

NECESSITY OF SKEPTICISM

by Edward Jayne
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It is hard to believe, but true, that western civilization has thrived for twenty-five centuries precisely because it tolerates skepticism at unprecedented levels, especially about religious issues. First described as Sophism, skepticism emerged in ancient Greece as an independent discipline during the Age of Pericles, and it became even more influential during the Hellenistic period from the third century, B.C., until the time of Christ. Skepticism survived the next couple of centuries, but during the Dark and Middle Ages it was totally eradicated in Europe in favor of Christian theology. It reappeared in Arab civilization between the ninth and eleventh centuries, A.D. and once again during the Italian Renaissance in the writings of such figures as Pomponazzi, Montaigne and Bacon. The Reformation somewhat dampened its pursuit, but it enjoyed a full-scale renewal during the French Enlightenment, especially in the writings of Voltaire, Diderot, and Hume. After a four-decade interlude of post-Napoleonic conservatism justified by Kantian metaphysics, skepticism came to life again in the mid-nineteenth century, persisting well into the twentieth century despite two world wars and the Cold War against godless communism. Skepticism may be conceded to have arisen at other times in western tradition, but the six epochs listed here seem to have been when skepticism thrived additional to science and systematic inquiry in general. Major skeptics during these periods included ancient Greek philosophers such as Protagoras, Pyrrho, Arcesilaus, and Carneades as well as their modern counterparts, Gassendi, Hume, Nietzsche, Santayana, and Bertrand Russell.

Of course it is to be conceded that belief has also been pervasive in western tradition--a good deal more widespread, in fact, than skepticism. However, belief has played a dominant role in all civilizations without exception since 4,000 B.C, and the unique advantage of western civilization is that skepticism could be tolerated now and again at unusually high levels among a sophisticated minority. Belief had probably been first encouraged in primitive agrarian societies as a shared spiritual commitment essential to social harmony under rigid patriarchal leadership. This basically authoritarian arrangement seems to have prevailed without exception until Greek colonization spread from the Black Sea to Marsala (now called Marseilles) during the seventh and sixth centuries, B.C. The increased class and geographical mobility produced by mercantile trade finally gave skepticism its broad appeal antithetical to religious customs and rituals to celebrate the supernatural authority of the gods. Skepticism also benefited from increased Greek exposure to obvious contradictions among the beliefs and ceremonies of nearby societies, whose deities were no less absurd than the Homeric gods. And perhaps most important of all was the emergence of a sophisticated middle class, mostly the so-called Metics of Greek city states, who profited as much or more from making choices for themselves as from joining the community as a whole by obeying the gods.

Faith persisted in western civilization, as it does even today among the overwhelming majority of the populace. As a result, a healthy balance between belief and disbelief has been

possible, but on a more inclusive scale a dialectic standoff has emerged between faith and skepticism (i.e. between belief and disbelief), also between obedience and intellectual freedom. A basically cyclical interaction has resulted essential to the advance of western civilization since Greek philosophers first challenged Homeric mythology. A partial toleration of skepticism occurred during nine hundred years of classical civilization, from the fifth century, B.C. to the fourth century, A.D., followed by a full millenium of traditionalist supplication, when skepticism was suppressed by a more formidable opponent in orthodox Christianity. However, as already indicated, skepticism recovered during medieval Arab civilization and once again during the Renaissance, and it has persisted off and on ever since. Only in western tradition has this essential dialectic role of skepticism been sufficient to offset the unyielding dominance of religious orthodoxy. Elsewhere in the world skepticism was at best transient, whether it occurred as individual doubt not to be admitted in the presence of others, or, in the cases of India and China, as a collective secular posture too intermittent to be sustained on a cumulative basis.

Even in western civilization, however, the public acceptance of skepticism has always been problematic, as illustrated by the fate of Potagoras, the first Greek philosopher exclusively identified as a Sophist. Only two sentences of his writings exist today, the second having introduced his ill-advised text upon the gods:

About the gods, I am not able to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they are like in form; for the factors preventing knowledge are many: the obscurity of the subject, and the shortness of human life.

