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Skepticism and Belief in Early-Modern France: The Fideism of Bishop Pierre Daniel Huet

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A Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Honors in History.
Faculty Advisor: Alan Charles Kors

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Abstract

Despite the seeming oppositions between skepticism and religious belief, Bishop Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721) was both a devout Catholic and a philosophical skeptic. While this opposition may seem paradoxical to both modern readers and Huet's contemporaries, this thesis explains how Huet's scandalous posthumous *Treatise Concerning the Weakness of Human Understanding* (1723) fits into the intellectual curriculum of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. By situating Huet in the intellectual context of Early-Modern France, this thesis demonstrates how philosophical skepticism became appealing to Catholic thinkers both as a polemic and as an epistemological stance in opposition to the rationalist transformation of pre-Enlightenment thought.

Keywords

pierre-daniel huet, early-modern france, skepticism, fideism

Comments

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Huet

A senior thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Honors in History

by

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Philadelphia, PA
March 23, 2007

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For those who love me

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: The Unintended Consequences of a Traditional Education.....	16
Chapter 2: The Cartesian Context: Huet’s Critique of the Presumption of Reason.....	44
Chapter 3: “It Is Certain Because It Is Impossible”.....	72
Conclusion.....	96
Bibliography.....	100

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Introduction

Bishop Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721) enjoyed an eminent career for a seventeenth-century scholar. Huet was born in Caen to a family of Protestant converts to Catholicism and rose to become one of the most respected intellectual figures of his age. He was appointed as the assistant tutor to the dauphin in 1670. Four years later he was elected to the Académie française. In 1686 he was appointed Bishop of Soissons, though his post was later transferred to Avranches. Huet had a productive scholarly career, having published the *Traitté de l'origine des romans* (*Treatise on the Origin of Romances* – 1670), the *Demonstratio Evangelica* (*Proof of the Gospel* – 1679), the *Censura cartesianae philosophiae* (*Critique of Cartesian Philosophy* – 1689), the *Alnetanae quaestiones de concordia rationis et fidei* (*Alnetian Questions Regarding the Agreement between Reason and Faith* – 1690), and the *Nouveaux mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Cartésianisme* (*New Memoirs to Serve the History of Cartesianism* – 1691) in addition to other minor but erudite works.

Despite his extensive scholarly accomplishments and contemporaneous renown, Huet likely would have been forgotten by subsequent generations were it not for the posthumous publication of his skeptical treatise, *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit humain* (*A Philosophical Treatise Concerning the Weakness of Human Understanding* – 1723). Most of those who considered Huet a friend were startled and unsettled by his explicit embrace of philosophical skepticism. The views articulated in the *Traité* seemed so distant from those expressed in Huet's earlier works that some of his contemporaries erroneously argued that he could not have written the skeptical treatise. This was particularly true of Huet's Jesuit friends, who were startled by its

heretical content and asserted that the work was a forgery.¹ The tension between the author's likely intentions and the reception of his work raise a number of revealing and historically significant questions. How could Huet, given his deep religious commitment to Catholicism, have written such a heterodox and heretical work? If his objective was not to undermine but to sustain orthodoxy and to preserve the faith from the assaults of reason, why was he so misunderstood by his colleagues?

Historians have addressed the subject of Huet's skepticism tangentially, but very little scholarship is dedicated solely to Huet's intellectual world and itinerary. Most of Huet's works remain untranslated, and most of his correspondence is still unpublished. While there are two biographies and a number of articles devoted to analyzing Huet's thought, no books in modern intellectual history are devoted entirely to Huet's skepticism. Richard Popkin, generally recognized as the leading authority on the history of skepticism, has written several articles comparing Huet to other skeptics of the seventeenth century. Thomas Lennon has translated Huet's *Censura cartesianae philosophiae* and has written articles on the nature of Huet's skepticism. Lennon argues against Popkin's classification of Huet as a "complete Pyrrhonian skeptic,"² offering a more moderate interpretation of Huet's *Traité*.³ While these historians have offered valid interpretations of Huet's skepticism, their analyses have neglected to trace carefully the evolution of Huet's thought through correspondence and other unpublished materials.

¹ Thomas M. Lennon, "The Skepticism of Huet's *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit Humain*," in *Scepticisme et modernité*, ed. Marc André Bernier and Sébastien Charles, (Saint-Etienne: Université de Saint-Etienne, 2005), 68.

² Richard H. Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, (San Diego: Austin Hill, 1980), 21.

³ Lennon, 65-75.

April Shelford provided one important exception to this tendency in her *Faith and Glory: Pierre-Daniel Huet and the Making of the Demonstratio Evangelica (1679)*, published in 1997 as a Ph.D. dissertation. She offers new evidence indicating that Huet was committed to philosophical skepticism much earlier than most scholars have suggested. Shelford's dissertation is the first major historical work that is concerned specifically with Huet's intellectual trajectory. Her dissertation places Huet within his educational context and interprets his place in it. More importantly for this thesis, Shelford's work incorporates a variety of primary sources, exploiting correspondence and manuscripts that are difficult to access. Due to the abundance of primary sources cited in Shelford's work, her dissertation has been a crucial source for this thesis, not so much for her interpretation of Huet's skepticism as for the primary evidence and contextual analysis to be found there.⁴

Huet is also worthy of further investigation because he bequeathed a vast library filled with his own marginalia.⁵ These notes reveal Huet's private reactions to the texts that influenced his intellectual development. In order to gauge these privately expressed ideas, this thesis will analyze Huet's marginalia and the manuscript versions of some of his published works. Such unpublished sources reveal a more personal side of Huet, allowing for a reconsideration of the assumptions underlying the evolution of his skepticism. Thus, this thesis will attempt to reconcile Huet's published works, including

⁴ While Shelford does describe Huet's early commitment to skepticism, she is more concerned with studying the Humanist aspects of Huet's works. Since she is concerned with Huet as a member of a scholarly community, the *Traité* is not her central concern.

⁵ Huet left his library to the main convent of the Jesuit order in Paris. His 9,000 volume library was purchased by the royal library of Louis XV in 1765. Most of his books are now at the Reserve of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, identifiable by the engraving *Ex libris bibliothecæ quam Illustriss. Ecclesiæ Princeps D. Petrus Daniel Huetius, Episcopus Abrincensis Domoï professæ Paris. PP. Soc. Iesu Integram Vivens Donavit, anno 1692*. For more on the history of Huet's library see: Charles Urbain, "La Bibliothèque de P. Daniel Huet Évêque d'Avranches," in *Bulletin du Bibliophile et du Bibliothécaire*, 1910, (Paris : Librairie Henri Leclerc), 133-146.

his memoirs, with his private correspondence and manuscripts in order to resolve the tensions between his private and public images and to understand the development of his skepticism.

Since Huet remains such an understudied and misunderstood thinker, a historical investigation of the development of his thought provides a number of benefits for an intellectual historian of the seventeenth century. A reinterpretation of Huet's skepticism, taking advantage of the sheer number of unconsulted primary sources, such as marginalia and manuscripts, should make possible an improved understanding of Huet's intellectual development. Further, the scarcity of contemporary scholarship on Huet invites new questions about the early-modern trends and debates. A study of lesser-known thinkers often reveals more about the intellectual trends of a period than studies of "canonical" authors, because the former may tend to be more representative of contemporaneous opinions.

While Huet does not figure in the modern canon of early-modern European thought, he was an influential thinker during the seventeenth century and was not forgotten during the Enlightenment. The eighteenth century's most influential skeptic, the Scot David Hume, began his celebrated and notorious *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* with a reference not to the ancient Greek skeptics, but to Huet's skeptical work. Remarkably, scholars devote little discussion to Huet's place in Hume's *Dialogues*, in which Cleanthes, the interlocutor defending natural philosophy, describes Huet as "a man of the most extensive learning, who wrote a demonstration of Christianity, [and who] has also composed a treatise, which contains all the cavils of the boldest and most determined

Pyrrhonism.”⁶ Cleanthes next states that John Locke was “the first Christian, who ventured openly to assert, that *faith* was nothing but a species of *reason*.”⁷ The curious leap from Huet to Locke reveals a certain tension in early-modern thought. On the surface, the fideistic skepticism of Huet appears incompatible with Locke’s view of faith. For Huet, faith was the only source of certainty to which man’s feeble reason must submit. However, Hume’s presentation of these authors may indicate his own understanding of the relationship between skepticism and empiricism. Hume’s Cleanthes perceives an intellectual progression from Huet’s assault on reason to Locke’s classification of faith under the realm of reason. Where Huet weakened the human reliance on reason, Locke unavoidably undermined the reliance on faith by arguing that it is inseparable from reason. Thus, for Hume’s interlocutor, the combination of skeptical arguments and empirical reasoning was dangerous, leading to the undermining of faith. While this is not necessarily Hume’s own view, Cleanthes’ argument certainly presents a perspective contemporaneous to Hume, whose use of this perspective reveals the tensions between Huet’s intentions and the effects of his philosophical skepticism. Hume’s use of Huet also demonstrates the latter’s presence in the Enlightenment.

Given Huet’s influence on the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, his philosophy deserves more careful scrutiny than it has so far received. If we engage in a historical investigation of the responses to Huet’s *Traité* and the origins of his skeptical thought, we will understand better the ways in which Huet and those around him perceived the relationships between human and divine knowledge, between scientific evidence and faith. The study of Huet’s intellectual context will reveal the continuity

⁶ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*

from his earlier works to his skeptical treatise, disclosing much about the world whose dilemmas and tensions produced such a seemingly eclectic thinker. Furthermore, we will better understand why both Huet's contemporaries and modern historians have been so mystified by his legacy.

Scholars too often classify philosophers in falsely rigid ways that gloss over thinkers' individual differences. Thus, the term "skeptic" itself must be placed in its historical context. The word has a loose set of connotations for a modern reader. However, ancient and early-modern philosophical schools of skepticism are associated with strictly defined sets of arguments regarding the nature and limits of claims of knowledge, truth, and certainty. These skeptical movements were by no means monolithic, but instead varied in place and time, depending on the intellectual worlds and debates around them. Consequently, the investigation into the nature and origins of Huet's skepticism must consider the intellectual context of seventeenth-century France, one that gave birth to the most diverse set of skeptical thinkers in early-modern Europe.

It is impossible to understand this skeptical revival without considering the history of the intellectual movement. The origins of the skeptical philosophy derived from ancient Greece, when thinkers developed various arguments to establish one of two general claims: that no certain knowledge was attainable, or that there was insufficient evidence to determine if any such knowledge was attainable.⁸ The former view is called Academic skepticism, while the latter is known as Pyrrhonian skepticism.

Academic skepticism aimed to demonstrate that any dogmatic proposition (a proposition that claimed certainty about the real nature of things) could not be verified

⁸ Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: from Savonarola to Bayle*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xvii.

with absolute certainty. “Dogmatic” schools suggested that the perception of an object by the senses guaranteed its real existence outside the world of human perception. The Academics claimed that the evidence of any proposition would be based on either sense perception or reasoning and argued that both faculties were unreliable. Since no human faculty was capable of verifying that human knowledge about the real natural world was accurate, the Academics argued that nothing was certain and that all knowledge was only probable.⁹ While complete certainty could not be attained, a degree of probability could be established such that some propositions would contain more certainty than others. This school of thought derives its name from the Platonic Academy, where it was formulated in the third century B.C.E. “from the Socratic observation ‘All I know is that I know nothing.’”¹⁰ The formulation is attributed to Arecesilas (c. 315-241 B.C.E.) and Carneades (c. 213-129 B.C.E.). It was passed down to the medieval and early-modern periods in Cicero’s *Academica* and Saint Augustine’s *Contra Academicos*.¹¹

The Pyrrhonian school derives its origins from Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360-275 B.C.E.) and his student Timon (c. 315-225 B.C.E.). Considering both the dogmatists and the Academics to be extreme, the Pyrrhonians proposed to suspend judgment on all questions that seemed to rely on conflicting evidence. For them, skepticism was a state of mind, not a commitment to a particular philosophy. Indeed, for Pyrrhonians, the proposition that nothing could be known with certainty, if drawn out to its full conclusion, would have to include itself. Thus, nothing could be known with certainty, including the proposition that

⁹ Ibid., xvii-xviii

¹⁰ Ibid., xvii

¹¹ Ibid.

nothing could be known with certainty. A Pyrrhonian skeptic would then achieve a state of *ataraxia* – peace of mind or quietude.¹²

The basic surviving text of Pyrrhonian skepticism, generally called the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, had been written by Sextus Empiricus around 200 C.E. in Alexandria. Sextus also composed the *Adversus mathematicos*, in which he subjected logic, mathematics, astrology, and grammar to skeptical refutations. Unlike Academic skepticism, which influenced the Middle Ages through the filter of St. Augustine's (354-430) attempted refutations, Pyrrhonian skepticism remained virtually unknown until the rediscovery and Latin publication of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in 1562.¹³

Prior to the sixteenth century, Academic skepticism had been the sole source of skeptical arguments, but the rediscovery of Sextus Empiricus allowed various reformulations of skeptical philosophy. Further, the exact source of skeptical arguments becomes difficult, if not impossible, to determine, because many such arguments were formulated or utilized merely to refute dogmatic claims rather than to construct new philosophical systems.

Toward the end of the sixteenth and the first half seventeenth centuries, skepticism became particularly influential in France because of the impact of the writings of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592). His *Apologie pour Raimond Sebonde*, published in his *Essais* (*Essays* – 1580), is generally considered to be the first major early-modern presentation of Pyrrhonian thought. However, Montaigne revealed the influence of both Pyrrhonian and Academic schools, because he followed both Sextus Empiricus'

¹² Ibid., xix.

¹³ José Maia Neto, "Academic Scepticism in Early Modern Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 no. 2 (1997), 198-199.

exposition in presenting forms of ancient skepticism and also frequently cited Cicero's *Academica*.¹⁴

Montaigne himself divided philosophers into “dogmatists, Academics, and Pyrrhonians.”¹⁵ He found Pyrrhonian doubt to be more radical and more coherent than Academic doubt and stressed the intellectual, moral, and religious advantages of Pyrrhonian *ataraxia*.¹⁶ He urged that it was “better to remain in suspense than to get engaged in so many errors that human fantasy has produced.”¹⁷

Montaigne's synthesis of Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism extends to three main realms of human knowledge: natural philosophy, theology, and humanist scholarship.¹⁸ In the domain of natural philosophy, Montaigne's skeptical outlook questioned the reliability of sense perception, the truth of first principles, the availability of a criterion of truth, and the reliance on appearances for formulating positive statements about the real nature of things. Montaigne's exposition of these difficulties raised doubts about the possibility of discovering true and certain facts about the world.

Montaigne's version of these arguments foreshadowed and influenced further skeptical challenges to traditional views in natural philosophy. In the mid-seventeenth century, both Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) and Marin Mersenne (1588-1648) formulated new epistemological and ontological systems, classified by most modern historians of skepticism as “mitigated skepticism.” Both used skeptical arguments in order to undermine Aristotelian scholasticism (and, in some cases, Cartesianism), and both then

¹⁴ Ibid., 201.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 202 quotes Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, Book II, Essay 12.

¹⁸ Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, 55.

established natural philosophies that relied on empirical observations and expressed limited claims about the probable nature of things.

Montaigne's exposition also contained a significant religious dimension. The fifteenth-century Spanish theologian Raimond Sebonde (c. 1380-1436) had asserted that all the articles of the Christian religion could be proven by natural reason. The main objection to this claim was the argument that the most essential articles of Christianity were based on faith and not on rational arguments. Montaigne's defense was an underhanded refutation. He first presented a theory of Christianity that relied exclusively on faith and then attempted to demonstrate that all reasoning was unsound, showing that Sebonde should not be blamed for his theoretical errors.¹⁹ Montaigne did not oppose the use of reason to support the faith, but he concluded that faith did not depend on any human arguments.²⁰ Consequently, any rational claim made to support the faith had to assume, in Montaigne's view, the truth of divine revelation.

Montaigne himself abided by the Pyrrhonist view that skeptics should accept established laws and customs. Thus, he accepted the Catholic faith as a cultural default of his particular time and place. He criticized Catholics for subjecting some of their doctrines to doubt and urged his Catholic readers to "either submit completely to the authority of our ecclesiastical government, or do without it completely."²¹ Because Montaigne considered human knowledge to be uncertain, he argued against Protestant attempts to challenge polemically the Catholic articles of faith.

¹⁹ Ibid., 47.

²⁰ Ibid., 48.

²¹ Montaigne, *Essays*, in *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 134.

This was a crucial statement in the context of Reformation and Counter-Reformation currents of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One of the main tenets uniting Protestant sects was the principle of *scriptura sola*, “by Scripture alone.” Protestants claimed that all the truths of the Christian religion should be understood from Scripture alone. Consequently, they initially argued that interpretive authority beyond Scripture was superfluous, since each believer could arrive at an individual understanding of truth by reading the Bible. This argument directly challenged the Catholic reliance on the doctrinal interpretation of the Church, and it led Catholic apologists such as Francisco Suarez (1548-1617) to assert that Scripture was not as clear as the Protestants had argued and could only be understood with the aid of the inspired authority of the Church.²² Thus, some Catholics referred to skeptical arguments to undermine the Protestant view of Biblical interpretation and to preserve orthodoxy.

Montaigne’s formulation of Christian Pyrrhonism was expanded in the seventeenth century by his disciple, the priest and philosopher Pierre Charron (1541-1603). Charron combined skeptical arguments with the main anti-rationalist currents in Christian theology to provide a solid basis for a Christian Pyrrhonism. In *Les Trois Véritez* (*The Three Truths* – 1594), Charron argued that God’s existence and God’s nature could not be known to man because of “our weakness and the greatness of God.”²³ Since natural human knowledge was irreparably limited, it could never understand an infinite being. Thus, Charron argued that God was unknowable for two reasons: because He was infinite, and because man was incapable of knowing anything with certainty.

²² Pierre-François Moreau, “Les arguments sceptiques dans la lecture de l’Ecriture sainte,” in *Le scepticisme au XVI^e et au XVII^e siècle: Le retour de philosophies antiques à l’Age classique, Tome II*, ed. Pierre-François Moreau, (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 386.

²³ Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, 58.

Consequently, man had to rely on faith in revelation and on the Church's interpretation of Scripture. Like Montaigne, Charron attempted to show that Christianity was the true religion and that the Catholic Church represented its true formulation.

Finally, Montaigne's skepticism reveals the "humanistic crisis of knowledge" ironically generated by the rediscovery of new schools of ancient thought.²⁴ Popkin argued famously that the increased availability of ancient perspectives precipitated a kind of learned skepticism, as humanists, faced with a diversity of opinions, found themselves unable to determine a conclusively superior theory.²⁵ Montaigne's *Essays* combined a variety of ancient theories with presentations of cultures of the New World to suggest that human opinions and cultures were relative to time, place, and circumstance.

Montaigne's skepticism had a profound influence on the seventeenth century not only because of its successful popularization, but also because of its far-reaching intellectual implications.²⁶ His outlook did not exclusively address natural philosophy or theology, but echoed what is known as *la crise Pyrrhonienne* (the Pyrrhonian crisis) in the intellectual life of Europe. Thus, Montaigne both reflected and propagated anxieties about the nature of knowledge and certainty on the eve of the intellectual revolution about to transform European culture.

²⁴ Ibid., 55.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ For more on Montaigne's influence, see the following works: Frédéric Brahami, *Le scepticisme de Montaigne*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997); Peter Burke, *Montaigne*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Henri Busson, *Littérature et théologie : Montaigne, Bossuet, La Fontaine, Prévost*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962); Bernard Jean and François Mouret, *Montaigne, Descartes et Pascal par la dissertation*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971); Pierre Villey, *L'influence de Montaigne sur les idées pédagogiques de Locke et de Rousseau*, (Paris : Hachette, 1911); Pierre Louis Joseph Villey-Desmeserets, *Montaigne et François Bacon*, (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1973); *Montaigne: scepticisme, métaphysique, théologie*, eds. Vincent Carraud, Jean-Luc Marion, Jocelyn Benoist et al. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2004).

In order to comprehend fully the impact of the skeptical revival in the seventeenth century, we must understand that it was by no means a uniform intellectual movement in its formulations and goals. In general, skeptical movements in seventeenth-century France can be divided into two broad categories. The first category of skeptics included figures such as Mersenne and Gassendi, who intended to establish new philosophical and scientific systems while taking into account the limits of human knowledge. As will be shown in the first chapter, these skeptics voiced dissatisfactions with the Aristotelian Scholasticism that permeated European universities at the beginning of the seventeenth century. These philosophers generally used skeptical arguments in order to undermine established philosophical views and to advance new epistemological outlooks.

