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“A DISEASE INCURABLE”: SCEPTICISM AND THE CAMBRIDGE PLATONISTS

Strictly speaking, of course, perfect scepticism commits one to perfect silence, or at least to the blank pages for which Sanchez commended Socrates. Since neither silence nor the blank page appealed to the Cambridge Platonists as a polemical stratagem, we suspect straightaway that for them scepticism—at least the fully-fledged variety—will have been at most a means to an end. In this they were not alone. Even the original sceptics hoped their critical quest would lead to “quietude [ἀταραξία] in respect of matters of opinion and moderate feeling in respect of things unavoidable . . . by means of a decision regarding the disparity of the objects of sense and of thought, and being unable to effect this, they suspended judgement; and they found that quietude, as if by chance, followed upon their suspense, even as a shadow follows its substance . . .”

1 Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola borrowed extensively from Sextus Empiricus and, as Charles Schmitt describes it, “his choices are therapeutic rather than theoretical. Aristotle had to go because he was the chief source of secular contagion among the faithful, and Sextus was the best medicine available. Pico regarded Christianity itself as immune to sceptical infection”.

For Descartes scepticism was the demon to be exorcized on his epistemological journey to the cogito and to the divinely-guaranteed certitude of clear and distinct ideas. For Glanvill in his Vanity of dogmatizing of 1661 scepticism signalled intellectual freedom by exposing the immodesty of dogmatic positions on matters of natural philosophy, divinity and mathematics being immune to sceptical surgery, and by exposing the pretensions of the Schoolmen, whose divinity “hath mudded the fountain of certainty with notion and ethnick admixtions”. “In philosophy I’m a Seeker”, Glanvill

confessed, "yet I cannot believe, that a Sceptick in philosophy must be one in divinity". Ten years later, however, he seems to have changed his mind about the value of scepticism, to judge by his ΛΟΓΟΥ ΘΡΗΣΚΕΙΑ or, A seasonable recommendation and defence of reason, in the affairs of religion; against infidelity, scepticism, and fanaticisms of all sorts (London 1670).

In his survey of scepticism in the Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Popkin divides the sceptics into three broad groups. First, the "avowed sceptics", such as Montaigne, Bayle, or Hume. Second, "those who utilize sceptical materials to reach new viewpoints", such as Descartes or Hegel. Third, "those who are skeptics with regard to certain kinds of knowledge", such as Spinoza or Kant. This is a useful taxonomy, except that in assigning the Cambridge Platonists to group three, I am sensible of the attendant difficulties, especially the assumption that they can in fact be treated as a group, sharing the same philosophical and theological positions. At least none of them was an avowed sceptic in Popkin's sense, and none of them utilized scepticism as a methodological instrument. Indeed I am hesitant about placing them in group three, and would prefer to describe them as "admitting to a theoretical scepticism with regard to certain kinds of knowledge, but dismissive or contemptuous of any suggestion that such a scepticism be taken seriously in the practical affairs of the mind, and especially of the Christian soul in its quest for divine knowledge and understanding". Further work would be needed to test the accuracy of this description. In this paper I make a start by surveying attitudes and responses to scepticism in the writings of major figures in the Cambridge school: Whichcote, Smith, Culverwel, Cudworth, and More.

Sceptical positions, though duly rejected, are not accorded any extended critical treatment in the writings of Benjamin Whichcote (1609–83), Fellow of Emmanuel College. This seems to be in keeping with his unadorned belief in the quasi-divine nature of human reason: "To go against Reason, is to go against God: it is the self same thing, to do that which the reason of the case doth

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