

“CURING” PYRRHONIAN DOUBT: ANTI-SKEPTICAL RHETORIC IN THE EARLY 18TH CENTURY

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Abstract. By examining the analogies of sickness and disease used by several opponents of philosophical skepticism (Pyrrhonism) in the early 18th century, this article will shed light on the rhetorical strategies used in attempts to undermine the revival of this ancient school of philosophy. It will look at the ways in which anti-skeptics discussed the repercussions of the spread of Pyrrhonism for society and describe how they proposed to “cure” this so-called disease. A consideration of the strategies will both reveal some of the assumptions commonly shared by authors of apologetic literature in the first half of the 18th century and explain why they saw skepticism as such a dangerous philosophical position.

Keywords: Skepticism, Pyrrhonism, Irreligion, Atheism, Pierre Bayle, Jean-Pierre de Crousaz

Introduction

The essential tenet of Pyrrhonian skepticism, that the mind cannot know anything with certainty, including the veracity of the very proposition that the mind cannot know anything with certainty, had always been an extremely difficult position to refute philosophically. By making their own conclusion inconclusive, the skeptics left their opponents with little to disprove. The burden on disproof lay with the dogmatic philosophers, while the skeptics needed merely to demonstrate the weaknesses of the various axioms and premises. Fundamentally, the skeptics denied the possibility of obtaining true and certain knowledge about the surrounding world and about the content of the human understanding based on the view that the mind and the senses were unsuitable and insufficient tools for acquiring such knowledge. They enumerated the weaknesses of the sensory apparatus and the flaws in the operations of the mind to support their conclusions, and they gave numerous examples of how those weaknesses led to erroneous and uncertain ideas. They saw the feebleness of the understanding as a permanent state of affairs.

After the rediscovery of the works of Sextus Empiricus, whose *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* offered an exposition of Pyrrho’s philosophy, in the 16th century, Pyrrhonian skepticism gradually gained popularity among early-modern philosophers.¹ By the late-17th and early-18th centuries, it had attracted a number of prominent followers, especially in the Francophone world where prominent thinkers such as Michel de Montaigne, Pierre Charron, Blaise Pascal, and Simon Foucher, among others, popularized skeptical arguments and applied them to a variety of disciplines. In attempting to disseminate Pyrrhonism, early-modern thinkers adopted a variety of formulations and rhetorical strategies. For example, in denying the possibility of knowing the essences of things, one of the most notable skeptics of the early 18th century, bishop Pierre-Daniel Huet, maintained that one could never accurately know whether the objects perceived by the senses matched the real nature of the objects, since one only had access to the reproduction and not to the original.² While Huet made a rather ordered case for philosophical skepticism, his famous contemporary Pierre Bayle offered a significantly less systematic exposition of the ancient

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philosophy. In his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), Bayle presented his readers with a plethora of paradoxes, dilemmas, and unanswerable riddles. The goal of all these passages was not to provide an explicit exposition of the skeptical philosophy, but to implicitly demonstrate, through numerous examples, that, given the feebleness of the human mind, the suspension of judgment on philosophical questions was the only possible option. Bayle's arguments were even more difficult to answer than Huet's, because they were scattered throughout the multivolume work.

Despite the difficulty of answering Pyrrhonian arguments, the apparent proliferation of philosophical skepticism in the late-17th and early-18th centuries was met with a number of refutations and condemnations. In order to explain the seeming intransigence and the paradoxical philosophical positions of their opponents, the anti-skeptics often claimed that their adversaries were providing insincere arguments that aimed only to oppose particular positions and ideas rather than to provide coherent philosophical views. While the skeptics claimed that the human mind was permanently afflicted and weakened, their opponents suggested that, on the contrary, solely the minds of the Pyrrhonists were plagued and possessed. They attributed the skeptics' insincerity to a moral and intellectual disease, one that was corrupting the hearts and minds of students and intellectuals of their age, and one that had dangerous implications not only for philosophy and scholarship, but also for the state of society in general. The anti-skeptics frequently portrayed Pyrrhonism as a mental disorder or a contagion that plagued minds and spread quickly from person to person, creating a culture of incredulity, sensuality, and moral chaos. Indeed, the anti-skeptical literature was filled with alarmist warnings and apocalyptic predictions about the dangers of the Pyrrhonist plague that was engulfing the enlightened world of the 18th century. These authors saw a steady growth in the number of skeptics, unbelievers, and libertines, and they believed that these "irreverent" doctrines mutually reinforced one another.

By examining the analogies of sickness and disease used by several opponents of skepticism, this article will shed light on the rhetorical strategies used in attempts to defeat the skeptics. It will also look at the ways in which anti-skeptics proposed to "cure" this so-called disease. A consideration of the strategies will both reveal some of the assumptions commonly shared by authors of apologetic literature in the first half of the 18th century and explain why they saw skepticism as such a dangerous philosophical position.

Diagnosing the Disease

Opponents of skepticism often likened this ancient philosophy to a disease that was quickly spreading across their contemporaneous societies by corrupting the minds of the reading public. An anonymous letter in the *Bibliothèque Germanique* from 1730 described the pernicious effects of Pyrrhonism and claimed that "Its evils do not just affect a small number of people; it is a contagion that spreads itself and leads a universal ravage."³ The author of the article claimed that skepticism spread quickly from one infected person to another and that Bayle's *Dictionnaire* was the most obvious source of the contagion. The work, according to the article, was filled with frivolous material that would keep debates on various topics raging on and prevent any certainty.

