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# Henrik Lagerlund, "Skepticism in Philosophy: A Comprehensive, Historical Introduction."

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**Henrik Lagerlund.** *Skepticism in Philosophy: A Comprehensive, Historical Introduction.* Routledge 2020. 254 pp. \$160.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781138555549); \$44.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781138555563).

This is an accessible introduction to the history of skepticism that includes a persuasive corrective to Popkin's view of 'la crise Pyrrhonienne' in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It is pitched at first year undergraduates (and above) but, in its engagement with Popkin's histories, it also offers a new take on skeptical themes in medieval philosophy.

Conventionally enough, the book begins with a discussion of Pyrrhonian skepticism as presented by Sextus Empiricus. One of the most significant distinguishing characteristics of this form of skepticism is suspension of judgement (*epoché*). Lagerlund explains that it was only at a much later date, in the writings of Augustine, that emphasis shifted from the suspension of judgment to the concept of doubt. Augustine's discussion of skepticism was also responsible for dropping earlier skeptical concerns with how to live. For Augustine, the problem of skepticism was purely an epistemological problem.

Earlier, in the writings of Sextus Empiricus and Cicero, there was much discussion of how skepticism relates to practice. Sextus argued that skepticism enabled a tranquility or a peace of mind (*ataraxia*)—a suggestion that has ever since been met with incredulity. However, as Lagerlund notes, the ancient skeptics may not have been quite as impractical as their critics have made out: they recognized the practicality of respecting probable appearances.

In Popkin's thesis the skepticism of Sextus Empiricus was completely absent from medieval Europe and only reappeared in the late sixteenth century when it then had a tremendous impact, first upon Montaigne and then upon Descartes. Lagerlund argues that this is an oversimplification. Admittedly, there was a period in which skeptical concerns became extremely scarce from the late twelfth century to the late thirteenth century. It was then that the work of the completely unskeptical Aristotle and Avicenna was introduced into the Latin western philosophical tradition. Nonetheless, curiously, as early as the late thirteenth century a complete translation was made of Sextus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.

Nonetheless, following Popkin, Lagerlund grants that Montaigne was the first major philosopher of the early modern period to fully appreciate fully the significance of Sextus Empiricus and he pays tribute to Popkin for his part in persuading contemporary philosophers that Montaigne is worth reading. However, he has doubts as to whether Montaigne should be classed as a skeptic. According to Lagerlund, Montaigne's conclusion is 'one of pessimism more than skepticism' (110).

Here there is much room for debate. In tone, after his discovery of Sextus Empiricus in 1575-76, Montaigne is not pessimistic. The impact that his reading of Sextus Empiricus had on him is neatly demonstrated by the token he had cast inscribed 'ΕΠΕΧΩ. 43. 1576' (in other words, 'I abstain, aged 43, 1576'). Montaigne is, however, unusual among western skeptics in that he does not presuppose metaphysics and epistemology to be the highest branches of philosophy. 'In truth, knowledge is a great and very useful quality; those who despise it give evidence of their stupidity. But yet I do not set its value at that extreme measure that some attribute to it ... who placed in it the sovereign good, and held that it was in its power to make us wise and content. That I do not believe' (Montaigne, *The Complete Works* 2003, 387) In this respect Montaigne's skepticism is unlike that of Sextus Empiricus but may be closer to that of the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu (or Zhuangzi) (of the late fourth century BC). Both philosophers think that the question of 'what should I do?' is equally or more important than the question 'what do I know?'

Chuang Tzu's skepticism is illustrated in the following story: 'Once Chuang Chou [Chuang Tzu's given name] dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou. Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things' (*Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, Columbia University Press 1996, §2, 45) The point that he makes, which is fully apparent within the larger context of his writing, is that: 'Whether or not what he sees is a dream ... he has to accept it as given' (A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*, Open Court 1989, 194)—'there must be some distinction!' Chuang Tzu and Montaigne would agree: in order to act we must make choices whilst yet retaining an awareness of our fallibility. But, unlike Sextus Empiricus, neither would claim that knowledge of our fallibility has the power to make us content. Their hopes and expectations are more modest.

Against Popkin's argument that the arguments of Sextus Empiricus played a crucial role in the development of Descartes's thought, Lagerlund points out that the idea that God might be a deceiver was discussed (independently of discussions of Sextus Empiricus) already in the fourteenth century. He also points to anticipations of Hume's philosophy in the work of John of Salisbury, Nicholas of Autrecourt and Al-Ghazâlî, all of whom argued that there is no necessary connection between cause and effect.

There is an interesting discussion of Pierre Bayle and his argument that natural science should have nothing to fear from skepticism, for in science probable hypotheses are sufficient. Bayle argued that it is rather religion that should fear skepticism, since religion aspires to infallible belief. There are also sections of the book devoted to Pierre Charron, Francisco Sanches, George Berkeley, Mary Shepherd, David Hume and Thomas Reid. With Reid a new criticism is levelled at skepticism, or at least a development of an old criticism. The criticism that skepticism was impractical had been made in the ancient world; Reid argued that it was impractical because it went against common sense. Outside of his philosopher's study, Hume would have agreed.

Kant's attitude was that skepticism should be crushed but with philosophy, not with common sense. However, like Descartes, in pursuit of this end he was happy to help himself to skeptical methods. By contrast, Hegel's attitude was that skepticism was irrefutable but should be ignored. All of these positions are briefly but accurately explained. From Hegel, Lagerlund moves on to Moore and Wittgenstein. He explains how Moore famously attempted to vanquish external world skepticism by the common sense means of holding up both his hands. He eventually became dissatisfied with his 'proof,' but he retained his faith in common sense as the best response to external world skepticism.

Wittgenstein believed that Moore was fighting the battle on the wrong ground: 'There is no commonsense answer to a philosophical problem. One can defend common sense against the attacks of philosophers only by solving their puzzles i.e. by curing them of the temptation to attack common sense; not by restating the views of common sense' (Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, Harper 1958, 58-59). Wittgenstein's own response to external world skepticism was to argue that the 'doubt' of the skeptic is not the same as the 'doubt' used in an ordinary language situation. In an ordinary language situation the skeptic's doubt is nonsensical—it cannot be lived.

However, it should be stressed that both Moore and Wittgenstein have in mind, like Descartes, the skeptic who doubts rather than the skeptic who abstains from judgement. In the latter category, Montaigne and Chuang Tzu provide examples of a skepticism that, arguably, *can* be lived.

The penultimate chapter of the book discusses recent and modern and contemporary interest

in skepticism (since the 1960s) that has been inspired by the work of, among others, Richard Popkin, Arne Naess, Barry Stroud and Saul Kripke's 'meaning skepticism' which was itself inspired (and arguably solved) by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. The final chapter discusses such things as climate-change skepticism and round-earth skepticism. I'm not sure that it is appropriate to what Lagerlund calls 'the distinguished history' (1) of skepticism to end on that note. It might have been more appropriate to describe these things and then dismiss them, as irrelevant to the main philosophical history of skepticism, in the introduction. As Lagerlund points out, 'denial' rather than 'skepticism' would be a better word for these non-philosophical 'skeptical' movements.

My reservations, in short, are that it would be preferable had climate-change 'skepticism' etc. been briefly discussed and dismissed in the introduction; I am unconvinced by the claim that Montaigne is not a skeptic; and it would have been interesting to learn of skeptics (such as Chuang Tzu) outside of the western tradition. However, that said, as Lagerlund points out, despite the interest in skepticism since the 1960s, 'there still has not been a complete history of skepticism written until this one' (5). This one is a lively, readable and reliable history of skepticism—in the western tradition.

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