The second category, represented by thinkers such as François de La Mothe Le Vayer (1588-1672), Simon Foucher (1644-1696), and Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), appeared in the second half of the seventeenth century and employed skepticism for primarily religious reasons. Contrary to the *crise Pyrrhonienne*, this second wave of skepticism emerged to counter the mid-century revolution in natural philosophy. Struggling to preserve traditional theology from the onslaught of rational criticism, these thinkers attempted to elevate the status of faith in supernatural revelation and to show that human reason was neither capable of nor responsible for a rational approach to religious questions. This latter school of thought is often called “fideist.”

The combination of skepticism and religious belief may seem counterintuitive to modern readers, for whom skepticism is generally associated with religious doubt and disbelief. To avoid this anachronism, we must consider skeptical fideism within its appropriate historical context. Such an investigation should reveal the origins of this

intellectual movement and improve the historical understanding of the intentions of its proponents.

This study will not only show how Huet fits into the second category of fideistic skeptics, but it will also evaluate his attitudes and opinions in the intellectual context of the seventeenth century. It will demonstrate how a Huet, educated according to the most traditional curricula, became, in the eyes of his contemporaries, so opposed to the aims of his educational system. That opposition, this thesis will argue, was an invention of Huet's contemporaries reacting to his skeptical treatise and does not accurately reflect Huet's philosophical and theological viewpoints. Finally, this investigation will examine Huet's intentions in composing this work and explain why these intentions were so misunderstood by his contemporaries. Consequently, Huet's reasons for not publishing the *Traité* during his lifetime will become clear.

The thesis will be divided into three chapters. The aim of the first chapter is two-fold. First, it will describe Huet's intellectual world, presenting both the structure and content of his education. It also will expose the general philosophical trends in seventeenth-century France that influenced the formation of Huet's thought. It will give particular attention to Huet's own opinions regarding these trends, utilizing his correspondence and his memoirs. Second, the chapter will introduce Huet's *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit humain*, analyzing the actual nature of Huet's skeptical arguments.

The second chapter will demonstrate in detail the nature of René Descartes's (1596-1650) vital influence on the formation of Huet's skepticism. It will consider how divergent epistemologies led the two thinkers to formulate drastically different views

about the abilities of human reason. The chapter will establish the relationship between Huet's skepticism and his anti-Cartesianism, showing that these philosophical positions are interdependent for Huet. In addition, it will discuss modern interpretations of Huet to situate this thesis within contemporary debates.

The third chapter will address the religious dimension of Huet's skepticism. It will present Huet's view of the proper relationship between faith and reason and situate it among the tensions and debates of seventeenth-century theology. The chapter will consider the rational strain of Christianity as exhibited by the proofs of the existence of God offered by both the Aristotelian scholastics and the Cartesians. It will juxtapose this rationalist theology with the fideistic strain of Christianity, presented in the arguments of Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), La Mothe Le Vayer, and Pierre Bayle. Finally, the chapter will explain why Huet chose not to publish his treatise during his lifetime.

Seventeenth-century debate over the scope and limits of human knowledge, seen in bold relief in the case of Pierre-Daniel Huet, changed the thinking and, eventually, the curriculum of European civilization. Understanding the contexts, dilemmas, and evolution of Huet's thought sheds essential light on a crucial aspect of this process of deep, and even revolutionary, conceptual change. It clarifies what was occurring historically in a Europe whose mental life was being forever altered by the debates in which Huet was a central participant, a framer of issues for others, and a lightning rod for those uneasy or, indeed, alarmed about what was occurring among those who would teach the next generations of a learned culture that had already transformed Europe's understanding of what it was to know and what was out there to be known.

Chapter 1: The Unintended Consequences of a Traditional Education

Pierre-Daniel Huet's skeptical philosophy can be analyzed within the framework of Montaigne's three realms of human knowledge: theology, natural philosophy, and humanist study. Like Montaigne, Huet was a devout Catholic, who saw in skepticism the perfect path to the acceptance of revelation. Huet also deeply questioned the possibility of attaining any certainty by means of natural philosophy. Finally, Huet's humanist erudition led him to reject traditional philosophical systems and eventually to accept a skeptical outlook toward all human opinions.

This chapter will describe Huet's development as a skeptic in the context of his education in natural philosophy and his humanist endeavors in the world of Biblical exegesis. We will begin by considering Huet's seventeenth-century education. In presenting Huet's intellectual evolution we will reveal the origins of his skepticism. We will then examine the content of Huet's skeptical treatise to describe the exact nature of his skepticism.

* * *

Huet began his studies at the Jesuit collège de Mont Royal in Caen. The Jesuit curriculum, formally outlined in the *Ratio atque institutio studiorum societatis Iesu* (*Method and System of the Studies of the Society of Jesus* – 1599), entailed a combination of two three-year cycles of instruction in philology and philosophy. Students began with the humanities, comprised of an intensive course of Latin grammar and rhetoric, and then moved on to study philosophy in the second cycle. The goal of such an education was to

produce orthodox apologists for the Catholic cause in response to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.¹

Thus, before considering his education in philosophy, we will address Huet's humanist background and present its manifestation in Huet's own work. The fundamental aim of the humanities course was to produce learned students fluent in both written and spoken Latin.² Latin was the language of science, philosophy, and theology, uniting learned Europe with a universal medium of communication. The Jesuits believed that classical Latin presented the best linguistic model and used writers such as Ovid, Catullus, Virgil, Horace, Livy, Sallust, Caesar, and Propertius. Following the model of Quintilian, the Jesuits held poetry to be extremely useful in the development of rhetorical skills.³ Thus, students were instructed in Latin rhetoric and grammar by both classical poetry and prose.

A Jesuit student was expected to perform extensive Biblical exegesis. Training in Greek was deemed essential to real erudition, because it was the original language of the New Testament.⁴ Thus, humanistic study of ancient literature and rhetoric was crucial to the formation of a student who could cogently argue on behalf of Catholicism. Cyprian Soarez (1524-1593) argued in his *De arte rhetorica (Concerning the Art of Rhetoric – 1562)* that training in rhetoric essentially taught the student how to think because reason and rhetoric were so deeply intertwined.⁵

¹ April Shelford, *Faith and glory: Pierre-Daniel Huet and the making of the Demonstratio Evangelica (1679)*, Ph.D. Dissertation, (Princeton University, 1997), 43-44.

² Lawrence Brockliss, *French Higher Education in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Cultural History*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 112.

³ Shelford, *Faith and glory*, 45 (footnote) and 48.

⁴ Brockliss, *French Higher Education*, 113.

⁵ Shelford, *Faith and glory*, 50.

The instruction was not only linguistic, but also moral, providing classical models for imitation. The understanding of pagan culture would improve the morality of the students and enhance their understanding of the Bible.⁶ Readings were chosen for their ability to reinforce the similarity between Christian values and the ancient examples of virtue. Thus, by coming in contact with Latin and Greek texts, students encountered various accounts of European history and mythology.⁷

For some students, interest in the content of such ancient works surpassed the didactic value of linguistic lessons. For instance, Huet saw the study of languages as a tool and not as an end, because he came to consider himself an erudite first and foremost:

I am aware that this study has its use, and even necessity and that a correct knowledge of antiquity, which is the best part of polite literature, cannot be obtained without the aide of those tongues which were spoken by the nations who have transmitted to us the arts and sciences...but let them be regarded as handmaids, who are courted only as leading the way to their mistresses, which are the branches of knowledge themselves. Thus, languages are the keys by which the doors of learning are to be opened, and those who, content with the possession of them, stop at the threshold, and do not penetrate to the recesses, may be resembled to janitors, who, bearing the keys to many apartments, themselves sleep out of doors.⁸

Thus, perhaps contrary to its intentions, by exposing students to a vast spectrum of ancient texts Jesuit education promoted a spirit of erudition that often went beyond supplementing exegetical skills.

Huet left Caen in 1652 to accompany his mentor Samuel Bochart (1599-1667) to Sweden and the Netherlands. Huet made use of the many libraries he encountered during his voyage. In Denmark he visited Tycho Brahe's astronomical laboratory and in Sweden

⁶ François de Dainville, *La Naissance de l'humanisme moderne* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1940), 217-218.

⁷ Shelford, *Faith and glory*, 51.

⁸ Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Memoirs of the life of Peter Daniel Huet, Bishop of Avranches, written by himself*. trans. John Aiken, (London : Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, ... and Cadell and Davies..., 1810), 223. I have used an English edition because I planned ultimately to translate all French and Latin sources into English. Since a reliable contemporaneous English translation of the *Memoirs* proved to be very close to the French, I have cited it throughout my thesis.

he found the manuscript of Origen's *Commentary on St. Matthew*. Having copied the commentary in Sweden, Huet edited and translated it until 1668.⁹

Such a textual exercise was one of the most basic tasks of a humanist scholar. It involved the restoration of the text to its original form, providing a translation if the original were not in Latin, and composing a commentary on the primary text. Philological expertise in ancient languages was necessary, but an understanding of the particular historical and cultural contexts of the texts was equally crucial to revealing their meaning. The editor also had to be familiar with all of the references in the text and thus had to attain a copious knowledge of diverse subjects. In other words, he had to possess *erudition*.¹⁰

Indeed, Huet sought to attain a professional level of Biblical exegesis and would surpass many of his peers. He went beyond studying Latin and Greek and tried to learn Hebrew in order to read the Old Testament in the original. Bochart assisted Huet in improving his Greek and beginning his study of Hebrew. Bochart also stressed the importance of Hebrew in his own *Geographia sacra* (*The Sacred Geography* – 1646), claiming it was the first language, from which all others were derived. In upholding the spirit of humanism, Bochart also claimed that the interpreter had to know the meanings of proper names in the Bible, had to master geography and history in Scripture and in pagan texts, and had to learn the astronomical significance of prophecies.¹¹

Bochart's *Geographia sacra* similarly guided Huet to formulate his own research interests. Huet composed a work on a similar subject in his short *Traité de la situation du paradis terrestre* (*Treatise Concerning the Location of the Terrestrial Paradise* – 1691).

⁹ Shelford, *Faith and glory*, 78-79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 250-253.

Bochart's methodology also proved extremely influential on Huet. In undertaking this work, Bochart sought to discover the location of the Garden of Eden and to prove that Biblical geography was insufficiently known. He also proposed to discover the origins of the first people. Although Bochart suggested that ancient mythologies resembled fables, he believed that they could accurately confirm the Biblical account of history. Bochart sought to "correlate diverse ancient sources with the Bible" to support this claim. He demonstrated similarities between the Bible and pagan sources, such as the Orphic hymns and the works of Ovid, Hesiod, Teleclidus, Martial, Plato, Plutarch, and Macrobius. Thus, Bochart sought to synthesize the copious data he amassed in order to prove that the Bible did indeed provide a complete record of human history, thereby pronouncing the universality of the Christian religion.¹²

Bochart followed in the humanist tradition that, beginning in the fifteenth century, integrated ancient mythology, Neo-Platonic, Kabbalistic, and Pythagorean philosophies into the framework of Christian Revelation. The basis of this synthesis lay in the belief that the most pure form of Christian theology was passed directly from God to Adam and was later disseminated and diluted among the ancient peoples.¹³ The desire to reconcile what appeared to be authentic ancient sources with the Bible was a logical one for erudite believers. Such a synthesis could ease the tensions created by apparent historical discrepancies between the Bible and pagan sources.

Huet confessed in his memoirs that he did not finish his work on Origen because he was "deterred by the magnitude of an obscure task" and because he was contemplating "a work of more splendour," that he "conceived, much more useful to the Christian

¹² Ibid., 251-254.

¹³ Ibid., 278.

cause.”¹⁴ This work was his *Demonstratio Evangelica*. Although Huet began with an attack on the certainty of geometric principles, he combined moral axioms taken from Scripture with a structure of a geometric proof:

I imagined a new path might be struck out, different from the trodden ones, but certain plain, and direct, leading to a demonstration of that truth, not less clear and indubitable than the argumentative processes of geometricians, who boast that they do not persuade but compel conviction.¹⁵

This combination was similar to one used by Philippe du Plessis Mornay’s (1549-1623) *De la Vérité de la Religion Chrestienne (Concerning the Truth of the Christian Religion* – 1581). Mornay argued that the truth of Christianity could be proved using a method that resembled a geometric proof. He claimed that just as geometers had to accept certain axioms before engaging in geometrical proofs, basic principles could be equally established for the demonstration of religious truths. These principles were “God’s existence, beneficence, power, and omniscience; the immortality of the soul...and need for divine grace.”¹⁶ Mornay considered these truths to be universal and believed that from them man could arrive at “certain and indubitable” deductions.¹⁷

Despite its confident approach, Mornay’s method failed to prove, for most readers, that the truth he sought rested in Christianity. Christian revelations were particular, not universal. Therefore, a reliance on faith in revelation was necessary before any of Mornay’s principles could be accepted.¹⁸ Huet acknowledged the influence of Mornay but also voiced his disappointment with the proof:

I particularly expected much from Philip de Mornai (du Plessis)... But, Good God! How were my hopes deceived! I found vain and futile arguments, ancient testimonies collected

¹⁴ Huet, *Memoirs*, v. 2, 156-157.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁶ Shelford, “Thinking Geometrically in Pierre-Daniel Huet’s *Demonstratio Evangelica* (1679)” in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 no. 4 (2002), 602-603.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 603 quotes and translates Mornay, *De la Vérité de la Religion Chrestienne* (Paris, 1585), eiii v.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 603-604.

at random, and either misunderstood, or unfaithfully quoted, and errors without number.¹⁹

Unlike Mornay, Huet was writing after the authenticity of the Old Testament had been subjected to historical scrutiny. In his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*Theological and Political Treatise* – 1670), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) questioned the Mosaic authorship of the Bible, thereby significantly undermining the historical reliability of Scripture. Huet perceived Spinoza as an “unlearned” man who possessed no expertise for composing Biblical criticism. He argued that Spinoza borrowed most of his arguments from Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679).²⁰

In the *Prae-Adamitae* (*Men Before Adam* – 1655) La Peyrère suggested that the absence of various peoples from Biblical accounts, and the inconsistency between Biblical chronology and that of the Chinese, signaled the fact that the Bible was solely an account of Hebrew history and that Adam was not the first man, but the first Jew.²¹ Such an argument undermined both the universality of Christianity and the historical value of the Bible. These objections forced Huet to consider essential issues of textual authenticity.

Huet began his positive proof by providing an ordered set of definitions for the following terms: “authentic book,” “contemporary book,” “history,” “prophecy,” “true religion,” “Messiah,” and, finally, “Christian religion.”²² Like a true humanist, Huet

¹⁹ Huet, *Memoirs*, v.2, 159-160.

²⁰ Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 191.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 282.

²² *Ibid.*, “Thinking Geometrically”, 612 quotes the *Demonstratio Evangelica*: “1. An authentic book is one that was written by that author by whom it was said to have been written and around that time when it was written...2. A contemporary book is one that was written around that time when events related in it occurred...3. A history is a narrative of things that occurred in that time about which history is written... 4. A prophecy is a narrative of future events that had not yet occurred at the time when that prophecy was announced and which could not have been foreseen from natural causes. 5. A true religion is one that proposes only true things to be believed. 6. The Messiah is the man/God sent by God providentially for our salvation and predicted by the Prophets of the Old Testament. 7. The Christian Religion is that which establishes that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, and hold whatever has been written about him in the sacred books, whether the Old or New Testaments, as true.”

believed the authenticity of the texts to be an essential indicator of their historical value. Like Bochart, Huet sought to consult both pagan and Christian sources, and he “resolved to pass no work on the same topic, whether ancient or modern, without examination.”²³

Huet similarly aimed to synthesize these accounts:

We will demonstrate that those earliest Gods and Heroes of the peoples, whomsoever were worshipped throughout nearly the whole world, [and] indeed similarly the many founders and legislators and all the theology of the Pagans followed either from Moses himself or from the acts of Moses or from his writings.²⁴

Huet’s insatiable quest for knowledge was evident from his earliest years as a student. He confessed how he was often mocked by his peers for his overly studious nature, and how these insults only invigorated his passion for learning.²⁵ Thus, Huet serves as a typical example of a humanist of his generation. His intellectual curiosity grew proportionally to the number of texts he discovered, driving him to an inexorable quest for certainty and concordance among these sources, a certainty he never attained.

While the *Demonstratio Evangelica* represented the efforts of a humanist and a Biblical exegete, it also revealed Huet’s interest in geometry. In the following chapter we will address the anti-Cartesian dimension of the *Demonstratio* and describe Huet’s attempt to equate geometric certainty with historical certainty. Huet’s most influential teacher, Father Pierre Mambrun (1601-1661), who taught at Caen from 1647 to 1653, introduced him to formal philosophy after subjecting him to a rigorous course of geometry.²⁶ Huet remembered the experience in his memoirs:

Although I by no means repented the labour I had bestowed on geometry, yet I was rendered sensible of the injury I had sustained by the neglect of philosophy, concerning

²³ Huet, *Memoirs*, v.2, 159.

²⁴ Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 281 quotes *Demonstratio Evangelica* Proposition IV.3.I.

²⁵ Huet, *Mémoires (1718)*, (Toulouse: Société de Littératures Classiques, 1993), 18.

²⁶ Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 54.

which it was said by the ancients, that no gift more excellent had been, not would be, conferred by the Gods upon mankind.²⁷

Despite the rigors of Mambrun's instruction, Huet became deeply attached to his teacher. Mambrun served as a surrogate father for Huet, and the two remained close friends until Mambrun's death in 1661. This friendship can be traced through an extensive correspondence, in which Huet often recounted his spiritual and intellectual endeavors.²⁸

Upon commencing the study of geometry with Mambrun, Huet began the second cycle in the Jesuit curriculum, that of philosophy. This broad discipline encompassed logic, physics, metaphysics, ethics, and natural philosophy. The study of philosophy supplied the students with conceptual instruments they would need at the advanced faculties of theology, law, and medicine.²⁹ The curriculum of this cycle was based on the scholastic tradition of Aristotelian science; as the *Ratio Studiorum* instructed, "In matters of any importance, let him not depart from Aristotle [unless Aristotle conflicts in some way with the conclusions of Christian teaching]."³⁰

During the seventeenth century the course in logic relied on Aristotle's *Organon: The Categories, On Interpretation, Prior Analytics, Posterior Analytics, Topics, and On Sophistical Refutations*. The student first was introduced to the rules of logic and "the three distinctive mental operations: apprehension, judgment, and ratiocination."³¹ Then the student learned how the rules of logic could be applied to the "investigation and demonstration of knowledge."³²

²⁷ Huet, *Memoirs*, v.1, 26.

²⁸ Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 54-55.

²⁹ Brockliss, *French Higher Education*, 185.

³⁰ Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 82 quotes the translation of A.R Ball, "The Ratio Studiorum," in *St. Ignatius and the Ratio Studiorum*, ed. Edward. A. Fitzpatrick (New York and London, 1933), [119-254], 168.

³¹ Brockliss, *French Higher Education*, 194.

³² *Ibid.*

Pierre Gautruche (1602-1681), who also instructed Huet at Caen, composed a textbook *Philosophiae ac Mathematicae totius clara, brevis et accurate institutio* (*The clear, brief, and precise instruction in all philosophy and mathematics* – 1661).

Gautruche carefully followed the Aristotelian division of philosophy in his organization of the work. He began his epistemological discussion with the Aristotelian dictum, “there is nothing in the mind that has not first been in the senses” and sought to define the tools for the accurate interpretation of sense experience.³³ These tools included argument, method, definition and division.³⁴

The use of the syllogism was essential to Aristotelian philosophy. An example of a conclusion proved by a syllogism appears in Huet’s own skeptical treatise: “Peter is a rational animal.”³⁵ The conclusion can be derived from two premises: the particular premise would argue that Peter is a man, while the general premise would state that all men are rational animals. The conclusion to any syllogism depended on the logical relationship between universal and particular propositions. Gautruche and other Aristotelians believed that the syllogism was capable of yielding new knowledge that described the real nature and causes of things.³⁶

However, the usefulness of the syllogism was not uncontested among the students of scholasticism. In the *Traité*, Huet criticized the circular nature of this method:

They would prove for Instance that Peter is a rational Animal: See how they reason. Every Man is a rational Animal; Peter is a Man, therefore Peter is a rational Animal. The first of these Propositions being universal, does principally pass for true, because every Man in particular is a rational Animal...out of the Mass of these particular propositions, which declare every man to be a rational Animal, this universal Proposition was formed; viz. every Man is a rational animal: from thence it follows that the Certainty of this

³³ Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 378-380.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 380.

³⁵ Huet, *An essay concerning the weakness of human understanding*, trans. Edw. Combe, (London: printed for Matthew de Varenne, 1725), 67.

