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Anton M. Matytsin, *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. xi + 361 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1421420523.

Review by Charly Coleman, Columbia University.

François de La Pillonnière's *L'Athéisme découvert* (1715) relates the curious saga of a young man seeking the "marvelous accord that meditation lays bare between reason and revelation."<sup>[1]</sup> Plumbing the depths of divine wisdom, he threw himself into the study of philosophy, theology, and history, and acquired Greek and Hebrew. He appealed for instruction to one Father Hardouin, a Jesuit scholar with a shocking message. From time immemorial, Hardouin claimed, "a hidden and underground faction" had clandestinely denied the existence of a transcendent God. In this reordering of the great chain of being, there was no heaven or hell, only an "immutable order" sustained by the "universal reason of minds." To the pupil's astonishment, the sect counted among its members "Saint Augustine and the so-called Fathers of the Church," whose teachings had infiltrated the work of "our scholastics." Cartesians such as Nicolas Malebranche and other "new *philosophes*" now took up the call, beseeching their followers to "pass from faith to intellect." Rationalist theologians were thus doomed to failure, in that they drew unknowingly on the same polluted sources as their godless opponents.<sup>[2]</sup> Paradoxically, perhaps, true faith cast doubt on all knowledge, whether pagan or Christian.

One gains a richer understanding of La Pillonnière's tale from Anton Matytsin's engagingly erudite book. The author deftly weaves readings of a score of pivotal, challenging thinkers into a forceful analytical narrative. At the turn of the eighteenth century, Matytsin reminds us, incredulity did not necessarily lead to irreligion. Rather, participants in the period's vibrant and often fraught metaphysical and epistemological debates came to diverse conclusions regarding the limits of the human faculties and the ultimate status of knowledge. Many thinkers found a touchstone in "philosophical skepticism," or "Pyrrhonism," a tradition with an ancient lineage that had assumed new meanings in the wake of the Reformations and successive assaults on Aristotelian verities by Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo Galilei, René Descartes, John Locke, and Isaac Newton. As Matytsin argues, skepticism did not engender intellectual quietism. On the contrary, it ultimately provided a framework for eighteenth-century *philosophes* to implement a program of "*practicable* reason, concerned with concrete empirical observations of phenomena that affected matters deemed practical and useful" (p. 3). In this view, modern philosophy and science grew out of skepticism rather than the Enlightenment, thus following a diffuse intellectual tendency rather than a discrete agenda.

Matytsin does not cite *L'Athéisme découvert*, an admittedly minor text. More surprising is his relative neglect of Blaise Pascal and David Hume, two undeniably consequential skeptics of the period, as well as his occasionally awkward engagement with their most recognizable historian, Richard Popkin. Popkin wrote successive editions of a widely influential monograph on the skeptical tradition in early modern Europe, complemented by an array of articles.<sup>[3]</sup> He privileged several of the same figures as Matytsin, including Michel de Montaigne, Marin Mersenne, Pierre Gassendi, Pierre Bayle, François de La Mothe

Le Vayer, Pierre-Daniel Huet, and Jean-Pierre de Crousaz, among others. Popkin's and Matytsin's analyses have similar points of departure—the sixteenth-century skeptic revival—and both dwell on the period 1650-1730, while making brief forays into the later eighteenth century. As for specific interpretations, Popkin argues that Mersenne and Gassendi advanced a “constructive or mitigated scepticism,” or “*via media* between the completely destructive tendency of the *nouveau pyrrhonisme* and a questionable dogmatism,” that “has ultimately become a crucial part of modern philosophy.”[4] Matytsin makes a similar claim:

“Much like Pyrrhonian skepticism, which had emerged as a response to the dogmatic schools of ancient Greece, the mitigated skepticism of the Age of Enlightenment was the outcome of clashes between ambitious philosophical systems of the late seventeenth century. It offered a practical middle way between the futile quest for absolute certainty and complete resignation to extreme Pyrrhonian doubt” (pp. 231-232).

