SKEPTICS AND SKEPTICISM.

SKEPTICS AND SKEPTICISM. The term *skeptic* comes from the Greek words *skeptikos* ("an inquirer, one who reflects") and *skeptesthai* ("to view, to consider"). Philosophical skepticism arose from some of the observations made by early Greek philosophers. Heraclitus said that the world is in such flux that "one cannot step twice in the same river." The only truth, he asserted, was that everything changes. Cratylus went further and said that, since everything changes, people change, and their language changes, so that knowledge and communication are not really possible. The Sophists Protagoras and Gorgias asserted additional skeptical views. Protagoras argued that humanity is the measure of all things; by implication, each person measures the world individually, so there are no general human truths. Gorgias is said to have argued that nothing exists, but even if it did one could not know it, and even if one did know it one could not communicate it. The culmination of these early skeptical comments was Socrates' remark, at his trial, that all he knew was that he knew nothing.

Systematic accounts of human inability to gain accurate knowledge about the world were first rendered by Arcesilas (c. 315–241 BCE) and Carneades (213–129 BCE). They developed arguments, directed primarily against Stoic and Epicurean opponents, to undermine any claims of knowledge and to establish that nothing can be known. This view, termed "Academic skepticism," presented a series of arguments against the truth of purported sense and rational knowledge, and against any standard that could be employed to distinguish between truth and falsity. Cicero presented this view in his *De Academica* and *De natura deoreum*.

A more skeptical group claimed that the Academic skeptics were really negative dogmatists, as they indeed asserted that nothing can be known and that "all assertions are merely probable." Following the legendary Pyrrho of Elis (360–275 BCE), who would not make any judgment, a movement called Pyrrhonism developed about 100 BCE. Its theoretician, Aenesidemus (100–40 BCE), and his successors set forth a series of "tropes," or ways of suspending judgment on all questions, scientific, mathematical, metaphysical, theological, and ethical. The Pyrrhonian materials were gathered together by Sextus Empiricus in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and *Against the Dogmatists* (c. 200 CE) and were to play a most important role in the rise of modern skepticism.

Both the Academic and Pyrrhonian skeptics offered their doubts as ways of finding peace of mind and of conforming with popular religion. Their opponents claimed to know what the world was like, and to base their way of life on such knowledge. However, if these opponents were to find they were mistaken in their knowledge they would become mentally disturbed and uncertain as to how to live. The skeptics, however, by suspending judgment, would attain peace of mind. They would live undogmatically, doing what was natural and/or conventional. They would behave normally and accept the laws of their society and its customs, including religious ones. Others might scoff at popular religion because it did not conform to their "knowledge" of the world. The Academics and Pyrrhonians suspended judgment on such questions as "Do the gods exist?" and simply followed the religious customs of their communities undogmatically, without committing themselves to any theological claims. The skeptics thus could say that they were no threat to accepted religion.

The Greek skeptics, from Arcesilaus to Sextus, had apparently little effect on Judaism or Christianity (although Pyrrhonism flourished principally in Alexandria, Athens, and Rome). In Jewish postbiblical writing, the word for "skeptic" is *aipikuros*. Obviously derived from the name *Epicurus*, the term denotes both a general doubter and one who doubts crucial features of Judaism. Criticisms of *aipikurosim* indicate some awareness of skepticism in the Jewish community.

Church fathers occasionally comment on skeptical views, although only Augustine appears to have taken them very seriously. He had read Cicero's account. When he became a Christian, he wrote various dialogues about the status of religious knowledge; one of them, *Contra Academicos*, showed how faith and grace aided in overcoming problems of skepticism.

During the Middle Ages ancient skeptical views were little known or discussed, except through Augustine's rebuttal. Some Muslim and Jewish philosophers, however, pointed to basic skeptical problems in the acceptance of revealed reli-

gion. Ibn Rushd (Averroës) had shown that Aristotle's philosophy conflicted with certain revealed claims, such as the statement that the world was created and the individual soul is immortal. Maimonides argued that some religious claims could be proved and also disproved by reason and therefore had to be accepted on faith. The Muslim mystic al-Ghazālī sought to show that science and reason could not lead to satisfactory knowledge about the world and that God's omnipotence prevents people from being able to know God or God's handiwork. The skeptical implications of these Jewish and Muslim views appeared in discussions in the late Middle Ages, especially among the Latin Averroists and in the writings of Nicholas of Cusa.

