Book Reviews

Sébastien Charles and Plinio J. Smith (eds.)

A half century of scholarship has convincingly demonstrated the importance of skepticism to the development of philosophy, science, religion, and politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Western Europe. But what about the eighteenth century? Aside from the usual suspects—Berkeley, Hume, Kant—were there any skeptics, or did anyone care much about skepticism, in the Age of Enlightenment? According to one narrative, this was the period of progress, trust and pride in reason’s capabilities, and optimism—all bordering on dogmatism. Philosophers of the eighteenth century were too busy marching humanity forward, they were too full of common sense, they were too modern, to bother looking backward at the unproductive and often implausible doubts of Sextus Empiricus or Montaigne. According to another narrative, Enlightenment philosophers were deeply influenced by skepticism and were often skeptical themselves. The well-established influence of Bayle’s skeptical Dictionary (the “arsenal of the Enlightenment”) on the philosophes and Rousseau’s skeptical Savoyard Vicar may be offered as evidence for this narrative, along with the fact that a skeptical attitude toward religion, authority, tradition, and superstition is often equated with ‘Enlightenment’.

Which, if any, of these narratives is correct? Was skepticism in decline or even completely passé by the eighteenth century? Or was the eighteenth century the pinnacle of the modern revival of skepticism? These opposing interpretations of skepticism in the Enlightenment have divided historians, both considered collectively, but also in some cases individually, as in the case of Richard Popkin, who first defended the dogmatic interpretation of the Enlightenment only to later defend the skeptical interpretation (Popkin’s volte face is the subject of Sébastien Charles’s Introduction). These questions also give rise to the present volume of twenty-three essays, “which is entirely devoted to the
skepticism of the Enlightenment in both its historical and geographical dimensions, [and] seeks to provide readers with a revaluation of the alleged decline of skepticism” (xi).

Part One is comprised of five essays on skeptical themes in early eighteenth-century works. Plinio Smith's first essay in the volume presents Bayle's conception of skepticism as the method of antinomy, or in other words, the ability to present arguments pro and con concerning any thesis. Smith argues that Bayle's skepticism, though indebted to the writings of Sextus Empiricus, nevertheless differs in some important respects from the Pyrrhonian. Whereas Sextus presents dogmatic opinions in order to destroy them, Bayle presents all available opinions in order to inform his readers; and whereas Sextus re-organizes dogmatic positions to better undermine them, Bayle aims to present opinions faithfully. Smith's article is very insightful and helpful for understanding many articles in the Dictionary, but he may overemphasize the extent to which Bayle wished to inform his readers. Bayle's primary aim, it seems to me, is to challenge readers.

Leibniz felt challenged enough by Bayle's skepticism that he wrote the only book he would ever publish, *Theodicy*, in response to it. But, in lesser known works, Leibniz also confronted the skeptical thought of Simon Foucher and even Sextus himself, as Arnaud Pelletier recounts. Pelletier argues that Leibniz's responses to skepticism do not entail that he felt there was a *crise pyrrhonienne* that needed to be overcome. But we should not conclude, either, that the sense of a skeptical crisis had died before Leibniz, as Anton Matytsin's article demonstrates in its discussion of two ant-skeptics, Jean-Pierre de Crousaz and David-RenAUD Bouillier, whose 1733 and 1737 works (respectively) do portray Bayle's skepticism as a crisis. In fact, not only was the sense of a skeptical crisis still alive in the eighteenth century, but also that sense may have been intensified by the growing consensus that the philosophy of the seventeenth century, though ingenious, was ultimately a failure. The verdict that rationalism, in particular, was misguided was arrived at by Jean-François de Saint Laurens in his debate with the Cartesian François Lamy between 1708 and 1710, a fascinating exchange on faith, reason, the immortality of the soul, and knowledge of God that is analyzed in this volume by Sylwane Malinowski-Charles. However, what to some appeared to be a skeptical crisis, to others was a form of wisdom. Fontenelle, for example, documented the “wise Pyrrhonism of the Académie Royale des Sciences of Paris” at the turn of the century; a wisdom which, according to Luc Peterschmitt in his chapter, entailed the separation of physics and metaphysics that paved the way for Enlightenment scientific progress.

Part Two of the book focuses on the Enlightenment in the Anglophone world, and consists of five essays. Three essays deal with the inevitable Hume,