³⁶ Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 381-384.

universal Proposition, depends on the Certainty of all those particular Propositions. But in reasoning we now call into account, the Certainty of the particular Proposition depends on the Certainty of the universal...thus we fall into that vicious Reasoning called a Circle.³⁷

For Huet, the syllogism could not prove anything with certainty, because the premises were interdependent on each other and could not withstand scrutiny autonomously.

In general, the Aristotelian scholastics considered all objects in terms of their substantial and accidental properties. The substantial properties were those necessary to the object, belonging to its essence. Absent this essence, the object could no longer maintain its particular identity. Accidental properties were unessential, literally and metaphorically, and were often virtually interchangeable. These included color, size, shape, and other properties that could change without transforming the essence of an object. Furthermore, Aristotle had drawn a distinction between matter and form and had argued that when a change takes place, the matter remains invariable while the form alters.

The Aristotelian notion of causality outlined four classes of causes: material, formal, efficient, and final. The material cause described the matter from which the thing came to be. The formal cause described the particular essence of the thing. The efficient cause was the agent that actualized a form from its material cause. The final cause was the purpose for which the thing existed. Such a classification of causes was seen as particularly problematic for the critics of Aristotelianism, because it made claims about the real, not just the apparent, nature of things.

Various challenges to the Aristotelian philosophy emerged in the seventeenth century. One of the earliest oppositions to Aristotelian Scholasticism was formulated by

³⁷ Huet, *An essay concerning the weakness of human understanding*, 67.

Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in England. The Baconian intellectual revolution swept England and offered an entire re-organization of human knowledge. Identifying the key faults in the epistemological and ontological frameworks proposed by Aristotelian Scholasticism, Bacon reinforced the empirical nature of human knowledge. Thus, he branded the method of induction as the best way of learning and knowing things about the world. Bacon's induction was based on gathering evidence and only later organizing it into more general categories, always leaving room for adjustment. Though the Aristotelians were also technically empiricists, Bacon sought to oppose the scholastic method of deduction, largely based on the logic of syllogisms. He argued this method was not capable of creating new knowledge because the syllogism did not accurately reflect "the subtlety of nature." He also wrote, "The logic now in use serves rather to fix and give stability to the errors which have foundations in currently received notions."³⁸

Bacon's *New Organon* (1620) emphasized the limits of human knowledge, but used this emphasis to advocate an improvement in the gathering of knowledge. Thus, he proposed the use of instruments and experiments to assist the weakness of the human senses. Bacon's epistemological emphasis on empiricism and his proposed method of experimentation inspired a following of natural philosophers, primarily in England. Thinkers such as Robert Boyle, John Locke, and Isaac Newton all emerged as the luminaries of the new Baconian world. These natural philosophers dramatically revolutionized their disciplines, sweeping away traditionally established university curricula.

In France, René Descartes and his new system presented the most direct threat to Aristotelian scholasticism. Bacon did not drastically revise Aristotelian epistemology, but

³⁸ Francis Bacon, *New Organon*, (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1960), 41.

rather attempted to apply Aristotle's notion that nothing comes into the mind but from the senses. Descartes, on the other hand, presented a rationalist epistemology that argued for the existence of innate knowledge in the human mind. The most basic disagreement between the Aristotelian and Cartesian systems consisted in this difference in epistemology. Unlike the Aristotelians, Descartes did not think that all knowledge arose from sense experience. In his *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (*Meditations on First Philosophy* – 1641) and in his *Principia Philosophiae* (*Principles of Philosophy* – 1644), Descartes argued that the human mind, by the light of reason alone, could arrive at substantive truths concerning the fundamental laws of nature.³⁹ For example, he asserted that the total quantity of motion in the world was conserved, and that this was known *a priori*, following necessarily and logically from the immutability of God. Accordingly, for Descartes, the basic structure of the world was discovered independently of experience, was metaphysically necessary, and was known with metaphysical certainty.

Descartes based his foundational conception of knowledge on a single indubitable certainty, *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I exist), from which he derived his criterion of truth.⁴⁰ For the Cartesians, knowledge could be attained and verified through intuition and demonstration. Human beings could only be certain of those things of which they formed clear and distinct ideas and the truth of which they could demonstrate. Thus, if one clearly and distinctly perceived the necessary existence of God and of substance in one's mind, these objects had to exist necessarily in the realm of objective reality.⁴¹

³⁹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress, (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 19-20; Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, in *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*, trans. Desmond Clarke (New York, London: Penguin Books, 1999), 26.

⁴⁰ Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, 25.

⁴¹ Descartes, *Meditations*, 28.

In general philosophical terms, this debate is known as one between schools that favor either *a posteriori* reason or *a priori* reason, that is, between empiricists and rationalists, a debate whose roots can be found in the ancient contest between Aristotelians and Platonists. Empiricists argued that human beings arrive at knowledge of the external world through sense experience, suggesting that the origin of all ideas about the natural world is external to the mind. A mind before sense experience is thus a *tabula rasa*. Proponents of *a priori* reason, the rationalists, on the other hand, claimed that all human beings are born with certain innate ideas, and therefore, some ideas do not come into the mind through the senses. In the context of seventeenth-century France, this debate is manifested by the contest between the Aristotelian Scholastics and the Cartesians.

This epistemological debate was heightened by a theological dispute about the consequences of original sin and man's fall from grace. The theological dispute derives its origins from the tension between Augustinian and Thomistic thought.⁴² The view advanced by St. Augustine (354-430) stressed the fatal consequences of the fall, arguing that it inherently corrupted man's knowledge, especially given the severe limitations of imperfect, corporeal sense experience. Thus, for the Augustinians, man's soul was so corrupted that it could never arrive at true knowledge or certainty without divine guidance and intervention. The Thomists, who followed the doctrines of theologian St. Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274), disputed such a pessimistic view of the human condition. They agreed that man's natural light was lost after the fall and that all knowledge had to be gained through the senses. However, unlike St. Augustine, who lamented the corporeality of man's fallen condition, St. Thomas remained confident that true and

⁴² Kors, 266.

certain knowledge, including proofs of the existence of God, could be arrived at *a posteriori*, from the experience of the external world.⁴³

In physics and metaphysics, Descartes proposed a new system that distinguished all substances into two sorts: immaterial thinking being and corporeal extended being.⁴⁴ He asserted the essence of mind to be thought and the essence of matter to be extension. The existence of both of these was guaranteed by a perfect being: God.⁴⁵

Under this division, the Cartesians systematically rejected the Aristotelian notion of causality and instead proposed, in physics, a purely mechanistic universe. In opposition to the Aristotelian system that distinguished between substantial and accidental forms, Cartesianism considered physical phenomena only in terms of extension and motion.

Natural philosophers welcomed the Cartesian revolution, because it presented concrete methods that could be supported by evidence. The Dutch mathematician, astronomer, and physicist, Christiaan Huygens (1629-1695), proclaimed his approval for the Cartesian system, contrasting it with Aristotelian scholasticism:

What was very evident in the beginning, when this philosophy [of Descartes] had just begun to appear, is that one understood what Mr. Descartes said unlike the other philosophers who used words which caused nothing to be understood, such as qualities, substantial forms, intentional species, etc. He rejected this impertinent rubbish more completely than anyone had ever done.⁴⁶

Huygens perceived the Aristotelian philosophy as an impediment to the understanding of natural philosophy, because scholastic classifications failed to reflect the apparent nature

⁴³ Ibid., 299.

⁴⁴ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 27.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 27-28.

⁴⁶ Robert S. Westman, "Huygens and the Problem of Cartesianism," in *Studies on Christiaan Huygens : invited papers from the Symposium on the Life and Work of Christiaan Huygens, Amsterdam, 22-25 August 1979*, ed. Bos, Rudwick, Snelders, and Visser (Lisse: Swetz & Zeitlinger, 1980), 95-96. (Also quoted by Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 424-425).

of the physical world. Like Thomas Hobbes, who defined all terms without sensory referents to be literally and metaphorically “non-sense,” Huygens was frustrated by the obscurity of the Aristotelian terminology. Cartesian physics offered natural philosophers the opportunity to address physics mechanistically and empirically.

In his youth Huet was similarly attracted to the apparent clarity of the Cartesian system, but he later came to reject its tenets:

At this period Descartes published the principles of his sect; and as, during the three preceding years, I had given my attention to philosophy, and was abundantly furnished with the dogmas and precepts of this science, I felt an ardent desire to become acquainted with the opinions of this writer...and I cannot easily express the admiration which this new mode of philosophizing excited in my young mind, when, from the simplest and plainest principles, I saw so many dazzling wonders brought forth, and the whole fabric of the world and the nature of things, as it were, spontaneously springing to existence... and I long wandered in the mazes of this reasoning delirium, till mature years, and a full examination of the system from its foundations, compelled me to renounce it, as I obtained demonstrative proof that it was a baseless structure, and tottered from the very ground.⁴⁷

The emphasis that Huet placed on the apparent simplicity of the Cartesian system resembled Huygens’s sentiment about Cartesianism’s appeal to natural philosophers, but it also signaled, perhaps above all, his dissatisfaction with Aristotelian scholasticism.

In a letter from Huet to Mambrun in 1660, the former revealed a turn away from Aristotelianism to Greek atomism in the consideration of natural philosophy and metaphysics:

Although, indeed, like other men, [Aristotle] prated idly about some matters sometimes (and most of all in physics), he was, nonetheless most admirably expert in other subjects. He skillfully revealed such an infinity – and clearly such a great abundance – of things nature had concealed. Certainly regarding the principles of physics, I strongly approve the ideas of Leucippus, ideas that were then asserted and skillfully fashioned by Democritus and Epicurus. Indeed, I cannot either grasp nor mediate very well that first material [the Peripatics] call substantial forms. Apparently the hypothesis of atoms is easier [to comprehend] and more suited to the appearance of the truth.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Huet, *Memoirs*, v.1, 29.

⁴⁸ BN Ms. Lat., 11432, fol. 101-102. (Quoted and translated by Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 426-427).

Huet communicated these sentiments privately and, until the publication of the *Traité*, he refrained from openly criticizing the Aristotelians. His expressions of anti-Aristotelianism, when published, were always implicit. For example, when attacking the Cartesian notion of the mind, Huet designated an Epicurean and not an Aristotelian to be his spokesman against the notion of immaterial thought.⁴⁹ Similarly, Huet conflated Aristotelian and Epicurean ideas to oppose the Cartesian notions of causality and metaphysics. He chastised the Cartesian argument regarding causes and effects, claiming that it was “as easy for Descartes to produce from it some imaginary world as to produce this world.”⁵⁰ Aristotle and Epicurus, on the other hand, “were able to validly infer specifically defined effects.”⁵¹

Huet’s rejection of Cartesianism will be thoroughly addressed in the following chapter, but it is important to identify when Huet decisively turned away from Descartes’s philosophy. In 1666, he wrote a letter to his Jesuit friend René Rapin (1621-1687), describing his intellectual endeavors:

During this retreat, I recently determined to battle Cartesianism, and to recall it before the bar of my judgment. A bold deed, if that doctrine is taken at the mad value given it in this age. If however, one considers the matter [the philosophy] in and of itself, and investigates it carefully, starting with its principles, nothing is more futile.⁵²

Later in his life, Huet devoted two works to a refutation of the Cartesian system. The *Censura cartesianae philosophiae* was a serious philosophical work that attacked the basic epistemological and ontological arguments of Descartes. The *Nouveau mémoires*

⁴⁹ Huet, *Against Cartesian Philosophy* [*Censura philosophiae Cartesianae*] ed., trans. Thomas M. Lennon, (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003), 139. I have used Lennon’s translation because it is easily available, as opposed to the Latin version of the *Censura*, which could be accessed only on microfilm. I think it important to consider Lennon’s translation, because his interpretation of his own translation is very different from the one I will present toward the end of the second chapter.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 199

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 199-200; and Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 449.

⁵² BN Ms. Lat., 11432, fol. 143. (Quoted and translated by Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 434).

pour servir à l'histoire du Cartésianisme was, by contrast, a parody that related a fictional account of Descartes (who at this point was long dead) living in Lapland and teaching philosophy.

Huet's rejection of Descartes should also be considered in the context of a second major response to Aristotelian scholasticism in seventeenth century France. Marin Mersenne and Pierre Gassendi presented a skeptical challenge to the scholastic world, but maintained a limited role for skepticism. While rejecting the Aristotelian and the Cartesian notions that certain and necessary truths could be established about the nature of reality, Mersenne and Gassendi accepted the possibility of attaining probable knowledge based on appearances. Thus, although they did not accept the ultimate conclusions of the Pyrrhonists, they rejected the dogmatic principles of the Aristotelians and of the Cartesians.

Mersenne composed an attack on Pyrrhonism in his *La Vérité des Sciences contre les Sceptiques ou Pyrrhoniens* (*The Truth of the Sciences Against the Sceptics or Pyrrhonians* – 1625). He argued that although the skeptics were correct regarding the human inability to know the real nature of things, they erroneously rejected the useful information that could be gained about the apparent nature of the world. Thus, one had to accept that at least something could be and was known about the world.⁵³ Mersenne's work consists of a discussion between an alchemist, a skeptic, and a Christian Philosopher. The alchemist likely represented the Aristotelian system, because he neglected to refer to sense experience in his account for the natural world. Mersenne

⁵³ Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: from Savonarola to Bayle*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 113-114. I have used Popkin for the interpretation of Mersenne and Gassendi, because his view of mitigated skepticism is widely accepted among historians of skepticism.

favorably situated himself between the extremes of dogmatists and skeptics, proposing a new limited form of empiricism.

Gassendi, who, like Mersenne, was a cleric, adopted a similar philosophical framework. He criticized the dogmatic view for exaggerating the power of the human mind, while chastising the skeptics for adopting the opposite extreme. The senses could prove to be unreliable, but their errors could be corrected and their reliability increased.⁵⁴ Gassendi also attempted to establish the exact nature of his epistemological world view.⁵⁵ In his *De vita et moribus Epicure* (*Concerning the Life and Morals of Epicurus* – 1647) and his *Animadversiones in decimum librum Diogenis Laertii* (*Notes on the Tenth Book of Diogenes Laertius* – 1649), Gassendi revived Epicurean atomism, proposing it as a new alternative for natural philosophy. His system provided explanations of the basic physical, chemical, and biological phenomena by referring to the ancient Greek notion that all matter is composed of infinitely small matters moving in a void. Gassendi modified the classical theory by suggesting that atoms were created and set in motion by God.⁵⁶

Gassendi's and Mersenne's ontological and epistemological systems presented a middle ground for the natural philosophy of the seventeenth century. Thus, they adhered to skepticism in opposition to the dogmatic schools of Cartesianism and Aristotelianism and sought to construct new physical and metaphysical systems. However, they did not persistently address the religious dimension of skepticism. Huet's epistemological

⁵⁴ Ibid., 121-122.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 120-121.

⁵⁶ Matthew R. Goodrum, "Atheism, and the Spontaneous Generation of Human Beings: The Debate over a Natural Origin of the First Humans in Seventeenth-Century Britain," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 no. 2 (2002), 208.

theories had much in common with those of Mersenne and Gassendi, but he was committed to skepticism for religious and not for scientific reasons.

While Huet's skeptical treatise was not published until 1723, he composed it between 1690 and 1692.⁵⁷ In addition to hiding his work until his death and writing it under the pseudonym Théocrite de Pulvignac, seigneur de la Roche, Huet framed the *Traité* in a way that rhetorically distanced him from its main ideas.⁵⁸ Thus, he began his preface by stating, "Hear, my dear Friends not my Opinion, touching the Nature of human Understanding, and Reason, but that of an excellent Person, very well versed in all the ancient and modern Sects of Philosophy."⁵⁹ All the subsequent arguments on behalf of skepticism and its benefits are advanced by this "provincial Man of Quality."⁶⁰

While such a framing may seem a commonplace literary device, Huet's encounter with the provincial man of quality was anything but fictional. As evident from his *Mémoires*, Huet's interlocutor was Louis Cornis, whom Huet met in Caen toward the end of the 1650's.⁶¹ Although the exact date of their meeting remains unknown, the meeting took place before 1660, when Huet confessed skepticism in a letter to Mambrun. In the *Mémoires*, he wrote:

And hardly a day passed without him coming to see me or I going to see him and together we strolled, either along the most agreeable banks of the Orne or through the greenest meadows. Moreover, we generally conversed about the ancient philosophical sects, since he was not only exceptionally learned in all of them, but especially so in those that commanded the mind to abstain from all assent. And thus above all he wholly approved Sextus Empiricus' teachings, and his commendation so affected [me] that the author who

⁵⁷ Thomas M. Lennon, "The Skepticism of Huet's *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l'esprit Humain*," in *Scepticisme et modernité*. ed. Marc André Bernier and Sébastien Charles. (Saint-Etienne: Université de Saint-Etienne, 2005), 66.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 67. Lennon argues that "Roche" means rock and should be thus deciphered as "Pierre." "Théocrite" is accordingly the Greek translation of the Hebrew name "Daniel." Finally, Lennon suggests that "Pluvignac" stands for "pluie," which is French for "rain" can be translated into Greek as "huetos."

⁵⁹ Huet, *An essay concerning the weakness of human understanding*, xxxvii-xxxviii.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxviii.

⁶¹ Huet, *Mémoires*, 91.

until then had been merely a name to me was read by me diligently, became very familiar to me, and I conceived the highest opinion of him.⁶²

This passage presented one of Huet's only published revelations of his personal predilection for Sextus Empiricus. Because the *Mémoires* were published during his lifetime, Huet was careful to exclude any expressions of commitment to skepticism itself. He declared his "high opinion" of Sextus Empiricus, but did not state that he became a skeptic. Instead, he described his affinity for Cormis, whose influence was crucial to Huet's eventual commitment to skepticism. Huet's autobiographical account of the encounter with Cormis was very similar to his description of the interlocutor in the *Traité*. Before articulating his skepticism, Huet's interlocutor described his intellectual progression:

I was very much disturbed at those perpetual Disputes of Philosophers, upon all Subjects; and in Expectation of the great Advantages of Philosophy, which were so much boasted of, Knowledge of Truth, and Tranquility of Mind: I was much surprised to find my self plunged in the thick Darkness of invincible Ignorance, and Debates of which I could see no End. And being educated in the Philosophy of Aristotle, according to the Custom of the Age, I was still more astonished that the Sect of that Philosopher only, should be able to produce so great a Diversity of Opinions, of Greeks, Arabians, and Latins, of Ancients and Moderns.⁶³

This account described the consequences of a philosophical itinerary that ended in a complete disillusionment with all dogmatic systems. While the passage specifically pertained to Cormis, it could easily be applied to Huet's own quest for a coherent philosophical system. Like Huet, Cormis was educated as an Aristotelian, but soon he became disappointed with the number of disagreements within the Aristotelian school itself.⁶⁴ He was attracted to the novel system proposed by Descartes, but he did not find it

⁶² Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 432 quotes the Latin version of Huet's *Mémoires: Commentarius de Rebus ad eum pertinentibus* (1718), 333. The passage is available in French in Huet, *Mémoires*, 91.

⁶³ Huet, *An essay concerning the weakness of human understanding*, xl.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, xl-xlii.

to be more convincing than the Aristotelian system.⁶⁵ Cormis turned to Gassendi and then to Plato, but, once again, remained unconvinced by the tenets of either school. Finally, Cormis encountered the skeptical doctrines of Arcesilas, Carneades, and Pyrrho. Although he did not “approve of their Opinion in everything,” he agreed with the general notion that neither he “nor any other Man else ever had any natural Faculty to discover Truth with full and absolute Assurance.”⁶⁶

While Cormis’s road to skepticism may not exactly mirror Huet’s intellectual odyssey (for instance, there is no evidence that Huet was ever attracted to Platonism), the two intellectual journeys have essential things in common. The quest for truth and certainty within various philosophical systems led both to question and eventually to reject man’s ability to know any philosophical truths with certainty. Huet and Cormis accepted the basic tenets of skeptical philosophy, because they agreed with its account of the limited nature of human understanding.

The distinction between ontological and epistemological skepticism is crucial to understanding Huet’s skeptical system. An ontological skeptic would typically assert that true and certain knowledge of the natural world did not exist. On the other hand, an epistemological skeptic, like Huet, did not reject the theoretical existence of such certain knowledge, but simply denied the human ability to gain it in practice by means of sense experience and reason.⁶⁷ Thus, as he claimed in Book II of the *Traité*:

I deny not but there is Truth, to be found in things themselves, I mean that which is called Truth of Existence: for God knows things as they really are. But there is an Impediment in Man, which withhold him from it, and this impediment consists in the Want of proper and necessary Means to know Truth perfectly.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid., xliii.