The effects of Bayle's dictionary varied according to the age and the "*humeur*" of the reader, just as a disease would affect different bodies in different ways.⁴ Those most in danger of succumbing to skepticism, the anonymous author argued, were readers who were inexperienced in the philosophical and scholarly debates that Bayle discussed. Having read the various superficial musings of the *Dictionnaire*, such a semi-educated reader would feel as if he had become an expert in every subject from logic to medicine. The faux-intellectual would then parrot

Bayle's attacks on various respected philosophers without fully understanding the significance and meaning of the debates:

It does not matter, he prides himself on being in the position to take on the whole world; he recites from memory the great passages of his author; he does not understand even a half of them; he frequently mangles them, but his confidence is not at all shaken. His authority and aplomb impose themselves on another ignorant one, who, in turn, affirms the one who mislead him in the errors and in the fantasy that he is a clever man. The contagion spreads in this way; one does not see oneself to be mistaken, because one sees many people equally mistaken; and, after having been misled by another, one, in turn, misleads a third person.⁵

The anonymous author was particularly upset with the effects of the *Dictionnaire*, because he saw it as a text that not only easily misled inexperienced readers down the road to Pyrrhonism, but also turned them into sources of the contagion. This gave Bayle's work, according to the author, the ability to spread the disease of skepticism by geometric leaps.

The arch-critic of Bayle in the 18th century, Jean-Pierre de Crousaz, who taught logic and mathematics at the University of Lausanne, made similar comparisons between skepticism and infection in his *Examen du pyrrhonisme ancien et moderne* (1733).⁶ He saw Pyrrhonism not as a coherent and consistent philosophical system, but as a "derangement of the mind and of the heart."⁷ Crousaz repeatedly described skepticism as a "disease that troubles the mind, that blinds it, and that casts it into obstinacy."⁸ The philosophical skeptics, in his view, had an insatiable appetite for argument and sought to contradict all philosophical propositions, without regard for the established certainty of such propositions or for the evidence that might support them. He argued that the skeptics were unnaturally obsessed with, but also very gifted at, finding faults in the most respected doctrines, going even so far as doubting their own existence.⁹

Crousaz suggested that the origin of the skeptics' "derangement" came from "the spirit of dispute that reigned among the Greeks [and that] contributed significantly to the establishment of Pyrrhonism."¹⁰ He placed particular blame on the oft-maligned sophists, who believed themselves to be experts in every possible discipline and who emphasized rhetorical skill over scholarly proficiency. The sophists, according to Crousaz, continually sought new rhetorical tactics for disproving their opponents and became accustomed to a taste for constant contradiction. They did not care about the content of a given argument, but only about the ability to disprove it. Painting a historical picture of an intellectual culture engaged in endless and seemingly pointless disputations, Crousaz compared the Ancient Greek debates to the more contemporaneous scholastic philosophical disputations. He maintained that while the particular subject matter of the debates did not lead to Pyrrhonism, the preference for the art of rhetoric over the meticulous understanding of various subjects bred a spirit of contradiction and prevented an orderly examination of the facts. Crousaz accused the contemporary educational system for teaching young students to argue before instructing them in the significance and the content of the arguments:

One turned philosophy, and then theology, into a skill of speaking much and of thinking little, of never understanding the views of others, of taking their thoughts as backward, and of not understanding oneself.¹¹

Just as the anonymous author of the letter to the *Bibliothèque Germanique*, Crousaz believed that young and inexperienced minds were most susceptible to the disease of Pyrrhonism.

Aside from impugning the philosophical and religious disputes that plagued his own time and censuring what he perceived as an ineffective and dangerous educational system, Crousaz offered some universal psychological explanations of why some scholars fell under the spell of Pyrrhonian doubt. He described several hypothetical situations in which thinkers became discouraged with a search for truth because of inattention or impatience. Accepting axioms and premises without sufficient analysis, Crousaz argued, authors were quick to formulate conclusions and to construct entire metaphysical systems. However, once their critics revealed some defects or mistakes, the impatient author quickly decided that the fault is not with him, but with the human mind.

A man who made mistakes on several occasions is discouraged, and in order to avoid having to forego his findings, he limits himself to finding probabilities. Then the ridicule of those who are stubborn in their own errors affirms him ever more in the party of doubt. This is how Pyrrhonism established itself in those times and continues to establish itself today.¹²

For Crousaz, the conversion to philosophical skepticism allowed scholars to justify their errors and offered consolation to thinkers who became disillusioned with their own intellectual abilities. By claiming that “the human mind uselessly tires itself in the search of truth, and that no one will ever find it, since they themselves have not discovered it,” they could conclude that their fault lay not with their own shortcomings but with the universal fallibility of human reason.¹³

Crousaz’s Swiss compatriot and notable naturalist Albrecht von Haller, who composed the introductory remarks to the *abrégé* of Crousaz’s work (Jean Henri Samuel Formey’s *Le Triomphe de l’évidence*, 1756), equated philosophical skepticism with religious incredulity. He attributed both to the moral corruption and the increasing superficiality and sensuality of his age:

These faults and these vices are so favorable to unbelief; unbelief, in turn, is favorable to them, and the contagion of this evil is so palpable, that the insensitivity to it resembles the symptoms of a mortal gangrene.¹⁴

Haller saw the sickness and corruption of individuals take on the entire contemporary society. Unbelief and skepticism went hand in hand with the immoral pursuit of sensual pleasures, one reinforcing the other.

All three authors were surprised to see the spirit of skepticism and irreligion in what they perceived to be an enlightened age. The situation certainly appeared ironic: the number of skeptics continued to increase at a time of the greatest advances in philosophy and in the sciences.¹⁵ Crousaz attempted to explain the apparently growing popularity of philosophical skepticism not in the content of existing ideas, but in the form that philosophical and scientific debates assumed. Haller, in turn, attributed it to the moral corruption of society, perceiving a mutual reinforcement between unbelief and skepticism, on the one hand, and egotistic and sensualist materialism, on the other.

