

Skepticism and Toleration in Early Modern Philosophy

Instructor: **Todd Ryan**

Office: McCook 322

Office Phone: 297-5157

Email: todd.ryan@trincoll.edu

Required Texts

Sextus Empiricus, *Selections from the Major Writings on Scepticism, Man, and God*

Montaigne, *Essays*

René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*

Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*

Pierre Bayle, *Miscellaneous Thoughts on the Comet*

Pierre Bayle, *Philosophical Commentary*

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*

Michael Walzer, *On Toleration*

Course Requirements

Final grades will be determined on the basis of the following requirements:

Two 8-10 page papers (80%)

Class Participation (20%)

SCHEDULE

Ancient Greek Skepticism

Week 1 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*

Week 2 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*

Week 3 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*

Rediscovery of Skepticism

Week 4 Popkin, *History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Bayle*, Ch. 2
Montaigne, *Essays (Apology for Raymond Sebond)*

Week 5 Montaigne, *Essays (On Cannibals, On Coaches, On the Liberty of Conscience)*

Week 6 Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*

Skepticism and Toleration

Week 7 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chs. 19 and 20

Week 8 Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (Pyrrho, Simonides, Zeno of Elea)

Week 9 Bayle, *Miscellaneous Thoughts on the Comet*

Week 10 Bayle, *Philosophical Commentary*

Week 11 Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*
Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Week 12 Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*
Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Toleration: A Contemporary Perspective

Week 13 Walzer, *On Toleration*

Course Description

In the minds of most contemporary proponents of Liberalism, one of the most attractive and far-reaching achievements of the Early Modern period, is the articulation and defense of the value of civil toleration. Throughout the 17th- and 18th Centuries a number of disparate argumentative strategies were developed to defend what has come to be seen as one of the signature components of Western liberal democracy. Some based their rejection of religious intolerance on largely pragmatic considerations of the welfare of the state. Others offered a more principled defense of toleration, often on the grounds of the inviolable rights of persons. In this course will examine another strategy for defending religious toleration, namely an appeal to moral and religious skepticism. Among our central concerns will be to answer the question, what, if any, is the conceptual connection between philosophical skepticism and religious toleration?

Historically, there has been a close association between proponents of some form of philosophical skepticism and advocacy of religious toleration. And indeed there are obvious affinities between the two. To the extent that religious intolerance is predicated on a firm conviction that one possesses the truth about theological matters, the skeptical attack on dogmatism may prove a welcome ally. As Montaigne observes “It is putting a very high value on one’s conjectures to have a man roasted alive because of them (“On Cripples”). So, psychologically, the rejection of dogmatism may indeed be conducive to acceptance of religious difference. Yet, at first glance, skepticism seems particularly ill-suited to the task of mounting a robust philosophical defense of skepticism. For if one holds with the Academic skeptics that the only thing that can be known is that we know nothing, or with the Pyrrhonian skeptics, that even that is unknowable, it is difficult to see

how one is any position to argue for the positive value of toleration. How can a denial of the possibility of genuine moral knowledge lead to the positing of toleration as an indispensable political value? Moreover, few people today are prepared to accept the radical skepticism of a Pyrrho or a Carneades; such wholesale rejection of the very possibility of knowledge might strike many as a rather desperate measure in the struggle against intolerance.

Further, from an historical point of view, ancient Greek skeptics professed to be social conservatives: the reasoning being that if we cannot know whether a certain thing is really good or just, then we have no reason to militate for political change. To the extent that the goal of ancient skepticism is *ataraxia*, or tranquility of mind, the best and most prudent course is simply to follow the prevailing mores of one's own society. In the Early Modern period this tendency of radical skepticism to issue in social conservatism is displayed in the move by some of the most radical skeptical figures (Montaigne, Bayle) to ally skepticism with a fideistic conception of religious faith. Although both are in some sense proponents of religious toleration, it is not clear to what extent blind acceptance of religious dogma provides a firm ground for rejecting intolerance of dissent. For, as Edwin Curley has pointed out, if the best we can do in the face of a radical inability to attain to truth is to humbly submit to the teachings of the church, and the church itself has made intolerance of heretics a fundamental dogma, then a right-minded skeptic would do best to follow a course of intolerance.

