RENAISSANCE SCEPTICISMS

Edited by
GIANNI PAGANINI AND JOSÉ R. MAIA NETO
RENAISSANCE SCEPTICISMS
RENAISSANCE SCEPTICISMS

Edited by

Gianni Paganini and José R. Maia Neto
Renaissance Scepticisms

Edited by

Gianni Paganini
Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale, Vercelli, Italy

and

José R. Maia Neto
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil
In memory of Richard H. Popkin (1923–2005)
CONTENTS

Contributors ................................................................. ix

Introduction ................................................................. 1
*Gianni Paganini and José R. Maia Neto*

**Part I  Before Reading Sextus**

Renaissance Pyrrhonism: A Relative Phenomenon .......................... 13
*Emmanuel Naya*

Self-Knowledge, Scepticism and the Quest for a New Method:
Juan Luis Vives on Cognition and the Impossibility
of Perfect Knowledge .................................................. 33
*Lorenzo Casini*

**Part II  Scepticism, Reformation and Counter-Reformation**

The Issue of Reformation Scepticism Revisited:
What Erasmus and Sebastian Castellio Did or Did Not Know ........ 61
*Irena Backus*

*Tutius ignorare quam scire*: Cornelius Agrippa and Scepticism .......... 91
*Vittoria Perrone Compagni*

Pedro de Valencia’s *Academica* and Scepticism
in Late Renaissance Spain ............................................. 111
*John Christian Laursen*

**Part III  Four Renaissance Sceptics**

*Inter Alius Philosophorum Gentium Sectas, Et Humani,*
*Et Mites*: Gianfrancesco Pico and the Sceptics .................... 125
*Gian Mario Cao*
Contents

*Humanus Animus Nusquam Consistit*: Doctor Sanchez’s Diagnosis of the Incurable Human Unrest and Ignorance .............................. 149
*Agostino Lupoli*

Montaigne and Plutarch: A Scepticism That Conquers the Mind. .......... 183
*Nicola Panichi*

Charron’s Academic Sceptical Wisdom .............................................. 213
*José R. Maia Neto*

**Part IV  Three Reactions to Scepticism**

Giordano Bruno on Scepticism......................................................... 231
*Tristan Dagron*

The Sceptical Evaluation of *Technē* and Baconian Science. ................. 249
*Bernardo J. de Oliveira and José R. Maia Neto*

Tommaso Campanella: The Reappraisal and Refutation of Scepticism .... 275
*Gianni Paganini*

Index of Names................................................................. 305
CONTRIBUTORS LIST

Irena Backus  
*University of Geneva, Switzerland*

Lorenzo Casini  
*University of Uppsala, Sweden*

Vittoria Perrone Compagni  
*Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italy*

Tristan Dagron  
*CNRS/CERPHI, Ecole Normale Supérieure Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Lyon, France*

Bernardo J. De Oliveira  
*Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil*

John Christian Laursen  
*University of California, Riverside, USA*

Agostino Lupoli  
*Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy*

José R. Maia Neto  
*Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil*

Gian Mario Cao  
*Florence, Italy*

Emmanuel Naya  
*Université Lumière Lyon 2, France*
Contributors

Gianni Paganini
Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale, Vercelli, Italy