Dangerous Symptoms

In addition to describing Pyrrhonism as a disease and an infection, opponents of skepticism pointed to the dangerous symptoms that this disease manifested in society. The arguments about the potential social dangers of Pyrrhonism came, at least in part, from the desire to refute Pierre Bayle’s notorious hypothetical insinuation that a society of atheists could be just as virtuous as a society of believers.¹⁶ By presenting the perils that would be brought about by the

proliferation of skepticism (and, by implication, of atheism and libertinism) anti-skeptics sought both to refute Bayle's claim and to expose what they saw as the moral implications of Pyrrhonism.

Haller, who focused on describing the effects of religious unbelief rather than on disproving skepticism, painted a particularly dystopian picture of a culture that embraced "unbelief" or "incredulity" as its dominant religion. He described a society in which all the members lived solely for their own pleasure and felt no obligations toward other individuals or toward the community. The consequences of such an attitude would be, in Haller's mind, tragic. The family unit would fail to function due to a collapse of marriages, a reduction in childbirth, a proliferation of incest and of child abuse, and a rise in the abandonment of children. Trade and commerce would collapse because contracts would not be honored and no trust would exist among merchants. Charity and friendship would disappear entirely, as each individual would only pursue his or her own material interests. Sovereigns would wage endless bloody wars out of vanity and greed.¹⁷ Haller, explicitly compared his hypothetical society to Hobbes's state of nature:

I believe that it is sufficiently demonstrated that this new wisdom is the ruin of [all] social life. It gives each man no other object than his own well-being, a purely sensual well-being. It puts the forces of all men in perpetual opposition, which must result in a state of war and universal enmity, a consequence sincerely recognized by Hobbes, and which cannot finish until religion comes to bring peace.¹⁸

By equating religious skepticism with extreme egotism, Haller was able to offer a dramatic dystopian vision of a society diseased with decadence.

The anonymous author of the letter to the editors of the *Bibliothèque Germanique* drew similar links among sensualist inclination, skepticism, and atheism even earlier than Haller. He suggested that all human motivation depended either on the inborn instinct to satisfy the senses, a drive that led human beings toward an insatiable quest for pleasure, or on God-given reason that restrained instinctual desires and guided men to virtue. Consequently, the Pyrrhonist claims about the irreparable weakness of reason and their call to avoid all rational analyses appeared to the author as an underhanded and malicious attempt to promote libertinism. By overemphasizing the corrupted nature of the human mind, the author argued that Bayle and other skeptics pushed their readers away from an excessive confidence in human reason toward the opposite extreme, which promoted unbelief, religious irreverence, and, consequently, immorality and libertinism.¹⁹

Crousaz saw the proliferation of Pyrrhonism as an equivalent to a fire that was devastating the intellectual and moral landscape of his culture. He argued that Bayle's intentions were irrelevant, given the devastating effects of his *Dictionnaire*:

Whether he [Bayle] foresaw these effects or whether they are the due to the abuse that one made of what he had composed with completely different intentions, this is not the most important and the most pressing question that the *Examen [du pyrrhonisme ancien et moderne]* addresses on this subject. When the fire engulfs several houses and is in danger of spreading across the whole city, one must rush to put it out, instead of amusing oneself by disputing if it was caused by the imprudence or by the malice of its authors.²⁰

As he did in his use of the contagion metaphor, Crousaz stressed the impending perils of Pyrrhonism that was engulfing the surrounding intellectual world. The dangers of succumbing to universal doubt were threefold, in Crousaz's view: religious, moral, and intellectual. The threats to

the foundations of Christianity received the greatest attention in the *Examen*. Crousaz sought to refute the seemingly pious propositions of outspoken fideistic skeptics, who called for the submission of reason to faith. Such arguments, in his view, overlooked the rational foundations of religious belief and took for granted ideas that natural reason had provided. Thus, Crousaz argued that a rational understanding of God had to precede any supernatural belief in His existence and in His goodness:

Those who labor for the establishment of Pyrrhonism needlessly try to cover up their malicious plan by saying that they have no other goal but to humble reason...In order to make the most of faith, and to conduct oneself according to what the word of God commands us to believe and to do, one must first of all be assured that this book, on which we rely, [that] this book, which is the object of our faith and the foundation of our certainty, is most certainly the book that teaches us the will of God. For this it is necessary to already have already have an idea of God, in order to be able to assure oneself that this book is from Him by comparing what we learn there with the idea [we have] of Him.²¹

In other words, there could be no religious belief without a prior knowledge of the existence of God. This knowledge, for Crousaz, first came into the mind not from Scripture, but from a metaphysical analysis of causes and effects. Thus, he argued, the human mind was capable of arriving at the knowledge of the existence of God by understanding the necessity of the first cause. Belief in the veracity of the Christian Revelation thus depended, in his view, on a comparison between the contents of Scripture and the idea of God derived from a rational analysis. Pure fideism, Crousaz insinuated, was an untenable philosophical and theological position: either supernatural belief assumed certain rational propositions to be true, in which case it was not entirely irrational, or such belief was entirely unfounded.

While the former outcome would merely undermine the coherence of the fideists' arguments, the latter option would be disastrous for the foundations of Christianity. Indeed, Crousaz asked, if natural reason was insufficient in proving the truth of the Revelation, then how could one distinguish between true faith and mere fanaticism?²² Without reason, how could anyone either prove the sanctity and the truth of the Bible or interpret its words?²³ Crousaz also questioned the certainty which fideists like Huet attached to supernatural faith by invoking the contrast to other revealed religions:

Both the Jew and the Muslim brag and boast about the grace of Divine Revelation that makes them convinced of the truth of their religion. By what right will a Pyrrhonian presume that the Jew and the Muslim are mistaken and that it is he who is correct in his beliefs [while] the others are vainly mistaken?²⁴

If the intensity of devotion and the strength of one's beliefs were the sole criteria of certainty, reasoned Crousaz, how could one argue that Christianity could claim its status as the true religion? Reason alone, not faith, he concluded, could prove the truth of the Christian Revelation and its superiority to other revealed religions. Without such rational proofs, it was neither more nor less certain than other faiths.

