

H-France Review Vol. 20 (March 2020), No. 52

Jeffrey D. Burson and Anton M. Matytsin, eds., *The Skeptical Enlightenment: Doubt and Certainty in the Age of Reason*. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019. vii + 235 pp. Bibliography and index. \$99.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-78694-194-7.

Review by Dorinda Outram, University of Rochester.

Skepticism used to be considered a minor trend of thought in the Enlightenment, responsible at most for the epistemological motivation for enquiry into the natural world. *Nulla in verbis* was the Baconian motto of the Royal Society of London, or loosely translated “Take no man’s word for it.” More recently, skepticism has been discovered hard at work in this period, as Rodrigo Brandão’s neatly-argued essay, “Voltaire and modern skeptical doubt,” makes clear, along with other fine essays by Sebastien Charles on Berkeley and John P. Wright on Bayle and Hume. The papers in this collection taken together form a well-ordered argument about the way in which skepticism developed from a questioning of our capacity to know either the external world or the truths of faith with any certainty, to its taming by the later part of the century. Richard Popkin in his 1979 *The History of Scepticism: from Erasmus to Spinoza*, pointed out that the revival of ancient skepticism in the late sixteenth century was a major contributor to what Paul Hazard termed the “crisis of the European conscience” in the late seventeenth.[1] This crisis is widely regarded as having provided the germ of the Enlightenment, because of its challenge to assumptions about the nature of natural reason and its relationship with faith, that is, with what is by definition unknowable by reason.

A turning point here came from the work of Pierre-Daniel Huet, published in 1723 but meditated for far longer. Elena Rapetti points out that Huet’s *Trâité philosophique de la foiblesse de l’esprit humain* was immediately widely circulated, and its systematic defense of philosophical skepticism turned the author into a celebrity. After all, as Huet pointed out, he could argue around the seemingly scandalous point that “This law of doubting seems to hinder submission to faith, and to favor the corruption of manners” (p. 54). Yet in the end, as Rapetti writes, Huet managed to conceive “of a species of probabilism that reestablished the boundaries between a suitably tamed reason and faith. Huet had designed the *Trâité* as an answer to seventeenth-century issues, and also, in particular, as an antidote to the more aggressive Cartesian reason. However, his work when read by *esprits forts* in the new philosophical context of the eighteenth-century could become a source contributing to the establishment of an antimetaphysical reason” (p. 49). What Vincenzo Ferrone has called the “cultural revolution” of the eighteenth-century in his 2015 *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*, derived from the prolongation into the eighteenth-century of the intellectual debates surrounding skepticism.[2]

The editors argue that by the end of the century, with the exception of Condorcet and Paine, “Enlightenment thinkers came to see the powers of human understanding as inherently fallible and limited by individual experiences and idiosyncrasies. No longer considered innate and consistently perfect, reason was instead conceived as a faculty in need of training and improvement throughout the course of any individual’s life,” a position consonant with “pervasive critiques of philosophical skepticism [that had] shaped eighteenth-century definitions of reason” (pp. 2-3). Together, the papers resist the temptation, however, to read off from literary and philosophical skepticism to the radical action which was to burst out in France from 1789 onwards. Alan Kors’s timely paper on the d’Holbach circle shows, in a fine rendition of the dilemmas of Enlightenment thinkers deep in the imagination of Utopian worlds and societies, that they had yet no wish to create them by overturning the social and political order. Unlike Jonathan Israel, the writers in this volume do not believe that radical ideas turn inevitably into radical action, nor do they see logical structures as mere analogies of public order. Nor, as Brandão argues, did philosophical skepticism necessarily turn to religious skepticism. But these are points worth arguing, and the volume lacks a full-scale confrontation with Israel’s thesis that the ideas of the French Revolution came out of those of the Enlightenment. To argue the opposite is rather like arguing that the cultural ferment of the Weimar Republic had no effect on either the culture, structure, and actions of National Socialism and that ideas, once put into the air, ever cease to have effects. In the case of the eighteenth century, the ideas that shaped pre-Revolution thinking do not mysteriously cease to influence thought and action after May 1789. If there is a fault in this well-organised collection of meaty essays, it is this.

All this tells us a great deal about the structure and chronology of the Enlightenment itself. The prolonged struggles to define the nature of reason and the way in which ideas are formed, culminating as the revolutionary era opened in the 1770s, are difficult to connect with the increasing disorder which led to revolutionary movements demanding, in the words of a motto included on the Great Seal of the United States, a “new order of the ages” in the American colonies and France. But, since all things really are connected, perhaps this difficulty originates with the way we pose the question. The existence of organized skepticism had turned reason into a personal quest. It became part of the struggle to find and educate the new revolutionary man which, together with the undeniable existence of a utopian strand in the French Revolution, could come together in interesting ways. The search for individual reason was mirrored by the attempt in France to set up a new state and society which should be the opposite of the corruption of the old regime. That opposite was reason. No wonder Robespierre and David collaborated on a Feast of Reason in 1794.