Athenians were sufficiently outraged by the impiety of this remark (though it was anticipated a couple generations earlier by the poet Simonides) that they burned all of Protogoras' writings and he was forced to flee Athens by boat in order to escape capital punishment, incidentally the fate of Socrates a few decades later. By some accounts Protogoras was killed in a storm at sea while in flight, undoubtedly confirming the view of pious Athenians that the gods themselves had revenged themselves on him. Another possibility, though, would be that the story was concocted at a later time to confirm exactly this expectation. The second of Protogoras' sentences to have survived was even more profoundly subversive:

Of all things the measure is man--of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not.¹

Here mankind, not the gods, is said to possess knowledge and all the powers implied by its possession. Moreover, the Gods are totally missing relevant to both options: (1) "things that are as they are," in which case the gods do exist, but very likely as the products of our imagination to be accepted on this basis alone; and (2) "things that are not, that they are not," the products of our imagination whose tangible existence is to be rejected for exactly this reason," Protogoras could have been driven from Athens for this pronouncement too, though its reference to the gods was not explicit.

What has complicated the history of skepticism, and well enough that it is misunderstood even today, is that ancient skepticism later split into two distinct schools, (1) the Pyrrhonism of Pyrrho (after whom it was named) as well as Aenisidemus, and Sextus Empiricus, among others,

and (2) the Academic skepticism of Arcesilaus and Carneades, among others. Both schools have persisted into modern time with great success if with entirely different goals and expectations. Pyrrhonism has featured a total suspension of judgment (*epoche*) based on the recognition that ignorance is inescapable, therefore justifying the pursuit of one's peace of mind (*ataraxia*) by subscribing to whatever religious or political orthodoxy is in currency at the time--among Stoics, for example, be a Stoic, among Christians be a Christian, etc. During the Renaissance, this version of skepticism, described as fideism, also featured the simple logic later described as Pascal's Wager, that, because of our inescapable ignorance of the final truth, orthodox Christianity offers at least the possibility of salvation as opposed to unavoidable damnation for those who reject Christian eschatology and turn out to be wrong.

A far more radical version of skepticism was offered by the Academic school, named after Plato's Academy, which was under Arcesilaus' authority at the time. This so-called New Academy also featured the importance of *epoche*, but it treated this suspension of belief as a challenge and obligation to formulate the best possible explanation on a provisional basis without necessarily providing a final answer. Uncertainty obliges persistent investigation, Academic skeptics insisted, rather than the pursuit of quietude through orthodox belief. In other words, objective research was in order rather than social acceptance from sharing in the ignorance of others. Religion was accordingly featured by Pyrrhonian skeptics, and science and thorough scholarship by the Academic skeptics. The difference between these two versions of skepticism has been enormous. Both derive from exactly the same premise, but they draw opposite conclusions, one of which justifies the acceptance of whatever orthodox belief seems the most expedient, while the other requires sustained inquiry that can usually be expected to come in conflict with orthodox belief sooner or later. In the simplest possible terms, the logic of these two alternatives can be described as follows:

Pyrrhonian Skepticism: Everything is doubtful; *ergo*, one can worship any god(s) one pleases, including the Christian God as explained by Renaissance fideists.

Academic Skepticism: Everything is doubtful; *ergo*, one must take every precaution to isolate the believable from the unbelievable through persistent inquiry inclusive of scientific methodology.

Arcesilaus, the original Academic skeptic, emphasized the necessity of reasonable thought (*apeiron*) for coping with unavoidable ignorance, and a century later Carneades more inclusively emphasized the determination of probability (*eulogon*) for this purpose. As later explained by Sextus Empiricus, Carneades established three levels of probability beginning with (1) simple judgments, which consist of one's common-sense awareness (essentially Arcesilaus's *apeiron*). When possible, however, this could be augmented by (2) "tested" confirmation and (3) the "irreversible" determination of probability.² These two more advanced uses of skepticism could well have been intended to take into account the relatively primitive scientific experiments earlier advocated by the scientist Strato, third director of Aristotle's Lyceum, who seems to have been a good friend of Arcesilaus, the principal beneficiary of his last will and testament quoted in its entirety by Diogenes' Laertius. Some modern students of ancient skepticism who prefer the Pyrrhonian approach have translated Carneades' word *eulogon* as persuasiveness, a matter of rhetoric, but the categories of tested and irreversible probability indicated by Sextus suggest that

Carneades was thinking more in accord with the modern concept of probability. Also, it cannot be ignored that Cicero translated the word as *probabile* in his treatise *Academica* rather than a nominalization of the verb *persuasio*, which served in Cicero's writing as an obvious cognate to the verb *persuade* in modern English. If Cicero had intended the meaning "persuasive" in his translation of eulogon, he would have depended on the root *persuasio* instead of *probabile*, but he did not, so it seems appropriate to accept his translation as it stands.

