty.

If we look at more of this passage in *Quod nihil scitur*, we will observe that Sanches is not representing the uncertain, investigative ignorance of the Pyrrhonists but rather the complete and certain ignorance of the Academics: “I conjecture that neither I nor anyone else knows anything. Let this proposition be the banner under which I march; this is the flag I must follow. Nothing is known. If I eventually prove it, I shall rightly conclude that nothing is known; but if I fail, so much the better, for such was my claim in the first place.”⁷⁰ Sanches is certain of the fact that he knows nothing at all and that neither does anyone else know anything. Nothing is known, and many of the arguments Sanches presents in *Quod nihil scitur*—a fair amount of which are directed against Aristotelianism—are aimed at demonstrating just that.

⁶⁷ Sanches, *That Nothing is Known*, 12.

⁶⁹ Sextus, *Outlines*, 49.

⁷⁰ Sanches, 12.

In *HS*, Popkin describes Sanches as an Academic skeptic but as a skeptic nonetheless. “By and large,” Popkin says, “Sanches’ totally negative conclusion is not the position of Pyrrhonian scepticism, the suspense of judgment as to whether anything can be known, but rather the more full-fledged negative dogmatism of the Academics.”⁷¹ I agree with Popkin that Sanches’ arguments in *Quod nihil scitur* seem much closer in spirit to the views of the Academics than those of the Pyrrhonists. However, as I’ve argued in this section, although this does seem to be the case, I think that Sanches’ arguments are primarily anti-Aristotelian. Sanches’ anti-Aristotelianism should be given the same amount of consideration—if not more—than his Academicism.

IIIb. Michel de Montaigne: Against Intellectual Arrogance and Human Vanity

In *The History of Scepticism*, Popkin says that “Michel de Montaigne was the most significant figure in the sixteenth-century revival of ancient scepticism.”⁷² According to Popkin, the resurgence of skepticism in early modern philosophy is attributable not only to the “sceptical crisis” of the religious Reformation and the publication of a Latin translation of Sextus Empiricus’ writings in the second half of the sixteenth century but also to “the modernized formulation of ancient scepticism offered by Michel de Montaigne.”⁷³ Popkin describes Montaigne as a particular kind of skeptic, one who advocated “a new form of fideism—Catholic Pyrrhonism”—and he relies almost entirely on Montaigne’s essay, the *Apology for Raymond*

⁷¹ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 41. For an interpretation of Sanches contrary to Popkin’s, see Damian Caluori, “The Scepticism of Francisco Sanchez,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 89, no.1 (March 2007): 30–46. Although most recent scholars have viewed Sanches as an Academic or a mitigated skeptic, Caluori argues that Sanches was in fact a Pyrrhonist.

⁷² Popkin, *History*, 44.

⁷³ Popkin, *History*, 20.

Sebond, as support for this characterization.⁷⁴ Even though Montaigne makes frequent references to St. Paul and the New Testament, Popkin argues that such religious references work hand in hand with Montaigne’s overarching support of Pyrrhonian skepticism—that Montaigne’s *Apology* is primarily “a defense of Pyrrhonism with an explanation of its value for religion.”⁷⁵

Popkin’s description is accurate to some extent: Montaigne was clearly influenced by Pyrrhonian skepticism through the writings of Sextus Empiricus, and the strong impression that Pyrrhonian ideas left on him is observable in the *Apology*. However, I would argue that Popkin’s characterization is inaccurate and one-sided insofar as it overestimates Montaigne’s skepticism and ignores other influences on his thought. Montaigne wrote scores of essays on a variety of disparate topics, many of which do not contain any discussion of Pyrrhonian skepticism.⁷⁶ In addition, the *Apology* itself is filled with references to the Bible as well as dogmatic philosophical schools, including Stoicism and Epicureanism—all of which reveal several non-skeptical influences on Montaigne. I argue that throughout the *Apology* Montaigne is primarily concerned with promoting faith in God and admonishing man for his foolish, arrogant claims to knowledge in order to show “the vanity of man’s knowledge without God.”⁷⁷ In other words, whereas Popkin prioritizes Montaigne’s skepticism, I would emphasize his fideism. Montaigne’s fideism is supported in parts of the *Apology* by his use of Pyrrhonian arguments, but it is also bolstered by his repeated, severe criticisms of intellectual arrogance as well as his references to

⁷⁴ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 47.

⁷⁵ Popkin, *History*, 51.

⁷⁶ Cf. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003). Included among Montaigne’s essays are *To philosophize is to learn how to die*, *On virtue*, *Observations on Julius Caesar’s methods of waging war*, and *On three good wives*.

⁷⁷ Michel de Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, trans. Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 12.

Scripture and the ideas taken from other philosophical schools. Thus, I would claim that because Montaigne uses both skeptical and non-skeptical arguments in the service of faith over reason, it is a mischaracterization to call him Pyrrhonian as Popkin does. It would be more accurate to describe Montaigne as a fideist who recognizes the value of Pyrrhonism in addition to other philosophical and religious ideas and traditions.

In the Introduction to their translation of Montaigne's *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene describe the author's work as a defense of fideism.⁷⁸ For Montaigne, faith—not reason—“ignorance and obedience, not some alleged wisdom...lead to God.”⁷⁹ Some of Montaigne's support for his fideistic thesis comes from the skeptical arguments of Sextus Empiricus. In one section of the *Apology*, Montaigne lays out Pyrrhonian arguments against both the dogmatists and the Academics in order to show that neither of the latter two groups could come to any agreement about what constitutes knowledge. Therefore, because of the unsettled disagreements between the dogmatists and the Academics—among other reasons—according to Ariew and Grene, “Montaigne finds radical skepticism, of the Pyrrhonian variety, the only proper intellectual attitude.”⁸⁰

Montaigne was well versed in both of the ancient skeptical traditions and, in the *Apology*, he makes it clear that he prefers the Pyrrhonian attitude to that of the Academics. The following selection from the *Apology* which is, appropriately enough, quite similar to the opening lines of

⁷⁸ In *HS*, Popkin describes fideism in this way: “Fideism as a religious epistemology would seem to involve the claim that the guarantee of the truth of religious knowledge comes solely by faith. Such an assertion in no way denies that there may be all sorts of evidences that render this knowledge plausible or probable or might lead one to believe it. But the evidences can never be adequate to establish the truth of the religious propositions.” (Popkin, *History*, 104.)

⁷⁹ Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene, introduction to Montaigne, *Apology*, viii.

⁸⁰ Ariew and Grene, introduction, viii.

Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines*, indicates Montaigne's awareness and knowledge of both Pyrrhonism and Academicism.

Whoever seeks anything comes to this point: he says that he has found it, or that he cannot find it, or that he is still looking for it. All of philosophy is divided into these three kinds. Its aim is to seek the truth, knowledge, and certainty. The Epicureans, Stoics, and others thought they had found it. They established the sciences that we have and treated them as certain knowledge. Clytomachus, Carneades, and the Academicians despaired of their quest and considered that truth could not be conceived by the means at our disposal. Their conclusion is weakness and human ignorance; this school has the greatest following and the noblest adherents.⁸¹

The arguments that repeatedly show up in Montaigne's *Apology* are that man's arrogance—his “vanity and pride”—should be exposed for all its foolishness, that it should be squashed, and that man ought to recognize both the uselessness of his knowledge and the need for faith in God.⁸² Speaking against critics of Raymond Sebond and atheists who would “attack our religion,” Montaigne gives an impassioned response:⁸³

The means that I take to beat back this frenzy, and which seems to me most appropriate, is to crush and trample underfoot human vanity and pride; to make them feel the inanity, the vanity and nothingness of man; to snatch from their hands the miserable weapons of their reason; to make them bow their heads and bite the dust beneath the authority and reverence of divine majesty. To it alone belong knowledge and wisdom; it alone can value something by its own power; from it we steal what we say about ourselves and pride ourselves on.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Montaigne, *Apology*, 63–64. In the *Outlines of Scepticism*, Sextus says, “When people are investigating any subject, the likely result is either a discovery, or a denial of discovery and a confession of inapprehensibility, or else a continuation of the investigation. This, no doubt, is why in the case of philosophical investigations, too, some have said that they have discovered the truth, some have asserted that it cannot be apprehended, and others are still investigating. Those who are called Dogmatists in the proper sense of the word think that they have discovered the truth – for example, the schools of Aristotle and Epicurus and the Stoics, and some others. The schools of Clitomachus and Carneades, and other Academics, have asserted that things cannot be apprehended. And the Sceptics are still investigating.” (Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 3.)

⁸² Montaigne, *Apology*, 11.

⁸³ Montaigne, *Apology*, 11.

⁸⁴ Montaigne, *Apology*, 11.

The section referenced on the previous page in which Montaigne discusses the Pyrrhonists and the Academics is entitled “Man Has No Knowledge,” and within this section he reflects on the accomplishments of great thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—“that small number of excellent and chosen men who, gifted with a fine and special natural power, have stiffened and sharpened it by care, by study, and by art, and have elevated it to the highest point <<of wisdom>> that it could reach.”⁸⁵ Montaigne expresses disdain for the stubbornness and vanity of some of these dogmatic philosophers by describing a series of various disagreements among them.⁸⁶ His conclusion is that Pyrrhonism, as Ariew and Grene state, is indeed the “proper intellectual attitude” but only insofar as that attitude includes the avoidance of dogmatism and the awareness of one’s ignorance, both of which make it possible for us to receive divine knowledge through faith or revelation.⁸⁷ Speaking of the connection between this ideal Pyrrhonian stance and the need for reliance upon God, Montaigne says,

No human invention has so much verisimilitude and utility. It presents man naked and empty, recognizing his natural weakness, fit to receive some outside power from on high, stripped of human knowledge, and so much more likely to receive in himself divine knowledge <annihilating his judgment to make room for faith,> <<neither disbelieving>> nor establishing any dogma <against common observances; humble, obedient, teachable, studious; sworn enemy of heresy> and thus exempting himself from the vain and irreligious opinions introduced by false sects. <He is a blank tablet prepared to take from God’s finger such forms as it

⁸⁵ Montaigne, *Apology*, 63.

⁸⁶ It is interesting to note that in several places in the *Apology*, Montaigne suggests that many of these dogmatic philosophers were perhaps not so certain of their own doctrines—that even though they professed certain dogmas, they may have done so while maintaining an underlying stance of ignorance. Montaigne says, “I am not easily convinced that Epicurus, Plato, and Pythagoras have given us their atoms, their ideas, and their numbers as real money. They were too wise to establish their articles of faith on the basis of things so uncertain and so debatable. But into this obscurity and ignorance of the world, each of these great persons labored to bring some semblance of light, and they occupied their minds with inventions that had at least a pleasant and subtle appearance <<provided that, however false, it could be maintained against arguments to the contrary. “*These things are invented by the ingenuity of each, not by the power of knowledge.*”>> (Montaigne, *Apology*, 73.)

⁸⁷ Ariew and Grene, introduction, viii.

pleases him to write on it. The more we turn back and commit ourselves to God and renounce ourselves, the more we are worth.⁸⁸

Montaigne's "fideistic theme," according to Popkin, is "complete doubt on the rational level, joined with a religion based on faith alone given to us not by our own capacities but solely by God's grace."⁸⁹ Popkin describes Montaigne's *Apology* as containing a series of Pyrrhonian skeptical layers—the first layer being a "theological crisis" about the rule of faith, the second a critique of sense knowledge that includes a discussion of the problem of the criterion, and the third a "sceptical crisis...of scientific knowledge."⁹⁰ Popkin's views about Montaigne are not entirely inaccurate. I agree with Popkin that Montaigne's discussions of Pyrrhonian skepticism provide support for his fideistic beliefs. Additionally, as I stated before, Montaigne is known for the threads of skepticism that run through his works, and there are several parts of the *Apology* in which he favorably describes the Pyrrhonian philosophy. After all, Montaigne is often remembered for his skeptical motto, "Que se-jais?" ("What do I know?"). However, my point is that Popkin exaggerates the influence of skeptical ideas on Montaigne and, at the same time, conveniently avoids analyzing other influences on him. It also seems to me that Popkin lays too much emphasis on Montaigne's skepticism with regard to its later effects on early modern philosophers. He says that the *Apology* was to become "the womb of modern thought, in that it led to the attempt to either refute the new Pyrrhonism or to find a way of living with it," and that Montaigne's skepticism started "an intellectual movement that continued to plague philosophers in their quest for certainty."⁹¹ In the following chapters of this dissertation, I will address

⁸⁸ Montaigne, *Apology*, 68.

⁸⁹ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 55.

⁹⁰ Popkin, *History*, 55.

⁹¹ Popkin, *History*, 56.

sweeping claims like these more directly insofar as Popkin applies them to Descartes and Hume. Before discussing Popkin's claims about those philosophers, I will look briefly at the skepticism of another key pre-Cartesian intellectual: Pierre Charron.

IIIc. Pierre Charron: Much Like Montaigne, Seeker of Wisdom

Many of the claims Popkin makes about Pierre Charron are similar to those he makes about Montaigne. In the same way he characterizes Montaigne, Popkin calls Charron a “Catholic Pyrrhonist.”⁹² The way Popkin puts it, Charron was Montaigne's intellectual heir because in his writings Charron emulated Montaigne's emphasis on, and espousal of, Pyrrhonian skepticism—Pyrrhonism as the only intellectual path that might lead us to divine knowledge. According to Popkin, Charron's original contribution to the history of skepticism was his ability to take the Pyrrhonian ideas along with the “rambling and, for its day, more esoteric method of the French Socrates [Montaigne]” and make them amenable to learned academics and theologians.⁹³ Though Charron's major philosophical work, *La Sagesse (Of Wisdom)*, according to Popkin, is “little more than Montaigne's ‘Apologie’ in organized form,” the form of Charron's presentation as “one of the first philosophical writings in a modern language” is what made it groundbreaking for its time.⁹⁴ Charron is for the most part neglected in the history of early modern philosophy, but because of his significant contribution to early modern thought—specifically the formalized

⁹² Richard H. Popkin, “Charron and Descartes: The Fruits of Systematic Doubt,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 51, no. 25 (December 1954): 834.

⁹³ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 57.

⁹⁴ Popkin, *History*, 59.

presentation of Pyrrhonism in his treatise, *Of Wisdom*—in Popkin’s opinion, he “deserves to be honored as a father of modern philosophy.”⁹⁵

In *The History of Scepticism*, Popkin mentions Charron’s first work, *Les Trois Véritez* (*The Three Truths*), but since it is “primarily...a Counter-Reformation tract against Calvinism” that emphasizes the weakness of the human mind and appeals to the authority of the Catholic Church, and because it does not contain much of a discussion about Pyrrhonian ideas, Popkin treats it only briefly.⁹⁶ “The underlying theory of...Catholicism that is based only on complete scepticism,” however, “is made much more explicit in Charron’s philosophical writing, *La Sagesse*.”⁹⁷ My critique of Popkin’s claims about Charron is virtually the same as that of the claims he makes about Montaigne: Popkin exaggerates the influence of skepticism on Charron while downplaying, or avoiding discussions of, other influences. First, as mentioned, he treats Charron’s work, *The Three Truths*, as insignificant in comparison to *Of Wisdom*. It can be inferred from the section on Charron in *HS* that Popkin most likely does so because of the lack of Pyrrhonian ideas in *The Three Truths*. In addition to ignoring *The Three Truths*, in *HS* Popkin only makes one mention of the non-skeptical philosophical influences on Charron. He says that “Charron’s ethics [in *Of Wisdom*] was based on Stoic elements.”⁹⁸ Apart from that one remark he does not discuss the significance of Stoicism or other philosophical traditions on Charron’s thought.

As is the case with Montaigne’s *Apology*, there is no doubt that skeptical ideas are included in Charron’s *Of Wisdom*. For example, in some ways hearkening back to the views of

⁹⁵ Popkin, “Charron and Descartes,” 831.

⁹⁶ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 58.

⁹⁷ Popkin, *History*, 59.

⁹⁸ Popkin, *History*, 59.

the Pyrrhonists, Charron describes the wise man as one who practices a “suspension of decision and resolution.”⁹⁹ He says,

The wise man...if someone takes issue and contradicts him...he is ready to listen to reasons on the other side...and whatever his current opinion is, he thinks there is or might always be a better one, only one that has not yet come to light. This suspension is founded primarily on those propositions that are so well praised among the wise, namely, that nothing is certain, that we know nothing, that there is nothing in nature but thought; nothing certain but uncertainty...In short, it is the doctrine and practice of all the greatest sages and most noble philosophers, who expressly professed not to know, to doubt, inquire, and search...¹⁰⁰

The indifference of the wise man described above is in some ways similar to the investigative, non-assertive, and judgment-suspending qualities of the Pyrrhonists. When a Pyrrhonist says, “I determine nothing,” Sextus says what he means by that is, “I now feel in such a way as neither to posit dogmatically nor to reject any of the things falling under this investigation.”¹⁰¹ However, although there are such similarities between Charron’s ideas and those of the Pyrrhonian skeptics, Charron also describes the wise man as one who works towards self-improvement in traditionally non-skeptical ways. For example, in a discussion about the destructiveness of the passions on the human soul, Charron recommends the following approach to reducing harm: “The...best of all remedies is a lively virtue, resolution, and firmness of soul by means of which one foresees and confronts things without trouble...The right way to quiet and soften the passions is to know them well, examine and judge what powers they have over us and what powers we have over them.”¹⁰² These ideas and recommendations sound similar to those of the Stoics, who tell us that although many things are out of our control, it is to some

⁹⁹ Pierre Charron, *Wisdom*, in *Descartes’ Meditations: Background Source Materials*, ed. Roger Ariew, John Cottingham, and Tom Sorell (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 60.

¹⁰⁰ Charron, *Wisdom*, 60–61.

¹⁰¹ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 49.

¹⁰² Charron, *Wisdom*, 55.

extent within our power to curb the intensity of our passions. Thus, the Stoics encourage us to do whatever we can to temper our emotions. These kinds of suggestions for self-improvement, which, according to the Stoics, lead to virtue, are not to be found in the writings of Sextus or Cicero. They are foreign to the views of the Pyrrhonists and the Academics.

It is important to note that although he makes normative claims like the ones just mentioned—which, in virtue of their prescriptiveness alone, arguably makes them non-Pyrrhonian—Charron does so in the service of faith. He encourages intellectual indifference, but he says, “What is more, nothing is of greater service to piety, religion, and divine action than indifference.”¹⁰³ Another important aspect of Charron’s *Of Wisdom* is the criticisms of human vanity and arrogance, intellectual or otherwise, contained within it. In support of his fideism, Charron says, “But of all the passions, one must carefully guard against and deliver oneself from egoism: the presumption and mad love of self, plague of man, chief enemy of wisdom, true gangrene and corruption of the soul, by which we adore ourselves and remain so content with ourselves that we listen only to ourselves and believe only ourselves.”¹⁰⁴

Popkin does not examine the areas of Charron’s philosophical writings that exhibit non-skeptical tendencies, e.g. the predominance of Stoic ideas in his ethics or his criticisms of Aristotelian epistemology. In her article, “Pierre Charron’s View of the Source of Wisdom,” Maryanne Cline Horowitz says that “Popkin has overemphasized the significance of Charron’s Pyrrhonian arguments, and has neglected to point out that Charron’s scepticism is severely limited by his theory of natural seeds of virtue and knowledge.”¹⁰⁵ I agree with Cline that Popkin

¹⁰³ Charron, *Wisdom*, 62.

¹⁰⁴ Charron, *Wisdom*, 55.

¹⁰⁵ Maryanne Cline Horowitz, “Pierre Charron’s View of the Source of Wisdom,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 9, no. 4 (October 1971): 443.

makes too much of Charron's skepticism and too little of his dogmatic claims—possibly even his full-fledged theories—about virtue and knowledge. I have pointed out some areas of Charron's writings in which non-skeptical ideas and influences are apparent. I have shown why I think it is more accurate to view Charron as a fideist rather than a “Catholic Pyrrhonist” or, at the very least, that there is good reason to question Popkin's primary characterization of Charron as a skeptic.¹⁰⁶

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described some of the characteristics of the two ancient skeptical traditions, Pyrrhonism and Academicism. The Pyrrhonists held fast to the principle of non-assertion, neither assenting to nor denying any claims made about reality. They did so through the practices of equipollent reasoning and suspension of judgment (*epochē*) in order to attain what followed as a natural result: tranquility (*ataraxia*). The Academics found fault with the dogmatic epistemological and ethical claims of contemporary philosophical schools. They argued that there is no discernable criterion of truth and, therefore, that nothing is apprehensible. Yet, based on probabilistic reasoning, they made judgments and held opinions about reality. It was their view that although nothing is apprehensible, some accounts and arguments are more plausible than others. Thus, the Academics would approve of, or assent to, the claims with which they were presented based on how likely they seemed.

I have also discussed the influence of skeptical thought on early modern philosophers prior to Descartes by examining the writings of Francisco Sanches, Michel de Montaigne, and Pierre Charron. I have argued that all of these thinkers were influenced by skeptical ideas but not

¹⁰⁶ Popkin, “Charron and Descartes,” 834.

in the ways or to the extent in which Richard Popkin claims. In his work, *Quod nihil scitur*, Sanches often repeats the refrain, “that nothing is known,” which is nearly identical to the Academic claim to universal inapprehensibility. However, many of the arguments in Sanches’ *Quod nihil scitur* are directed against Aristotelianism: it is this aspect of Sanches’ work that should be analyzed with equal, if not more, rigorousness than his so-called skepticism. Montaigne and Charron clearly favored the attitude and way of life of the Pyrrhonists, but their admiration is not sufficient to call them Pyrrhonists or skeptics. After all, both Montaigne and Charron speak positively of other philosophers and schools of philosophy. In the same section of the *Apology* in which he aligns himself intellectually with the Pyrrhonian skeptics, Montaigne recognizes Pythagoras—though he was a pagan—for his praiseworthy attempts to understand divinity.¹⁰⁷ However, we would not for this reason call Montaigne a Pythagorean. As I have noted in this chapter, skepticism was only one of many concerns that these pre-Cartesian early modern philosophers addressed.

Before moving on to the next chapter, in which I will discuss and critique some of his claims about Descartes, I would like to briefly reflect on Popkin’s general description of early modern philosophers as Pyrrhonian. It seems to me that the characteristic term, “Pyrrhonian,” may be a misnomer in the context of early modern philosophy for a number of reasons. To point out just one of them: consider the differences between the motivations and desired results of the Pyrrhonists, on the one hand, and early modern philosophers, on the other. As discussed in the first part of this chapter, the Pyrrhonian skeptics put forward modes of reasoning to show, among other things, how the senses tend to deceive us. For the Pyrrhonists, it was not the purpose of these kinds of arguments to make any claims about the reality of objects based on the results of

¹⁰⁷ Montaigne, *Apology*, 74–75.

their investigations. They did not discuss the discrepancy between what our eyesight shows us about the size of an object and what our reason dictates in order to claim that the object is *actually* of some particular size. Rather, engaging in these modes of reasoning displayed and reinforced their ignorance about the nature of things. Following the principle of equipollence, the Pyrrhonists argued that equally convincing arguments could be presented on both sides of these kinds of issues. By practicing their distinctive methods of reasoning, Pyrrhonian skeptics sought to attain tranquility.

Descartes displays hyperbolic doubt in the First Meditation to show that the senses sometimes deceive us. However, Descartes' examples of sensory deception are presented for a different reason: to demonstrate that, in fact, reasoning is more reliable than sense perception. "The trustworthiness of the senses," Descartes says, "is less certain than that of the understanding."¹⁰⁸ Whereas the Pyrrhonists did not hold any opinions or make any claims about reality (they simply stated how things *seemed* to them), most early modern philosophers, including Montaigne, Charron, and Descartes did indeed do so. Knowing that such a significant difference exists—and this is just one of many—can we legitimately characterize these early modern philosophers as Pyrrhonian?

¹⁰⁸ AT VIII, 132; AC, 78.

