

Skepticism High and Dry: An Introduction

Didier Maleuvre
(University of California, Santa Barbara)

This volume of essays have for a stage the troubled stretch of history commonly known as the Baroque period when the main European players of the time, Spain, Italy, France, England and Germany, now reluctantly, now petulantly tore themselves away from the medieval consensus of faith to wander into the age of inquiry. It was an epochal transition from an age of certitude, in which the main questions about the nature and meaning of life obtained definite answers, to an age where man, being the measure, had to work it all out from the ground up. Grudgingly, one way of apprehending the world, and of giving contours to the meaning of life, gave way to another by attrition or exhaustion or simply because the answers provided by the old order no longer matched the new facts pouring in. Such was the age of faith that knowledge formed a definite and absolute summa, if not always in the hands of mere mortals, at least under the eye of the One who knew, and knew perfectly and universally. And such was, and is, the modern age that knowledge was placed in the fragile and changeful custody of a human intelligence that knows it cannot know all or even the parts, but doubts, and questions, and questions its own questioning. The Baroque period is the European mind thrown in the turmoil of spiritual orphanhood.

Of course, it is never a clean crossing between one way of organizing reality and another. As it tears itself away from its ancient moorings, a society feels the pull and the strength of these attachments. It misses their steadying hand, is grateful for the safe harbor they once afforded, is beholden to their memory. There is no skepticism which does not quicken faith—no doubt about life itself which does not in some fashion spark a desperate keenness to run back to the tried and tested, and no voyage out which does not raise doubt about whether the destination even exists. When we speak about the natal journey from the age of faith to the age of science, we must not forget—and this is especially true of the period that occupies us in this volume—that there was yet no sure prospect, no indubitable sighting of a continent called science in which society would make safe landfall. Europeans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were leaving one mode of being for another that was yet to prove itself: they were trading the existent for the non-existent merely on a promise, or because circumstances forced them to reassess the foundation of their certainties even as their intellect was yet to provably fashion a viable alternative. In some way, we today are still struggling in this age of uncertainty—testing out whether the human mind can really pitch its tent on the quicksand of spiritual insecurity, which periodically twists in violent convulsions of longed-for faith—the great violent political and ideological fevers of the twentieth century, for example. New gods will arise, and even if they don't look like gods, we will blandish them with a fury of belief that is equally inverse to our degree of sureness. We only ever fundamentally disagree over the things we cannot prove; and we are never so fierce with our beliefs as when we are at a loss to vouch for them. This, it seems, is the situation which, turning a corner, Europe stumbled into unawares in the sixteenth century, and the wars of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation and the Holy Inquisition and the crisis of skepticism and Pyrrhonism and fideism are but surface manifestations of the fact that, sometime after 1500, Europeans started holding their beliefs in abeyance. These were no longer the substance of reality, but a set of contingent permutable colorings of it. And the keener this was felt, the closer did men and women hewed to their beliefs and defended them with a ferocity equal to the fear that they had become, in some

measure, contingent, relative to climate and time, perhaps as fickle as folktales and as mutable as pagan superstitions.

In her article “Meditations on Hierarchy, Equality, and their Dynamic Interaction” of the present volume, Professor Carroll offers a sociological modeling of the reasons why late Renaissance societies produced the intellectual and moral crisis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with their stridencies of fanatical passion and skeptical disaffection intertwined. The anthropological model is this—social stability tends to produce egalitarian order, which in turn tends to reinforce stability. Thus societies dependent on the cycle of agricultural growth or nomadic transhumance generally form egalitarian structures that fortify societal stability. The advantage of such societies is to inspire a sense of at-homeness in the world, of community with the immanent gods, of trust in a universe which, if not always kind, is at any rate always just and right. The drawback of stable societies is their very stability: to the degree that permanency breeds trust so it breeds fatalism and rigidity. Stability is loath to challenge itself because in it people find the world generally amenable to their unchanging purposes. Stability tends not to inquire, and when it asks questions, falls back on answers drawn from ancestral authority. More crucially, the drawback of stable societies is that they are usually no match to unstable ones when the two kinds by chance come to meet.

For unstable societies are, as the idea implies, changeful and progressive. They have it in their blood to modify circumstances and explore new contexts. They are forever upsetting their apple carts. This creates disruption, of course, but also flexibility, resilience, and readiness—a constant war footing which looks like chaos to the distant eye of stable societies, but is in actuality a way of dispersing and multiplying the ideas and decision-making processes in everything from production, education, knowledge and governance. To a similar degree that stable societies spring from fairly egalitarian social arrangements, unstable societies are the product of stratified societies—stratified but not immovably so. A stratified society breeds a diversity of interests and pursuits and occupations, which foment disagreement, class tension, and restlessness, all of which lay a ferment of intellectual and political growth. Class-bound societies tend to evolve, then, while classless societies tend to stagnate. The former die every day by explosion; the latter, over ages by implosion.