In the sixteenth century a new period in skepticism began, partly as a result of the humanist revival of the classics (including the rediscovery of Cicero's accounts of Academic skepticism and the writings of Sextus Empiricus), partly as a result of new data about the geographical, human, and astronomical world that contradicted previously accepted theories, and partly because skeptical arguments were employed in theological conflicts between Roman Catholics and reformers. Erasmus, disputing Luther, appealed to ancient skeptical arguments to deny that one could tell if people had free will. Erasmus suspended judgment on theological issues while accepting on faith the views of his church. Montaigne, after reading Sextus Empiricus, modernized the ancient skeptical arguments into a thorough attack on the science and theology of his time. He showed how attempts to know the world led to contradictions and absurdities. He also introduced a fideistic note, that humans should turn to God and accept on faith whatever knowledge God gives humans. In view of all the doubts about religious claims to knowledge (of such subjects as the nature of God, God's relationship to humanity, and humanity's spiritual nature and religious destiny), one should accept the faith into which one is born. Changing faiths would require knowledge of the merits of various faiths, whether they are true, or truer than one's own.

Whether or not Montaigne was sincere in his fideism, his position was adopted by various Counter-Reformers in France who sought to show that the Calvinists made indefensible claims about the source of religious knowledge and the nature of such knowledge. These Catholics sought to reduce the Calvinists to complete skeptics. The Calvinists, in turn, tried in a similar way to reduce the Catholics, by arguing that it was uncertain who the pope was, what he and church councils had said, and so on.

Montaigne's presentation of the new Pyrrhonism brought about a general skeptical crisis among many intellectuals in the seventeenth century. Descartes's philosophy was designed to overcome all doubts by pushing skepticism even further than Sextus or Montaigne. By finding one fundamental truth ("I think, therefore I am"), one could then establish a general criterion of truth and discover truth in mathematics, physics, and theology. Others, faced with the same skeptical crisis, sought a solution in the interpretation of biblical prophecies (Joseph Mede and Henry More), in a desperate appeal to faith (Pascal), or in moderating one's quest for knowledge to a kind of probabilism (Gassendi, Chillingworth, and the English latitudinarian theologians).

Many sought to undermine Descartes's optimistic answer to skepticism, and to cast doubts on any metaphysical foundation to modern science and any rational basis to theology. This attempt was coupled with skeptical criticism of scripture as a collection of books containing special indubitable knowledge—criticism launched by La Peyrère in his *Men before Adam* and by Spinoza in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. The French Protestant philosopher, historian, and theologian Pierre Bayle joined these skeptical strands together in his massive *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697–1702), casting doubts on the new philosophies of the seventeenth century, from Descartes to Locke and Leibniz, as well as on older philosophies. Bayle's only advice to his readers was to abandon reason for faith. Voltaire and Hume developed the more irreligious implications of Bayle's attacks. Voltaire called Bayle's work "the arsenal of the Enlightenment," and used it to undermine any confidence in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Hume used Bayle's skepticism to show that one has no rational basis for one's beliefs in any area whatsoever. One's beliefs in science or religion are based on natural factors, on animal faith. Kant developed Hume's skeptical criticism of arguments about the nature of God, contending that knowledge of the nature and existence of God is beyond the capabilities of pure reason and that all theological arguments about the existence and nature of God are faulty.

Hume's naturalistic skepticism and the limitations placed on human reason by Kant's analysis would seem to have led modern thought into an unconquerable skepticism. Many more recent philosophies have suggested ways of avoiding, overcoming, or living with skepticism: ways that others, in turn, have shown to be impracticable. Hume and Kant ended a tradition of seeking rational knowledge about the existence and nature of God. This skepticism about theological knowledge produced a vital form of fideism. J. G. Hamann, a religious friend of Kant's, argued that Hume was actually the greatest voice of orthodoxy. By eliminating any appeal to reason or evidence in religion, he showed it rested on faith. Hume had said skepticism is the first step toward becoming a true and believing Christian. It is doubtful, however, that Hume was any kind of Christian but, rather, was a deist or an agnostic. Hamann, however, used Hume's writings to urge Kant to turn to faith. Kierkegaard found the basis of his fideism in Hamann's interpretation of Hume and developed the total skepticism that he regarded as inherent to religious belief.

Modern skepticism from Montaigne onward eroded confidence in traditional metaphysical and theological systems, a process that is reflected in the accommodation of its tenets in pragmatism, positivism, and existentialism. This process also led to radical expressions of fideism as the basis

for religious belief, such as those of Pascal and Kierkegaard, and to various forms of Neo-orthodoxy in the twentieth century.

SEE ALSO Doubt and Belief; Existentialism; Neoorthodoxy; Positivism.

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RICHARD H. POPKIN (1987)
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