Chapter Two:

Popkin on Descartes and Skepticism

In this chapter, I discuss and critique Richard Popkin's views on Descartes and skepticism. In his writings, Popkin makes several claims about Descartes, including the bold assertions that his philosophical project was primarily motivated by a skeptical threat and that he eventually admitted defeat to skepticism. I disagree with Popkin on these points as well as others, and I present arguments to show that Descartes was not affected by skepticism in such ways. For each of Popkin's claims that I engage with, I provide evidence from Descartes' writings to show how and in what ways it is inaccurate. The material in this chapter naturally points us toward the next chapter in which I will present my own interpretation of Descartes' views on—and use of—skepticism. Before addressing his claims about Descartes, I will first provide some background information on Popkin's unique story about the history of skepticism.

I. Popkin's History of Skepticism: The "Sceptical Crisis"

The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle (HS), written by Richard H. Popkin and first published in 1960, is a groundbreaking work on the history of skepticism in early modern philosophy. Much of its originality lies in the emphasis the author places on skeptical ideas: Popkin believed skepticism, particularly that of the Pyrrhonian tradition, to be responsible for shaping early modern thought. According to him, early modern philosophy developed out of a "sceptical crisis that challenged all previous knowledge, a crisis that developed in the sixteenth

century.”¹⁰⁹ As Popkin explains it, this skeptical crisis in philosophy was partly an outgrowth of the Reformation—the religious wars between Catholics and Reformers—and, even more so, the result of the first Latin-translated publication and the subsequent rising influence of Sextus Empiricus’ Pyrrhonian skeptical writings. Looking back on his work nearly fifty years after introducing his idea of a skeptical crisis, Popkin believed that his arguments about skepticism’s significance had offered a new paradigm in which to understand modern philosophy—one that provided “a more meaningful picture of the making of the modern mind than what had previously been proposed.”¹¹⁰ The fact that soon after the publication of his book, “there were practically no negative or even critical reviews” of it, is a reason Popkin cites as to why his novel approach to understanding modern philosophy’s development is especially meaningful.¹¹¹

The first chapter of *The History of Scepticism* deals with the Protestant Reformation—the religious battles in sixteenth-century Europe between Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin and Counter-Reformers like Erasmus of Rotterdam. Popkin claims that the main point of contention in these theological wars was the standard for religious knowledge: the “rule of faith.”¹¹² The question that needed to be answered on both sides was, “What counts as the criterion for religious knowledge?”¹¹³ On the one hand, Luther would have it that the rule of faith

¹⁰⁹ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, viii.

¹¹⁰ Popkin, “Role of Scepticism Reconsidered,” 502.

¹¹¹ Cf. Popkin, “Scepticism Reconsidered,” 502. In this passage, Popkin refers to this new paradigm and his work on skepticism as a joint effort by him and Charles B. Schmitt.

¹¹² Popkin, *History*, 3.

¹¹³ The problem of the criterion is a fundamental issue in epistemology that goads us to question the basis of our claims to knowledge. It dates back to ancient Greek skepticism and is a topic that Sextus Empiricus discusses in detail. Given his emphasis on Pyrrhonian skepticism as the most influential component of early modern philosophy’s development, it is not surprising that Popkin should reference this ancient skeptical problem in order to support his claim that the “problem of the criterion” for religious knowledge was the primary idea at issue during the Reformation.

is “what conscience is compelled to believe on reading Scripture.”¹¹⁴ Calvin claimed that the criterion for religious knowledge is the “inner persuasion” provided by the Holy Spirit upon reading Scripture.¹¹⁵ The Counter-Reformers, on the other hand, speaking in defense of the Catholic Church, viewed the beliefs in these kinds of personal criteria as akin to the promotion of religious anarchy. If conscience were the rule of faith, then anyone could be permitted to believe anything, and any religious beliefs could be justified. The Counter-Reformers claimed that the authority of the Church was time-tested and therefore much more reliable than what one individual alone could ascertain from reading Scripture.

Popkin presents this introductory discussion about the religious Reformation in order to show, in part, how a skeptical crisis developed in philosophy. “The sceptical problem that arose in the religious sphere of the Reformation,” he claims, “was to unleash a sceptical crisis in the sciences and all other areas of human knowledge.”¹¹⁶ In Chapter 2 of *HS*, Popkin builds on the story of this skeptical crisis by discussing the vital significance of Sextus Empiricus: “the only Greek Pyrrhonian sceptic whose works survived,” an individual who “came to have a dramatic role in the formation of modern thought.”¹¹⁷ Popkin argues that prior to the first publication of a Latin translation of Sextus’ works in 1562, not much about Sextus Empiricus or Pyrrhonian skepticism was known in Europe. He admits that there had been some discussions about skepticism, based on the works of Cicero and Diogenes Laertius, leading up to the time period in question. However, the works by these authors were “less philosophical presentations” of skepticism, and they lacked the kind of philosophical force that only could have come from the

¹¹⁴ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 5.

¹¹⁵ Popkin, *History*, 10.

¹¹⁶ Popkin, *History*, 15

¹¹⁷ Popkin, *History*, 18.

writings of Sextus Empiricus.¹¹⁸ Thus, according to Popkin, they did not generate much intellectual dialogue or debate. “It is only after the works of Sextus were published,” he concludes, “that scepticism became an important philosophical movement.”¹¹⁹

According to Popkin, the skeptical crisis in philosophy that arose from the Reformation and the publication of Sextus Empiricus’ works had a profound effect on intellectuals during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and primarily resulted in pitting skeptics against dogmatists—a conflict that, he claims, would ensue for the remainder of modern philosophical history. As Michael Ayers, a reviewer of *HS* puts it, “[Popkin’s] underlying judgment is that early modern philosophy is best understood in terms of a battle between anti-dogmatic, Pyrrhonian sceptics and dogmatic anti-sceptics, with moderates looking for a middle way.”¹²⁰ Whether discussing thinkers like Montaigne and Bayle, both of whom it can be argued are on one side of the skeptical spectrum, or dogmatic philosophers like Descartes and Spinoza, on the other side, Popkin drives home the point that all of them were deeply affected by this skeptical crisis.

The lasting influence of Popkin’s research in general, and of *The History of Scepticism* in particular, is seen through the many scholars who have followed his lead over the past half-century or so.¹²¹ These contemporary thinkers have furthered Popkin’s story about the history of skepticism by arguing for the central role that skepticism played in shaping modern philosophy.

¹¹⁸ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 34.

¹¹⁹ Popkin, *History*, 35.

¹²⁰ Michael Ayers, “Popkin’s Revised Scepticism”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (2004): 320.

¹²¹ Harry M. Bracken, José Maia Neto, and Richard Watson, among others, have been influenced by Popkin.

To cite just one example of the influence of Popkin's paradigm, José Maia Neto opens his article, "Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy," with this:

Ancient skepticism was more influential in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than it had ever been before. Thanks to the groundwork of Charles B. Schmitt and Richard H. Popkin on the influence of ancient skepticism in early modern philosophy and to the extensive research that followed their lead, skepticism is now recognized as having played a major role in the rise of modern thought.¹²²

Popkin's history of skepticism has been highly influential, and most historians of early modern philosophy would agree to that. However, there are scholars who recognize both the ingenuity and the significance of Popkin's work and yet take issue with the claims he makes. For example, Michael Ayers reiterates the common judgment that "Popkin's contribution to the historiography of early modern thought has been very great indeed," but he criticizes Popkin's work for a number of reasons.¹²³ Ayers asks, rhetorically, "Does all this exaggerate the role of ancient scepticism in determining the shape of modern philosophy and science?"¹²⁴ After all, he continues, "Platonism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism seem no less important than Scepticism, offering theories and themes that were variously elaborated and modified by different philosophers in opposition to one another and, even more, to Scholastic Aristotelianism."¹²⁵ Additionally, Ayers points out Popkin's imprecise and inconsistent usage of terms that are essential to understanding his arguments—terms like "sceptical crisis," "dogmatism," "mitigated

¹²² José R. Maia Neto, "Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 2 (April 1997): 199.

¹²³ Ayers, "Popkin's Revised Scepticism," 320.

¹²⁴ Ayers, "Popkin's Revised Scepticism," 323.

¹²⁵ Ayers, 326.

scepticism,” and even “scepticism” itself. The “inherent slipperiness of some of his key terms” seemingly helps to support Popkin’s story but also makes his claims less credible.¹²⁶

I find Ayer’s critique of Popkin’s history of skepticism to be convincing. I agree that Popkin’s use of key terms is ambiguous and, what is more relevant to my arguments in this dissertation, I think that he overemphasizes the role of Pyrrhonian skepticism in the development of early modern philosophy. One telling example that illustrates Popkin’s tendency to exaggerate the significance of skepticism comes from his discussions about Descartes.

In the following sections, I will describe what Popkin has to say about the influence of skepticism on Descartes’ philosophy, and I will provide arguments supported by pertinent textual references to explain why I think Popkin’s views are inaccurate. As I outline, examine, and critique a selection of Popkin’s claims about Descartes, it will be helpful to keep in mind his arguments in *HS* and his story as a whole. The claims Popkin makes about Descartes are as follows:

1. The threat of skepticism was the main impetus for Descartes’ philosophical project.
2. Descartes only could have attained certainty by taking Pyrrhonism sufficiently seriously.
3. Descartes recognized that skepticism was insurmountable, and he ultimately conceded to it.

II. Descartes and the Threat of Skepticism

In *The History of Scepticism*, Popkin devotes two chapters to a discussion of Descartes and skepticism. In the first of these two chapters, “Descartes: Conqueror of Scepticism,” Popkin paints a picture of Descartes as having been so troubled by the threat of skepticism that he felt

¹²⁶ Ayers, “Popkin’s Revised Scepticism,” 330.

compelled to respond. According to this portrayal, prior to his awareness of a skeptical threat, Descartes “had not concerned himself with metaphysical questions.”¹²⁷ However, soon after realizing the extent of what Popkin describes as a “sceptical crisis,” along with its dangerous implications for philosophy and the sciences, Descartes felt that he needed to provide an answer. Herein lies one of Popkin’s main claims about Descartes, the one that I will address first: Descartes’ philosophical project was primarily motivated by the threat of skepticism.¹²⁸

Some of Popkin’s support for this claim comes from a story that had been told about Descartes. Popkin states that Descartes “apparently developed his philosophy as a result of being confronted with the full significance of *la crise pyrrhonienne* [the Pyrrhonian crisis] in 1628–29.”¹²⁹ What exactly happened in 1628–29 that caused Descartes’ “awakening to the sceptical menace?”¹³⁰ As the story goes, during that time Descartes attended a lecture in France by an alchemist named Chandoux. Popkin himself admits that there is not much reliable information about the details of this gathering, but supposedly Descartes was the only person in attendance who did not applaud Chandoux’s speech. In fact, according to the story, Descartes publicly criticized Chandoux and the members of the audience for so easily accepting probability as a satisfactory criterion for truth. “According to the account we have,” Popkin says, “Descartes spoke first in favor of Chandoux’s anti-Scholasticism. Next he went on to attack the fact that the

¹²⁷ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 146.

¹²⁸ As aforementioned, there are many scholars who are influenced by Popkin and make claims that are similar to his. For example, the view that Descartes’ philosophy was in large part developed as a response to skepticism can be found in E. M. Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). In the Preface to this work, Curley says, “Throughout the book I argue that much criticism of Descartes stems from a failure to see his work in the context of the late Renaissance skepticism against which it is so largely directed.” (Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics*, ix.)

¹²⁹ Popkin, *History*, 144.

¹³⁰ Popkin, *History*, 145.

speaker and the audience were willing to accept probability as the standard of truth, for if this were the case, falsehoods might actually be taken as truths.”¹³¹

It is clear from his writings that Descartes was not in favor of probabilistic reasoning where it concerned claims to knowledge in philosophy and the sciences.¹³² To justify this judgment of Descartes’s views on probabilistic reasoning, we need only look at one of several examples from his works in which he expresses disdain for probability. In this case, Descartes speaks ironically about those whom he believes foolishly cleave to Aristotelian principles and probabilistic reasoning. “Those who now follow Aristotle,” Descartes says, and “who have only very mediocre minds,” are so blinded by their fealty to Aristotelian principles—which are utterly obscure—that they stubbornly and unreasonably oppose Descartes’ “very simple and very evident” principles.¹³³ Descartes continues,

But even the best minds have no reason for wanting to know these principles [i.e. Descartes’ principles of philosophy]; for if they want to know how to speak about all things and to acquire the reputation for being learned, they will achieve their objective more easily by contenting themselves with probability, which can be found without great difficulty in all sorts of matters, than by seeking the truth, which can only be discovered little by little in some and which, when it is a question of speaking about other matters, obliges one to confess frankly that one is ignorant of them.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 145.

¹³² It is important to note that with regard to ordinary, day-to-day activities, Descartes says that he practiced a “provisional morality” that included, for the sake of practicality, living according to probabilistic reasoning. In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes states, “And thus the actions of life often tolerating no delay, it is a very certain truth that, when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable; and even if we notice no more probability in some than in others, nevertheless we must settle on some, and afterwards no longer regard them as doubtful, insofar as they relate to practical matters, but as very true and very certain, because the reason that made us decide on them appears so.” (AT VI, 25; A, 57.) It is with *philosophical* and *scientific* knowledge that Descartes would not allow for probabilistic reasoning to interfere.

¹³³ AT VI, 70–71; A, 78.

¹³⁴ AT VI, 71; A, 78–79.

Descartes' view that probability is not an adequate criterion for philosophical or scientific knowledge does not imply a fear of—or even recognition of—a skeptical threat, as Popkin suggests. Rather, it reinforces our understanding of Descartes' long-standing desire to seek and attain certain knowledge, what Descartes describes in the *Meditations* as the kind of knowledge that would be needed “to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences.”¹³⁵ A statement made by Descartes that displays the unwavering commitment to—and the fundamental importance of—attaining certain knowledge comes from the *Discourse on Method*, in which Descartes applauds himself both for choosing the philosophical path and for his accomplishments thus far: “I cannot but take immense satisfaction in the progress that I think I have already made in the search for truth, and I cannot but envisage such hopes for the future that if, among the occupations of men purely as men, there is one that is solidly good and important, I dare to believe that it is the one I have chosen.”¹³⁶

I would argue that Popkin misinterprets Descartes by equating his response to probabilistic reasoning, and his contempt for it, with a reaction to a skeptical threat or a skeptical crisis. Popkin suggests that Descartes' response to Chandoux's lecture in Paris was primarily anti-skeptical, presumably because one well-known characteristic of the Academic skeptics is their reliance on probabilistic reasoning. Popkin says that at the time of his visit to Paris, Descartes “discovered how the best minds of the day either spent their time advocating scepticism or [accepting] only probable, and possibly uncertain, views instead of seeking absolute truth.”¹³⁷ Thus, Popkin claims that Descartes must have been shaken by a “skeptical

¹³⁵ AT VIII, 17; AC, 9.

¹³⁶ AT VI, 3; AC, 47.

¹³⁷ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 146.

crisis.” However, instead of coming to this conclusion, Popkin might have observed that Descartes’ arguments against probabilism extended across philosophical traditions, both past and present, from the Pyrrhonists and the Academic skeptics to the Scholastic Aristotelians. Certainty was a *sine qua non* for Descartes’ particular conception of knowledge, and probabilistic reasoning was antithetical to it.

Like Descartes, the Pyrrhonian skeptics viewed probability to be an inadequate criterion for claims to knowledge. In the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus Empiricus indicates this view in a discussion about the differences between the Pyrrhonian skeptics and the Academics. Sextus contends that the Pyrrhonists do not make judgments or claims about appearances due to their being more or less convincing, i.e. by considering what is more or less probable, whereas the Academics do: “For the Academics say that things are good and bad not in the way we do, but with the conviction that it is plausible that what they call good rather than its contrary really is good...we say that appearances are equal in convincingness or lack of convincingness (as far as the argument goes), while they say that some are plausible and others implausible.”¹³⁸ Even so, it would be a stretch to assume, as Popkin does, that because Descartes shunned probabilistic reasoning just as the Pyrrhonists did, he must have been similarly responding to the views of the Academic skeptics.

Popkin contends that Descartes’ metaphysical philosophy was primarily developed as a response to the “ever-increasing danger” of skepticism.¹³⁹ At the time of the writing of *The History of Scepticism*, he admitted that his views about Descartes’ motivations were uncommon in the scholarship. The “traditional interpretation” of Descartes “saw him as the scientific enemy

¹³⁸ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 59–60.

¹³⁹ Popkin, *History*, 144.

of Scholasticism and orthodoxy;” a more recent interpretation, which had been gaining favor, viewed Descartes “as a man who tried to reinstate the medieval outlook in the face of Renaissance novelty, and a thinker who sought to discover a philosophy adequate for the Christian worldview in light of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century.”¹⁴⁰ Popkin’s interpretation of Descartes falls in line with neither of these views. Popkin claims not only that Descartes was aware of a skeptical threat but also that he wrote the *Meditations* and other metaphysical works as a direct response to that threat. He says,

Descartes himself expressed great concern with the scepticism of the time; he indicated a good deal of acquaintance with the Pyrrhonian writings, ancient and modern; he apparently developed his philosophy as a result of being confronted with the full significance of *la crise pyrrhonienne* [the Pyrrhonian crisis] in 1628–29, and he proclaimed that his system was the only intellectual fortress capable of withstanding the assault of the sceptics. When and how Descartes came into contact with sceptical views is hard to tell. But he seems to have been well aware not only of the Pyrrhonian classics but also of the sceptical current of his time, and its ever-increasing danger to the cause of both science and religion.¹⁴¹

The statement Popkin is referring to in the passage above, in which Descartes proclaims his philosophy to be the only one that could withstand the assault of the skeptics, comes from the *Discourse on Method*. In that work, Descartes states, “And noticing that this truth—*I think, therefore I am*—was so firm and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.”¹⁴² Popkin seems to suggest that Descartes’ statement in the *Discourse* implies that he had felt a sense of danger about skepticism. However, there is another way to interpret Descartes’ words, one that I prefer and believe to be more accurate.

¹⁴⁰ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 143.

¹⁴¹ Popkin, *History*, 144.

¹⁴² AT VI, 32; A, 61.

The statement in question contains a formulation of what Descartes deemed to be the first principle of philosophy, the *cogito: cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). I would suggest that the importance of this statement lies not in what Descartes says about the skeptics, but in the self-evidence of the *cogito*. The *cogito* represents a claim to self-evident, certain knowledge and is thus, by its very nature, counter to the stated investigative results of both skeptical traditions, which view knowledge to be either impossible (Academicism) or as yet unattained (Pyrrhonism). Although Descartes does refer to the skeptics in this statement, it is my contention that he does so as a side note or an afterthought. Descartes has discovered and stated his first principle of philosophy, the truth of which he considers to be undeniable. So he states, dismissively, that even the “most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics” are “incapable of shaking it.”

If we look again at what Descartes says about the skeptics here, we might consider why he does not refer to the most well-reasoned or best arguments of the skeptics. Instead he qualifies the skeptics as tending to be “most extravagant” in their suppositions. This sort of characterization does not show a sense of great concern about skepticism on Descartes’ part. I would argue that it further reveals what Descartes points out in other writings: his contemptuous attitude towards skepticism and his opinion that skeptical arguments tend to be extravagant or otherwise deplorable. Popkin misinterprets Descartes by attributing to him certain motivations, and he does so by inserting an *ad hoc* skeptical threat without providing plausible textual support for its existence.

Popkin relies on the story about Chandoux’s lecture from 1628–1629—the details of which he admits are slim and uncorroborated—and questionable interpretations of Descartes’ statements, like the one just discussed, to undergird his claim that Descartes recognized and then, almost immediately, urgently responded to a skeptical crisis. However, nowhere in his writings

does Descartes discuss skepticism as posing any kind of real or serious threat. Quite the contrary, most of Descartes' references to skepticism in his published works and correspondence present a slighting view of that philosophy and its adherents.¹⁴³

Just as there is inadequate support for the argument that Descartes viewed skepticism as a threat, there is insufficient evidence in Descartes' writings to suggest that he developed his own philosophy as a response to skepticism. In the dedicatory letter to the *Meditations*, Descartes states several reasons for his interest in pursuing such a project, none of which indicate a fear of skepticism or the feeling of a need to respond to it. Descartes suggests that a long-standing desire to philosophically demonstrate the existence of God and the soul is what prompted him to take on the project of the *Meditations*. "I have always thought," he states, "that two issues—namely, God and the soul—are chief among those that ought to be demonstrated with the aid of philosophy rather than theology."¹⁴⁴ In the same letter, Descartes also mentions how a decree from the Church Council reinforced his plan for this undertaking, especially with regard to his desire to philosophically demonstrate the immortality of the soul. He says, "Because the Lateran Council held under Leo X, in Session 8, condemned such people [those who argued against the immortality of the soul] and expressly enjoined Christian philosophers to refute their arguments and to use all their powers to demonstrate the truth, I have not hesitated to undertake this task as well."¹⁴⁵ Additionally, Descartes explains how his unique philosophical method, which he had previously outlined in the *Discourse on Method*, could be more thoroughly examined and better

¹⁴³ In Chapter Three, I discuss Descartes' expressly stated views on skepticism.

¹⁴⁴ AT VIII, 1; AC, 1.

¹⁴⁵ AT VIII, 3; AC, 2.

displayed through his *Meditations*.¹⁴⁶ These are but some instances of Descartes' stated reasons for pursuing the project of the *Meditations*. There are many other places in his writings, aside from the *Meditations*, where Descartes discusses the motivations for his philosophical pursuits. However, nowhere do we find Descartes mentioning the threat of skepticism as being a strong motivation, let alone the primary impetus, for his philosophical project.¹⁴⁷

If, as Popkin claims, Descartes had undergone a “sceptical crisis” in 1628–1629, we should expect to find some indications of that crisis in his other writings from that time period or, at the very least, soon afterwards. However, we do not. Between 1618 and 1629, Descartes worked on his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* or *Regulae* (to be discussed later), which deals with method and the rules for conducting one's reason well. The *Regulae* contains no signs of skepticism or hyperbolic doubt. Between 1629 and 1633, Descartes worked on a short treatise on metaphysics, which is now lost, and he also prepared scientific and mathematical essays, including *The World* (*Le Monde*), *Dioptrics*, *Meteors*, and *Geometry*.¹⁴⁸ None of these works exhibit any meaningful discussion of skepticism, and none of them provide us with sufficient evidence to infer that Descartes underwent a skeptical crisis.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. AT VIII, 3; AC, 2.

¹⁴⁷ One question that might be raised here is, “If Descartes was not primarily responding to skepticism, why then did he utilize skeptical arguments in the First Meditation?” In a nutshell, Descartes recognized the value of skeptical doubt as a means to overturning it. However, Descartes' strategic use of skepticism does not imply that he was responding to a skeptical threat, let alone that the threat of skepticism was the primary motivating factor for his *Meditations*. In Chapter Three, I discuss some reasons for Descartes' use of doubt and skeptical argumentation in his published works.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Roger Ariew, introduction to René Descartes, *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, ed. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000).

III. Descartes' Certainty through Pyrrhonism

Popkin claims that Descartes only could have arrived at the certain knowledge of the existence of the mind by “taking Pyrrhonism sufficiently seriously.”¹⁴⁹ The evidence for his claim that Descartes took Pyrrhonism sufficiently seriously, i.e. what Popkin means by Descartes “taking Pyrrhonism sufficiently seriously,” is the hyperbolic doubt presented in the First Meditation—specifically, the presentation of the malicious demon hypothesis, which I will hereafter refer to as “malicious demon hyperbolic doubt.” “So, all in all,” Popkin argues, “from the despairing depths of the First *Meditation* Descartes believed he had been able to accomplish a complete overturning of skepticism marching from complete doubt to complete assurance. This amazing change of state was possible only because Pyrrhonism had been taken sufficiently seriously.”¹⁵⁰ I contend that Descartes’ use of hyperbolic doubt in the First Meditation is not an indication that he took Pyrrhonism seriously. It is a strategic implementation of skeptical argumentation designed to help debunk the prevailing Aristotelian ideas about knowledge—ideas that Descartes took seriously and believed to have impeded progress in philosophy and the sciences. To get a sense of Descartes’ opposition to Aristotelianism take, for example, what he says in the Preface to the French edition of the *Principles of Philosophy*: “Aristotle’s principles...have not enabled any progress to be made in all the many centuries in which they have been followed.”¹⁵¹ To cite another example of Descartes’ anti-Aristotelianism, in a letter to Voetius from May of 1643, Descartes says, “The ordinary philosophy which is taught in the schools and universities is...merely a collection of opinions that are for the most part doubtful, as

¹⁴⁹ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 155.