Nicola Panichi
Università degli Studi di Urbino, Italy
There can be no doubt that the recent historiography of Renaissance and early modern scepticism had, as its founding fathers, Richard H. Popkin and Charles B. Schmitt. It may be said that, thanks to their writings, we contemporary scholars have regained knowledge of the importance of scepticism in the formation of European thought. For the first great philosophical historians at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this awareness was already an acquired heritage, but it had been nearly lost after the Enlightenment, and even more particularly in the nineteenth century. To find treatises that are comparable in importance and intensity, despite the different standards applied, we must go back as far to some articles in Bayle’s Dictionnaire, after that to Brucker’s monumental Historia critica and Reimman’s Historia universalis atheismi, and, at the end of the eighteenth century, to Stäudlin’s Geschichte und Geist des Skepticismus. As well as producing an admirable monograph on ancient Pyrrhonian scepticism, which he clearly distinguished from that of the Academics, Brucker included in his Historia a section on the “modern sceptics” which, alongside Huet, Bayle, Gassendi and Glanvill, also dealt with Montaigne, Sanchez, Charron, Hirnham and La Mothe Le Vayer. Reimman investigated the doubtful view that writers of the Italian and French Renaissance – from Boccaccio to Postel, from Machiavelli
to B. des Périers, and even Campanella – were sceptics and irreligious. 1 After
the eighteenth century and during the nineteenth, thinkers were not unaware
of scepticism’s importance for philosophy as the treatment of doubt in Hegel’s
Phänomenologie des Geistes or Kierkegaard’s Johannes Climacus clearly show.
It was only in the limited sphere of the historiography of philosophy that scepti-
cism seems to have lost the appeal and the central place it had retained during
the previous three centuries. This fact alone clearly illustrates the situation in
which, starting from the 1960s, Popkin and Schmitt found themselves working.
They had, indeed, to recreate the object of their studies ex novo, following the
canons of recent historical research, rounding out and giving visibility to a move-
ment that, throughout the development of historiography, had been relegated to
a shadowy and marginal place compared to the great figures of the “dogmatists,”
on which early modern philosophy had concentrated.

In the works of Popkin, 2 as is well known, a central role is played by the
rediscovery of the Pyrrhonian branch of scepticism, as the writings of Sextus
Empiricus began to be read and then published. Through the great figures of
Gianfrancesco Pico, Montaigne and Charron, Popkin reconstructed a general
prehistory of modern thought. Because one of the basic Pyrrhonian arguments
is to challenge the existence of any criterion of truth, Pyrrhonian scepticism
becomes crucial also in the religious controversies about the rule of faith, making
Pyrrhonism – rather than Academic and Ciceronian scepticism – the driving
force in early modern philosophy. Popkin saw Academic scepticism as a kind of
negative dogmatism, deprived of the conceptual tools available in ancient
Pyrrhonism such as the tropes, the discussion about the criterion of truth, and

1 Johann Jakob Brucker, Historia critica philosophiae a mundi incunabulis ad nostram
usque aetatem deducta, Pars II Lib. II cap. XIV “De secta pyrrhonia sive sceptica”, tomus
I, Lipsiae: Literis et impensis Bern Christoph. Breitkopf, 1742, pp. 1317–1349. Id., Histo-
riacritica philosophiae a tempore resuscitatarum in occidente literarum ad nostra tempora,
pp. 536–609. Jakob Friedrich Reimmann, Historia universalis atheismi et atheorum falso et
merito suspectorum, Hildesiae: apud Ludovidum Schroeder, 1725 (anastatic reprint with
an introduction by Winfried Schröder, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1992),
section III (“De atheismo Christianorum”), ch. IV (“De atheismo Christianorum in Italia”)
and ch. V (“De atheismo Christianorum in Gallia”), pp. 382–430; Carl Friedrich Stäudlin,
Geschichte und Geist des Skepticismus vorzüglich in Rücksicht auf Moral und Religion,

2 We refer first and foremost to the History of Scepticism, which reached its third edition
with the subtitle: From Savonarola to Bayle, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. For
a brief overview of recent studies on modern scepticism, cf. G. Paganini, “Introduction”
to G. Paganini (ed.), The Return of Scepticism. From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle,
the notion of phenomenon; therefore Academic trend seemed to him less consistent with the sceptical goal of *epoché*.

Summarizing his view of modern scepticism in a three-fold scheme, Popkin wrote: “What I believe was crucial … was, first, the form of the sceptical problem of the criterion of religious knowledge that arose in the early conflicts between Reformers and the Counter-Reformers; second, the availability of the texts of Sextus through their being printed in Latin in 1562 and 1569; and third, the forceful presentation of scepticism by Montaigne in his *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*.”

In the second (1979), and much more in the third and last edition (2003), this historical framework was enriched with new aspects and details, doubling the length of the book. However, the essential elements of his evaluation of the first Renaissance and post-Renaissance phase of scepticism remained unchanged. By incorporating the results of later research (in particular by Schmitt, but also by Garin, Cavini, Cao and Floridi), Popkin was able to backdate the entrance of Sextus into modern culture to before the time of Savonarola, while still keeping at the centre of his *History* the moment of the publication of Sextus by Hervet and Estienne, which roughly coincided with the religious crisis of the Reformation and the personal re-elaboration of the ancient Pyrrhonism available in Sextus by Montaigne.

