The Ways of Scepticism (Then and Now)

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Abstract: The following essay outlines the principal arguments presented by the sceptical tradition, from its explicit beginnings in Greek philosophy down to a variety of contemporary forms of scepticism. The discussion takes its point of departure from an analysis of the original sceptical tropes that were directed against the “Dogmatists,” focussing particularly on the “Modes” of Aenesidemus and Agrippa. The principal part of the essay is dedicated to an elucidation of the nature and status of “beliefs” with a view to comparing ancient, modern, and contemporary types of scepticism. Far from re-endorsing the ideal of a life without beliefs as a model for human happiness, modern and contemporary varieties of scepticism offer a description of human historical experience that is indeed based on beliefs. From this point onwards, the actual power of scepticism – represented by a lineage that includes Montaigne, Hume, Goodman, and Primo Levi – derives from its attempt to combine two perspectives that appear formally incompatible with one another: (i) the desire for a permanent order of things in the context of a predictable and meaningful shared world, and (ii) a profound admiration for the human variety that is enshrined in different acts and kinds of belief.

Cette secte se fortifie par ses ennemis plus que par ses amis
Pascal, Pensées

An Outline of Early Pyrrhonism

Since it arose among the Greeks during the third century BC, Scepticism has occupied a singular position in the history of the irresolvable conflict of philosophies. This singularity is evident in the contrast that was proposed by Sextus Empiricus – a thinker of the third century A.D. who summarized the principal arguments of the Pyrrhonian variant of Scepticism1 – in order

1 By “Pyrrhonian variant” I refer specifically to the philosophical tradition that was initiated by Pyrrho of Elis, as distinct from that of the New Academy which endorsed the teachings of Carneades and Arcesilas. This School denied the possibility of absolutely true knowledge and appealed instead to the criterion of “the probable” (pithanon). The arguments of Pyrrhonian
to distinguish three distinct groups of philosophers: those who claim to have discovered the truth: the *Dogmatists*; those who claim that the truth cannot be known: the *Academics*; and those who *persist in their search* for truth: the *Sceptics*. The sceptic (*skeptikos*) is one who ceaselessly undertakes to investigate or examine everything (*skeptesthai*).

The *Dogmatists* are those who attempt to establish the real nature of the world over and beyond its appearance to the senses which are common to ordinary observers. With its rejection of dogmatic philosophic systems Scepticism proposes a kind of philosophizing that refuses to endorse alternative claims or propositions which both have an equal claim to truth. By deploying this method of argumentation the Sceptics attempted to dissociate themselves entirely from all dogmatic disputes and disagreements, understanding *dogma* here to mean *any assent to a proposition that was non-evident* (*adelo*).2

The singular character of Scepticism is also revealed by its general attitude towards those who endorsed such philosophical dogmas. The Sceptical approach to the Dogmatists is motivated by an essentially philanthropic sentiment: the Sceptic, “being a lover of his kind (*philanthropos*), desires to cure by discourse, as best as he can, the self-conceit (*oiesin*) and rashness (*propeteian*) of the Dogmatists” (PH III, 280). For all its therapeutic spirit, the Sceptic depiction of the Dogmatist is unsparing: the latter is said to believe in non-evident entities, to be precipitate, and to be absorbed by self-love when he comes to examine his own judgments. In other words, the Dogmatist combines a kind of intellectual Narcissism with a radical – and dangerous – absence of hesitation.

The therapeutic aim is precisely to cure the Dogmatist of his obsession with defining and discovering the *real nature* of things and the world. For the Sceptics, things in themselves cannot be determined in principle. Propositions concerning such things, being neither true nor false, lie entirely beyond the boundaries of human knowledge. What we may call appearances, on the other hand, are the objects we share in common human experience. The priority here ascribed to the realm of appearance or the phenomenal is due to the fact that it is this realm which provides the *criterion* for the general approach of the Sceptics. And, above all, it provides a *practical criterion for action in the world*. This respect for the phenomena is thus precisely what distinguishes the Sceptics from their “dogmatist” opponents. For the latter, “the things apparent are the vision of the non-evident” (PH I, 138).