⁶⁶ Ibid., xliii-xlvi.

⁶⁷ Ibid., xlvii.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 139-140.

Huet's basic skeptical conclusion about the weakness of the human mind was formulated in a series of definitions in the first chapter of the *Traité*. He defined philosophy as the "Study of Wisdom, the search of Truth...by the assistance of Reason."⁶⁹ He then identified the human mind as "A Principle, or Power born in Man, moved or excited to form Ideas, and Thoughts, by the Reception and Impression of Species in the Brain."⁷⁰ These species were "traces imprinted into the Brain by the Motion of the Spirits and Nerves, when they are agitated by the Organs of Sensation."⁷¹ From this, it followed that an "Idea or an Image" was the result of this impression.⁷² Huet's first three definitions revealed his empirical epistemology, suggesting that all ideas come into the mind from external sources through the senses.

He further defined thought as "the Action of the Understanding, moved and determined by Species in the Brain, to form to it self Ideas, to compare, and judge of them together."⁷³ Reason, for Huet, was the faculty of human understanding that searched "after Truth by its natural Operations."⁷⁴ Finally, Huet defined the "truth of judgment" as the "agreement or correspondence" between the object of consideration that existed outside of human perception and the idea or image of that object in the human mind.⁷⁵ Thus, an agreement between the object and the idea of that object required the knowledge of both. However, since the human mind could only know the external objects through the ideas formed by the mind, the verification of an agreement between the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 3

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 3-4

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

object and the idea proved impossible. Consequently, Huet concluded that “man cannot know Truth with perfect Certainty by the Aid of Reason.”⁷⁶

Building on these definitions, Huet proposed that there were “two ways of knowing Truth” – with uncertainty or certainty.⁷⁷ The latter path to truth was further divided into two degrees: divine and human certainty. Huet claimed that human certainty could be considered in degrees of probability but could never reach an absolute level.⁷⁸

Huet’s letter to Mambrun, expressing his predilection for Epicurean theory also revealed his probabilistic view of knowledge. Having declared his preference for the atomistic theory Huet wrote:

However, I desire that these be admitted only as hypotheses – not as the Democretians considered them, i.e., absolute [truth]. All things certainly have their origins in atoms, and thus are [destroyed] when resolved into them; they appeared to adhere to this opinion as if to a sacrament. I in truth admit this as most probable, not as certain. Most pleasing is the method of the best Academy of which Carneades is reported the father, because truly they sought that which had the appearance of truth and the probable: moreover, [Carneades] discerned nothing as true and proven, and swore by the words of no master; but secured that which had the appearance of truth from whatever source it might arise, and rested in that.⁷⁹

Thus, Huet combined dogmatic Epicureanism with Academic skepticism and argued that all conclusions about the physical world were provisional. While Huet accepted that there were probable systems of natural philosophy, he refused to grant full certainty to any such system. The letter also indicates that he had adopted a skeptical outlook in epistemology by the age of thirty, before having published any of his major works. Thus, Huet’s private correspondence proves useful, because it reveals candid expressions of philosophical views that Huet did not advertise openly until the publication of the *Traité*.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 5-6

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁷⁹ BN Ms. Lat., 11432 fol. 101-102. (Quoted and translated by Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 426-427). See pages 31-2 for the first part of this letter.

In the *Traité*, Huet argued that in contrast to the probabilistic nature of human certainty, divine certainty, attained by faith in divine revelation, guaranteed true knowledge about God's revelation and provided the highest degree of assurance.⁸⁰ Thus, having formulated his view of man's inherent inability to arrive at certainty through reason, Huet urged his readers to rely on faith for "fortifying the Imbecility of Reason and the Senses, dissipating the Obscurity of Doubts, and sustaining the anxious Mind."⁸¹

In Book II of the *Traité*, Huet argued that the ultimate end of suspending judgment in the search for philosophical truths was not to avoid error, but to "prepare the mind for the Reception of divine Faith."⁸² While faith provided the highest attainable level of earthly certainty, it nonetheless remained beneath the "certainty of the Blessed" that occurred only in the afterlife.⁸³ Huet's pessimism regarding man's rational abilities was in many ways similar to Augustinian arguments about the consequences of the fall. Huet not only rejected the possibility of knowing truth through reason, but he argued that faith itself could not be an absolute basis of certainty, constrained as it was by man's earthly nature.

Book I of Huet's *Traité* furnished a series of attempts to prove the inadequacy of human reason. He reaffirmed the religious and Scriptural basis of his skepticism, citing Solomon's statements about the uselessness of man's inexorable and doomed search after truth, the corruption of the soul by the body, and the weakness of man's reason.⁸⁴ He quoted various arguments of the holy fathers of the Church: Arnobius, Lactantius, and Gregory Nazanien. Huet offered St. Augustine's description of human understanding as

⁸⁰ Huet, *An essay concerning the weakness of human understanding*, 8.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 163.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

“obscured by the habitual Darkness, with which it is covered in the Night of Sin, [and] cannot readily see the clearness nor Sanctity of Reason.”⁸⁵ Finally, Huet claimed that even St. Thomas Aquinas “pronounced that our Minds are so hampered by the Senses, they cannot comprehend Things perfectly, and their imbecility is so great, that if they would judge of Matters which are certain in themselves, they will become uncertain.”⁸⁶

Huet marshaled a series of detailed proofs of the weakness of the human mind, referring to the nature of things, the nature of the mind itself, the incomprehensibility of the essence of things, the continuing mutability of things, the difference in and imperfection of human perception, the infinity of causes, the absence of a criterion of truth, the inadequacy of evidence, the circular nature of proving the certainty of reason by reason, and the fallibility of all dogmatic opinions. Huet’s last demonstration provided the articulation of the law of doubting, as advanced by a variety of ancient philosophers.

Book II proposed “the most sure and legitimate way of Philosophizing,” elaborating upon the issues proposed in the first book. Huet stressed that “man is by nature so made, that he cannot himself attain to the Knowledge of Truth.”⁸⁷ He sought to substantiate the supplementary role of faith with respect to reason, and he proposed the exact purposes of doubting. Toward the end of the book, Huet urged that philosophers should not tie themselves “to the Sentiments of any Author,” but select from every sect that which has “some Appearance of Truth.”⁸⁸ He concluded the second part of the *Traité* by refusing to adhere to any particular skeptical school: “Not being an Academick,

⁸⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 138.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 166 and 168.

Sceptick, Eclectick, or of any other Sect I must answer I am my own, that is to say at liberty, unwilling to submit to any Authority.”⁸⁹

His refusal to accept fully the principles of any single system, including some tenets of the skeptics, certainly indicates that Huet was attempting to remain consistently skeptical throughout his *Traité*. An espousal of any particular philosophical system would have jeopardized the aim of Huet’s project. He ended the *Traité* by outlining and answering the major objections to the proposed system, showing both his willingness to entertain objections and his system’s ability to withstand them. Indeed, Huet left the reader of the *Traité* with the freedom to accept or reject the skeptical system, thereby placing his audience in the identical position with respect to himself, that he occupied with respect to Cormis.

While the most general aim of Huet’s *Traité* was to advocate the utility of skepticism for philosophy and for religion, Huet’s main argument appears to be contrary to the spirit of Pyrrhonian doubt. The first two books aimed to demonstrate definitively the weakness of the human mind and of human reason and man’s consequent inability to attain true and certain rational knowledge. While this formulation led the author to advance a skeptical outlook in philosophy, the hypothesis is anything but Pyrrhonian in its nature. Huet indeed subjected all rational conclusions to doubt, but he affirmed with complete certainty the weakness of the human mind. This element remains the sole constant throughout Huet’s *Traité* and stands in direct opposition to the Pyrrhonian proposition that man cannot know anything with certainty, including the very proposition that man cannot know anything with certainty. Therefore, Huet should be classified as an

⁸⁹ Ibid., 176.

Academic and not as a Pyrrhonian skeptic, since he affirms at least one positive principle, namely the weakness of the human mind.

* * *

Thus, the origins of Huet's skepticism lay in three phenomena. First, his quest for a universal proof of the Christian religion and his encounter with a large variety of ancient and modern texts opened Huet's mind to conflicting opinions, which forced him to reconsider his own beliefs. Second, Huet's disillusionment with his Aristotelian education in philosophy led him to seek a new coherent philosophical framework, ultimately leading him to repudiate all dogmatic systems. Third, Huet's devotion to Catholicism drove him to formulate his skepticism in a way that best supported his own view of the relationship between faith and reason. Thus, the three causes of Huet's skepticism seem to spring from the traditional educational system in which Huet matured as a scholar.

Huet's skepticism was not a radical rebellion against the established intellectual order, but an attempt to reconcile the inconsistencies he encountered in the course of his intellectual development. Huet was an orthodox Catholic who attempted to maintain intellectual integrity in a world where the incorporation of both rediscovered and new texts presented dramatic challenges to traditional intellectual authorities. Thus, Huet's reaction sheds light on the tensions that existed between the aims of humanist scholarship and Biblical exegesis, and between philosophical and theological claims to truth in seventeenth-century France. We will address the latter issue more closely in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: The Cartesian Context: Huet's Critique of the Presumption of Reason

René Descartes exercised the single most important contemporaneous intellectual influence on Pierre-Daniel Huet. The nature of this influence was primarily negative, in so far as it led Huet to develop a philosophy with its deepest foundations in anti-Cartesianism. His disdain for Cartesianism, exhibited most explicitly in the *Censura philosophiae cartesianae* and in the *Nouveaux mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Cartesianisme*, was also present in implicit forms in the *Demonstratio Evangelica*, the *Alnetanae quaestiones de concordia rationis et fidei*, and in the *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit humain*. Because Descartes figured so prominently in all of Huet's philosophical works, this chapter will investigate, in the context of the seventeenth-century phenomena, the philosophical origins of Huet's critique of Descartes.

Three main contemporary interpretations of Huet's skepticism attempt to address his combination of skepticism and anti-Cartesianism. The first interpretation, advanced by Christian Bartholmèss and Thomas Lennon, argues that Huet's fideistic skepticism was an intellectual position developed as a reaction to the rationalist confidence and the intellectual arrogance of the Cartesian philosophy. These scholars argue that Huet was not a sincere skeptic, but rather employed skeptical arguments as a method to defeat the philosophical positions of Descartes and his followers. The second explanation, advanced by Richard Popkin, suggests that Huet's skepticism preceded and served as the primary motivation for his anti-Cartesianism, thereby defining the essential arguments against Descartes. The third interpretation, offered by Alan Charles Kors, claims that while Huet was a sincere skeptic by the time he wrote the *Traité*, his skepticism arose as a reaction to the interminable theological debates between Cartesians and Aristotelians.

In opposition to these interpretations, Huet's actual intellectual development, discussed in the previous chapter, reveals that Huet's commitment to skepticism and his disdain for the Cartesian philosophy emerged almost simultaneously. While modern interpretations provide plausible explanations of Huet's intellectual positions, all of them envisage Huet distinctly either as a skeptic or as an anti-Cartesian, without adequately considering the possibility that both philosophical positions developed simultaneously, and, consequently, depended on and contributed to each other.

Huet's skepticism was both the cause and the result of his anti-Cartesianism. It is a cause to the extent that Huet's view of the human mind and of the human condition was entirely incompatible with the Cartesian confidence in the powers of human reason. It is clear that Huet considered himself a skeptic by 1660, while he formulated a treatise against Descartes in 1666.¹ However, Huet's skepticism was further informed by his crusade against Cartesianism. Huet perceived in Descartes a threat to the established philosophical and theological order, and he turned to skeptical arguments to defeat that threat. In using skepticism as a weapon against the Cartesians, Huet came to adapt its tenets in a way that could most effectively serve his purposes. Thus, while Huet's skepticism was directed at all dogmatic schools, it took specific issues with Cartesianism, which gave Huet's thought a truly unique nature.

This chapter will present the most essential disagreements between Huet's and Descartes's epistemological systems, in order to explain the intellectual stakes of the debate. It will then consider Huet's published and unpublished reactions to Cartesian thought and compare his implicit skeptical arguments in works prior to the *Traité* to the

¹ April Shelford, "Thinking Geometrically in Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Demonstratio Evangelica* (1679)" in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 no. 4 (2002), 606-609.

skeptical formulations of the *Traité* itself. Three elements of Huet's critique will receive particular attention: his assessment of Descartes's hyperbolic doubt; his refutation of the proposition *Cogito ergo sum*; and his view of the impossibility of establishing criteria of truth. This chapter will then consider Huet's reaction to Nicholas Malebranche (1638-1715), whom he perceived as one of the main disciples of Descartes. Finally, it will evaluate contemporary historical interpretations of the relationship between Huet's anti-Cartesianism and skepticism. Ultimately, this chapter will demonstrate that anti-Cartesianism and skepticism in Huet's philosophy are inseparable elements in the formation of his thought.

* * *

The most basic point of disagreement between Huet and Descartes arose in the epistemological contest between empiricism and rationalism. This divergence is crucial because it led the authors to conclusions about the powers of human reason that ultimately define Huet as a skeptic and Descartes as a dogmatist. While Descartes opposed the Aristotelian reliance on *a posteriori* reason and wanted to formulate an epistemology based on *a priori* rationalism, Huet accepted the Aristotelian reliance on empiricism. At the same time, Huet's empirical epistemology was tainted by an Augustinian view of fallen human nature, leading him to reject human ability to gain true and certain knowledge about the real world.

Although Augustinian philosophy is usually associated with a pessimistic view of the limits of natural knowledge and natural theology, it also widely appealed to the Cartesians who were drawn to and reinforced by its critique of sensory knowledge. The Cartesians maintained that pure intuitive reason, unhindered by the senses, remained a

guide to truth. Consequently, they attempted to discover the basic metaphysical truths by reason alone, without appealing to the fallen, bodily senses.² Thus, the Cartesians adapted Augustine's distrust of the senses to give authority to their own rationalist epistemology.

Descartes's first proof of God was the most obvious manifestation of an *a priori* argument in his philosophy:

Again, the idea that enables me to understand a supreme deity, eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, and creator of all things other than himself, clearly has more objective reality within it than do those ideas through which the finite substances are displayed.³

The Cartesian principle of objective reality stipulated that the existence of clear and distinct ideas of God and of substance in the mind necessitated their existence in the realm of objective reality. Descartes claimed that all human beings had a clear and distinct idea of God, defined as an infinite, perfect being. Since human mind was not infinite, it could not have autonomously formed an idea of an infinite being. Descartes concluded that an infinite being was the necessary source of this idea.⁴ In the second proof, he proposed that existence could "no more be separated from God's essence than...the idea of a valley can be separated from the idea of a mountain."⁵ Thus, Descartes's proofs of God operated outside of an empirical framework, relying entirely on the idea of God to demonstrate His necessary existence.

In the *Traité*, Huet claimed that Descartes had proposed three sources of ideas: ideas formed by sense experience; ideas formed in us; and innate ideas, among which are

² Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 300; and Henri Gouhier, *Cartésianisme et Augustinisme au XVIIe Siècle*, (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1978), 10.

³ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress, (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

the idea of God, ideas of geometrical principles, and ideas of essences.⁶ However, Huet sharply disagreed and claimed that if one carefully considered the nature of the human mind, one “will find no *Idea* therein that was not formed upon the *Species* of external *Objects*.”⁷ Huet affected the rare combination of a Thomistic view of epistemology and an Augustinian pessimism regarding the human inability to arrive at certain knowledge of the external world. Although Huet’s empiricism, as previously shown, should be attributed to his embrace of Epicureanism rather than to his scholastic education, he was, nevertheless, on the scholastic side of the debate. At the same time, Huet’s logical conclusions did not match those of the Aristotelian Scholastics. While most scholastics maintained a confidence in human reason despite the limits of empirical observation, Huet’s empiricism led him to reject systematically the possibility of human certainty.

For Huet, as evident in the *Traité*, this impossibility followed from the nature of the human mind. He argued that the human mind was “a Principle, or Power born in Man, moved or excited to form *Ideas*, and Thoughts, the Reception and Impression of *Species* in the Brain.”⁸ He further defined the truth of judgment as the “agreement between the *Idea* that is in us,” and “the external Object which is the Origin of that *Idea*.”⁹ However, since human beings could gain knowledge of the external object only through the medium of the idea, they could never know the actual nature of the external object. Consequently, it was impossible for man to verify if the idea and the object agree or correspond with each other. Since the existence of this agreement defined truth, in Huet’s view, it followed from the very definition of truth and from the epistemological limits of

⁶ Pierre-Daniel Huet, *An essay concerning the weakness of human understanding*, trans. Edw. Combe, (London: printed for Matthew de Varenne, 1725), 151-152.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

the fallen human mind that “man cannot know Truth with perfect certainty by the Aid of Reason.”¹⁰ Thus, by beginning with an epistemological foundation that most explicitly rejected *a priori* reason, Huet consistently arrived at the conclusion that most explicitly opposed the confidence in human reason proposed by Cartesian rationalism.

There were further consequences of this epistemological position that led Huet to formulate skeptical arguments against both Cartesianism and dogmatism. While Descartes buttressed his *a priori* epistemology by stressing the independence of the human mind, Huet attempted to disprove this notion in his critique of the Cartesian philosophy. Descartes perceived the mind to be of prior epistemological and logical importance to the body. Thus, in the *Meditations*, Descartes was careful to specify that the mind, not the body, was the first agent aware of its own existence. Having subjected the very existence of the body to doubt, Descartes postulated, “I am therefore precisely nothing but a thinking thing.”¹¹ Huet, on the other hand, defended the inseparability of the physical and non-physical aspects of thought. In the *Censura*, Huet designated an Epicurean interlocutor to press the Cartesian system on this point. The Epicurean argued that immaterial thought is an absurd concept, because without the body thought would not exist.¹² This discussion did not serve to advance any particular dogmatic assertions, but rather formulated a critique of Descartes’s view of an incorporeal mind.

The appropriation of patristic thought remained an important element in philosophical and theological debates of the seventeenth century. Thus, Huet meticulously sought to undermine the Augustinian foundations of Cartesian epistemology:

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹¹ Descartes, *Meditations*, 19.

¹² Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Against Cartesian Philosophy* [*Censura philosophiae Cartesianae*], ed., trans. Thomas M. Lennon, (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003), 138-139.

This and nothing else was meant by Augustine when he said that it is not the body that senses, but the soul by means of the body, meaning thereby in the way that a messenger forms in himself the message that he receives from elsewhere...since there is true vision when the body sees while the mind is distracted, and no vision when the mind sees while the body does not, it is evident that the body senses, not the soul.¹³

Huet's critique implied that Descartes was not only incorrect in the formulations of his epistemology and his view of the mind, but that he also misused Augustinian doctrines.

By interpreting Augustine on knowledge in a way that supported an empirical epistemology, Huet tried to invalidate doubly the Cartesian view of immaterial thought.

In the *Traité*, Huet presented further arguments to support the materiality of thought. He attempted to dispute the Cartesian notion that reason is immaterial, claiming, "'Tis a Maxim of the Philosopher Parmenides, that the Disposition of Man's Understanding depends on the Disposition of the parts of the Body."¹⁴ While in this instance Huet may appear to be a dogmatist, his arguments are of a purely critical nature. He did not seek to impose his own epistemological or ontological framework, but advanced claims that undermined Cartesian arguments.

However, the discussion of the corporeality of thought in the *Traité* moved beyond criticism and formulated explicitly skeptical conclusions. Huet did this by presenting the logical and physical consequences of the material nature of human thought. There were two particular proofs in the *Traité* that appealed to the materiality of thought in a way that undermined the confidence in the powers of human reason. In discussing the unreliability of the senses in his second proof, Huet suggested that physical differences in the brain, physical agitations of the body, and age were among factors that

¹³ Ibid., 146-147.

¹⁴ Huet, *An essay concerning the weakness of human understanding*, 31.

crucially affected human thought and human perception.¹⁵ Consequently, it was possible for the same person to perceive the external world differently depending on that person's physical condition. This argument strongly undermined the Cartesian reliance on reason as the criterion of certainty, suggesting that individual reason was not a suitable criterion of truth, given its mutability and its dependence on physical conditions.¹⁶

Similarly, the fifth proof regarding the weakness of human understanding suggested that "things cannot be known with perfect certainty" because there is a great difference in the perception from person to person.¹⁷ For instance, colors, shapes, and sizes may all appear different to different men. If all knowledge were founded on sensory experience and individual perception, there could be no objective standard by which the truth and certainty of knowledge could be judged. Thus, Huet quoted Euripides to conclude that "amongst Men Nothing is equal, nor alike, except the Names of things, but that Things themselves have Nothing in them permanent nor sure."¹⁸ Once again, Huet attacked the Cartesian notion of clear and distinct ideas, suggesting that ideas depended entirely on the subjective perception and the reason of individuals. In a world of subjective differences, no perspective could accurately claim to conceive of an objective reality.

