The Archeology of Skepticism

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Abstract: Skepticism is a central aspect of our intellectual heritage, even if many of us do not recognize it. Only in recent decades has the intellectual archeology been done that enables to see this part of our heritage and its role in how we came to think the way we do. Gianni Paganini’s Skepsis. Le débat des modernes sur le scepticisme (2008) is the most important recent work in this archeology, bringing out the role of early modern thinkers from Montaigne to Bayle in the development of the contemporary world view. Some of these thinkers helped us accept and learn to live with skepticism, such as Montaigne and Bayle. Others, such as Campanella and Descartes, thought they could refute skepticism, but their encounters with it accomplished two things: one, bringing skeptical arguments to the attention of the philosophical world, and two, giving skepticism renewed life by their failures to refute it. All of this is great background to understanding what Barack Obama means when he calls himself a skeptic.

Many people today are fundamentally skeptics, even if they do not know it. It may seem like a paradox to suggest that people might not know how they think, but it is all too common. One thinks that one thinks in the only possible way to think, but it turns out that there are many different ways of thinking. Up to a certain point, one can choose among them. If you understand the philosophical underpinnings of yours and other ways of thinking, you both have a better understanding of your own thinking plus have some control over it. But you cannot tinker with and adjust your way of thinking if you do not even know what it is.

So we need an archeology of ideas which tells us where they came from, and an anatomy that tells us how they work. That is part of what the history of philosophy does. And Skepsis. Le débat des modernes sur le scepticisme by Gianni Paganini provides us with an archeology and anatomy of skepticism, that pervasive element of the modern way of thinking.

This archeology and anatomy require going back to the writings of influential thinkers who participated in the transition from the ancient and medi-

eval way of thinking to the modern way. All of these categories are much-debated today, and there are ways in which we still think the way the ancients and medieval people thought. But very few doubt that there is also something new and special about modern ways of thinking that cannot be found in the ancients or medieval people. One element of thought that they did not have was modern science, and it has changed our way of thinking. But it has not changed it entirely, and we still have roots in the ancient world.

Skepticism is one of the philosophical positions that started in the ancient world and made its way into the modern, precisely through the thinkers discussed in Paganini’s book. We are now intellectual heirs, in one way or another, of the Frenchmen, Englishman, and Italian in this book. If we want to understand our own heritage, we must understand the people who colonized our minds.

I have said that most people today are fundamentally skeptics. There is plenty of evidence for this claim. Even Barack Obama, the President of the United States, calls himself a skeptic at several points in his book, The Audacity of Hope. But he uses the word in opposite ways, and that is one of the things that we could learn to avoid. “Skeptic” and “skepticism” make up one of those concepts that has changed over time such that it can mean opposite things. For example, the phrase “religious skeptic” is sometimes used to mean an atheist, someone who holds the position that there is no God. But it can also refer to agnosticism or suspension of judgment about religion. I hope it is clear that making a judgment and suspending judgment are two different things.

The skeptical tradition of suspending judgment comes from the ancient Greek Pyrrhonians, named after Pyrrho of Elis, a figure who is said to have lived his skepticism. A parallel tradition with some overlap and some differences traces its origins to Socrates’s paradoxical claim that he knew more than anyone else because he knew that he did not know anything. This became known as Academic skepticism after its adoption by Plato’s successors in the Academy. Cicero is our main source for it, and Augustine made it famous by attempting to refute it.

The ancient skeptics developed criteria for living after suspending judgment about the truth. If they could not know the deep truth, they could live by the *phenomena* or appearances of things. They could live by habit, custom, *pathe* or gut feelings, impulse, *nomoi* or laws, training in a skill, and so forth. None of these require truths, and yet they may be the real basis for most of our actions in life. If this is right, we may all be skeptics.

It is widely accepted that Richard Popkin performed some of the most influential archeology of the transmission of ancient skepticism into the early

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modern period. His *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* sketched out the rediscovery of ancient skepticism and its use in philosophical and religious debates in the early modern period. Before he wrote, historians of philosophy tended to dismiss skepticism as unworthy of philosophical attention. That is clearly untrue. If I had to recommend only two books on the subject, I would suggest Popkin and Paganini. Here is why.