One of the specific scepticism were presented and examined in two works by Sextus Empiricus (circa 200 AD): the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*Pyroneioi Hypotyposeis*) and *Against the Mathematicians* (*Adversus Mathematicos*).

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hallmarks of Scepticism lies in directly challenging this move from the level of the phenomenon to that which is not evident.

In speaking of the indefinable and indeterminable nature of things the Sceptics wished to show that conflicting propositions concerning their supposedly true nature all have the same status, and thus exhibit a situation of equipollence (isostheneia): being neither true nor false, they are all equivalent to one another with regard to their claims to the truth. In the face of this predicament, the Sceptical attitude, as already indicated by Pyrrho, recommends a suspension of judgment, or simply suspension (epoche). The consequence of this path which leads from isostheneia through to epoche is a state of tranquillity or absence of disturbance: ataraxia.

The arguments we have been considering so far all derive from what are thought to have been the historical teachings of Pyrrho. A native of Elis, Pyrrho probably lived from around 360 to 270 BC, but although he seems to have been very active as a teacher, he left no written works. His conduct was characterised by an extreme asceticism and indifference to worldly temptations. Thus Victor Brochard tells us that Pyrrho “fut avant tout un désabusé: il fut un ascète grec.” His teachings might be summarized as a defence of the simple life, a refusal by appeal to the epoche to grant any value to theoretical discussions regarding the real or true nature of things, and a the quest for ataraxia which is considered as the greatest of goods. The essentially practical orientation of Pyrrhonism was confirmed by Mario Dal Pra when he claimed that Pyrrho effectively established two permanent themes of Scepticism: the emphasis on phenomena and appearances and, on the moral plane, the appeal to customs and tradition.

The Original Techniques of Scepticism: the Modes of Aenesidemus and Agrippa

The central role of the epoche would continue to be a key feature of Scepticism from Pyrrho onwards. Sextus Empiricus reconstructed the arguments concerning the epoche that were deployed by Aenesidemus, who lived between 80 BC and 130 AD. Thus at the same time as the Sceptical tradition returned to its Pyrrhonian sources of inspiration, the idea of the epoche also received the formal and substantive elaboration that would subsequently characterise it. This “retour au Pyrronnisme” was specifically noted by Pierre Couissin in a classic paper which showed that Aenesidemus recovered the original Pyrrhonian notion of the epoche which, at the hands of the thinkers of the New Academy, and especially Carneades, had been edged into the background in

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order to make way for a probabilism based on the notion of “the likely” (*pithanon*).\(^5\) The role of Aenesidemus in the context of ancient Scepticism is in fact defined by his formulation of two sets of arguments: the “ten modes” of the *epoche* and the “eight modes” of causality.

The ten modes of Aenesidemus hold a decisive place in the Sceptics’ arsenal of arguments. They define the specific means by which the core content of Pyrrhonism – involving *isostheneia*, *epoche* and *ataraxia* – is expressly deployed in a concentrated and systematic manner. In this sense, they may be viewed as the formal expression of a *Pyrrhonian program* to be applied to all knowledge claims about the world that take the perceived phenomena as signs of non-evident things.

In the exposition of the ten modes provided in the *Hypotyposes*, Sextus Empiricus declares that its purpose is to establish antitheses or oppositions (*antitheseis*), and thereby to justify a consistent suspension of judgment regarding them. The antitheses in question seem to encompass both the perception of phenomena as well as the attributes which observers assign to the latter. Nevertheless, what is presented as decisive here is a claim concerning the fundamentally relative character of human judgments, whether these merely register or record appearances or represent claims concerning the nature of things.