¹⁵ Ibid., 30-32.

¹⁶ Incidentally, John Locke, who argued against the possibility of attaining ontological certainty, advanced a particularly controversial argument in favor of the materiality of thought. In 4.3.6 of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke suggested that arguing against the possibility of thinking matter had one impious consequence: it denied God the ability to create matter capable of thought. This proposition led to debates not only in Britain, but in France as well, where a number of learned journals such as the *Bibliothèque choisie*, *Bibliothèque raisonnée*, *Bibliothèque britannique*, and *Journal de Trévoux*. These debates took place contemporaneously with Huet's composition of the *Censura* and extended far beyond 1721 (the date of the publication of the *Traité*). The stakes of these disputes were not only philosophical, but theological, as they concerned the nature of the human soul and mind. For a further discussion of this topic see Yolton, John W., *Locke and French Materialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.) and Yolton, John W., *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

¹⁷ Ibid., 44-45.

¹⁸ Ibid., 45.

Both of these arguments in the *Traité* went far beyond critiques of Cartesian philosophy. Huet sought to not only undermine the Cartesian confidence in the powers of the mind, but to demonstrate that all dogmatic systems failed to overcome the inherent weaknesses of the human mind. Thus, he built on his arguments regarding the materiality of thought in the *Censura* and drew skeptical conclusions that were not visible in his earlier works. However, the evolution of Huet's expression of skeptical arguments did not always follow this pattern, and some of Huet's most significant skeptical assertions surfaced much earlier than would be expected from most historical commentary.

Huet's specific rejection of the Cartesian criterion of truth and his repudiation of all criteria both followed from his epistemology. The inspection and rejection of Descartes's criterion in the *Censura* clearly foreshadowed the conclusion of the *Traité*, where Huet claimed that God denied "a certain Rule of Truth" to human nature.¹⁹ In the *Censura*, Huet began by disparaging Descartes for both ambiguity in defining the criterion of truth and inconsistency in abiding by that criterion. For instance, Huet maintained that Descartes used the term "idea" not only to denote the images imprinted in our minds, but also to describe the operations of the mind, such as comparison and judgment.²⁰ At times, Descartes called upon the existence of clear and distinct ideas to provide certainty, but at other points he used the natural light as the criterion of judgment.

For Huet, the first criterion was easily called into question because not all true ideas were equally clear and distinct. Similarly, some false ideas could appear to be clear and distinct.²¹ Consequently, the clarity of the idea could not guarantee its truth. Huet also questioned the actual application of clear and distinct ideas. He suggested that from

¹⁹ Ibid., 49.

²⁰ BN Ms. Fr., 14702, fol. 16 verso.

²¹ Ibid.

the existence of disagreements among Cartesians, who all presumably appealed to the same criterion of truth, it followed that:

Either they perceive something clearly and distinctly that is false, from which it follows that clear and distinct perception is not a sure criterion of truth, or they do not adhere to this standard in examining their views, and thus they do not take it to be a sure and necessary standard.²²

Huet implicitly used the argument about differences in perception that exist even among Cartesians to attack the Cartesian notion of objective truth. Indeed, if the formulation of clear and distinct ideas guaranteed the truth, there would be no disagreement among those who follow this criterion. Huet similarly ridiculed the natural light as a criterion of truth by proposing the difficulty of distinguishing natural light, “the faculty of knowing given to us by God,” from non-natural light.²³ In Huet’s final analysis, clear and distinct ideas as well as the natural light were inadequate criteria of truth because they were both capable of deceiving the human mind.

Huet also questioned the very possibility of the existence of adequate criteria of truth:

If every truth, whether known through itself or through something else, must be signified by a character of truth distinguishing it from falsity, this character itself is also a truth that bears its own character of truth, that is, another truth, and so on to infinity.²⁴

This argument, voiced openly in the *Censura* and essentially taken from Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, presented the fundamental skeptical rejection of all criteria of truth. The phrasing of the argument in the *Censura* is almost identical to the text in the *Traité*:

Since the Criterium is the *Rule of Truth*; we must have adjusted this *Rule*, and be assured that it is right, before we apply it to Truth... Now we know not how to adjust it, nor be assured it is right, if we have another *Rule of Truth*, which is certainly true, and which

²² Huet, *Against Cartesian Philosophy*, 127.

²³ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

may serve to rectify the first. This second to be well rectified, must be regulated on a third, and this third on a fourth, and so to Infinity.²⁵

Huet, far from being a hidden skeptic, openly advanced the tenets of skepticism as early as 1689. So, perhaps, the critics of Huet's *Traité* who read the *Censura* should not have been taken aback by Huet's skepticism. Although Huet carefully framed most of his skeptical arguments in the *Censura* so as to distance himself from the label of skeptic, in this particular case he overtly donned the skeptical hat. This instance also demonstrates the extent to which the *Censura* and Huet's anti-Cartesianism influenced the formulation of his skepticism.

Descartes's and Huet's respective epistemologies led the thinkers to adopt drastically contrasting conclusions about the powers of human reason. However, there was another crucial element that followed from the difference in epistemology. Descartes began his *Meditations* with a hyperbolic doubt, but came to the most certain conclusions about the existence of the external world. Huet, on the other hand, framed his skeptical arguments in a way that doubt became the ultimate end of his philosophy. In fact, Huet's first chapter in the *Censura* attacked what he saw as Descartes's fallacious use of hyperbolic doubt from several perspectives.

Contemporaneous and contemporary interpretations of Cartesian doubt should be considered before Huet's own criticisms can be discussed. While this thesis does not aim to discern the true nature of Cartesian doubt, it is useful to review the spectrum of interpretations and criticisms of this doubt in order to situate Huet's own reactions to Descartes's method. A number of thinkers in the seventeenth century scrutinized the authenticity of the Cartesian doubt and considered it to be a dialectical method of refuting

²⁵ Huet, *An essay concerning the weakness of human understanding*, 53.

the skeptics to arrive at certitude. Indeed, Descartes's disciples sought to dispel any notion that Descartes was a real skeptic, describing his doubt as a provisional method for dispelling prejudices to arrive at scientific truths.²⁶ For instance, Pierre-Sylvain Regis (1637-1707) suggested that Descartes did not intend to speak of a true doubt.²⁷ This interpretation is also defended by modern scholars like Popkin, who interprets Descartes's hyperbolic doubt as a strategy to defeat skepticism on its own terms.²⁸

Popkin suggests that while Descartes did not intend to appear as a skeptic, the effects of his arguments certainly advanced the skeptical cause.²⁹ Indeed, philosophers such as Jacobus Guilielmus Feverlinus (1689-1766) chastised Descartes for being the moral cause of atheism and skepticism due to the inadequacy of his method.³⁰ Others went further and claimed that Cartesian doubt was an explicit profession of skepticism. Historian Carlo Borghero argues that the hyperbolic doubt proposed by Descartes went far beyond any skeptical arguments by denying the testimony of the senses, stressing the uncertainty of mathematics, and advancing the hypothesis of God-the-deceiver.

Revealingly, Huet's own reaction to the hyperbolic doubt advanced in the *Meditations* does not fall within these categories. Huet neither thought that Descartes feigned doubt nor perceived Descartes's involuntary support for skepticism. Instead, Huet believed that Descartes started out as a skeptic, but later created a fallacious dogmatic

²⁶ Carlo Borghero, "Cartesius scepticus Aspects de la querelle sur le scepticisme de Descartes dans la seconde moitié du XVII^e siècle" in *Le scepticisme au XVI^e et au XVII^e siècle: Le retour de philosophies antiques à l'Age classique, Tome II*, ed. Pierre-François Moreau, (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 394.

²⁷ Pierre-Sylvain Regis, *Réponse au livre qui a pour titre P. Danielis Huetii, Censura philosophiae cartesianae*, (Paris : J. Cusson, 1691), 3. « ...il n'a pas entendu parler d'un doute véritable. »

²⁸ Richard Henry Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: from Savonarola to Bayle*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 151.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 172

³⁰ Borghero, 398.

system.³¹ Huet's manuscript of the *Censura* reveals his surprise at Descartes's emergence from the state of hyperbolic doubt:

All of a sudden, this irresolute man, who wants one to doubt all things, changes in an instant and, without telling us that he is sure that God or some evil genie does not deceive us, he affirms with full confidence that he thinks that he exists. One more time I would like to know how this man, who does not know if God, in creating him, did not subject him to a world of perpetual illusions, [how this man] can be assured that he does not make a mistake when he believes that he is, that he thinks, that there are contradictory things.³²

To Huet, Descartes's leap from complete uncertainty to full confidence seemed entirely inconsistent with the latter's earlier doubts. How could someone who a moment ago was contemplating whether God was a deceiver, all of a sudden gain such certainty in the truth of his own thoughts? Huet considered this to be an erroneous logical leap, as Descartes "breaks faith and promise by assuming as true what is no less doubtful than other things that he considered to be treatable as false."³³ Essentially, Huet claimed that Descartes did not adequately escape the skeptical framework that he created at the outset of his *Meditations*.

Descartes's essential problem, for Huet, was in the principle *Cogito ergo sum* that lay the foundation of all Cartesian philosophy. After subjecting all acquired knowledge to doubt and distrusting all of his senses, the meditating voice of Descartes concludes that because he was able to persuade himself of the inexistence of the world within his meditation, he must exist since he is aware of the persuasion. When all else in the surrounding world is gone, including the body, thought continues to exist. Therefore,

³¹ Lennon, "Huet, Descartes and the Objection of Objections," in *Skepticism in Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Thought: New Interpretations*, eds. Neto and Popkin, (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2004), 124.

³² BN Ms. Fr., 14702, fol. 9 verso. « tout d'un coup cet homme irresolu, qui veut qu'on doute de tout change dans un instant, & sans nous dire qui peut sauoir assuré que Dieu ou quelque mechant genie ne l'abuse point, il a affirme en homme pleinement convaincu qu'il pense ce qu'il est. . .Encore une fois je voudrais voudrois bien savoir comment cet homme qui ne sait si Dieu en le creant ne l'a point destiné à des illusions perpetuelles peut estre assuré qu'il ne se trompe point quand il croit, qu'il est, qu'il pense, qu'il y a des choses contradictoires. »

³³ Huet, *Against Cartesian Philosophy*, 74.

thought and an agent that thinks [a thinking thing] must exist. Descartes is aware of his thinking process, and by virtue of that awareness he concludes that he exists.³⁴ Thus, for Descartes, both the awareness of one's own existence and the reflection upon that existence guarantee that existence.

For Huet, the most significant fault of the *Cogito ergo sum* principle was that it engaged in circular reasoning. "This argument reduces to that of Chrysippus...If I exist, I exist; or, I am, therefore I am. I thereby assume that I am in order to prove that I am, and I argue in a vicious circle."³⁵ Descartes's use of "I" in the clause "I am a thinking thing" already implies existence of the subject. Huet argued that the proposition "I exist" does not follow from the premise "I am a thinking thing."³⁶ Thinking in no way implies existence, if existence itself is subjected to doubt. Thus, Huet blamed Descartes for engaging in circular reasoning because Descartes assumed that he exists in order to prove that he exists.

Furthermore, the very grammar of Descartes's proposition made no logical sense to Huet, who distinguished between three things in considering the proposition "I am thinking:" the mind that is thinking, the action of thinking, and the object of the thought.³⁷ In his manuscript of the *Censura*, Huet proposed to subject the proposition "I am thinking, therefore I am" to such a division into parts:

When he states "I think," what is the object of which his mind thinks? It could only be his thought. Yet, this thought about which he reflects, is not the one which he forms in thinking of it;...One must say: "I think that I was thinking," since our mind cannot think of more than one object [in a given moment], any more than our eyes can perceive more than one thing at a time. This is why when I think that I think, this necessarily supposes

³⁴ Descartes, *Meditations*, 18-19.

³⁵ Huet, *Censura*, 72.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

two thoughts, where one reflects on the other, the latter [thought reflects] on the former one, the present [thought reflects] on the past one.³⁸

Huet deconstructed Descartes's ambiguous use of "I am thinking" in order to show that even if thought did guarantee existence, it could not do so without reference to the past. Such a reference to the past, however, destroyed the momentous realization of one's existence on which the *Cogito* principle depended. Aiming for the jugular, Huet sought to destroy the principle on which Cartesian doubt was abandoned and to plunge the Cartesians back into their own net of uncertainty.

Nor did Huet wish to entertain seriously the Cartesian claim that Descartes only feigned his doubt:

I respond that what Descartes thought about his existence is not an issue between us, but rather whether he undertook to question and prove his existence, and whether, having done so, he satisfactorily did so through argument and reasoning.³⁹

Huet explicitly refused to speculate about the sincerity of Cartesian doubt. Instead, he wished to demonstrate that the leap from skepticism to dogmatism was inadequately justified, because "if our existence were known to us by itself why were Democritus and the Academics in doubt about their own?"⁴⁰ Thus, Huet argued that whether or not Descartes's doubt about his own existence was feigned or sincere, his departure from that doubt was not supported by adequate arguments.

Huet's frustration with Descartes becomes apparent when he writes, "But he [Descartes] left off doubting just when it was most necessary to doubt, namely, at a

³⁸ BN Ms. Fr., 14702, fol. 6. « Quand il dit je pense, quel est l'objet, a qouy son ame pense ? Ce ne peut estre que sa pensée. Or cette pensée, sur laquelle il reflichit, n'est pas celle qu'il forme en y pensant ; ... Il faut dire, je pense que j'ay pensé ; puisque notre ame ne sauroit non plus que nos yeux regarder en mesme temps qu'une seule chose. C'est pourquoy quand je pense que je pense, cela suppose necessairement deux pensées, dont l'une reflechit sur l'autre, la derniere sur la premiere, la pensée presente sur la pensée passée. »

³⁹ Huet, *Against Cartesian Philosophy*, 97.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

principle that is no less uncertain than all the other that he subjected to doubt.”⁴¹ Huet added in his manuscript: “He [Descartes] does not begin to err until the moment when he separates himself from the skeptics.”⁴² While at the time of the publication of the *Censura* Huet did not hold the reputation of a skeptic, this lament certainly revealed his appreciation for the skeptical use of doubt.

Later in the *Censura*, Huet entirely rejected the feign hypothesis and argued that for Descartes, doubt was authentically skeptical in its beginning stages:

For when they [Cartesians] say that Descartes only feigned doubt but that the skeptics really doubted, I agree with the latter but find the former unsupported by any argument. For by what mark can the feigned doubt of Descartes be distinguished from the real doubt of the skeptics? The skeptics philosophize in the same way as does Descartes: they each search after truth, they each avoid error, they each think that error is avoided through doubt, which they each therefore advocate.⁴³

Huet’s attitude supports Lennon’s interpretation. Huet really did consider that Descartes began his *Meditations* as a sincere skeptic and then committed an intellectually dishonest leap from doubt to certainty.⁴⁴ Huet seemed to express a certain amount of enthusiasm for the similarity between Descartes and the skeptics, thereby revealing his own predilection for skeptical philosophy.

At the same time, Huet argued that Descartes and the Cartesians inherently misunderstood the skeptics and their reasons for doubt. The skeptics, unlike Descartes, continued to suspend their judgment “because nothing seemed to them capable of being perceived with sufficient clarity or certainty.”⁴⁵ Huet deflected the Cartesian accusation that all skeptics doubt simply in order to doubt, and explicitly offered the explanation

⁴¹ Ibid., 110.

⁴² BN Ms. Fr., 14702, fol. 13. « puis qu’il ne commence proprement a errer du moment qu’il se separe des Sceptiques. »

⁴³ Huet, *Against Cartesian Philosophy*, 112.

⁴⁴ Lennon, “Huet, Descartes and the Objection of Objections,” 135.

⁴⁵ Huet, *Against Cartesian Philosophy*, 110.

from Sextus Empiricus: “The Cartesians should indeed know that the ultimate goal of the skeptical philosophy is not doubt but tranquility in those things that depend on opinion.”⁴⁶ In this statement, Huet both scolded the Cartesians for their ignorance of ancient philosophy and furtively defended the tenets of skepticism against misinterpretation.

Huet expanded on the skeptical reasons for doubt in the *Traité*, suggesting that the suspension of judgment has both an immediate goal and a remote end. The former goal consisted in “avoiding Error, Obstinacy, and Arrogance.” The latter goal, in Huet’s fideistic view, prepared the mind for the “Reception of the divine Faith.”⁴⁷ Huet’s fideism and the ultimate end of his skeptical doubt will be discussed further in the next chapter; here the immediate goals of doubt require closer scrutiny.

A typical skeptic would normally attribute the existence of inherent philosophical errors to any dogmatic system. Huet’s use of the words “obstinacy” and “arrogance,” on the other hand, seems to single out Cartesianism. While Huet clearly disagreed with Descartes’s conclusions, he also perceived the Cartesians as an arrogant and presumptuous sect.

Huet’s most essential criticism is that “Descartes, caught in an obvious contradiction and inconsistency of views, abandons his previous doubt and, misusing its advantages to the benefit of his philosophy, he pretends to pretend.”⁴⁸ For Huet, Descartes did not feign doubt, but rather pretended to pretend to doubt, and only feigned his escape from the hyperbolic doubt. Thus, Huet perceived that the entire Cartesian system was based on intellectual dishonesty, as it pretended to escape an inexorable state

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Huet, *An essay concerning the weakness of human understanding*, 163.

⁴⁸ Huet, *Against Cartesian Philosophy* 112.

of doubt. Huet recognized Cartesianism not only as dogmatism, but as a dogmatism that is aware of its inherent falsity: Descartes was conscious of the fact that his dogmatic system did not rest upon solid ground, yet he dissimulated this awareness by pretending to be entirely confident of the foundations of his philosophy. It is this perceived vanity, arrogance, and pretension in the philosophy of Descartes that most offended Huet.

Huet perceived a duplicitous calculation in the feigned ignorance of Descartes. He dedicated the last part of his conclusion to the *Censura* to explaining this calculation. For Huet, Descartes falsely claimed to be unfamiliar with ancient philosophy in order to appear to his audience as a novel philosopher, while appropriating and disguising arguments from ancient philosophies. Huet identified the horrific consequence of this claim, arguing that Descartes's disciples genuinely followed these principles and neglected both literature and philological scholarship, pursuits dear to Huet.⁴⁹ Thus, he sought to deny his opponent any originality by meticulously pointing out each instance where Descartes appropriated previously formulated philosophical arguments. For instance, Huet claimed that the proposition of beginning all philosophy with doubt has been advanced by the skeptics, by Aristotle, and by Augustine. Similarly, the argument "I am thinking, therefore I exist" has been employed by Augustine in *The City of God*.⁵⁰ Huet thus argued that most of Descartes's arguments have been essentially plagiarized and present no philosophical novelty.

Although the Aristotelian Scholastics could just as easily be classified as dogmatists, there are several reasons why Huet did not attack them openly. First, many of Huet's friends and colleagues happened to be Aristotelians. An open censure of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 214-215.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 218.

Aristotelian Scholasticism would have entailed political suicide for Huet, ending his career. Thus, Descartes was the most convenient target. Second, although Aristotelian Scholasticism remained entrenched in the universities, Cartesianism continued to make a bold advance in French intellectual life. Third, Descartes's belief in the existence of innate knowledge and his epistemological commitment to rationalism and to *a priori* reasoning made him the most obvious opponent. Fourth, the pretension Huet perceived in the confidence of the Cartesians made their sect a clear target for a philosopher attempting to defeat the presumption of the dogmatists.