Europe before the Renaissance was of course a class-bound society, fiercely so, but its economic dependency on agriculture, and the rural seasonal cycle it imparted to its motion, kept it in the feudal arrangement that typifies societies at once stratified and agricultural. The feudal agreement began to crumble, first in Italy where it was never the strongest, then in Spain, England, France, Flanders, and Northern Germany when the economy shifted from the countryside to the city. Urban economies are diversified; they bring into play traders, artisans, administrators, clerics, financiers, lenders, magistrates, lawyers, physicians, journeymen, peddlers and quacks, a stampede of trades and occupations, all of whom tug this way and that at the social fabric, angling and jockeying for advantage and security. The city is an unstable aggregate. It produces a populace that question, plan, anticipate, outsmart, parley, persuade for a living. In it, knowing and expressing one’s stakes and ambitions are paramount. Urban mercantile life always creates new rules upon the old rules. It chafes at the restraints imposed by the lord of the manor, the tolls, ancestral obligations, dues, tariffs, and monopolies on goods and ideas that knit the medieval world together. Cities, in other words, breed contentious and articulate people, people who make a livelihood by taking nothing for granted. Doubt, philosophically known as skepticism, is the face with which the city dweller meets the world at his doorstep. In the urban hothouse European society made its primary residence starting in the Renaissance, and it is probably the economic and cultural

relocation that has most to answer for ushering the modern age. It is certainly the transformation precipitating the intellectual crisis that dismantled the monopoly maintained by the medieval church over knowledge, morals, and politics. City people began to write and count and read for themselves, and argue among themselves in print and town halls, and the habit of disputation and investigation slowly pushed against the barriers of clerical authority as surely as it did against the old baronial excises on trade and travel.

Knowledge has never been the same. It is no longer Knowledge, but a motley of knowledges forced into cohabitation. The birth pangs of this new reality stretch between the symbolic markers of 1527, when the Lutheran mercenaries of Charles V sacked Rome, and the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 when Europeans desisted slaughtering one another over matters of biblical interpretation. A degree of skepticism is necessary for knowledges, in the plural, to blossom. It requires accepting that my knowledge is not so absolute that it must prevail over everyone else. It requires accepting that what I know to be true may not work for you, hence that it is, in some fashion, relative to the knower. This is not an easy realization. It is humbling to the human spirit, and injurious to the dignity in which Europeans were used to wrap God, who could not be fully divine if his truth started and stopped with every accident of geography. Yet the very idea was in fact creeping in—had begun to trickle in on the reports of seafarers from the fifteenth century onward. Sea travels down the coast of Africa, and around into the Indian Ocean and the Far East, and soon across the Atlantic—it all jolted eyes and minds out of parochial custom. European-sent voyages between 1420 and 1560 quadrupled the surface of the known globe. The reports of travelers, buoyed by the printing press, uprooted Europeans from their very own soil. There really were more things in heaven and earth than were dreamt of in our philosophy, more exotic people and customs and faiths no less staunch and yet local, no less fervent and yet partial, than ours. Sometime in the sixteenth century the mind, and the world, became a bric-a-brac.

This stirred many an intellect; but it also depressed and unhinged quite a few more. It is not unusual for a mind disquieted by new knowledge to flinch and retrench in the sanctity of its sure ancient beliefs. An animal is never so fierce as it fears for its life, as so it is of ideologies (an ideology is the armor worn by an idea when it fears for its life). Thus, too, the sixteenth century. Amid the free-for-fall of liberated creeds and convictions, censorship, heresy-hunting and mind control climbed to the breach, more notably under a re-energized Holy Inquisition, but also in the hundreds of municipal and royal interdicts that popped across the cities and principalities of Spain, France, Italy, and Germany. The sixteenth century was a time when the printing press was used as much to issue bans and anathemas as to ventilate new ideas. Universities even published their indexes of condemned books. This was no more a frenzy of Catholics as it was of the Reformed councils. As Dominican inquisitors ferreted out heresy in the doings of believers, Protestant divines forced the absolute literalism of the scriptures upon the individual believer, which was equally stifling to scientific curiosity. All of this indeed happened, not during the dark ages, but in the age that was turning to the light of knowledge. Trials for witchcraft rose to a climax in the sixteenth century, and more witches burned at the stake during 1560-1630 than in any single century theretofore. Such was the effect of citifying and diversifying knowledge that it prompted a protectionist claw to reach out and drag souls back into the fold.

Of course, the very attempt to stanch intellectual curiosity not only acknowledges its existence but also tempts it. There is no mind that feels more the contingency of beliefs, and there is no quicker apprenticeship of skepticism, than in a mind that is forced to profess against its own judgment. Censorship and the Inquisition, in the end, fired up the phenomenon they were trying to curb, and that is the intellectualization of religion, belief, and society at large. There is a cruel ritual

Christian authorities forced upon Jews before their expulsion from Spain in 1492, which consisted of dragooning them into theological debates with Christians, at the outcome of which Jewish disputants faced the bogus choice between repentant defeat and dangerous defiance. A victory for religious correctness, we imagine the winners wagering. Yet Pyrrhic is the victory. For an intellect humiliated into orthodoxy shows to itself and to others its pliability, and also its instrumental dexterity: what is a mind that professes against its conviction but a mind capable of manipulating and compartmentalizing itself? It is a mind that juggles beliefs, and such a mind is longer spellbound or possessed by believing. Skepticism has crept into it, which, whatever else the dogmatists tried to achieve, cannot have been their long-term plan.