In the order presented by Sextus Empiricus (PH I, 36), the ten modes or “tropes” were arranged as follows: (I) the differences between animals; (ii) the differences between individual human beings; (iii) the different constitutions of the sense organs; (iv) the different states and circumstances affecting the subject; (v) differences of positions, distances, and places (or circumstances of the object); (vi) different combinations; (vii) quantities; (viii) relativity; (ix) frequency; and (x) different customs and persuasions. Each of these factors encompasses diverse, specific, precarious, and non-universalizable circumstances that affect our perceptions and observations of the world. The result is a plurality of *versions of the world* – to use a phrase that may recall Nelson Goodman – in a scenario that leads directly to the *epoche*.

The eight modes, also attributed to Aenesidemus, are intended to invalidate the claims of the Dogmatists with regard to causes, i.e. claims based on non-observable assumptions that attempt to explain the world of phenomena. This battery of arguments is mobilised against the *pride* of the Dogmatists, i.e. their presumptuous identification of causalities or “etiologies” (PH I, 180). Insofar as they are more than simply a battery of negative arguments, the modes would seem to express a commitment to some type of knowledge. This aspect is suggested by specific restrictions which were drawn up spe-

cifically in order to regulate our acceptance of causal explanations: the latter must operate within the realm of phenomena, and events relating to phenomena can only be provided with causal connections by reference to other observable phenomena.

The third stage in the development of ancient Scepticism – after Pyrrho and Aenesidemus – brings us to the obscure figure of Agrippa (circa 100 to 200 AD). Agrippa’s importance for the history of Scepticism is due to his formulation of the “five modes.” The ten modes explore the general conditions of perception that affect the observer and the disposition of objects, and thus leads to the *epoche*. With the eight modes, the suspension of judgment was presented as an unavoidable conclusion in response to the etiological propositions of the Dogmatists. In the five modes of Agrippa, the same result arises from consideration of what might be called the cognitive claims of the Dogmatists.

The first of the five modes – *diaphonia* (dispute in the sense of irresolvable disagreement) – refers to the fundamental discrepancy involved in any complex of statements regarding the nature of things. Any specific statement may be contradicted by another claim. The undecidable character of the dispute prevents any arbitration beyond that insisted upon by one or other of the two sides involved. Like the argument from equipollence, the mode of *diaphonia* will make a significant reappearance in modern Scepticism, and above all in Montaigne, in relation to the irreducible variety of cultural forms. And, in fact, this is one of the most important arguments deployed in the sceptical tradition. The argument may also be interpreted in terms of its strategic position: it defines a situation of irresolvable disagreement in response to which the Dogmatists will attempt to develop various strategies of escape. And it is precisely these escape strategies that are countered in the remaining modes of Agrippa.

Taken together, the importance of the eight modes of Aenesidemus and the five modes of Agrippa for establishing the Sceptical repertoire of arguments can hardly be overestimated. They define what we might well call the *philosophical form of Dogmatism*.

*A Life without Beliefs?*

The ancient Sceptics argued, by appeal to the *epoche*, for the existential possibility and indeed superiority of a *life without beliefs*, and perhaps this is one of the most striking and remarkable claims encountered in the entire history of philosophy. The Sceptical way of life is governed by four principles. These enjoin us to follow the rules of nature, the impulse of the passions, the usual customs and habits, and the resources of *techne*. Its basic *doctrinal rule* prescribes compliance with appearances and a form of life that adheres to the normal
standards of life. Such compliance, however, is described as *adoxastos* — one that is not founded on opinion, but rooted in our involuntary feelings and affections (PH I, 22). Amidst the various phenomena which are characteristic of ordinary life, the Sceptic believes that it is quite possible to live among other human beings without maintaining any belief or dogma whatsoever.

