

## CHAPTER 42

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# SIMON FOUCHER AND ANTI-CARTESIAN SKEPTICISM

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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SIMON Foucher (1644–96) was a Parisian intellectual and Catholic priest with wide-ranging interests in philosophy, science, literature, history, and theology. Although his name has been all but forgotten, Foucher was well known and respected by the most famous philosophers of his day. A frequent correspondent of Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630–1721), Foucher was the first to publish objections to the system of Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) and to both the monadology and theory of established harmony of G. W. Leibniz (1646–1716). In addition to these critical works, Foucher published a series of books expounding what he called the “Academic philosophy” (Foucher 1673, 1675, 1687, 1693). His goal was to produce a complete system of philosophy, but he died before the work was completed. The Academic writings that we do have constitute the introductory parts devoted to Foucher’s Logic. In light of these works, understanding the place of Foucher in the history of Cartesianism, even on the most general level, is anything but straightforward. Solid arguments can be made for both the claims that Foucher was a Cartesian and that he was a fierce anti-Cartesian, even one that is chiefly responsible for the “downfall of Cartesian metaphysics” (as Richard Watson has argued).

The best example of this Foucher paradox—that Foucher can be considered both radically anti-Cartesian and fundamentally Cartesian—is provided by one of the earliest historians of the reception of Descartes’s philosophy, Adrien Baillet (1649–1706). Foucher appears twice in Baillet’s *La Vie de Monsieur Descartes* in a span of 100 pages. The first time we encounter Foucher is in the story of the return of Descartes’s remains to Paris in 1667. Funeral arrangements are being made and somebody must be chosen to give the eulogy. Two philosophers are selected: Claude Clerselier (1614–84) will give

what appears to be the main eulogy, and since Foucher is in Paris, Jacques Rohault (1618–72) asks him to give a second eulogy on a different day in a different place (Baillet 1691: 439). If this is true, then we have solid evidence that Foucher was not merely a Cartesian, but a Cartesian-with-clout in 1667. Then we meet Foucher a second time in Baillet's *Vie*, in a chapter devoted to the many accusations of unoriginality, if not plagiarism, with which Descartes was met. Foucher is the *first* accuser discussed by Baillet (Baillet 1691: 532). Called the "restorer of the Academic philosophy" by Baillet, Foucher is treated as the main critic of Descartes to have charged him with taking his main ideas from Plato and other ancient Academic philosophers. Foucher indeed critiqued Descartes along these lines. So what are we to make of a philosopher who may have eulogized Descartes in 1667, only to treat Descartes's philosophy as second- or third-hand Platonism several years later? Interestingly, Baillet does not even acknowledge the tension between these two appearances of Foucher in his work.

One way to resolve this tension is to question the veracity, or at least the implications, of Baillet's claim that Foucher was invited to eulogize Descartes. All of the most important recent Foucher scholars have done this, but they have arrived at different conclusions. Félix Rabbé (1834–1900) takes Baillet at his word and concludes that Foucher was among the "devout partisans" of Descartes's philosophy in 1667 (Rabbé 1867: 4–5), but later changed his philosophical outlook. However, since Foucher himself tells us that he was already trying out his main objection to Descartes's philosophy on Rohault in 1667 (Foucher 1675: 45–7), Henri Gouhier (1898–1994) concludes that Foucher was not a Cartesian but a skeptic at that time, though he may well have been asked to give a funeral oration anyway, since he could provide an objective perspective on Descartes's accomplishments (Gouhier 1927; see Watson 1987: 33). Watson doubts that Foucher was even asked to deliver a funeral oration. Foucher was a vain man, carefully documenting his own accomplishments in his works; so if he had been given such a great honor, then he would have told us about it. Moreover, only Baillet mentions the request; neither Clerselier nor Rohault ever mentions Foucher giving, or being asked to give, any kind of eulogy for Descartes (Watson 1987: 33–4). Given the scarcity of historical evidence, however, we will probably never know whether, or on what conditions, or for what reason, Foucher was asked to deliver a funeral oration for Descartes.