The transition of ancient skepticism from its inception in Greece to its later adoption in Rome is somewhat confusing, so a brief historic summary seems useful for explaining the sequence. A generation younger than Aristotle, Pyrrho provided a theory of skepticism that was overshadowed just a decade or two later by the Academic school, which thereupon dominated the practice of skepticism during the Hellenistic period over the next couple hundred years. The principal assessment of Academic skepticism still available today was Cicero's dialogue, *Academica*, now a fragment, the sole supportive text to have survived medieval censorship. This was authored by Cicero almost a century after Carneades lived, based on the teachings of second and third generation disciples of Carneades who helped educate Cicero during his youth. Then the Pyrrhonian approach, all but forgotten by then, was resurrected at about the time of Cicero--probably a decade or two later--by Aenisidemus of Alexandria, and this in turn became the dominant theory of skepticism for at least the next two hundred years, culminating with the writings of Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes Laertius perhaps toward the end of the reign of the Antonine emperors from 100 to 180 A.D. Just as Cicero had made no mention of Pyrrho, Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes Laertes discussed Arcesilaus and Carneades but totally omitted any reference to Cicero. Two hundred years later, Saint Augustine's first book, *Contra Academicos*, attacked Cicero's summary of Academic skepticism, which had been a youthful fascination on St. Augustine's part, but without making any reference whatsoever to Pyrrho, Aenisidemus, or Sextus Empiricus. So it would seem that Academic skepticism regained its earlier popularity before the Emperor Theodosius imposed Christianity on a totalitarian basis at the end of the fourth century, A.D., exactly when St. Augustine wrote his attack.

The most interesting aspect of this elongated Roman phase in the history of skepticism was the abrupt transition from Academic skepticism as explained by Cicero to the revised and updated version of Pyrrhonian skepticism advanced by Aenisidemus. One possible explanation would take into account Augustus's effort to validate his authority as Rome's first emperor by fabricating its mythological history comparable to the Homeric epics. Augustus's friend Virgil complied by authoring *The Aeneid*, so it would have been highly useful for the resurrection of Pyrrhonian skepticism by Aenisidemus in order to promote Virgil's fabrications despite their patent absurdities no less inconceivable than those of Homer's pantheon. For if any belief was acceptable, why not the renewed belief in Rome's traditional assortment of gods, incidentally permitting the extension of godhead to the emperor himself? Whether any connection between Virgil and Aenisidemus' contributions was intended, as I am suggesting here, it could have been accepted in retrospect as a package arrangement to nullify discontent among aristocrats too sophisticated to have otherwise accepted Augustus' strategy. For, among Pyrrhonists, who cared if nothing was absolutely certain in religious matters? If this collective response was sought, it collapsed after not more than a generation or two, but the same Pyrrhonian logic could later be applied to near eastern fertility gods that were gaining popularity at the time, and still later to

Christianity itself preceding Theodosius' totalitarian campaign against all paganism inclusive of ancient skepticism.

