

# SKEPTICAL FIDEISM IN CICERO'S *DE NATURA DEORUM*

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ABSTRACT: The work of Richard H. Popkin both introduced the concept of skeptical fideism and served to impressively document its importance in the philosophies of a diverse range of thinkers, including Montaigne, Pascal, Huet, and Bayle. Popkin's landmark *History of Scepticism*, however, begins its coverage with the Renaissance. In this paper I explore the roots of skeptical fideism in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, with special attention to Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, the oldest surviving text to clearly develop a skeptical fideist perspective.

KEYWORDS: Cicero, Academic skepticism, skeptical fideism

The work of Richard H. Popkin both introduced the concept of skeptical fideism and served to impressively document its importance in the philosophies of a diverse range of thinkers, including Montaigne, Pascal, Huet, and Bayle. Popkin added the term "skeptical fideism" to the philosophical lexicon in the first edition of his landmark account of the role of skepticism in the development of early modern philosophy, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Co., 1960).<sup>1</sup> Essentially we have here a compound term, composed of two component terms, each of which is susceptible of a very wide range of meanings. 'Skepticism' is perhaps the easier one to narrow down, since the meaning of this term must, given Popkin's intended use of it, refer to some relatively extreme form of ancient Greek skepticism, and in particular to some Renaissance or early modern revival of Academic or Pyrrhonian skepticism.<sup>2</sup> 'Fideism' is based on the Latin *fides*,

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<sup>1</sup> Popkin's *History of Scepticism* has now gone through three expanding editions, the last of which extends his coverage as far as Pierre Bayle, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Searching for "skeptical fideism" in the *Philosopher's Index* does not return any results earlier than Popkin's paper "The High Road to Pyrrhonism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965): 18-32. Searches done using the PhilPapers archive and Google also failed to return any pre-Popkin results for "skeptical fideism."

<sup>2</sup> Popkin proposes that, for his project, skepticism is "a philosophical view that raises doubts about the adequacy or reliability of the evidence that could be offered to justify any proposition" (*History of Scepticism*, xiii-xiv).

meaning ‘faith’—hence faith-ism—and ‘faith’ is somewhat harder to pin down in this way. After all, as Popkin argues, Montaigne is a fideist, but Montaigne seems not to be a fideist in the same way that, say, Pascal or Bayle are.<sup>3</sup>

So, we can begin by exploring some possible meanings for this term ‘skeptical fideism’ that emerges in scholarship focusing on Renaissance and early modern philosophy. Having done that, I want to look back and consider the history of this kind of view in the Western tradition. It certainly didn’t spring into existence circa 1500 CE, unprecedented and new. I will be suggesting that the clearest and best articulated ancient version of the position resides in Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum* (*DND*), though we will also consider some earlier and some later texts, from Plato and from Sextus Empiricus respectively, which contain important elements of a ‘skeptical fideist’ view and which no doubt contributed to the overall set of raw materials from which later figures, like Montaigne, could draw inspiration.<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Taxonomizing Varieties of Skeptical Fideism

If we think of a religion as consisting of a (constantly evolving and perhaps never fully determinate) set of doctrines and practices, then a concern for holding the right doctrines (orthodoxy) and a concern for maintaining and engaging in the correct practices (orthopraxy) will seem to naturally follow. Different religions might distribute their concern in different ways, some pressing the importance of orthodoxy, where others might emphasize orthopraxy instead.

Taking this distinction as an initial point of departure, a skeptical fideist might combine some form of extreme skepticism (undercutting any claims to justified belief or knowledge) with the acceptance of certain *religious doctrines*. Alternatively, a skeptical fideist might combine some form of extreme skepticism with continued attachment to certain *religious practices*. Lastly, of course, a skeptical fideist might combine some form of extreme skepticism with acceptance

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<sup>3</sup> See Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, xiv-xvi.

