

**PYRRHONISM OR ACADEMIC SKEPTICISM? FRIEDRICH WILHELM BIERLING'S 'REASONABLE DOUBT' IN THE *COMMENTATIO DE PYRRHONISMO HISTORICO* (1724)**

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Following the revival of ancient skepticism in early-modern Europe, debates about the possibility of obtaining true and certain knowledge of the world took place not only in metaphysics and in the natural sciences, but also in history and other humanities. While seeking to comprehend their own place in the process of historical development, 18<sup>th</sup>-century historians attempted to reconsider the nature and the purpose of historical writing, in general. Simultaneously, historical scholarship drew critiques from new sources. Cartesians, Deists, and philosophical skeptics posed challenges to the reliability of the discipline. Even antiquarian scholars, influenced by the humanist tradition, began to doubt the veracity of ancient histories due to the paucity of documentary evidence and to the alleged unreliability of reputed authors such as Livy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and Plutarch. Consequently scholars began to re-examine their sources as they sought new foundations for true and certain historical knowledge.

Despite the increasingly acerbic nature of these debates, some thinkers argued that a middle ground between extreme Pyrrhonian skepticism and complete moral certainty about all historical facts was possible. One such attempt to integrate skeptical critiques with traditional historical methods and to rehabilitate Pyrrhonism in the eyes of the learned community was provided by the German scholar Friedrich Wilhelm Bierling (1676-1728). A professor of philosophy and theology at the University of Rinteln and an active correspondent of Leibnitz on the very question of historical certainty, Bierling offered both a novel approach to the study and writing of history and a unique interpretation of the varieties of philosophical skepticism.

He began his work by attempting to dispel the notion that Pyrrhonism amounted to a complete rejection of certainty. He argued that Pyrrho and his disciples had been significantly misinterpreted, and that their goal had been merely to challenge the untenable positions of the dogmatists and to force them back toward a middle ground. He saw the hyperbolic doubt of the Pyrrhonists as a *jeu d'esprit* and as a tool used to

ridicule the dogmatists. Indeed, Bierling employed Sextus Empiricus' meaning of the terms Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism, suggesting that while the adherents of the former abandoned all search for truth, the disciples of the latter school continued their scholarly pursuits. Although he explicitly argued in favor of a reasonable historical Pyrrhonism, Bierling, in fact, described an approach that most resembled Academic skepticism. He admitted that while definitive historical truths existed, they were often inaccessible to scholars. He also advocated a probabilistic approach to the study of history, provided a scale of certainty for various kinds of historical facts, and argued that a judicious suspension of judgment led to a greater, not lesser, degree of certainty. Thus, despite his explicit claims to provide a place for Pyrrhonism in history, the epistemological strategies promoted by Bierling resemble elements of Ciceronian or Academic skepticism much more closely than they do Pyrrhonism.<sup>309</sup>

Bierling's particular interpretation of different varieties of skepticism sheds light on the way in which 18<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers understood the sub-divisions within this philosophical movement. The relationship between Pyrrhonian and Ciceronian or Academic skepticism in questions of historical certainty reveals a complex interaction between the two variants of this ancient philosophy. In fact, Cicero's influence was rather significant: his claim that a historian should tell nothing more and nothing less than the truth was almost ubiquitous in contemporaneous discourses.<sup>310</sup> By considering Bierling's approach to historiography in the context of the vibrant debates of his time, both in France and in Germany, and by comparing his analysis of skepticism to that of his contemporaries, this paper will try to demonstrate how Academic skepticism and mitigated Pyrrhonism came to resemble each other in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Re-appropriating Pyrrhonism**

Since its revival in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Pyrrhonism gradually became the dominant strain of philosophical skepticism in learned Europe. The two were synonymous in the minds of critics, who derided all forms of this ancient philosophy and associated it with irreligion, immorality, and anti-intellectualism. This conflation of terms rendered the distinction between the various schools of early-modern skepticism more difficult, since

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<sup>309</sup> This becomes especially apparent if one compares Bierling's skepticism against the five elements of Cicero's *Academica* articulated in Jose R. Maia Neto's seminal article "Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 2 (April 1997): 199–220.

<sup>310</sup> Cicero, *De Oratores* II.62 "Nam quis nescit primam esse historiae legem, ne quid falsi dicere audeat? Deinde ne quid veri non audeat?"

both critics and supporters frequently used the terms interchangeably. In order to explain the seeming intransigence and the paradoxical philosophical positions of their opponents, anti-skeptical thinkers often claimed that their adversaries were providing insincere arguments that aimed only to oppose particular positions and ideas rather than to provide coherent philosophical views. They attributed the skeptics' insincerity to a moral and intellectual disease: one that was corrupting the hearts and minds of students and intellectuals of their age and that had dangerous implications not only for philosophy and learning, but also for the state of society in general.