Both the Pyrrhonian and Academic traditions survived the ten centuries of medieval orthodoxy that followed. However, the Academic version of skepticism, which always verged on atheism, especially in the teachings of Carneades, suffered far greater losses. For example, the more than 400 treatises written by Clitomachus as a disciple of Carneades (roughly 16 times the productivity of Plato) were utterly destroyed--not a word has survived. And the same for Strato, like Carneades a notorious atheist, whose 46 texts are also totally lost--not a word having survived. Cicero's *Academica*, Academic skepticism's single supportive assessment by a more or less contemporary author, probably escaped obliteration because of Cicero's fame in ancient and medieval times, indeed during the Renaissance, which may be said to have begun with Petrarch's effort to resurrect Cicero's writings. Pyrrhonism fared better in having escaped the conversion to palimpsest by medieval scribes, but this occurred without having improved its popularity during the Renaissance compared to the subversive impact of Academic skepticism once its *locus classicus* by default--*Academica*---was found and translated. Venturesome Renaissance theologians such as Pico della Mirandola effectively promoted Pyrrhonism as a "defense of last resort" for Christianity, while scientists and philosophers such as Copernicus, Bacon and Gassendi resurrected what they could from Cicero's explanation of Academic skepticism, clarified, when needed, by relevant if hostile passages from Sextus and Diogenes Laertius. Cicero's *Academica*, for example, could only have been the text Copernicus referred to without citation in his Introduction to his *Revolutions of Heavenly Spheres* as his original source for his groundbreaking notion of a heliocentric universe. Also, Copernicus' brief but significant reference to probability elsewhere in his Introduction could only have been inspired by its discussion in *Academica* relevant to Carneades' theory of skepticism. Altogether, there were at least ten texts, translations, and commentaries regarding *Academica* between its first modern edition in 1471 and its thorough assessment in Gassendi's *Syntagma* in 1649. In contrast there were only four texts and commentaries of Sextus Empiricus between Pico della Mirandola's *Examen* in 1520 and the full edition of Sextus' writings published in 1621.³

For it turns out that the fearful gorilla in the attic inspired by ancient classicism and despised by Luther and the Jesuits was hard-core Academic skepticism, though it could not be more than briefly mentioned by theologians and philosophers opposed to its ideas. Even those supportive of its possible implications had to beware what they said, for they could be challenged for heresy if they were too candid about their sympathies--as were Bruno, Vanini, and Galileo, and as would have been the case for Christopher Marlow if he had not first been killed in a knife fight. The presumably harmless celebration of Homeric gods and goddesses masked what was really happening, as did the *carpe diem* convention of taking full pleasure in the moment, granted the expectation of death without any kind of a blissful afterlife. Poets like Spenser and Shakespeare shamelessly interspersed Greek and Biblical allusions, and Shakespeare and others stretched love conventions as much as possible. In both instances seemingly harmless poetic liberties were exercised, but those in the know knew what was implied. Similarly, Cicero's role as an orator, politician, and polite philosopher was universally lauded, but, again, those in the know knew what was implied. For Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* challenged the authority of the ancient gods, sometimes in terms that could easily be applied to Christianity itself, and with *Academica* Cicero was by default Academic skepticism's sole surviving spokesman--both

dangerous and eminent--with essentially the same role later played by Hobbes, Voltaire and Russell. Today Cicero is treated as having enjoyed an overblown reputation during the Renaissance. But not at all! His contribution was absolutely central to the Renaissance's abandonment of medieval orthodoxy.

Apparently, most periods of heightened skepticism and secular achievement were brought to a close resulting from warfare that spurred a convergence of religion and patriotism followed by orthodox stultification. Also, these transition phases have almost inevitably been accompanied by an intellectual shift in skepticism from the Academic variety tolerant of atheism to the strictly Pyrrhonian dedication to religious values for lack of anything else to believe in. Pyrrho himself played such a role as a young contemporary of Aristotle during the final decline of ancient Hellenic civilization, as did Aenesidemus at about the time Augustus became emperor. The same might well have happened with al-Ghazzali toward the calamitous end of Arab civilization, and with Pico della Mirandola and later Descartes and Pascal during the religious wars after the Renaissance, and with Kant once the Enlightenment declined into the French Revolution, and with Wittgenstein and Derrida during the emergence of what now amounts to a rather precarious *de facto* American empire (whose military expenditures now exceed those of the entire rest of the world combined). In all instances, inflexible orthodoxy crept into the thinking among the populace at levels previously considered obsolete, and, among intellectuals, there was a sympathetic effort to justify current trends in light of Pyrrhonian latitudinarianism. This can be illustrated by current trends in the United States, the most recent hegemonic epicenter in the history of western civilization. Two world wars plus the Cold War culminating in Vietnam and, four decades later, its vulgar caricature in Iraq have stirred the rebirth of fundamentalist Christian orthodoxy. The trend has recently intensified to such an extent that a large and vociferous Christian minority exerts excessive influence in politics, public schools, etc., in a nation presumably educated well enough to avoid such a threat. Typically, twentieth-century Pyrrhonian skeptics have helped to facilitate this transition, Wittgenstein, for example, by having challenged Russell's "scientism," and Derrida as well as his colleagues and epigones by having resorted to seemingly endless obfuscations in order to render obsolete Sartre's no less confusing secular version of metaphysics. That both Russell and Sartre were indignant of America's imperial role, while their attackers were relatively indifferent to the problem, might seem incidental, but it is not. Radical "discourse" supplanted radical activism exactly when such a transition was opportune. This could be seen in American English Departments in response to the Vietnam protest movement during the late sixties. Half the graduate students in schools such as S.U.N.Y., Buffalo (which I myself attended at the time), were swallowed up in radical activism, the other half in heated debate about the concept of indeterminacy and its arcane epistemological implications.

