

José R. Maia Neto

Academic Skepticism in Seventeenth-Century French Philosophy: The Charronian Legacy 1601–1662. Dordrecht: Springer, 2014. Pp. xii + 165. ISBN 978-3-319-07358-3.

If Anglophone historians of early modern philosophy think of Pierre Charron (1541–1603) at all, they likely think of an unoriginal disciple of Michel de Montaigne who attempted to systematize Montaigne's *Essays* in a treatise, *De la sagesse*, at the beginning of the seventeenth century. José R. Maia Neto's short but informative book attempts to correct this common, uncharitable picture of Charron and to restore to that philosopher the credit that he deserves for fundamental contributions to the development of modern European philosophy. The specific goal of the work is to give a systematic account of the influence of Charron on Gassendi, Descartes, Pascal, and La Mothe le Vayer surrounding the issue of skepticism. Maia Neto's thesis is that each of these latter four philosophers engaged closely with Charron's Academic skeptical notion of wisdom: La Mothe le Vayer and Gassendi supported and elaborated it, while Descartes and Pascal opposed it and tried to offer a rival account of wisdom. In addition to demonstrating the significant legacy of Charron on subsequent philosophers, Maia Neto also contributes to the broader history of philosophy by showing that Academic, and not merely Pyrrhonian, skepticism played an important role in the development of modernity. After the Introduction, Maia Neto's book contains one chapter on Charron's skeptical account of wisdom, and then one chapter on each of Gassendi, La Mothe le Vayer, Descartes, and Pascal, followed by a Conclusion.

The philosophical question that serves as the theme of this book is announced at the outset of the second chapter: "Is a skeptical wisdom, a wisdom based on suspension of judgment (*epochè*), possible?" (11). The answer to this question would seem to be 'no'. After all, doesn't the wise person know many important things and teach these things to others? What kind of wisdom refuses to give assent to anything? Maia Neto's first task in the book, therefore, is to argue that there was in antiquity a positive, and not merely a dialectical, account of wisdom espoused by the Academic skeptics and built upon the following views of Arcesilaus: wisdom is opposed to opinion; avoiding opinion entails refraining from assenting to anything dubitable; all things are obscure; human understanding is weak; and therefore, the wise person has a duty to suspend judgment on all matters (11–12). According to Maia Neto, Charron's "*Wisdom* is a full-fledged development of this Academic skeptic concept of wisdom adapted to his time. Its foundation lies precisely on rational unbiased examination which can be exercised fully only by those who have suspended judgment. *Épochè* is thus the central characteristic of the wise man" (13). Maia

Neto provides evidence that Charron derived his skeptical wisdom from Arcesilaus' and Cicero's notions of intellectual integrity—i.e., “not giving assent to anything that is not warranted by reason” (24)—from Carneades' probabilism (32), from the crisis at the University of Paris surrounding Ramus' critique of Aristotle (16–20), and from Montaigne's idea of the skeptic as the attainment of the limited perfection available to humans (16).

After describing the nature and sources of the Charronian skeptical account of wisdom, Maia Neto begins to track its legacy in subsequent authors, beginning with Gassendi, whose first published work, the *Exercitationes paradoxicae adversus aristoteleos*, was influenced by Charron's *De la sagesse*. Maia Neto provides two kinds of evidence that Gassendi's *Exercitationes* were influenced by Charron. First, Gassendi himself admitted this influence in letters from the period, as well as in the Preface to the *Exercitationes*. While these texts show Gassendi's great admiration for Charron, they fall short of giving details about the nature of the influence that Charron's account of wisdom might have had on the *Exercitationes*. Consequently, Maia Neto must provide an interpretation of the *Exercitationes* according to which some of its key ideas are inherited from Charron, which he does by showing that key aspects of Charronian wisdom, especially intellectual integrity, are adopted and developed by Gassendi for the benefit of his students, who needed to be freed from the yoke of Aristotelianism. Maia Neto shows that Gassendi's praise of philosophical freedom, arguing pro and con, questioning authority, rejecting opinion, dogmatism and prejudice, all bear resemblance to elements of Charronian wisdom. Gassendi “set the bases of a new model of science compatible with the skeptical attitude proposed by Charron: modest, fallibilist, hypothetical, probabilistic, and based on experience. This model of science becomes the model of modern experimental sciences, as it was adopted by Robert Boyle and the members of the Royal Society” (144).

The very rich and multi-faceted account of Charronian Academic wisdom from the second chapter is somewhat flattened in the third chapter, however, where ‘integrity’ seems to serve as a catch-all. Maia Neto makes the following claims: “intellectual integrity obliged [Gassendi] also to expose to his students the problems and errors he found in [Aristotle's] philosophy” (46); “[t]he Aristotelian teachers of Aristotle sin against intellectual integrity by inducing their students to only defend and never attack Aristotle” (47); “[t]he exercise which generated the *Exercitationes* was an exercise of intellectual integrity” (47); “Academic skepticism appears in Charron and Gassendi as the genuine school of philosophy to the extent that it preserves intellectual integrity...” (53); “the problem of induction in Gassendi is not merely epistemological. It compromises intellectual integrity in its epistemic, anthropological and moral