<sup>4</sup> In his *History of Scepticism*, Popkin discusses Cicero as an important source-text for skeptical ideas for early modern thinkers, but Popkin does not consider *DND* as a source-text for skeptical fideism itself. Terence Penelhum, writing a couple decades later, does briefly consider Cicero’s *DND* as such a source. See his *God and Scepticism: A Study in Scepticism and Fideism* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983), 13-14. For an excellent recent paper which considers *DND* in relation to both skepticism and fideism (though not skeptical fideism), see J. P. F. Wynne, “Learned and Wise: Cotta the Sceptic in Cicero’s *On the Nature of the Gods*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 47 (2014): 245-273. Indeed, anyone interested in *DND* should read Wynne’s paper.

of, and continued attachment to, certain religious doctrines *and* certain religious practices. As in the various religions themselves, a skeptical fideist of the third type (one whose view embraces both religious doctrines and religious practices) might distribute their focus in different ways. If you think of a spectrum, where one end represents undivided concern with orthodoxy (and no concern for orthopraxy at all), and where the opposite end represents undivided concern with orthopraxy (and no concern for orthodoxy at all), then think of dead-middle as representing equal concern for orthodoxy and orthopraxy, where moving in one direction from that middle point prioritizes doctrines more, and where movement in the opposite direction would prioritize practices more. This would seem to cover all possible distributions of focus between doctrines and practices. Toward the purely orthopraxic end of the spectrum, 'faith' is entirely or largely a matter of maintenance of and adherence to existing religious conventions. Toward the purely orthodoxic end, 'faith' is entirely or largely a matter of accepting and believing in the right doctrines. At the middle of the spectrum, 'faith' would mean a rich combination of both beliefs and practices. Note that for any of the views just sketched, what makes the view *fideistic*—rather than simply *religious*—is that fideists hold that their religious doctrines and/or practices cannot be rationally defended.<sup>5</sup> Some fideists even go so far as to propose that their religious commitments may be positively irrational, in the sense of being not merely *unsupported by reason*, but of being *positively opposed* to the deliverances of reason.<sup>6</sup>

Now, considered in these terms, I would place Montaigne relatively close to the orthopraxic end of the spectrum.<sup>7</sup> However, there is no doubt that Montaigne also sometimes expresses himself in ways that straightforwardly suggest some concern for religious beliefs (orthodoxy) as well. On the other hand, thinkers like Pascal and Bayle might be regarded as skeptical fideists of the middle-spectrum or orthodoxy-end type, since their accounts of faith seems less about traditions and more about inner mental states like belief.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, xiv-xv.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* Bayle develops a version of this irrationalist form of fideism. See the article "Pyrrho" (pp. 194-209) along with the "Third Clarification" (pp. 421-435) in Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> I have defended this view, though not quite in these terms, in earlier work. See Brian Ribeiro, "Sextus, Montaigne, Hume: Exercises in Skeptical Cartography," *Modern Schoolman* 87 (2009): 7-34.

<sup>8</sup> For example, note how Bayle's discussion puts a heavy focus on doctrines (and hence on

## 2. The Ancient Roots of Skeptical Fideism

In seeking the ancient roots for the tradition of skeptical fideism, we can begin by considering the Socrates of Plato's dialogues. If one were arguing for the view that Plato's Socrates is properly considered a skeptic, the evidence for that view would consist of pointing out his aporetic engagements with interlocutors in the so-called Socratic dialogues. What is friendship (*Lysis*) or piety (*Euthyphro*) or courage (*Laches*)—well, who can say? On the other hand, the evidence for refusing to read the character Socrates as a skeptic would surely include his apparently firm commitment to, and willingness to be put to death on account of, certain moral and spiritual views, concerning never doing wrong (even in return for a wrong received) and Socrates' belief in an immortal soul and the possibility of divine judgment after death and the possibility of reincarnation and rebirth.<sup>9</sup>

But note how these *pro et contra* arguments about Socrates-as-a-skeptic relate to each other: it is exactly this odd or counter-intuitive combination of extreme skeptical doubt and ready acceptance of religious beliefs or practices that characterizes the skeptical fideist. In skeptical fideists, the 'faith' doesn't do away with the 'skepticism': the two are joined or somehow found to harmonize. Second, note that the various moral and spiritual ideas which Socrates accepts seem to be accepted without much in the way of rational defense. They seem more like posits or hypotheses, not like items of knowledge. To that extent, they would be consistent with a quite extreme skepticism. For example, in the *Meno*, after Meno's skeptical dilemma is presented—we can't search for what we know or for what we don't know (80d-e)—Socrates responds by citing the views of some "wise men and women talk[ing] about divine matters" (81a).<sup>10</sup> These people were "priests and priestesses," though Socrates also finds the same view in some poets as well (81a-b).<sup>11</sup> The view

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orthodoxy). See Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, s.v. "Pyrrho" (esp. 199-204). For a clear statement of Pascal's skeptical fideism, see Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1995), 33-36 [= Sellier 164 / Lafuma 131].