Another Sceptical way of defining beliefs can be found in the introduction to the tenth mode of Aenesidemus concerning the *epoche*, the argument that provided ancient Scepticism with its principal means of challenging ethnocentrism. According to this formulation, human societies reveal a great variety of forms of life which are all based upon different customs, laws, *dogmata* and traditional legendary beliefs (*mythikai pisteis*). In express opposition to the attitudes of Herodotus, who believed that the Egyptians violated the fundamental rules of humanity in all their social practices, Aenesidemus presents his tenth trope as a challenge to any kind of trans-cultural judgment. Every form of human life appears as “true” in its own terms, and none may be taken as a sufficient ground for refuting any other form of life (PH I, 145-163). This argument presents *pisteis* and *dogmata* as normal components of social life. In this sense, it seems impossible not to engage with beliefs, even for a Sceptic. In sharp contrast with Ulrich – Robert Musil’s “man without qualities” – our Sceptic does have and maintain particular beliefs. What distinguishes the Sceptic from the general majority of people is perhaps simply his emphatic awareness of the fact of the diversity of human values and forms of life.

Nonetheless, regardless of the way in which a Sceptic maintains his attachment to ordinary beliefs, there is a more important problem to be addressed: what is the difference between the two types of *dogmata* that have been mentioned above? In a technical sense, there is no real distinction between the *dogmata* that the Sceptic avoids in the domain of philosophy and those that he accepts in the domain of life (*bios*). The distinction seems rather to lie in the way in which the *dogmata* are produced: if they arise from a foolish quest to discover non-evident entities, then they can only become the chosen targets of the *epoche*; if, on the other hand, they represent the long-established results of time and history, and are already enshrined by actual and constantly repeated use, then life without them is impossible.

The Sceptic’s position is a curious one: without adhering personally to the foundations of a given belief, he nonetheless adheres openly to its effects on the actual formation of our common life. The crystallization of beliefs and dogmas over time turns them into a part of life as a phenomenon, life as it appears. Beginning with an ethical affirmation of the desirability of a life without beliefs, an experi-

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ence vouchsafed by *ataraxia*, ancient Scepticism thus ended up by treating beliefs as a necessary condition for the actual existence of social life. If this judgment were endorsed consistently, we should have to do more than personally suspend our judgment concerning the grounds of such beliefs. For they must be taken seriously as the necessary foundations of our social and historical experience.

*Scepticism and the Fabric of Beliefs*

The implications of the second form of argumentation of Sextus Empiricus with regard to beliefs, formulated in the tenth mode of Aenesidemus, can clearly be traced in the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne, who was one of the principle sources and protagonists of the “Pyrrhonian crisis” that flared up in the 16th and 17th centuries. After centuries of hibernation and more or less complete absence from serious philosophical discussion during the medieval period, Scepticism began to return to the mainstream of Western philosophy from the 15th century onwards. According to Richard Popkin, signs of its presence may already be detected in Pico della Mirandola, Erasmus of Rotterdam, and Savonarola. However, it was with Michel de Montaigne, in the later 16th century, that the legacy of Scepticism finally revealed itself more clearly and, at the same time, took the form of a renewed version of this tradition.

In presenting his own account of human beings, Montaigne strongly emphasises the evidence of the variety of their behaviour and beliefs, and the effects of specific circumstances upon the constitution of the latter. This variety, which indicates more than an intrinsic characteristic of the human animal, has implications for the actual constitution of the social and historical world. This leads directly to the central issue of causality. The issue was specifically addressed by Montaigne, who suggests the presence of at least two patterns of causality in human experience.

Strictly speaking, the first one should not even be called a pattern since it reveals a high degree of indeterminacy in the connections between causes and effects: the same causes produce different effects, and different causes produce similar effects. The scene described by Montaigne manifests an ineliminable

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8 This is the claim that underpins the two otherwise independent essays “Par divers moyens on arrive à pareille fin” (Book I, essay I) and “Divers événements de même conseil” (Book I,
causal disorder: the links between cause and effect depend in fact on the action of a set of particular circumstances whose (inconstant) support lies in the diversity of human behaviour itself: “Man is indeed an object miraculously vain, various and wavering”⁹ Human beings, in that sense, may be seen as so many existential expressions of a striking variety and lack of causal determination. This scenario of causal disorder and indeterminacy is susceptible only to a local elucidation, if that.

