1. Popkin’s Definition of Modern Skepticism

Richard Popkin offers a very clear and precise definition of modern skepticism: “a philosophical view that raises doubt about the adequacy or reliability of the evidence that could be offered to justify any proposition.” Skepticism is understood as that position according to which there is no conclusive reason that proves that a certain belief is true. Skeptics share this conception of justification with their antagonists, dogmatists. “The antithesis of scepticism... is ‘dogmatism’, the view that evidence can be offered to establish that at least one nonempirical proposition cannot possibly be false.” Therefore, the main difference between skepticism and dogmatism lies in how each sect evaluates or assesses arguments, reasons, and evidence, and not in holding or not holding beliefs. According to Popkin, suspension of judgement is limited to “the question of whether these beliefs were true,” that is, the skeptic suspends his judgement because a certain belief may not be true, so refrains from affirming that it is true, because it may be false.

That is why Popkin goes on to say that “‘sceptic’ and ‘believer’ are not opposing classifications... The skeptic may, like anyone else, still accept various beliefs.” Believers can be dogmatic, when they think they have a good, rational justification for their beliefs, or when they hold a belief based on arguments or evidences; or they can be skeptical, when they hold beliefs despite their lack of rational justification for these beliefs, or when they hold beliefs not based on any argument or by faith. Therefore, the expression ‘skeptical fideism’ is perfectly all right. Modern skepticism has nothing to do “with disbelief, especially disbelief of the central doctrines of the Judeo-Christian tradition.”

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1 Popkin 2003: xxi.
2 Ibid.: xxiii.
3 Ibid.: xxi.
4 Ibid.: xxi.
If one holds, as did the fideists, that ‘God exists’ without claiming that one has conclusive reasons or that one knows it, one may be a skeptic.

From Popkin’s definitions, one could draw a picture of the conceptual connexions among concepts like truth, judgement, belief, reasoning, and justification in modern skepticism. I am not sure Popkin would accept these conceptual connections as I will explain them here. We may, perhaps, deepen our understanding of modern skepticism by assessing this picture.

According to this picture, it is fundamental to make a distinction between $p$ and ‘$p$ is true’. All the dispute between dogmatists and skeptics would turn on ‘$p$ is true’, but not on $p$. The skeptic can hold a belief $p$, and he does not suspend his judgment concerning $p$, but he will not assert ‘$p$ is true’. So understood, a judgement is something of this kind: ‘$p$ is true’, and suspension of judgement is not to affirm, nor to deny, that ‘$p$ is true’. In order to assert ‘$p$ is true’, one needs a justification. This is what dogmatists think they can provide. Dogmatists offer a $J$ (reasons, arguments, evidence) for sustaining that ‘$p$ is true’ and cannot possibly be false. Skeptics argue that $J$ (reasons, arguments, evidence) is not completely reliable; in the light of skeptical arguments, $p$ may be false; therefore, skeptics do not assent to ‘$p$ is true’, since this last proposition has not been established by philosophical arguments. Skeptics, however, may go on accepting $p$, but this does not mean ‘$p$ is true’. Beliefs themselves are untouched by the skeptical challenge, as if they were protected or invulnerable to skeptical arguments. The skeptical challenge is directed only at the justification that would lead us from merely affirming $p$ to the more robust, dogmatic position of holding ‘$p$ is true’.

With this picture of modern skepticism in mind, I would like to examine some French philosophers that deal with skepticism: La Mothe le Vayer, Foucher, Huet, and Bayle. I will be asking: 1) whether skepticism is concerned merely with justification of beliefs, and not with beliefs themselves; 2) whether it is an attack against reason; 3) whether

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5 In terms of contemporary theories of truth, truth is not redundant. According to a redundant theory of truth, to say ‘$p$ is true’ is just to affirm $p$, that is, $p = ‘p$ is true’. However, in this picture to say ‘$p$ is true’ involves more than just to affirm $p$. Skeptics would be saying that, in order to say ‘$p$ is true’ we need to have good reasons or to be justified, whereas we may just affirm $p$ without any reason whatsoever.