As a general principal, a revival of Pyrrhonism at the expense of Academic skepticism seems to have taken place whenever epochs of secular inquiry fall into decline. Western civilization's entire intellectual tradition since ancient Greece can accordingly be interpreted in light of a sustained disagreement between Academic skepticism and orthodox Christianity, the latter buttressed by Pyrrhonian skepticism to appease intellectuals otherwise reluctant to accept such an outcome. The resulting sequence may be diagrammed as follows:

Periods of High Secular Achievement	Academic Skeptical Tradition	Pyrrhonian Skeptical Tradition
1. Ancient Greece	Protagoras Socrates	
	Arecesilaus Carneades	Pyrrho Aenisidemus
	Early scholars:	Sextus Empiricus Diogenes Laertius
2. Muslim Civilization	Averroes	al-Ghazzali
3. Renaissance	Pomponazzi	Pico della Mirandola
	Montaigne F. Bacon Gassendi Hobbes	Descartes Pascal
4. Enlightenment	Locke Hume	Berkeley Kant
5. Post-Darwinian	T. Huxley Nietzsche Santayana B. Russell R. Rorty	Kierkegaard Wittgenstein Derrida

A couple of the choices here are arguable, for example Berkeley and Kierkegaard's inclusion among the Pyrrhonians as agents of ideological transition though there was no major political or intellectual crisis at the time they lived. Nevertheless, Berkeley's skepticism did contribute to the political shift in England in mid-eighteenth century, when deism's rejection of a personal god lost public support and collective opinion turned decisively to the right at the beginning of George III's reign. However, this was admittedly a modest intellectual adjustment relative to the overall history of western civilization, so Berkeley may be cited as an example of Pyrrhonism somewhat unencumbered by ideological trends. On the other hand, Montaigne's presence in the column for Academic skeptics rather than the Pyrrhonians might seem dubious at best to most intellectual historians. Montaigne's key essay, "Apology for Raimond Sebond" ends with a rousing declaration of his Christian faith, suggesting a Pyrrhonian outlook, therefore the necessity of including Montaigne among the Pyrrhonians. But not so. The Academic version of skepticism was dangerous to admit in France during the mid-sixteenth century, so Montaigne's final declaration of faith must be considered a typical use of the "double truth" invented by

Averroes and deployed with great success by Pomponazzi at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Like these predecessors, Montaigne used his obligatory final declaration of faith to justify his earlier exploration of Academic insights that could not otherwise have been published. Not accidentally, the bulk of his text centered on Academic theory, as illustrated by the authors he focused on. By an admittedly loose tabulation, he cited or quoted Cicero at least 109 times (Academica alone at least 30 times), while referring to Diogenes Laertius only 30 times, and, significantly, Sextus Empiricus only 17 times. He also quoted the materialist philosopher Lucretius (probably an atheist) at least 68 times, while quoting St. Augustine 20 times, the Bible 15 times, and St. Thomas Aquinas not at all. What confuses the issue is that Montaigne was torn not by the choice between faith and skepticism, but more specifically between two versions of skepticism, Pyrrhonian and Academic, and his intended (if not final) opinion, at least in his “Apology,” was decisively Academic despite his protestations otherwise.