The browbeating game played at the expense of the Jews in fifteenth-century Spain is one that Europe visited on itself in the subsequent century and a half, and has forever seasoned its spirit with irony. The wars of religion did more to debase the coinage of belief than any rediscovered volume of Sextus Empiricus. For it then became plain that ideas, if they were still keys to reality, were also pawns wielded to gain advantage. For instance, it did not go unnoticed—Montaigne at any rate did not miss it—that Huguenots condemned royal absolutism when a Catholic ruled, but praised it when a Bourbon Protestant claimed the throne. How was it not clear that ideals were the toys of expediency, and that beliefs were, not consubstantial with reality, but instrumental to it? And if political ideas were bendable to religious salvation, might not religious salvation also bend to political expediency? This, in the last instance, was the moral of the Peace of Westphalia, which accommodated divine truth to the political map. From Constantine up to the age of Machiavelli, religion used kings to spread itself; from the sixteenth century onward, the secular powers used religion to bolster their tactical aims. Men and women still believed, of course, but often with the desperate rage of *wanting* to believe. And wanting to believe is but the last stop before disenchantment—the disenchantment which a society grown intellectually conscious of itself finds when it gains literacy and worldliness and plurality. Hence the irony that speaks out of Montaigne and Cervantes, out of Calderón and Bayle, Shakespeare and Francisco Sanches, Charon and Galileo. *De omnibus dubitandum*. There is nothing truly known the opposite of which isn't fanatically held among the people of some other part. The splintering of Europe into doctrinal regions, its self-banishment from the center of the earth and of the universe, the citification of its mentalities—all this produced the crisis period stretching from around 1560 to the late 1600's when, ripened by intellectualism, men and women unwittingly became separate from their own beliefs, and flayed in a new open-ended space, and scrambled to get back into the safe den of certitude and comfortable ignorance. Hence the urbane philosophical detachment of Montaigne, Sanches, or Gassendi; hence, too, the passion to believe at any cost—be the cost that of the intellect itself—of, for example, Pascal.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are, to an ear keen for coherence, an era of both shocking unbelief and shocking superstition-mongering. It is a time when a humanist like Petrus Ramus could risk such pronouncements as “unbelief is the beginning of knowledge” and enjoy royal protection (Owen 505). But it is also the time when, together with the inquisitorial tribunals and the witch burnings and the wars of religion, saw an astonishing return of supernaturalism, of belief in its most gullible and intemperate form. The driest expressions of epistemological doubt abided cheek by jowl with the soggiest forms of credulity, of reliance on magic both high and low, sorcery, divination, necromancy, conjuring, astrological omens and collusions, prophecies, animal and plant miracle cures. Astrologers were consulted on the eve of a battle or at the birth of a princeling. Amulets were sewn into vestments, and country priests blessed the livestock, prayed for rain from the altar and excommunicated caterpillars for blighting the crops. Paris at any time

in the sixteenth century counted as many as 30,000 astrologers, all doing brisk business even under the eye of the clerical Sorbonne which meanwhile condemned sorcery, not for chicanery, but precisely for dread of its efficacy. This was no eccentricity of the unlettered masses. Thomas More and Erasmus vouched for the power of witchcraft, and Luther attributed diseases to devils entering the body. Maleficent possession, in fact, could sometimes descend on a town, as it was reported of sixty burghers of the fair town of Friedeburg, including its pastor (Janssen XII, 329). Books of magic spells, written by and for the literate, outsold every other publishing genre in the sixteenth century, and if it is said that the printed word advanced scientific literacy, the case holds that it also spread the gallimaufry of folk magic and gave mountebanks a platform infinitely vaster than the market square.

The essay “Polemical Magic: Early Faust Literature and Skepticism in the Reformation,” by Dustin Lovett, shows how unskeptically both Protestants and Catholics of the sixteenth century accepted the efficacy of magic. Though protestants read *Faust* as impugning and ridiculing the sorcery of the Catholic Eucharist, they did not read it as demolishing the credibility of magic proper. This of course would happen betimes: when one starts to mock the witchcraft of a tribe, one casts a doubt on the validity and truth value of magic. You cannot dispel enchantment here without calling enchantment into question everywhere. This is the same with the “Devil books” in which Renaissance readers learned spells to ward off evil spirits or attach a lover. Supernaturalism suffers from the written word: promises set on paper can be checked against outcomes. There is a reason after all why the Catholic Church forbade laypersons to own any portion of the Bible (1227): a belief parsed into a sentence is exposed to the acid of patient understanding. Myths and miracles in time pay a heavy price for their transfer from warm hearsay to the cold page. The reading eye is more analytic than the impressionable ear. A belief enunciated is a belief half-explained, and a belief half-explained is less of a belief by half. This is why it is not good for religion when religionists argue over it, be it by the intromission of the legend of Faust: believers who argue must explain themselves, and when they explain themselves, they step outside of their beliefs. From this perspective, it ran against the Holy Inquisition’s own interest, at considerable damage, to concentrate its fire on the correctness of belief over, say, right conduct and propriety. Matters of everyday morality, corruption, sales of office, civic integrity did not retain the interest of inquisitors. They wanted to drill down to the inner stuff of people’s thoughts, to reach in and mold the soul. It was badly mistaken. For to tell a person what they should think simply remind or reveal to them that they think, that they adopt and permutate ideas to construct meaning—which meaning is the product of manipulated work. Some ecclesiastics rightly worried about the ardor of inquisitors like Cardinal Caraffa, not just because it spread an unpopular wave of terror and made the once pastoral Church into a wolf; it also created hypocrites, doublethink artists, and skeptics, even among the clergy. What could come of the ordinance of the Inquisition of 1550, for example, which ordered the trial of Catholic priests who did not thunder loud enough against Protestantism? (Durant VI, 925). It made a dissembler out of the parish priest who, if he had any spiritual dignity, saw himself operating a dual-track mind, professing ideas that were put into him by force and not by faith. He could only begin to instrumentalize his belief and start on the road to doubt. It cannot be discounted how much, by focusing on ideas, the Inquisition intellectualized religion and thereby leached its salt. It is said that there is no school of atheism like a faculty of theology, just as there was no school of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century doubters, cynics, and free spirits like the Jesuit Order which set about spreading Catholicism by means of education. Education, when properly done—and the Jesuits were peerless at it—will perforce make heretics. The lesson is, you cannot intellectualize belief without soaking it in a dissolvent.