Foucher comes across as a paradox in Baillet's work largely because he is discussed only briefly and in two short paragraphs. Perhaps some elaboration on Baillet's part would have resolved the tension between those discussions. However, for different reasons Foucher remains an enigma for the historian of philosophy today, even several decades after significant interest in Foucher was renewed by some of the best scholars of early modern philosophy in recent memory. The earliest result of the careful attention paid to Foucher by Richard Popkin (1923–2005), Richard Watson, José R. Maia Neto, and others was a historical narrative according to which Foucher was part of a wave of anti-Cartesian French skepticism at the end of the seventeenth century. The other main figures in this movement were Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) and Huet who, along with Foucher, have even been dubbed the "three skeptical musketeers" (Pelletier 2013: 51). According to Popkin, Foucher "saw himself as the reviver of Academic skepticism"

(Popkin 2003: 275) and he “provided some crucial refurbished skeptical arguments to meet the developing new dogmatism—Cartesianism” (Popkin 2003: 277). Watson, a student of Popkin’s, argues that “Simon Foucher is important in the history of modern philosophy as a sceptic who originated epistemological criticisms that are fatal to the Cartesian way of ideas. His method is that of the traditional sceptic: He assumes the principles of the system under analysis and then reasons to contradictory conclusions” (Watson 1987: 33; see also Watson 1966, 1969). Another student of Popkin’s, Maia Neto, argues that “Foucher’s Academic skepticism is one of the most important sources of the skepticism held by the two greatest early modern skeptics: Pierre Bayle and David Hume” (Maia Neto 1997: 215). As we will see in Section 2, the portrayal of Foucher as an Academic-skeptical critic of Descartes and Cartesianism is plausible and well grounded in numerous texts.

However, the same texts that provide a basis for considering Foucher a skeptic contain arguments that do not cohere well with this interpretation at all: arguments that defend Descartes’s criterion of truth; arguments that prove the existence of God; arguments that praise the accomplishments of modern science; arguments *against* skeptical objections of the sort that we find especially in Huet. Many of these anti-skeptical elements of Foucher’s thought even sound downright Cartesian, leading Watson and Maia Neto to soften their initial skeptical interpretation of Foucher, and even to begin to speak of the Cartesianism of Foucher’s thought. In Watson’s most recent account of Foucher, for example, he says that “Foucher was something of a Cartesian in his adherence to the method of doubt in the search for knowledge, but he eschewed the dogmatism of doctrinaire Cartesians, among whom he ranked Malebranche” (Watson and Grene 1995: 6). And Maia Neto’s most recent moniker for Foucher is no longer “Academic skeptic”, but “Academic Cartesian” (Maia Neto 2003: 71). So the Foucher paradox or enigma or dilemma is still very much alive: was Foucher a eulogizer of Descartes or one of his staunchest critics? Was Foucher a Cartesian searcher after truth or an anti-Cartesian skeptic? In what follows I take each horn of the dilemma in turn, before turning to my own interpretation of the place of Foucher in the history of (anti-)Cartesianism and late seventeenth-century French skepticism.

## 2. FOUCHER AND THE “GREAT CARTESIAN PREJUDICE”

To the extent that Foucher is known at all among Anglophone philosophers today, he is known for a series of skeptical arguments against what he considered the “great Cartesian prejudice” (Foucher 1693: 76), namely that ideas in the mind can represent things outside of the mind. Foucher’s attack on this supposition was repeated by Bayle in his *Dictionary* in the seventeenth century, and later adapted and made famous by Berkeley and Hume in the eighteenth century. Foucher’s reputation as a skeptic is based

largely on this skeptical attack against the Cartesians, taken out of the context of Foucher's larger philosophical project. In this section I explore this skeptical argument on its own in order to motivate the skeptical reading of Foucher's relation to Cartesianism, while in Section 3 I will situate this skeptical argument within Foucher's other philosophical writings, which will render Foucher's relation to Cartesianism more complex.