Crousaz drew an analogy between Huet's lack of commitment to a philosophical sect and the implications of his view for religion. Huet had argued that he did not wish to adhere to any strict philosophical system because he neither wished to be mistaken in matters nor desired to dispute about matters in which he could reach no certainty.²⁵ Crousaz suggested that, by Huet's

logic, the diversity of religions should have led the learned author of the *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l'esprit humain* to conclude: "I should there not embrace any religion, from fear of erring in my choice, and I will regard them all as equally doubtful."²⁶

Crousaz and other anti-skeptics believed that Pyrrhonism presented a danger not only to religion but also to morality and to the maintenance of a stable society. He argued that while reason provided rational proofs for the existence of God and for the truth of the Christian Revelation, it also guided individuals toward morally virtuous behavior. However, if one assumed that reason could not prove anything with certainty, then on what basis could one judge particular acts as immoral?²⁷ Consequently, any measure of virtue and vice would vanish, while the passions and the drive to fulfill sensory gratification would become the guiding force of all human action.

Crousaz found particular faults with the way in which Bayle's *Dictionnaire* had retold numerous stories of debauchery and impropriety in the most vivid details. He dismissed Bayle's excuse that such examples were merely historical facts and that, as a historian, Bayle was justified in offering these stories to his readers.²⁸ Instead, Crousaz believed, the famous Pyrrhonist had done this in order to entertain his readers and to attract a wider public by offering scandalous tales.²⁹ Far from using these stories in order to make his audience deplore human depravity, Crousaz claimed, "Bayle had walked the imagination of his readers through dangerous ideas."³⁰ Thus, he warned that the *Dictionnaire* furnished new examples of deviance for the *libertins érudits*. Crousaz asked the readers rhetorically:

To what end do uncertainty and the impossibility of freeing oneself from it drive [us], if not to lead us to conclude that men have no advantage with respect to brutes, that the pleasures of the mind are nothing but chimaeras, and that the voice of nature calls upon us to abstain from these tiring daydreams in order to calmly imitate the sensuality of wild beasts?³¹

Indeed, he argued, this devious intention was precisely what made Bayle so popular among the most heterodox minds. "In his own time," he wrote, "Mr. Bayle had eluded the accusations of Pyrrhonism and of atheism, which now make up a great part of his merit in the eyes of his supporters."³² While allowing for the possibility, however improbable, that Bayle's intentions were not malicious, Crousaz nevertheless pointed to the danger of the logical consequences that followed from Bayle's examples of moral depravity and his arguments against rational proofs of religion.³³ Intentionally or not, the *Dictionnaire* became a deadly weapon in the hands of subversive intellectuals.

Pyrrhonism was not only dangerous to religion and to morality, Crousaz claimed, but to the progress of knowledge in general. By questioning the most indubitable principles and by establishing a logical equivalence between the most certain and the most questionable propositions, philosophical skeptics were explicitly and implicitly suggesting that the search for metaphysical, physical, moral, and religious truths was inevitably doomed to failure. "If reason," wrote Crousaz, "is condemned to never be able to assure itself of the truth, it is a waste of time to seek it, and would it not be more worthwhile to amuse oneself by wasting it on the most trivial subjects than on the most important ones?"³⁴ Such an outcome, for him, was the greatest intellectual consequence of the rising popularity of philosophical skepticism. Bayle's critic also repeatedly invoked the contrast between light and darkness, a characteristic juxtaposition in the rhetoric of the Enlightenment. Although he sternly defended religion against the Pyrrhonists, Crousaz perceived a similarity between the goals of religious fanaticism and of philosophical skepticism, suggesting that both sought to cast mankind into the obscurity of ignorance.

Potential Cures

The opponents of skepticism agreed that the remedies to the Pyrrhonist disease were not easy to find. The anonymous correspondent of the *Bibliothèque Germanique* wrote that real Pyrrhonists were so deranged that finding a cure for them was improbable. He questioned whether the skeptics' "derangement was voluntary, whether they took some pleasure in it, whether they stubbornly clung to their opinions, and whether they fed their vanity."³⁵ He noted that it would be impossible to "bring them [the skeptics] back from their confusion" since they purposely try to not understand the words of reason that are offered to them.³⁶ Echoing Crousaz's distaste for the undue preference for rhetoric, the author suggested that one potential cure was in teaching the skeptics to think before they spoke so that they gradually gain respect for the love of truth and for *évidence*.

However, the author remained unconvinced about the possibility of such an outcome, since the skeptics enjoyed contradicting others, purposely fled the truth instead of seeking it, and obstinately refused to accept any arguments that did not confirm their belief in the weakness of human reason. Instead of arguing with the skeptics, he admitted that he merely mused at their ramblings:

I limit myself to listening to them and to instructing myself, by listening to them, in the different deviations to which the human mind is subject and in the confusions to which the passions carry it. I benefit from remarking the sad and shameful effects of idleness, rashness, pride, and sensuality.³⁷

The helpless state of the skeptics' minds evoked the sense that it was an incurable disease, which absolved the author from having to answer the numerous difficulties and paradoxes posed by Bayle and other skeptics.