The distillate of this process is the so-called crisis of knowledge of the Baroque period, which called into question the validity, and resigned itself to the vanity, of knowledge. Skepticism penetrated the fabric of discourse, political, religious, and intellectual, loosening its weave, slackening its knots, alternately depressing and enraging the faith of men and women, touching every utterance with the dab of irony and philosophic fatalism. The baroque masterpiece of this divided consciousness, which touts and mourns belief, avers and demurs, professes and vacillates is of course *Don Quixote* and, as Professor Hilaire Kallendorf reminds us in “Lycanthropy and Free Will: The Female Werewolf in Cervantes’s *Persiles*,” much of Cervantes’ later prose too. Fact or fiction? Real or imagined? Actual or textual? The running gag of *Don Quixote* is that reality will never quite play along with our imaginings. Yet again, we only seem to know reality through the mind’s fanciful eye. Can a woman will herself into a werewolf? wonders Cervantes in *Persiles*—as Quijote dreamed himself into a Knight of the Golden Fleece. She can so far as the belief is strong and confines itself to her self-perception. Just the same, to *will* a conviction—is it not to admit its contingency? For if conviction flies one-way from the self to paint itself upon reality, then reality may be found to refuse playing along—to, say, knock Quijote off his horse again and again, to humble and humiliate his concepts, and play him for a fool. Reality is a partner of the will only when the will concedes the sovereignty of reality. This agreement underpins the modern scientific method, which combining will and reality, theory and empiricism, solved the skeptical depression of sixteenth-century Europe. But such a combination wasn’t available to the likes of Cervantes and Montaigne. Such was their historical moment that it awakened the mind, showed it the extent of its powers (Faust again), its autonomy and influence over reality (Quijote). Yet such was the poverty of technical means, and the spell of metaphysical apriorism, that the European mind had not yet quite devised the tools of leveraging subjectivism into a practical project, i.e., the scientific method. It saw how powerful the mind was—that it could make a hell of heaven, and of heaven a hell. But it did not know yet how to control this formidable responsibility, that of having inherited a mind-shaped world. The time-lag between subjective self-realization and the objective control of this self-realization covers the skeptical crisis of 1550-1700. There we find, for example, Montaigne’s brand of stoic, wait-and-see, soft-tempered skepticism that takes nothing for granted yet does not know what to do with its doubt; there also we find Cervantes’s cruel and madcap skepticism that makes of all consciousness a kind of lunacy—teased and flogged and pitied and fondled like an effigy at the Feast of Fools.

Science, it is said, was born of skepticism. But it was also born to domesticate the unruly nihilistic tendencies of doubt. Science is the humble admission that we do not know (the skeptical starting point), coupled with the hopeful determination to do something about it (the constructive next step). Both this humility and hopefulness met with strong cultural headwind. To say that we do not know at all impugned the *raison d’être* of those who, by the order of ecclesiastic grace and revelation, guarded over the ultimate truths. And to say that we can remedy human nescience could be construed as the rebellion of pride against God and all things ordained. Yet it is an oversimplified view that pits scientific investigation, on one side, and the Church on the other, and it is unrealistic to suppose early-modern rationalism owes nothing to the main, and almost exclusive, center of intellectual activity in medieval Christendom, which was the Church. To understand, then, how the monasteries incubated scientific skepticism, we must turn to the intellectual situation of theology at the twilight of the Middle Ages. The word “incubate” is chosen for a reason: incubation promises growth but not birth. The two currents of theological thought in the late medieval church of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had the potential of both awakening and stifling scientific thought.

Scholasticism was a tense and irritable parley. One side of it was galvanized by the revival of Greek rationalism and the re-discovery of Aristotle. It led theologians to want to harmonize the tenets of faith with the deductions of reason. The other side of scholasticism was the enduring strand of Neo-Platonism and Augustinian mysticism. The two in combination let the scientific hatchling out of the egg.