In 1673 Foucher had several copies printed of a short work of his entitled *Dissertations sur la recherche de la vérité, ou sur la logique des academiciens* (Foucher 1673). No copies of this work have ever been found; in fact, Foucher apologized to Leibniz that he himself could not find a copy of the work to give to him. The next year, 1674, Malebranche published the first three Books of *De la recherche de la vérité*, which according to Foucher touched on much the same material that interested Foucher in his similarly titled 1673 work. Perhaps because he was frustrated that Malebranche had scooped him, or perhaps because he felt strongly that the subject matter was important, Foucher wasted no time in publishing his *Critique de la recherche de la vérité ou l'on examine en même temps une partie des principes de Mr. Descartes. Lettre par un Academicien* (Foucher 1675). As the full title of this work indicates, its goal is to critique Malebranche's *Recherche*, but also to launch a broader attack against the foundations of Descartes's philosophy and to offer an introduction to the philosophy of the ancient Academics, as Foucher understood it.

Foucher's (1675) *Critique* is a catalogue of unproven assumptions that form the basis of Malebranche's *Recherche*. The three most egregious "suppositions", which exhibit the "great Cartesian prejudice", are that there are ideas that represent what is outside of us; that ideas can represent objects without being like those objects; and that we can know by the senses that there is extension outside of us (Watson and Grene 1995: 29–38). Foucher's strategy against these suppositions is to argue that there is no way to distinguish with certainty which ideas represent objects outside of us and which ideas represent only modes of our mind. Foucher launches his attack from the starting point of Cartesian dualism (which is the first unproven supposition that Foucher attacks in his *Critique*): that minds are thinking, non-extended created substances, and that bodies are non-thinking, extended created substances. The lesson of Foucher's skeptical exercise is that Cartesian dualism entails external world skepticism.

Foucher begins by noting that according to Descartes and Malebranche, all ideas are ways of being of the mind. But there is nothing in the mind, which is unextended, that is anything like extended substance. No ideas, therefore, can bear *any* resemblance to material objects that they allegedly represent. It follows that there are no ideas in the mind that resemble extended objects more than do other ideas in the mind, from which Foucher concludes: "either . . . all our ideas represent material objects to us, or . . . we do not have any ideas that are capable of representing material objects to us. And this ruins equally all the claims of this [Malebranche's] work" (Watson and Grene 1995: 30).

One way to answer Foucher's criticism of the first supposition is to posit that ideas can represent objects without resembling them. This is the next supposition to which Foucher turns his skepticism. "If [ideas] can *represent* without being *like*, not only all the ideas we have, whether in our senses, imagination, or some other way whatever it be, have as much right to *represent*, the ones as much as the others, but all our ideas, whatever

they are, would be able to represent one and the same object, a position one cannot support” (Watson and Grene 1995: 32). If ideas could be like material objects, and if representation were based in likeness, then one idea would gain more “right” to represent some material object than another idea by being more like the object. Not all ideas could represent the same object because not all ideas would be sufficiently like that object in order to represent it. But if we take away the capacity of ideas to resemble objects, and we thereby separate the notions of representation and resemblance, as Foucher believes the Cartesians and in particular Malebranche do, then we find ourselves without a natural criterion for determining which idea represents which object. Perhaps God undertakes the pairing of ideas and objects, but then mental representation leaves the realm of philosophy and enters the realm of theology, two sciences that Foucher distinguishes as starkly as anyone in his period (Watson and Grene 1995: 26). So wary is Foucher of mixing philosophy and theology that he may well be worth studying (in a different context) for his important role in the secularization of philosophy.

It is on the basis of passages like the following one that Foucher has been considered a fairly traditional skeptic, whose aim was to create and permanently maintain a distance between ideas in the mind and the essence of the reality outside of the mind:

if our ideas represent these [material] things to us, it is necessary that they cause the same effect in us that these things would if they were present, by causing us to know what they are in themselves, and not the ways of being that these same things would excite in us if they acted through our senses. For as these ways of being are not *like* these things, following the acknowledgment of these philosophers, these ideas would not represent these things, but represent only their effects. So to represent these things as they are in themselves it is necessary that our ideas dispose us exactly as though the things were now in us and were *immediately* present to us. For this it is necessary that our ideas cause an effect in our soul that is at least *like* the effect the things would cause if they were really there, which these ideas could not do unless they were *like* the things. (Watson and Grene 1995: 32–3)

Traditional skeptics are those philosophers who work to create a permanent, unbridgeable divide between the world outside the mind and the ideas in the mind. Foucher’s arguments against Malebranche certainly aim at this goal.