Another debatable choice involves Wittgenstein and Derrida’s description as Pyrrhonians because of their overlooked double identities, both skeptical and dogmatic. As professional philosophers both of them asserted an uncompromising skeptical perspective while entertaining Christian assumptions in their private lives. Unlike early Pyrrhonians, who were skeptics pretending to be believers, they were believers pretending to be skeptics. Nevertheless, they may be included in the category of Pyrrhonians, since belief and skepticism were linked in a manner ultimately beneficial to belief. Paradoxically, therefore, Montaigne can be accepted as having been Academic despite his energetic double-truth protestations of his faith, while Wittgenstein and Derrida were Pyrrhonian despite their no less energetic commitment to a presumably secular vision of skepticism. In Derrida’s case this was at least true until his late compilation, *Acts of Religion*, published in 2002. When Wittgenstein waved a fireplace poker at Karl Popper in 1946 (see David Edmonds and John Eidinow’s *Wittgenstein’s Poker* (HarperCollins, 2001), he knew exactly what he was doing and who was his enemy, since Popper had already established his reputation as a major theoretician and apologist for scientific methodology beginning in the late twenties. The two Viennese philosophers were totally at odds with each other, one a dyed-in-the-wool Pyrrhonist, the other no less dyed-in-the-wool within the Academic tradition. And appropriately it was Bertrand Russell, also of the Academic tradition, who asked Wittgenstein to put the poker down.

There are other difficulties with the paradigm I have suggested that should be taken into account. Plato, for example, may be considered to have anticipated the Pyrrhonists by having so effectively reversed Socrates’ generic version of skepticism, summarized by his repeated assertion that he knew more than others because he knew he didn’t know. As reformulated by Plato, this mantra was elaborated to propose a supposedly higher truth in transcendent forms with occasional reference to godhead (something Socrates may be presumed to have known he didn’t know). By revising Socrates in this fashion, Plato transposed a strictly neutral version of skepticism into something akin to Pyrrhonism. On the other hand, Aristotle and Strato anticipated Academic skepticism, Aristotle by having repeatedly surveyed the opinions of others before launching into his own explanation, Strato by having used primitive experiments to demonstrate hypotheses, anticipating the scientific method that was much later described by Karl Popper, if with no reference to Strato. Strato himself actually proposed the Stratonician Presumption that limited genuine knowledge to empirical data from the physical universe. Where in the Bible, then, is there the slightest suggestion of either Aristotle or Strato’s version of

inquiry? Where does either Moses or Christ express uncertainty and acknowledge valid differences of opinion and actually pay attention to the world about him in a systematic fashion? Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius, on the other hand, rejected godhead beyond the quaint suggestion by Epicurus that gods exist in a realm of their own without affecting the rest of the universe. These three Hellenistic philosophers represented the belief not in God, which was just as dogmatic as anything said in Genesis, for example, but they were at least friendly with the Academic skeptics, and it turns out that their suppositions were a good deal closer to the truth than was Biblical revelation. Epicurus' relatively brief "Letter to Herodotus" serves as a treasure trove of suppositions that could later be explored on a scientific basis.

Scholastic theology during the Middle Ages also played a minor role in the dialectic between Pyrrhonism and Academic skepticism, for example relevant to the incessant conflict between realists and nominalists. Realists such as St. Anselm and St. Thomas Aquinas treated mind-independent universals as truly existing, while nominalists such as Abelard and Ockham, emphasized the possibility of a universe beyond ourselves that cannot be fully explained by these universals. Anselm's ontological proof of the existence of an all-powerful God on the assumption that if such a God is found lacking, an even bigger conception of God becomes necessary, epitomized the Realist position with obvious Pyrrhonian implications that a God could be deduced without being understood. On the other hand, Ockham's razor inverted Anselm's proof in the realm of heuristics by insisting that the simplest full explanation is the most acceptable--always, if without Ockham's recognition, with the possibility that God's existence could be denied on exactly this basis. At any other time in the history of western civilization, Ockham would have been identifiable as an Academic skeptic, Anselm as a Pyrrhonist.

