

# **Cleaning the Slate of Knowledge. Pyrrhonian Scepticism in Theology and Science in 17th Century France.**

ECST XII Sigtuna TOPIC: Knowledge and understanding in Science and Theology

Author: Per Lind  
PhD Candidate, Lund University

Postal address:  
Centre for Theology and Religious Studies (Hämtställe 36)  
Allhelgona Kyrkogata 8  
22362 Lund, Sweden  
email: per.lind@teol.lu.se

## **Outline:**

*In this paper some applications of Pyrrhonian scepticism in the intellectual arena of 17<sup>th</sup> century France are briefly explored. These applications belong to a bookprinter (Henri Estienne), a theologian (Pierre Charron), and a scientist (Pierre Gassendi). It is the author's regretful contention that even the proponents of pyrrhonian scepticism seem to think that the inherent destructivity of pyrrhonist doubt needs to be guided according to various principles external to pyrrhonism, whereas in fact pyrrhonism has a fairly good grip on itself. Also, it is noted that with pyrrhonism, the otherwise supposedly disparate natures of science and religion are treated as equally rationally ungrounded.*

## **Keywords:**

EPISTEMOLOGY, SCEPTICISM, KNOWLEDGE, PYRRHONISM, SCIENCE, THEOLOGY, 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY, EMPIRICISM, FIDEISM

## **Full text:**

It is not uncommon for philosophers of religion to analyze and compare the respective truth-claims of science and religion. In some cases the existence of a common epistemological ground of sorts between the two is asserted; mainly, it would seem, in order for them both to be counted as equally legitimate knowledge strategies. Most of the time, though, the existence of such a ground is denied. It is also, philosophers being what they are, a point of particular disagreement just what an epistemological ground amounts to in the first place. Should it be constructed from empirical, rational, individual, social, psychological, anthropological, physiological, biochemical, neurological, political or perhaps even spiritual considerations? Naturally, the opinions differ. What is generally agreed upon, on the other hand, is that the establishment of epistemological grounds is a good and desirable thing, sorting among the premium employments of philosophy. The danger involved, of ending up suffocating aspects of reality considered less epistemologically robust under the metaphorical pillow of others considered more so, is nominally acknowledged, but in practice disregarded as something of

naturally larger concern for those who are in the wrong, i.e. thinkers of an orientation different from one's own. Consequently, acts of 'epistemological suffocation' are numerous and varied: The empirical is sometimes understood solely or primarily in terms of the neurological, the rational in terms of the political, the spiritual in those of the psychological and so on. Along the same lines, religion is sometimes viewed as a bad kind of science, and science is sometimes viewed as a bad kind of religion.

With the ancient sceptical school of Pyrrhonism, this is positively not so. Here, the establishment of epistemological grounds is considered to express, not the greatness of the human spirit, but merely intellectual vanity. Literally pulling in the opposite direction, pyrrhonism would much rather speak of a common epistemological 'unground' between science and religion, should the subject arise, than of a ground. From a pyrrhonist standpoint, everything is ultimately ungrounded, and human wisdom is never entitled to go beyond the epistemological zero-point of *appearances* (φαινόμενα). Accordingly, the seemingly inherent lure of conceptual thought to do just that and hungrily reach for the supposedly real nature of things is kept in severe check by the negative method of scepticism, which opposes every proposition with another proposition of equal weight. Emphatically, this motivation of remaining with the appearances is what the infamous 'denials of everything' normally associated with scepticism stems from. The goal of the pyrrhonist sceptic is to acquire inner balance through ceasing to *dogmatize* about reality, not through denying it outright. The undisputed source book of pyrrhonean scepticism, Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, actually makes this point very clear, right from very first pages.<sup>1</sup>

Though clearly present already in the antique sources, such instrumental perspectives on the pyrrhonist doubt has been strangely reinvented by many of the later proponents of pyrrhonism. Even the renowned sceptic David Hume, who most certainly should have known better, condemned pyrrhonism as being "excessive", while maintaining, on the other hand, that when "corrected by common sense and reflection" the destructive power of pyrrhonism was actually useful.<sup>2</sup> In this paper we shall have a brief look at three similar, but lesser known