Crousaz similarly noted that, strictly speaking, committed skeptics could not be cured from their love of contradiction any more than a drunkard or a religious fanatic could be reasoned with. Crousaz held the skeptics' position to be illogical, because he believed that they did not reason in good faith: their love for contradiction and dispute caused them to adopt positions that were at odds even with their own views.³⁸ While Crousaz admitted that no argument, however self-evident or reasonable, was likely to force a committed Pyrrhonist to retract his position, he nevertheless advocated engaging the skeptics in debate instead of punishing them. Such debates, he suggested, could at least unsettle deranged minds in their commitment to universal doubt. The chief goal of such discussion, however, was to reason with those who had not yet fully committed themselves to the intractable position of the skeptics:

All that one should expect is to take advantage of whatever respect there is for reason among those who are weakened by the sophisms of the Pyrrhonists, and to make them taste the clarity that guides to certainty.³⁹

Thus, Crousaz aimed to show the philosophical and practical weaknesses of skepticism to those readers, whom he believed to be in danger of becoming skeptics. By inoculating potential victims, he hoped to prevent the further spread of the Pyrrhonist pestilence. Such a preventative measure was, for Crousaz, far more important and productive than curing already "diseased" skeptics.

The first line of attack, pursued by the author of the *Examen*, involved demonstrating the theoretical inconsistency of the skeptics, whom he believed to be "in perpetual contradiction with themselves."⁴⁰ The greatest logical fault of Pyrrhonism, in Crousaz's view, was that it was not

self-reflexive either in its methods or in its conclusions. In seeking to undermine the powers of human reason, the skeptics, nevertheless, relied on the established rules of logic and on the accepted definitions of terms. For example, argued Crousaz, Sextus Empiricus had maintained that man was composed of mind and body. By what means, he asked, could a skeptic, who claimed that no proposition could be known with certainty, understand the meaning of his own words?⁴¹ How could a skeptic speculate about matters such as truth or certainty, without defining the meaning of these concepts? And would the very act of defining terms such as mind, reason, and truth, as Huet did in his skeptical treatise, not constitute an acceptance of some fundamental assumptions, thereby refuting skepticism?⁴²

Furthermore, Crousaz argued that the skeptics themselves sought to prove the dogmatic claim that true and certain knowledge of the world was unattainable.⁴³ It was in vain, he maintained, that the Pyrrhonists tried to argue that our inability of knowing anything with certainty was itself uncertain: "This proposition 'ALL IS UNCERTAIN' is [either] true or false; if it is false, then you are wrong in maintaining it and the opposite is true; if it is true, then there is some truth."⁴⁴ Thus, Crousaz noted, the skeptics found themselves in an unwinnable position. If they were correct in their assertion (despite the inconsistency of having made a dogmatic statement) that no true and certain knowledge could ever be obtained, then they had articulated the only certain proposition and, consequently, disproved that assertion. In proving the validity of their ultimate conclusion, the skeptics inevitably undermined it and demonstrated that some certain knowledge, however limited, was possible.

In fact, Crousaz disputed, the ultimate conclusion of skeptical philosophy was based on a logical leap. Having observed particular deficiencies of the human mind the skeptics jumped to general observations about its capacities. Using specific examples of mistakes or ambiguities in reasoning, the Pyrrhonists extrapolated a universal conclusion regarding the mind's weakness. For Crousaz, the skeptics argued along the following lines: "Many people were mistaken; therefore one cannot be assured of anything."⁴⁵ This led the Pyrrhonists to mistakenly conclude: "We cannot know anything, since we cannot know everything."⁴⁶ Such deductions appeared to Crousaz to be both excessively drastic and logically invalid.

While skeptics such as Huet denied the possibilities of reaching any certainty in rational investigations, they argued that all knowledge was merely probable.⁴⁷ Crousaz, however, objected to this, claiming that the skeptics could no more reach conclusions about the probable nature of things than they could obtain true and certain knowledge of the world. He reasoned thus:

A Pyrrhonist who reasons in this way may easily recognize that he is contradicting himself, if this disease allows his mind to reflect freely and sincerely. The most probable is that which most resembles that which is true; and how is it possible for me to judge if an opinion has more or less the semblance of being true, unless I know the nature of truth?⁴⁸

In other words, a skeptic who made judgments about probabilities had to abandon his perpetual doubt and to accept implicitly that human reason had the capacity for acquiring some knowledge. It was only out of extreme insincerity, Crousaz noted, that a skeptic could deny the high probability or the moral certainty of universally accepted propositions.

At the same time, Crousaz agreed that one could make use of the skeptical method in many investigations. Indeed, he even supported a moderate version of mitigated and partial skepticism with regard to questions that seemed difficult or impossible to solve. He argued that such moderate doubt would of benefit in preventing any foundational skeptical conviction:

A prudent suspension [of judgment], far from aiding Pyrrhonism, is a great means to prevent it. It is from having been too credulous and, through this, having been filled with a thousand errors and uncertainties, that the impatient minds choose the side of believing that [all] examination is useless, instead of making an effort to retrace their steps and to study prudently...But from the fact that such a suspension is appropriate in some cases, it does not follow that it should be universal.⁴⁹

By suggesting that certain aspects of philosophical skepticism could be used in critical scholarship, Crousaz attempted to admit the usefulness of the methods while refusing the ultimate conclusions associated with them. By contrasting sensible skepticism with the radical Pyrrhonism he hoped to portray his opponents as unreasonable fanatics.

Conclusion

The turn toward the reliance on moral certainty and probability was one common solution for thinkers who opposed extreme skepticism. On the one hand, such a turn served as an admission that the Pyrrhonist claim about the impossibility of obtaining complete metaphysical certainty was correct. Unable to disprove the skeptics completely, their opponents had to cede ground and admit that complete epistemological certainty was unattainable. On the other hand, the anti-skeptics did push back against the claim that nothing could be known with complete certainty, by suggesting that such certainty was not necessary for philosophical or practical enquiries.