<sup>9</sup> Drawing from the *Crito* and the *Meno*. See *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). Even if the *Meno* is a late enough dialogue to be giving us more Plato than Socrates, the *Meno* still informs subsequent audiences' readings of Socrates-the-character-in-Plato's-dialogues. We are considering the question whether Socrates-the-character could be understood as a skeptical fideist in some way(s) or to some extent.

<sup>10</sup> Translations from the *Meno* are from *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> *Apology* 22b-c suggests that the poets themselves may be subject to divine inspiration in their

in question is the famous theory of recollection, involving immortal souls, reincarnation, etc. Does Socrates come to accept this view on the basis of its being *embraced by religious figures and inspired poets*? Seemingly, yes. Of course, Socrates does offer the questioning of the slave boy as support for this view, but he then concludes by adding that he thinks we will be “better men, braver and less idle, if we believe [this theory]” (86b-c). This suggests that Socrates’ theory comes from religious/poetic sources *and* that it requires some support from pragmatics (we will be braver, less idle if we believe it). I’m not sure if this is skeptical fideism exactly, but certainly some of the raw materials are here. We have the apparent inability to achieve rational insight or knowledge, combined with the attempt to seek inspiration—pun intended—from other sources like religious teachers and poets.

Or consider Socrates’ frequent appeals to his divine sign (*daimonion*) in the *Apology* and elsewhere. Socrates begins his defense speech with the story of Chaerephon’s visit to the oracle of Delphi. Through the telling of this story we are meant to learn that if Socrates is indeed the wisest—as the oracle reports him to be—this is only because he humbly recognizes his own *lack of wisdom* (21a-23c). With this Socratic insight into his own ignorance firmly in place, Socrates begins to defend himself, and explain his behavior, by making appeals to the divine, both in the message of the oracle and in reference to the urgings of his *daimonion*. In other words, it seems that when Socrates reaches the end of his elenctic rope and finds only *aporia*—because true wisdom is merely the recognition of how little human wisdom amounts to (23a)—then he must appeal to divine inspiration and divine assistance. He reports this as a regular occurrence.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, this short account leaves a number of complications unresolved. Certainly, Plato’s character Socrates never self-identifies as a skeptic. And the nature and extent of his skepticism has not been discussed in any careful way here. Even if later skeptics claimed Socratic heritage,<sup>13</sup> those claims must be critically evaluated. Moreover, the various moral and spiritual ideas I drew attention to may not align with any then-practiced religion or religious tradition, though perhaps this should

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productions, explaining their connection to those “priests and priestesses” and their potential role as authorities on divine matters.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, *Apology* 31c-32a and also 40a-c (where the voice is said to be his “constant companion”). Dan Larkin’s contribution to the Vanderbilt Ancient Epistemology workshop (April 2018) provided an especially clear analysis of the fideistic aspects of Plato’s Socrates. Larkin’s reading powerfully illustrates how someone like Montaigne might have understood Socrates.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Cicero, *DND* 1.11.

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not carry too much weight with us. Perhaps one's 'faith' needn't be a communally shared faith. Nonetheless, as I've said, there is something like the skeptical fideist's combination of 'skepticism' and 'faith' in the character of Socrates, with Plato's various dialogues being the first texts to even suggest that unique yet counter-intuitive combination. For a later thinker like Montaigne, for whom Socrates looms so large as the perfect model of the philosopher, one can see how the reading of Socrates-as-skeptical-fideist would be possible and perhaps attractive: the searching doubts, combined with the humble piety, all tied neatly together in the 'oracle of Delphi' story, a humble searcher heeding his divine sign rather than trusting to his own insight.

### 3. Cicero & Skeptical Fideism in *De Natura Deorum*

Cicero's *Academica*, which is entirely devoted to comparing and evaluating several versions of Academic skepticism, does not discuss the general question of what the Academic skeptic's attitude toward religion is or ought to be.<sup>14</sup> However, in *De Natura Deorum* (*On the Nature of the Gods*), the skeptical character Cotta does address this question, both directly and repeatedly.

The puzzle is this: how can Cotta be *both* a pontifex of the Roman state religion<sup>15</sup> and *also* an Academic skeptic, perhaps even a *radical* Academic skeptic, just as Cicero identifies himself to be in the *Academica*?<sup>16</sup> In Book 1 of *DND*, Cicero describes what the "Academics" think, and one would presume that Cicero's

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<sup>14</sup> For a recent translation of the *Academica*, see Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, trans. Charles Brittain (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> The *pontifices* were one of the four major colleges of priests in the ancient Roman state religion. They were the most important of the four orders.