¹⁵⁰ Popkin, *History*, 155.

¹⁵¹ AT IXB, 18–19; CSM I, 189.

is shown by the continual debates in which they are thrown back and forth. They are quite useless, moreover, as long experience has shown to us; for no one has ever succeeded in deriving any practical benefit from ‘prime matter’, ‘substantial forms’, ‘occult qualities’, and the like.”¹⁵²

Descartes’ use of hyperbolic doubt in the First Meditation is not a reflection of his serious consideration of Pyrrhonism. Rather, it is a means to support his attempt to turn the study of philosophy away from Aristotelianism and towards Cartesianism. In a letter to his friend, Marin Mersenne, from January 28, 1641, Descartes apparently writes in confidence about the kinds of effects he genuinely hopes his *Meditations* will have on its readers: “I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle.”¹⁵³

One thing that seems clear about Descartes’ views concerning the First Meditation is that he does not take very seriously the substance of the arguments that results from his use of hyperbolic doubt. For instance, in a letter to Leiden University from 1647, Descartes explains how his hypothetical example of a malicious demon bent on deceiving him—the most extreme form of his hyperbolic doubt—was something “that we neither believe...nor want...believed.”¹⁵⁴ He continues, “My purpose was excellent because I was using the supposition only for the better overthrow of scepticism and atheism, and to prove that God is no deceiver, and to establish that

¹⁵² AT VIII B, 26; CSMK, 221.

¹⁵³ AT III, 298; CSMK, 173.

¹⁵⁴ AT V, 9; CSMK, 316.

as the foundation of all human certitude.”¹⁵⁵ Additionally, in the Synopsis to the *Meditations*, Descartes implies that it would be absurd to believe that we may actually be dreaming or that a malicious demon is deceiving us at all times.¹⁵⁶ “No one of sound mind,” he says, “has ever seriously doubted” “that there really is a world, that men have bodies, and the like.”¹⁵⁷ Descartes’ skeptical doubts in the First Meditation are not meant to be taken at face value. Instead they are presented in order to show that they are, in fact, unsound to begin with. In the Synopsis of the *Meditations*, Descartes describes the purpose and the usefulness of his First Meditation doubts: “Although the utility of so extensive a doubt is not readily apparent, nevertheless its greatest utility lies in freeing us of all prejudices, in preparing the easiest way for us to withdraw the mind from the senses, and finally, in making it impossible for us to doubt any further those things that we later discover to be true.”¹⁵⁸ Descartes believes that as a result of spending adequate time and effort going through the *Meditations*, his readers will find that such doubts can be dismissed.

Popkin’s claim that Descartes took Pyrrhonism sufficiently seriously implies that it was only by employing the method of doubt in the First Meditation—what Descartes refers to as

¹⁵⁵ AT V, 9; CSMK, 316–317.

¹⁵⁶ Although there are examples like this in which Descartes is clear about his opinions concerning hyperbolic doubt as well as his reasons for using it, he was criticized by some readers of his *Meditations* for not being straightforward with his audience. For example, in the Fourth Set of Objections to the *Meditations*, Antoine Arnauld says this: “All the same, [the First] Meditation ought to be bolstered with a brief preface in which the author indicates that these things are not being seriously doubted at all. Rather, the purpose of doubting is to set aside for a short time whatever provides the least (or, as the author says elsewhere, ‘hyperbolic’) occasion for doubting whether something so firm and stable might be found that not even the most perverse person should have even the slightest grounds for doubting it. Thus, in place of the words: ‘since I was ignorant of the author of my origin,’ I would advise replacing them with: ‘I pretended to be ignorant...’” (AT VIII, 215; AC, 128.)

¹⁵⁷ AT VIII, 16; AC, 9.

¹⁵⁸ AT VIII, 12; AC, 6.

exaggerated doubts¹⁵⁹—that Descartes was able to discover the first principle of philosophy that is revealed in the Second Meditation: *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am).¹⁶⁰ Popkin claims that it is solely this method of radical skeptical doubting that leads Descartes to the “dramatic reversal of doubt that occurs in the discovery of the *cogito*.”¹⁶¹ Only then, after emerging from the extreme doubts of the First Meditation to the certainty of his own existence, can Descartes discover or demonstrate what follows in the subsequent Meditations: the criterion of knowledge, i.e. clear and distinct perceptions, and the existence of both God and the external world.

However, I would argue that by looking at the *Meditations* not as a standalone work but in context, i.e. by comparing Descartes’ statements in that work to what he has written elsewhere, we can conclude that Descartes did not view his use of hyperbolic doubt to be essential for the certain knowledge of the *cogito*. Popkin primarily focuses on the *Meditations* to support his arguments about Descartes, but that is just one of Descartes’ works that contains his metaphysical doctrines. As Cartesian scholar Roger Ariew puts it, “Arguably, Descartes’ masterpiece is the *Meditations*, but to understand that work, one has to appreciate it in contrast with its previous reflection in the *Discourse*, its restatement in the *Principles*, and the debates it provoked in the *Objections* and *Replies* and in the correspondence.”¹⁶² There are clear similarities in Descartes’ metaphysical and epistemological arguments that span across his works, from the *Discourse* to the *Principles*. Accordingly, then, later in this chapter I will discuss

¹⁵⁹ Cf. AT VII, 89; CSM II, 61 and AT VII, 226; AC, 135.

¹⁶⁰ This particular formulation of the *cogito*—*cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am)—appears not in the *Meditations* but in the *Discourse on Method*. Here is one of the ways Descartes presents the *cogito* in the Second Meditation: “Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement ‘I am, I exist’ is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind.” (AT VIII, 25; AC, 13.)

¹⁶¹ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 152.

¹⁶² Ariew, introduction to Descartes, *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, xviii.

a selection of Descartes' other writings in order to show why I believe hyperbolic doubt is unnecessary for his *cogito*.

An examination of some of Descartes' published works and writings, including the *Regulae*, the *Discourse on Method*, and the geometrical presentation of the *Meditations*, will lend support to my view that hyperbolic doubt is not essential for Descartes' first principle of philosophy. The main point I wish to get across is that none of these works include the kind of Pyrrhonism (as Popkin calls it) or exaggerated doubts (Descartes' term) observable in the First Meditation, and yet all of them arrive at *cogito*-like principles similar to the *cogito* found in the *Meditations*. This fact may lead us to believe that Descartes' hyperbolic doubt, though useful, is unnecessary for his discovery of the *cogito*. If my arguments are convincing—and I believe they are—they will add credibility to my view that Descartes did not seriously engage with Pyrrhonism in the way that Popkin claims.

To be fair, Popkin's claim that the Pyrrhonism of the First Meditation is essential to Descartes' attainment of certainty is in some senses plausible. Part One of the *Principles of Philosophy*, described by Descartes as a textbook version of his philosophy, does contain somewhat the kind of hyperbolic doubt that is in the *Meditations*. Additionally, the presentation of hyperbolic doubt in the First Meditation is an essential component for understanding the *Meditations* as a whole. To remove the First Meditation from the work would obviously make the *Meditations* incomplete and, because of the tight-knit relationship among all six Meditations, to do so would also make the arguments of the work in its entirety less coherent and less convincing.¹⁶³ In these ways, then, the Pyrrhonism or hyperbolic doubt of the First Meditation is

¹⁶³ Cf. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress, introduction to René Descartes, *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006). Roger Ariew describes the view of Descartes' *Meditations* as internally self-consistent and self-contained—a view espoused by

necessary to maintain the cohesiveness of the *Meditations*. There is perhaps also some support for Popkin's claim that comes from Descartes' remarks about his use of skepticism in the First Meditation, statements which I will discuss in the next section.

IV. Descartes on His First Meditation Skepticism

One area of Descartes' writings that shows he believed his hyperbolic doubt to be useful for demonstrating the existence of the mind, God, and the external world is the Synopsis of the *Meditations*. In the Synopsis, Descartes makes his opinions about skeptical doubt clear. As mentioned earlier, he says that "no one of sound mind has ever seriously doubted" that the external world really exists.¹⁶⁴ Descartes admits that the arguments he presents in the *Meditations* to demonstrate "that there really is a world, that men have bodies, and the like" are "not very useful for proving what they prove," but he also says that they are useful insofar as they underscore our knowledge of the human mind and God, which is "the most certain and most evident" kind of knowledge.¹⁶⁵ Although in this part of the Synopsis Descartes is not explicitly referring to the hyperbolic doubt of the First Meditation, the explanation on his part about his particular argumentative strategy points us to a commonly accepted view of Descartes: that his skepticism is methodological.¹⁶⁶ That is to say, by utilizing his distinctive skeptical method—

Martial Gueroult—as one that "does have textual support." (Ariew and Cress, introduction, xiii.) However, he also points out some reasons as to why this view may not be accurate. For example, Ariew says, "So, although Descartes does at times claim the complete dependence of his principles on each other such that none of them can be changed without the whole set collapsing, it is also obvious that he did make such changes (even to principles he claimed could not be changed)." (Ariew and Cress, introduction, xiv.)

¹⁶⁴ AT VIII, 16; AC, 9.

¹⁶⁵ AT VIII, 16; AC, 9.

¹⁶⁶ For a detailed analysis of Descartes' methodological skepticism, see Harry G. Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes' Meditations* (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970). Frankfurt discusses the strategies Descartes employs in the First Meditation, which include the use of doubt and the

even though that method includes intentionally and perhaps even disingenuously presenting preposterous scenarios like the dream argument and the malicious demon hypothesis—Descartes is able to show the ways in which hyperbolic doubt can be an effective means to attaining certain knowledge. Descartes’ method of doubt, then, is efficacious for his goals in the *Meditations*. However, as I will argue in the ensuing sections, since the *Meditations* is one of only two published works of his in which malicious demon hyperbolic doubt appears—and because in his other writings Descartes affirms the *cogito* without resorting to such doubt—that kind of hyperbolic doubt is not essential for Descartes’ *cogito*.

When criticized by Thomas Hobbes for belaboring the obvious by rehashing in the First Meditation “old” ideas like the deceptiveness of sense perception, Descartes replies in this way: “I do not think I could have omitted them [the skeptical arguments from the First Meditation] any more than a medical writer could omit a description of a disease whose method of treatment he is trying to teach.”¹⁶⁷ If we take Descartes’ analogy in the way I believe it is meant to be taken, then the “disease” he mentions would stand for either skepticism or skeptical arguments (as displayed by the hyperbolic doubt of the First Meditation), and the so-called “treatment” would be the methodical dispelling of skeptical doubts and the certain knowledge attained in the subsequent *Meditations*.¹⁶⁸ This analogy seems to suggest that, for Descartes, the skepticism of

attempt to move us away from reliance on the senses and towards attaining certainty through the use of reason. In addition, see Popkin, “Charron and Descartes.” Popkin describes Descartes’ systematic “method of doubt” as providing him with “*the way to discover knowledge.*” (Popkin, “Charron and Descartes,” 833.)

¹⁶⁷ AT VIII, 171–172; AC, 100–101.

¹⁶⁸ It is interesting to compare Descartes’ “treatment of a disease” analogy to what Sextus Empiricus says about the Pyrrhonists (Sceptics) toward the end of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*: “Sceptics are philanthropic and wish to cure by argument, as far as they can, the conceit and rashness of the Dogmatists. Just as doctors for bodily afflictions have remedies which differ in potency, and apply severe remedies to patients who are severely afflicted and milder remedies to those mildly afflicted, so Sceptics propound arguments which differ in strength – they employ weighty arguments, capable of vigorously rebutting the dogmatic affliction of conceit, against those who are distressed by a

the First Meditation is both useful for—and essential to—his later claims in the *Meditations*. Just as for a physician it would be helpful, even necessary, to know and describe the nature of the illness in question in order to properly treat it, the philosopher seeking to attain certain knowledge would need to understand one of the obstacles in his way, i.e. skeptical doubt, in order to overcome it.

This interpretation of Descartes' analogy might strengthen Popkin's claim that Descartes took Pyrrhonism sufficiently seriously. However, it is not clear whether or not Descartes' description of combating the "disease" of skeptical doubt necessarily entails falling prey to the sickness itself. In other words, one can describe and understand skepticism or skeptical argumentation without having to actively partake in hyperbolic doubt the way that Descartes does in the First Meditation. Still, by examining some of Descartes' own statements about his use of skepticism in the *Meditations*, it would seem that in some ways Popkin's claim is plausible. It might be the case that Descartes was, in fact, taking Pyrrhonism sufficiently seriously. Depending on how it is interpreted, Descartes' admission of a need to include a description of the skeptical "disease" in the First Meditation can lend support to such a claim.

V. Hyperbolic Doubt in Part One of the *Principles of Philosophy*

Although the *Principia Philosophiae (Principles of Philosophy)* was first published in 1644, Descartes began working on it in 1640, during the same time in which he was drafting his replies to the objections to his forthcoming publication of the *Meditations*. Descartes intended for his *Principles* to be a textbook version of his philosophy, and he presented the work in a manner that he thought would be well suited to teaching students in the university. In a letter to

severe rashness, and they employ milder arguments against those who are afflicted by a conceit which is superficial and easily cured and which can be rebutted by a milder degree of plausibility." (Sextus, *Outlines*, 216.)

Mersenne from December 31, 1640, Descartes refers to his plan to write the *Principles*. He says that he is resolved in the upcoming year to write his philosophy “in such an order that it can be easily taught.” He continues, “And the first part, which I am now working on, contains almost the same things as the *Meditations* that you have, except that it is in an entirely different style, and that what is said at length in the one is more abridged in the other, and vice versa.”¹⁶⁹ Part One of the *Principles*, entitled “The Principles of Human Knowledge,” contains Descartes’ epistemological and metaphysical claims, including the *cogito*, proofs for God’s existence, the criterion of truth (clear and distinct perceptions), and arguments to demonstrate the substantial difference between mind and body—“almost the same things as the *Meditations*,” as Descartes says.

In Part One of the *Principles*, Descartes insists that we use a particular method of doubt in order to attain truth—one that is quite similar to that of the *Meditations* in that it encourages us to doubt our former opinions and to get into the habit of distrusting our senses. Descartes’ first principle of knowledge states, “The seeker after truth must, once in the course of his life, doubt everything, as far as possible.”¹⁷⁰ Descartes says that we should not merely doubt any questionable claims to knowledge we may have but that we should even consider them as false. Dubious kinds of so-called knowledge have come to us from childhood, from our faulty opinions or preconceived notions, and from our overreliance on the senses. Because the senses have deceived us many times, we should not trust them. Descartes says, “If our doubts [about the senses] are on the scale just outlined, there seem to be no marks by means of which we can with

¹⁶⁹ AT III, 276; A, 94.

¹⁷⁰ AT VIII A, 5; CSM I, 193.

certainty distinguish being asleep from being awake.”¹⁷¹ In this statement, we see a succinct version—but a version nonetheless—of Descartes’ dream argument from the First Meditation.

Unlike the other works by Descartes that I will analyze in the next few sections, Part One of the *Principles* presents the reader with a method of doubt that is strikingly similar to that of the *Meditations*. In the *Principles*, Descartes not only suggests that we may be dreaming, but also introduces the possibility of the existence of a supremely powerful and deceitful God. “Now we do not know,” Descartes says, “whether [God] may have wished to make us beings of the sort who are always deceived even in those matters which seem to us supremely evident; for such constant deception seems no less a possibility than the occasional deception which, as we have noticed on previous occasions, does occur.”¹⁷² As is the case with the *Meditations*, in the *Principles* this kind of hyperbolic doubt—malicious demon hyperbolic doubt—is outlined as a part of the process that naturally carries us toward the *cogito*. The similarities between the *Meditations* and the *Principles* seem to suggest that Descartes needs hyperbolic doubt for the *cogito*. Yet, in the *Discourse*, Descartes discovers the certainty of both his existence and his intellectual nature without relying on malicious demon hyperbolic doubt. Additionally, in the *Regulae* and the geometrical presentation of the *Meditations*, he does so without using any kind of hyperbolic doubt. The fact that there are instances like these in Descartes’ works lends credibility to my claim that Descartes does not need hyperbolic doubt to arrive at the certain knowledge of the *cogito*.

¹⁷¹ AT VIII A, 6; CSM I, 194.

¹⁷² AT VIII A, 6; CSM I, 194.

VI. Descartes' Works without Hyperbolic Doubt

What I take Popkin to mean by Descartes “taking Pyrrhonism sufficiently seriously” is that Descartes utilized hyperbolic doubt (in particular, malicious demon hyperbolic doubt) in the First Meditation to arrive at the *cogito*.¹⁷³ According to Popkin, Descartes recognized the value of Pyrrhonism and then ingeniously used argumentative strategies from that skeptical tradition in an attempt to overcome skepticism. Whereas it is generally agreed that the Pyrrhonists practiced equipollent reasoning and suspended judgment, never to arrive at any certain conclusions, Popkin says that Descartes “doubts in order to achieve certainty” so that “something of monumental importance can issue from the sceptic’s method.”¹⁷⁴ More importantly, he argues, Descartes’ hyperbolic doubt goes much further than the typical skeptical doubts of the Pyrrhonists. According to Popkin, Descartes’ most significant contribution to the history of skepticism is his argument for the possibility that a malicious demon might be deceiving us at all times. This scenario is the most radical form of skepticism imaginable because if we accept it as a real possibility, then “not only is our information deceptive, illusory, and misleading but our faculties, even under the best of conditions, may be erroneous.”¹⁷⁵ In addition to questioning the reliability of our senses—which is a practice similar to that of the Pyrrhonists in their use of “modes”—Descartes introduces a malicious demon with the power to make it such that the veridicality of our rational faculties can be called into question. “In introducing this level of

¹⁷³ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 155.

¹⁷⁴ Popkin, *History*, 151.

¹⁷⁵ Popkin, *History*, 148.

doubt,” Popkin says, “creating the possibility of the *malin genie* [malicious demon], the *crise pyrrhoniennne* [Pyrrhonian crisis] had been pressed to its farthest limit.”¹⁷⁶

Popkin details the extreme nature of Descartes’ hyperbolic doubt from the First Meditation, and he cites that kind of skeptical argumentation as evidence for Descartes’ serious engagement with Pyrrhonism. However, the only two published works of Descartes’ in which this kind of hyperbolic doubt appears are the *Meditations* and the *Principles of Philosophy*. In some of his other published works and in his correspondence, Descartes does discuss the usefulness—perhaps even the necessity—of doubting, but aside from the *Meditations* and the *Principles*, he does not partake in, or advocate, hyperbolic doubt of the sort that references either a malicious demon or a deceptive God. In the *Regulae*, the *Discourse on Method*, and the geometrical presentation of the *Meditations*, Descartes arrives at the *cogito* or what I consider to be versions of the *cogito*. Yet, in none of these works does Descartes utilize or encourage this type of hyperbolic doubt. Therefore, I would argue it is plausible to think that the use of the kind of hyperbolic doubt found in the First Meditation and Part One of the *Principles* is not necessary for Descartes’ *cogito*.

Via. The *Regulae*

The *Rules for the Direction of the Mind (Regulae)* is one of Descartes’ earliest works, written sometime between 1618 and 1628 but published posthumously. Though he never completed the *Regulae*, that which remains of what he wrote and is available to us can help us to form a comprehensive view of Descartes’ philosophy, especially if we interpret the work in the context of his other writings. In the *Regulae*, Descartes presents the reader with a series of rules

¹⁷⁶ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 149.

that he argues, if strictly adhered to, can aid us in our investigations into—and attainment of—philosophical and scientific truth. Descartes makes it clear that the rules he provides are meant to be followed with a specific goal in mind: “to arrive at knowledge of all things” as far as humanly possible.¹⁷⁷

In the opening sections of the *Regulae*, Descartes makes three claims that inform us of his opinions on how we can attain such knowledge. First, he states that there are only two ways in which “we can arrive at knowledge of things without any fear of error...namely, intuition and deduction.”¹⁷⁸ Second, he says that “first principles themselves are known only by intuition.”¹⁷⁹ Finally, he argues that a particular “method is necessary for the investigation of truth.”¹⁸⁰ By discussing these three claims, I will show that although some discussions about doubt appear in the *Regulae*, there is neither any mention of—nor any use of—hyperbolic doubt. Additionally, I will argue that we are presented with an embryonic but still recognizable form of the *cogito*, Descartes’ first principle of philosophy that apparently results from the kinds of intuition and method described in the *Regulae*. Both the lack of hyperbolic doubt and the existence of the *cogito* in the *Regulae* provide support for my view that Descartes could have arrived at the certainty of the *cogito* without utilizing hyperbolic doubt.

“By method,” Descartes says, “I understand certain and simple rules such that if a person follows them exactly, he will never suppose anything false to be true, and, spending no useless mental effort, but gradually and steadily increasing his knowledge, will arrive at true knowledge

¹⁷⁷ AT X, 372; A, 7.

¹⁷⁸ AT X, 368; A, 6.

¹⁷⁹ AT X, 370; A, 7.

¹⁸⁰ AT X, 371; A, 7.

of all those things to which his powers are adequate.”¹⁸¹ In order for it to be feasible that we never suppose anything false to be true, we might assume that doubt can be used as a heuristic technique: when effectively utilized, doubt can help us to rid ourselves of false opinions so that we will be left with only true, certain knowledge. For Descartes, if we follow his method correctly, whatever we end up accepting to be true will be, as a result, necessarily indubitable. Accordingly, then, he states, “We reject all knowledge that is only probable, and we declare that only those things ought to be believed which are perfectly known and of which there can be no doubt.”¹⁸²

Again, from Descartes’ description of this particular method, we might make the inference that doubt is useful. However, it is important to note that active doubting is not actually a stated component of Descartes’ method. The method presented in the *Regulae* does not encourage us to doubt our previous opinions so that we might attain knowledge in the way that, for instance, Descartes’ method of doubt in the *Discourse* implicitly does. Rather, the method of the *Regulae* suggests that we ought to “turn the whole force of our minds to the smallest and simplest things” and “abstain from superfluous labor” so that we may, by those actions, arrive at the kind of knowledge that is indubitable.¹⁸³

In the *Regulae*, Descartes says that “there can be no scientific knowledge except through an intuition of the mind or through deduction.”¹⁸⁴ As aforementioned, he also says that “first

¹⁸¹ AT X, 371–372; A, 7.

¹⁸² AT X, 362; A, 3.

¹⁸³ AT X, 400; A, 20; AT X, 392; A, 16.

¹⁸⁴ AT X, 372; A, 7–8.

principles themselves are known only by intuition.”¹⁸⁵ I would suggest that in the *Regulae* Descartes presents, by way of example, one of these first principles that can only be known through intuition: the *cogito*, which we are most likely familiar with from its clearly stated and more well-known formulations in the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*.¹⁸⁶ In Rule 3 of the *Regulae*, Descartes says this about intuition:

By *intuition* I understand neither the fleeting testimony of the senses nor the deceptive judgment of the imagination with its false constructions, but a conception of a pure and attentive mind, so easy and so distinct, that no doubt at all remains about what we understand. Or, what comes to the same thing, intuition is the indubitable conception of a pure and attentive mind arising from the light of reason alone; it is more certain than even deduction, because it is simpler, even though, as we noted above, people cannot err in deduction either. Thus everyone can intuit with his mind that he exists, that he is thinking, that a triangle is bounded by only three lines, a sphere by a single surface, and the like. Such things are much more numerous than most people think, because they disdain to turn their minds toward matters so easy.¹⁸⁷

In Rule 3, Descartes describes the process of arriving at what looks very much like the *cogito*. Descartes says that through “a conception of a pure and attentive mind,” a person can know with absolute certainty “that he exists, that he is thinking.” This explanation is strikingly similar to the presentations of *cogito* in the *Discourse* and the *Meditations* in that it both emphasizes the certainty of one’s existence and implies the necessity of one’s thinking as it pertains to one’s existence. Additionally, here is what Descartes says in Rule 8:

But let us give the most noble example of all. If a person proposes to himself the problem of examining all the truths for the knowledge of which human reason suffices—a task which should be undertaken at least once in his life, it seems to

¹⁸⁵ AT X, 370; A, 7.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Roger Ariew, *Descartes Among the Scholastics* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2011). I thank Roger Ariew for encouraging this reading of Descartes—for suggesting that it is plausible to infer the presence of the *cogito* in the *Regulae*. In *Descartes Among the Scholastics*, Ariew cites this passage from the *Regulae* as evidence for a Cartesian *cogito* prior to the 1637 publication of Descartes’ *Discourse*. “There is a shadow of a *cogito* in Rule 8,” he says. (Ariew, *Descartes Among the Scholastics*, 299.)