The second pattern of causality is suggested by the image of a very long drawn-out historical process that undergoes countless additions and subtractions along the way. This image, which some have seen as the expression of a conservative attitude on Montaigne’s part, reflects an interpretation of history in which the gradual diachronic addition of tiny, different, and accidental circumstances in fact gives rise social effects and institutions of prodigious dimensions. By reference to what we may call a hydraulic metaphor, Montaigne appears to suggest a way of understanding history in which the contingent turns out to be necessary:

Laws gain their authority from actual possession and custom: it is perilous to go back to their origins; laws, like our rivers, get greater and nobler as they roll along: follow them back upstream to their sources and all you find is a tiny spring, hardly recognizable; as time goes by it swells with pride and growths in strength. But just look at those Ancient concerns which gave the original impulse to that mighty stream, famed, full of dignity, awesome and venerable: you then see them to be so light and so delicate that it is not surprising that these people here – philosophers who weigh everything and reduce everything to reason, never accepting anything on authority and trust – reach verdicts far removed from those of the generality.¹⁰

The substantive content of the countless variety of human acts and products are effected by belief. Man is, above all, an animal that believes.¹¹ Confronted with the fact of belief, modern Scepticism will suggest an approach that specifically undertakes to observe the social and historical and social world as a process that depends upon beliefs. Although the topic of “tranquillity” was still addressed by Pierre Charron, early in the 17th century, in his celebrated book De la sagesse (1601), and treated as the appropriate consequence of a philosophically cultivated ignorance, the modern Sceptics – Montaigne, Pierre

⁹ Montaigne, Complete Essays, p. 5.
¹⁰ Montaigne, Complete Essays, p. 658.
Bayle, David Hume – have expressly attempted to investigate the role that is actually performed by beliefs in creating and sustaining the human world.

It is to Montaigne that we owe the acknowledgement of the ubiquitous and ineliminable character of beliefs: if we talk about human beings, we must talk about their beliefs and their circumstances; these are no longer mere doxai unjustifiably rooted in the unsearchable depths of the indeterminable. On the contrary, they are now recognised as the indispensable, effective, and existential elements of established order in the world. After this enhanced recognition of the value of the productivity of belief, David Hume, in the 18th century, defined what we might well describe as the philosophical form of belief. He thereby also defined the terms for all future discussions of this matter.

The Humean project of applying the experimental method to the investigation of human nature depends upon obtaining a clear definition of the relevant phenomena and defining the place where they occur. That place is none other than history. And this implies that we must take ordinary human representations seriously as the basic stuff and matter of the historical world. Faced with the statements made by human beings, Hume will not argue about their logical, ontological, or epistemological consistency. Rather, what really interests him is the productivity of these statements and the beliefs that underpin them. This way of dealing with ordinary knowledge, set forth theoretically in the Treatise, will be fully realized in the History of England, a work which was appropriately described by Samuel Beckett as a history of representations.

According to Hume, beliefs are organised in a complex web which is itself based on a number of natural beliefs. Although the content of some beliefs can be transformed over time and develop through changing usage, it appears that natural beliefs exhibit certain fixed characteristics. Thus Hume goes on to claim that a natural belief is: (i) one that is regularly encountered in ordinary life; (ii) one that is incapable of rational justification; (iii) one without which the regular activities of ordinary life would be impossible; (iv) one that is universally accepted.

If we consider the specific content in question, there are three basic beliefs that meet this fourfold criterion: (i) the belief in the continuous existence of an external world that is independent of our perceptions; (ii) the belief that the regular events that occur in our experience provide a reliable basis for under-

standing what will occur in future; (iii) the belief in the trustworthiness of our senses. These three types of belief – rooted at the deepest levels of human nature – ensure: (i) the existence and regularity of the events in the world; (ii) the predictability of these events; (iii) the epistemic consistency of our judgments.