The last Cartesian supposition that Foucher attacks is that we can know extension by means of our senses. He argues by *reductio* that if we accept this supposition, then it would follow that our soul is extended. This is because, according to the Cartesians, sensation is merely passive, and amounts to changes *in us* produced by objects. This entails that by means of sensation we know only modes of our own souls. If we know extension by means of sensation, then extension must be a possible mode of our soul. Our souls must be extended, or extendable, things—a conclusion that undermines the foundation of Cartesian philosophy (Watson and Grene 1995: 36).

The merits of these skeptical arguments—whether they demonstrate understanding of orthodox Cartesianism at the time or whether they succeed in undermining foundational aspects of Descartes’s metaphysics—are questions that Watson has explored

exhaustively in a work that all scholars interested in Foucher must read, *The Breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics* (Watson 1987). My goal in the rest of this chapter, however, is to challenge the portrayal of Foucher by Watson and others as an *anti*-Cartesian, skeptical thinker. This portrayal is possible only if we limit our attention to a few ingenious skeptical arguments that Foucher deployed against Descartes and his followers. The overwhelming impression that the rest of Foucher's works gives is that he was a non-skeptical Cartesian philosopher single-mindedly focused on perfecting a method for discovering truth, a method that Foucher found in the works of ancient Academic philosophers, and that Foucher believed Descartes had rehabilitated, though misapplied.

### 3. FOUCHER, ACADEMIC PHILOSOPHY, AND DESCARTES

According to Foucher, the ancient Academic philosophers were misunderstood largely because people attributed to them positions they held only dialectically. Because the Academics were often embroiled in debates with dogmatic Stoics surrounding issues related to the possibility of knowledge and the criterion of truth, the Academics gained a reputation for being skeptics. But on Foucher's interpretation, Academics are not skeptics, despite their adeptness at wielding skeptical arguments against their opponents' positions. (For more on Foucher's interpretation of the ancient Academic philosophers, see Maia Neto 2003, Charles 2013, and Hickson 2018). Whether or not Foucher's diagnosis of the misunderstanding of the Academy is correct or not, he seems to have hit upon the reason for the frequent misunderstandings of *himself*. Foucher's skeptical arguments against the possibility of knowledge of the nature of the external world are spectacular, and they have a tendency to outshine the rest of Foucher's philosophical writings. But these skeptical arguments by no means capture the overall spirit of Foucher's project, which, far from being skeptical and anti-Cartesian, is, in his own words, dogmatic and very closely tied to Cartesianism.

Foucher's main philosophical works (1673, 1675, 1687, and 1693) are all intended to clarify the correct method of philosophizing. Even the fairly narrow critique of Malebranche in 1675 is worthwhile in Foucher's mind only because it "will give me occasion to justify the manner of philosophizing that I have observed in the *Dissertations*" (i.e. Foucher 1673). The skepticism that is employed in Foucher's writings, including in his critique of Malebranche, is never an end-in-itself; in fact, only those who are misinformed could ever think that Academic philosophers were skeptics (Foucher 1687: 2). Nevertheless, skepticism, or at least extreme intellectual caution, does play an important role in the Academic way of philosophizing, which is reducible to five laws, which bear striking resemblance to the laws that Descartes establishes for the discovery of truth in the *Discourse*: 1) Proceed only by means of demonstration in philosophy; 2) Do not consider questions that cannot be decided clearly; 3) Admit that you do not know that of

which you are ignorant; 4) Distinguish the things you know from the things that you do not know; 5) Always search for new truths (see Foucher 1687: 5–9).