¹⁸⁷ AT X, 368; A, 6.

me, by anyone who is in all seriousness eager to attain excellence of mind—he will certainly discover by the rules given above that nothing can be known before the intellect, since the knowledge of all other things depends on this, and not the reverse. Then, when he has examined everything that follows immediately after the knowledge of the pure intellect, he will enumerate, among other things, all the other instruments of knowledge we possess besides the intellect; and these are only two: namely, imagination and the senses. He will then devote all his care to distinguishing and examining these three modes of knowledge; and seeing that strictly speaking truth or falsity can exist only in the intellect, but that they often take their source from the other two as well, he will carefully attend to everything by which he can be deceived so that he may be on guard against it.¹⁸⁸

What Descartes seems to be saying in the passage above is that by strictly following these rules, a person will discover the knowledge of his mind—“pure intellect” as distinct from the “imagination and the senses”—before any other kind of knowledge. In other words, if someone seeks after knowledge by utilizing Descartes’ prescribed method, he will through intuition discover the certain knowledge that he is, first and foremost, a “thinking thing.”¹⁸⁹ I would suggest that this conclusion is but a variation on the versions of the *cogito* that appear in the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*. In those two works, the *cogito* is presented in a way that shows that the certainty of one’s own thinking necessarily implies one’s existence: “I think, therefore I am.”¹⁹⁰ Although in this example from the *Regulae*, Descartes makes no claims about one’s necessary existence, “pure intellect,” thought, or mind, is described as being the first kind of knowledge that one attains by following his method.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ AT X, 395–396; A, 18.

¹⁸⁹ AT IXB, 7; CSM I, 195.

¹⁹⁰ AT VI, 32; A, 61.

¹⁹¹ In Rule 12 of the *Regulae*, Descartes presents a different example of what I consider to be yet another form of the *cogito*. “If, for example,” Descartes says, “Socrates says that he doubts everything, it necessarily follows that he understands at least that he is doubting, and hence he knows that something can be true or false, etc.; for there is a necessary connection between these facts and the nature of doubt. The union between such things, however, is contingent when the relation conjoining them is not an inseparable one. This is the case when we say that a body is animate, that a man is dressed, etc. Again, there are many instances of things which are necessarily conjoined, even though most people count them as contingent, failing to notice the relation between them: for example the

In the passage above taken from Rule 8, Descartes advocates vigilance, but he does not encourage doubt. If we recognize that we are prone to error—that our faculties of the imagination, the senses, and even the intellect can deceive us—then we will and should be cautious about our claims to knowledge. The kind of careful attention that Descartes exhorts us to practice here is not equivalent to doubting, let alone hyperbolic doubting. We can describe it as scrutiny or sharpness of mind. To “be on guard against” deception with regard to our faculties, as Descartes insists, is to promote better, more acute, and more accurate reasoning in order to attain the kind of non-probabilistic, indubitable knowledge that Descartes is seeking.¹⁹² Although in the *Regulae* there is some mention of the value of doubting for the purpose of attaining certain knowledge, the hyperbolic doubt of the kind found in the *Meditations* is non-existent. Additionally, one of the results found in the *Regulae* is what I consider to be an inchoate form of the *cogito*—and Descartes arrives at this without using hyperbolic doubt.

Vib. The *Discourse on Method*

There may be some hesitation on the reader’s part in accepting my claim that the *cogito* appears in the *Regulae*. However, there can be no doubt about the presence of the *cogito* in the *Discourse on Method*. The *Discourse* from 1637 was Descartes’ first published work. In it we find, among other things, Descartes’ explanation of how he developed and used his unique method to attain certain knowledge, including that of the *cogito*. Descartes’ method in the *Discourse* draws from that of the *Regulae* in many ways. For example, in both works Descartes

proposition, ‘I am, therefore God exists’, or ‘I understand, therefore I have a mind distinct from my body.’ Finally, we must note that very many necessary propositions, when converted, are contingent. Thus from the fact that I exist I may conclude with certainty that God exists, but from the fact that God exists I cannot legitimately assert that I too exist.” (AT X, 421–422; CSM I, 46.)

¹⁹² AT X, 396; A, 18.

observes that in order to attain philosophical and scientific truth one must reject any and all opinions that contain a trace of dubiety. In Part Four of the *Discourse*, Descartes says, “I thought it necessary...that I reject as absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see whether, after this process, something in my beliefs remained that was entirely indubitable.”¹⁹³ He describes how he arrives at the *cogito* through the process of meticulous and strategic doubting, which includes—akin to the First Meditation—pretending that he is dreaming. As a result, Descartes concludes, “It necessarily had to be the case that I, who was thinking this, was something.”¹⁹⁴ Through this method of doubt, Descartes discovers the first principle of philosophy, the certainty of “this truth—*I think, therefore I am.*”¹⁹⁵

Descartes’ use of doubt seems to be an important component of his method in the *Discourse*. By interpreting the *Discourse* on its own, one might even argue that doubt is not only useful, but also necessary for Descartes as a means to attaining certain knowledge. However, in the *Discourse*, there is no use of the kind of hyperbolic doubt that we find in the First Meditation. In particular, there is no discussion of the possibility that a malicious demon is deceiving us at all times. That extreme form of doubt from the First Meditation, according to Popkin, is Descartes’ most significant contribution to the history of skepticism. Popkin acknowledges that “this kind of super-Pyrrhonism,” as he calls it—the possibility of the existence of a relentlessly deceptive, malicious demon—is not apparent in the *Discourse*.¹⁹⁶ Yet, he also says that it is only by “introducing the *malin genie* [malicious demon]” in the First Meditation that Descartes could

¹⁹³ AT VI, 31; A, 60.

¹⁹⁴ AT VI, 32; A, 60–61.

¹⁹⁵ AT VI, 32; A, 61.

¹⁹⁶ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 148.

have hoped to defeat skepticism.¹⁹⁷ Popkin states, “Only when scepticism had been carried to this extreme, to engender a *crise pyrrhoniennne* [Pyrrhonian crisis] greater than that ever dreamed of by the *nouveaux pyrrhoniens* [the New Pyrrhonians, e.g. Montaigne and Charron], could one overcome the force of scepticism.”¹⁹⁸ If the malicious demon hypothesis, as Popkin claims, is “Descartes’ great contribution to sceptical argumentation” in that it provided the final, necessary push for Descartes’ discovery of the *cogito*, we should expect to find at least an inkling of it in his other published works on metaphysics, including the *Discourse*.¹⁹⁹ Yet, aside from the *Meditations*, we see a version of it only in Part One the *Principles of Philosophy*. In the *Discourse*, Descartes does not state or even imply that the use of this “super-Pyrrhonic” kind of hyperbolic doubt is essential for the discovery of the *cogito*.

In a letter to Silhon from May of 1637, Descartes appears to be replying to a question about why, in the *Discourse*, he does not give detailed arguments to prove the existence of God and the soul. He responds, in part, in the following way:

I agree, as you observe, that there is a great defect in the work you have seen, and that I have not expounded, in a manner that everyone can easily grasp, the arguments by which I claim to prove that there is nothing at all more evident and certain than the existence of God and of the human soul. But I did not dare to try to do so, since I would have had to explain at length the strongest arguments of the sceptics to show that there is no material thing of whose existence one can be certain...Now it is not possible fully to understand what I later say about the existence of God unless you begin in this way...But I was afraid that this introduction would look at first as if it were designed to bring in scepticism, and would disturb weaker minds.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Popkin, *History*, 148.

¹⁹⁸ Popkin, *History*, 148.

¹⁹⁹ Popkin, *History*, 150.

²⁰⁰ AT I, 353–354; CSMK, 55–56.

In addition to foreshadowing the *Meditations*, which would be published four years later, Descartes' response seems to suggest that he intentionally left hyperbolic doubt out of the arguments of the *Discourse* both to spare people of "weaker minds" from being troubled by skeptical arguments and to prevent them from misinterpreting his use of skepticism.²⁰¹ Descartes continues his response to Silhon: "But as for intelligent people like yourself, Sir, if they take the trouble not only to read but also to meditate in order on the same topics on which, as I reported, I meditated myself, spending a long time on each point, to see whether I have gone wrong, I trust that they will come to the same conclusions as I did."²⁰² In this letter, then, Descartes admits that the lack of detailed arguments in the *Discourse*—presumably, including those that present or utilize hyperbolic doubt—make his proofs for the existence of God and the soul less effective. Still, Descartes also says that by following the method described in the *Discourse*—one which contains neither detailed skeptical argumentation nor malicious demon hyperbolic doubt—"intelligent people" would "come to the same conclusions," one of those conclusions being the certain knowledge of the *cogito*.

Vic. The Geometrical Presentation of the *Meditations*

In the Second Set of Objections to the *Meditations*, Mersenne makes a request of Descartes to present the *Meditations* in geometrical form so that readers may be more easily convinced of the truth contained within that work. Mersenne says to Descartes that "it would be useful if...you were to set forth the entire proof in geometrical form...after establishing as

²⁰¹ In an earlier letter to Mersenne, from February 27, 1637, Descartes provides a similar response. He says, "I was afraid that weak minds might avidly embrace the doubts and scruples which I would have had to propound, and afterwards be unable to follow as fully the arguments by which I would have endeavoured to remove them. Thus I would have set them on a false path and been unable to bring them back." (AT I, 350; CSMK, 53.)

²⁰² AT I, 354; CSMK, 56.

premises certain definitions, postulates, and axioms, so that, with a single intuition, the mind of any reader might be satisfied by you and imbued with divine power.”²⁰³ Descartes obliges Mersenne by appending such a presentation to the end of his Reply. In order to demonstrate both the existence of God and the distinction between the soul and the body in this particular kind of presentation, Descartes provides ordered lists of definitions, postulates, and axioms, followed by propositions and demonstrations. As an example of the style of this presentation, observe how in his first definition, Descartes says that, “By the word, ‘thought’ I include everything that is in us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it.”²⁰⁴ To take another example, in his first postulate, Descartes encourages his readers to carefully and thoroughly examine “the judgments that they have constructed” based on the senses in order to “finally acquire the habit of no longer placing too much faith in them.”²⁰⁵

The geometrical presentation of the *Meditations* contains many of the same ideas and arguments that we find in the *Meditations* themselves, including a demonstration of the self-evident knowledge of the *cogito*. In the first postulate, Descartes exhorts his readers to rid themselves of their strong faith in the senses. In the second postulate, Descartes says, “I ask that readers ponder their own mind and all its attributes. They will discover that they cannot be in doubt about these things, even though they suppose that everything they ever received from the senses is false.”²⁰⁶ This is the extent of Descartes’ method for arriving at the *cogito* in the geometrical presentation: after ridding ourselves of the strong influence of the senses, if we carefully reflect on the nature of our mind, we will realize that it necessarily exists. This proof of

²⁰³ AT VIII, 128; AC, 75.

²⁰⁴ AT VIII, 160; AC, 94.

²⁰⁵ AT VIII, 162; AC, 95–96.

²⁰⁶ AT VIII, 162; AC, 96.

the *cogito*, then, is observable in the second postulate of the geometrical presentation of the *Meditations*. Yet, in this presentation there is no skeptical argumentation or hyperbolic doubt akin to what is found in the First Meditation. Descartes does make it clear to the reader that this alternate version of the *Meditations* should not be considered as a substitute for the *Meditations* themselves. However, the fact that hyperbolic doubt is entirely non-existent in it lends support to my view that Descartes could have arrived at the certainty of the *cogito* without resorting to that kind of extreme doubt.

In his Reply to Mersenne, Descartes explains the differences between the *Meditations* themselves and the geometrical presentation, as well as his reasons for choosing to write and publish the *Meditations* in a particular manner. The *Meditations*, Descartes says, were written “by way of analysis,” a “mode [*ratio*] of argument” that “shows the true way a thing has been discovered methodically and, as it were, ‘a priori,’ so that were the reader willing to follow it and to pay sufficient attention to everything, he will no less perfectly understand a thing and render it his own than had he himself discovered it.”²⁰⁷ “Synthesis, on the other hand,” Descartes continues, “clearly demonstrates its conclusions by an opposite way...it uses a long series of definitions, postulates, axioms, theorems, and problems, so that if something in what follows is denied, this mode may at once point out that it is contained in what went before.”²⁰⁸ Additionally, Descartes notes that the synthetic mode of argumentation, which he utilizes for the geometrical form of the *Meditations*, is in some ways “not as satisfactory”²⁰⁹ as the analytic mode in which he presents the *Meditations* themselves. He also suggests that he purposely wrote

²⁰⁷ AT VIII, 155; AC, 92.

²⁰⁸ AT VIII, 156; AC, 92.

²⁰⁹ AT VIII, 156; AC, 92.

the *Meditations* in the analytic mode because it is easier to teach his metaphysical principles in that way.²¹⁰

If this were all that Descartes had to say about the matter, we might be tempted to undervalue the geometrical presentation or treat it as insignificant compared to the *Meditations*. However, in addition to noting the benefits of the analytic mode of argumentation and the defects of the synthetic mode, Descartes points out some of the flaws of analysis. For example, he says, “Analysis possesses nothing with which to compel belief in a less attentive or hostile reader, for if he fails to pay attention to the least thing among those that this mode [*ratio*] proposes, the necessity of its conclusions is not apparent.”²¹¹ After describing both the positive and the negative aspects of each mode of argumentation, Descartes tells Mersenne that he chose to write the *Meditations* in the analytic mode primarily for the benefit of his readers—that by reading the *Meditations* in this particular mode, the knowledge they gain of his metaphysical principles would be more meaningful, convincing, and lasting. Descartes says, “I have chosen the one style of writing over all others with which I thought it can most especially be procured and from which I am convinced that readers will discern a greater profit than they would have thought, since, on the other hand, when the synthetic mode of writing is employed, people are likely to seem to themselves to have learned more than they actually did.”²¹²

I would argue that Descartes’ choice to write the *Meditations* in the analytic mode rather than the synthetic mode has more to do with the perceived efficacy just described and less to do

²¹⁰ Descartes says, “But in my *Meditations* I followed analysis exclusively, which is the true and best way to teach. But as to synthesis, which is undoubtedly what you [Mersenne] are asking me about here, even though in geometry it is most suitably placed after analysis, nevertheless it cannot be so conveniently applied to these metaphysical matters.” (AT VIII, 156; AC, 92.)

²¹¹ AT VIII, 155–156; AC, 92.

²¹² AT VIII, 158–159; AC, 94.

with content. Descartes believed that presenting the *Meditations* in the analytic mode would provide greater benefit to his readers. Even though both styles of argumentation and writing have their assets and defects, the way in which the *Meditations* are presented, according to Descartes, is more conducive to learning. However, Descartes still chooses to append the geometrical presentation to the end of his Reply, and he does so because he also recognizes the value of synthesis—that some readers may find it difficult by reading the *Meditations* alone “to intuit the entire body of [his] Meditations and at the same time to discern its individual parts.”²¹³ As Descartes notes, even though the geometrical presentation is more concise than the *Meditations*, it contains many of the same arguments found within it: there are arguments to show how we arrive at the certain knowledge of the *cogito*, proofs for the existence of God, and demonstrations to show that the mind and the body are distinct substances.²¹⁴ Yet, in the geometrical presentation of the *Meditations* there is no use of skeptical argumentation—no discussion of a dream argument or the possibility of a deceptive, malicious demon—that leads Descartes to these conclusions. This fact alone, though by itself is insufficient to prove that Descartes does not need hyperbolic doubt to arrive at the certainty of the *cogito*, provides strong evidence to support such a claim.

²¹³ AT VIII, 159; AC, 94.

²¹⁴ Cf. Willis Doney, “The Geometrical Presentation of Descartes’ A Priori Proof,” in *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. Michael Hooker (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 1–25. In this article, Willis Doney primarily discusses the discrepancies between Descartes’ proofs for the existence of God in the geometrical presentation, on the one hand, and both the *Meditations* and the *Discourse*, on the other. However, Doney also states his opinions about Descartes’ uses of synthesis and analysis and, on this point, he seems to agree with me: Descartes intended for the gist of his arguments in the geometrical presentation to be similar to, or the same as, that of the *Meditations* themselves. Doney says that Descartes’ remarks about analysis and synthesis “leave us with two possibilities: the ‘synthetic’ arguments are indeed in reality the same as their ‘analytic’ predecessors; or they are not the same but closely related to the arguments in the body of the *Meditations*.” (Doney, “The Geometrical Presentation,” 14.)

VII. Descartes' Concession

So far, I have argued against two of Popkin's claims about Descartes: 1. That Descartes developed his philosophy primarily as a response to the threat of skepticism, and 2. That it was only by taking Pyrrhonism sufficiently seriously—through the use of hyperbolic doubt—that Descartes could have arrived at the certainty of the *cogito*. In this section, I will critique what I consider to be Popkin's most controversial claim about Descartes: that Descartes recognized skepticism was insurmountable and ultimately conceded to it. In *The History of Scepticism*, Popkin devotes two chapters to a discussion of Descartes and skepticism. It is in the second of these two chapters, "Descartes: Sceptique Malgré Lui" (Descartes: Skeptic in Spite of Himself), that he makes this bold claim.

To begin with, Popkin focuses on—and agrees with—the arguments of a selection of objections to the *Meditations* by Gassendi, Mersenne, and others, that question the validity of Descartes' criterion of truth: clear and distinct perceptions. He says that such criticisms are decisive against Descartes' metaphysical claims because they point to the fact that there is no way to know with certainty whether one's perceptions are actually clear and distinct or simply seem to be so. Because Descartes' criterion of truth is questionable, all of his supposedly indubitable principles, including that of the *cogito*, can be reduced to mere subjective opinions. With regard to each of these principles, Popkin asks, "Is it really true, or is it just that Descartes thinks it is true?"²¹⁵

Then Popkin makes the controversial claim that I will critique. He suggests that not only was Descartes unable to satisfactorily answer such skeptical objections but that Descartes himself recognized his inability to do so. Popkin argues that Descartes admitted that the

²¹⁵ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 165.

objections like the ones just mentioned are impossible to combat and that, as a result, he had to effectively acquiesce to them. The main support for Popkin's view that Descartes conceded to skepticism comes from his interpretation of a passage in Descartes' Reply to the Second Set of Objections to the *Meditations*, which is addressed to Mersenne. This is the passage to which Popkin refers:

To begin with, directly we think that we rightly perceive something, we spontaneously persuade ourselves that it is true. Further, if this conviction is so strong that we have no reason to doubt concerning that of the truth of which we have persuaded ourselves, there is nothing more to enquire about; we have here all the certainty that can reasonably be desired. What is it to us, though perchance some one feigns that that, of the truth of which we are so firmly persuaded, appears false to God or to an Angel and hence is, absolutely speaking, false? What heed do we pay to that absolute falsity, when we by no means believe that it exists or even suspect its existence? We have assumed a conviction so strong that nothing can remove it, and this persuasion is clearly the same as perfect certitude.²¹⁶

Popkin says that in this passage, Descartes admits to the existence of a skeptical problem that "allows for the construction of a possible state of affairs in which all of our most assured knowledge could be false."²¹⁷ Additionally, according to Popkin, Descartes accepts the fact that what he considers to be true may actually be "absolutely false" and realizes that "our subjective certainty suffices because it is actually all that we ever have."²¹⁸ Popkin says,

Here Descartes both introduces this sceptical possibility and admits that we have no way of eliminating it. All we have is "a conviction so strong" that doubt is impossible for us and this is what constitutes our certitude. But as long as it is possible that such belief, persuasion, or conviction does not correspond to the divinely ordained or known truths, everything we know or believe may be false. At the outset of his conquest of scepticism, Descartes had insisted that one should reject any propositions if there was any reason at all for doubt. Here a monumental reason for doubt is presented, namely that for all we can tell, in spite

²¹⁶ Popkin, *History*, 166. This is Popkin's translation of Descartes: AT VIII, 144–145; AC, 85.

²¹⁷ Popkin, *History*, 166.

²¹⁸ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 166.

of all assurances we may possess or feel subjectively, everything we know or believe may, “absolutely speaking,” be untrue.²¹⁹

I argue that Popkin misinterprets what Descartes says in the referenced passage and that his misunderstanding centers on the word, “feigns.” In particular, Popkin does not fully appreciate the imaginary quality of the scenario that is implied by Descartes’ use of that word. According to Popkin, what Descartes is saying is that our knowledge may, “absolutely speaking,” be false. However, I interpret Descartes to be describing a situation in which such “absolute falsity” is not actually possible, but only feigned. For Descartes, there is no need for concern if someone pretends or imagines (or feigns) that what he is certain of is “absolutely false,” because there is absolutely no reason to doubt such certain knowledge. As Descartes says later in the same Reply, “No difficulty is raised were someone to suppose that these things appear false to God or to an angel, for the evidence of our perception does not permit us to listen to someone conjuring up such a scenario.”²²⁰ Popkin does not recognize just how crucial the word “feigns” is within the context of this passage, and he misses or glosses over its relation to Descartes’ use of the terms, “absolutely speaking” and “absolute falsity.” I do not think that Descartes is discussing the possibility of *actual* “absolute falsity.” Rather, what he means is, “What heed do we pay to that *feigned* absolute falsity, when we by no means believe that it exists or even suspect its existence?”²²¹

Primarily as a result of his reading of this passage alone, Popkin claims that Descartes finally accepted the fact that his criterion of truth is objectively uncertain. According to Popkin, Descartes “ended by saying that we have to accept what we are forced to believe as true and

²¹⁹ Popkin, *History*, 166.

²²⁰ AT VIII, 146; AC, 86.

²²¹ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 166. This is my rewording of Popkin’s translation of Descartes.

certain, even though it may actually be false.”²²² For Popkin, then, Descartes admitted defeat to skepticism because he realized that he was unable to answer the question of whether our knowledge is objectively certain or merely subjectively so. However, I have argued that Popkin misinterprets Descartes’ words and their intended meaning in the passage in question. Additionally, the indications from Descartes’ other works overwhelmingly support my view. Throughout his writings, Descartes consistently shuns probabilistic, opinionated, and subjective knowledge in philosophy and the sciences. He claims that those kinds of knowledge are inadequate but that his criterion of truth—clear and distinct perceptions—guarantees objective and certain knowledge. Even if we look only at what Descartes says just before and after the passage in question, we will observe this to be his characteristic attitude. First, Descartes states, “In our clearest and most careful judgments...I straightforwardly affirm that we cannot be deceived.”²²³ Later, along the same lines, he says, “Some...perceptions are so evident and at the same time so simple that we could never think of them without believing them to be true...in other words, we can never doubt them.”²²⁴

VIII. Conclusion

Richard Popkin believes that Descartes developed his philosophy primarily as a response to a skeptical threat. He concludes his article, “The Sceptical Crisis,” by saying, “René Descartes felt it necessary to find an entirely new foundation for knowledge to overcome the sceptical

²²² Popkin, *History*, 167.

²²³ AT VIII, 143–144; AC, 85.