The attempts to portray extreme skepticism as a disease, a derangement of the mind, and a corruption of the heart provided several advantages to the anti-skeptics. First, by using an *ad hominem* argument and portraying the skeptics as unreasonable, insincere, and deranged, their opponents attempted to appeal to the reading public and present skeptical claims as arguments that were impossible to answer because they were inconsistent and purposely misleading. By discrediting the sources of Pyrrhonist attacks, the anti-skeptics could relieve themselves of the need to disprove the various arguments of their adversaries. Second, by equating Pyrrhonism with a dangerous disease that was spreading through society like an epidemic, opponents of skepticism could focus on the hypothetical consequences of adopting skepticism as a philosophical position, rather than focusing on the arguments of the skeptics. The enumeration of the negative social effects, as seen most evidently in von Haller's text, moved attention away from philosophical matters, and raised the stakes of the debate. According to the anti-skeptics, the issue was not just philosophical truth, but the very survival of society. Third, the conflation of Pyrrhonism with irreligion, atheism, libertinism, and materialism allowed the apologists to present skepticism as the underlying intellectual cause of these various symptoms. Such an association made the case against skepticism all the more credible to the reading public.

It would not be unfair to say that Crousaz, Haller, and other anti-skeptics were, in some ways, preaching to the choir: their descriptions of the moral depravity and of the intellectual malady of the skeptics reinforced the notions that the opponents of Pyrrhonism had already associated with it.⁵⁰ At the same time, in order to be effective, the opponents of skepticism needed to address a broader audience to make skepticism seem unappealing. They mostly agreed about that fact that fully convinced skeptics could never be cured from their "disease," but they sought to prevent the apparent growth in the ranks of the Pyrrhonists.

Despite the anti-skeptics' best efforts or, at least in part, because of them, Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* continued to enjoy enormous popularity in the intellectual world of the eighteenth century. Ironically, in seeking to refute his opponent, Crousaz cited large sections of Bayle's work, exposing it to an even wider audience. In 1734, just a year after the publication

of Crousaz's *Examen*, a fifth edition of the enormous four-tome folio *Dictionnaire* was printed in Amsterdam.⁵¹ Bayle's views on religious toleration and his critiques of established opinions made him a wildly popular figure in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁵² Indeed, during the course of the century his *opus magnum* became one of the most widely owned seventeenth-century texts in French private libraries.⁵³

However, the efforts of the anti-skeptics were not entirely in vain. While the *philosophes* appreciated the critical spirit of philosophical skepticism, particularly its attacks on religious and philosophical dogmatism, few Enlightenment thinkers truly embraced the ultimate conclusions of Pyrrhonism. In the *Entretien entre D'Alembert et Diderot*, Denis Diderot declared to the imaginary D'Alembert:

In that case, there is no such thing as a skeptic, since, apart from mathematical questions which admit of no uncertainty, there is for and against in all questions. The scales, then, are never even, and it is impossible that they should not hang more heavily on the side we believe to have the greatest probability.⁵⁴

This attitude, articulated by one of the most radical Enlightenment thinkers, encapsulates the spirit of the various refutations of Pyrrhonism. Although the critical attitude of Bayle and other skeptics remained an important weapon in the arsenal of the *philosophe*, few Enlightenment thinkers would argue that the human mind was incapable of knowing anything with certainty. The methods of philosophical skepticism provided the *philosophes* with ability to overcome their opponents, but these arguments could seldom be used to construct new epistemological or ontological systems. Indeed, the rational pragmatism of Crousaz and other anti-skeptics would prove to be far more in line with the growing confidence in the powers of human reason.

References

- ¹ For more on the revival of philosophical skepticism see, for example: Popkin, R.H., *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Popkin, R.H., Schmitt, C., eds., *Scepticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Wiesbaden: In Kommission bei Otto Harrassowitz, 1987); Popkin, R.H., Vanderjagt, A.J., eds., *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Laursen, J.C., *The politics of skepticism in the ancients, Montaigne, Hume, and Kant* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), Brahami, F., *Le travail du scepticisme: Montaigne, Bayle, Hume* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001); Paganini, G., ed., *The Return of Scepticism: From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003); Bernier, M.A., Charles, S., eds., *Scepticism et modernité* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2005); Neto, J.R.M., Paganini, G., Laursen, J.C., eds., *Scepticism in the Modern Age: Building on the Work of Richard Popkin* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).
- ² Huet, P-D., *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l'esprit humain* (Amsterdam: Henri du Sauzet, 1723), 14-16.
- ³ "Réponse à la Lettre sur le progrès du Pyrrhonisme", *Bibliothèque Germanique XX* (1730): 116-117. "Ces maux ne se bornent pas à un petit nombre de personnes; c'est une Contagion qui se répand & qui fait presque un ravage universel."
- ⁴ "Réponse à la Lettre sur le progrès du Pyrrhonisme", (1730): 144.
- ⁵ "Réponse à la Lettre sur le progrès du Pyrrhonisme", (1730): 136. "N'importe, il se flâte d'être en état d'attaquer tout le monde, il recite de memoire de grands lambeaux de son Auteur, il ne les entend qu'à demi, il les estropie souvent, mais sa confiance n'en est point ébranlée. Son autorité & son air de persuasion impose à un autre ignorant qui, à son tour, affermit celui qui l'a trompé, dans ses erreurs & dans la fantasia où il est de se donner pour un habile homme. La contagion se répand de cette maniere ; on n'apprehende plus d'être dans l'erreur, parce qu'on y voit beaucoup de gens, & qu'après avoir été trompé par un autre, on a trompé à son tour un troisième."
- ⁶ For more on Crousaz see La Harpe, J.E.V. de, *Jean-Pierre De Crousaz (1663-1750) et le conflit des idées au siècle des lumières* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955); Mayer, J., "Crousaz: Critique éclairée, mais peu

éclairante, du scepticisme au XVIIIe siècle”, *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 136 (2004): 47-55; Häselser, J., “Succès et refus des positions de Crousaz dans le Refuge huguenot”, *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 136 (2004): 57-66; Häselser, J., “Formey et Crousaz, ou comment fallait-il combattre le scepticisme?”, in G. Paganini, (2003), 449-461; Réat, P., *Le "Dictionnaire" de Bayle et la lutte philosophique au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Les Belles lettres, 1971), 154-162.