The role of skepticism in Foucher's philosophy is very similar to the role that skepticism plays in Descartes's First Meditation: to distinguish what we know with certainty from what we do not know with certainty. The goal of Foucher's critical engagement with Cartesians was to demonstrate that they began with, but ultimately departed from, this Academic way of philosophizing: "[Descartes] wished to observe the First Law of the Academics, but because he did not observe the Third Law, he fell into obscurity and error after taking only two or three steps along the path of evident truth" (Foucher 1687: 111). All of the "Suppositions" and "Assertions" detailed in Foucher's (1675) critique of Malebranche are specific examples of Cartesian departures from the Third Law of Academic philosophy. Foucher's goal is not to undermine for destruction's sake; it is to call back the straying Cartesians to the correct path and to begin the search for truth anew: "it is necessary to bring Descartes back to the Academy, not to leave the Academy to join Descartes" (Foucher 1693: 113). Just as we should not consider Descartes a skeptic on account of the arguments of his First Meditation, so too we should not consider Foucher a skeptic on account of his skeptical critique of Descartes and other Cartesians. In fact, there is good reason to consider Foucher a Cartesian on account of his skeptical objections to Cartesians, since his methodological use of skepticism parallels that of Descartes.

There are at least four ways in which Foucher's Academic way of philosophizing is Cartesian, all of which Foucher himself recognized as Cartesian aspects of his philosophy: 1) "they [i.e. the Academics and Descartes] begin to philosophize by means of doubting things in general, and by the universal examination of our judgments"; 2) "[t]hey agree that we must consider the senses incapable of judging by themselves the truth of things outside of us"; and 3) "[t]hey agree in following approximately the same method of philosophizing" (Foucher 1693: 187–8). The fourth similarity between Foucher's Academics and the Cartesians is the most fundamental, and the one that upsets the skeptical, anti-Cartesian reading of Foucher more than anything else. Foucher spends roughly a quarter of his (1693) *Dissertations* defending Descartes's criterion of truth, which Foucher sometimes calls "le bon sens" and other times "évidence". This evidence has its origin in divine reason, and shines like a "torch in the fog" (Foucher 1693: 204–5). The goal of Academic philosophers is to discover evident truths and to teach the correct method for discovering them, for delving deeply into them, and for using them to discover further evident truths. Foucher is not short on examples of evident truths that have been discovered, the majority of which come from mathematics (Foucher 1693: 83–8).

However, Foucher also identifies a number of "dogmas" that distinguish his Academic philosophy from Cartesianism. The proof of these dogmas would have constituted the substance of the next volumes of Foucher's "complete system of philosophy", which likely would have included a Metaphysics and a Physics (see Foucher 1693: 197), had he lived to write them. These non-Cartesian dogmas are: 1) that the essence of matter does not consist in extension (what the essence of matter is, Foucher does not say);

2) that minds and bodies engage in reciprocal action on one another; 3) that there is no idea of “infinity in act”, there is only the idea of “infinity in power”; 4) a different means of proving the existence of God; 5) several (unnamed) doctrines in physics, despite the fact that the Academics agree with the Cartesians about the infinite divisibility of matter (Foucher 1693: 188). So Foucher was not a Cartesian in that he was committed to every doctrine of Descartes. However, Foucher’s non- and anti-Cartesian philosophical views are far from being all skeptical in spirit. Foucher had his own positive philosophical views.

#### 4. FOUCHER’S ACCIDENTAL ROLE IN THE SKEPTICAL ATTACK ON DESCARTES’S CRITERION OF TRUTH

If we consider Foucher’s works as a whole, rather than considering particular arguments taken out of context, then the label ‘skeptic’ does not fit Foucher. Foucher’s Academic works certainly employ skeptical arguments, but the same can be said of the works of many, if not most, philosophers, especially those who engaged in polemical battles with other philosophers. Skeptical arguments are powerful tools for revealing philosophical errors, for questioning an author’s certainty, for exercising the imagination and creativity, and for reminding us that there is still work to be done. They are not the possessions of skeptics alone. There are innumerable skeptical arguments in the Western philosophical canon, but very few genuine skeptics.