Another area of potential difficulty in the application of the paradigm above would involve the decline of skepticism during the Reformation. As the simplest possible explanation, this historic catastrophe of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries involved the struggle between Protestants and Catholics to determine which of them would restore true Christianity by eradicating pagan excesses that desecrated the reign of Pope Leo X, who was reputed to have marveled, "We owe all this to the fable [sic] of Jesus Christ!" One of the most offensive of these excesses was skepticism, so it would seem natural during this period of Christian reaction that skepticism fell into substantial disuse by the middle of the seventeenth century except among Pyrrhonists. But this is not entirely true, again necessitating a careful assessment of the model proposed above. As documented by Richard Popkin's remarkable scholarship summarized in *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Bayle* (Oxford, 2003 in its latest edition), there were numerous skeptics during the period belonging in one or the other of the Pyrrhonian and Academic factions.⁴ Pyrrhonists included La Mothe Le Voyer, Jean-Pierre Camus, François Veron, Isaac La Peyrère among many others, while Academic skeptics included Gabriel Naudé and Marin Mersenne as well as Gassendi and Hobbes listed above (close friends who were seldom in disagreement with each other). The best way to deal with this confusion, I would suggest, is to treat the transition from Renaissance exploratory freedom to the Reformation's orthodox demands as having been gradual for those who lived at the time from one decade to the next. As to be expected, there were numerous exceptions, with discernible traces of Pyrrhonism during the fifteenth century and with no less discernible traces of Academic skepticism during the seventeenth century, but with a visible transition from one to the other as suggested by the

above paradigm. It is also possible to divide the minority of Academic skeptics during the seventeenth century into those who may best be treated as having culminated the Renaissance, for example Montaigne and Charron, and those who are better understood to have anticipated the Enlightenment, for example Bacon, Gassendi and Bayle. By the mid-eighteenth century the two versions of skepticism switched roles, once again restoring Academic skepticism into preeminence, but still later there was another turnabout when Kant abandoned the Enlightenment to rediscover God--and so forth.

In one way or another a rather large portion of western civilization's collective history thus derives from skepticism and the struggle to cope with it--to absorb or deny it, or to find some kind of a compromise with its most dangerous assumptions. But we cannot forget that it was skepticism that first manifested itself in this overarching twenty-five century dialectic history. Christianity only began to play a substantial role a full seven centuries later--as much as anything, one suspects, because it provided the best and most effective defense of traditional values against the methodical inquiry encouraged by Academic skepticism. Mithraism and the rest of the Near Eastern fertility religions had been useful toward this end for a couple of centuries, but not to the same extent as Christianity, which imposed a totalitarian rejection of all other beliefs, including skepticism itself. What was insufficiently realized at the time was the enormous benefit of skepticism resulting from its commitment to the pursuit of better answers. For human freedom, free markets, universal literacy, modern hospitals, our libraries and universities, free enterprise, and parliamentary democracy--everything unique to western civilization is somehow the product of skepticism's endurance in the teeth of its orthodox denial. Even our fads in art, architecture, and popular culture may be traced to skepticism through a pursuit of the new to supplant the old. Without skepticism, the status quo would utterly prevail, since there would be no cumulative intellectual growth. There would have been no advances in science, nor much of a technology (no electricity, no light bulbs, no combustion engines), nor a secular philosophy, nor an art and literature worthy of veneration. Even religion would be diminished, for faith in God would lack its theology, and theology its metaphysics. Belief would metastasize, and sameness would utterly prevail, as seems to be the case with so-called non-western traditions. Knowledge would fester without really asking or answering questions, and as a result there would be much less to say. For the many benefits of skepticism finally exceed its losses. Without the challenge of skepticism, conceptual stultification sets in--idea becomes habit, theory becomes ideological compliance, society dumbs down, and everybody is the loser. C.S. Peirce once defined belief as thought at rest.⁵ Skepticism is just the opposite. Putting the mind at rest on a permanent basis can only be catastrophic. It is skepticism that brings thinking to life, proof of which is the remarkable overall accomplishment of western civilization.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Both quotations may be found in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vo 2 (Loeb Classics, 1970), pp. 463-65.

² Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Loeb Classics, 197), pp. 139-41.

³ See C.B. Schmitt, “The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times,” in Myles Burnyeat (ed.), *The Skeptical Tradition*, pp. 225-51.

⁴ Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford, 2003).

⁵ Charles Sanders Peirce, “How To Make Our Ideas Clear,” vol. 5, in *Collected Papers* ed by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Belknap, 1935), p.255.