---

<sup>1</sup> There are several editions of this work. See for example Sextus Empiricus: *Outlines of Pyrrhonism/Translated by R.G. Bury*, Harvard UP (Loeb Classical Library), Cambridge, Mass 1933, pp. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Hume, David: *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1777), Leeds Electronic Text Centre, URL = <<http://www.etext.leeds.ac.uk/hume/ehu/chupbsb.htm>>, p. 158, 161. It is remarkable that Hume argues just as if

instances in which the apparent destructivity of pyrrhonian scepticism was put to use, all of them set in the intellectual arena of France, roughly around the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

According to the late Richard Popkin of Columbia University, at this time and place pyrrhonism made footprints in the ongoing developments of religion, science and philosophy to a degree unparalleled in modern history.<sup>3</sup> The first example concerns a book printer, the second a theologian, and the third a scientist.

## **1. Henri Estienne**

As indicated, the notion of somehow *domesticating* the allegedly rogue pyrrhonist doubt, and marshalling its intellectual resources of criticism for causes considered exterior to itself in no way originates from Hume. In fact, pyrrhonism has been subject to this view of perilous utility ever since its reappearance on the intellectual map of Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In 1562, when French book printer Henri Estienne (1528-1598) was about to publish the first Latin edition of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, he apparently felt that he owed the reader his reasons for publishing this material, that seemed to have “declared war on philosophy”.<sup>4</sup> In the preface of the said edition, Estienne explains that the aim of the sceptical arguments is simply to humble the pride and rash dogmatism of philosophers, and not to annihilate entirely the aspirations of human reason. He assures the reader that he considers Sextus’ arguments more “subtle” than true, with his main point evidently being that there is no need to fear any destructive epistemological consequences of this scepticism. Truth cannot be concealed by a lie, Estienne argues, no more than a cloud can remove the light of the sun. Moreover, he goes on to say that “...no matter how much the truth is attacked, it will always return with a new light, just like the hand that has held snow directly afterwards only gets warmer thereof.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly the implication here is, again, that scepticism, even if not exactly true, still can be of instrumental value, and actually work in the service of truth, albeit in its own strangely backward way. Precisely through persuading us, Estienne seems to think, the ‘subtle lies’ of

---

pyrrhonism itself did not in fact have a lot to say on “common sense and reflection.” The truth is, pyrrhonism was in no need of his help in the matter. See for example Sextus Empiricus (1933), pp. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Popkin, Richard: *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, Oxford UP, New York 2003 (1964, 1979)

<sup>4</sup> “...celui qui a déclaré la guerre à la philosophie”. Quoted from Grenier & Goron: *Oeuvres Choisies de Sextus Empiricus*, Aubier (Bibliothèque Philosophique), Paris 1948, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> “Tu crains peut-être que la vérité nous soit cachée par un mensonge? C’est comme si tu cragnais qu’un nuage nous enlevât la lumière du soleil. La vérité a beau être attaquée, elle reparait avec une nouvelle lumière, comme la main qui a tenu la neige n’en est que plus chaude aussitôt après.” Quoted from Grenier & Goron (1948), p. 24.

pyrrhonian scepticism can, by their sheer contrast with perceived reality, verily show us where and what the truth is not.

Be they true or subtle, however, the arguments of pyrrhonian scepticism, once published, soon came to have a tremendous impact. Through the popular essays of Michel de Montaigne, who read and was heavily influenced by Estienne's edition of Sextus Empiricus, pyrrhonian scepticism managed to reach the learned circles of the time almost in their entirety, regardless of creed and nationality.<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare, for one, most certainly read Montaigne's essays, and is also considered by some to have been distinctly affected by their pyrrhonist trait.<sup>7</sup> Concerning the pyrrhonist influence on modern philosophy, Berkeley philosopher Benson Mates goes so far as to talk of "... probably the clearest case of major influence in the entire history of philosophy".<sup>8</sup> This may very well be the case. Undeniably, pyrrhonism was big in France in the first formative years of modern philosophy (the early 17<sup>th</sup> century) just as France was big in philosophy. Modern philosophy is, in this view, mainly a series of answers to questions asked by pyrrhonian scepticism. Needless to say, René Descartes' rather ungallant straw man duel with and self-proclaimed victory over "the doubt of the sceptics", essentially through the nowadays world-famous maxim of *Cogito ergo sum*, was a big help in this regard.<sup>9</sup>