If Foucher is not a genuine skeptic, then what are we to make of the place usually assigned to him in the history of Cartesianism, and in the history of early modern philosophy generally? Again, focusing on Foucher’s works, we should consider him a philosopher inspired by and committed to Descartes’s method, but also a philosopher who felt that improvements could and should be made to the application of that method. Skepticism was the means used by Foucher to make the need for these improvements manifest. Foucher is a methodological Cartesian, but doctrinally he is an original philosopher whose complete system, if it had been finished, might have made a significant contribution to the development of modern philosophy and science.

However, labels like ‘skeptic’ are not only employed by historians of philosophy to describe single authors or their works in isolation from other authors’ works. Labels are also useful tools of the historian of philosophy to pick out trends, to mark periods, to highlight themes across authors, and to indicate important developments. To add to the “Foucher paradox”, therefore, I want to argue in this last section that despite leaving us with a corpus that is not itself a skeptical project, there is still a sense in which Foucher’s works contributed to seventeenth-century anti-Cartesian French skepticism. Foucher, like Descartes on Popkin’s view, turns out to be a skeptic *malgré lui*, but for different reasons.



One way to make this argument is on the basis of Watson's argument in *The Breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics*. According to Watson, the decisive issues that led to the downfall of Cartesianism in the late seventeenth century were precisely the issues that Foucher targeted in his Academic writings: "The downfall of Cartesianism in the late seventeenth century has now been traced to the inability of Cartesians to solve two major problems deriving from conflicts among their metaphysical principles. They could give philosophically satisfactory explanations neither of how minds can know material objects, nor of how mind and matter can causally interact" (Watson 1987: 149). Foucher was not a skeptic, but his use of skeptical arguments brought down one of the most important philosophical systems in the history of Western thought. So from the point of view of the big-picture historian of philosophy who is interested in tracking the rise, development, and fall of great systems, Foucher's place in the story, whether he would like it or not, is that of the devastating skeptic. This is one sense in which Foucher is an "accidental skeptic": Foucher's skeptical writings are, from our point of view, far more historically important and interesting than his non-skeptical views, so from the historian's perspective Foucher is most usefully treated as a skeptic.

The above justification for ascribing the label 'skeptic' to Foucher hinges on Foucher having a very prominent role—one worth labeling—in the downfall of Cartesianism. However, Thomas Lennon denies that Foucher's role was that great: "a disadvantage of Watson's role for Foucher is that he [Foucher] just wasn't well enough known or widely enough read to have had the effect ascribed to him. Malebranche himself did not take Foucher seriously" (Lennon 2003: 119). Lennon suggests that it was not Foucher who brought about Descartes's decline, but Huet: "Foucher contributed to the downfall less by noting the internal inconsistency of Cartesian principles than by bringing Huet to believe that Cartesianism represented a threat to religion, and that the danger was Descartes' failure to adhere to his own (perfectly acceptable) principles" (Lennon 2003: 119). If Lennon is right, then despite the fact that Foucher inspired a clear skeptic, Huet, to attack Descartes, there is really no point in calling Foucher himself a skeptic. Huet, who knew Foucher well, seems to have been of this opinion: "[Foucher] hardly knew the names of Arcesilaus and Carneades, let alone anything about Pyrrhonism" (Letter to Nicaise, 19 April 1697; quoted from Rabbe 1867: Appendix X). Nevertheless, we might still call Foucher an "accidental skeptic" on account of his role in motivating skeptics to attack Descartes.

However, there is another, more interesting sense in which Foucher is an accidental skeptic, which makes sense of treating him, along with Bayle and Huet, as one of the "three skeptical musketeers" of late seventeenth-century French philosophy. Within the span of a decade, and seemingly without plan or collaboration, these three philosophers contributed to a crisis that went straight to the heart of Cartesian philosophy—not just its metaphysics, which is Watson's focus, but the core of its epistemology. Foucher, Huet, and Bayle cast serious doubt in very different ways on the Cartesian criterion of truth, which the three of them took to be "*évidence*". However, whereas Huet and Bayle attacked the criterion intentionally and directly in their writings, Foucher undermined the criterion while trying to defend it!