²²⁴ AT VIII, 145–146; AC, 86.

crisis, a crisis that has continued to haunt philosophy up to the present time.”²²⁵ Given the emphasis that Popkin places on skeptical thought throughout his work—his view that skepticism was the main component that drove the development of early modern philosophy—it seems only natural that he would make such a claim. In this chapter, I have argued against the plausibility of Popkin’s views insofar as they relate to Descartes. By analyzing Popkin’s arguments and Descartes’ writings, I have attempted to show that Descartes was not primarily motivated by the threat of skepticism to write the *Meditations* or any of his other philosophical works. In addition, I have presented arguments to show that Descartes did not take Pyrrhonism as seriously as Popkin suggests. In the *Regulae*, the *Discourse on Method*, and the geometrical presentation of his *Meditations*, Descartes arrives at the certain knowledge of his first principle of philosophy without resorting to malicious demon hyperbolic doubt. This fact provides support for my claim that Descartes does not need hyperbolic doubt for the *cogito*, and it implies that Descartes does not seriously engage with Pyrrhonism. Finally, I have shown why I think Popkin’s controversial claim that Descartes conceded to skepticism is inaccurate.

Before concluding this chapter, I would like to provide a few of my thoughts on the reception of Descartes’ *Meditations*. Popkin suggests that the bulk of the criticisms against Descartes’ *Meditations* centered on the skepticism of the First Meditation. According to him, soon after the publication of the *Meditations*, critics of Descartes focused almost entirely on either questioning his method of doubt from the First Meditation or attacking the legitimacy of the resultant *cogito*. Popkin says, “The dogmatists pressed their attack against the *First Meditation*, for herein lay the most powerful Pyrrhonian argument, which, once admitted, they saw could never be overcome. The sceptics attacked the remainder of the *Meditations* as a

²²⁵ Richard H. Popkin, “The Sceptical Crisis,” in *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 336.

doubtful non sequitur to the *First Meditation*.²²⁶ However, it seems to me that not only does Popkin make too much of the role of skepticism in Descartes' thought—this I have already discussed in detail—but he overvalues the influence that Descartes' use of skepticism had on his objectors and their criticisms.

Popkin makes the proverbial mountain out of a skeptical molehill and in doing so he avoids elaborating on the variety and multiplicity of non-skepticism-related objections to Descartes' *Meditations*. The *Objections and Replies* themselves, which were published together with the *Meditations*, reveal numerous debates between Descartes and his objectors that deal with entirely non-skeptical concerns, including the nature of God, the validity of particular proofs for His existence, and the relationship between thinking and corporeal substances. In addition, it is my view that by overestimating and almost exclusively focusing on the skeptical and anti-skeptical responses to Descartes' *Meditations*, Popkin either undervalues or ignores the predominance and authority of both Scholasticism and Aristotelianism during Descartes' time.

In the closing chapter of his book, *Descartes Among the Scholastics*, Roger Ariew provides well-researched and convincing arguments to show that the majority of critiques against Descartes by his contemporaries did not center on skepticism, hyperbolic doubt, or the *cogito*. “One can read whole books critical of Descartes' philosophy, written in the seventeenth century,” he says, “without running into any discussion of the *cogito* or any other aspect of Descartes' epistemology.”²²⁷ Rather, Ariew argues, “seventeenth-century critiques were predominantly directed against Descartes' various metaphysical theses” for being “inconsistent

²²⁶ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 158.

²²⁷ Ariew, *Descartes Among the Scholastics*, 313.

with Christian theology” and, at the time, unacceptably at odds with Aristotelian principles.²²⁸ Properly evaluating the role of skepticism in Descartes’ philosophy and critiquing the claim that skeptical ideas were the primary impetus for it requires us to keep in mind how deeply entrenched and influential Scholastic philosophy was during Descartes’ life. Although I have not argued at length for it in this chapter, I would suggest the following view as a plausible alternative to Popkin’s claims about Descartes: Descartes’ philosophy was motivated by his disagreements with Scholastic philosophy, and there is more reason to believe that he was primarily responding to and rejecting Aristotelian methods, principles, and teachings rather than attempting to combat a skeptical threat or thwart a skeptical crisis.

²²⁸ Ariew, *Descartes Among the Scholastics*, 313; Ariew, *Descartes*, 314.

Chapter Three:

Descartes and Skepticism

In this chapter, I present my interpretation of Descartes' views on skepticism. First I highlight some of the areas in Descartes' *Discourse on Method* that reveal the influence of skepticism on his thought. Then I analyze a selection of remarks from the correspondence in which Descartes makes judgments or states his opinions about both the skeptics and skepticism. I argue that such remarks display Descartes' attitude of contempt for skeptical philosophy. Finally, since Descartes associates the skeptics with the activity of constant and total doubting and yet presents scenarios that seemingly arise from extreme doubt—like the malicious demon hypothesis—I look at what Descartes says in the correspondence about his own use of doubt in his published works. Descartes distances himself from the skeptics because he claims that whereas they doubt everything and, in so doing, act heretically, he uses doubt for a noble purpose. I suggest that although Descartes is influenced by skeptical ideas and considers skeptical argumentation to be useful, his strategic use of such argumentation should not lead us to believe that he condones skepticism. Quite the contrary, most of his remarks on the subject show that Descartes is highly critical or dismissive of skeptical ideas. Therefore, I argue that it is more accurate to characterize Descartes as a philosopher generally opposed to skepticism.

I. The Influence of Skepticism on Descartes' Thought

The opening line of Bernard Williams' essay, "Descartes's Use of Skepticism," reads, "Descartes was not a skeptic. One has to take a distant and inaccurate view of his writings to suppose that he was."²²⁹ I agree with Williams. Descartes was not a skeptic. However, though he acknowledges that Descartes was not a skeptic, Williams believes that skepticism was of fundamental importance to both Descartes' reasoning and his philosophical approach. Skepticism, Williams says, was first "the extreme dramatization of uncertainty, an uncertainty which, largely independent of any philosophical discipline or exercise, already existed, and which Descartes felt he had to confront. It was, second, part of his method for overcoming uncertainty and attaining knowledge."²³⁰

There are many Cartesian scholars and historians of early modern philosophy who accentuate the role of skepticism in Descartes' thought. For example, in his book, *The History of Scepticism*, Richard Popkin argues that Descartes realized the danger of skepticism "to the cause of both science and religion" and, as a result, attempted to "set in motion his philosophical revolution by discovering something 'so certain and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions brought forward by the sceptics were incapable of shaking it.'"²³¹ Popkin, whose claims about Descartes I critique in Chapter Two of this dissertation, argues that Descartes was deeply concerned with skepticism and, in fact, that his philosophical project was primarily motivated by a skeptical threat.

²²⁹ Bernard Williams, "Descartes' Use of Skepticism," in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 337.

²³⁰ Williams, "Descartes' Use of Skepticism," 338.

²³¹ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 144; Popkin, *History*, 145.

It is understandable that Descartes' skepticism should be a topic of such pronounced scholarly engagement. Descartes' skeptical method of doubt in the First Meditation is often viewed as having been revolutionary for its time—a highly original means of turning inwards in order to arrive at the discovery of a self-evident and internally intuited first principle of philosophy (the *cogito*). Roger Ariew questions the historical accuracy of such an account. Through an exposition and an analysis of the writings of two other well-known seventeenth-century thinkers, Jean de Silhon and Antoine Sirmond—both of whom also make use of *cogitos* in their works—Ariew shows this type of portrayal of Descartes to be misleading. “That image of Descartes,” he says, “does not mesh very well with some of what Descartes says about the *cogito* or with the reality of the reception of his philosophy in the seventeenth century.”²³² Ariew argues that most of the seventeenth-century critiques of Descartes focus on his metaphysical claims and their incompatibility with Scholastic and Aristotelian principles as well as Church doctrines. Even so, Ariew is perfectly aware of the current and prevalent view that Descartes' philosophical endeavors are closely connected to skepticism. He says, “Descartes' attempt to answer the skeptic by establishing that he exists as a thinking thing is often considered emblematic of modern philosophy.”²³³

In her article, “Descartes and Skepticism,” Marjorie Grene points to the numerous differences between Descartes and the ancient skeptics in order to argue that Descartes was not a skeptic. Yet, Grene also recognizes the tendency for today's philosophers to associate Descartes with skepticism. “The hyperbolic doubt of the First Meditation,” she says, “is often taken for

²³² Ariew, *Descartes Among the Scholastics*, 313.

²³³ Ariew, *Descartes*, 312.

the epitome of skepticism.”²³⁴ Though I do argue that too much is made Descartes’ skepticism, it is apparent that Descartes was influenced by skeptical ideas. To say otherwise would exhibit a misinformed view of his writings. Descartes utilizes hyperbolic doubt in the First Meditation, and he uses skeptical arguments and reasoning in both the *Discourse on Method* and the *Principles of Philosophy*. I would suggest that in the *Discourse* he echoes the language of Michel de Montaigne, who was well known during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for his skeptical writings, and the ideas of both Sextus Empiricus, a Greek Pyrrhonist from the second century A.D., and Cicero, a Roman Academic philosopher from the first century B.C. In the next section, I will discuss parts of Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* in which the influence of skepticism on his thought seems fairly clear.

II. Montaigne, Sextus, and Cicero in the *Discourse on Method*

It is not my view that Montaigne was a skeptic. In Chapter One of this dissertation, I argue that although Montaigne praises the intellectual attitude of the Pyrrhonists in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, such admiration does not justify characterizing him as a Pyrrhonist or as a skeptic. Some of Montaigne’s motivations are non-skeptical. Much of his writing in the *Apology* is intended to admonish man for his intellectual arrogance and to point him towards faith in, and reliance on, God. In addition, many of Montaigne’s *Essays* aside from the *Apology* point to the influences of non-skeptical traditions, including Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Christianity. Nevertheless, Montaigne was known in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for his use of skeptical reasoning in the *Apology* and, insofar as his discussions about—and approval of—

²³⁴ Marjorie Grene, “Descartes and Skepticism,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 52, no. 3 (March 1999): 553.

Pyrrhonism in that work are concerned, we can say that he was certainly influenced by skeptical ideas.

There are no clear-cut or foolproof indications from Descartes' writings to support this view, but I would suggest that in the beginning of the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes' choice of words demonstrates the impression made on him by the writings of Montaigne.²³⁵ He opens the *Discourse* with the following reflections: "Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world, for everyone thinks himself to be so well endowed with it that even those who are the most difficult to please in everything else are not at all wont to desire more of it than they have."²³⁶ Compare this to what Montaigne says in his essay, *On presumption*: "It is commonly held that good sense is the gift which Nature has most fairly shared among us, for there is nobody who is not satisfied with what Nature has allotted him."²³⁷ There is no hint of skeptical reasoning in either of these statements, but Descartes' phraseology is strikingly similar to that of Montaigne, and it seems to suggest Montaigne's influence on him.

In Part Three of the *Discourse*, Descartes explains the reasons why, in practical life, he chose to live by a certain "provisional code of morals," the first two maxims of which, respectively, are quite similar to some of Sextus Empiricus' statements from the *Outlines of*

²³⁵ There are only two places in the correspondence that I know of where Descartes mentions Montaigne by name, both of which are in a letter to the Marquess of Newcastle, from November 23, 1646, and deal with claims about human and animal intelligence. Descartes explains his disagreement with the "opinion of Montaigne and others who attribute understanding or thought to animals." (AT IV, 573; CSMK, 302.) Later he says, "Montaigne and Charron may have said that there is a greater difference between one human being and another than between a human being and an animal; yet there has never been known an animal so perfect as to use a sign to make other animals understand something which bore no relation to its passions; and there is no human being so imperfect as not to do so, since even deaf-mutes invent special signs to express their thoughts." (AT IV, 575; CSMK, 303.)

²³⁶ AT VI, 1–2; A, 46.

²³⁷ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 746.

Pyrrhonism and Cicero's remarks in the *Academica*.²³⁸ In Part One of the *Discourse*, Descartes explains the specific method he had used "to conduct his reason well" as well as his delimiting of that method to the search for—and attainment of—scientific and philosophical truth.²³⁹ Where such kinds of truth are concerned, Descartes argues that only certain knowledge is acceptable and that there can be no room for opinions or probabilistic reasoning. "Concerning philosophy," Descartes states, "considering how many opinions there can be about the very same matter that are held by learned people without there ever being the possibility of more than one opinion being true, I deemed everything that was merely probable to be well night false."²⁴⁰ However, while he shunned probability, accepted only certain knowledge, and diligently practiced his method in search of philosophical truth, in everyday life Descartes says that he chose to settle on probabilistic reasoning and follow commonly accepted opinions.

Descartes describes the pragmatic reasons for his decision to adhere to a provisional code of morals while pursuing philosophical truth. "In order not to remain irresolute in my actions," he explains, "while reason required me to be so in my judgments, and in order not to cease to live as happily as possible during this time, I formulated a provisional code of morals, which consisted of but three or four maxims."²⁴¹ The first of these maxims is "to obey the laws and customs of my country, constantly holding on to the religion in which, by God's grace, I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in everything else according to the most moderate opinions and those furthest from excess—opinions that were commonly accepted

²³⁸ AT VI, 22; A, 56.

²³⁹ AT VI, 4; A, 47.

²⁴⁰ AT VI, 8; A, 49.

²⁴¹ AT VI, 22; A, 56.

in practice by the most judicious of those with whom I would have to live.”²⁴² Compare Descartes’ first maxim to Sextus’ description of how the Pyrrhonian skeptics chose to live according to the customs and laws handed down to them: “Attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions – for we are not able to be utterly inactive. These everyday observances seem to be fourfold and to consist in guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching kinds of expertise.”²⁴³ Just as Descartes governed himself in public life according to commonly accepted opinions, the Pyrrhonists followed, “by the handing down of customs and laws...from an everyday point of view,” common opinions including, for instance, the opinion that “piety is good and impiety bad.”²⁴⁴

Descartes’ second maxim of his provisional morality is “to be as firm and resolute in my actions as I could, and to follow the most doubtful opinions, once I had decided on them, with no less constancy than if they had been very well assured.”²⁴⁵ With regard to how he would practice this rule in his practical life, Descartes expounds on and defends his decision to rely on probabilistic reasoning. He says, “And thus the actions of life often tolerating no delay, it is a very certain truth that, when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable; and even if we notice no more probability in some than in others, nevertheless we must settle on some, and afterwards no longer regard them as doubtful, insofar as they relate to practical matters, but as very true and very certain, because the reason that made us decide on

²⁴² AT VI, 23; A, 56.

²⁴³ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 9.

²⁴⁴ Sextus, 9.

²⁴⁵ AT VI, 24; A, 57.

them appears so.”²⁴⁶ Parallels can be drawn between the reliance on probability encouraged by Descartes’ second maxim and the views of the Academic skeptics described by Cicero in his *Academica*. Cicero characterizes the Academic philosophers as remaining firm in their conviction “that nothing is apprehensible” and yet also admitting that some accounts or arguments seem more likely than others.²⁴⁷ “While there are no impressions allowing for apprehension,” Cicero says, “there are many allowing for approval. It would be contrary to nature were there no persuasive impressions.”²⁴⁸ Though they deny their ability to know with certainty the truth of accounts or arguments, the Academic skeptics approve of or assent to them based on persuasiveness or probabilistic reasoning.

In addition to these commonalities between Descartes and the skeptics, it can be argued that both Descartes and the Pyrrhonists are aligned in their desired goal: tranquility. For the Pyrrhonists, there can be no doubt that the end or aim of their pursuits is tranquility. Sextus says that such peace of mind, or *ataraxia*, is that for the sake of which the Pyrrhonists philosophize in a particular manner: “The causal principle [of Pyrrhonism] we say is the hope of becoming tranquil.”²⁴⁹ In Part Six of the *Discourse*, Descartes describes tranquility as that which he “esteem(s) above all things.”²⁵⁰ However, Descartes and the Pyrrhonists hold different views concerning what leads to tranquility. The Pyrrhonists argue that equipollence and the suspension of judgment naturally lead us to tranquility whereas Descartes says that the “perfect peace of mind I am seeking” can possibly be attained through his forthrightness with the public about the

²⁴⁶ AT VI, 25; A, 57.

²⁴⁷ Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, 40.

²⁴⁸ Cicero, 58.

²⁴⁹ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 5.

²⁵⁰ AT VI, 74; A, 80.

motivations for his philosophical work.²⁵¹ Of course, whereas the Pyrrhonists posit tranquility as their ultimate goal, there are many places in Descartes' writings that show he had several different goals in his philosophical and scientific pursuits. For example, in a letter to the Marquess of Newcastle, from October of 1645, Descartes says, "The preservation of health has always been the principal end of my studies."²⁵² Additionally, it goes without saying that Descartes often repeats the refrain of a desire to seek after and attain truth above all else.

There are similarities between Descartes, on the one hand, and both the Pyrrhonian skeptics and the Academic skeptics, on the other. Descartes' provisional morality hearkens back to the attitudes of both the Pyrrhonists, as evidenced by Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines*, and the Academics, as understood through Cicero's *Academica*. In addition, although they held different views about what exactly would lead to it, both Descartes and the Pyrrhonian skeptics sought after tranquility. Besides the *Discourse*, Descartes' other published works, including the *Meditations* and the *Principles of Philosophy*, present skeptical arguments that remind us of some of the characteristic Pyrrhonian "modes" of reasoning.²⁵³ For example, in the Third Meditation, in order to challenge our claims to knowledge based on the senses, Descartes compares our two ways of thinking about the size of the sun. He argues that whereas our sense perception (in this case, eyesight) shows us that the sun is of approximately one size, astronomical reasoning reveals the sun to be, in fact, much larger.²⁵⁴ In the *Outlines of*

²⁵¹ AT VI, 74; A, 80.

²⁵² AT IV, 329; CSMK, 275.

²⁵³ On the skeptical modes, see Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 11–46.

²⁵⁴ Cf. Descartes, *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*: "I find within myself two distinct ideas of the sun. One idea is drawn, as it were, from the senses...By means of this idea the sun appears to me to be quite small. But there is another idea, one derived from astronomical reasoning...through this idea the sun is shown to be several times larger than the earth. Both ideas surely cannot resemble the same sun existing outside me; and reason convinces me that

Pyrrhonism, Sextus also presents arguments to show how our senses are inadequate for providing us with certain knowledge. However, Sextus' views in this regard are different from those of Descartes. Concerning objects in the world, including the sun, and how they appear to us, Sextus says, "We shall be able to say what the existing objects are like as observed by us, but as to what they are like in their nature, we shall suspend judgment."²⁵⁵ Although there is common ground between Descartes and the skeptics, it can only indicate so much when it comes to the influence of skepticism on Descartes' thought.

The instances of a skeptical reasoning and argumentation in Descartes' writings do not provide adequate or sufficient evidence to claim that Descartes held a favorable view of the skeptics. Nor do such skeptical marks in his works imply that Descartes was seriously concerned with skepticism. The respective projects of Descartes, on the one hand, and both the Pyrrhonian skeptics and the Academic skeptics, on the other, are patently dissimilar. Whereas the Pyrrhonists and the Academics provide particular modes of reasoning that display our ignorance about claims to knowledge, Descartes presents skeptical arguments to show that the senses are deceptive but that the understanding—when properly utilized—is more reliable than sense perception for acquiring knowledge. In fact, Descartes argues not only that certain knowledge can be attained, but also that he has attained it. Unlike the Pyrrhonists, who suggest that equipollence and the suspension of judgment—both of which result in reaffirming our ignorance—lead to tranquility, Descartes suggests only that frankness with the public about the motivations for his philosophical project might bring about such peace of mind. The Pyrrhonian skeptics lived in accordance with the customs and laws handed down to them, but they did so

the idea that seems to have emanated from the sun itself from so close is the very one that least resembles the sun." (AT VIII, 39; AC, 22.)

²⁵⁵ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 17.

because despite the fact that they were unwilling and apparently unable to make claims to knowledge about anything, they were “not able to be utterly inactive.”²⁵⁶ Descartes’ provisional code of morals, which is similar in spirit to some aspects of the Pyrrhonian and Academic ways of life, helped him to live day to day “as happily as possible” by accepting the most moderate and most commonly accepted social customs.²⁵⁷ Yet, unlike the Pyrrhonian skeptics, he lived in this manner while practicing a method of philosophical inquiry that would in fact lead him to certain knowledge.

III. Descartes’ Views on Skepticism: The Correspondence

Descartes mentions skepticism several times in his correspondence. He discusses doubt even more. Based on the indications from his writings, Descartes seems to have believed that the activity of doubting was the primary characteristic of skepticism. In the *Discourse*, he distinguishes his method and his goals from what he considered to be those of the skeptics. Descartes says, “I...rooted out from my mind all the errors that had previously been able to slip into it. Not that, in order to do this, I was imitating the skeptics who doubt merely for the sake of doubting and put on the affectation of being perpetually undecided; for, on the contrary, my entire plan tended simply to give me assurance and to cast aside the shifting earth and sand in order to find the rock or clay.”²⁵⁸

In a letter to Hyperaspistes from August 1641, Descartes explains why his use of a particular kind of hyperbolic doubt precludes him from being called a skeptic, and he both

²⁵⁶ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 9.

²⁵⁷ AT VI, 22; A, 56.

²⁵⁸ AT VI, 28–29; A, 59.

characterizes the skeptics as doubting everything and criticizes them for doing so disingenuously: “You cannot have a sceptic saying, ‘Let the evil demon deceive me as much as he can,’ because anyone who says this is by that token not a sceptic since he does not doubt everything...It is only in name, and perhaps in intention and resolve, that [the skeptics] adhere to their heresy of doubting everything.”²⁵⁹ These examples reveal Descartes’ view that skepticism is typified by incessant and total doubting as well as his desire to distance or disassociate himself from the skeptics. Instead of examining every reference to skepticism or doubt in Descartes’ correspondence, in the following sections I will focus on statements Descartes makes that carry judgments about the skeptics, skepticism, and the use of doubt. In so doing, I will show how Descartes’ stated views reveal that he had a dismissive and contemptuous attitude towards skeptical philosophy.

Where Descartes writes on the subject in his correspondence, it is usually within a context in which the main topic of exchange is not skepticism but other aspects of his work. In some of these letters, Descartes responds to specific questions asked of him and objections made against arguments in his published works, whereas in others he defends himself for what he thought were unfair or slanderous charges brought against him. As a result, in some of his letters Descartes’ tone is cordial whereas in others it seems guarded or even antagonistic. Readers of the correspondence can gauge distinct differences in attitudes and personal likes or dislikes between Descartes and his correspondents. With regard to our understanding of Descartes’ views on skepticism, these differences are significant. In most of the correspondence where skepticism is mentioned, whether Descartes is writing to a friend or foe, there is consistency in Descartes’ judgments: his opinions about skepticism are consistently negative.

²⁵⁹ AT III, 433–434; CSMK, 196–197.

To get a sense of the contrast in attitudes just mentioned, take one example: two letters that show two different sides of Descartes. The first of these letters is from May of 1637 and was written by Descartes in response to his friend, Jean de Silhon. Descartes begins his message with acknowledgement and agreement: “I agree, as you observe, that there is a great defect in the work you have seen, and that I have not expounded, in a manner that everyone can easily grasp, the arguments by which I claim to prove that there is nothing at all more evident and certain than the existence of God and the human soul.”²⁶⁰ Descartes answers Silhon’s questions by providing an explanation as to why, in the recently published *Discourse on Method*, he did not more clearly explain to the reader the arguments that demonstrate God’s existence and the existence of the human soul. “I did not dare to do so,” Descartes says, “since I would have had to explain at length the strongest arguments of the sceptics to show that there is no material thing of whose existence one can be certain.”²⁶¹ Descartes closes his relatively brief letter to Silhon, “As for intelligent people like yourself...they will come to the same conclusions as I did. I shall be glad, as soon as I have time, to try to explain this further. I am pleased to have had this opportunity to show you that I am, etc.”²⁶² It seems plain enough from the tone of this letter that there is a feeling of mutual respect and a sense of civility between Descartes and Silhon.

However, such professional courtesy cannot be observed in the letter from Descartes to Voetius from May of 1643. In this letter, Descartes seems clearly offended by his correspondent. At the start of it, he says, “Even if the philosophy at which you rail were unsound, which you have failed to show at any point, and never will manage to show, what vice could it possibly be

²⁶⁰ AT I, 353; CSMK, 55.

²⁶¹ AT I, 353; CSMK, 55.