Nicholas Malebranche, who was the best-known disciple of the Cartesian school, received a similar reaction from Huet after publishing the *De la recherche de la vérité* (*Concerning the Search after Truth*) in 1674. Huet's own copy of the work, available at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, contains a page of comments on the inside of the cover. After giving the work cursory praise for its acuteness, discernment, reflection, and eloquence, Huet commenced an entire page of criticism: "But all of this is corrupted by excessive presumption, pride, and impudence."⁵¹

Lennon gives a great deal of attention to Huet's reception of Malebranche's work. In fact, he argues that the "pride, vanity, and arrogance" Huet perceived in Malebranche's *De la recherche de la Vérité* gave birth to his anti-Cartesianism.⁵² Lennon claims that Huet employed skepticism as a tactic against Descartes and his followers. Lennon specifically refers to the "skeptical ridicule" of the *Nouveaux mémoires*, which he argues

⁵¹ Huet's marginal note inside the front cover of Nicolas Malebranche, *De la recherché de la vérité*, (Paris, Chez Andre Pralard, 1674). « Mais tout cela est corrompu par trop de presomtion, de fierté & de hardiesse. »

⁵² Lennon, "Huet, Malebranche and the Birth of Skepticism," in *The Return of Skepticism: From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle*, ed. Gianni Paganini, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 154.

was written as a deserving response to the “pride, vanity, and arrogance” of Cartesian dogmatism.⁵³

Lennon’s interpretation of “pride, vanity, and arrogance” is problematic because he believes that Huet was most deeply offended by the Cartesian ridicule and dismissal of all humanist disciplines, such as history, geography, philology. Consequently, Lennon argues that the production of Huet’s *Censura* was spurred by a bitter personal animosity towards the Cartesian disdain for the humanist tradition. In other words, the conflict between Huet and Descartes was an interdisciplinary quarrel, as the reputation and the relevance of entire intellectual fields are at stake. This interpretation is very similar to one advanced by nineteenth-century historian Christian Bartholmèss, who also argues that Huet was motivated by “the unjust disdain of that philosopher [Descartes] for memories, languages, traditions, for all that with which the historian occupies himself.”⁵⁴ Like Lennon, Bartholmèss interprets Huet’s aversion to skepticism as a personal animosity and argues that skepticism was more of a means than an end for Huet.⁵⁵

Although these arguments seem cogent, they exaggerate the importance of Huet’s personal animosity toward the Cartesian disdain for the humanities. Thus, the scholars suggest that Huet’s entire rejection of Cartesianism was motivated by interdisciplinary insults. Shelford, however, argues that Huet sought to settle the interdisciplinary quarrel as early as 1679, when he published the *Demonstratio Evangelica*. She suggests that in writing the work, Huet accepted the Cartesian challenge of providing demonstrative proof

⁵³ Ibid., 159.

⁵⁴ Christian Bartholmèss, *Huet évêque d’Avranches ou le scepticisme théologique*, (Paris: Franck, 1850), 4. « l’injuste dédain de ce philosophe [Descartes] pour les souvenirs, les langues, les traditions, pour tout ce qui occupe l’historien. »

⁵⁵ Ibid., 117.

of the Christian religion and sought to equate demonstrative proofs with moral ones.⁵⁶ In undertaking this challenge, Huet began by subjecting all geometric principles to intense scrutiny. This was a way of undermining Cartesian criteria by challenging a discipline that the Cartesians regarded as one that led to greatest certainty. Shelford claims that Huet's critique of geometrical demonstrations and axioms for their lack of clarity in definitions of terms, such as line, point, and extension was modeled on Sextus Empiricus' *Against the Geometers*.⁵⁷ Having concluded this critique, Huet proceeded to provide a proof of the Christian religion employing a "geometrized" account of prophecies and their fulfillments.⁵⁸

Ultimately, Huet aimed to show that historical or moral demonstrations contained as much certainty as geometrical ones, and that geometric definitions were not as clear as they appeared to be.⁵⁹ In fact, Huet suggested that where the demonstration of the truth of the Christian religion was concerned, historical criteria based on divine Scripture were both clearer than and superior to geometric definitions in validating the truth of the Christian religion.⁶⁰ Thus, Huet the humanist attempted to show that philology, Biblical exegesis, and history were far more relevant to interpreting the truth of the Scriptures than abstract metaphysical formulations.

Such a rebuttal of both Descartes's and Malebranche's ridicule of the humanities seems like an adequate expression of the humanist bitterness toward the arrogance of the geometrizing Cartesians described by Lennon. Lennon correctly indicates that the *Nouveaux mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Cartesianisme* can be interpreted as a

⁵⁶ Shelford, "Thinking Geometrically in Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Demonstratio Evangelica* (1679)," 607.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 611.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 614.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 612.

⁶⁰ Huet, *Demonstratio Evangelica*, (Amsterdam: Janssonio-Waesbergios, 1680), 4.

ridicule in response to the “pride, arrogance, and vanity” of the Cartesian philosophy.⁶¹ However, he goes further to suggest that Huet’s personal bitterness “gave birth to the *Censura*.”⁶²

Such an interpretation inherently exaggerates the role of Huet’s personal resentment against the Cartesians in the formation of the *Censura*. After all, the *Censura* is a deeply philosophical work that is addressed to learned audience, as it is first published in Latin. Huet engaged in meticulous refutations that involved arcane terminology and assumed that his audience was cognizant of the references to ancient philosophers. On the other hand, the *Nouveaux mémoires* was published solely in French and addressed a more popular audience, given its satirical genre. Thus, while the *Demonstratio Evangelica* defended the stature of the humanities among the learned audiences, the *Nouveaux mémoires* served as a popular ridicule of Cartesianism. Unlike these works, the *Censura* focused on presenting the main philosophical weaknesses of the Cartesian system and defeating the Cartesians in purely philosophical terms.

Another problem with Lennon’s interpretation is its chronological inaccuracy. Lennon argues in two separate articles that Huet’s rejection of Cartesianism can be dated to 1674, when he read Malebranche’s *Recherche* for the first time.⁶³ However, Huet’s correspondence indicates that he first contemplated composing a treatise against Cartesian philosophy as early as 1666.⁶⁴ Furthermore, it has already been established that Huet’s interactions with Cormis and his subsequent commitment to skepticism took place

⁶¹ Lennon, “Huet, Malebranche and the Birth of Skepticism,” 159.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 154.

⁶³ *Ibid.*; and Lennon, “Foucher, Huet, and the Downfall of Cartesianism,” in *Cartesian Views: Papers presented to Richard A. Watson*, ed. Lennon, (Boston: Brill, 2003), 121.

⁶⁴ BN Ms. Lat., 11432, fol. 143, Prid. Cal. Dec. 1666, Huet to Rapin. (Quoted and translated in Shelford, “Thinking Geometrically in Pierre-Daniel Huet’s *Demonstratio Evangelica* (1679),” 606). See the previous chapter for the contents of this letter.

around 1660.⁶⁵ Thus, while Malebranche's work may have further embittered Huet, his intellectual criticisms would have already been formulated.

By failing to date Huet's intellectual commitment skepticism accurately, Lennon fails to acknowledge a progression in Huet's increasingly explicit exposition of skepticism. In the *Demonstratio Evangelica* Huet modeled his refutation of geometric certainty on Sextus Empiricus, thereby subtly advancing a skeptical influence under the veil of humanism. By the time of the *Censura*, Huet's skepticism became more apparent in the arguments about the criterion of truth and in the defense of the skeptical causes of doubt. The *Alnetanae quaestiones de concordia rationis et fidei*, which will be more extensively discussed in the following chapter, exposed the fideistic side of Huet's skepticism. In this text, Huet sought to establish a hierarchy between faith and reason, whereby reason would become subjected to faith and would refrain from infringing upon its domain in all theological questions. While reason would maintain an autonomous ability to philosophize, its utility was deeply questioned.

Bartholmèss's and Lennon's neglect of the correspondence also leads them to reject the sincerity of Huet's skepticism. Bartholomèss refuses to acknowledge Huet as a skeptic, instead classifying Huet as a Christian dogmatist who employs skepticism to preserve the faith.⁶⁶ Although Lennon's interpretation is not so categorical, he does not accurately analyze the skepticism inherent in Huet's critique of Descartes. By concluding his article on Malebranche and Huet with a cursory mention of Huet's "skeptical ridicule" Lennon neglects to describe the process by which Huet's aversion to

⁶⁵ Bartholmèss, 51; and BN Ms. Lat., 11432, fol. 101-102 Huet to Mambrun, 16 November 1660. (Quoted and translated in Shelford, "Thinking Geometrically in Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Demonstratio Evangelica* (1679)," 609).

⁶⁶ Bartholmèss, 132 and 173.

Cartesianism drove him to formulate skeptical arguments.⁶⁷ Bartholmèss goes deeper than Lennon in analyzing Huet's skepticism as a tactic, claiming that skepticism's main force was the negative dialectic that reduced all Cartesian arguments to absurdity.⁶⁸ However, by refusing to consider Huet as a sincere skeptic, Lennon and Bartholmèss seem to disregard the philosophical stakes of the argument between the skeptics and the Cartesians.

Given the inadequacy of these interpretations, the combination of "pride, vanity, and arrogance" ["presumption, "pride," and "impudence" are the words used by Huet] could be interpreted as a criticism that goes much deeper than personal animosity. Huet's aversion to Descartes's clever dissimulation of doubt certainly comes to mind. Consider the following part of the commentary:

His meditations, instead of curing his prejudices and arming him against verisimilitudes according to his own precepts, made him take up extravagant visions, mad conjectures, and suppositions much more uncertain than those he fought against.⁶⁹

Unlike Descartes, Malebranche did not even attempt to suspend his judgment and remove his prejudices. However, in Huet's view, Malebranche emulated Descartes in having constructed an absolutely false system based on the most uncertain principles. The obvious weakness of Malebranche's and Descartes's principles doubly offended Huet by combining presumption with the awareness of error. Both were, for Huet, authors of imaginary dogmatic systems that affronted reason by their obvious fallacies.

Contrary to Lennon's argument, Huet's condemnation of Descartes and Malebranche went beyond personal animosity. Although Huet was offended by the

⁶⁷ Lennon, "Huet, Malebranche and the Birth of Skepticism," 159 and 154.

⁶⁸ Bartholmèss, 67.

⁶⁹ Huet's marginal note inside the front cover of Nicolas Malebranche, *De la recherché de la vérité*, (Paris, Chez Andre Pralard, 1674). « Ses meditations, au lieu de le guerir de ses prejugez, et l'armer contre les vraysemblances selon le precepte de Des Cartes, luy on fait prendre des visions extravagantes, des conjectures folles, & des suppositions bien plus incertaines q[ue] celles qu'il combat. »

Cartesian ridicule of the humanities, it would seem strange that he would dedicate the *Censura*, the *Nouveaux mémoires*, the *Traité*, and arguably the *Demonstratio Evangelica* along with the *Alnetanae quaestiones* to repudiating Cartesian principles. Rather, his aversion to Cartesianism stemmed from deep theological and philosophical disagreements.

Kors offers another interpretation of Huet's anti-Cartesianism and skepticism. He gives particular attention to Huet's early commitment to Cartesianism and offers the view that Huet's "fall from Cartesian certainty began an odyssey that ended in fideism."⁷⁰ Such an interpretation fails to acknowledge Huet's early embrace of skepticism because it suggests that Huet rejected Cartesianism significantly before embracing skepticism. Although Kors's interpretation does not accurately date Huet's skepticism, it provides an original interpretation of the tension between reason and faith. Kors claims that Huet's position was, in a way, an intellectual retreat from the ferocity of the religious debates of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁷¹ He suggests that while Huet was not initially averse to dogmatism, his participation in the endless sequence of proofs and disputations of proofs of the existence of God led him to reject the very possibility of rationally proving the existence of God. The appeal of fideistic skepticism lay in its ability to peacefully resolve the disputes about the existence of God without an engaging in an inexorable cycle of proofs, objections, and objections to objections, ad infinitum.

Although Bartholmèss does not qualify Huet as a skeptic, he nevertheless perceives the seemingly logical progression from Huet's earlier works to the *Traité*. He suggests that Huet's skeptical oeuvre was nothing but an extreme consequence and frank

⁷⁰ Kors, 341.

⁷¹ Ibid., 376.

application of explicit and implicit principles, proposed in his earlier works.⁷² He sees great similarity between the structure, the narrative frame, and the arguments of the *Alnetanae quaestiones* and the *Traité*. Bartholmèss points out that in both works Huet aimed to destabilize reliance on reason as a means to certitude. He argues that the common goal of both works was to preserve the faith and the revealed dogma by reducing the human reliance of reason, thereby rendering Christian dogma the only source of certainty.⁷³

In describing the consequences of the Cartesian philosophical revolution, Popkin argues that the “application of Cartesian methodology and the Cartesian standard of true philosophical and scientific knowledge to the evaluation of religious knowledge” was perhaps the major factor in the development of irreligion in the seventeenth century.⁷⁴ He then describes a subsequent rejection of the Cartesian principles by those who wished to preserve Biblical texts from being evaluated by the Cartesian standards. Huet’s categorical rejection of Descartes’s rationalist methods and aims certainly seems to fit this description.

Consider Huet’s own view of how Descartes’s intellectual presumption enervated religious authority:

Descartes yet had such confidence in his views that he declared that nothing should be accepted as true that was not clearer and more certain than the demonstrations of geometers, that his views were so evident and certain that they would, if properly understood, remove all ground for dispute, and finally that the things of nature could spring from no other causes than those proposed by him...And this presumptuousness of Descartes has led the Cartesians into such unbridled and precipitate temerity that no one from this grandiloquent sect blushes to write that whatever they know must be true.⁷⁵

⁷² Bartholmèss, 50.

⁷³ Ibid., 55 and 70.

⁷⁴ Popkin, “Cartesianism and Biblical Criticism,” in *Problems in Cartesianism*, ed. Lennon et al. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1982), 61-62.

⁷⁵ Huet, *Against Cartesian Philosophy*, 133-134.

Descartes and the Cartesians represented, for Huet, the ultimate expression of dogmatism in his age. The confidence with which Descartes advanced his views deified him and rendered him an infallible authority in all matters philosophical and theological. In fact, Descartes had such audacity that “he dared to compare the truth of his opinions with the truth of the dogmas of the faith, asserting that they necessarily agree with each other, and that those argued for by him in philosophy cannot be contrary to those of theology unless theology contradicts the light of reason.”⁷⁶ Thus, for Huet, Descartes not only presented an erroneous doctrine, but had the impudence to compare its certainty to divine sources of knowledge.

This comment is crucial because it clearly reveals Huet’s own perception of the stakes of the debate. If Descartes were able to erect a philosophical system that dictated certain knowledge claiming that the intellectual certainty of his principles are equivalent to those of divine revelation, then he would inherently undermine the principles of the faith. Huet took all human certainty to be far below the level of divine certainty.⁷⁷ Thus, even if human certainty were attainable by reason, it would only faintly resemble divine truth and would most certainly never contradict it.⁷⁸ To suggest, as Descartes does, that the relationship was reversed, that the principles of divine theology should be subjected to the standard of human reason was pure and simple heresy, in Huet’s view.

* * *

Herein lies the birth of Huet’s skepticism. Huet was able to perceive the withering away of established philosophical and theological authorities in light of fierce intellectual debates. These debates inherently enervated the intellectual stability that has so far been

⁷⁶ Ibid., 200.

⁷⁷ Huet, *An essay concerning the weakness of human understanding*, 219.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 8.

provided by incontestable intellectual authorities. Perhaps Huet was able to foresee the irreparable damage that philosophical and theological contests for intellectual authority would bring to the stability of religious traditions in the Enlightenment. Thus, Huet's aim was to defend the faith against the onslaught of rational critiques of revealed truths. The strategy consisted in defeating the intellectual confidence of dogmatists like Descartes by stressing the fallibility of human reason.

As will be shown in the following chapter, Huet's fideism was responsible for the formation of his philosophical skepticism. In arguing that skeptical philosophy was most effective in leading people to agree to the truths of Christianity, Huet revealed his understanding of the potential danger of submitting revealed truths to the undiscerning examination of reason. When faced with the extreme dogmatism of Descartes, Huet had to undermine the rationalist effort. Consequently, he began to formulate a more refined version of skepticism that combined a pessimistic view of the abilities of human understanding with an unshakeable faith in the truth of the Christian doctrine. Thus, while the rejection of Cartesian principles may not be the root cause of Huet's skepticism, the audacity he perceived in Descartes and his disciples certainly radicalized Huet's own perspectives.

Chapter 3: “It Is Certain Because It Is Impossible”

Having considered Pierre-Daniel Huet’s biographical and philosophical motivations for adopting philosophical skepticism, the thesis will now turn to the religious dimension of Huet’s thought, which, as will be demonstrated, was the most crucial factor in the formation of his skepticism. Huet’s skepticism developed as a defense against the rationalist revolution of his age that threatened to challenge all supernatural theological doctrines with an indiscriminate appeal to naturalistic logical explanations. Consequently, Huet denounced the powers of reason and argued that the human mind was weak in order to convince his audience that there was only one source of true and certain knowledge: faith in supernatural revelation. Huet’s skepticism was, above all, religious in its nature and purpose. While this may seem an idiosyncratic position, Huet’s skeptical fideism was, in fact, neither singular nor surprising, and, in context, Huet’s seemingly contradictory positions, from critic of Descartes to the author of the *Traité*, were essentially consistent.

To demonstrate this consistency and continuity, this chapter will show how Huet’s *Alnetanae quaestiones de concordia rationis et fidei* presents the logical link between his anti-Cartesianism and his skepticism. While the *Censura* explicitly refuted the tenets of one particular philosophical system, it implicitly denounced the presumption of reason. The *Quaestiones*, in turn, relegated reason to a concomitant position with respect to faith. Finally, the *Traité* struck the lethal blow to the foundations of reason, demonstrating its utter inability to know anything with certainty.

* * *

To understand the context in which the fideistic movement became appealing in seventeenth-century France, we must look back a century and a half to the Lateran Council of 1513. Prior to this council, some of the major axioms of Christianity, such as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, were considered as preambles to, rather than articles of, the faith. A group of Italian philosophers, known as the Paduan Averroists, claimed that neither the existence of God nor the immortality of the soul could be demonstrated by natural human reason; for them, faith was the sole source of such knowledge.¹ The arguments at stake concerned neither the actual existence of God nor the immortality of the soul, but rather the human ability to know such things with certainty by the use of natural reason.

In response to such potentially dangerous claims, the Fifth Lateran Council declared the existence of God and the immortality of the soul to be naturally demonstrable, which made it an article of the faith that such natural demonstrations were compelling. The fifth session of the Council, in effect, made fideism on such issues heretical:

And since truth cannot contradict truth, we define that every statement contrary to the enlightened truth of the faith is totally false and we strictly forbid teaching otherwise to be permitted. We decree that all those who cling to erroneous statements of this kind, thus sowing heresies which are wholly condemned, should be avoided in every way and punished as detestable and odious heretics and infidels who are undermining the catholic faith.²

¹ The Latin term “quod Deum esse demonstrari non potest, sed sola fide tenetur.” For more on the Paduan Averroists, see Paul Friedrich Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 286.

² Transcript of the Fifth Lateran Council, 8th Session, 19 December 1513, “Condemnation of every proposition contrary to the truth of the enlightened Christian faith,” <http://www.piar.hu/councils/ecum18.htm> (4 Jan. 2007); See also Charles-Joseph Hefele, ed., *Histoire des Conciles d'après les documents originaux*, tome VIII, première partie, trans. J. Cardinal Gergenroether, (Paris: Librairie Letouzet et Ané, 1917) 420-422.

The Council further restricted philosophers from deviating in any way “from the true faith” in any principles or conclusions they present to the public. Furthermore, all philosophers were obligated to “devote their every effort to clarify for their listeners the truth of the Christian religion.”³ Finally, the Council sought to undermine future challenges to the authority of the Church, by limiting the study of philosophy to five years and allowing scholars to pursue further study of philosophy only if they simultaneously studied theology.

The intention of this decision was to prevent any possible challenges to the orthodox positions of the Catholic Church. While the Council intended to reduce the controversy and debates surrounding the articles of Christianity, its decrees inadvertently generated an increasingly heated series of debates. For if the existence of God were demonstrable by natural human reason, then there could be “no greater task in philosophy than assiduously to seek out, once for all, the best of all these arguments and to lay them out so precisely and plainly that, henceforth all will take them to be true and precise demonstrations.”⁴

This latter passage is taken from René Descartes’s letter to the Faculty of Theology in Paris more than a century later. Written as a dedication to his *Meditations*, this letter identified the unintended consequences of the Lateran Council. If philosophers could not dispute the veracity of Church doctrines, they would debate the best ways of demonstrating the accuracy of those doctrines.

Thus, the intellectual world of seventeenth-century France was plunged into an inexorable series of debates about and demonstrations of the existence of God. The

³ Ibid.

⁴ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress, (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 2.

Aristotelian Scholastics, who generally referred to St. Thomas Aquinas's five traditional proofs, stood on one side of the debate. The first proof, from motion, claimed that the existence of motion in the universe indicated the necessary existence of a First Mover. The second proof claimed that the "sequence of dependent cause and effect" in the surrounding world, necessitated the existence of a First Cause. The third proof argued that the contingency of all living things required the existence of a Necessary Being. The fourth proof, from degrees of perfection, advanced that from the degrees of perfection in finite things, the existence of a Supremely Perfect being could be inferred. Finally, the fifth proof argued that the order and harmony of the world demonstrated the existence of a Benevolent and Providential Being, who governed the world.⁵

All of the Aristotelian proofs in their Thomistic form applied to *a posteriori* demonstration, since they relied on observations about the external world and from these observations inferred the existence of God. Thus, the Aristotelian Scholastics were committed to an empirical epistemology, believing that "nothing entered the mind except by way of the senses."⁶ The Cartesian proofs stood in direct opposition to and challenged the Scholastic epistemology, attempting to demonstrate the existence of God *a priori*, without reference to evidence beyond the mind itself.

