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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.

Response by Anton M. Matytsin, Kenyon College.

It is a privilege to have a scholarly exchange about one's research, and I thank Charly Coleman for his engagement with my work. I am grateful to the editors of *H-France* for the chance to answer questions and discuss my book, the main arguments and important aspects of which do not fully emerge in Coleman's review.

*The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment* seeks to demonstrate "the making of a new conception of rationality that developed during the eighteenth century out of a crucible of debates surrounding philosophical skepticism" (p. 2). I show how the disputes about the powers and limits of human reason led Enlightenment thinkers to see "probability and verisimilitude as acceptable alternatives to metaphysical certainty" and "produced what Keith Baker has termed an 'epistemological middle-ground' that emerged 'between absolute certainty and absolute doubt'" (pp. 2–3).<sup>[1]</sup> The book examines how philosophers from the first half of the eighteenth century contributed to the development of a limited confidence in the powers of human reason by the second half of the 1700s. In other words, the main goal of the book is to explore the transition from the 1690s—a period Richard Popkin described as the *crise pyrrhonienne* and that Paul Hazard has associated with "the crisis of the European mind"—to a period commonly identified as the "High Enlightenment," which has also been alternatively designated as the "Age of Reason."<sup>[2]</sup> This transition involved the recognition by many *philosophes* of the significant limitations of human reason. As Coleman rightly notes, it was also characterized by a shift in focus from speculative reason and abstract metaphysics to "*practicable* reason, concerned with concrete empirical observations of phenomena that affected matters deemed practical and useful" (p. 3). These changes occurred as a result of debates between various philosophical skeptics, usually identified as "Pyrrhonians" by their contemporaries, and their numerous opponents, many of whom were concerned about skepticism's dangers to religion.

The book's focus is on this period of intellectual upheaval between 1690s and the 1750s (from Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697) to the *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772)). The debates of this period—too often neglected in histories of the Enlightenment—explain much about the trajectories of later intellectual developments. Coleman claims that, aside from "a few notable exceptions such as [Jean Le Rond] d'Alembert," the book'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." This statement is patently untrue. The book certainly covers the 1740s and extends well into the 1750s, as should be apparent from its engagements with the *Encyclopédie* and numerous other texts. The "few notable exceptions" to whom Coleman refers include Louis-Bertrand Castel, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Denis Diderot, Jean Henri Samuel Formey, Albrecht von Haller, David Hume, and Julien Offray de La Mettrie, among others. *The Specter of Skepticism* explains how the

Enlightenment's apparent confidence in humanity's rational capacities emerged out of debates with real (and imagined) philosophical skeptics earlier in the century. I do not claim that skepticism permeated the learned culture of the "High Enlightenment," but I do argue that understanding the supposed triumph of reason requires an explanation of how thinkers grappled with the powerful arguments of philosophical skepticism. Coleman's review omits any mention of my central claim about how the debates between the skeptics and their opponents "transformed both philosophical skepticism, mitigating its claims, and the various competing theories of knowledge, leading thinkers to regard probability and verisimilitude as acceptable alternatives to metaphysical certainty" (pp. 2-3).

While another volume would be required to examine the full influence of skeptical thought on the second half of the eighteenth century, my book suggests that this influence did, in fact, exist and is most apparent in the *Encyclopédie*. In the "Discours préliminaire" and in various articles, Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, Denis Diderot, and other contributors made a consistent case for a mitigated or moderate skepticism. As my discussions of the "Discours préliminaire" and of articles such as "Ame," "Idée," "Métaphysique," "Pyrrhonienne," and "Vraisemblance" reveal, the editors and contributors attempted to navigate a middle ground between total Pyrrhonian skepticism and absolute, metaphysical certainty in some of the most important philosophical questions. Embracing practicable reason over speculative reason, they also advocated abandoning skeptical doubts in practical matters.[3]

D'Alembert's account of the origin of ideas sought to refute potential skeptical arguments about the fallibility of human understanding. Coleman is right to bring up d'Alembert's passage on instinct. The *philosophe* invoked instinct to answer the problem of how the human mind could confirm the existence of objects outside itself. However, his appeal to instinct made a major concession to the skeptics' claims. Skeptics such as Pierre-Daniel Huet and Simon Foucher had argued that the correspondence between ideas in the mind to objects outside the mind could not be demonstrated philosophically, because the mind could only access ideas and not objects that those ideas supposedly represented. D'Alembert avoided this philosophical conundrum, urging his readers to accept the connection between their ideas and the real existence of objects represented by those ideas "without wavering." [4] He seemed to acknowledge that the philosophical force of the argument against the existence of the external world was sophisticated and did not offer a useful way of engaging reality. D'Alembert thus anticipated and attempted to answer the challenge of philosophical skepticism—a challenge that needed to be addressed, because the specter of skepticism still loomed over the learned world of the eighteenth century.