## **2. Pierre Charron**

Interestingly, it was a theologian, not a philosopher, who, next to Montaigne, contributed the most to the proliferation of pyrrhonian scepticism. Pyrrhonist theologian Pierre Charron (1541-1603), was a close friend of Montaigne's, so close, in fact, that the latter adopted him as a son and in effect bequeathed to him the right to bear his coat of arms.<sup>10</sup> It is generally agreed that Charron was Montaigne's disciple in matters of philosophy, however to what extent is debated. As one might have guessed, being both a theologian and a friend of Montaigne, Charron essentially brought pyrrhonism into Catholicism, linking the sceptical

---

<sup>6</sup> Popkin (2003), pp. 44, and also the foreword of Grenier & Goron: *Oeuvres Choisies de Sextus Empiricus*, Aubier (Bibliothèque Philosophique), Paris 1948

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, George Coffin: *Shakespeare's Debt to Montaigne*, (Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass 1925), Bell, Millicent: *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*, Yale UP, New Haven 2003

<sup>8</sup> Sextus Empiricus: *The Sceptic Way: Sextus Empiricus' Outlines of Pyrrhonism/ translation, with introduction and commentary by Benson Mates*, New York 1996, p 4. On the same page, Mates also states, referring to the works of Sextus Empiricus, that "... nearly every argument and many of the examples that have dominated epistemology ever since the Renaissance are to be found in these works."

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from Popkin (2003), p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> Charron, Jean: *The "Wisdom" of Pierre Charron*, Chapel Hill 1960, p. 17, and Popkin (2003), p. 57

arguments of antiquity to the negative theologies of the Christian mystical tradition. More to the point, he saw a use for the arguments of pyrrhonian scepticism in fighting various heretical knowledge claims, especially those of Calvinists.

This brutal humbling of human reason, brought forward in his 1596 work *Les Trois Véritez*, of course meant that Charron had to look elsewhere in order to find a foundation for his own theology. Thus, in the less polemical and more philosophical work *La Sagesse*, first published in 1601, he demonstrated the hows and whys of divine revelation being the sole foundation of faith, as well as presenting a stand-alone system of ethics. Here, the sceptical attitude is presented as more helpful than anything else in religion, since it empties the soul of all opinions and makes it, quoting Popkin, “‘blank, naked and ready’ before God.”<sup>11</sup> According to the pyrrhonist theology of Charron, then, divine revelation, in principle understood as the Catholic Church, catches the best hold in a soul that is drained of all perceived truth by the beforehand practice of scepticism. Down the same road, Charron cleverly concluded that the sceptic is always safe from the danger of heresy, since heresy by its very nature requires opinions, and the only opinions the pyrrhonist Christian can have are, quite simply, those that God chooses to impose on him. Somewhat paradoxically, for a time these radical views made Father Pierre Charron equally popular with the free-thinking intellectual avant-garde of the time, the so-called *Libertins érudits*, as with the strongly conservative theological forces of the Counter-Reformation.<sup>12</sup>

### **3. Pierre Gassendi**

Our last pyrrhonist belongs to the absolute forerunners of science and the scientific outlook, even though he was until recently more remembered as one of Descartes main critics and a great admirer of Epicurus. In his own time, however, Gassendi was a central figure. He knew both Descartes and Hobbes, and influenced such thinkers as Leibniz, Locke and Newton.<sup>13</sup>

As a member of the so called *Tétrade*, a famous, some would say infamous, foursome of freethinkers (the other members being Guy Patin, Gabriel Naudé and La Mothe Le Vayer<sup>14</sup>), and a close friend of Marin Mersenne, who aided and corresponded with most of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Popkin (2003), p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Popkin (2003) p. 57-63