All in all, this is a volume which should be read by every scholar of the eighteenth century, of the history of ideas, and of the history of religion. Well-organized essays of a remarkably even standard of debate gather around the development of what the editors cogently argue was a major strand in the history and structure of Enlightenment thought. Jeffrey Burson argues for the importance of the synthesis of intellectual currents in the work of Jesuit thinkers in the run-up to the Enlightenment, and in particular for the work of French Jesuits such as Claude Buffier, whose empirical reading of Descartes paved the way for Locke and Malebranche. Martin Mulsow and John Christian Laursen continue the former’s heroic labors in excavating the German learned world of the early Enlightenment, with an essay on Wittenberg law professor Georg Michael Heber and his injection of philosophical skepticism into the language and profession of jurisprudence, no small matter at a time when the law faculties of the German states also provided opinions in many actual legal cases. This takes a new view of the legal thinking of the late

seventeenth century. The two authors of this paper also argue that Heber may well have been the author of the *Symbolum sapientiae*, an early work of religious skepticism. Interestingly, they conclude that Heber's careful management of his long-standing position in the elite shows that skeptical views need not have led to social and intellectual ostracism. A translation of Heber's 1693 course announcement on legal skepticism is included, containing his trenchant words affecting legal theory and practice: "I hold that the principles that can be deduced from reason alone are never so undoubted, comprehensible, evident, and clearly and distinctly perceived that they cannot have the phantom of the opposite of truth as a permanent companion" (p. 84). Law is often not clear, and judgements can be held by both sides. Therefore Heber announces boldly that he will often "...make that Pyrrhonian claim that 'it is not clear; I stand still, I suspend, I hold back my agreement'" (p. 86). Heber's skeptical boldness is balanced by Sebastien Charles's intriguing reinterpretation of Berkeley's skepticism. He argues that Berkeley, usually seen as one of the great skeptics of the Enlightenment because of his denial of the existence of a "real world," in fact constructed an answer to skepticism rather than a version of it. To try to by-pass the difficulties which arise when the existence of the real world is questioned, Berkeley produced a theological conception of reality, and saw the world as nothing more than a language through which God speaks to humanity. It was only thus, in Berkeley's understanding, that skepticism could be answered. One might be tempted from this point on to see the history of skepticism as the history of the increasing incomprehensibility of the world in the Enlightenment. John P. Wright argues that both Bayle and Hume sustained the point of view that man has to believe what is rationally incomprehensible. Skeptics often point out the impossibility of proving the reality of the external world, yet still behave, as most people do, as though they believed that world was real. In matters of religion, the mysteries of faith can never be more (or less) than that. Wright also argues that even beliefs of common sense and empirical science are ultimately incomprehensible. Hume's refusal of strict linkage between cause and effect is well known. This is a sensible, interesting, and clearly argued paper, and it leads on to Anton M. Matytsin's paper on philosophical skepticism in the *Encyclopédie*, which details how its editors, Diderot and D'Alembert, navigate between total skepticism on the one hand and absolute certainty on the other. To do so clearly set up limits for reason and, like the skepticism of Hume and Bayle, allowed for the emergence of a middle ground which privileged practical reason over speculation.

In conclusion, this volume well narrates the history and taming of skepticism by the late Enlightenment. It deserves an interested readership and, since its contributions are clearly written, would even be of some use for advanced-level classes in the Enlightenment and in the history of religion. The editors are to be congratulated for bringing to fruition this volume of essays, and for making a clear and convincing argument for the importance of skepticism in the Enlightenment.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Anton M. Matytsin and Jeffrey D. Burson, "Introduction: from an 'age of skepticism' to an 'age of reason'"

Jeffrey D. Burson, "Healing the skeptical crisis and rectifying Cartesianisms: the notion of the Jesuit synthesis revisited"

Elena Rapetti, "A man who sticks only to his own sentiments': Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l'esprit humain*"

Martin Mulrow and John Christian Laursen, “Georg Michael Heber on legal and (possibly) religious skepticism in early Enlightenment Germany”

Sébastien Charles, “George Berkeley, or the skeptic in spite of himself”

Rodrigo Brandão, “Voltaire and modern skeptical doubt”

John P. Wright, “Skepticism and incomprehensibility in Bayle and Hume”

Anton M. Matytsin, “Taming thought with practice: philosophical skepticism in the *Encyclopédie*”

Alan Charles Kors, “Political skepticism in Holbach’s circle”

NOTES

[1] Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

[2] Vincenzo Ferrone, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), chapter 13 and pp. 88, 133, 159.

Dorinda Outram, Emerita
University of Rochester
dorinda.outram@rochester.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172