Effectively, Bierling was attempting to clear the name of Pyrrhonism in a learned culture where calling someone a Pyrrhonian was equivalent to calling them an atheist or a libertine. He noted that he was well aware of the derision associated with the ancient school and its support for a universal doubt. In order to undermine this association, Bierling attempted to redefine the term "Pyrrhonism" by using Sextus Empiricus' tripartite classification of all philosophical schools. The first set consisted of dogmatic philosophers, such as Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics, who believed that they had arrived at the true understanding of things through their inquiries. The second group included the Academics such as Clitomachus and Carneades, who after an unsuccessful search for the truth, declared that it could not be found and abandoned their efforts. Finally, according to Bierling, Sextus placed the skeptics in the third category, describing them as those who, despite not having found the truth continued their search.<sup>311</sup>

By repeating this classification, Bierling sought to present Pyrrhonian skepticism as a pragmatic school of thought and to weaken its association with radical and universal doubt. In his *Dissertations sur la recherche de la vérité contenant L'histoire et les principes de la philosophie des académiciens* (1693) Simon Foucher, who openly considered himself a follower of the Academic tradition, offered a similar defense of skepticism, suggesting that, far from abandoning all attempts to understand the world, the Academic philosophy consisted in the continuous search for the truth.

We could even call it (Academic skepticism) the philosophy of all times, since, because it consists in searching, it is not unreasonable to attribute to it all the good and solid things that the investigations of all the centuries could acquire. One can consider it as the main path toward the

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<sup>311</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Bierling, *Commentatio de Pyrrhonismo Historico* (Leipzig, 1724) 2–3. He cites Sextus Empiricus (Latin, book 1, chapter 1).

truth, others being nothing else but particular roads by which the dogmatists will get lost in the confusion of their prejudices.<sup>312</sup>

Foucher rejected Sextus' claim that the Academicians abandoned all inquiry; however, his description of the goal Academic skepticism strongly resembled Bierling's interpretation of Pyrrhonism. In both cases, the authors emphasized that the chief aim was precisely not to abandon the search for truth, but to continue it gradually and methodically.

Bierling further suggested that the critics had either completely misunderstood Pyrrhonism or accepted the fictional accusations made against it by other philosophical sects at face value. Instead, Bierling suggested that Pyrrho, despite being known as the head of the Pyrrhonians, did not go further than seeking to advance a tamed version of skepticism.

You might ask: what does moderate Pyrrhonism consist of? I designate three rules to you: Investigate carefully; judge prudently; and thus restrain judgment while examining and refuse to understand obscure things.<sup>313</sup>

Bierling thus attempted to present Pyrrhonism not as a radical school whose adherents advocated doubting everything, but as a judicious method of approaching philosophical questions.

According to him, it was the other philosophical sects, both ancient and modern, that provided inaccurate and exaggerated descriptions of their skeptical opponents, painting them as radical, unreasonable, extravagant, and morally corrupt. They had accused Pyrrho both of intellectual insincerity, for rejecting the most certain principles, and of moral corruption, for undermining fundamental ethical doctrines. Bierling suggested that it was a common practice among ancient philosophers to circulate vicious rumors about the private lives of their adversaries to demonstrate the supposed practical and moral failings of their tenets. He compared the rumors that Pyrrho's enemies made up about him to the allegations that the Stoics had disseminated about

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<sup>312</sup> Simon Foucher, *Dissertations sur la recherche de la vérité contenant L'histoire et les principes de la philosophie des académiciens*, (Paris: Anisson, 1693). 3–4. “On la pourroit mesme apeller la Philosophie de tous les tems: car parce qu'elle consiste à chercher, il n'est pas déraisonnable de lui attribuer tout ce que les recherches de tous les siècles ont pu acquerir de bon & de solide. On la peut donc considerer comme le grand chemin de la verité, les autres n'étant que des routes particulieres par lesquelles les Dogmatistes vont s'égarer dans la confusion de leurs prejugez.”

<sup>313</sup> Bierling, *Commentatio de Pyrrhonismo Historico*, 6. “Quaeris: in quo consistat ille pyrrhonismus temperatus? Tres tibi commendo regulas: inquire sedulo; iudica circumspecte; rebus ita exigentibus iudicium cohibe altumque sapere noli.”

