INTRODUCTION

SKEPTICISM AND POLITICS

Claims to know something are ubiquitous in politics and government. Among other purposes, such claims are used on the one hand to support positions, policies, and personalities, and on the other hand to undermine institutions, ideologies, and particular individuals. One time-honored way of fighting such claims has been to draw attention to the philosophical problems associated with any claim to knowledge. A major source of such problems has been the various skeptical traditions. This is a book about the relationship between certain important skeptical traditions and politics.

Skepticism is widely understood to entail doubt, distrust, criticism, a negative attitude, and especially religious unbelief and atheism. It is sometimes treated as a timeless perspective that needs no historical or philosophical analysis and is immediately obvious to anyone who uses the language. But it turns out that there has been an identifiable and vigorous set of closely related traditions of skepticism throughout the history of ideas that merits consideration as skepticism properly understood. It should be clear from the outset that this book is about certain historical traditions of skepticism, and not about every conceivable skepticism. Although these traditions have been closely associated with the history of philosophy, it is not quite accurate to characterize most of them as philosophical skepticism because on most interpretations these traditions were more anti-philosophical than philosophical.

The historical traditions of skepticism have been traced to the beginnings of recorded Western culture in figures such as Homer and Heraclitus. Socrates and Pyrrho of Elis are credited with giving the two major traditions the recognizable form that they bore down to the modern age. Our chief sources for the ancient Greek and Roman flowering of these traditions are the works of Cicero, Sextus Empiricus, and Diogenes Laertius. We also know of them from the Church Fathers. Lactantius and Eusebius wrote against versions of the traditions, and Augustine devoted his earliest extant work to a refutation of one of them.

A huge scholarly literature about ancient skepticism has developed
in many languages and especially during the last decades. Almost all of this literature is philological or philosophical in the narrower sense. Although some scholars have ventured thoughtful and provocative remarks about the political implications of ancient skepticism, there has been a dearth of sustained or systematic attention to them.

The Greek and Roman traditions were virtually forgotten during the Middle Ages but rediscovered and rejuvenated during the Renaissance. Here again, a large scholarly literature has traced the development of the traditions from early figures such as Erasmus and Pico della Mirandola to Emerson and Kierkegaard. Recent work has characterized figures such as Hobbes, Rousseau, and Adam Smith, who might not earlier have been seen as such, as skeptics; and shown how indebted anti-skeptics such as Leibniz and Hegel were to the traditions of skepticism for challenge and inspiration. There is something of a cottage industry in journals of philosophy as scholars compete to demonstrate the skeptical or anti-

1 A number of extensive bibliographies to this literature are available. See Giannantoni, ed., Lo scetticismo antico, vol. 2, pp. 753 ff.; Long and Sedley, eds., The Hellenistic Philosophers, vol. 2, pp. 476 ff. For more recent work, see Voelke, ed., Le scepticisme antique: Perspectives historiques et systématiques and the third edition of Dal Pra, Lo scetticismo greco, with updated bibliography.

2 Perhaps the most influential pioneering work in this field was Richard H. Popkin, The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes, revised and reissued as The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza. See also Popkin's High Road to Pyrrhonism, eds. Watson and Force, and The Third Force in Seventeenth Century Thought. Also widely influential has been the work of Charles B. Schmitt, including Cicero Scepticus: A Study of the Influence of the Academica in the Renaissance. A useful collection covering figures from the ancients to Kant is Burnyeat, ed., The Skeptical Tradition. On Emerson, see Michael, Emerson and Skepticism. For a wide-ranging review in French, see Dumont, Le scepticisme et le phénomène; and in Italian, Paganini, Scepsi moderna: Interpretazioni dello scetticismo da Charron a Hume. Other significant works will be cited in footnotes below.