As did Popkin, Matytsin further insists that early modern skepticism provided an epistemological impetus for fideism, or the idea that, given the frailty of human reason, divine revelation (for Catholics, as understood by the Church) offered the only stable grounds for religious belief (pp. 25-32).[5]

Such inevitable convergences relate directly to the intellectual stakes of Matytsin's project as he defines them. It is to be expected that two excellent historians of skepticism, sharing many of the same key sources, would arrive at related conclusions. Even so, Matytsin might have clarified further how his approach differs from Popkin's, which shifted over the course of a long career. In his introduction, Matytsin criticizes the early Popkin's thesis that skepticism fell into stark decline during the eighteenth century, before acknowledging that the elder scholar “revised his view” in subsequent publications (p. 17). Although Matytsin alludes to Popkin's writings in the main chapters, it is not always immediately clear to which Popkin he is referring. Matytsin observes that “Popkin once wrote that Hume was ‘the only living skeptic’ in the mid-eighteenth century” (p. 145). The footnote, however, concedes that Popkin later “modified his views” (p. 296, n. 54) to consider how Voltaire, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Denis Diderot, and others developed their thought in dialogue with the skeptical tradition.[6]

The treatment of Popkin is indicative of a more fundamental slippage in how Matytsin understands the two decisive elements in his analysis, the Enlightenment and skepticism. Matytsin often refers to the “Age of Enlightenment,” even in his book's title, but seems of two minds as to whether the Enlightenment itself is a worthy object of historical inquiry. He suggests that the myriad approaches applied to the subject have generated so many competing “micro-Enlightenment’ accounts” (French, German, radical, moderate, religious, etc.) that the term has lost any real meaning (p. 12).[7] Yet Matytsin allows for a variety of strands of skepticism (Academic and Pyrrhonian, mitigated, etc.) that nonetheless formed “a coherent yet diverse philosophical (or anti-philosophical) movement” (p. 1). Moreover, he concludes that proponents of “mitigated skepticism,” who at times could also be considered anti-skeptics, or at least adverse to the more extreme iterations of philosophical doubt, upheld ideals Ernst Cassirer and other canonical scholars have identified with the Enlightenment, namely, epistemological modesty and religious toleration.[8] Matytsin's formulation of the complex relationship between skepticism and Enlightenment-era philosophy (if not the Enlightenment *tout court*) guides the summary that follows, and raises questions that cast beyond this thought-provoking book.

*The Specter of Skepticism* is organized both thematically and chronologically. There are ten chapters of varying structures and lengths, many featuring the same cohort of thinkers. The book opens with the publication in 1562 of Sextus Empiricus's recently recovered writings, which taught that all knowledge remained dubious, even the proposition of one's lack of certitude. Pyrrhonian skepticism (named for Sextus's supposed predecessor, Pyrrho of Elis) thus stood in contrast with its Academic counterpart, first professed by Socrates, that the fundamental lack of certainty served as the one philosophical given. Sextus's work was translated into Latin in the midst of the Reformation, when conflicts between

Catholics and Protestants gave rise to confessional debates concerning the accessibility of divine truths to human reason.

Sixteenth-century theologians weaponized Pyrrhonism with myriad targets in mind. Catholics generally militated against the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* by emphasizing the inadequacies of natural comprehension. In so doing, they justified a fideist position later taken up by Montaigne, La Mothe Le Vayer, and (at least publicly) Huet. Exiled French Huguenots, in particular Bayle, likewise raised doubts regarding the certitude of knowledge, whether derived from the senses, intelligence, or historical evidence. Even during Bayle's lifetime, commentators struggled to fix his intentions. Was he a fideist who sought—albeit paradoxically through a display of erudition—to deflate the hubris of the *rationaux*, theologians who affirmed the powers of reason? Or, was he, beneath the veneer of humility and toleration, a barely concealed atheist hoping to undermine all religious faith? Matytsin first answers with a methodological pronouncement. Since scholars cannot hope to know Bayle's "true feelings," they should simply "take him at his word" (p. 54). He then sets aside the question entirely, in order to focus on critics such as the Calvinist Pierre Jurieu and Catholic Jacques Bernard, who charged Bayle with both incredulity and insincerity.

Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697) served as a vector for skeptical ideas, which opponents likened to a mental pathology with deleterious social effects. The work inspired "mitigated skeptics" such as Mersenne and Gassendi, along with their English counterparts Francis Bacon and Robert Boyle. Philosophical doubt also authorized the biblical criticism of Isaac de La Peyrère, which went on to inform Baruch Spinoza, whom Matytsin, following Popkin, argues progressed from fostering doubt in the reliability of the scriptures to affirming the unassailability of his own geometric method. In contrast to Jonathan Israel, who characterizes the Enlightenment as dogmatically Spinozist, Matytsin shifts attention to the reception of Bayle's skepticism, debates over which, he contends, ultimately redefined the nature and extent of reason.[9] French Jesuits, for instance, accused Bayle of scholarly ineptitude and challenged his epistemological claims. Huet was perhaps Bayle's perfect foil, in that he had spent his career extolling the powers of the mind, only to have it revealed posthumously that he was a fideist skeptic who sequestered religious truth from the domain of natural philosophy. The Protestant Crousaz entered the fray as the *crise pyrrhoniennne* reached a fever pitch (p. 110). Systematic doubt was essentially hypocritical, he asserted, in that it problematized the founding postulate of every doctrine except its own. This was more akin to the more dogmatic Academic stance than to true Pyrrhonism. The latter, as Matytsin describes Friedrich Wilhelm Bierling's formulation, framed "a perfect middle ground between dogmatism and complete skepticism," one that "established the limits of human knowledge and the appropriate place for uncertainty" (p. 118). At the Académie royale des sciences et belles-lettres de Prusse, Jean-Baptiste Boyer d'Argens and Samuel Formey joined the effort by fending off more extreme skeptics such as David Hume, with the aim of securing a compromise between faith and reason.

Matytsin devotes the second half of his book to the coalescence and eventual triumph of this moderate position among skeptics and their critics alike. Many of the figures introduced in the early chapters reappear as Matytsin describes their interventions in controversies surrounding the mind-body problem, the essence of matter, the structure of the cosmos, and historical scholarship. As Matytsin argues, "these debates transformed skepticism, making its claims more mitigated and reserved," while inducing practitioners of myriad "disciplines" to "abandon the quest for absolute certainty and accept probability as an adequate compromise" (p. 155). Descartes fell prey to skeptical criticisms that his new metaphysics, grounded in the self-evident truth of the *cogito*, raised as many difficulties as it resolved. Matytsin does not insist that John Locke and Isaac Newton were themselves committed skeptics. It suffices that the former's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* made "skeptical inferences" (p. 164). More crucially, Voltaire and Condillac followed the injunction of their English predecessors to restrict the field in which reason should be productively exercised. The *philosophes* advocated suspending judgment on questions related to the existence of God and the correspondence between human perception and external reality to focus their attention on mundane considerations. It was more essential that knowledge serve a useful

purpose than that it be impervious to doubt. Over the past century, skeptics had eroded rationalist presumptions of certitude. Henceforth, empirical experimentation would be the intellectual order of the day.

Matytsin aspires not only to contextualize the Enlightenment within the currents of skepticism, but also to sweep it away. For better or worse, depending on one's perspective, the venture reaches an impasse. As I noted above, the disqualification of the Enlightenment as overly variegated applies equally to the skeptical "movement" of the period. To be sure, the "Discours préliminaire" to the *Encyclopédie* championed Lockean empiricism over Cartesian metaphysics. As Matytsin leads us to anticipate, its author, Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, went so far as to deny "any relation between each sensation and the object that occasions it." However, the *philosophe* soon added, in apparent contrast to Matytsin's reading, that "only a kind of instinct, *surer than reason itself*, can compel us to traverse so great a distance."<sup>[10]</sup> I would suggest that d'Alembert, while willing to challenge competing views, did not remain beholden to skepticism. Rather, he advanced an alternative that, to his mind, was at once less totalizing and more certain.