The Latin ‘*evidentia*’, the French ‘*évidence*’, and their cognates are not prominent terms in Descartes’s writings, though they are present, and in crucial texts such as the first rule of the *Discourse*: “never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth [*ne recevoir jamais aucune chose pour vraie, que je ne la connusse évidemment être telle*]” (CSM I.120/AT VI.18). Descartes used a wide variety of concepts when engaging the issue of the criterion of truth: indubitability, clarity and distinctness, the natural light of reason, good sense. However, by the time Foucher, Huet, and Bayle began attacking Cartesianism at the end of the seventeenth century, ‘*évidence*’ had become the catch-all term for the Cartesian criterion of truth. In his famous skeptical article in the *Dictionary*, “Pyrrhon”, Bayle has his skeptical abbot pronounce: “You will rightly claim that *évidence* is the criterion [*caractere sûr*] of the truth; for if *évidence* is not this criterion, then nothing would be” (Bayle 1740: 732). After enumerating the many things that might pass as “the” Cartesian criterion of truth, Huet concludes that *évidence* is the essential feature of them all: “[Descartes] seems to take evidence to be something general that ought to be in everything we perceive that deserves to be regarded as true, whether it is perceived through the natural light, or through clear and distinct perception, or through reasoning, or through the senses, or in some other way” (Huet 2003 [1694]: 121).

The reason for the simplification of Descartes’s criteria of truth into a single dominant criterion seems to be Malebranche, at the outset of whose *Recherche* we read: “truth is almost never found except with evidence, and evidence consists only in the clear and distinct perception of all the constituents and relations of the object necessary to support a well-found judgment” (Malebranche 1997 [1674]: 10). Discussions of criteria of truth in the period cannot be distinguished from discussions of the separation of faith and reason, and Malebranche, more than Descartes, made *évidence* the criterion of the philosopher as opposed to the theologian: “[w]e must be equally submissive to faith and evidence; but in matters of faith, evidence must not be sought before belief, just as in matters of nature, one must not stop at faith, that is, at the authority of philosophers. In a word, to be among the Faithful, it is necessary to believe blindly; but to be a philosopher, it is necessary to see with evidence” (Malebranche 1997 [1674]: 62). In the late seventeenth century, therefore, to attack *évidence* is to attack philosophy as an autonomous discipline vis-à-vis theology.

Bayle and Huet both attacked *évidence* and along with it both Cartesian philosophy and rational inquiry in general. Bayle’s skeptical objections in the article “Pyrrhon” are well known. Through a dialogue between two Catholic abbots, Bayle demonstrates that a number of evident rational principles, such as the transitive property of equality, are contradicted by core Christian doctrines, such as the Trinity. To be rationally consistent and faithfully Christian, therefore, one must reject the evident principles as false. But if one does so, then the criterion of evidence loses its credibility (Bayle 1740: 732). This article of the *Dictionary* is notoriously difficult to interpret; Bayle took great pains in his final debates with Rationalist theologians to point out that he, Bayle, is not a Catholic abbot, and a fortiori he is not the skeptical Catholic abbot of his writings. Nevertheless, Bayle, in those same debates with Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736) and Isaac

Jaquelot (1647–1708), undermined *évidence* by arguing that we must acknowledge that there are many degrees of *évidence* and it is not possible to determine who, if anyone, possesses the highest degree (Bayle 2016 [1707]: 162–3). It follows from Bayle’s reasoning that possession of *évidence* is not sufficient for declaring that one possesses the truth. Bayle asserted throughout his career that recognizing *évidence* is a necessary condition for possessing the truth, but without the sufficiency condition met, *évidence* is not the unique and powerful criterion it was thought to be in late seventeenth-century French thought.