D'Alembert's invocation of instinct resembled a strategy that Claude Buffier used to find a way out of a debilitating skepticism in the *Traité des premières vérités* (1724). The Jesuit, whose epistemology informed the *Encyclopédie's* article "Vraisemblance," claimed that it was impossible to prove any foundational principles, including the existence of the external world, with metaphysical certainty. However, as I discuss in chapter five, he suggested that people should seek probable knowledge that mostly closely resembled the truth, and he insisted that the innate principle of "common sense" allowed human beings "to form basic conclusions about the world with relative certainty" (p. 119). [5]

For opponents of Pyrrhonism, it was essential to find a way out of skeptical solipsism by invoking some axiom or principle that would allow them to have a basis for discussion. David Renaud Boullier, Jean-Pierre de Crousaz, Jean Henri Samuel Formey, and other critics of skepticism took up Buffier's approach and appealed to the principle of moral certainty. It brought the mind to a level of certitude "that no rational person could doubt in good faith" but "could never command complete metaphysical certainty" (p. 255). Appeals to moral certainty and probability became important strategies in attempted refutations of skepticism during the eighteenth century, as did arguments about the impracticality of suspending one's judgment on all questions. Indeed, d'Alembert's appeal to instinct resembled what Richard Popkin called David Hume's "solution of the Pyrrhonian controversy." [6] For Popkin, Hume's solution consisted of admitting that while skeptical claims were irrefutable philosophically, they carried no psychological force. As a consequence of this distinction, Hume reasoned that our beliefs and our

daily behavior were not affected by our inability to provide coherent philosophical explanations for those beliefs.

Although Coleman is deeply familiar with Diderot, my book's discussion of the *philosophe*, and especially of his *Encyclopédie* article "Pyrrhonienne," is conspicuously absent from the review. As I show in chapter six, Diderot's position in the article resembled d'Alembert's stance toward skepticism and certainty. After praising Pierre Bayle for taking a middle ground between absolute doubt and complete credulity, Diderot concluded the article by calling for pragmatic limitations both on the ambitions of human reason and on Pyrrhonism. Diderot conceded that absolute certainty was not achievable in philosophical questions, but he insisted that he would stop debating "once a relatively definite principle was established" (p. 153). The *philosophe* observed that "[a]bsolute Pyrrhonism was neither a sincere nor a sustainable philosophical position, since the skeptics' theoretical stance never held in any practical matters" that concerned daily life (p. 154).<sup>[7]</sup> This is precisely the kind of "epistemological middle ground" that my book demonstrates having emerged as a consequence of debates between the skeptics and their opponents.

Coleman's critique of the book's chronological scope is even more perplexing given his own chronology. He writes: "Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697) served as a vector for skeptical ideas.... The work inspired 'mitigated skeptics' such as [Marin] Mersenne and [Pierre] Gassendi, along with their English counterparts Francis Bacon and Robert Boyle." Bayle's *Dictionnaire* was one of the most widely owned texts in eighteenth-century France. Many critics identified it as the source of the "skeptical epidemic." However, it did not have the power of inspiring thinkers who died well before its publication. This anachronism might seem like a minor error, as might Coleman's misidentification of the Huguenot Jacques Bernard as a "Catholic." However, these gaffes not only cast doubt on the reviewer's familiarity with these authors, but they also raise questions about the depth of his engagement with the book, much of which details the influence of and reactions to Bayle's text during the eighteenth century.