Popkin gave us the big picture, but Paganini’s book is deeper philosophically. And this is partly due to his sophisticated methodology. In order to prove that there is more Pyrrhonism in Montaigne than many have recognized, he compares Montaigne to Francisco Sanches. Sanches was unaware of Sextus Empiricus, the main transmitter of ancient Pyrrhonism, and it was precisely by drawing on the vocabulary of Pyrrhonism that Montaigne went beyond Sanches as a skeptic. Henri Estienne’s translation of Sextus Empiricus into Latin was available to Montaigne, and it translated the Greek term *phenomenon* as *phantasia*. Montaigne innovated by replacing Estienne’s *phantasia* with the French *apparition*. The upshot is that in Montaigne’s usage the French word was loaded with skeptical implications. If your vocabulary becomes pervaded with the skeptical vocabulary, you become a skeptic without necessarily knowing it. If you admit that one cannot know anything but phenomena, fantasies, and appearances, you are a skeptic. That was part of Montaigne’s legacy to the French.

Importantly, Paganini notes that Montaigne’s skepticism was not the same as ancient skepticism. It is mixed with bits of dogmatism, and Montaigne rejects the Pyrrhonian goal of *ataraxia* or tranquility. But that makes him an original contributor to the history of skepticism, not merely a transmitter. Along the way, Paganini effectively refutes various notions of eminent scholars such as Myles Burnyeat.

The treatment of La Mothe Le Vayer in this volume goes far beyond Popkin’s. This author really deserves more attention from philosophers, and this is the place to start. Le Vayer had the merit of taking the new anthropological knowledge about human customs around the world very seriously, pushing the suspension of judgment based on opposing customs and practices even further than Montaigne. Although he had a lot of respect for the early modern science developing around him, Le Vayer could not bring himself to accept the modern scientific dogmas of progress. And the question may still be asked: do we know for sure that scientific progress will continue forever, and not end with human self-extinction?

Paganini draws an interesting contrast between Le Vayer and the *Theophrastus redivivus*, an atheist tract from 1659. The contrast brings out an oscillation in Le Vayer between a pure Pyrrhonism and a circumspect or Christianized

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Pyrrhonism. It is not hard to believe Pierre Bayle’s charge that oscillation—arguments pro and con, constant movement of ideas, refusal to stay on one place—is in fact one of the things that skeptics most love to do. Like many skeptics, Le Vayer may have been in it for the game, not for the prize at the end.

Tommaso Campanella has an important place in Paganini’s narrative. That is partly because Campanella was an opponent of skepticism, not a supporter. But sometimes you can learn as much or more about a doctrine from its opponents than from its supporters. In his treatment of opponents in this volume, Paganini makes good on the title’s claim to present a debate. Campanella is also interesting because, although he is writing in the period from 1603 to 1638, he does not seem to know anything about the Pyrrhonism rediscovered by Montaigne and others in the previous century. So the skepticism he refutes is Aristotelian or pre-neo-Pyrhonian. In the process of refuting it, Campanella provided the most thorough expression of skepticism of the period.

Campanella can stand as a predecessor of Descartes, because one of the things he says is that even if your knowledge about external things is wrong about them, it is true at least as a matter of self-knowledge. A rough translation: “I think something is true, therefore I know something about what I think.” Descartes was pithier, but the sentiment is not too different. Nevertheless, Paganini demonstrates that there was no direct influence of Campanella on Descartes. However, the opposite is the case with Marin Mersenne, who plagiarized extensive passages from Campanella on skepticism.

Many have doubted that Thomas Hobbes was influenced by Pyrrhonism. No one has done what Paganini does, which is trace the vocabulary of skepticism that can be found in Hobbes’s Latin writings. If, like Montaigne, his vocabulary is loaded with terms like phantasma and phaenomena, we can begin to see why Paganini describes Hobbes as building his own dogmatic philosophy on the basis of the elements of skeptical philosophy.

The longest and deepest treatment here is the discussion of Descartes, as befits the thinker who is so often credited with founding modern philosophy. Paganini starts off with the point that Descartes was not a skeptic, not even a skeptic malgré lui, as Popkin called him (and this was one of the theses of Popkin that Descartes scholars found hardest to swallow). He was a dogmatist looking for good uses for doubt. Paganini points out that Descartes shows no sign of recognizing the fideistic or Christian apologetic uses of skepticism that Popkin thought he found.

In his archeological way, Paganini spends a lot of time on Descartes’s early work, Recherche de la verité, finding in it the sources of his more famous later work. Among other things, he finds that Descartes is much closer to libertines such as La Mothe Le Vayer than most previous scholars have appreciated, getting from them the idea that doubts should make you nervous
and unhappy rather than bring you tranquility. Descartes was debating with contemporary skeptics more than anyone else: this is the key context. Thus Stephen Gaukroger, in *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*, who does not see any of this, gets it exactly wrong when he writes that the scientists provoked Descartes to make his discoveries. These skeptics deserve more attention if they are what provoked Descartes to found modern philosophy. Finally, it should be observed that Paganini’s analysis is not all about sources: the total doubt of Descartes, as opposed to the limited and local doubts of his predecessors, is his own original contribution.