²⁶² AT I, 354; CSMK, 56.

imagined to contain great enough to require its author to be slandered with such atrocious insults?”²⁶³ Cordiality and mutual respect are nonexistent. Instead there is a sense of indignation on Descartes’ part brought on by the belief that Voetius had made insulting remarks about him and inaccurate statements about his work.

The contrast in attitudes that comes across in this example is to some extent indicative of Descartes’ correspondence in general. Because of such interpersonal differences between Descartes and his correspondents—his friendliness with some and defensiveness towards others—and, even more so, the consistency in his opinions about skepticism nonetheless, I would argue that the correspondence provides us with an authentic representation of Descartes’ views on skepticism. The correspondence as is presents a more realistic picture of Descartes’ opinions on skepticism than we would have, for instance, if all of his correspondents were well-liked colleagues.

IIIa. On the Pyrrhonists, the Skeptics, and Skepticism

In the letters where Descartes shares his opinions about the Pyrrhonists and the skeptics, he does so by describing such philosophers as ineffective, disingenuous, or heretical. Judgments like these provide clear indications that Descartes did not view skeptical philosophy in a positive light. We can get a sense of Descartes’ disdain for the skeptics’ way of life from what he says about them in the Reply to the Fifth Set of Objections to the *Meditations*. “For when it is a question of organizing our life,” he says, “it would, of course, be foolish not to trust the senses, and the sceptics who neglected human affairs to the point where friends had to stop them falling

²⁶³ AT VIIIIB, 25–26; CSMK, 220.

of precipices deserved to be laughed at.”²⁶⁴ Descartes seems to be referencing the stories told not only about the Pyrrhonian skeptics but also about Pyrrho, the *de facto* founder of Pyrrhonism. In the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, which was written sometime between the second and fourth centuries A.D., Diogenes Laertius describes Pyrrho as having led his life in the following manner: “going out of his way for nothing, taking no precaution, but facing all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, dogs or what not, and, generally, leaving nothing to the arbitrament of the senses; but he was kept out of harm’s way by his friends who...used to follow close after him.”²⁶⁵ Descartes could not see the virtue in both choosing not to trust the senses and deliberately adhering to no beliefs in the course of one’s practical life. He did not find anything laudable about this way of life. In fact, Descartes thought that the Pyrrhonian skeptics should be mocked for behaving in the ways described.

In a letter to Renieri for Pollot, from April or May of 1638, Descartes answers questions and responds to criticisms about his recently published *Discourse*, a text in which he showed nascent signs of the hyperbolic doubt that was to come later in the First Meditation. In part of his response to Renieri, Descartes criticizes the Pyrrhonists for perpetually doubting and, as a result, never arriving at any certainty. For Descartes, to be constantly lacking in certain knowledge akin to the Pyrrhonists would not be a state of affairs to be content with but rather an obvious reason to aspire to knowledge. However, “although the Pyrrhonists reached no certain conclusions from their doubts,” Descartes says, “it does not follow that no one can.”²⁶⁶ In the Second Meditation, after implementing his skeptical method and reflecting on his agonizing doubts, he presses on:

²⁶⁴ AT VII, 351; CSM II, 243.

²⁶⁵ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 475.

²⁶⁶ AT II, 38–39; CSMK, 99.

“Great things are...to be hoped for if I succeed in finding just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken.”²⁶⁷ Descartes was after certain knowledge in philosophy and the sciences, and he recognized that Pyrrhonian or skeptical doubt could be strategically used and presented to support his claims to such knowledge.

In the same letter to Renieri from 1638, Descartes continues along these lines by suggesting that Pyrrhonism (which, according to him, is primarily characterized by doubting everything) might in fact be used to arrive at certain knowledge. He says, “I would try now to show how these doubts [of the Pyrrhonists] can be used to prove God’s existence.”²⁶⁸ In this letter, then, Descartes indicates what would later appear in the *Meditations*, where he indeed uses Pyrrhonian or skeptical arguments—in conjunction with his method of hyperbolic doubt—to support his demonstrations of the existence of the soul, God, and the material world.

To return to the letter to Hyperaspistes from August of 1641: in addition to characterizing the skeptics as disingenuous, Descartes implies that they are atheistic and describes them as heretical. The skeptics, according to Descartes, “would not have doubted the truths of geometry if they had duly recognized God, because since those geometrical truths are very clear, they would have had no occasion to doubt them if they had known that whatever is clearly understood is true.”²⁶⁹ Yet, according to Descartes, such skeptics did in fact doubt obviously true propositions, including geometrical demonstrations, “even though they clearly understood

²⁶⁷ AT VIII, 24; AC, 13.

²⁶⁸ AT II, 39; CSMK, 99.

²⁶⁹ AT III, 433; CSMK, 196.

them.”²⁷⁰ Thus, Descartes concludes, “It is only in name, and perhaps in intention and resolve, that they adhere to the heresy of doubting everything.”²⁷¹

In the previously referenced letter to Voetius from May of 1643, Descartes points out the faulty reasoning of those skeptics who would deny the self-evident *cogito*:

You deny that anyone can rightly conclude, from the fact that he is thinking, that he exists; for you want the sceptic to conclude merely that he *seems to himself to exist* – as if anyone using his reason, however sceptical he might be, could seem to himself to exist without at the same time understanding that he really exists, whenever this seems to him to be the case. Thus you deny what is the most evident proposition there could possibly be in any science.²⁷²

In this passage, Descartes points to a generally accepted and well-known characteristic of the Pyrrhonian skeptics: their willingness to state how things seem to them (or what is apparent to them) but their unwillingness to make claims about reality. In the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus puts it this way: “What [the Sceptics] investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent.”²⁷³ For instance, the Pyrrhonian skeptics would not deny that sunlight seems to give warmth. What they disputed were claims that the dogmatists would make as a result of that apparent warmth—for example, the claim that the sun actually does possess, produce, and provide heat or warmth. Descartes implies that such reasoning, when it concerns the question of one’s own existence, is self-deceptive, disingenuous, inane, impossible, or all of the above. No one can honestly say to himself, “I seem to exist,” without admitting that, in fact, he necessarily exists. This selection from the letter to Voetius, then, provides clear evidence of Descartes’ dismissive attitude towards skeptical philosophy.

²⁷⁰ AT III, 433; CSMK, 196.

²⁷¹ AT III, 434; CSMK, 196–197.

²⁷² AT VIII B, 165–166; CSMK, 222.

²⁷³ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 8.

In a letter to Chanut from November 1, 1646, Descartes expresses his extreme dissatisfaction with critics who misinterpret his work and slander him. He laments the fact that “a certain Father Bourdin thought he had good reason to accuse me of being a sceptic, because I refuted the sceptics.”²⁷⁴ In this letter, Descartes suggests that having his words twisted by people like Bourdin has given him enough reason to stop publishing his works altogether. “The best thing I can do henceforth is to abstain from writing books,” he says. “I shall pursue my studies only for my own instruction, and communicate my thoughts only to those with whom I can converse privately.”²⁷⁵ Based on such remarks about the skeptics in his correspondence, we can see that Descartes expresses his desire not to be associated with them. Descartes denies that he is a skeptic, and he explains why his particular use of skeptical reasoning absolves him from the charge of being a skeptic. In addition, Descartes’ statements on the subject in the correspondence reveal his slighting views of—and his contempt for—skepticism.

IIIb. On the Use of Doubt

I have drawn attention to the judgments about skepticism and the skeptics that Descartes expresses in his correspondence. At this point it should be fairly clear that Descartes disapproved of skeptical philosophy. He held negative views about the skeptics, believing them to be disingenuous, ineffectual, foolish, and even heretical. As far as I can tell, Descartes has not written a single word about skepticism or the skeptics to suggest any kind of approbation on his part. However, unlike his opinions about skepticism, his views on the use of doubt are not so one-sided or straightforward.

²⁷⁴ AT IV, 536; CSMK, 299.

²⁷⁵ AT IV, 537; CSMK, 300.

As previously discussed, one of Descartes' views about the skeptics is that they primarily doubt everything—even those things like the self-evident certainty of the *cogito* for which, according to him, doubt would be inconceivable. However, Descartes does utilize doubt in his published works, and in the *Meditations* he even presents an extreme form of hyperbolic doubt through the malicious demon hypothesis. What Descartes says in the correspondence about his use of doubt reflects the fact that although he looked down on the skeptics for incessantly doubting everything, he recognized the value of using doubt strategically.

The correspondence that best presents Descartes' opinions about what he considers to be the proper use of doubt is his letter to Buitendijck from 1643. In this letter, Descartes responds to a question regarding “whether it is ever permissible to doubt about God.”²⁷⁶ Descartes explains how the answer to this question would depend upon one's reasons for doubting. “For if someone takes as his aim to doubt about God in order to persist in this doubt,” Descartes says, “he is sinning gravely since he wishes to remain in doubt on a topic of such importance. But if someone proposes to himself doubt as a means to pursuing a clearer knowledge of truth, he is doing something altogether pious and worthy, since no one can wish the end without also wishing the means.”²⁷⁷ In this part of the letter, Descartes implicitly refers to the skeptics. Though many of those who were of a skeptical bent would disagree with his characterization of them, Descartes' view of the skeptics is that they doubt “merely for the sake of doubting.”²⁷⁸ Unlike the skeptics, who “sin gravely” by doubting in their particular manner, Descartes claims to be using doubt in the *Meditations* and other published works for a noble purpose: to seek and attain “knowledge of

²⁷⁶ AT IV, 62; A, 212.

²⁷⁷ AT IV, 63; A, 212.

²⁷⁸ AT VI, 29; A, 59.

truth.” According to Descartes, the motivations or intentions behind one’s doubt are highly significant factors that must be considered in order to determine whether or not the use of doubt is permissible.

Descartes responds to another question posed by Buitendijck concerning “whether it is ever permissible to assume something false in matters that concern God.”²⁷⁹ This question contains an implicit reference to the malicious demon hypothesis from the First Meditation. In the First Meditation, Descartes supposes “not a supremely good God, the source of truth, but rather an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever...has directed his entire effort at deceiving me.”²⁸⁰ In response to the question about the permissibility of positing the possible existence of an evil genius or a malicious demon, Descartes says this:

A person who invents a deceiving God (or even the true God, but not yet clearly enough known to himself or to others, for whose sake he is setting up his hypothesis) and who is not misusing this fiction for a bad purpose, in order to persuade others of something false concerning the divine power, but only in order to better illuminate his intellect, so that he may come to a better knowledge of God or show him more clearly to others, such a man, I say, is not really sinning, but acting so that good may come. For there is no malice in this; he is rather doing something absolutely good, and he cannot be reproached for this, except by slander.²⁸¹

We can see that Descartes provides a similar answer to the question about inventing a deceiving God as the one he gives in response to the question about doubting God’s existence. To fabricate a false, deceptive, or malicious God would be acceptable as long as the purpose in doing so was noble: to increase one’s knowledge and to know God better. Descartes defends his unique use of skeptical doubt because he doubts as a means rather than as an end. “We must

²⁷⁹ AT IV, 63–64; A, 212.

²⁸⁰ AT VIII, 22; AC, 12.

²⁸¹ AT IV, 64; A, 213.

make a distinction,” Descartes says, “between doubt as an end, and doubt as a means.”²⁸² According to Descartes, the skeptics pursue and use doubt as an end in itself—they doubt “merely for the sake of doubting”—which is foolish and ineffectual because it keeps them in a state of uncertainty (or the appearance of a state of uncertainty).²⁸³ However, as a means, Descartes would gladly utilize skeptical doubt in order to show how certain knowledge can be attained and, as a result, that such doubt is unfounded. Just as the motivations for doubting must be examined in order to determine whether or not the use of doubt is permissible, so the recognition that doubt should only be used as a means and never as an end is equally important.²⁸⁴

In a letter to Princess Elizabeth from May 10, 1647, Descartes expresses more than a little disconcertment over charges of atheism and heresy brought against him for his use of doubt in the *Meditations*. Descartes seems especially troubled by one theologian in particular, Jacobus Revius, who had been spreading inaccurate interpretations of his work: Revius would “make people believe that I said some things in [the *Meditations*] which are quite absurd and are contrary to the glory of God – for example, that we must doubt that there is a God. He would even have it that I want people to deny absolutely for a while that there is a God, and things of

²⁸² AT IV, 63; CSMK, 229.

²⁸³ AT VI, 29; A, 59.

²⁸⁴ Cf. Janet Broughton, “Cartesian Skeptics,” in *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 25–39. In this essay, Janet Broughton presents an interesting interpretation on Descartes’ use of doubt. Whereas I think that one of Descartes’ intentions behind his hyperbolic doubt is to show his readers that, ultimately, exaggerated doubts are unsound, Broughton believes that Descartes’ ability to doubt something—e.g. the existence of a non-deceptive God—is a condition for its truth. She says, “What I believe Descartes aimed to do was to have the meditator [of the *Meditations*] establish the absolute certainty of some of his beliefs *by showing that their truth is a condition of his using the method of doubt*. Among these are the beliefs ‘I exist’ and ‘I have an idea of God.’ The meditator then argues that those absolutely certain beliefs together entail that he is created by a nondeceiving God, and from that, he claims it follows that all of his clear and distinct ideas are true. So ultimately the existence of God and the truth of clear and distinct ideas are conditions of his use of the method of doubt.” (Broughton, “Cartesian Skeptics,” 34.)

that sort.”²⁸⁵ Descartes’ response to Revius’ accusations indicates that his use of doubt in the *Meditations*, though strategic, is not sincere. The doubting of God’s existence is not necessary for Descartes, and it is certainly not advised. Nor is Descartes’ doubt meant to be taken seriously. To genuinely doubt or deny God’s existence, according to Descartes, would indeed be “contrary to the glory of God” and is not what Descartes intends for his readers to do. Rather, Descartes’ use of doubt in the *Meditations* is meant to show his readers how following exaggerated or hyperbolic doubt eventually reveals the absurdity of such doubt.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained my interpretation of Descartes’ association with skepticism. By beginning with a discussion of the similarities between the writings of Montaigne, Sextus Empiricus, and Cicero, on the one hand, and the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes’ first published work, on the other, I have shown that Descartes was influenced by skeptical ideas. However, although he was influenced by skepticism, on the whole he regards the skeptics with contempt. In his correspondence, Descartes trounces the skeptics for their inanity and disingenuousness. He calls them heretical for constantly doubting everything even when it would be absurd and impious to do so. Yet, Descartes also recognizes the value of using doubt as a means rather than an end. His use of doubt in his published works is strategic.

The things that Descartes doubts, at least insofar as the way in which his doubts are presented in his published works—for example, the way in which he appears to be uncertain about whether or not we are awake—are not things that are *actually* doubted by Descartes. In a letter to Mersenne from October 16, 1639, Descartes says, “For my part, I have never had any

²⁸⁵ AT V, 16; CSMK, 317.

doubts about truth, because it seems a notion so transcendently clear that nobody can be ignorant of it.”²⁸⁶ If there were no need to doubt things that are obviously true, such as the certainty of our own existence, then why would Descartes utilize doubt in his published works? I suggest that the kind of doubt Descartes presents in his published works helps him to reveal the self-evident certainty of such truths as the *cogito*, particularly for those readers who find it difficult to realize those “transcendently clear” truths. In the same letter to Mersenne, Descartes says that his criterion of truth is the “natural light,” and that although everyone has this natural light, “hardly anyone makes good use of that light, so that many people – perhaps all those we know – may share the same mistaken opinion. Also,” Descartes continues, “there are many things which can be known by the natural light, but which no one has yet reflected on.”²⁸⁷ In a letter to Colvius from November 14, 1640, Descartes says, “In itself it is such a simple and natural thing to infer that one exists from the fact that one is doubting.”²⁸⁸ Yet, most people do not reflect on this truth. Descartes’ method of doubt, then, is presented for the benefit of his readers—for their instruction—so that through such a method they may better realize the truths that are, or should already be, so plain to them: that they are thinking things who necessarily exist, and that God exists and is not a deceiver.

Unfortunately for Descartes, his use of doubt caused some of his contemporaries, including Pierre Bourdin, to peg him as a skeptic. Whether we describe skepticism according to Descartes’ one-sided characterization or understand that tradition more comprehensively and accurately, it is clear that Descartes was not a skeptic. Not only was he not a skeptic, but in the

²⁸⁶ AT II, 597; CSM III, 139.

²⁸⁷ AT II, 598; CSMK, 139.

²⁸⁸ AT III, 248; CSMK, 159.

correspondence he also makes it clear that he is fundamentally opposed to skeptical philosophy. Descartes derided the skeptics and attempted to distance himself from any association with them because he thought that his motivations were quite different from theirs, and more admirable. Whereas the skeptics were constantly in doubt, Descartes was not. The Pyrrhonian and Academic skeptics may have denied that they had access to certain knowledge about reality, but Descartes both sought after such knowledge and claimed to have attained it.

Chapter Four: Hume and Skepticism

In this chapter, I present my interpretation of David Hume's views on skepticism. I begin by noting the marked differences between Descartes' and Hume's opinions about skeptical philosophy. In brief, whereas Descartes is generally dismissive of the skeptics, Hume values skeptical philosophy. Next, I summarize Hume's criticisms of Cartesian skepticism. Hume contends that the kind of hyperbolic doubt encouraged by Descartes is ineffectual because it is impossible to satisfactorily put into practice. According to Hume, carrying Cartesian doubt to its limit does not lead to fruition in the form of an original first principle; rather, it results in increasing our doubt even further. Then, in order to provide a context in which to appreciate Hume's unique espousal of a particular kind of skepticism, I discuss some of the writings of Pierre Bayle, a "supersceptic," according to Richard Popkin, and a thinker who had a profound influence on Hume's thought.²⁸⁹ Finally, I critique Popkin's characterization of Hume as a Pyrrhonist *par excellence*. Popkin's assessment of Hume as the perfect Pyrrhonist aligns with the themes of his work, specifically the emphasis he places on the influence of Pyrrhonian skepticism on early modern thinkers. However, an analysis of Popkin's claims about Hume alongside Hume's own remarks about skepticism shows that it is inaccurate to describe Hume as a Pyrrhonist of any kind. Hume calls his own philosophy skeptical, but his skepticism is not akin to the views of the Pyrrhonists as described by Sextus Empiricus. Nor does it seamlessly line up

²⁸⁹ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 283.

with the views of the Academic skeptics as explained by Cicero, though there is some kinship between Hume's philosophy and that of the Academics. I suggest that Hume's skepticism is an admission of our intellectual limitations and an approach to philosophical study that bears in mind those limitations, restricts our investigations to feasible, non-abstruse, non-metaphysical subjects, and promotes "accurate and just reasoning."²⁹⁰

I. Descartes the Anti-Skeptic, Hume the Skeptic

With regard to their respective opinions about skeptical philosophy, Descartes and Hume are on opposite ends of the spectrum. As discussed in Chapter Three of this dissertation, Descartes had a very low opinion of the skeptics, one that fluctuated between dismissal and outright condemnation. Descartes believed that the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics were foolish and deserving of reproach for their peculiar and inane ways of living. Referring to the Pyrrhonists, Descartes says, "For when it is a question of organizing our life, it would, of course, be foolish not to trust the senses, and the sceptics who neglected human affairs to the point where friends had to stop them falling of precipices deserved to be laughed at."²⁹¹ Additionally, although he utilizes skeptical arguments in some of his published works—e.g. the hyperbolic doubt of the First Meditation—Descartes does not think that any reasonable person (himself included) can be so naïve as to actually believe such arguments. He says, "That there really is a world, that men have bodies, and the like" are "things which no one of sound mind has ever seriously doubted."²⁹² Rather, contrary to the views of the Pyrrhonian skeptics, who were always "still

²⁹⁰ EHU, 9; SBN, 12.

²⁹¹ AT VII, 351; CSM II, 243.

²⁹² AT VIII, 16; AC, 9.

investigating,” not yet having arrived at truth, Descartes thought that examining such unrealistic doubts could provide him with just one possible way to attain certain knowledge.²⁹³ “Although the Pyrrhonists reached no certain conclusion from their doubts,” Descartes says, “it does not follow that no one can.”²⁹⁴ As a result, after coming to his certain conclusions, Descartes could then show that those kinds of doubt should be dismissed as unsound. Even the sincerity of Descartes’ use of hyperbolic doubt in the First Meditation is open to question. Given some of his remarks on the subject—e.g. his denial that in the *Meditations* he demanded, or even implicitly encouraged, his readers to doubt God’s existence—it is plausible to think that Descartes’ use of hyperbolic doubt in the First Meditation and his apparent subsequent descent into delirium are either feigned or merely strategically presented.²⁹⁵

Unlike Descartes, who is generally dismissive of skepticism, Hume seriously engages with skeptical doubts and skeptical argumentation, and he appears to be deeply affected by skeptical philosophy. As many Hume scholars have noted, the melancholy, despair, or crisis that Hume undergoes in the Conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise of Human Nature* seems to be a genuine and meaningful response on Hume’s part to the force of skeptical reasoning.²⁹⁶ Indeed,

²⁹³ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 3.

²⁹⁴ AT II, 38–39; CSMK, 99.

²⁹⁵ In a letter to Princess Elizabeth from May 10, 1647, Descartes expresses his dissatisfaction with people like Jacobus Revius because they had been spreading inaccurate interpretations of his work. He says, Revius would “make people believe that I said some things in [the *Meditations*] which are quite absurd and are contrary to the glory of God – for example, that we must doubt that there is a God. He would even have it that I want people to deny absolutely for a while that there is a God, and things of that sort.” (AT V, 16; CSMK, 317.); The Second Meditation begins with this: “So serious are the doubts into which I have been thrown as a result of yesterday’s meditation that I can neither put them out of my mind nor see any way of resolving them. It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top.” (AT VII, 23–24; CSM II, 16.)

²⁹⁶ Cf. Donald C. Ainslie, *Hume’s True Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume’s Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Barry Stroud, “Hume’s Scepticism: Natural Instincts and Philosophical Reflection,” *Philosophical Topics* 19, no. 1, *Modern Philosophy* (Spring 1991): 271–291.

in many parts of his writings, Hume grapples with various skeptical arguments—pointing out the advantages of some and the flaws of others—and his ruminations reveal the pull that skepticism had on him. In the Abstract to the *Treatise*, Hume even describes his own philosophy as skeptical. He says, “By all that has been said [in the *Treatise*] the reader will easily perceive, that the philosophy contained in this book is very sceptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding.”²⁹⁷

Though it is obvious that Hume was influenced by skeptical philosophy, what Hume scholars disagree about is the precise nature of Hume’s skepticism. In Section XII of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume seems to imply that “mitigated scepticism, or *Academical* philosophy,” is more advisable, reasonable, practicable—i.e. better, in a number of ways—than Pyrrhonian skepticism.²⁹⁸ Yet, in the same section of the *Enquiry*, as well as in some parts of the *Treatise*, he also reckons with the sheer power of Pyrrhonian reasoning and credits the Pyrrhonists for providing us with a means to curbing our intellectual arrogance. In Section XII of the *Enquiry*, Hume says, “And if any of the learned be inclined, from their natural temper, to haughtiness and obstinacy, a small tincture of Pyrrhonism might abate their pride, by showing them, that the few advantages, which they may have attained over their fellows, are but inconsiderable, if compared with the universal perplexity and confusion, which is inherent in human nature.”²⁹⁹ Additionally, Hume’s description of his philosophy as being “very sceptical” and “tend[ing] to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding” seems to imply that, for Hume, philosophizing skeptically has something to do

²⁹⁷ T, 413; SBN, 657.

²⁹⁸ EHU, 140; SBN, 161.

²⁹⁹ EHU, 141; SBN, 161–162.

with accepting our intellectual limitations.³⁰⁰ Though this may not be contrary to the views of the Pyrrhonists, such an idea does look like a modification of them.