To start with the Aristotelians. To rationalists in the league of Abélard, Albertus Magnus, Anselm, and Aquinas, truth could only be one: it was inconceivable that what confirms itself in the plain light of reason should stand at variance with religious doctrine. There had to be a way of reconciling logic and revelation, of finding the syllogism behind every article of dogma. Not a mystery or miracle (barring the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption, and the Last Judgment), said Aquinas, which could not be justified by reason. There would the scriptures stand, there would the patristic literature speak to the philosopher, that nothing of what seemed mysterious, incomprehensible, and miraculous in it would not be explained point by point. Many churchmen, especially among the Franciscans, were alarmed by this surge of theological rationalism. A religion that no longer spoke to the heart and instead conversed politely with the head—wasn't this a religion corrupted by man's pride, a religion shorn of awe and tremulous piety? Their concern was not unfounded. Thirteenth-century Aristotelianism emboldened the taste for theological disputation one step short of heresy, and many were alarmed, for example, to see Aquinas argue as cogently for and against a canonic precept, as though matters of conviction ultimately hanged on intellectual acrobatics. Aquinas taught generations of philosophers to occupy both sides of an argument simultaneously, and this discipline of self-critique, of arguing with oneself, of second-guessing the fundamentals of our worldview—it was preparatory training in the basics of scientific investigation. Ultimately, however, Aristotelian theology did not liberate reason. Indeed one can suppose Thomism even to have slowed down the advance of reason, which flexed its muscle, begged to be heard, showed its prowess, yes. Yet it was all ultimately in the service of revealed truth. Aquinas in fact made no mystery of his always starting from his conclusions, putting reason to work out an arrangement pre-ordained by faith. The dignity conferred on reason for being a servant of the Church (*philosophia ancilla theologiae*) was an honor, to be sure, though it was the honor of servitude just the same: Aristotle officiating for the Holy Ghost, and respectful of its mysteries.

But what of mysticism? Was it uniformly deleterious to the release of scientific rationalism? On the opposite side of Thomistic rationalism was a strand of scholastic theology that gained currency in the fourteenth century by the influence of intellectual eminences like Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. None of the divine truths can be explained or justified or demonstrated by reason, Ockham argued; God is beyond the grasp of human understanding; it is fruitless to send dialectic to the aid of divine mystery even as a means. This sounded like a sign for reason to start its retreat. In actuality, however, Duns and Ockham indirectly caused reason to forge its own path. Religion locked herself up in the citadel of mystery, intuition, imagination, and of things seen through a glass darkly. Meanwhile, released from service, reason was given the whole world to roam in. Aquinas proved the amazing instrumental dexterity of reason; Ockham unwittingly directed it to its sphere of activity, the profane areas of life. Importantly, Franciscan scholastic philosophers like Ockham freed reason from officiousness and self-importance. Reason is fallible, reason is incomplete, reason gropes and fumbles. Yes, but reason knows this, and happily released from the obligation of always being right, can set about improving itself. Reason could, in other words, become its own best critic.

This adjustment revolutionized the very meaning of knowledge. Medieval man was reasonably certain of knowing the truth, of being in possession of the true facts about God and morality and the universe. He wrote comprehensive *summae* and conclusive *specula*. The post-Renaissance intellect, by contrast, became one that wonders, asks questions, and doubts. Inductive ignorance, not deductive knowledge, was the impetus. As the seventeenth-century travel writer Jean Chardin put it, “Doubt is the beginning of science; he who doubts nothing, examines nothing; he who examines nothing, discovers nothing; he who discovers nothing is blind and remains blind” (Hazard 12). Genuine knowledge derives from admitted ignorance. What we call the societal crisis of skepticism in the Baroque period is in no small part the epistemic pain of adjusting to this new epistemic posture. Meanwhile, science brought humility into the exercise of reason. *Sapere aude*, dare to know: this is not the motto of genuine scientific learning, but instead: dare not to know, dare to admit ignorance, dare to tarry in darkness. Science does not give certainty; it was never its mission. The preface of Copernicus’s *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs* (1543) got its spirit right. Scientific knowledge is not like climbing a mountain and planting a flag on top of it. It is a series of ventures, approaches, hypotheses that serve their purpose if they give a foothold to climb on. As for the top of the mountain, there is none—at least not for science:

To the reader, concerning the hypotheses of this work. The master’s... hypotheses are not necessarily true, they need not even be probable. It is completely sufficient if they lead to a computation that is in accordance with the astronomical observations... The astronomer will most readily follow those hypotheses which are most easily understood. The philosopher will perhaps demand greater probability; but neither of the two will be able to discover anything certain... unless it has been made known to him by divine revelations... For the rest let no one expect certainty from astronomy as regards hypotheses. It cannot give this certainty. He who takes everything that is worked out for other purposes, as truth, would leave this science probably more ignorant when he came to it. (Hazard 12) (Kesten 297-8)

Considering the times, we must take this foreword for the act of propitiation that it was, and to which the medieval Church responded in gallant form, as often it did when it felt safe in its position. Pope Leo X took an interest in Copernicus’s *De Revolutionibus* and had it explained in his chambers. So long as the science abided by its own investigative hypothetical spirit and did not make absolutistic claims about the nature of reality, the Church did not always see itself at loggerheads with natural philosophy. Monasteries and cathedral schools had for nearly a millennium the only centers of intelligentsia, of rational training and systematic knowledge that inured minds to the discipline of non-contradiction and logical verification. For a good reason is medieval science, if this isn’t a misnomer, in large part the activity of Dominicans and Franciscans—Robert Grosseteste, Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, etc. This remains so, albeit to a lesser extent, in the period immediately following the Renaissance when churchmen, Jesuits most of them, take time off from theology to dabble in measures and calculations, in scales, barometers, telescopes, hydrometers and other fine measuring devices (Copernicus, Famianus Stra, Niccolo Cabeo, Athanasius Kircher). The Jesuits it was who trained and harbored Bayle, Descartes, and Gassendi. As for the humanists—Petrarch, Erasmus, Copernicus—they not uncommonly lived on ecclesiastic sinecures and pensions provided by a Church tolerant of their worldly challenge. We know Galileo’s troubles with the Inquisition, but must not overlook the fact that he received the protection of Jesuit cardinals, that he was entertained at their Collegium Romanum well after he