Coleman's claim about my "awkward engagement" with Richard Popkin similarly reveals an odd and selective reading of my text. The book's historiographical intervention is deeply informed by Popkin's monumental work on the history of skepticism. Like other recent scholarship in the field, my book acknowledges its debts extensively, contrary to what the reviewer suggests. Popkin's attempt to connect philosophical skepticism to the intellectual legacies of the Reformation is an important point of departure for this book, as the first chapter makes clear. It would be hard not to begin any discussion of early modern skepticism without starting with Michel de Montaigne, who offered one of the most influential expositions of ancient Pyrrhonism in the *Essais* (1580). The brief account of the origins of the skeptical crisis in chapter one certainly builds on Popkin's work on seventeenth-century skepticism and discusses many of the same figures covered in his book, as do other accounts of skepticism in this period. I duly credit Popkin's use of the term "mitigated skepticism," which originally comes from David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), to describe the works of Mersenne and Gassendi, and certainly also find the term applicable for the attitudes of several eighteenth-century *philosophes*.

While explicitly acknowledging its many debts to Popkin, my book also follows the recent scholarship of Sébastien Charles, John Christian Laursen, José Raimundo Maia Neto, Gianni Paganini, Plínio Junqueira Smith, and Giorgio Tonelli, in extending the insights of Popkin's analysis into the eighteenth century and showing the persistent influence of skepticism in this period.<sup>[8]</sup> *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, the last edition of Popkin's study, covered the period from the late fifteenth to the early eighteenth century.<sup>[9]</sup> While Popkin revised his initial view of skepticism in the Enlightenment, he unfortunately did not have the opportunity to continue his nuanced analysis far into the 1700s. *Scepticism in the Enlightenment*, an important volume cited in the review and in my book, republishes some of Popkin's articles that articulate his revised views on the importance of skepticism in the eighteenth century <sup>[10]</sup>. However, these essays neither provide a comprehensive account of the

important debates between the skeptics and their opponents in the 1700s nor highlight the role that these disputes played in the making of a new conception of rationality. As my introduction makes clear, *The Specter of Skepticism* explicitly focuses not only on the skeptics, as Popkin did, but also on the work and ideas of their many adversaries, which have often gone overlooked in Popkin's work and in many genealogies of the Enlightenment.

Coleman's suggestion about the book's "relative neglect of Blaise Pascal and David Hume" merits a response. It is true that Pascal makes only a brief and marginal appearance in my story. This is partly because, while Pascal articulated an influential call for the submission of reason to faith, his contemporaries did not perceive him as a dangerous Pyrrhonian skeptic. From the evidence, Pascal, unlike Pierre Bayle and Pierre-Daniel Huet, was not one of the thinkers whom the opponents of skepticism sought to refute. However, Coleman's claim that the book neglects David Hume again seems to stem from a careless reading of the text. A central section in chapter six examines the translation, transmission, and refutation of Hume's skeptical ideas into the French-speaking world through Jean Henri Samuel Formey and the Prussian Académie royale des sciences et belles lettres (p. 144-148). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) was translated into French only in 1758 and did not play a major part in earlier debates that my book explores. Nevertheless, while analyses of Hume's skeptical thought are prominent in philosophical literature, I decided to devote particular attention to exploring how thinkers on the Continent read and reacted to Hume's engagement with skepticism.

Finally, Coleman makes an observation about the complex nature of the terms "Enlightenment" and "skepticism," which he rightly designates as "the two decisive elements" in this account. My book does not doubt that "the Enlightenment itself is a worthy object of historical inquiry," as Coleman seems to suggest. It would be odd for a work analyzing eighteenth-century intellectual culture to maintain that the Enlightenment is not worthy of "historical inquiry." Instead, I merely point out the historiographical tendency to use the term "the Enlightenment" so broadly that it becomes "merely a placeholder for 'eighteenth-century intellectual culture'" (p. 12). I also note that the semantic problem may be solved in at least two possible ways. First, by using the term "Age of Enlightenment as a purely chronological designation" and without reference to its "philosophical or cultural essences," Enlightenment scholars might follow those working on the Renaissance who engaged in these debates several decades ago (p. 13). The second option, proposed by Dan Edelstein, would be to examine how Enlightenment thinkers self-consciously reflected on the aims and methods of their intellectual projects [11]. I would certainly welcome Coleman's own solution to this historiographical dilemma.