There is disagreement about how to accurately qualify Hume's skepticism, and there is good reason for it. Hume describes his own philosophy as skeptical, yet it is not entirely clear what he means by "skeptical" with regard to his own philosophy. In some parts of his writings he seems to endorse "mitigated" or non-radical, non-Pyrrhonian skepticism, but in other areas he makes seemingly positive evaluative remarks about the Pyrrhonists. For example, in the Abstract to the *Treatise*, Hume describes Pyrrhonian arguments as being so forceful and convincing that they are, in fact, insurmountable. Yet, Hume contends that we continue to live according to our opinions and beliefs, even though we cannot adequately justify them, simply because we *must*. He says, "Our author [Hume] insists upon several other sceptical topics [in the *Treatise*]; and upon the whole concludes, that we assent to our faculties, and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. Philosophy would render us entirely *Pyrrhonian*, were not nature too strong for it."³⁰¹ Such statements might prompt us to ask the question, "Is Hume a Pyrrhonist?" It is difficult to answer this question in the affirmative because, for one reason, in other parts of his writings Hume seems to speak on behalf of the views of the Academic skeptics. For instance, in the *Enquiry* Hume counterposes "the Academic or Sceptical philosophy," which he believes has been historically at the receiving end of unfair "public hatred and resentment," to a dogmatic philosophy "like that of Epictetus, and other Stoics."³⁰² Such kinds of dogmatism, according to Hume, are "only a more refined system of selfishness" that "foster a predominant inclination" in

³⁰⁰ T, 413; SBN, 657.

³⁰¹ T, 414; SBN, 657.

³⁰² EHU, 41–42; SBN, 41; EHU, 42; SBN, 41; EHU, 41; SBN, 39.

us and reinforce our natural “bias and propensity” at the expense of the actual “correction of our manners, and extirpation of our vices.”³⁰³ Unlike Stoicism and other forms of dogmatism, Hume says that Academicism is the “one species of philosophy which seems little liable to this inconvenience...because it strikes in with no disorderly passion of the human mind, nor can mingle itself with any natural affection or propensity.”³⁰⁴

Is Hume neither a Pyrrhonist nor an Academic skeptic? Or does he endorse a kind of skepticism that adds to the views of one of the ancient skeptical traditions? Does his philosophy combine elements of Pyrrhonism and Academicism in a unique way? Although sometimes Hume speaks favorably about Pyrrhonian skepticism, his philosophy on the whole does not neatly line up with the basic views of that tradition. Unlike the Pyrrhonists, who investigate and search for truth but have not yet discovered it, Hume seems fairly confident about the plausibility of his theories on human nature and human experience, which include detailed explications and analyses on the influence of instincts, custom, and habit, among other things. Yet, Hume also suggests, akin to the views of the Academic skeptics, that probability is the most we can hope to attain when it comes to our claims to knowledge. Later in this chapter, I will present my interpretation of what I consider to be Hume’s distinctive brand of skeptical philosophy, but before doing so it will be useful for me to discuss Hume’s criticisms of Cartesian skepticism. The ways in which he critiques Descartes reveal some kinds of skeptical reasoning that Hume does not endorse.

³⁰³ EHU, 41; SBN, 39.

³⁰⁴ EHU, 41; SBN, 40–41.

II. Hume's Criticisms of Cartesian Skepticism

In Section XII of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume draws a distinction between two kinds of skepticism. He says, first, that there is “a species of scepticism *antecedent* to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Descartes and others, as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgment.”³⁰⁵ Second, “There is another species of scepticism, *consequent* to science and enquiry, when men are supposed to have discovered either the absolute fallaciousness of their mental faculties, or their unfitness to reach any fixed determination in all those curious subjects of speculation, about which they are commonly employed.”³⁰⁶ Hume criticizes the first of these kinds of skepticism—“scepticism *antecedent* to all study and philosophy,” Cartesian skepticism, or “Cartesian doubt”—for being both ill founded and infeasible.³⁰⁷ According to Hume, Descartes and those of his ilk encourage us to participate in “universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties” so that we may arrive at “some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful.”³⁰⁸ In Chapter Three of this dissertation, I argue that although Descartes utilizes hyperbolic doubt in the *Meditations* and the *Principles*, he does not actually find that kind of extreme doubt to be necessary to arrive at the certain knowledge of the *cogito*. Nor does Descartes, in my view, encourage his readers to practice hyperbolic doubt. For these reasons, I would argue that Hume's appraisal of Cartesian doubt is inaccurate. Even so, barring the issue of whether or not Hume's interpretation of the reasons for Descartes' use of doubt is correct, it is clear that Hume thinks it is impossible to effectively engage in such extreme doubt because to do

³⁰⁵ EHU, 131; SBN, 148.

³⁰⁶ EHU, 132; SBN, 150.

³⁰⁷ EHU, 132; SBN, 150.

³⁰⁸ EHU, 131–132; SBN, 148–150.

so could not reveal any “original principle, which has a prerogative above others, that are self-evident and convincing.”³⁰⁹ Additionally, Hume says that even if we were to discover such a first principle, Descartes’ recommended process of universally doubting “our very faculties” would make it impossible for us to ever be assured of the veracity of that newfound principle. It should be fairly clear, then, that Hume does not find Cartesian skepticism (as he understands it) to be a plausible or practicable means to attaining certain knowledge.³¹⁰

Hume is quick to note that, when properly modified, Cartesian doubt can be of immense value. “It must, however, be confessed,” he says, “that this species of scepticism, when more moderate, may be understood in a very reasonable sense, and is a necessary preparative to the study of philosophy, by preserving a proper impartiality in our judgments, and weaning our mind from all those prejudices, which we may have imbibed from education or rash opinion.”³¹¹ Doubting our claims to knowledge—but doing so in a balanced way—promotes vigilance and humility. As a check to our intellectual pretensions, doubting in moderation is a commendable practice. In other parts of his writings, Hume provides objections to Pyrrhonian skepticism similar to those he presents against Cartesian skepticism in the *Enquiry*, all of which point to his belief that the extreme doubt advocated by the Pyrrhonists is unviable. Yet, it is important to note that in this part of the *Enquiry*, Hume finds something problematic not only about radical doubt

³⁰⁹ EHU, 132; SBN, 150.

³¹⁰ Cf. David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982). David Fate Norton says that in addition to Hume’s obvious criticism of Cartesian skepticism—that it is both impossible and self-defeating—“Hume’s account of belief constitutes a further implicit and more significant criticism of Descartes’ sceptical program.” (Norton, *David Hume*, 254.) According to Norton, Descartes considers justifiable beliefs to be true, but “Hume never supposes that what is believed, for whatever reasons or causes, must be true.” (Norton, 254.) Additionally, because Hume thinks that whether they are true or not, some beliefs are unavoidable, Norton argues that he is implicitly criticizing Descartes for not clearly or satisfactorily explaining the relationship between beliefs and doubts.

³¹¹ EHU, 132; SBN, 150.

itself; he specifically finds fault with the belief that such doubt can be used to attain indubitable knowledge in the way he thinks the Cartesians encourage us to do so.

In much of Book I, Part 4 of the *Treatise*, Hume implicitly criticizes Descartes' philosophical views. In Section 4, "Of the modern philosophy," he argues against the credibility of what he calls "the fundamental principle" of modern philosophy, the claim that a distinction can be drawn between primary and secondary qualities of objects; in Sections 5 and 6, respectively, he disputes the arguments made by "these philosophers" concerning the immateriality of the soul and the attribution of personal identity to a soul, a self, or a substance.³¹² With regard to Cartesian doubt, in particular, much of what Hume says in Book I, Part 4, Section 1 of the *Treatise* ("Of scepticism with regard to reason") lines up with the criticisms of Cartesian skepticism he presents in the *Enquiry*. In this section of the *Treatise*, Hume first draws the reader's attention to the incompatibility of knowledge and probability. "Knowledge and probability are of such contrary and disagreeing natures," he says, "that they cannot well run insensibly into each other."³¹³ According to Hume, knowledge is (or is assumed to be) "certain and infallible," yet it can also be observed that when it comes to the judgments we make about "matters of fact," for which we rely on our faculty of reason, we are often mistaken.³¹⁴ Because of "the weakness of that faculty, which judges," our claims to knowledge based on our judgment cannot be adequately justified.³¹⁵ For Hume, these reflections reveal first, that "all knowledge degenerates into probability," and second, that critical examination of "the

³¹² T, 149; SBN 226; T, 153; SBN, 232.

³¹³ T, 121; SBN, 181.

³¹⁴ T, 121; SBN, 180; For Hume's explanation of what he means by "matters of fact" and how he distinguishes those "objects of human reason or enquiry" from "relations of ideas," see EHU, 28–29; SBN, 24–26.

³¹⁵ T, 122; SBN, 182.

objects concerning which [one] reason[s]” does not lead us to certain knowledge but, quite the contrary, to “a total extinction of belief and evidence.”³¹⁶ What Hume is saying, then, is that reason can never assure us of the veracity of our claims to knowledge and that the more we attempt to grasp at criteria that would justify such claims, the more uncertain we inevitably become.

In the parts of the *Enquiry* I have already referenced, Hume argues that Cartesian skepticism cannot lead us to the certain knowledge of any original first principle, and in the parts of the *Treatise* I have cited, he argues that the use of reason itself cannot lead us to knowledge but only to judgments that are more or less likely to be true.³¹⁷ In fact, Hume is of the opinion that any attempts to discover certain knowledge through the use of reason ineluctably lead us into such severe doubts that it is impossible to escape from them. Yet, for Hume, this is not the end of the story. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Hume does not think that the radical doubts that result from rational inquiry are to be indulged. What is more, he believes that our inability to fully pursue these kinds of extreme doubt makes it impossible for anyone to be a Pyrrhonist. For Hume, although Pyrrhonian reasoning has its merits, there are limits to both its usefulness and its viability.³¹⁸

³¹⁶ T, 121; SBN, 180; T, 122; SBN, 183.

³¹⁷ For a more thorough discussion and analysis of Hume’s skepticism about reason as well as the relationship between Hume’s and Descartes’ arguments in these respects, see Graciela De Pierris, “Hume and Descartes on Skepticism with Regard to Demonstrative Reasoning,” *Análisis Filosófico* 25, no. 2 (November 2005): 101–119.

³¹⁸ Cf. Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of Its Origins and Central Doctrines* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1960). In Chapter XXI of this classic study, Norman Kemp Smith argues that Hume distinguishes himself from both the skeptics and the dogmatists. Kemp Smith says that according to Hume, both the skeptics and the dogmatists are mistaken because they hold to “a false view of reason, as being a faculty which by its very nature, if its pretensions are to be at all justified, must be accorded an ultimate sovereignty.” Kemp Smith says that by bringing reason down to its proper place as the “slave of the passions,” Hume places himself “outside and above the controversy between the dogmatists and the sceptics.” (Kemp Smith, *Philosophy of David Hume*, 448–449.)

III. Pierre Bayle: “Supersceptical” Fideist

In his classic work on early modern philosophy, *The History of Scepticism (HS)*, Richard Popkin describes Pierre Bayle as “the most sceptical of all the Pyrrhonists.”³¹⁹ According to Popkin, Bayle was a “supersceptic,” a philosopher who carried skeptical reasoning and argumentation farther than anyone before him.³²⁰ “Bayle...was not content to just restate the classical sceptical problem of knowledge and to continue the tradition of Montaigne against the latest dogmatic opponents,” Popkin says.³²¹ Rather, he wanted to do much more: he used skeptical argumentation to attack any and every kind of theory, “be it metaphysical, theological, or scientific.”³²² “Each theory,” Popkin continues, “is inspected and examined and questioned [by Bayle], and in the course of this process, it disintegrates into contradictions and paradoxes. Pursued long enough, this approach exhibits the sad fact that rational effort is always its own undoing...Rational endeavor, in any area whatsoever, is ‘the high road to Pyrrhonism,’ to complete scepticism.”³²³ Yet, Bayle did not direct his skeptical objections towards any and all theories merely to reveal their inadequacies or flaws. He attacked theories that result from the use of reason in order to advocate for faith and revelation as the only legitimate criteria for knowledge. Popkin says, “Bayle announces over and over again that when man realizes the inadequacy and incompetency of reason to resolve any question, he should seek another guide—

³¹⁹ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 173.

³²⁰ Popkin, *History*, 283.

³²¹ Popkin, *History*, 288.

³²² Popkin, *History*, 288.

³²³ Popkin, *History*, 288.

faith or revelation.”³²⁴ This, in a nutshell, is a statement of fideism. In *HS*, Popkin describes fideism in this way: “Fideism as a religious epistemology would seem to involve the claim that the guarantee of the truth of religious knowledge comes solely by faith. Such an assertion in no way denies that there may be all sorts of evidences that render this knowledge plausible or probable or might lead one to believe it. But the evidences can never be adequate to establish the truth of the religious propositions.”³²⁵

Popkin admits that, for a number of reasons, it is extremely difficult for us to know Bayle’s true motivations and actual views, especially those concerning religion. He says, “Bayle has been seen as an atheist, as a critic of traditional religion, as an enlightened sceptic, an advocate of complete toleration, a fideist, a true believer, a man of faith.”³²⁶ Though it has been contested, Popkin’s view is that Bayle was an unorthodox Christian, someone for whom “perhaps religion had no expressed or expressible content...but was only ‘in the heart’ in some quite unemotional way.”³²⁷ Even so, whether he was in fact a fervent Calvinist or an atheist at heart, Popkin believes that Bayle greatly contributed to the history of skepticism primarily because he “carried scepticism to its ultimate extreme.”³²⁸ “Bayle’s method,” Popkin says, “was not just that of the other sceptics, the various tropes of Sextus Empiricus, but was a method of analysis...that, in Bayle’s hands, led only to utter confusion, bewilderment, and perplexity.”³²⁹

³²⁴ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 289.

³²⁵ Popkin, *History*, 104.

³²⁶ Popkin, *History*, 296.

³²⁷ Popkin, *History*, 297.

³²⁸ Popkin, *History*, 300.

³²⁹ Popkin, *History*, 301.

More than any other aspect of his writings, it is Bayle's use of skeptical argumentation—and the drastic results that follow from it—that influenced Hume's thought.

Pierre Bayle's magnum opus is the *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, a monumental work in which Bayle presents a series of biographies—along with his own extended reflections in the chapters' footnotes—that include entries on biblical figures and contemporary philosophers, among other personas. For our purposes, it will be useful to look briefly at Bayle's biographical chapter on Pyrrho, the *de facto* founder of Pyrrhonian skepticism. In this chapter of the *Dictionary* (in addition to the “Third Clarification” and the chapter on Zeno of Elea), Bayle's opinions about skepticism are brought to the fore. Since I would like to indicate the influence that Bayle had on Hume, I will point out a couple of areas in Bayle's and Hume's respective texts in which the similarities between the two philosophers are apparent. Before doing so, I should simply note that in his remarks from the chapter on Pyrrho, Bayle pushes his characteristically fideistic theme (described above) onto his readers: to “make them feel the infirmity of reason so that this feeling might lead them to have recourse to a better guide, which is faith.”³³⁰

Both Bayle and Hume seem to understand how Pyrrhonian skepticism could be interpreted as being dangerous for religion, but both also imply or state that Pyrrhonism is a harmless philosophy because most people would never seriously buy into it. In Remark B of “Pyrrho,” Bayle says, “It is therefore only religion that has anything to fear from Pyrrhonism. Religion ought to be based on certainty. Its aim, its effects, its usages collapse as soon as the firm conviction of its truths is erased from the mind. But this should not be a cause of uneasiness. There never were, and there never will be more than a small number of people who can be fooled

³³⁰ Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), 204.

by the arguments of the skeptics.”³³¹ Compare this to what Hume says in Book I, Part 4, Section 1 of the *Treatise* (“Of scepticism with regard to reason”): “Shou’d it here be ask’d me, whether I sincerely assent to this argument, which I seem to take such pains to inculcate, and whether I be really one of those sceptics, who hold that all is uncertain, and that our judgment is not in *any* thing possest of *any* measures of truth and falsehood; I shou’d reply, that this question is entirely superfluous, and that neither I, nor any person was ever sincerely and constantly of that opinion.”³³² Both Bayle and Hume value some aspects of Pyrrhonism, but both also recognize its incredibility and its infeasibility.

Popkin argues that Pierre Bayle was the one philosopher who had the most profound effect on David Hume. Whether or not this is true is hard to say. However, there is no doubt that Bayle’s writings had a strong influence on Hume’s thought. Hume traveled to France in 1734, when he was a relatively young man, and over the next few years he wrote what was to become his first published work in philosophy, the *Treatise of Human Nature*. Popkin says about Hume, “In his early notebooks, at least half of the entries are quotations from Pierre Bayle’s writings with Hume’s thoughts thereon.”³³³ Popkin sees this fact, in addition to the information we have about Hume that “when he went to France [in 1734], he took with him eight folio volumes of Bayle’s writings,” as clear indications that in 1734 or thereabouts Hume both underwent some sort of personal skeptical crisis and developed his *Treatise* primarily in response to Bayle’s skepticism.³³⁴

³³¹ Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, 195.

³³² T, 123; SBN, 183.

³³³ Richard H. Popkin, “David Hume,” in *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 454.

³³⁴ Popkin, “David Hume,” 454.

Though it is difficult to determine the extent of the influence, it can be argued that Bayle was one of only a handful of philosophers that Hume seemed to be directly responding to in his epistemological (or “metaphysical”) parts of the *Treatise* (i.e. what Hume presents in Book I). In a letter to his friend, Michael Ramsay, from August 31, 1737, written during the time in which he was working on the *Treatise*, Hume suggests that in order to fully appreciate the philosophical intricacies of Book I, Ramsay should read through some of the writings of just four thinkers: Malebranche, Berkeley, Descartes, and Bayle. “These books [by these authors],” Hume says, “will make you easily comprehend the metaphysical parts of my reasoning, and, as to the rest, they have so little dependence on all former systems of philosophy, that your natural good sense will afford you light enough to judge of their force and solidity.”³³⁵

In his article, “Bayle and Hume,” Popkin suggests that Hume’s philosophy was primarily formed as a response to the skeptical problems introduced by Pierre Bayle. Concerning the “total skeptical crisis developed by Bayle,” Popkin says, “Hume alone seems to have seen it whole, seems to have been completely dismayed by it, and seems to have sought a post-Baylean way of living with complete doubt about all rational matters.”³³⁶ As support for his view, Popkin cites the fact that “about half of the philosophical entries in [Hume’s] early memoranda are items dealing with Bayle.”³³⁷ He argues that Hume was entirely convinced by Bayle that the use of reason could not lead us to certain knowledge and that much of Book I of the *Treatise* is Hume’s

³³⁵ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Stephen Buckle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 204.

³³⁶ Richard H. Popkin, “Bayle and Hume,” in *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, ed. Richard A. Watson and James E. Force (San Diego, CA: Austin Hill Press, 1980), 151.

³³⁷ Popkin, “Bayle and Hume,” 151.

attempt to deal with “Baylean levels of skepticism.”³³⁸ According to Popkin, Bayle had no real cause for concern when it came to the inadequacy of human reason, which he happily railed against, because he had his faith to rely on. Thus, he could implement skeptical reasoning and argumentation to attack any and all theories without having to worry. “Hume did not share Bayle’s official faith,” however, and “was troubled,” Popkin says, “by his realization of what would happen if one accepted all of the doubts Bayle had raised. The doubts, he saw, are unavoidable and unanswerable.”³³⁹ Yet, according to Popkin, it is from this realization that Hume was able to discover a novel “Pyrrhonian” solution to the skeptical doubts that so disturbed him.

IV. Popkin on Hume’s Pyrrhonism

In his article, “David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and His Critique of Pyrrhonism,” Richard Popkin argues that Hume was not your typical Pyrrhonian skeptic. Far from it, he was a Pyrrhonist *par excellence*: a “complete Pyrrhonist,” a “proper Pyrrhonist,” and a “consistent Pyrrhonist.”³⁴⁰ Popkin’s view is that Hume greatly contributed to the history of skepticism by innovatively improving upon the Pyrrhonian skeptical tradition. According to Popkin, Hume was able to further the ideas of the Pyrrhonists unlike anyone before him—including Pierre Bayle—thereby making his skepticism “the only ‘consistent’ version of the original skeptical theory,

³³⁸ Popkin, “Bayle and Hume,” 153.

³³⁹ Popkin, “Bayle and Hume,” 158; Popkin, “Bayle and Hume,” 155.

³⁴⁰ Richard H. Popkin, “David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and His Critique of Pyrrhonism,” in *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, ed. Richard A. Watson and James E. Force (San Diego, CA: Austin Hill Press, 1980), 132; Popkin, “David Hume: His Pyrrhonism,” 129; Popkin, “David Hume: His Pyrrhonism,” 127.

more consistent than even the formulation of Sextus Empiricus.”³⁴¹ In Popkin’s view, Hume realized the power of Pyrrhonian reasoning—“that the extreme skepticism of the Pyrrhonians cannot be refuted”—but he also recognized its inherent errors.³⁴² Popkin says, “Pyrrhonism is incredible: it is incompatible, according to Hume, with the actions necessary to support human life.”³⁴³ Popkin claims that in addition to recognizing the persuasiveness of Pyrrhonism, on the one hand, and its infeasibility, on the other, Hume proposed what is essentially a new and better form of Pyrrhonian skepticism—one which, based on a proper understanding of the compulsoriness of our opinions and beliefs, melds dogmatism and skepticism in such a way as to provide us with a realistic picture of human nature.³⁴⁴

I would argue that Popkin’s characterization of Hume as the consistent and perfect Pyrrhonist is inaccurate, and there are three main reasons for my critique of Popkin:

1. To call Hume any kind of Pyrrhonist while at the same time arguing that he is “both a dogmatist and a skeptic” is to use the term, “Pyrrhonism,” and its related variants loosely and to fundamentally misunderstand Pyrrhonian skepticism.³⁴⁵
2. The “melancholy and delirium” experienced by Hume as a result of his uncertainty and doubts are antithetical to the tranquility that is supposed to follow naturally from the Pyrrhonian way of life.³⁴⁶

³⁴¹ Popkin, “David Hume: His Pyrrhonism,” 126.

³⁴² Popkin, “David Hume: His Pyrrhonism,” 113.

³⁴³ Popkin, “David Hume: His Pyrrhonism,” 124.

³⁴⁴ Cf. Richard H. Popkin, “Sources of Knowledge of Sextus Empiricus in Hume’s Time,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54, no. 1 (January 1993): 137–141. In support of his claims about the predominant influence of Pyrrhonian skepticism on Hume, Popkin wrote this article in which he details the general awareness of Sextus Empiricus’ writings during Hume’s lifetime. Popkin argues both that Hume was quite knowledgeable about Sextus and that rather than, for instance, “just seeing [Hume’s ideas] as a reaction to Berkeley’s criticism of Locke,” as many scholars have a tendency to do, it is more accurate to view Hume’s epistemological ideas as a response to classical Pyrrhonian arguments. (Popkin, “Sources of Knowledge,” 141.)

³⁴⁵ Popkin, “David Hume: His Pyrrhonism,” 132.

³⁴⁶ T, 175; SBN, 269.

3. Although he makes some positive evaluative remarks about the Pyrrhonists and calls his own philosophy skeptical, nowhere in his writings does Hume describe his own philosophy as Pyrrhonian.

IVa. Hume the Pyrrhonist: Dogmatist and Skeptic

Popkin says that “the true Pyrrhonist,” i.e. David Hume, “is both a dogmatist and a skeptic.”³⁴⁷ By describing Hume as a dogmatist and a skeptic, what Popkin means is, first, that Hume realized that he was unable to use reason to overcome the arguments of the Pyrrhonists regarding knowledge, belief, and opinion (this is Hume the skeptic admitting to the force of Pyrrhonian reasoning) and, second, that Hume also recognized the impossibility of living without adhering to beliefs and opinions—that “our naturally acquired beliefs” are “necessary to our existence” and that “we judge because we have to, and we act because we have to.”³⁴⁸ (This is Hume the dogmatist arguing that we are naturally disposed or necessitated to hold certain beliefs and opinions.) For Popkin, Hume’s acute awareness of the impossibility of living as a Pyrrhonist and his view that nature forces us to hold opinions regardless of our attempts to do otherwise are what make his kind of Pyrrhonism consistent—“the only ‘consistent’ Pyrrhonian point of view,” actually.³⁴⁹

I agree with Popkin’s interpretation insofar as Hume’s double-mindedness about the merits of Pyrrhonism is concerned. Like Popkin, I think that in his writings Hume emphasizes some of the deterministic qualities of human nature: our nature is such that, contrary to what the Pyrrhonists might say, we cannot avoid having certain beliefs and opinions. Popkin says that,

³⁴⁷ Popkin, “David Hume: His Pyrrhonism,” 130.