Huet attacked both the necessity and sufficiency of *évidence* for guaranteeing us that we possess the truth. Like a traditional Pyrrhonian skeptic, Huet employs a battery of arguments drawing upon the various tropes outlined by Sextus Empiricus (160–210). He delights above all, as skeptics usually do, in documenting disputes among his rivals. The trope of interminable disagreement, the first mode of Agrippa, is turned by Huet against the Cartesians and their criterion of truth: “The Cartesians also disagree among themselves and, using the same standard of truth, maintain opposite and contradictory views” (Huet 2003 [1694]: 127). For Huet, *évidence* is no more authoritative than a rumble in the gut for determining what is true and what is not. In fact, like stomach troubles, the appearance of *évidence* can be accounted for physiologically, by appealing to brain impulses and the flow of animal spirits (Huet 1723: 49–50).

In the eighteenth century, Jean-Pierre de Crousaz (1663–1750) took these recent skeptical attacks by Bayle and Huet against *évidence* to constitute a philosophical crisis in urgent need of a response (Crousaz 1733). Crousaz does not mention Foucher as adding anything to the problem, but a strong case can be made that he did. Whereas Bayle attacked the sufficiency of *évidence*, and whereas Huet attacked both the necessity and the sufficiency of *évidence* for guaranteeing the truth, Foucher defended both the necessity and sufficiency of *évidence*. However, after hundreds of pages of Foucher’s Academic writings, readers are left wondering what, if anything, could ever be an evident proposition beyond the basic axioms of geometry. Foucher defended *évidence* in principle, but the effect of his writings is to cast serious doubt on the *scope* of *évidence*. If a philosopher marches by the light of *évidence* alone, which is the first rule of the Academics, will she ever manage to be anything more than a geometer? Can Cartesians, who follow this method, ever achieve anything outside of pure mathematics? None of Foucher’s writings suggests a positive response to this question.

Foucher was deeply aware of the limitations of scope and the turtle’s pace of his, and the Cartesians’, philosophical method. In his last apology on behalf of the Academic method, Foucher explains that philosophy, especially in his day, *must be slow* to proceed: “It is not time to build, it is still necessary to dig to support the foundation; for we are still today in the same state of ignorance that they were in during the time of the Academics” (Foucher 1693: 79). Given the ignorance of his time, the proper pursuit of the philosopher was to study first principles. Aware that his readers might tire of reading endlessly about first principles, Foucher gives an apology for these too, arguing that it is by means of careful attention to the foundations that we are able to, literally, reach the stars: “We easily conceive that if two triangles have two sides equal to two sides and one

angle equal to one angle, then they are congruent; yet many men despise this truth as if it possessed little importance. Nevertheless, it is by this means that we have discovered the art of measuring inaccessible places, of determining the sizes of the stars, and of judging their distance from the earth” (Foucher 1693: 85).

By means of the passage just quoted Foucher tries to establish the “esteem that we owe to evident truths” (Foucher 1693: 83), which are the truths that Foucher’s Academic method aims to uncover. This esteem is based, apparently, in the potential of evident truths, like those of basic geometry, to bear fruit in the empirical sciences. Here lies the irony. Foucher’s skeptical arguments against the Cartesians, outlined above, leave the reader wondering how, if at all, it is possible to arrive at knowledge of the real existence of extended objects outside of the mind. None of Foucher’s positive writings give us any reason to believe that “inaccessible places” and “stars” are anything more than ideas in the mind. What meaning, therefore, is there to the notion of the “distance of the stars from the earth”? If this distance is just a relation that joins together two mere ideas, star and earth, then most of Foucher’s readers will have little esteem for his evident truths, which fail to get us outside of our minds into the real world.

Bayle and Huet were sworn enemies of *évidence* and did what they could to undermine it. But there is a sense in which Foucher, allegedly the friend of *évidence*, did the most harm to this central Cartesian notion. If the friends of *évidence*, like Foucher, find themselves trapped in their own minds when they follow this criterion, then there is hardly any need for the enemies of *évidence* to wage their battle! Since Foucher’s writings serve in this way to undermine *évidence*, and thereby aid Bayle’s and Huet’s attacks on the criterion, there is solid reason to count Foucher a part of this skeptical crisis. But perhaps, if Foucher had lived a decade or so longer, he would have completed his system of philosophy and shown us how to recover the real existence of the mind-independent world by following the light of *évidence*. This possibility should lead us to count Foucher, once again, merely as an “accidental skeptic”.

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