declared all authority null apart from reason and experiment, and that even after his condemnation, he enjoyed pope Urban VIII's fatherly forbearance so that, after three days in prison, he spent life between the hospitality of the archbishop of Siena and the comfort of his own villa near Florence. The Church did want Galileo to *say* that he was wrong; it did not demand that he *be* wrong. A philosophical doctrine derived from Averroism even put a theoretical framework on this two-mindedness. In the fifteenth century, the Paduan philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi formulated the idea of the "two truths" that had natural philosophy and theology run concurrently on separate tracks of idealism, and Gassendi reasserted that cognitive concordat in the seventeenth century. Which, as far as the scientific mind was concerned, was not fundamentally troubling. Scientists understood their work to spring, not of dogmatic lust, but of the resolve to err and forage and get things wrong till eventually the most plausibly not-wrong conclusion remains. The Church was welcome to the privilege of always being right beyond doubt; science, for one, was content with *its* doubt, which trained it to be curious, second-guessing, and rigorous. There is no question as to which cognitive stance eventually paid off and yielded the greater boon of practical benefits, if not of spiritual rest.

It may be admitted that the doctrine of the "two truths" actually plays for time. There comes a time when, having established a ladder of verified assumptions, scientific knowledge works less like supposition and more like fact-storing. By the mid-seventeenth century, for example, it seemed vanishingly unlikely that natural philosophers would suppose, say, geocentrism to be a promising hypothesis. There are things which, once demonstrated through the disciplined application of doubt, can be doubted no more, at least not within a currently optimal scientific framework (perhaps geocentrism may someday make sense to a quantum-reality traveler; it currently does not to the traveler in Newtonian space). Nevertheless, it was a mistake for the metaphysically-minded Giordano Bruno to imbue Copernican science, and science in general, with the spirit of ontological certitude. Bruno in his more careless moments asseverated that science was ready to take from religion the mantle of true knowledge. This undisguised attack on the Church, for which Bruno paid dearly, actually did no service to science either which, when it comes to it, isn't interested in what actually and ontologically is. Ultimate truth has never helped an astronomer work out the course of this or that celestial ellipsis. Ontology is the province of philosophers and theologians, and scientists can do very well without it. The disinterest received the nod of theologians back in the early modern period, as it receives the snub of Continental metaphysicians in the twentieth century. How can science be ignorant and incurious of the "ground of being"? But if we understand this alleged ignorance for what it is, i.e., the intellect putting itself under suspicion, then we begin to glimpse the actual spiritual challenge posed by the scientific revolution. Science steered between two reefs: the one, of ontological certitude, and the other, of nihilistic despair. Science said that we could know enough for our purposes.

In many ways, the skeptical crisis of 1550-1650 was the work of writers and thinkers of a metaphysical cast of mind who could not adapt to the spiritual touch-and-go of science. For if science does run on the juice of skepticism, it is not to elevate skepticism into an ontological marker. It does not say, unlike the skeptics who wanted to know something for sure (in the event, that we never do know), that knowledge is forever doubtful. In other words, science is doubtful also of skepticism, and plainly not interested in it as a theory of reality. This metaphysical disinterest proved too strong a potion for the sixteenth-century mind. Still steeped in the age of faith, this mind wanted some absolute, which skepticism provided, after a fashion. Thus, for example, Montaigne who epitomizes the moment when, disenchanted of absolute knowledge, the intellect grabs onto this disenchantment and makes it the truth of all reality. "Our science," he

writes, “has not put one single thing squarely in its rightful place, and I will leave this world knowing nothing better than my own ignorance” (Montaigne 602). This reaction is comparable to that of the adolescent dismissing all truths because he has found a few of them to be doubtful, and feeling supreme in his ruling. Of course, Montaigne was right to think that sixteenth-century science seemed to put nothing in its rightful place. Renaissance scientists themselves had not given up on the dream of intuitive, heaven-sent knowledge. When he did not calculate planetary positions, Tycho Brahe composed horoscopes, and Kepler believed in witchcraft. A century later, Isaac Newton could be found dilating on alchemy at greater length than the applied mathematics for which he is famous. The habit of knowledge is hard to kick. Given this, Montaigne could be excused for thinking all knowledge vain, except for the knowledge that knowledge is vain. The first principle (that all knowledge is vain) is a metaphysical extrapolation inspired by the work of science, but in reality foreign to it; the second principle (that we know that we do not know) is a philosophical consolation, a bromide, dogmatic self-reassurance posturing as stoic resignation.