The power of belief as a feeling characterised by the epistemic markers of certainty and conviction was clearly noted by Bernard Williams, who argues that it is logically impossible, incompatible with the very idea of belief, to suppose that we can ever decide to believe.15 His claim seems to follow directly from the following proposition of Hume’s: “Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determined us to judge as well as to breathe and feel.”16

Scepticism, or Ways of Making and Unmaking the World

Hume’s sensitivity towards the question of belief proved extremely fertile. During the 19th century, even before C. S. Peirce made belief one of the central topics of his own thought, we can find significant reflections on the subject in an author such as Alexander Bain who, in a work published in 1859, described belief as “a habit of action” and “that which constitutes the basis on which a man is willing to act.”17 The Sceptical attitude is still revealed by the reluctance to attribute any truth value or rational grounds to beliefs. In the formulation provided by Peirce, the meaning of beliefs is defined in terms of the effects that they produce with respect to our conduct. The direction of enquiry here clearly moves from the grounds of belief to an investigation of the practical consequences of systems of belief.18

Irrespective of the debate concerning the possible similarities and connections between pragmatism and scepticism, we can certainly recognise a venerable Humean topic here: that regarding the productivity of beliefs that, despite their lack of rational grounding, effectively underlie our experience of the world. The very idea of a world depends upon the habitual character of causal and natural beliefs, as well as upon the contingent contents expressed in regulative values and guidelines that give meaning to our experiences. On the other hand, the suggestion that the meaning of beliefs is established

16 Hume, Treatise, I, IV, i, p. 183.
through their effects turns human beings, as the bearers of these beliefs, into the constructive agents of the symbolic networks that surround us. The full constructivist implications of this insight can be traced in the reflections of the American philosopher Nelson Goodman (1901–1998), and especially in his book *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978).

Adopting an approach that he specifically describes as “sceptical,” “analytical” and “constructivist,” Goodman attempted to extend the kind of philosophical perspective defended by Ernst Cassirer, who had already argued that “a multiplicity of worlds may be constituted from nothing, by means of the use of symbols.”\(^{19}\) And in fact, the topics which Goodman, like Cassirer, is most interested in pursuing include the multiplicity of our worlds, the creative power of human understanding, and the variety and productive capacity of symbols. Goodman devoted particular attention to investigating the practical ways in which human symbolic action facilitates the experience of genuinely different and simultaneous worlds. In this sense, his work has enormous significance for analyzing the creative processes of social and political invention.

One possible starting point for an understanding of Goodman’s universe is the claim that any description of a world constitutes a property of the system of description in question: “we are confined to the modes of description,” not to what is being described. This approach implies that the relevant versions of experience are presented as depictions rather than descriptions,\(^ {20}\) just as they are in the constructed universe of painting and literature. Goodman’s constructivism is expressed in his voluntaristic conception of the process through which the world is constituted by human symbolic activity. And this perspective implies a strong theory of human agency. The sceptical dimension of Goodman’s thought is revealed by the way in which the topic of the truth is displaced: the truth inherent in each relevant world requires no validation from anything antecedent to or beyond itself. A “constitution,” as a form of world, for example, is just as true as Pablo Picasso’s *Woman in the Wardrobe*, in the Centro Cultural de Belem in Lisbon, or the seventeen frescos by Giovanni Bazzi (Il Sodoma) in the Monte Oliveto Maggiore in Tuscany. The analytical side of Goodman’s work is revealed by his meticulous enumeration of the procedures through which such worlds are constructed.