³⁴⁸ Popkin, “David Hume: His Pyrrhonism,” 126.

³⁴⁹ Popkin, “David Hume: His Pyrrhonism,” 103.

according to Hume, our beliefs and opinions are “the effects of instinct, animal faith, custom, and habit,” among other things; this description of Hume I also agree with.³⁵⁰ However, I would argue that to call Hume a Pyrrhonist of any kind in spite of (or, according to Popkin, because of) his dogmatic assertions about human nature—e.g. the claims that “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” and that “Philosophy would render us entirely *Pyrrhonian*, were not nature too strong for it”—is to mischaracterize him.³⁵¹

Like Popkin, Barry Stroud views Hume’s philosophy as being “closest to that way of life said to have been achieved by certain ancient skeptics,” i.e. the Pyrrhonists.³⁵² However, Stroud disagrees with Popkin’s interpretation of Hume as both a dogmatist and a skeptic. Contrary to Popkin, he argues that simply following nature and being dogmatic at some times and skeptical at others “would not really be following a sceptical way of life.”³⁵³ Rather, according to Stroud, Hume’s particular skeptical philosophy—which relies on serious considerations of Pyrrhonian skepticism—is Pyrrhonian precisely because it leads to tranquility just as the ancient Pyrrhonists’ way of life led them to tranquility. Stroud says that, according to Hume, “following the ‘profound researches’ of the Pyrrhonist can lead to greater easiness in the face of ignorance and

³⁵⁰ Popkin, “Bayle and Hume,” 157.

³⁵¹ T, 266; SBN, 415; T, 414; SBN, 657.

³⁵² Barry Stroud, “Hume’s Scepticism: Natural Instincts and Philosophical Reflection,” *Philosophical Topics* 19, no. 1, *Modern Philosophy* (Spring 1991): 271; Cf. Robert J. Fogelin, “Hume’s Skepticism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 209–237. Like Stroud, Hume scholar Robert Fogelin also favors a Pyrrhonian reading of Hume with regard to his skepticism. Although Fogelin admits that at the end of the *Enquiry*, Hume advocates mitigated (non-Pyrrhonian) skepticism, he thinks that readers’ devaluing of the seriousness with which Hume considers Pyrrhonian arguments “diminishes Hume’s genius.” (Fogelin, “Hume’s Skepticism,” 235.) Specifically, Fogelin says that Hume’s “theory of belief...pushes his philosophy in the direction of extreme (or Pyrrhonian) skepticism.” (Fogelin, “Hume’s Skepticism,” 210.)

³⁵³ Stroud, “Hume’s Scepticism,” 281.

uncertainty, less precipitousness in adopting beliefs simply in order to free oneself from indecision, and less obstinacy in holding on to the beliefs one has.”³⁵⁴ Thus, for Stroud, Hume is “closer to the ancient sceptical conception of the quest for *ataraxia* or tranquillity than is Popkin’s fully natural, but possibly unreflective, way of life.”³⁵⁵ I agree with Stroud that Popkin’s description of Hume as a Pyrrhonist—or as both a dogmatist and a skeptic—is inaccurate, especially if in our characterization of Hume we intend for him to remain faithful to the characteristics of the ancient Pyrrhonian tradition. Yet, as I will argue in the next section, I do not think that Hume’s serious considerations of Pyrrhonian skepticism lead him to *ataraxia* or tranquility. On the contrary, Pyrrhonian or excessive doubts lead Hume to extreme uneasiness.

In the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, a book written some time in the second century A.D. by the Greek Pyrrhonist Sextus Empiricus, the author contrasts the views of the Pyrrhonists with those of the dogmatists, and his explanation of the central differences between the Pyrrhonists and the dogmatists rests on whether or not a claim is made regarding the discovery or attainment of truth. Sextus says, “Those who are called Dogmatists in the proper sense of the word think that they have discovered the truth...and the Sceptics [the Pyrrhonists] are still investigating.”³⁵⁶ For the Pyrrhonian skeptics, it is not just an overarching claim to truth with a capital “T” that indicates dogmatism; making assertions about the truth of anything concerning reality constitutes dogmatism. Speaking of the Academics, who were viewed by the Pyrrhonists as negative dogmatists, but dogmatists nonetheless, Sextus says, “For anyone who holds beliefs on even one subject, or in general prefers one appearance to another in point of convincingness or lack of

³⁵⁴ Stroud, “Hume’s Scepticism,” 282.

³⁵⁵ Stroud, 283.

³⁵⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 3.

convincingness, or makes assertions about any unclear matter, thereby has the distinctive character of a Dogmatist.”³⁵⁷ Thus, to take just one of many examples from his writings: where Hume says in the *Enquiry*, “Such is the influence of custom, that, where it is strongest, it not only covers our natural ignorance, but even conceals itself, and seems not to take place, merely because it is found in the highest degree,”³⁵⁸ he is speaking as a dogmatist by default if we agree with Sextus’ description of what constitutes dogmatism.

In *HS*, Popkin suggests that although Hume holds certain “positive views,” his views “actually constitute a type of epistemological Pyrrhonism.”³⁵⁹ As I have just explained, according to Sextus, making any definitive “positive” statements about reality precludes one from being deemed a Pyrrhonist. In addition to the inaccuracy of calling Hume a Pyrrhonist based on Sextus’ writings on the subject, Hume himself says that it is impossible for the arguments and views of the Pyrrhonian skeptics to have any real or lasting effects. Hume thinks that even if we were able to live as Pyrrhonists, the outcome would be catastrophic. In Section XII of the *Enquiry*, “Of the academical or sceptical philosophy,” Hume says,

But a Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: Or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence...And though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or others into momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasoning...when he awakes from his dream, he will be the first to join in the laugh against himself, and to confess, that all his objections are mere amusement, and can have no other

³⁵⁷ Cf. Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 59–60; Sextus, *Outlines*, 58.

³⁵⁸ EHU, 31; SBN, 28–29.

³⁵⁹ Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 94.

tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe.³⁶⁰

Hume paints a bleak picture of what would result if we were to live according to the views of the Pyrrhonian skeptics. He says that the effects of Pyrrhonian arguments are short-lived and suggests that it is impossible to be a Pyrrhonist. In the same section of the *Enquiry*, Hume argues that the regular, daily activities necessary to human life are the “great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of scepticism.”³⁶¹ He says that “in the schools” it may be “difficult, if not impossible, to refute” Pyrrhonian principles, but that “as soon as [such principles] leave the shade, and by the presence of real objects, which actuate our passions and sentiments, are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of nature, they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined sceptic in the same condition as other mortals.”³⁶²

In his article, “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?” Myles Burnyeat takes Hume’s passage above—what he calls “Hume’s Challenge”—as a starting point from which to argue against Hume’s claim that it is impossible to live by Pyrrhonian principles. According to Burnyeat, Hume agrees with the Pyrrhonists that reason is ineffective in overcoming skeptical arguments. However, according to Hume, belief is something entirely different from reason in that “a man cannot live without belief.”³⁶³ Hume’s point—his “dogmatic claim,” as Burnyeat calls it—is that our beliefs are so deeply entrenched that it is impossible for them to be overcome

³⁶⁰ EHU, 140; SBN, 160.

³⁶¹ EHU, 139; SBN, 159.

³⁶² EHU, 139; SBN, 159.

³⁶³ Myles Burnyeat, “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?” in *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, ed. Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 27.

by skeptical arguments.³⁶⁴ Although Hume thinks the Pyrrhonists can provide no adequate response to such an objection, Burnyeat argues that Sextus in fact does so. I am in agreement with Burnyeat on this point.

Hume's claim that we are unable to live without adhering to any beliefs or opinions is contrary to the views of the Pyrrhonists as attested by Sextus. In the *Outlines*, Sextus says that the Pyrrhonists "report their own feelings without holding opinions," and that "they do not hold beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences; for Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear."³⁶⁵ In order for "Hume's Challenge" against the Pyrrhonists to be convincing, Hume would need to show not only that it seems obviously impossible for a Pyrrhonist to live according to his views, but also that it actually is impossible to do so. Sextus says that the Pyrrhonists are able to live without holding opinions or beliefs and that doing so—in addition to practicing other habits—brings tranquility. Hume's remarks about Pyrrhonism, some of which I have discussed in this section, are not indicative of a man who would describe himself as a Pyrrhonist. Nor do his statements align with the traditional characteristics of Pyrrhonian skepticism as described by Sextus. For these reasons, then, I would argue that Popkin mischaracterizes Hume by calling him a Pyrrhonist.

IVb. Melancholy versus Tranquility

In the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus says that peace of mind, tranquility, or *ataraxia*, is the natural result of the Pyrrhonian way of life. The Pyrrhonists practice equipollent reasoning, opposing conflicting accounts or arguments while recognizing their equality with regard to their

³⁶⁴ Burnyeat, "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" 28.

³⁶⁵ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 7; Sextus, 6.

“being convincing or unconvincing.”³⁶⁶ It seems to them that “none of the conflicting accounts takes precedence over any other as being more convincing.”³⁶⁷ They suspend judgment—“a standstill of the intellect, owing to which [they] neither reject nor posit anything.”³⁶⁸ According to Sextus, from these practices tranquility follows “fortuitously, as a shadow follows a body.”³⁶⁹ Yet, for Hume, the result of Pyrrhonian reasoning—in the form of his philosophical investigations that both lead him to doubt and uncertainty and keep him in those states of mind—is not tranquility. Quite the contrary, in the Conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise*, Hume reveals that his lack of certainty deeply saddens and terrifies him. Hume says,

My memory of past errors and perplexities, makes me diffident for the future. The wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the faculties, I must employ in my enquiries, encrease my apprehensions. And the impossibility of amending or correcting these faculties, reduces me almost to despair, and makes me resolve to perish on the barren rock, on which I am at present, rather than venture myself upon that boundless ocean, which runs out into immensity. This sudden view of my danger strikes me with melancholy; and as ‘tis usual for that passion, above all others, to indulge itself; I cannot forbear feeding my despair, with all those desponding reflections, which the present subject furnishes me with in such abundance.³⁷⁰

Since one of the hallmarks of the Pyrrhonian way of life is the tranquility that is meant to attend it, and because Hume’s engagement with philosophy and skeptical reasoning leads him to the kind of melancholy that he describes in the passage above, I argue that we cannot legitimately characterize Hume as a Pyrrhonist. For Hume, the uncertainty that results from his philosophical investigations brings with it a kind of “melancholy and delirium” which cannot be

³⁶⁶ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 5.

³⁶⁷ Sextus, 5.

³⁶⁸ Sextus, 5.

³⁶⁹ Sextus, 11.

³⁷⁰ T, 172; SBN, 264.

overcome by continued rational inquiry.³⁷¹ Only “nature herself,” Hume says, “suffices to that purpose, and cures me...either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras.”³⁷² He continues, “I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour’s amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further.”³⁷³ It is interesting to note that whereas Hume appears to feel a great sense of relief from the realization that “nature herself” dispels his doubts, uncertainties, and anxieties, Sextus says that the dogmatists—i.e. all non-Pyrrhonian philosophers—are “perpetually troubled” and suffer from psychological and emotional disturbances because, among other reasons, they accept some opinions to be true.³⁷⁴ Were he alive, perhaps Sextus would say that Hume’s seemingly fluctuating emotional states—his despondency at one moment and his relaxedness at another—are symptoms of his dogmatism. We might even think that when Sextus says the following about the dogmatists, he could be alluding to the David Hume of the Conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise*: “When they lack what they believe to be good, they take themselves to be persecuted by natural evils and they pursue what (so they think) is good. And when they have acquired these things, they experience more troubles; for they are elated beyond reason and measure, and in fear of change they do anything so as not to lose what they believe to be good.”³⁷⁵

³⁷¹ T, 175; SBN, 269.

³⁷² T, 175; SBN, 269.

³⁷³ T, 175; SBN, 269.

³⁷⁴ Cf. Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 10.

³⁷⁵ Sextus, 10.

IVc. Hume the Just Reasoner

I am not of the opinion that Hume is a Pyrrhonist, and in the previous sections I explained some reasons as to why I think it is inaccurate to call him a Pyrrhonist. In the *Treatise*, Hume says that “all knowledge degenerates into probability,” and this claim of his aligns with one of the major tenets of the Academic skepticism: that the assent or approval of specific accounts, claims, or arguments is based on persuasiveness or plausibility.³⁷⁶ In the first century B.C., Cicero, a Roman orator and statesman, wrote the *Academica*, a dialogue in which he explicates the views of the Academics and critiques those of the Stoics as well as other contemporary dogmatic schools of philosophy. In this work, Cicero suggests that the Academics base their assent to arguments on probabilistic reasoning. So, for example, in one part of the *Academica*, Cicero says, “We hold many views to be persuasive,” and in another part he states, “We discern as many true as false things.”³⁷⁷ In Section VI, “Of Probability,” from the *Enquiry*, Hume argues that our beliefs, including those about causality, are directly related to probabilistic reasoning. With regard to causes and effects, he says, “Though we give the preference to that which has been found most usual, and believe that this effect will exist, we must not overlook the other effects, but must assign to each of them a particular weight and authority, in proportion as we have found it to be more or less frequent.”³⁷⁸ In Section 4 of the *Enquiry*, Hume argues that “all arguments concerning existence are founded on the relation of cause and effect,” that “all our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past,” and that because we “put trust in past experience, and make it the standard of our future

³⁷⁶ T, 121; SBN, 180; Cf. Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*.

³⁷⁷ Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, 6; Cicero, 65.

³⁷⁸ EHU, 56; SBN, 58.

judgment, these arguments must be probable only.”³⁷⁹ Thus, it can be argued that there is kinship between Hume and the Academic skeptics with regard to the emphasis they place on probabilistic reasoning.

Yet, I do not think it is accurate to call Hume an Academic skeptic. For one thing, another central view of the Academics is that “nothing is apprehensible.”³⁸⁰ In other words, according to the Academics, nothing can be known with certainty. Although they assent to some accounts or arguments and base their approval on probabilistic reasoning, Cicero contends that the Academics “don’t find any sign of apprehension.”³⁸¹ Hume seems to be more confident than the Academics about the accuracy and veridicality of his claims. Although he is “skeptical” in the sense that he is cautious about being too “dogmatic” in his arguments, he does seem to think that there are certain obvious truths that we simply cannot ignore or deny. In this sense, Hume is arguing for the apprehensibility of some kinds of knowledge. For example, in Section V of the *Enquiry*, Hume posits as a principle “*custom or habit*.”³⁸² In the spirit of intellectual humility, he says, “By employing that word [custom], we pretend not to have given the ultimate reason for such a propensity.”³⁸³ Yet, he continues by claiming, “We only point out a principle of human nature, which is universally acknowledged, and which is well known by its effects.”³⁸⁴ To take another example: in Section V of the *Enquiry*, Hume argues that our beliefs arise from “an

³⁷⁹ EHU, 36–37; SBN, 35; EHU, 37; SBN, 35; EHU, 36; SBN, 35.

³⁸⁰ Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, 40.

³⁸¹ Cicero, 65.

³⁸² EHU, 43; SBN, 43.

³⁸³ EHU, 43; SBN, 43.

³⁸⁴ EHU, 43; SBN, 43.

operation of the soul” and that such a belief is “unavoidable.”³⁸⁵ He says that operations like these “are a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able either to produce or to prevent.”³⁸⁶ These kinds of dogmatic assertions—the truth of which Hume appears to be fairly certain about—make it difficult for us to legitimately characterize Hume as an Academic skeptic, especially if we keep in mind the Academic claim of universal inapprehensibility.

My view is that what Hume really means when he describes his own philosophy as “skeptical” is that he aims for moderate and just reasoning. To get a sense of his attempt to be moderate or bring levity to his philosophical studies, take what he says in the Conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise*: “The conduct of a man, who studies philosophy in this careless manner, is more truly sceptical than that of one, who feeling himself an inclination to it, is yet so overwhelm’d with doubts and scruples, as to totally reject it. A true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical convictions; and he will never refuse any innocent satisfaction, which offers itself, upon account of either of them.”³⁸⁷ It seems that, for Hume, a true skeptic does not take philosophy (or anything, for that matter) too seriously. He is not overly burdened by extreme doubts, and he is not excessively moved or motivated by his own philosophical interests or inclinations. When Hume speaks about the “origin of [his] philosophy” as a natural “curiosity”—“sentiments” that “spring up naturally in [his] present

³⁸⁵ EHU, 46; SBN 46.

³⁸⁶ EHU, 46; SBN, 46–47.

³⁸⁷ T, 177; SBN, 273.

condition”—one might think of him as partaking in the kind of “innocent satisfaction” that he says characterizes the “true sceptic.”³⁸⁸

Hume says that “accurate and just reasoning” is “the only catholic remedy” for destroying “that abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon, which, being mixed up with popular superstition, renders it in a manner impenetrable to careless reasoners, and gives it the air of science and wisdom.”³⁸⁹ It is clear from his writings that Hume holds a very low opinion of metaphysical or “abstruse” philosophy. In the final paragraph of the *Enquiry*, he encourages his readers to throw their books on metaphysics into the flames.³⁹⁰ In one of his statements from the Abstract to the *Treatise*, Hume describes his own philosophy as skeptical. He says, “the reader will easily perceive, that the philosophy contained in this book [the *Treatise*] is very sceptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding.”³⁹¹ It is this aspect of Hume’s skepticism—the emphasis he places on our intellectual limitations—that is more consistently characteristic of Hume’s thought than a predilection for, or an aversion to, either Pyrrhonism or Academicism.

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed David Hume’s views on skepticism. In an effort to somewhat naturally transition from Chapter Three of this dissertation to the current chapter, I began by comparing Hume’s views on skeptical philosophy with those of Descartes. I noted Hume’s sincere attempts to engage with skeptical reasoning as evidenced by the numerous

³⁸⁸ T, 176; SBN, 270–271.

³⁸⁹ EHU, 9; SBN, 12–13.

³⁹⁰ Cf. EHU, 144; SBN, 165.

³⁹¹ T, 413; SBN, 657.

references to skepticism he makes in his writings, and I contrasted these with Descartes' general dismissal of skeptical philosophy. Then I explained the influence of the writings of Pierre Bayle on David Hume's thought. It is plausible to think that the epistemology contained in Hume's *Treatise*, at least in some respects, was a response to Bayle's skeptical arguments. Finally, I presented and critiqued Richard Popkin's claim that Hume was the perfect and consistent Pyrrhonist. For a number of reasons, I argue that to describe Hume as a Pyrrhonist would be to mischaracterize him. I suggest that, for Hume, being a skeptical philosopher means accepting one's intellectual limitations, avoiding making claims to knowledge based on sophistical, abstruse, and metaphysical subjects or investigations, and reasoning moderately and justly.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have provided a critique of the idea that skepticism was the driving force in the development of early modern thought. Historian of philosophy Richard Popkin introduced this thesis in the 1950s and expounded on it for the next half decade, and it has become an increasingly accepted interpretation. By way of a study of both ancient skepticism and its influence on philosophers like Montaigne, Descartes, and Hume, among others, I have presented my criticisms of Popkin's arguments concerning the formation of early modern thought. I believe this work provides a meaningful contribution to the scholarship for a few distinct reasons, three of which I will briefly discuss.

First, the approach I use—referring to the two ancient skeptical traditions, Pyrrhonism and Academicism, in order to provide a baseline from which to judge whether or not a specific early modern philosopher is a skeptic—has potentially beneficial implications for further research. It is quite clear that all of the philosophers I've treated in this work had an awareness of both Pyrrhonian skepticism and Academic skepticism. In fact, most of them were fairly knowledgeable about both skeptical traditions. For instance, in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne writes at length about the distinctions between the Pyrrhonists and the Academics, the latter of whom he thought were negative dogmatists. Sextus Empiricus also viewed the Academics as negative dogmatists, and the fact that Montaigne seems to reiterate much of what Sextus says shows that he was intimately familiar with that Greek Pyrrhonian skeptic's work. Yet, as I argue in Chapter One, the influence of Pyrrhonism on Montaigne does

not provide us with sufficient grounds to define Montaigne as a Pyrrhonian skeptic. Utilizing the ancient texts—including those written by Sextus and Cicero—in order to determine whether or not it plausible to describe certain early modern philosophers as skeptics is a method that prevents us from being hasty in our characterizations of them. Doing so helps us to avoid placing superficial labels on such philosophers and encourages us to be cautious about the way we classify them. Before saying, “This philosopher is a skeptic,” we should ask ourselves, “If we compare the ancient skeptical sources to the writings of this philosopher, is there sufficient and adequate evidence to call him a skeptic?”

Second, my critique of Popkin encourages a holistic approach to analyzing the works of early modern philosophers. Treating a philosopher’s work comprehensively allows us to make claims about that philosopher that are both plausible and justified. Doing so also helps us to make well-informed judgments that are faithful to that philosopher’s thought. As I have shown in this dissertation, Popkin has a tendency to pick and choose specific parts of a philosopher’s writings in order to support his own claims. This method is flawed because by being selective, Popkin ignores other aspects of a philosopher’s thought, many of which give us good reason to question Popkin’s claims. For example, as I mention in Chapter Two, Popkin focuses on only a handful of areas from Descartes’ writings in which skepticism is discussed. One of Popkin’s claims is that Descartes only could have arrived at the certain knowledge of the *cogito* by taking Pyrrhonism sufficiently seriously. Popkin relies almost exclusively on Descartes’ First Meditation to support this claim. Yet, by examining other works by Descartes, I have shown that perhaps hyperbolic doubt and skeptical argumentation are not essential for Descartes’ *cogito*. Additionally, as I point out in Chapter Three, for the most part Popkin does not take into account the letters from Descartes’ correspondence that reveal his consistently negative attitude towards

skepticism. Studying a substantial portion of a philosopher's works—not just those parts that conveniently line up with a particular set of claims—makes for a more accurate appraisal.

Third, my critique, which questions the primacy of the influence of skepticism on early modern philosophers, opens the door to further research into what Popkin mostly ignores: other influences on such philosophers. Popkin prioritizes Descartes' reaction to skepticism, yet he does not provide much analysis of the Scholastic Aristotelian tradition in which Descartes was educated. Of course, Popkin does point out that his interpretation is novel and that many scholars before him had mostly viewed Descartes' philosophy as a response to Scholasticism. Perhaps too much significance had been placed on Descartes' Scholastic background, and Popkin was responding to such an interpretation by introducing a "sceptical crisis." However, an account of the influences on Descartes and other early modern philosophers that overemphasizes skepticism and devalues both Aristotelianism and Scholasticism seems equally problematic. The evidence shows that Sanches, Montaigne, and Charron were influenced by skeptical ideas but not to the extent in which primarily characterizing them as skeptics would be accurate; that there was no skeptical crisis for Descartes, although Descartes was also influenced by skepticism; and that Hume was deeply affected by skeptical philosophy, enough to call his own philosophy skeptical, but that there are good reasons to dispute the claim that he was a Pyrrhonist or an Academic skeptic.

In the Introduction to *HS*, Popkin says, "Some have suggested that I am not always speaking about scepticism but rather about people who discuss scepticism. This may be the case, but I do not know how one could write a history of scepticism without it being mainly about the people who discuss the subject."³⁹² Granted, a history of skepticism should include details about

³⁹² Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, xxiii.

people who discuss skepticism. Yet, just because a philosopher discusses skepticism does not make him a skeptic—even if he writes at length about skeptical philosophy and expresses his admiration for it. If we consider the writings of Cicero, to be an Academic skeptic means to hold to the views that nothing can be known but that some arguments are more likely than others. According to Sextus, a Pyrrhonian skeptic does not hold any opinions or beliefs, but suspends his judgment on all issues concerning knowledge and truth. Keeping these criteria in mind, it is plausible to think that the philosophers I have studied in this dissertation—Sanches, Montaigne, Charron, Descartes, Bayle, and Hume—were not really skeptics.

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