⁷ Crousaz, J-P. de, *Examen du pyrrhonisme ancien et moderne* (The Hague: Pierre de Hondt, 1733), 7. “...dérangement de l'esprit et du cœur...”

⁸ Crousaz, J-P. de, (1733), 70.

⁹ Crousaz, J-P. de, (1733), Preface [2], 2-3.

¹⁰ Crousaz, J-P. de, (1733), 17. “L'esprit de Dispute qui régnoit chés les Grecs contribua encore beaucoup à l'établissement du Pyrrhonisme.”

¹¹ Crousaz, J-P. de, (1733), 20. “...on a fait de la Philosophie, & ensuite de la Théologie, un Art de parler beaucoup & de penser peu, de n'entrer point dans les vuës des autres, de prendre leurs pensées à rebours, & de ne s'entendre pas soi-même.”

¹² Crousaz, J-P. de, (1733), 357. “Un homme qui s'étoit trompé plusieurs fois, se décourageoit, & pour n'être plus obligé à se retracter, il se bornoit à trouver des vraisemblances. Ensuite le ridicule de ceux qui s'opiniatroient dans leurs erreurs, l'affermissoit toujours plus dans le parti du doute. Voilà comment le Pyrrhonisme s'établissoit dans ces temps-là, & s'établi encore aujourd'hui...”

¹³ Crousaz, J-P. de, (1733), 23. “L'auteur de ce Système, & une partie de ceux qui en avoient admirer l'Art & qui l'avoient embrassé avec un grand Zèle, venant à y trouver du faux ou de l'incertain, ne peuvent se consoler que par la pensée que l'esprit humain se fatigue inutilement à chercher la Verité, & que personne ne la trouvera jamais surement, puis qu'ils ne l'ont pas trouvée eux-mêmes.”

¹⁴ Haller, A. von, “Discours préliminaire” in J.H.S. Formey, *Triomphe de l'évidence* (Berlin: Lange, 1756), i. “Ces défauts & ces vices favorisent tant l'Incrédulité; elle les favorise à son tour, & la contagion de ce mal est si palpable que l'insensibilité là-dessus ressembleroit aux symptômes d'une gangrène mortelle.”

¹⁵ Haller, A. von, (1756), i and Crousaz, (1733), Preface [3], 1-2.

¹⁶ Bayle, P., “Eclaircissement sur les athées” in *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 2e édition (Rotterdam: Reinier Leers, 1702), t.III, 3136-3140.

¹⁷ Haller, A. von, (1756), viii-xiii.

¹⁸ Haller, A. von, (1756), 14-15. “Je crois qu'il est assez démontré que cette nouvelle sagesse est la ruïne de la vie sociale. Elle ne donne pour objet à chaque homme que son bonheur particulier, & un bonheur purement sensuel. Elle met perpétuellement en opposition les forces de tous les hommes, & il doit en résulter en état de guerre, & d'inimitié universelle, que Hobbes a reconnu sincèrement en être la suite, & qui ne peut finir que lorsque la Religion viendra ramener la Paix.”

¹⁹ “Réponse à la Lettre sur le progrès du Pyrrhonisme”, (1730) : 117-119, 128-129.

²⁰ From an announcement of Crousaz's forthcoming work in the *Bibliothèque Germanique* XVIII (1729): 99-100. “S'il [Bayle] a prévû ces effets ou s'ils ne sont dûs qu'à l'abus qu'on a fait de ce qu'il a composé dans de tout autres desseins, ce n'est pas là une question dont l'Examen soit le plus important & le plus pressant, qu'on ait à faire sur ce sujet. Quand le feu est allumé dans quelques Maisons & en danger de se repandre dans tout une Ville, il faut se hâter de l'éteindre, au lieu de s'amuser à disputer, s'il a pour premiere cause l'imprudence ou la malice de ses Auteurs.” Crousaz used identical terminology in his private correspondence: BNF. Ms. Fr. 22227, ff.37r, “Letter from Crousaz to Bignon”, [1730].

²¹ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 233. “Ceux donc qui travaillent à l'établissement du Pyrrhonisme tâchent inutilement de couvrir leur mauvais dessein, en disant qu'ils n'ont d'autre but que d'humilier la raison...à faire de la FOI son tout, car pour avoir la Foi, & pour se conduire sur ce que la parole de Dieu nous ordonne de croire & de faire, il faut premièrement s'être assuré que ce Livre sur lequel nous nous reposons, ce Livre, l'objet de notre Foi, le fondement de notre certitude, est très-certainement un Livre qui nous apprend la volonté de Dieu; Pour cela il est encore nécessaire d'avoir déjà quelque idée de Dieu, afin de pouvoir s'assurer que ce livre est de lui, en comparant ce que nous y apprenons avec son Idée.”

²² Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 230. “...comment on peut distinguer une Foi véritable d'avec le Fanatisme & les égaremens de l'imagination.”

²³ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 350-351.

²⁴ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 346. "Le Juif & le Mahométan se vantent, & se flattent l'un & l'autre d'une Grace d'une Impression Divine, qui les rend convaincus de la vérité de leur Religion. De quel Droit un Pyrrhonien présuamera-t-il que le Juif & le Mahométan se trompent, & que c'est lui qui est favorisé de ces impressions dont les autres se flattent vainement?"