<sup>16</sup> While Cicero narrates the *Academica* and clearly identifies himself with Clitomachus's radical interpretation of Carneades (*Acad.* 2.65-66, 2.78, 2.108, 2.112-113), one might nonetheless have the impression from *other texts* that Cicero was actually a mitigated skeptic (e.g., see the *Tusculan Disputations*). (For Cicero as a mitigated skeptic, see Harald Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 84-101; for Cicero and Cotta as radical skeptics, see Wynne, "Learned and Wise.") As Wynne points out ("Learned and Wise," 256-257), there may be a way to understand these textual tensions through the lens of Cicero's claim that, even as a radical skeptic, his human weakness often leaves him holding opinions (see *Acad.* 2.66). Incidentally, 2.66 from the *Academica* provides an especially clear example of the "aspirationalist" reading of radical skepticism which I defended with respect to Sextan Pyrrhonism in Brian Ribeiro, "Is Pyrrhonism Psychologically Possible?," *Ancient Philosophy* 22 (2002): 319-331. I wish I had been aware of this passage back in 2002, since it would have bolstered my case in some respects.

description would fit the only other Academic (viz., Cotta) involved in this dialogue, the dialogue which Cicero is *preparing the reader to understand*. The Academic skepticism described there in Book 1 of *DND* certainly appears to be of the radical type.<sup>17</sup> If the other Academic, Cotta, held a *different* kind of view (mitigated Academic skepticism) from Cicero himself (radical Academic skepticism), this would have been a natural place for Cicero to inform the reader of that and perhaps indicate the nature of their disagreement. *Yet he does not*.

So, if our puzzle is “how can Cotta be *both* a pontifex of the Roman state religion and *also* an Academic skeptic, perhaps even a *radical* Academic skeptic?,” then I think *solution* to this puzzle, in *DND*, is skeptical fideism. In fact, what I’m calling the solution to this puzzle is not hard to find in *DND*. There are several places in *DND* where Cotta’s priesthood is quite explicitly the topic of discussion. In each case where Cotta responds at any length, he describes his own view in skeptical-fideistic terms. Take the first of these important passages—Cotta speaking:

In this investigation of the nature of the gods, the primary issue is whether they exist or not. You [Velleius] say that it is difficult to deny it. I agree, if the question is posed in public, but it is quite easy in this type of conversation conducted between friends. So though I am a *pontifex* myself, and though I believe that our ritual and state-observances should be most religiously maintained, I should certainly like to be persuaded of the fundamental issue that gods exist, not merely as an expression of opinion but as a statement of truth; for many troubling considerations occur to me which sometimes lead me to think that they do not exist at all (*DND* 1.61 [24]).

Here, although Cotta thinks the “ritual and state-observances should be most religiously maintained,” this is not rooted in his belief that the existence of the gods can be rationally defended. *At the very most* Cotta merely accepts that belief (in a fideistic sense), and it seems possible that he *does not even opine* that the gods exist. A number of passages in *DND* see Cotta admitting that the gods do exist in what appears to be only in a for-the-sake-of-argument sense.<sup>18</sup> Admittedly other passages in *DND* suggest that Cotta does actually believe that the gods exist, though he clearly

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<sup>17</sup> See *DND* 1.1 [3] and 1.11-12 [6-7]. Unless otherwise indicated, all passages quoted from *DND* are from Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. P. G. Walsh (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and page number references to that edition are given in square brackets. *DND* is also available in the Loeb Classical Library series: *De Natura Deorum* in *Cicero*, Vol. 19, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951).

<sup>18</sup> For one example, see the paragraph immediately following the one quoted above (*DND* 1.62 [24]).

does not regard that opinion as rationally supported.<sup>19</sup> Whether Cotta actually believes that the gods exist or not, since Cotta thinks that any religious practices or beliefs he does embrace have no rational support, Cotta's view is a version of skeptical fideism—he's an Academic pontifex. His fideism is directly driven by his skepticism.