With a few notable exceptions, such as d'Alembert, Matytsin's analysis does not extend beyond the 1730s, and thus cannot fully demonstrate that the years associated with the High Enlightenment were defined intellectually by an ascendant skepticism. Even the cases he cites seem to indicate otherwise. According to Matytsin, "Condillac attempted to demystify the powers of reason. He deconstructed the understanding into its constituent parts and analyzed them separately" (p. 179). On what basis should this method be characterized as skeptical? Condillac admired Bayle, as did Denis Diderot. But the *Encyclopédie* sought to break through the incredulity of the *Dictionnaire*. The *philosophes'* skepticism, insofar as they professed it, had been mitigated to the point of irrelevance.

Matytsin admirably demonstrates that the operative questions in natural philosophy were changing, along with the scope and nature of doubt itself. Yet new forms of certainty also beckoned. As Cassirer long ago observed, "the strongest intellectual forces of the Enlightenment do not lie in its rejection of belief but rather in the new form of faith which it proclaims, and in the new form of religion which it embodies."<sup>[11]</sup> More recent work in historical epistemology, which Matytsin does not consider, has borne out this insight. Sophia Rosenfeld charts the emergence of common sense as a source of "epistemic authority" in democratic politics, via the "mitigated skepticism" of Latitudinarian Anglicans.<sup>[12]</sup> Dan Edelstein posits the existence of a "Super-Enlightenment," or "epistemological no-man's-land between *Lumières* and *illumination*," where reasoned circumspection gave way to "pure speculation."<sup>[13]</sup> Taking a cue from *L'Athéisme découvert*, I would note that Paul Henri Dietrich d'Holbach denounced every tenet of spiritual orthodoxy, but harbored no such reservations about his own system. "Man is the work of nature," he wrote. "He exists in nature, he is subject to its laws, he cannot free himself from them, he cannot overcome them even in thought."<sup>[14]</sup> So fervent were his irreligious convictions that Christian apologists accused him not only of dogmatism, but even of "fanaticism."<sup>[15]</sup>

*The Specter of Skepticism* is provocative in the best sense of the word. It reveals to us anew that, around 1700, reason's orientation and purposes underwent a seismic shift. Theologians and philosophers came to take a certain pride in their intellectual modesty. Matytsin's laudable ambitions might have more fully embodied the same spirit. He may one day exorcize the historical demons of the Enlightenment, provided his work delves more deeply into the eighteenth century. For now, it is only fitting that doubts persist.

## NOTES

[1] [François de La Pillonnière], *L'Athéisme découvert, par le R. Père Hardouin Jésuite, dans les Écrits de tous les Pères de l'Église, & des Philosophes modernes* (n. p., 1715), p. 3.

[2] Ibid., pp. 7, 13, 16, 21.

[3] Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) and the essays collected in Richard H. Popkin, Ezequiel de Olaso, and Giorgio Tonelli, eds., *Scepticism in the Enlightenment* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997).

[4] Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, rev. ed., p. 112.

[5] Ibid., pp. xxi-xxiii.

[6] See Popkin et. al., eds, *Scepticism in the Enlightenment*, pp. 8-11.

[7] For an overview of these historiographical developments, see John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 1-51.

[8] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951).

[9] See, for instance, Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[10] Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, "Discours préliminaire," *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres*, 35 vols. (1751-1780; repr., Stuttgart-Bad Cannstat: F. Frommann, 1966-1988), 1: ii. Emphasis added.

[11] Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, pp. 135-136.

[12] Sophia A. Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 4, 29.

[13] Dan Edelstein, "Introduction to the Super-Enlightenment" in Dan Edelstein, ed., *The Super-Enlightenment: Daring to Know Too Much* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010), p. 33.

[14] Paul Henri Dietrich, baron d'Holbach, *Système de la nature, ou Des Loix du monde physique et du monde moral*, 2 vols. (London, 1770), 1: 1.

[15] Louis-Athanase des Balbes de Berton de Crillon, *Mémoires philosophiques du baron de \*\*\** (Vienna and Paris: Berton, 1777), p. 112.

Charly Coleman  
Columbia University  
[cc3472@columbia.edu](mailto:cc3472@columbia.edu)

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