This brings us to Pierre Bayle, who is analyzed here less for his own sake than for the light some of his work throws on Descartes. There is a remarkable passage about Bayle’s article on “Rimini,” which brings up many of the places in the Bible where God misleads or lies to people. There was a medieval tradition of debate on this subject, and a heterodox tradition that approved of God’s lies. These were reworked in the *Second Objections* to Descartes. So when Descartes relies on God’s veracity to confirm his knowledge that he is because he thinks, he is swimming against a stronger current than most readers imagine. The best that Bayle can do in “Rimini” is say that such passages in the Bible should not be taken literally. But if we start down that road, we will not take much in the Bible literally. Later, Bayle opts for that road, ending with a morality without a legislating God, which Paganini characterizes as a “disenchanted realism.” Bayle’s analysis deprived Descartes’s principle of divine veracity of all philosophical value.

As Bayle put it, people “believe that they believe” without actually believing. The simplest form of this paradox would be to think that “I am a Catholic” or “I am a republican” without actually knowing or believing core beliefs of that religion or political ideology. One knows the image or stereotype, but does not know the substance behind it. In fact, one could be a registered member of a party and yet strongly oppose one or more of its tenets. To the extent that we endorse, vote for, maintain membership in a religion or party without actually knowing the dogmas it claims to endorse, we are engaged in a kind of skeptical behavior, not relying on the truth but on custom or tradition, gut feelings, appearances, and so forth.

Popkin engaged with the scholarly literature, but not at the pace and scale at which Paganini does. He seems to have read and assessed almost everything important on these figures in French, Italian, English, and other languages. That builds confidence: the author is standing on the collective shoulders of many careful scholars and the reader can see where and how the literature is right and wrong. For example, Richard Tuck is called to task for asserting that

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something is a great novelty because he does not know any predecessors, which is always a dangerous thing to say. Paganini points out that Stanley Cavell’s work on skepticism may have its merits, but it is based on an entirely idiosyncratic notion of what skepticism is, with little or no historical foundation.

Making the point that the thinkers under consideration here are still philosophically alive and spreading their influence worldwide, there is a literature on skepticism in Montaigne and Sanches in Portuguese that is not covered here: Rui Bertrand Romão, A “Apologia” na balança; Rui Bertrand Romão, Quid? Estudos sobre Francisco Sanches; Luiz Eva, A figura do filósofo.

Can you live by suspending judgment about the truth of things? Some have said you will fall off of cliffs because you have not decided if they are really there and if you will really fall. But remember, you can live by gut feelings, habit, custom, law, and so forth. For this reason, it has sometimes been claimed that skepticism must be conservative, maintaining the status quo. But it is notorious that customs change, and perhaps impossible to identify a single custom or tradition that has not changed over time. So if you live by customs you can live by changing customs. You can also live by the impulse or gut feeling that things should be different, rejecting all contemporary customs and starting new ones.

The opposite charge has also been made, that skepticism must be radically subversive of established church and state, since it undermines the truths on which they are allegedly based. But that is not necessarily true, either. Without believing in their truth, you can continue to go along with customs and established ways. Arguably the strongest supporters of any church or state are those who have not thought through every dogma that supports it, but rather have accepted it on faith. As we have pointed out, most people have not read the political platform of their party, nor are they familiar with all of the dogmas of their religions.

It has also sometimes been said that skepticism is a good philosophy for the powerless, because it will reconcile them to their powerlessness. But I have already mentioned that the President of the United States described himself a few years ago as a sort of skeptic. He was not powerless then: he was a U.S. Senator. One does not have to have a dogmatic overall theory of the Constitution – and he specifically says he does not have one – in order to have the gut feeling that it should be interpreted in a certain way. One does not have to absolutely know that military involvement in Afghanistan is necessary.

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in order to go along with the consensus of opinion (not knowledge) that says he should remain there. If they are honest, even the powerful might have to admit that they act more on customs and habits and gut feelings and appearances than on absolute truths.

By now readers may have figured out that they might be skeptics without having known it, or at least that they see a lot of skeptics around them. They might be interested in finding out how this philosophy developed and spread so widely that they could absorb it out of the intellectual atmosphere of prevailing customs and appearances. If they want to explore the philosophical bases of modern skepticism, this is the book to read.

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