The course will be structured as follows. We shall begin with a brief examination of Greek skepticism as articulated in Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Skepticism*. This will provide students with the historical and philosophical background required to assess the

skepticism of modern thinkers. Next, we will turn to Montaigne's *Essays*, especially the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*. As I have indicated above, Montaigne's dual reputation as a fideist and an early proponent of religious toleration pose the question of the relation between skepticism and toleration in a particularly acute form. Background for this section of the course will be provided by Richard Popkin's excellent discussion of the influence of skeptical thought (and specifically the rediscovery of Sextus' text) on Protestant and Catholics alike during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.

Then, after a brief examination of Descartes and Spinoza, we will turn to the two most prominent defenses of religious toleration, Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* and Bayle's *Philosophical Commentary*. Of particular interest here will be two relevant contrasts: first, the contrast between the relatively modest skepticism of Locke, as articulated in the *Essay*, with the far more radical and corrosive skeptical attacks on reason and religion to be found in Bayle. With respect to the latter, we shall look not only at the well-known attack on the rationality of Christian religion in the article Pyrrho, but also at Bayle's efforts to dissociate individual morality from religious belief through his notorious "paradoxes" (e.g. the upright atheist, the untenability of a society of true Christians, the irrelevance of abstract religious beliefs in determining behavior, etc). The second contrast between Bayle and Locke concerns their very different defenses of toleration itself. Whereas Locke effectively treats the separation of church and state as an axiom from which religious toleration immediately follows, Bayle argues at length for the impropriety of state interference in the private beliefs of individuals. Yet what is most revealing is that Bayle's grounds for establishing tolerance as a moral and religious value are far removed from the skepticism of the *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. On the

contrary Bayle appeals to the rights of individual conscience as the sacred and inviolable point of contact between God and the believer. This again raises the viability of a skeptical defense of toleration in an especially acute form.

Texts

All of the primary texts for the course are now readily available in modern translations. This includes both Bayle's *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet* translated by Robert C. Bartlett (SUNY, 2000) and the *Philosophical Commentary*, edited by John Kilcullen (Liberty Fund, 2005). However, the unavailability of modern translations of several works has precluded their inclusion in the syllabus. Central among these are Sanchez, *Quod Nihil Scitur*; Pierre Jurieu, *Des droits des deux souverains en matière de religion*; and Pierre Jurieu, *Le Philosophe de Rotterdam accusé, atteint et convaincu*.

Among the secondary literature I have found several texts to be especially useful. Perhaps the best philosophical discussion of ancient skepticism is Barnes and Annas, *The Modes of Scepticism: Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations* (Cambridge, 1985). Despite its execrable production values, *Early Modern Skepticism and the Origins of Toleration*, edited by Alan Levine (Lanham: Lexington Books, 1999) contains useful articles on many of the central figures of the Early Modern period. Also useful, although somewhat broader in scope, is the collection of essays in *Justifying Toleration*, edited by Susan Mendus (Cambridge, 1988).

Considerations

The development of a course on skepticism and toleration raises a number of issues, two of which have been foremost in my mind. The first concerns the nature of the course as whole. Much of the course is given to the examination of the historical alliance between

skepticism and toleration in the Early Modern period. Needless to say each of these defenses of toleration arose in a specific historical context as a reaction to the prevailing political and social circumstances in which they were written. Often their aim was as much the establishment of concrete political change as the expression of abstract philosophical principle. Obviously, a proper understanding of the texts cannot safely ignore these historical contexts. Further, one of the main contentions of the course is that the purported conceptual connections between these two movements prove, upon examination, to be much more tenuous than has been commonly supposed. But this raises the question as to the extent to which such a course is a course in Philosophy at all (as opposed to, say, what used to be called history of ideas). This concern is neatly illustrated by Popkin's enormously influential *History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Bayle*, which contains a first-rate analysis of the historico-political context in which skepticism was rediscovered, but comparatively little by way of *philosophical* analysis of those skeptical ideas themselves.

The second issue is a pedagogical one. Given the pervasiveness of our contemporary commitment to toleration, there is a serious threat that students will fail to engage the chosen texts critically. This, of course, is a familiar problem to those who attempt to teach the intellectual origins of a revolution that has achieved such overwhelming success that its once radical ideas have become the received wisdom. In these circumstances it is imperative that the instructor find a method of making as plausible as possible the intellectual case against toleration. This task, I fear, is complicated by the specifically religious nature of the debate. My own experience suggests that today's philosophy undergraduates have relatively little sympathy for the

religious dogmatism of an Augustine or Jurieu. Those who are not openly hostile to religion are mostly indifferent to it. How then can we offer a compelling case on both sides of the issue?