Coleman points to a tension in the way I analyze the various micro-Enlightenments and yet accept "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)." Unlike "the Enlightenment," which in its English version exists as a retrospective category of analysis, philosophical skepticism was a long intellectual tradition with many branches and it was appropriated by a broad spectrum of thinkers. Unlike "the Enlightenment," "skepticism" and "Pyrrhonism" were actors' categories that philosophers at the time used to self-identify and to describe their opponents. Although specific articulations of philosophical skepticism changed depending on intellectual contexts and interlocutors, thinkers who self-identified as skeptics shared a number of common principles. It thus seems somewhat odd to draw a parallel between my explanation of the various strands of philosophical skepticism and my treatment of the term "the Enlightenment," which continues to be the subject of intense and fruitful historiographical debates.

## NOTES

[1] For Baker's analysis see: Keith Michael Baker, "Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History," in Willem Melching and Wyger Velema, eds., *Main Trends in Cultural History: Ten Essays* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 95-120 (quotation p. 117).

[2] Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 43–63, 144–73.

[3] For more on skepticism in the *Encyclopédie*, see: Véronique Le Ru, “Le scepticisme dans l’*Encyclopédie* de Diderot et de d’Alembert,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 65(2010): 75–92 and Valentina Sperotto, *Le Scepticisme comme méthode dans l’œuvre de Denis Diderot* (Ph.D Diss., Università di Trento and Université de Picardie Jules Verne, 2015), pp. 178–214, 237–283.

[4] Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, “Discours préliminaire des éditeurs,” in Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 28 vols. (Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton & Durand, 1751–1772), v.1, p. ii.

[5] Claude Buffier, *Traité des premières veritez* (Paris: Veuve Maugé, 1724), 25–26. For more on Buffier, see: Louise Marcile-Lacoste, *Claude Buffier and Thomas Reid, Two Common Sense Philosophers* (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1982); Jeffrey D. Burson, *The Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment: Jean-Martin de Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth-Century France* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 47–50, 180–181; Jeffrey D. Burson, “Claude G. Buffier and the Maturation of the Jesuit Synthesis in the Age of Enlightenment,” *Intellectual History Review* 21/4(December 2011), pp. 449–472.

[6] Richard H. Popkin, “David Hume and the Pyrrhonian Controversy,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 6:1(1952): 65–81 (65, 78–79).

[7] Denis Diderot, Art. “Pyrrhonienne ou sceptique, philosophie,” in *Encyclopédie*, v.13, pp. 613–14. For the censored sections, see Douglas H. Gordon and Norman L. Torrey, *The Censoring of Diderot’s Encyclopédie and the Re-Established Text* (New York, 1947), pp.77–78.

[8] See, for example: José Raimundo Maia Neto, Gianni Paganini, and John Christian Laursen, eds., *Skepticism in the Modern Age: Building on the Work of Richard Popkin* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Sébastien Charles and Plínio Junqueira Smith, eds., *Scepticism in the Eighteenth Century: Enlightenment, Lumières, Aufklärung* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013); John Christian Laursen and Gianni Paganini, eds., *Skepticism and Political Thought in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Plínio Junqueira Smith and Sébastien Charles, eds., *Academic Scepticism in the Development of Early Modern Philosophy* (Dordrecht, 2017).

[9] Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[10] The specific essays in question are: Richard H. Popkin, “Scepticism in the Enlightenment,” in Richard H. Popkin, Ezequiel de Olaso, and Giorgio Tonelli, eds., *Scepticism in the Enlightenment* ([Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997], previously published in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 26[1963], pp. 1321–1335) and Popkin, “New Views on the Role of Skepticism in the Enlightenment” in *Scepticism in the Enlightenment*, pp. 157–172, (previously published in *Modern Language Quarterly* 53/3[1992], pp. 279–297). A third essay that deals with the second half of the eighteenth century, but does not discuss France extensively is: Richard H. Popkin, “Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in the Latter Part of the Eighteenth Century,” in *Scepticism in the Enlightenment*, pp. 17–34 (previously published in Paul Fritz and Richard Morton, eds., *Woman in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and Other Essays*. Publications of the McMaster University Association for 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Studies (Toronto: Samuel, Stevens, Hakkert & Co., 1976), v.4, pp. 319–343. I also cite Tonelli’s important essay from this volume early in the book, see: Giorgio Tonelli, “The ‘Weakness’ of Reason in the Age of Enlightenment,” in *Scepticism in the Enlightenment*, pp. 35–50 (previously published in *Diderot Studies* 14[1971]: 217–244).

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[11] Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

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