Indeed, Popkin saw Savonarola’s position as limited (“Savonarola and his followers did not challenge the Church’s criterion of religious knowledge”), while he considered the impact of the work of Gianfrancesco Pico to be marginal, despite Schmitt’s objections in this regard. Lastly, he reserved a relatively unimportant role for the Academic trend of scepticism. Nor did the other two principal figures of Renaissance scepticism (alongside Montaigne) fare any better in Popkin’s reconstruction: with regard to Agrippa of Nettesheim, his *History* stresses the “fundamentalist anti-intellectualism,” playing down *De incertitudine* which, according to him, does not contain “a serious epistemological analysis.”

And although he held Sanchez to be “more interesting than any other sceptics of the sixteenth century, except Montaigne,” he stressed his “totally negative conclusion,” which is not, unlike Pyrrhonian scepticism, “the suspense of judgement as to whether anything can be known, but rather the more full-fledged negative dogmatism of the Academics.”

---

Charles B. Schmitt introduced two innovations compared to Popkin: on one hand, with his study on Gianfrancesco Pico he effectively placed the watershed of Renaissance scepticism before and not after the intellectual crisis represented by the Reformation; then, with an investigation into the fortunes of the “sceptical” Cicero, he rescued the Academic current compared to the Pyrrhonian trend emphasized by Popkin, even if he agreed with him that after the diffusion of Sextus the influence of Academic scepticism decreased drastically, and this for the same reason held by Popkin, namely, that Sextus’ *Outlines* and *Adversus Mathematicos* are much more philosophically interesting than Cicero’s *Academica*. Anyway, Schmitt shared Popkin’s conviction that a decisive factor for “the re-emergence of a sceptical tendency in the Renaissance period is primarily due to the recovery of the ancient sources.” As a result, he too developed a historiography that successfully blended philosophy with philology and the history of the classical tradition.

Schmitt’s and Popkin’s studies were a huge step forward compared to the previous phase of the scholarship on Renaissance scepticism, which was characterized by the much less convincing works of Owen and Busson, or others whose subject matter was more limited, such as those by Strowski and Villey. Some ideas that had held sway in the body of previous historical writings emerged bitten from the new research, such as the conviction that the outcome of all scepticism was irreligion, or the idea that scepticism emerged from the final crisis of Italian Aristotelianism, or again that the new Pyrrhonism was closer to the themes of the Reformation. In particular it was Busson’s work that was demolished, though this was partly due to the attack by Lucien Febvre a bit earlier than Popkin’s. With regard to the previous phase of scholarship, Popkin’s work produced a sort of reversal of the sides: actually, this reversal was so radical that there was a risk of

---


9 See C. B. Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus* cit., pp. 73–74, 164.

10 Ibid., p. 11.


falling into the opposite extremity, no less one-sided than the previous scholarship. Thus the over-simple equivalence between scepticism and irreligion proposed by Busson was replaced in Popkin by an equivalence, equally excessive and generalised, of scepticism with fideism. Only later did numerous significant exceptions come to light, true counter-examples sufficiently relevant to limit and cast doubt on what had become an excessive use of the category of fideistic scepticism.

It appeared, however, that the alliance between the two lines of research (Popkin’s Pyrrhonian line and Schmitt’s Academic line) could finally give rise to a “complete” historiography on early modern scepticism and, in particular, on that of the Renaissance. Unfortunately, up to now this hope has not come true, and the results concerning Renaissance scepticism have been particularly disappointing. Even if specific pieces of research (on the sources or on individual authors, such as Pico, Agrippa, Erasmus, Montaigne, Sanchez and so forth) have given and are still producing significant results, an overall synthesis comprising the entire Renaissance period has not been achieved yet. Strange as it might appear, no work yet exists that deals with the history of scepticism during the Renaissance as a whole, and this volume (with all the advantages and disadvantages inherent in collective works) is a first co-ordinated attempt to trace a history of sceptical currents, themes and discussions during the period from the fifteenth century to the death of T. Campanella.

---