<sup>13</sup> Lolordo, Antonia: *Pierre Gassendi and the Birth of Early Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2007, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> See the untitled review by Mary Elisabeth Storer of René Pintards classic *Le Libertinage Érudit dans la première moitié du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 61, No. 7 (Nov., 1946), p. 482. URL = <http://www.jstor.org/stable/view/2908734?seq=1> (080415)

scientists of the day, Gassendi had both ears to the ground in the intellectual community. As a scientist, he was the obvious alternative to Descartes in the budding area of non-Aristotelian physics. In addition, he was a prominent astronomer who adhered to the Copernican worldview just like Galileo, for whom he had a profound respect, despite a disagreement concerning the nature of comets. As an astronomer, Gassendi is renowned for having observed the transit of Mercury across the Sun in 1631. This observation confirmed, in his mind, the Copernican system so famously advocated by Galileo. Because of his deep respect for Galileo, and most likely also because of the relative uniformity of their theories, the condemnation of Galileo in 1633 was a total and complete shock to Gassendi.<sup>15</sup>

Like his namesake Charron, Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) was a man of the Catholic Church. Young Gassendi early on became familiar with such sceptical thinkers as Sextus Empiricus, Erasmus, Montaigne and especially Charron, having grown to dislike Aristotelianism already in his student years. He considered Aristotelianism lacking in a great many respects, deeming it a perversion of the study of truth, “unworthy of the title Aristotelian and of the name philosophy”, taught by “credulous, arrogant, supercilious and presumptuous fools”. Worse still, the teachers of Aristotelianism neglected the knowledge and wisdom of life Gassendi found in the likes of Cicero, Seneca, Lucretius and Plato.<sup>16</sup> Hence, once he became a lecturer in philosophy himself, Gassendi taught Aristotelianism in a manner not quite orthodox, always making sure to incorporate the contemporary proceedings of the various fields of science. Also, following the example of Sextus Empiricus, but publicly referring to Aristotle’s own teaching method, he generously presented counter-arguments along with the Aristotelian dogmas.<sup>17</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Gassendi’s 1624 work *Exercitationes Paradoxicæ adversus Aristoteleos* was a vehement sceptical attack on the established and reputedly infallible Aristotelian doctrine, which in his view had held truth, and consequently science, captive for far too long. Not only had the Aristotelians deliberately neglected the genuine wisdom of antiquity, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, the field of mathematics and the sciences of observation and experiment. “They examine nothing in this world”, cried Gassendi, “When they enter their

---

<sup>15</sup> Brundell (1987) p. 30-47

<sup>16</sup> Brundell, Barry: *Pierre Gassendi. From Aristotelianism to a New Natural Philosophy*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1987, p. 15-16.

<sup>17</sup> Brundell (1987), p. 25.

Schools they enter into another nature which has nothing in common with this nature outside.”<sup>18</sup> It has been pointed out that Gassendi was, in many ways, a typical renaissance humanist, but this cry, to my ears, definitely sounds like the cry of a scientist.<sup>19</sup>

Significantly, as he was more or less a devout follower of Charron in matters of theology, it was in the field of science that Gassendi’s pyrrhonism really shone forth. If Charron had used pyrrhonism to pave the way for divine revelation in the soul, Gassendi made pyrrhonism pave the way for the ‘revelation’ of empirical science in the mind. As previously stated, pyrrhonism is really all about remaining with the appearances, and never let one’s own ideas take the place of reality itself, no matter how true or otherwise compelling they might appear. Accordingly, in Gassendi’s pyrrhonist view, all we can ever hope to do in science is to theorize about appearances. While his sceptic war on Aristotelianism in some ways can be said to have become less intense as his life progressed – though his lifelong attempted vindication of Epicurus system of ethics and atomistic physics surely was aimed to replace the old order – Gassendi never grew to tolerate any kind of knowledge claims about reality. He stayed true to the sceptic insights of his youth, reported in the *Exercitationes*:

After I had come to see how great a gulf there is between the human mind and Nature’s genius, what else could I conclude than that the intimate causes of natural phenomena totally escape the power of human discernment? Therefore I became upset and ashamed at the foolishness and arrogance of the dogmatic philosophers...<sup>20</sup>

