

## *Book Reviews*



**John Christian Laursen and Gianni Paganini (eds.)**

*Skepticism and Political Thought in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. Pp. vi + 292. ISBN 978-1-4426-4921-7.

This volume rides the recent tidal wave of secondary scholarship on the role of skepticism in early modern philosophy. We are now in the second (or perhaps third, depending on who's counting) generation of scholarship since Richard Popkin's discipline-shaking *The History of Scepticism (from Erasmus to Descartes in 1960; from Erasmus to Spinoza in 1979; and from Savonarola to Bayle in 2003)*. The increasing scope of the subtitles of Popkin's editions reflects the expanded conception of early modern skepticism that has developed in the secondary literature since then: far from being a uniform movement with clearly defined positions and boundaries, skepticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is a radically heterogeneous cluster of positions that are, in some cases, mutually inconsistent with each other. One might thus forgive the scholar of early modern skepticism of despair at the task of rendering the movement intelligible *qua* coherent philosophical position. Even more forgivable, then, is the despair at explicating enough systematicity in the movement so as to discern implications for political thought.

Yet this is the Sisyphean task that the editors of the present volume have set for themselves and their contributors: to canvass the landscape of early modern skepticism, and to draw out, however tenuously, the ramifications for political thought. The editors acknowledge the near-impossibility of this task in the Introduction, though they skip over what is perhaps the most difficult part of the task: defining the nature of early modern skepticism. They characterize skepticism as "an attitude that foregrounds the difficulties in deciding on the truth or falsity of any proposition" (3), "oppos[ing] dogmatism, or the claim to access to truth and knowledge" (4). The classic division between the *nouveaux pyrrhoniens* and the *nouveaux académiciens* makes an appearance, as do the two most common arguments against (ancient) skepticism: the *apraxia* objection and the self-refutation objection. The editors admit, however, that

the volume “cannot be expected to solve the theoretical problem of the connection of skepticism with any particular political theory or practice... [even] supposing that skepticism could be qualified as a homogeneous system having its own principles” (13).

So this is a deeply contextual volume, in the sense of Mogens Lærke’s recent work on historical perspectivism:<sup>1</sup> it is concerned only with “the ways in which various different skeptical...texts in their contexts shaped the early modern approach to politics and social life” (13). Lærke’s historical perspectivism recommends that the scholar “[take her] departure from an *internal perspective*” and that “the parameters and guiding principles of the reconstruction [be] formulated from a *perspective situated within the historical context* of these past philosophies” (Lærke 2013: 21). As the editors of the volume note, an initial survey of early modern skepticism ought to provoke both “suspension of judgment about any necessary implications of the skeptical tradition, and further enquiry into the concrete conclusions drawn by specific skeptics in specific times and places” (11).

This focus on particularity explains the radical heterogeneity of the volume’s thirteen contributions. The first chapter, by Emidio Spinelli, deals not with the modern period, but rather with ancient skepticism, focusing on Pyrrhonism. This is a puzzling choice, given that ancient skepticisms often bear only a thin relation to their early modern successors. For those relatively new to skeptical scholarship, however, the piece serves as an excellent introduction to the potential implications of Sextus Empiricus’s thought in the moral and political spheres.

Daniel Brunstetter’s piece brings welcome attention to the respects in which La Mothe Le Vayer does not fit neatly into the narrative of the *libertins clandestins*. Like Popkin, Brunstetter argues that La Mothe Le Vayer’s target is more precise than religion (Popkin) or politics (Brunstetter) as a whole. Rather, La Mothe Le Vayer’s goal is to critique nefarious forms of the phenomenon in question “in order to ‘offer a few light suspicions according to the reach of our humanity’” (41). Brunstetter concludes that La Mothe Le Vayer implicitly supports tolerance as a necessary political condition for skeptical theorizing.

Gianni Paganini’s contribution on Hobbes traces the influence of Montaigne, Charron, and La Mothe Le Vayer through the theme of vanity (alternately: *presumption*, *vanité*, *philautia*) and through the adoption of certain methods and positions. According to Paganini, Hobbes’s positioning of humans and

1 M. Lærke, “The Anthropological Analogy and the Constitution of Historical Perspectivism.” In M. Lærke, J. Smith, and E. Schliesser (eds.), *Philosophy and Its History: Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy*, 7–29. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.