Many worlds are possible as a result of distinct processes of “worldmaking.” The feature common to them all derives from the demand for meaning: it is in the nature of belief systems, necessarily involved in worldmaking, to establish parameters that define the human condition in scenarios endowed with pre-


\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 3.
dictability and meaning. In other words, they create worlds in which beliefs, rather than grounding principles, are established as grammars or resources for construing experience. The questions of familiarity and predictability appear to be strongly associated with the idea of belief as a habit of action, as a way of sustaining a shared sense of our experience of the world. The negative counterpart of this idea – i.e. an experiment in which beliefs are unmade and the bearers of beliefs are destroyed – would then appear as an image of the worst of possible worlds. Prevented on its own assumptions from revealing the nature of the best of possible worlds, Scepticism may be endorsed instead as an appropriate means of exposing the worst of all worlds.

Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi – one of the most remarkable thinkers of the 20th century – has left us an account of the extermination camp which is profoundly disturbing for a number of reasons. One of these reasons relates specifically to a situation in which the ordinary beliefs, as well as the bodies, of those subjected to the experience are annihilated. The work of Primo Levi – who defined himself as a Sceptic – provides a vital resource for understanding the terrible implications of procedures that combine a radical unpredictability with the uttermost concentration of physical and political power. It is hardly accidental that an author who in some ways did see himself as a Sceptic has directly addressed the consequences of an experiment which attempted to eradicate ordinary beliefs and liquidate those who sustained them.

It is important to define the extent to which the position and outlook which Primo Levi expressed in his book *Se questo è un uomo* (1958) – a profound testimony of his experience in Auschwitz – can properly be described as Sceptical.21 It must be emphasised from the outset that Levi’s “scepticism” does not reveal itself in terms of the typical moves and arguments espoused by classical Scepticism, a tradition that that arose in a world characterised if anything by a certain excess of meanings. On the contrary, Levi’s scepticism and his misology spring from a world that is radically devoid of sense, a senseless world devoted to the eradication of all human certainty. As Robert Antelme has suggested: “La seule certitude possible est derrière nous.”22 To complete the comparison, we might say that while ancient Scepticism can be understood within the general context of the Hellenistic quest for happiness, Levi’s scepticism springs instead from despair and a feeling of rootlessness. To speak about scepticism in Levi is, in direct terms, to acknowledge a double failure, one which implies the most radical annihilation of humanity itself.

In one sense, Levi’s scepticism has an epistemic dimension. In other words, it affects the relationship between individual subjects and their own knowl-

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edge and basic beliefs. Like the beliefs described by David Hume, such basic beliefs belong to the epistemic dimension. They act as a necessary condition for knowledge, and can thus be defined as beliefs that uphold the very possibility of our ordinary beliefs. This dimension operates before experience \((ex \ ante)\) and the feeling of total epistemic failure is one of the most radical expressions of human fallibility: I have stopped trying to understand for a long time now.\(^{23}\) A failure of this kind destroys our most entrenched beliefs concerning our personal identities. In other words, it is tantamount to the annihilation of the subject in the individual human mind itself. Levi’s discovery of the futility of all systems points to an epistemic failure:

In the face of this complicated world my ideas of damnation are confused; is it really necessary to elaborate a system and put it into practice? Or would it not be better to acknowledge one’s lack of a system?\(^{24}\)

In another – and complementary – sense, Levi’s sceptical stance derives from negative ontological features. To the basic epistemic failure already mentioned we must add the fact that the world Levi describes is radically obscure and elusive. Unpredictability is a basic constitutional norm of the world of the extermination camp, and this finds its purest and most radical expression in a remark of an SS guard which Levi reported in a chapter from Survival, one that is significantly entitled At the bottom:

Driven by thirst, I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within hand’s reach. I opened the window and broke off the icicle but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. ‘Warum?’ I asked in my poor German. ‘Hier ist kein warum’ (there is no why here), he replied pushing me inside […].”\(^{25}\)

Levi’s conclusion is devastating:

The explanation is repugnant but simple: in this place everything is forbidden, not for hidden reasons, but because the camp was created for that purpose. If one wants to live one must learn this quickly and well:

Qui non ha luogo il Santo Volto,  
quì si nuota altrimenti che nel Serchio\(^{26}\)

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\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 41.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 29.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.
Levi’s evocation of Dante’s *Inferno* (Canto XXI, 48-49 “The Sacred Face has no place here; / Here we swim another way than in the Serchio”) leaves no room for doubt: the remark “there is no why here” suggests the destruction of any meaningful connection between the experience of the past and that of the present and extinguishes any sense of familiarity. That remark implies that in the death camp Levi encounters a world that is deprived of its basic ontological foundation: the pattern of regularities that lends sense to the hallucinatory human request for order and stability. In that sense, the world of the death camp, according to Levi’s testimony, appears as the strongest and most hideous refutation of the idea of custom as presented by David Hume in his *Treatise on Human Nature*. Custom is a natural belief – a common hallucinatory device – that makes social and human life possible. In its most fundamental character, according Hume, custom is the power which allows human beings to entertain expectations with regard to the future. Thus, the remark that “there is no why here” is a radical suppression of our common causal and cognitive procedures. Levi’s testimony bears witness to a radically un-Humean world, one characterised by a kind of ontological disorder, by the suppression of the future, by the futility of our ordinary habits and beliefs. In short, this is an experience of “unmaking” the world.

*Scepticism, Certainty, Pain, and the Enhancement of Human Variety*

The experiment of Auschwitz, related through the eye-witness testimony of Primo Levi, also tells us something about the radical experience of pain. In contrast to Paul Valéry, who thought that physical pain established an opposition between the subject and his own body, and represented something foreign to inner being of the subject, what Levi describes is the experience of the utter eradication of this inner being and the recognition of pain as an absolute existential marker. It is as though extreme physical pain – the pain of the death camp – fully expresses the body as the bearer of this pain. In other words, our attempt to speak about this extreme pain is shifted from the traditional assertion “I am in pain” to the monstrous insight “I am pain,” which thus assumes the absurd role of attesting to the existence of the suffering subject.27

In a remarkable book, Elaine Scarry has suggested that the subject’s experience of his or her own pain would actually be the closest thing to the idea of philosophical certainty. In analytical terms this is a pain experienced in the first person. The pain of the other, in contrast, expressed through a third-per-

son judgment, would be most closely identified with the idea of doubt.\textsuperscript{28} Such a regime of certainty requires the suppression of any symbolic dimension through an immediate and automatic compliance with the fact of the pain:

Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."\textsuperscript{29}

However, this principle of identity with the body, together with the resulting elimination of language, introduces what is perhaps the most radical form of solipsism. This would be a form of solipsism grounded not on the supposed use of a private language, but on the intransitive experience of the body in pain. This scenario also invokes another significant 20\textsuperscript{th} century sceptic, the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett. In Beckett just as in Hume, our common experience itself remains something unknowable, arising from a constant flow impressed upon the mind and the world itself. However, in contrast to Hume, we can find no shelter in ordinary existence: “Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit […] We cannot know and we cannot be known.”\textsuperscript{30}

The refuge that is sought in the body only establishes the primacy of pain and the most radical incommunicability. The power of Scepticism – revealed in the lineage that connects Montaigne, Hume, Goodman, and Primo Levi – lies in the struggle to unite two formally opposed features: (i) the desire for an enduring order in a predictable and meaningful shared world and (ii) the praise of human variety that is enshrined in the various forms of belief. If we think along these lines, then fallibilist perspective of the Sceptic exhibits strongly humanistic features. And what is more, Scepticism continues to represent an invaluable ethical and philosophical resource for contesting the political and existential implications of any belief in some ultimately true ground or foundation that would definitively claim to define the human project. In that sense, the uncertainty and the misology of the Sceptics calls for a state of things that was wonderfully described in the words of H. G. Wells, in a letter addressed to James Joyce: “the world is wide and there is room for both of us to be wrong.”

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\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 4.