A richer passage comes later on, right at the beginning of Book 3. In Book 2, Stoic theology is expressed and defended by the character Balbus. Much of the material consists of the arguments of natural theology. Balbus then concludes Book 2 by revisiting the issue of Cotta's priesthood and insisting that Cotta, "as leading citizen and priest," ought to embrace the Stoic arguments just offered. To argue against the existence of the gods, Balbus says, is "a debased and impious practice" (2.168 [107]). This casting down of the gauntlet sets the stage for Cotta's reply, given in Book 3, which the reader is told begins with Cotta smiling (3.1 [108]). Cotta says that at this point he will "say a word about [his] own position" (3.5 [109])—he has so far mostly played the role of critic. Here is what he says:

I take considerably to heart your authority, Balbus, and the comments at the close of your discourse, in which you urged me to remember that I am not just Cotta, but also a priest. The point you were making, I imagine, was that I should defend the beliefs about the immortal gods which we have inherited from our ancestors, together with the sacrifices, ceremonies, and religious observances. I shall indeed defend them, and I have always done so; no words from any person, whether learned or unlearned, will ever budge me from views which I inherited from our ancestors concerning the worship of the immortal gods. (*DND* 3.5 [109])

That Cotta's fideism includes orthopraxy regarding the rituals and observances is clear. In discussing the Book 1 passage before, we saw that there was some question of whether Cotta's 'faith' also includes any actual beliefs, or whether it was limited

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<sup>19</sup> "In fact I do believe that [the gods] do [exist], but the Stoics do not prove it" (*DND* 3.15 [113]). One might argue that passages like this one prove that Cotta is a mitigated skeptic (because Cotta admits to opining); however, Wynne ("Learned and Wise," 256-257) provides a clear way of understanding such statements where they do not prove that at all (cf. *Acad.* 2.66, as discussed in note 16, above). Moreover, it should be borne carefully in mind that Cotta *only* professes to opine about the existence of the gods, a belief he finds "no cautery can dislodge . . . from [his] mind" (3.7 [110]). This *one case of opining*, taken on its own, is hardly impressive evidence for claiming that Cotta is a mitigated and not a radical skeptic, especially given Wynne's discussion. In fact, it seems to me that radical Academic skepticism *in general*, plus firm belief on the existence of the gods *in particular*, reads exactly like skeptical fideism! For further discussion, see Joseph DeFilippo, "Cicero vs. Cotta in *De natura deorum*," *Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2000): 179-181.

to practices alone. In Cotta's reply to Balbus in the passage we are now considering, Cotta raises this belief/practice question again by saying that Balbus would have him "defend the beliefs . . . together with the sacrifices, ceremonies, and religious observances." Cotta's response to Balbus's demand is less than clear. He says he will defend them, and always has, though the tone in no way suggests a rational defense, but more a defense in the sense of refusing to 'budge' (or 'move') from the views he has ancestrally 'inherited' (or 'received'). Moreover, the views Cotta will defend are those "concerning the worship of the immortal gods," rather than views concerning their existence.<sup>20</sup> Later in the same passage Cotta adds that in "any discussion of religion" his "guiding lights" are not Stoic philosophers, like Zeno or Chrysippus, but former Roman religious officials whom he mentions by name (3.5 [109]). This certainly reads like skeptical fideism of the more orthopraxically-focused variety. "So much, Balbus, for the sentiments of Cotta the priest," Cotta says. Cotta says he will lend his assent to what his forebears have taught him "even when no rationale is offered" (3.6 [109]).<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. After Cicero

When we turn our attention to much later thinkers who further develop and explore variations of skeptical fideism, we can see how these later thinkers could find antecedents of their view in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. We have already considered how the character of Socrates as he is depicted in Plato's dialogues has some of the raw materials in place for that unique combination of an extreme epistemological skepticism and a fideistic acceptance of some religious beliefs and/or practices. However, in my view Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* provides later thinkers, like Montaigne, with the most fully elaborated version of skeptical fideism in ancient Western philosophy. *De Natura Deorum* is both the oldest surviving text in the Western canon to clearly develop a skeptical fideist perspective and the most fully developed version of that position in Greek and Roman philosophy.

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<sup>20</sup> Here's the important end of the passage in another translation: "I myself will indeed defend them always and always have defended them, nor will anybody's speech, <a speech> of a learned man or of an unlearned man, ever move me from that opinion [*me ex ea opinione . . . movebit*], which I have received from my ancestors, about the worship of the immortal gods" (Wynne, "Learned and Wise," 256).

<sup>21</sup> A third passage where the pontifex/skeptical fideism connection is made comes later in Book 3 (*DND* 3.43-44 [122-123]), though the passage is not as instructive as the two considered above.