Skepticism, then, was the error of positing ignorance as the essence of all human relation to things. *De Incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum*, reads the title of a philosophical treatise by Henry Cornelius Agrippa of 1530. This is philosophy clinging to the chair of theology from which, clad in tonsure and miter, it blankets reality in universal statements. Scientific work is much less categorical, and less romantic about skepticism. It knows that discomfiture awaits the intellect at every move not because it is in the nature of man not to know, but because reality is rich in surprises. A skeptic is essentially someone who does not like surprises and recoils from the mugging of mind by fact. He prefers to say that nothing is known rather suffer the indignity of being proven wrong. Shunning the dusty workshop, he keeps to the apostolic chair of ex-cathedra essentialist thinking. This is where we must locate sixteenth-century skepticism. It is philosophy snubbing the humbling job of taking measurements and calculating ratios, and instead retrenching into metaphysical infallibilism. Better to say nothing, says the philosopher-skeptic, better to withhold judgment, better to speculate rather than submit to the plebeian court of appeals of facts. *That nothing is known*—the proclamation of Sanchez’ 1581 treatise: this is refuge, the convenient solution of the metaphysician who, feeling the rumble of a rebellion from below, forms a *Fronde* of philosophical disaffection towards all human knowledge. Of the scientific method, the skeptical metaphysician affected to hear only that everything is open to doubting; he did not want to hear that doubt is strictly an epistemological attitude, a means of elucidation, and not an ontological feature of the world. To say that we cannot know, that nothing is known, is metaphysical absolutism in falsely penitent dress. Skepticism decidedly knows much too much about a reality about which it purports to say so little. For if we know nothing for sure, how can we know that everything is ultimately not to be known? The more it digs in, the more skepticism looks like religion sniping from the rearguard to repel the advance of science.

Here come to mind the words of the Holy Office condemning Galileo in 1616. In it, theology and philosophy (deductive) join forces against science (inductive): “The view that the sun stands motionless at the center of the universe is foolish, philosophically false, and utterly heretical, because contrary to Holy Scripture. The view that the earth is not the center of the universe and even has a daily rotation is philosophically false” (Wolf 36). That heliocentrism is heretical, is true enough; that it is “philosophically false” proves the affinity of philosophy with religion. Both deal in the big questions deduced from apriori fundamentals; both incline to holism and gaze at things from the broadest angle possible. Both, on this ground, share a suspicion of the contrary approach that is plied by piecemeal experimentalists and foragers who go at things through narrow slits and cracks of reality. Sixteenth-century skepticism sprang of the marriage of

theology and philosophy: it is never philosophically false because it is never falsifiable (how would we ever *know* that we know nothing?); and it is never religiously wrong because it cannot, by definition, dismiss the truths of religion, and in the end inclines towards a resignation, intuitionism, and supramundane detachment that savors of the monastery.

To observe the career from skepticism to fideism, we need only consider Montaigne. “The for and against are both possible;” “it may be and it may not be;” I determine nothing, I do not comprehend things, I suspend judgment.” These inscriptions on the rafters of Montaigne’s study oversaw his meditative ramblings. “There is plague on Man: his opinion that he knows something,” he writes in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (1576). There is a time and place for skepticism, to be sure. Its neutrality vis-à-vis all knowledge was the right emollient during a crisis of history stained in the red of religious war. When ideological factions are at dagger drawn, it is opportune to remind everyone how little in fact we know for sure. Just the same, this temporary salve wears down the patient by continued application. Knowledge cannot settle our differences, the skeptic tells the contestants time and again; our heart, not our head, will split the difference. But differences do exist—and especially differences of the heart, of temper, of fondness, of proclivity, of proximity. How can we harmonize our actions absent the arbitrage of an agreed-upon known reality? Here we have cause to fear that the cognitive uprootedness may throw us back into the daze of passion. “Nothing is so firmly believed as that which is least known,” Montaigne said (242). If we defend nothing with more fervor and righteous rage than the convictions we cannot prove, and if we hotly assert, protest and condemn in the inverse proportion to which we are certain of our propositions, then skepticism may not be the long-term medicine. A society of skeptics, literally of know-nothings, isn’t necessary one of intellectual pacifists and tolerant stoics. It is just as likely to evolve into a brawl of people ready to fight over ideas for which, since they can provide no evidence, they must shed the next best thing, which is blood. The opposite perhaps holds true: the more clearly we know, the more readily do we settle our disputes before an objective referee. This is why there are wars of religion but no war in the house of science. On this score, scientific fact has probably pacified us, and may continue to pacify our societies. If a bacillus, and not a witch, is responsible for the blight of my crops, or if poor hygiene, not the Jews, killed my newborn, then that there is generally good news for women and Jews, indeed for the tranquility and morality of all involved. Where there is distrust or dislike or laziness about facts, by contrast, expect a fight to break out, and a scapegoat to take the fall. In any case, it must not be assumed that skepticism necessarily helps us out of our disagreements; it merely postpones discussion, while meantime tribal irritation and hearsay are let to fester.

This is one count against skepticism. The other is that, for all its intellectual fastidiousness, it is really no safeguard against irrationalism. For what, in the end, does the Montaignean skeptic live by? Skepticism tells him that all customs are arbitrary, opportune, and myopic; that none rest on a belief which sufficient scrutiny cannot dismantle. But what else is there if all knowledge is custom? Custom blinds but it also binds: at least it gives us a set of rules to live by, and which prove their utility if only because they have been good enough to keep us alive. Moreover, if custom blinds, we can never know, as per the skeptic’s radical epistemological doubt, what it blinds us to. We therefore have to trust that custom does its job, somehow. This explains why, from the perch of skeptical detachment, Montaigne walks back to the homely abode of accepted tradition: ours are arbitrary customs, often absurd and sometimes cruel, he finds, but they are all we have, given we never fathom the true state of things.