²⁵ Huet, P.D., (1723), 8.

²⁶ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 750. "La Logique des Pyrrhoniens & les Maximes de Mr. Huet propose à la page 5 de sa Préface, nous conduisent directement à cette conclusion... Je n'embrasserai donc aucune Religion, de peur de me tromper dans mon choix & je les regarderai toutes comme également douteuses."

²⁷ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 209, 357.

²⁸ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 202-203, 205, 217-218.

²⁹ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 219.

³⁰ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 212. "Mr. Bayle a promené l'imagination de ses Lecteurs sur des idées dangereuses"

³¹ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 194. "...à quoi conduit l'incertitude & l'impuissance de s'en tirer, si ce n'est à nous faire conclure que les hommes n'ont point d'avantages par-dessus les bêtes, que les plaisirs de l'esprit ne sont que des chimères, & que la voix de la nature nous appelle à quitter ces rêveries fatigantes, pour imiter tranquillement la sensualité des animaux brutes."

³² Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 231. "Mr. Bayle éduoit alors les accusations de Pyrrhonisme & d'Athéisme qui sont aujourd'hui une grande partie de son mérite dans l'esprit de ses Partisans..."

³³ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 239.

³⁴ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 202. "Mais c'est là une suite du Pyrrhonisme; si la raison est condamnée à ne pouvoir jamais s'assurer du vrai, c'est perdre son temps que de le chercher, & autant vaut-il s'amuser à le perdre sur les sujets les plus minces, que sur les plus importants."

³⁵ "Réponse à la Lettre sur le progrès du Pyrrhonisme", (1730), 137. "Je les plains, & je les plaindrois encore plus, si leur dérangement n'étoit pas volontaire, s'ils n'y prenoient pas plaisir, s'ils ne s'y obstinoient pas & s'ils n'en faisoient pas l'aliment de leur vanité."

³⁶ "Réponse à la Lettre sur le progrès du Pyrrhonisme", (1730), 137-138. "...les ramener de leurs égarements."

³⁷ "Réponse à la Lettre sur le progrès du Pyrrhonisme", (1730), 140-141. "Je me borne à les écouter, & à m'instruire, en les écoutant, des différens écarts auxquels l'Esprit humain est sujet & des égarements où les Passions l'entraînent. Je profite en remarquant les tristes & les honteux effets de l'oisiveté, de la précipitation, de l'orgueil & de la sensualité."

³⁸ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), Préface [2], 2-3.

³⁹ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 12. "Tout ce à quoi on doit s'attendre, c'est de profiter de quelque respect qu'ont encore pour la Raison ceux qui se sentent ébranlés par les sophismes des Pyrrhoniens, & de leur faire goûter l'évidence qui conduit à la Certitude." Crousaz makes similar claims on pages 77-78.

⁴⁰ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 11. "...en perpetuelle contradiction avec eux-mêmes."

⁴¹ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 74.

⁴² Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 751.

⁴³ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 28.

⁴⁴ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 771. "Cette Proposition TOUT EST INCERTAIN, est vraie ou fausse, / Si elle est fausse vous avez tort de la soutenir & de plus le contraire est vrai / Si elle est vraie, il y a donc de la Vérité."

⁴⁵ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 764. "Beaucoup des gens se sont trompés, Donc on ne peut s'assurer de rien."

⁴⁶ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 70. "On ne peut rien savoir, pendant qu'on ne saura pas tout."

⁴⁷ Huet, P.D., (1723), 20-21.

⁴⁸ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 358. "Un Pyrrhonien qui raisonne ainsi, peut aisément reconnoître qu'il se contredit, si cette maladie laisse son esprit en état de réfléchir avec liberté & avec sincérité. Le plus Vraisemblable est-ce qui ressemble le plus à ce qui est Vrai ; & par où me sera-t-il possible de juger si un sentiment a plus ou moins l'air d'être vrai, à moins que je ne connoisse le Caractère du vrai."

⁴⁹ Crousaz, J.P. de, (1733), 378. "Une prudente suspension, loin de favoriser le Pyrrhonisme, est un grand moyen de le prévenir; C'est avoir été d'abord trop Crédules, & s'être par là remplis de mille erreurs, & de mille incertitudes, que des esprits impatiens au lieu de se donner la peine de revenir sur leurs pas, pour

examiner prudemment, prennent le parti de croire que le l'Examen seroit inutile...Mais de ce que la suspension est à propos dans certains cas, il ne s'ensuit pas qu'elle doive être universelle.”

⁵⁰ Mayer, J., (2004): 54-55.

⁵¹ Rétaf, P., (1971), 476.

⁵² O'Cathasaigh, S., “Bayle and Locke on Toleration”, in M. Magdelaine, C. Pitassi, R. Whelan, A. McKenna, eds., *De l'humanisme aux Lumières, Bayle et le Protestantisme: Mélanges en l'honneur d'Elisabeth Labrousse* (Paris: Universitas, 1996), 688, 690. See also: Labrousse, E., *Pierre Bayle* (La Haye: M. Nijhoff, 1963); Levine, A., ed., *Early Modern Skepticism and the Origins of Toleration* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 1999).

⁵³ Popkin, R.H., “New Views on the Role of Skepticism in the Enlightenment”, *Modern Language Quarterly* 53 (September 1992): 283-284.

⁵⁴ Diderot, D., *Entretien entre D'Alembert et Diderot*, in *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, ed. A. Tourneux (Paris: Garnier, 1875), II, 119-120. “En ce cas, il n'y a donc point de sceptique, puisqu'à l'exception des questions de mathématiques, qui ne comportent pas la moindre incertitude, il y a du pour et du contre dans toutes les autres. La balance n'est donc jamais égale, et il est impossible qu'elle ne penche pas du côté où nous croyons le plus de vraisemblance.”