Science, for Gassendi, doesn’t approach any kind of external truth or knowledge of essences independent of appearances, but merely, in a way, adds to the world of appearances, in providing clearer, and therefore more satisfactory and likely models of explanation of the manifest behaviour of things. Scientific progress is done *within* the world of appearances, not through going beyond them. For how could we use appearances to go beyond appearances? After all, all we can do to verify theories is observe; that is, bluntly put, to give heed to what appears. The world of appearances is true *as far as appearances go*, but for a pyrrhonist, that is emphatically not beyond itself. Therefore, there can be literally no end to science, in Gassendi’s view, at least not as long as the goal is to conquer the external world of essences. Having seen the catastrophic consequences of Aristotelian scientific dogmatism, Gassendi

---

<sup>18</sup> Quoted from Brundell (1987), p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Brundell (1987), p.19.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted from Brundell (1987), p. 19.

arguably saw a new, obstinately open-ended framework for empirical scientific research in scepticism.<sup>21</sup> For the contemporary mind, the desired attitude of pyrrhonian scepticism, i.e. that of not committing to any particular model of reality, is of course not hard to relate to the ideal of scientific neutrality.

### ***Concluding reflections***

As one who sympathizes with the objectives and argumentative techniques of pyrrhonian scepticism, it is a bit frustrating to always find that not only the enemies, but even the *proponents* of pyrrhonism generally ignore the natively instrumental nature of the pyrrhonist doubt, and consequently, like David Hume, find pyrrhonism overly destructive, and in dire need of a guiding philosophical hand. Now, if the goal of pyrrhonism actually was to cause existential imbalance and mental turmoil, then it would indeed be consistent with such a reading. However, it is not. On the contrary, the object of pyrrhonism is existential balance and peace of mind. This is of course violently inconsistent with the popular opinion according to which pyrrhonism is an epistemological dead end, leading only to ever increasing uncertainty and doubt. Nonetheless, it is a fact. In reality, there is no need to put some kind of lid on pyrrhonian scepticism – it comes complete with its own built-in lid! The pyrrhonian sceptics of antiquity were not nihilists, because *they did not deny appearances*. In actual fact, they adhered to them, albeit, as Sextus puts it, “undogmatically”.<sup>22</sup> After all, if you are not entitled to say what’s objectively, externally real, how could you possibly be entitled to say what isn’t? However, this is not the place to discuss the consistency of Pyrrhonism. The object of this paper is merely to stress the perhaps long-forgotten fact that philosophical scepticism was not only alive and well during the founding of modern science and the reformulation of Christian faith in the so-called Counter-Reformation, but actually deeply involved in both areas.

An enticing point of interest, in my view, is the relatively similar use of appearances as an epistemological zero-point in science and religion. The notion of Father Charron’s, for example, that the only opinions a Christian Pyrrhonist can possibly have are those that God imposes on him, is in some ways remarkably akin to the notion of Hume’s, that

---

<sup>21</sup> On the significance of the concept of clearness, as opposed to the occult or obscure, in Gassendi’s system, see Brundell (1987), pp. 108. Unlike Brundell, Lolordo (2007) argues for a progressive interpretation of Gassendi’s work. On this view, Gassendi abandons the scepticism of his youth, and gradually becomes more epistemologically positive as his philosophy develops.

<sup>22</sup> Sextus Empiricus (1933), p. 17.

...the great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of scepticism, is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life. These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools; where it is, indeed, difficult, if not impossible, to refute them. But as soon as they leave the shade, and by the presence of the real objects, which actuate our passions and sentiments, are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined sceptic in the same condition as other mortals.<sup>23</sup>

In both cases some other force than the intellect compels the sceptic to think and act in a certain way. With Hume, “action, employment, and the occupations of common life” function in a manner not unlike that of divine revelation in Charron’s system. Needless to say, Charron would not, if challenged, deny the given immediacy of the everyday – that is, of course, *the appearances* – any more than Hume did. Hume’s system, in turn, does not warrant him the right to ascribe any less reality to the divine revelation of Charron’s system than to the “action, employment, and the occupations of common life” of his own. Simply put: What appears, appears. For the sceptic, everything else is dogmatism.

---

<sup>23</sup> Hume (1777) p. 158-159.