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Sextus Empiricus, writing a couple centuries after Cicero, does provide his own brand of skeptic—the Pyrrhonian skeptic—with something to say about religion. The passages in Sextus, however, while they might suggest an orthopraxic and traditionalist version of skeptical fideism, also have a tone of pragmatic insincerity to them. Sextus presents more or less the same view in both the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and in *Adversus Mathematicos*:

[F]ollowing ordinary life without opinions, we [Pyrrhonists] say that there are gods and we are pious towards the gods and say that they are provident.<sup>22</sup>

[I]n line with his ancestral customs and laws, [the Pyrrhonist] says that there are gods and does everything that tends to worship of and reverence towards them.<sup>23</sup>

Here we have the marks of orthopraxy—“without opinions” and “in line with his ancestral customs and laws,” the Pyrrhonist performs the appropriate acts of “worship.” But there’s also that note of insincerity or duplicity—the Pyrrhonist “says” that the gods exist, but surely the Sextan Pyrrhonist doesn’t *believe* they do.<sup>24</sup> This is the key point: a genuine skeptical fideist is not simply a skeptic who disingenuously keeps up the practices or professions of some faith. Cotta’s ‘faith’ may have no rational grounding, but it’s not *disingenuous*. The Sextan comments quoted above read more like a recipe for Hume’s later attempt to package (or camouflage) his corrosive critiques of religious beliefs with obviously insincere appeals to faith and the gospel that would fool no discerning reader.<sup>25</sup>

In any case, for a thinker like Montaigne, to whom Plato, Cicero, and Sextus were all well-known and often-quoted sources, there are a variety of materials in

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<sup>22</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143 [= *PH3.2*].

<sup>23</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists*, trans. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 13 [= *M9.49*].

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the views expressed in Book 2 of Cicero’s *De Divinatione*, where the view articulated is closer to Sextus’ than to Cotta’s. See Cicero, *De Divinatione* in *Cicero*, Vol. 20, trans. W. A. Falconer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), esp. 2.28 and 2.70.

<sup>25</sup> Hume does this in many places. See David Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 164 and 186 (the conclusions of Sections 8 and 10 respectively); *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 66, 89, and 97. These various passages speak, in barely concealed dissimulation, of “mysteries” and “faith” and even “the gospel” and “divine revelation.” Not all of these passages are *in propria persona*, but many of them are. The reasons for dissembling on this topic are easy to see, particularly given the time in which Hume lived, so I don’t mean to be saying anything critical of Hume’s character here.

Greek and Roman philosophy for constructing a skeptical fideist perspective. Montaigne's "Apology for Raymond Sebond" (*Essays* II:12) provides the central text for examining his skeptical fideism. One of Montaigne's many expressions of the view, below, echoes familiar ideas from Cotta—remaining *unmoved*, holding onto one's *ancestral traditions*.

As I do not have the capacity for making a choice myself, I accept Another's choice and remain where God put me. Otherwise I would not know how to save myself from endlessly rolling. And thus, by God's grace, without worry or a troubled conscience, I have kept myself whole, within the ancient beliefs of our religion, through all the sects and schisms that our century has produced.<sup>26</sup>

On first reading, Montaigne seems to go well beyond orthopraxy here, with his talk of "God's grace" keeping him "within the ancient beliefs of our religion." In my view, though, these statements of belief are at most statements of a tepid acceptance—think of the 'religious beliefs' of the not-very-religious in our own day and age. But even if I am wrong, and Montaigne's beliefs are genuine and deep, this would simply be his own version of the position, moving in the direction of the orthodoxic end of our spectrum. Pascal and Bayle would both move their versions of skeptical fideism even further in that direction.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have explored the ancient roots of skeptical fideism in the texts of Plato, Sextus, and most especially Cicero. I regard Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* as both the oldest surviving Western text where this view is developed and the text which provided later thinkers with the most fully articulated ancient version of the view. Historical transformations between Cicero's time and Montaigne's made it the case that they were considering very *different* religious 'faiths' when they sought to harmonize their skepticism with their faith. Cicero's Academic pontifex and Montaigne's Catholic Pyrrhonist may, therefore, raise different questions for us. Montaigne, who we have only briefly discussed, certainly seems to broaden the position's possibilities in ways which qualify as original and which tell us something about the changing nature of religion in Western history. Later skeptical fideists like

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<sup>26</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, trans. M. A. Screech (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 149.

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Pascal and Bayle provide further variations of skeptical fideism, which in turn inspired philosophers of religion and theologians down to the present day.<sup>27</sup>

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