Descartes based his first proof of God on the fact that he possessed a clear and distinct *idea* of a "supreme deity, eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, and creator of all things."⁷ He argued that an idea of an infinite being had to possess more objective reality than ideas of finite substances. There could not be more objective being in an idea

⁵ For a more thorough discussion, see Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), 298-299.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁷ Descartes, *Meditations*, 27-28.

than in its cause. “Hence it follows that something cannot come into being out of nothing, and also that what is more perfect...cannot come into being from what is less perfect.”⁸ Since the idea of God was infinite, but man’s mind merely finite, Descartes concluded that there could be no other source of the idea of God than “a certain substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent and supremely powerful, and that created me along with everything else that exists.”⁹ Descartes’s first proof God was entirely *a priori*, since it did not refer to any empirical evidence outside the mind. Consequently, this knowledge was, according to Descartes, innate in all human beings.¹⁰

Descartes’s second proof relied on his view of the nature of ideas. If one could form a clear and distinct idea of something in the mind, it followed that one could clearly and distinctly perceive all the things that belonged to that idea. For instance, one could only conceive of a unicorn as having one horn and of a triangle as having three angles. Since the idea of God was of a supremely perfect being, He must have all the attributes of perfection, including necessary existence. Descartes claimed that if the property of existence were removed from the idea of God, then He would no longer be perfect. Thus, “from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and for this reason he really exists.”¹¹ The non-existence of a perfect being was a logical impossibility, a self-contradiction.

For the Cartesians, Descartes’s proofs were convincing because they did not rely on man’s feeble senses, but, rather, deduced the existence of God from first principles.¹² The Scholastics, on the other hand, considered Cartesian proofs as “dangerous for their

⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰ Ibid., 34.

¹¹ Ibid., 44.

¹² Kors, 299.

weakness” and argued that Descartes had relied on misguided epistemological methods.¹³ Both philosophical schools continued to devise their own demonstrations, while refuting their opponents. What was at stake was not so much the existence of God as the battle for supremacy in the learned world. A philosophical system’s ability to demonstrate irrefutably the existence of God would ensure its superiority in the intellectual world of seventeenth-century France. Ironically, each school’s inability to present a conclusive proof coupled with an unwillingness to surrender to its opponents perpetuated debates regarding the existence of God into the eighteenth century, compounding refutation upon refutation, objection upon objection.

Huet’s *Censura* presents one such set of refutations of Descartes’s two proofs of God. In the manuscript version of the *Censura*, Huet wrote that he planned to “examine Descartes’ argument, or to better say, joke, concerning the existence of God.”¹⁴ Huet’s refutation identified Descartes’s proof as insincere, but treated the Cartesian argument with full philosophical seriousness.

Having summarized Descartes’s two proofs, Huet addressed his opponent’s view of the idea of an infinite and supremely perfect being: “For, if this idea is not of a different nature than our other ideas, its source cannot be necessarily attributed to an infinite and supremely perfect cause.”¹⁵ Consequently, Huet argued that Descartes’s use of the term “idea” was ambiguous, because it could refer both to the action of the thinking mind and to the object of a thought. Furthermore, he claimed that “our idea of an infinite and supremely perfect being, is itself finite and imperfect” although “Descartes

¹³ Ibid., 301.

¹⁴ BN Ms. Fr., 14702, fol. 28. « L’ordre que nous nous sommes présenté nous engage maintenant a examiner le raisonnement ou pour mieus dire *la Plaisanterie* de Des Cartes sur l’existence de Dieu.»

¹⁵ Ibid., fol. 28 verso. « Car si elle n’est pas d’une autre nature que nos autres idées il n’est point du tout necessaire de remonter a une cause infinie & souverainement parfaite. »

would have us believe that this idea is so excellent and elevated that it not only far surpasses the perfection of our soul, but that it could only be derived from God.”¹⁶ For Huet, Descartes was inconsistent in attributing reliability to the human idea of infinity. Descartes, in his critic’s view, defeated his own argument by suggesting that man can only conceive of infinity “negatively” (knowing what it is not), but not “positively” (knowing what it is). Huet argued that such reasoning showed that our idea of God was clearly finite and, thus, could not serve as the basis for the alleged Cartesian “proof.”

For Huet, since our idea of God was finite, it was necessarily and categorically different from God. Being imperfect, our idea could not reflect accurately the nature of a supremely perfect being. Consequently, this idea was neither a clear nor a distinct idea of God.¹⁷ In addition, Huet demonstrated that Descartes’s errors were not only philosophical, but theological in nature. He presented Scriptural passages describing the inability of human understanding to conceive properly of God, further deconstructing Descartes’s notion of a clear and distinct idea of God. Huet concluded that if no such clear idea of God existed, then its source could not be attributed necessarily to any supremely perfect being.

Having thus disposed of the first Cartesian proof, Huet assailed the proof from necessary existence. Huet conceded that, in theory, a perfect being could not lack the property of existence. However, to combat the Cartesian argument Huet advanced a metaphysical claim that divided all things into two categories:

There are then two sorts of beings: beings that depend entirely on the mind, do not exist outside the mind, and are purely fictitious; and beings that actually exist, subsisting

¹⁶ Ibid. « l’idée que nous d’un estre infini & souverainement parfait, est quelque chose de finie & imparfaite... Des Cartes pretend qu’elle est si excellente, & d’une dignité si relevée que non seulement elle surpasse de beaucoup la perfection de noste ame, mais qu’il n’y a que Dieu seul qui la puisse produire »

¹⁷ Ibid., fol. 31.

independently of thought in the nature of things. The former are in the terms of the schools said to be solely mental, while the latter – real.¹⁸

Thus, Descartes's infinite and supremely perfect being could be guaranteed only mental existence.¹⁹ The presence of a supremely perfect being in the mind could not, in itself, necessitate the existence of such a being in the real world. It could only testify to the necessary existence of such an idea in the mind:

From this it is obvious that this objective reality, which according to Descartes exists in the idea of an infinite and supremely perfect thing, is entirely inside our mind, and in no way depends on the thing which it represents.²⁰

Having relegated the Cartesian proofs to an idealist level of certainty, Huet achieved his aim and showed that the Cartesian God did not exist necessarily in the realm of objective reality. Huet's refutation not only explicitly rejected the Cartesian proofs of God, but implicitly challenged the theological value of such demonstrations. While Huet displayed the inadequacy of applying *a priori* reason to supernatural knowledge in the *Censura* he openly articulated this view in the *Traité*, arguing that natural human reason was a weak and inappropriate source of knowledge. Huet cited St. Thomas Aquinas:

Things which may be proved demonstratively, as the being of God, the Unity of the Godhead, and other Points, are placed among Articles we are to believe, because previous to other things that are of Faith: and these must be presupposed at least by such as to have no Demonstration of them.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid., fol. 32 verso. « Il y a donc de deux sortes d'estres ; des estres qui dependent entierement de l'esprit, ne subsistent point sans l'esprit, & qui sont purement imaginaires, & des estres qui sont effectivement, & qui quoyque personne n'y pense ne laissent par de subsister dans la nature des choses. On dit des premiers dans l'escole qu'ils ne sont que du costé de l'entendement, & des derniers, qu'ils sont du costé de la chose ». (Lennon's translation from the Latin reads "barbarous language of the schools" p.166).

¹⁹ Ibid., fol. 33. Summarized from « De cette manière l'existence de cet estre infini & souverainement parfait suit la nature de cet estre, si elle est seulement du costé de l'entendement, il n'aura point d'autre existence que celle la si elle est du costé de la chose, son existence sera du mesme costé .»

²⁰ Ibid., fol. 32. « Dela il est aisé de comprendre que cette Realité objective, qui doit estre selon Des Cartes dans l'idée d'une chose infinie & souverainement parfaite, est toute dans nostre ame, & quelle ne depend en aucune façon du moins prochainement, de la chose qu'elle nous represente. »

²¹ Pierre-Daniel Huet, *An essay concerning the weakness of human understanding*, trans. Edw. Combe, (London: printed for Matthew de Varenne, 1725), 144.

The implication of Huet's citation opposed the view of the Lateran Council regarding the necessity of accepting the demonstrability of the existence of God and of other former preambles to the articles of the faith. In Huet's view, rational arguments on behalf of the existence of God inadvertently undermined faith in God. He perceived Descartes's arguments as both insincere and weak. Since the proofs were so easy to overturn, they inadequately defended the most crucial position in Christianity. The longer such debates were to continue, the more speculative the defenses of the existence of God would become.

Thus, Huet approached the refutation of Descartes's proofs from several perspectives. First, he was advancing answers against specific dogmatic claims about the real nature of things. Second, Huet was implicitly advancing a skeptical view by demonstrating the weakness of human reason. Third, he was identifying with the fideist position, which claimed that the existence of God could not be demonstrated by natural human reason. Such knowledge was accessible only through Christian faith.

The fideist position became increasingly appealing as a withdrawal from the intense theological quarrel between the Cartesians and the Aristotelians.²² The fideists did not wish to enter the debate on the terms of the Lateran Council. Instead of accepting the claim that the existence of God and the immortality of the soul were demonstrable by reason, they argued, like the Paduan Averroists, that both of these claims were not knowable by natural human reason, but could be ensured solely through submission to faith in the supernatural revelations. Tertullian (c. 155-230) has generally been identified as the first proto-fideist, for his having described Christ's death in the following way:

²² Kors, 370.

“The Son of God died: it is *immediately* credible--because it is foolish. / He was buried, and rose again: it is certain--because it is impossible”²³

The scholarly use of the word “fideism” points to another interesting aspect of Huet’s thought. The term itself was coined in the nineteenth century to identify a movement known within Catholicism as traditionalism, which stood in opposition to rationalism. The traditionalists believed that all divine revelation was communicated solely through tradition. Thus, they thought that if traditional interpretations of Scripture were abandoned, human access to the truths of the Christian Revelation would be lost.²⁴

Huet’s deep interest in ancient texts, his obsession with philology, and his antiquarianism come to mind. If we consider his career, it would be difficult to conclude that he believed that all scholarly pursuits should be abandoned. At the same time, he denounced man’s reason for its weakness. He advocated the suspension of judgment in contentious questions while devoting his whole life to scholarship. The paradox can be resolved best with two possibilities. Either Huet believed his scholarly pursuits to be meaningless, but, nevertheless, continued them, or he thought that his erudite interests in antiquity were the only ones relevant to the attainment of wisdom in man’s fallen state.

The latter explanation sheds light on Huet’s motivations for writing the *Demonstratio Evangelica*. He thought that the truth of Christianity could only be made convincing with reference to antiquity, a method that would reinforce faith in the

²³ Tertullian, *De Carne Christi*, Ch. 5.4, http://www.tertullian.org/articles/evans_carn/evans_carn_03latin.htm (4 Jan. 2007)
“*Et mortuus est dei filius; credibile prorsus est, quia ineptum est. Et sepultus resurrexit; certum est, quia impossibile*”

²⁴ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Fideism,” <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fideism/#2> (3 Jan. 2007).

Christian revelation. Huet also likely believed that the submission to faith in the Christian tradition in all matters theological could consolidate the contentious Catholic community.

French fideists were most concerned with proving two specific claims: that human beings were incapable of knowing anything about the real world with certainty through natural human reason; and that human beings should, consequently, accept faith in revelation as the sole source of reliable knowledge. The second point, being more significant for the fideists, was necessarily contingent on the first. Consequently, many fideists attempted to demonstrate the uncertainty of natural human knowledge about the real world. The fideists argued against the usefulness of natural philosophy, contrary to the growing confidence in the abilities of the human mind visible in the Cartesian and the Baconian revolutions in France and Great Britain, respectively.

The early and prominent French fideistic skeptic François de La Mothe Le Vayer inherited the “mantle” of skepticism from Montaigne, according to Richard Popkin. Popkin describes La Mothe Le Vayer’s skeptical corpus as “predominantly illustrative,” in the sense that his work provided examples of the usefulness and virtues of skepticism, rather than formulating positive theoretical claims about its advantages.²⁵

In the *Opuscule ou Petit Traité Sceptique sur cette Façon de Parler, N’avoir pas le Sens Commun* (*Opuscule or The Little Skeptical Treatise on the Way of Speaking Without Common Sense* – 1646), La Mothe Le Vayer questioned the human ability to know with certainty any natural truths about the real world, given the fallibility of the senses, the human inability to recognize the truth, and the absence of any criteria of

²⁵ Richard Henry Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: from Savonarola to Bayle*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 83.

truth.²⁶ Consequently, man could not obtain an objective knowledge of the real world, but could only know the world subjectively and imperfectly. In the *Sololiques Sceptiques* (*Skeptical Soliloquies* – 1670), La Mothe Le Vayer denied that man was a rational animal, claiming instead that man was an “animal desiring knowledge” but never able to attain it.²⁷

Thus, as he claimed in the *Discours pour montrer que les Doutes de la Philosophie Sceptique sont de grand usage dans les sciences* (*A Discourse Demonstrating that the Doubts of Skeptical Philosophy Are of Great Use to the Sciences* – 1668), Pyrrhonism would convince mankind of the uselessness of inquiry and debates in natural philosophy.²⁸ It would also demonstrate the lack of absolute truth within the framework of human knowledge:

In fact, the general system [of human knowledge] is composed of logic, physics, and morals, from which all human knowledge borrows that which it considers most important; [this system] is nothing but a collection of opinions contested by those who have time to examine them in depth.²⁹

Moving against the intellectual current of the seventeenth century, La Mothe Le Vayer opposed the increased attention given to natural philosophy following the Baconian and the Cartesian revolutions.

Pierre Bayle, the most widely read controversialist of the late seventeenth century, was the most influential fideist of his time in both Catholic and Protestant Europe. Like

²⁶ François de La Mothe Le Vayer, *Œuvres de François de La Mothe Le Vayer*, tome 2, (Paris: Chez Augustin Courbé, 1654) [The treatise appears on 365-397], 366-7.

²⁷ La Mothe Le Vayer, *Sololiques Sceptiques*, (Paris: Louïs Billaine, 1670), 18; « un animal desireux de sçavoir »

²⁸ La Mothe Le Vayer, *Œuvres de François de La Mothe Le Vayer*, tome 10, partie 2, (Dresden: Chez Michel Groell, 1756), 74-75.

²⁹ François de La Mothe Le Vayer, *Discours pour montrer que les Doutes de la Philosophie Sceptique sont de grand usage dans les sciences* published in the *Ouvrages*, 1756, 76; « En effet le systeme general compose de la Logique, de la Physique, & de la Morale d’où toutes les connoissances humaines empruntent ce qu’elles ont de plus considerable, n’est rien qu’un ramas d’opinions contestées par ceux, qui ont le tems de les approfondir. »

La Mothe Le Vayer, he propagated doubts about the abilities of natural human reason. At the same time, Bayle employed a unique rhetorical method. Instead of openly asserting the weakness of human reason, his *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (*Historical and Critical Dictionary* – 1697) presented paradoxes and contradictions that plagued the most basic human assumptions about the surrounding world.

In some cases, Bayle questioned contemporaneous advances in natural philosophy. In the article on “Zeno of Elea,” Bayle offered an overview of the debate regarding the existence of the vacuum. Having challenged the most commonly accepted notions of substance, extension, and motion, Bayle wrote: “Our Zeno would be much more formidable today than he was in his own time. It can no longer be doubted, he would say, that if there were a total plenum, motion would be impossible.”³⁰ Bayle was not concerned with resolving the dispute regarding the existence of the vacuum. Rather, he sought to demonstrate the multiplicity of controversies and inconsistencies that surrounded the most widely accepted views of physics itself.

In the second place, the fideists applied the conclusions drawn from their first principle to make an epistemological assumption that, given man’s feeble reason and senses, mankind should accept faith in revelation as the only source of true and certain knowledge. Thus, in addition to saving man from an inexorable search for truth, skepticism was, for La Mothe Le Vayer, useful for religion:

Those who have possess humility and ignorance, at all times, are much better accommodated [to receive the supernatural lights of faith] than those who are in spiritual darkness. The dogmatists, on the contrary, have never had a stronger concern than to make others appear to not know something, became uncontrollably lost [in spiritual things], and their presumption to have enough light of the understanding to overcome every manner of obscurity causes them to blind themselves in proposing that they believe

³⁰ Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, trans., Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), 382.

that they are advancing into the darkness that human nature cannot penetrate. I find that Skepticism is of no little use to a Christian soul, because it makes the soul surrender all those magisterial opinions that are so strongly detested by St. Paul.³¹

La Mothe Le Vayer judged that through total skepticism mankind could attain perfect reconciliation with Christianity. He compared the soul of a Christian skeptic to “a field cleared and cleansed of bad plants, such as the dangerous axioms of an infinity of learned persons, which then receives the dew drops of divine grace much more happily.”³² A skeptic’s mind, according to Le Vayer, would not hold any opinions contrary to the true faith, because the mind will have accepted its inability to know anything with certainty by natural human reason. Having accepted the weakness and irrelevance of reason, the soul will turn to faith in revelation for certainty.

The mathematician and Jansenist apologist, Blaise Pascal, who was one of the most prominent fideists of his time, expressed attitudes similar to that of La Mothe Le Vayer’s in his collection of *Pensées* (1670), arranged by his Jansenist friends for posthumous publication. A mathematical prodigy, Pascal became disillusioned with mathematics and natural philosophy and turned to the order of Jansenists. Named after Flemish theologian Cornelius Otto Jansen (1585-1638), the Jansenists were a controversial Catholic movement. Far more than the Thomists, they emphasized the dire consequences of man’s fall from grace and believed that no human action on earth, independently of the grace of God, could adequately rectify man’s fallen state.

³¹ François de La Mothe Le Vayer, *De la vertu des payens*, (Paris: Chez Augustin Coubré, 1647), 224-5; « Mais comme ceux qui ont fait de tout temps possession d’humilité & d’ignorance, s’accommodent bien mieus que les autres avec ces tenebres spirituelles. Les Dogmatistes au contraire, qui n’ont jamais eu de plus forte apprehension que celle de faire paroistre qu’ils ignorant quelque chose, s’y perdent incontinent, & leur presumption d’avoir assez de lumiere d’entendement pout surmonter toute sorte d’obsurité, fait qu’ils s’aveuglent d’autant plus qu’ils croyent s’avancer dans des tenebres que nostre humanité ne scauroit penetrer. Quoy qu’il en soit je trouve qye la Sceptique n’est pas d’un petit usage à une ame Chrestienne, quand elle luy fait perdre toutes ces opinions magistrales que saint Paul deteste si fort. »

³² Popkin, 85 cites and translates this passage from La Mothe Le Vayer, *Prose Chagrin*, in *Œuvres*, v.9 (Paris, 1669), 361-2.

Unlike Huet, who demonstrated the futility and the weakness of rational proofs of the existence of God through his refutations of the Cartesian proofs of God, Pascal explicitly denounced all such “metaphysical” attempts because they were, in his words:

So remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and, even if they did help some people, it would be only for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake.³³

Instead of a metaphysical proof of the existence of a supreme being, Pascal proposed a wager. In attempting to answer whether or not God exists, man can make two choices. If he chooses to believe that God does not exist, two outcomes are possible. If he is correct, he wins nothing, since no afterlife exists; but if he is wrong he loses everything, and is doomed to hell for eternity. If, on the other hand, man believes that God exists the two possible outcomes become significantly more favorable: if he is right, he wins everything, but if he is wrong, he loses nothing.³⁴ Pascal’s wager is not a proof, but rather an incitement to believe. Pascal maintained that such an argument would be more convincing, more effective, and more appealing than obscure metaphysical demonstrations, because faith was “God perceived by the heart, not by the reason.”³⁵

Pascal also claimed that “faith is different from proof. [The latter] is human and the [former] a gift of God.”³⁶ He warned about submitting religious doctrines to the scrutiny of natural reason, claiming that the Christian “religion will be left with nothing mysterious or supernatural.”³⁷ Without such elements, Christianity would, in Pascal’s view, lose its most essential feature.