One outcome is that the skeptic finds himself reborn into a cynical pragmatist—a traditionalist seasoned with irony: “It is his soul that a wise man should withdraw from the crowd,

maintaining its power and freedom freely to make judgments, while externally accepting all received forms and fashions” (Montaigne 133). Here Montaigne lands on a secular version of the “the two truths doctrine:” there is a truth of the marketplace (as there was of the altar), and a truth of the individualist (as there was of reason). The twain need not agree. The practical problem, of course, is that the skeptic now inhabits the marketplace as if in a play. This is why skeptical irony tends to run itself out in the short term: first because it is psychologically unsustainable for an individual to take his life lightly and fictitiously all the time; second because a society made of mummery, a society where everyone reads cynicism in everyone else’s eyes, is one that sickens and dies (see France in summer 1789; see the Soviet states in 1989).

As a matter of fact, it is usually a small gap between the skeptical generation that professes knowing nothing for sure (say, Socrates) and the mystagogue generation that declares itself in possession of unknowable things (say, Plato). One result of Montaigne skewering all certainty was Pascal finding certainty only in the mysteries of the faith. The radical skepticism of late twentieth-century postmodernist deconstruction in American universities devastated the idea of knowledge out of whose ashes rose the unassailable faith of identitarian critical theory: since we can know nothing, let us at least *believe* this, *my* truth, and may the Devil take the doubtful. Montaigne shows in his person the transition between skepticism and intuitionism. For example, he saw no evidential or logical reason for the immortality of the soul. But what is a proof anyhow? So he decided to believe in the immortal soul, it being better to espouse the thing that gives us least spiritual trouble and social friction. “Except within the faith, I believe in no miracles,” he says elsewhere (Montaigne 964-5). Does Montaigne make light of faith or does faith make short work of him in the end? On the one hand, someone who sees himself believing in miracles only inside the faith but not outside may be suspected of having left the faith, of *playing* at faith. On the other, to behold oneself believing in the unbelievable for the sake of faith is just the abdication of reason that faith demands (*credo quia absurdum*). On this score, Montaigne may just be one of the faithful, as trustful of miracles as the heartiest clodhopper on his estates. The skeptic, then, must factor this in his travel expenditures. The flight away from knowledge sometimes includes a return trip to gullibility.

An age of doubt convulsed by desperate faith. An age of erosive irony that broke into bouts of fanatical violence. An age on the brink of disbelief that bled itself white over articles of metaphysical intangibilities. An age of philosophical skepticism and theological ardor. Such is to our eyes the period during which Europe tore itself away from the moral nursery of the Middle Ages and hurled itself into the vast unknown of science. To be sure, it may not have looked like a triumphant beginning to its contemporaries, and probably more like an ending. With religious slaughters burning fields and emptying towns, with the autodafés and the witch-hunts and the possession scares and the persecution of heresy real or imagined, with the sneering realpolitik of dynasts and princes of the church, with the churn of superstitions, of astrology, chiromancy, evil eyes and goblins and demons, exorcisms, miracles and quackery, it would have seemed to the timid embattled rationalist that an age of profound decadence portended the end. Of course, the clergy read more and educated itself, the Vatican Library in mid-sixteenth century seemed to many like that of Alexandria reborn, while the ruling class and the affluent kept printer-publishers busy and built private libraries and patronized scholars and natural philosophers. Yet the rise of scientific and historical knowledge only seemed to stoke the confusion. Faust the polymath cannot tell knowledge apart from necromancy and ends up the biggest fool. The literature of the sixteenth century is predominantly one of preciousness, lampoon, demented grandeur, earnest pastiche and

disaffected satire (from Erasmus to Rabelais, Aretino, Tasso, and Cervantes) or else philosophic resignation (Cervantes again and Montaigne). In the arts, mannerism, the style which only knows how to exaggerate or emaciate the Renaissance fullness of form, stands atremble before a very dim-lit future. Confusion, not direction, is everywhere the keynote.

Of course, any reflective age is, so far as it views itself, a time of transition. It knows whence it comes, but knows not whither it goes. The sixteenth century is especially interesting to the historical eye because, of all the periods between the sixth until the twentieth century (which must surpass it in moral disarray), it is a period that most acutely documented its own loss of bearings. The essays presented here are testimonies of this crisis. They speak to us of a time when the modern mind was born. When we speak of birth, we often think of an entity coming into its own. Perhaps, then, the idea of birth doesn't quite fit the event in question. For the modern mind was born, not of knowing what it is about, but of self-estrangement. It was born of seriously questioning the foundations and guarantees and prospects of knowing itself. "Dare to not know," in other words, is the motto from which the modern age derives its impetus, and it wasn't, nor has been, an easy wisdom to live by. We, to this day, are not sure whether it ultimately leads to growing reason or unreason.

Works Cited

- Durant, Will and Ariel. *The Story of Civilization, Volume VI*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957.
- Hazard, Paul. *The Crisis of the European Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953.
- Janssen, Johannes. *History of the German People after the Close of the Middle Ages*. Volume XII. London: Kegan Paul, 1910.
- Kesten, Hermann. *Copernicus and his World*. New York: Roy Publishers, 1945.
- Montaigne, Michel de. *The Complete Essays*. Trans. M.A. Screech. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Owen, John. *Skeptics of the French Renaissance*. London: Sonnenschein, 1893.
- Wolf, Abraham. *History of Science, Technology, and Philosophy in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959.