³³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans., A.J. Krailsheimer, (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 57.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

Bayle was similarly concerned with an overly rationalist approach to theology. In his article on “King David,” Bayle painted a disturbing picture of a revered biblical figure, described in Scripture as a murderer and an adulterer. At the same time, Bayle noted, Scripture claimed that David was beloved by God, which meant that all his earthly sins did not prevent David from being accepted into heaven.³⁸ Bayle used this paradoxical situation to reinforce the incomprehensibility to human intelligence of God’s judgments and ways.

Although Bayle began his article on “Pyrrho” by claiming that Pyrrhonism was dangerous to theology and religion, he concluded on a very different note:

Our reason is a path that leads us astray since, when it displays itself with the greatest subtlety, it plunges us into such an abyss. The natural conclusion of this ought to be to renounce this guide and to implore the cause of all things to give us a better one. This is a great step toward the Christian religion; for it requires that we look to God for knowledge of what we ought to believe and what we ought to do, and that we enslave our understanding to the obeisance of faith. If a man is convinced that nothing good is to be expected from his philosophical inquiries, he will be more disposed to pray to God to persuade him of the truths that ought to be believed than if he flatters himself that he might succeed by reasoning and disputing.³⁹

Bayle expressed the most fundamental fideistic argument and, at the same time, exposed his intentions. Like Pascal and Le Mothe Le Vayer, Bayle believed that the most basic tenets of Christianity had to be approached through faith and not through reasoning and argument. In Bayle’s view, skepticism was useful for being able to demonstrate the weakness of natural reason and, consequently, for leading man to find refuge in supernatural belief. Thus, his aim in the *Dictionary* was to convince his readers of the theological uselessness of philosophy and to guide them towards accepting faith.

Like La Mothe Le Vayer and Bayle, Pascal also desired to see reason cede to the rule of faith. At the same time, he cited St. Augustine, claiming that “reason would never

³⁸ Bayle, 62-3

³⁹ Ibid., 206.

submit unless she perceived appropriate occasions to do so.”⁴⁰ Huet’s marginal note on this passage in his copy of the *Pensées* is particularly revealing:

He supposes that this submission should depend on reason: but it seems to me on the contrary, that to submit reason to faith is more of a feat of faith than of reason. Reason and faith are equally imperious, and neither would ever agree to submit to the other, unless it is done involuntarily, by violence and opposition. Therefore, one of the two must defeat the other, and it is up to faith to make reason submit, not otherwise.⁴¹

Huet’s analysis of Pascal reveals his own perception of reason. He envisioned that the struggle between reason and faith went much further than that described by Pascal. For Huet, reason had to be coaxed into submission, because it would never voluntarily accept inferiority with respect to faith.

While it should not seem that La Mothe Le Vayer, Pascal, and Bayle are identical thinkers, their fideism was based on similar principles. All three believed that natural human reason was feeble and, therefore, incapable of discovering knowledge about the surrounding natural world (and particularly about God). All three considered rational proofs of the existence of God irrelevant to Christianity. Instead, they called upon submission of reason to faith.

Huet also argued that the suspension of judgment in all philosophical questions prepared “the Mind for the reception of divine Faith.”⁴² He thought that if skepticism were to be adopted as a philosophical attitude, it would prevent acerbic debates in natural philosophy and, more importantly for Huet, in theology:

⁴⁰ Pascal, *Pensées*, (Paris: Chez G. Desprez, 1670), 48, as published in Raymond Francis, *Les pensées de Pascal en France de 1842 à 1942*, (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1959), 382. « La raison, dit St. Augustin, ne se soumettrait jamais si elle ne jugeait qu’il y a des occasions où elle doit se soumettre. »

⁴¹ Huet’s margin note on Pascal, *Pensées*, (Paris: 1670), 48, as published in Raymond Francis, *Les pensées de Pascal en France de 1842 à 1942*, (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1959), 382. « Il suppose que cette soumission même doit dépendre de la raison: et il me semble au contraire que, de soumettre la raison à la foi, est plutôt l’ouvrage de la foi que de la raison; parce que la raison et la foi sont également impérieuses, et que, l’une ne consentira jamais d’être soumise à l’autre, et si elle l’est ce sera involontairement, par violence, et par contraire. Or l’un des deux devant vaincre l’autre, il appartient à la foi de soumettre la raison, et non pas à la raison de soumettre la foi. »

⁴² Huet, *Traité*, 163.

Faith is a Gift that God is pleased to grant to them who trust not too much to the Strength of Nature, presume not too far on the Penetration of their Reason, nor espouse their own Sentiments with affected Obstinacy, but diligently prepare their minds to receive it.⁴³

Indeed, Huet's concern with the relationship between faith and reason has received little attention. His *Alnetanae quaestiones de concordia rationis et fidei*, however, reveals Huet's deep concern with the issue and definitively reconciles his skepticism and his Catholic faith:⁴⁴

I undertook the discussion of the very difficult topic concerning the agreement of Reason and Faith; or, what ought to be the province of reason in adopting faith; and how far the empire of faith over reason ought to extend.⁴⁵

Reason, Huet wrote, was merely a faculty that assisted us in learning things, either by perception or by reflection.⁴⁶ Faith, on the other hand, was a gift granted by God to mankind. Faith alone could guarantee absolute truth.⁴⁷

Huet described a conflict between the two sources of knowledge. As in his note on Pascal's *Pensées*, Huet declared that reason, "when she is turbulent and commanding, refuses to cede to other arbiters."⁴⁸ The human mind thus becomes divided and turns to "sedition and tumultuousness" never resting in peace.⁴⁹ Such peace, according to Huet, could only be established under the guidance of faith, claiming that "she [reason] must know herself, become aware of her weakness, and not aspire to give us happiness and

⁴³ Ibid., 165.

⁴⁴ Alnetanae is the place adjective for Alnetum, the Latin name for the Abbey Aunay in Normandy. Huet received Aunay from the king in 1674 and retired there in 1680. In 1685 Huet moved to Soissons and then later to Avranches. The title of the work suggests that Huet attributed some connection between his work and the time he spent in Aunay. This would suggest that the work was conceived in the first half of the 1680's. It is surprising that this work has neither been translated from Latin nor transferred off Microfilm.

⁴⁵ Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Memoirs of the life of Peter Daniel Huet, Bishop of Avranches, written by himself*, v.2, trans. John Aiken, (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, ... and Cadell and Davies..., 1810), 202.

⁴⁶ Huet, *Alnetanae quaestiones de concordia rationis et fidei*, (Paris: Apud Thomas Moette, 1690), microform, 7.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 4-5. "(Rationis nostrae dissidum); quae cum turbulenta sit & imperiosa, alienis parere recusant arbitris..."

⁴⁹ Ibid., 5. "dat se in seditionem & tumultum"

eternal health, when we cannot even know truth through her.”⁵⁰ Huet believed that natural human reason inhibited the reception of divine truth. This human faculty was overly ambitious, discounting its own limitations and consistently attempting to exert its rule over man, in natural and supernatural questions.

Consequently, Huet proposed that faith and reason should operate within different domains. The former, he argued, should be concerned with all matters of religious belief. Reason could operate autonomously, but should never be applied to matters of faith.⁵¹ Conversely, faith would not interfere in questions of natural philosophy.⁵² In such a state, no conflict would exist between the two faculties, because each would be concerned with a particular realm of knowledge. Huet’s system did not call for a complete elimination of reliance on natural reason, but rather sought to establish a structural relationship, under which reason would be in a position of obedience and subordination to things known by faith.

Thus, Huet could defend supernatural truths without reference to abstract proofs: “I believe that God is three in one, not because of reason, but because of the first revealed truth.”⁵³ The supernatural world could coexist with the natural world. The division was crucial, in Huet’s mind, to preventing scholars from attempting to discuss matters of faith from a philosophical perspective. Cartesians and Aristotelians would no longer attempt to prove truths that could be certain only through belief in revelation.

⁵⁰ Ibid.; “Agnoscat ipsa sese, suæque sibi imbecillitatis conscia felicitatem ac æternam salutem nobis conciliare se non posse speret, per quam ne veritatis quidem compotes esse possumus.”

⁵¹ Ibid., 61.

⁵² Ibid., 74-75.

⁵³ Ibid., 30. “Credo Deum esse trinum & unum, non propter Ratione, sed propter primam veritatem revelantem quæ id revelatit.”

The *Quaestiones* appeared, logically and temporally, between the *Censura* and the *Traité*. While the *Censura* explicitly challenged only one particular philosophy, it implicitly attacked the presumption of reason. The *Quaestiones* relegated reason to a separate and unequal position with respect to faith. The *Traité* struck the final blow to reason, demonstrating its utter feebleness.

Some modern historians have perceived the continuity in Huet's works but have not adequately analyzed the relationship between faith and reason in Huet's philosophy. Christian Bartholmèss claims that the *Traité* presented the extreme conclusions that followed from the principles advanced in Huet's two preceding works (the *Censura* and the *Quaestiones*).⁵⁴ According to April Shelford, Huet declared his intention to make the *Traité* the fourth book of the *Quaestiones* to Etienne Pirot (1631-1713), a Sorbonne theologian and censor.⁵⁵ Historian Germain Malbreil argues that the *Traité* was supposed to serve as the first book of the *Quaestiones*, because it would have logically paved the way for the demonstration of the superiority of faith.⁵⁶ While the sequential order is of secondary importance to our argument, the continuity of themes reveals Huet's view of his own project. He perceived a unity between the *Quaestiones* and the *Censura*:

Each of these treatises, that in which I endeavored to conciliate reason and faith, and that in which I oppugned the Cartesian philosophy, were part of a greater work which I had planned in my mind and of which it will not be foreign to the purpose of this book to give a sketch.⁵⁷

Thus, as was argued in the second chapter, Huet's opposition to Descartes was motivated largely by his opposition to Cartesian intellectual optimism in philosophy. Huet's

⁵⁴ Christian Bartholmèss, *Huet évêque d'Avranches ou le scepticisme théologique*, (Paris: Franck, 1850), 50.

⁵⁵ April Shelford, *Faith and glory: Pierre-Daniel Huet and the making of the Demonstratio Evangelica (1679)*. Ph.D. Dissertation, (Princeton University, 1997), 453.

⁵⁶ Germain Malbreil, "Les droits de la raison et de la foi, la dissociation de la raison, la metamorphose de la foi, selon Pierre-Daniel Huet," *Dix-Septième Siècle* 37 no. 2 (1985), 131.

⁵⁷ Huet, *Memoirs*, v.2, 203.

“greater work” could be interpreted as a skeptical fideistic project that culminated in the *Traité*. Huet admitted that his “love and esteem” of ancient philosophy led him to study ancient sects in depth. His studies, however, led him to express astonishment about and disillusionment with philosophy:

And as this science [philosophy] is boundless, wandering into immensity beyond the limits of time and creation, whilst the human mind, cooped within narrow bounds, depressed to earth, and involved in thick darkness, attempts by the aid of its reason to break forth into the light, and to seize upon the arduous summits of truth, I proposed to enquire how high it could raise itself by its own powers and what aids were to be sought for it from faith. These exalted studies long, much, and not unpleasantly, exercised my mind and the accumulated product of my labors was swelling to a great bulk, when I thought it would be more useful, and better accommodated to common understandings, if it were divided into parts, and brought under certain head.⁵⁸

By “parts,” Huet was referring to the *Censura*, the *Quaestiones*, and the *Traité*, all of which combined skeptical arguments with a fideistic outlook in opposition to the increasingly rational and naturalistic current of seventeenth-century theology.

Although Huet perceived Descartes and the Cartesians as his main opponents and wanted to remove natural reason from intervention in matters of religion, his project was not widely appreciated, as reactions to the *Traité* in Huet’s correspondence reveal.

While Huet’s friends perceived the sincerity of his arguments, they disparaged Huet’s fideism. Huet sent a manuscript of the *Traité* to his friend Charles de La Rue (1643-1725), a preacher and orator at the Society of Jesus. He received a less than favorable reply. De La Rue urged Huet to suppress the more shocking and controversial parts of the treatise, warning of the potential “public fury” against Huet.⁵⁹ De La Rue also predicted the reaction of Huet’s friends:

You will see the greater part of your friends either declaring against you or, at least, not daring to defend you... You will say that I am afraid, and that one ought not fear for the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 204-205.

⁵⁹ Shelford, *Faith and Glory*, 452.

truth! I will confess to you, I am afraid. But I will respond that this truth is not so important that you, in its defense, must take on the whole world.⁶⁰

Such a reaction illuminates Huet's reasons for not publishing the *Traité* and accurately predicts the future outrage. Huet's social standing and his friendships required a certain amount of discretion with respect to religious controversies.

Pirot, the Sorbonne censor, was appalled by the work and troubled by the consequences of Huet's skepticism. He wrote that by claiming the impossibility of attaining true and certain knowledge through natural reason, Huet "deprived Christian apologists of an essential tool," thereby undermining faith, not buttressing it.⁶¹ For Pirot and other Jesuits, Huet's views were in direct opposition to their professional vocations and roles.

Strictly speaking, Huet's position was heretical because it stood in direct opposition to the Fifth Lateran Council by claiming that reason could not demonstrate the existence of God. Pirot and De La Rue did not doubt the sincerity of Huet's religious beliefs. On the other hand, they could not allow him to advertise his views openly, for fear of a backlash. Thus, Huet's intentions were understood but not widely supported.

When the *Traité* was finally published in 1723, it received much criticism from Huet's other friends and colleagues. Many claimed that Huet could not have written the work, until Huet's friend abbé Pierre-Joseph Thoulier d'Olivet (1682-1768) produced the original manuscript in Huet's hand.⁶² Others were dismayed over the book's content and

⁶⁰ Ibid., Shelford cites and translates parts of the letter. (De La Rue to Huet, n.d., BN Ms. Fr., 15188, fol. 328-331).

⁶¹ Ibid., 453. Shelford cites three letters: Pirot to Huet, 2 May 1692, BN Ms. Fr., 15189, fol 36 verso-39 verso; Huet to Pirot, n.d., BL Ashburnham 1866, #1970; Pirot to Huet, 8 May 1692, BL Ashburnham 1866, #1969.

⁶² Léon Tolmer, *Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721) humaniste, physicien*, (Bayeux : Colas, 1949), 550-1.

distraught by its author's conclusions.⁶³ It is difficult to know whether the expressed reactions were sincere or feigned, given that Huet had circulated a manuscript of the work among his friends.

D'Olivet defended Huet's memory against the onslaught of criticism. He explained the main arguments of the *Traité* and claimed that these arguments could have been easily perceived in Huet's earlier works.⁶⁴ He similarly suggested that there was nothing irreligious in the *Traité*, as the opinions proposed therein did not contradict the teachings of the Church.⁶⁵ He regretted that Catholic intellectuals had "treated such a man as Huet like the world would treat a Bodin or a Spinoza" for having properly identified faith as the God-given, and consequently infallible source of knowledge.⁶⁶

* * *

Huet's pious intentions were shared by those who chastised his skeptical treatise. His tactics, however, appeared excessively unconventional. Despite such a perception, Huet's fideistic skepticism presented one of the most orthodox reactions to the naturalization of theology in the seventeenth century. Huet sought to convince his contemporaries to abandon rational arguments concerning the existence of God and the immortality of the soul and to accept these beliefs on faith alone. Reliance on faith was the only thing that could, in Huet's view, prevent the complete overthrow of orthodox intellectual authorities.

⁶³ Kors, 370; and Thomas Lennon, "The Skepticism of Huet's *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit Humain*," in *Scepticisme et modernité*, ed. Marc André Bernier and Sébastien Charles, (Saint-Etienne: Université de Saint-Etienne, 2005), 68.

⁶⁴ Pierre-Joseph Thouliez d'Olivet and Paul Pellisson, *Histoire de l'Académie Française*, tome 2, (Paris: Chez J.B. Coignard, 1743), 388-389.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 389.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 390; "...qu l'on ait traité un home tel que M. Huet, comme on traiteroit un Bodin & un Spinoza"

Although Huet denounced human reason, his humanist pursuits indicate that he thought that some remnants of truth could be found in antiquity. For the modern reader, he occupied the wrong place in the battle of ancients and moderns. Arguing that ancient sources possessed significantly more value than modern ones ever could, Huet stood against the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century and doomed himself to relative oblivion for the future. Huet is thus a tragic figure: he understood the dangers presented by rationalism to traditional authorities, but he was disparaged for his efforts by those who claimed to represent those very authorities. He was forgotten by modernity for his orthodoxy, and censured by his friends for what they perceived as his heterodoxy. His case sheds light on the tensions and the dilemmas of Catholicism in seventeenth-century culture.

Conclusion

The study of Huet's thought is important to understanding the seventeenth century and its intellectual climate. It demonstrates that seemingly contradictory intellectual positions can be reconciled when they are considered historically. An historical analysis that blends context with particular ideas expressed in that context reveals new details regarding both each of these elements and their interrelationship. An investigation of Huet's publications in view of the intellectual world of seventeenth-century France sheds light on the tensions between developments in natural philosophy and established theological claims. Such a study provides a prism through which we are able to analyze both disciplines more closely, revealing the nuanced relationship between the two in the eyes of learned Europe.

While the thesis has demonstrated that Huet was not alone in his philosophical and theological views, it remains difficult to establish how far the influence of fideistic skepticism spread. Such beliefs may have often been concealed from public view, as with Huet. Consequently, this thesis has demonstrated the methodological importance of using unpublished sources. These have revealed crucial facts about Huet's intellectual development, allowing for the reinterpretation of his philosophy. Thus, it would be interesting to substantiate further the pervasiveness of such beliefs by studying the views of seventeenth and eighteenth century skeptics more meticulously than has been previously done.

The continuity demonstrated in Huet's intellectual development and scholarship reveals the particular but historically revealing nature of his skeptical thought. Huet's case shows how a scholar of his background could have become disillusioned with the

uncertainties that permeated the dogmatic philosophies of his time, and how such an intellectual could have ultimately come to espouse skeptical philosophical positions that rejected the human mind as a criterion of truth and certainty. This conversion, in its deepest aims, maintained the goals of his Jesuit education. Huet, after all, was a Catholic apologist who experienced an intellectual disillusionment with the methods of apologetic works, but not with their purpose. He saw in fideistic skepticism the best defense of revealed truths. Huet's fideism aimed at moving supernatural questions away from the scrutiny of natural philosophy.

In Descartes, Huet perceived the most dangerous and influential manifestation of rationalism applied to supernatural religious truths. All philosophical attempts to prove the existence of God were, in Huet's mind, not only futile, but also enfeebling to the faith. Thus, Huet's philosophical and theological positions aimed to preserve traditional authority from reexamination by the new philosophy of the scientific revolution. When confidence in the powers of natural reason and in the human ability to know things with certainty was on the rise, Huet thought he could oppose this intellectual current with skeptical arguments.

It is ironic that the majority of Huet's anti-Cartesian works were published after Cartesianism had essentially won the intellectual struggle in France. His *Censura* represents a desperate attempt to reveal the errors of Cartesianism. The *Nouveaux mémoires* is a sarcastic work that, in its bitterness, acknowledged the loss to Cartesianism. Huet's *Traité* was thus the last attempt to dethrone Cartesian dogmatism.

Nonetheless, those who Huet believed should have supported him in the battle to preserve the intellectual traditions of Catholic France chastised his skepticism. His Jesuit

friends perceived his views to be perilous to their intellectual agenda, maintaining that rational arguments were necessary for reinforcing the faith. His decision not to publish the *Traité* signals his profound disappointment with the reactions of his colleagues. After all, if his ideas were not supported in the Catholic community, they could not be used for its defense.

Revealingly, Huet's critics were not able to perceive that he could embody both a commitment to philosophical skepticism and an insatiable quest for erudite knowledge. This combination certainly makes Huet unique in his own right. Despite having proclaimed the futility of attempting to know truths about the real world with certainty, he continued to engage in extensive scholarly pursuits. Huet believed that the knowledge of the divine, or at least wisdom, could be acquired through meticulous philological investigations. At the same time, he conceded that this knowledge could not be certain.

Huet's legacy is difficult to analyze because the Enlightenment appropriated most skeptical arguments to serve its own anti-supernatural agenda. After the Enlightenment, it became difficult to conceive of a combination of philosophical skepticism and religious orthodoxy. This reinterpretation of Huet signals the need to reconsider the views of other skeptics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries regarding the relationship between faith and natural reason.

Huet belongs to an understudied world of the opponents of Enlightenment and pre-Enlightenment rationalism. Their arguments were eclipsed by the unprecedented demonstrations of confidence in the human ability to know things with certainty. Huet's commitment to skepticism reveals his perception of the forthcoming revolutionary changes in the conceptual understanding of philosophy, theology, and the appropriate

relationship between the two. The analysis of the context, the evolution, and the nature of his ideas sheds light on the historical implications of the dramatic transformation of European thought in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

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