Epicurus and his hedonistic practices.<sup>314</sup> Bierling attempted to rehabilitate Pyrrho's personal reputation by noting that, far from teaching his disciples to ignore all moral rules, he had urged them to follow the customs and ethical standards of their societies and to remain loyal to their countries. Bierling further noted that although many people acknowledged the veracity of established moral tenets, they consistently violated them anyway. Thus, even if the skeptics really denied the validity of established moral or religious orders, such a rejection had no necessary connection with behavior.<sup>315</sup>

Nor was Pyrrhonism a simple rejection of established principles, according to Bierling. He criticized Descartes for providing a caricature of skeptical doubt in his *Meditations* (1641). Since Descartes had rejected as false, those things which he believed to be uncertain, Bierling argued, he was effectively still offering a dogmatic proposition:

Holding for false, those things that we doubt, offends the first principles of reason. One, who holds things as false, denies their truth; one who denies, maintains or establishes something; one who denies (therefore) does not doubt.<sup>316</sup>

Bierling also questioned the existence of true Pyrrhonians, arguing that there had probably never been any philosopher who had seriously agreed with the full implications of Pyrrhonian skepticism and doubted the veracity of every single proposition. Instead, he argued, Pyrrhonism was a rhetorical strategy used to counter the unfounded claims of dogmatic philosophers who went too far in their assertions. It provided a method for invalidating dogmatic positions. By suggesting that the mind could not know anything with certainty, including the veracity of the proposition that the mind could know nothing with certainty, the skeptics advanced a position that was extremely difficult to refute philosophically. By making their own conclusion inconclusive, the skeptics left their opponents with little to disprove. The burden on disproof lay with the dogmatic philosophers, while the skeptics needed merely to demonstrate the weaknesses of the various positive axioms and premises:

Clever and witty men appear as skeptics who, in order to instruct and harass the dogmatists, pretended to doubt even the most plainly evident things. Thus, they could always transfer the

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 11–13.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 15–17.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 22. “Pro falsis habenda, de quibus dubitamus, primis rationis repugnant principiis. Qui rem pro falsa habet, eam veram esse negat, qui negat, aliquid statuit: qui aliquid statuit, non dubitat.”

onus of proving things to others, and they could remain in the refuge from (ζητησεως/zeteseos) dispute, which truly and extremely seems as their advantage.<sup>317</sup>

For Bierling, Pyrrhonism had been misunderstood because the skeptics' hyperbolic doubt was mistakenly seen as a sincere position, not as a rhetorical device to show the usefulness of a skeptical attitude in all inquiries. The Pyrrhonists only formulated such extreme propositions about the uncertainty of all knowledge in order to confound and frustrate their opponents.

And thus they (who) agree with Pyrrhonism are not really Pyrrhonists. The weapons and arms of wisdom are to doubt prudently, the muscles and arms of ignorance are either to blindly negate or affirm anything, or to settle utterly nothing although there are evident reasons for settling.<sup>318</sup>

Skeptical doubt, rather than obscuring the human understanding of the world, offered an essential way of guaranteeing the relative accuracy of that understanding.

Bierling presented Pyrrhonians not as dangerous and irreverent thinkers, but as clever rhetoricians who sought the probable nature of things through unprejudiced examinations. Citing Bayle's famous dictum, "I know too much to be a Pyrrhonian, I know too little to be a dogmatist," he argued that a reasonable doubt was a perfect middle ground between dogmatism and complete skepticism, both of which were equally unreasonable.<sup>319</sup> Having established the limits of human knowledge and the appropriate place for doubt, Bierling also criticized those who might sincerely advocate complete skepticism. He suggested that such people were worthy neither of being despised nor of being refuted, but, instead, should be mocked and ridiculed.<sup>320</sup> Thus, by distancing what he saw as a reasonable and mild Pyrrhonism from radical skepticism, Bierling attempted to re-appropriate the term and clear its name.

### **Pyrrhonism in History**

The main goal of Bierling's exposé of Pyrrhonism was to explain its place in historical scholarship. Despite attempts, such as Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Demonstratio*

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 21. "Scepticos exstitisse faceti & satirici ingenii homines, qui, ut dogmaticos exercerent atque exagitant, simulabant, se de omnibus, etiam clarissima in luce positus, dubitare. Poterant ita semper probandi onus in alios deoluere, seque in asylum ζητησεως/zeteseos recipere, quod sane perquam commodum ipsis videbatur."

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 6. "Et sic accedunt ad pyrrhonismum non vero sunt Pyrrhonici. Nerui & artus sapientiae sunt, prudenter dubitare: nerui & artus insipientiae, vel temere aliquid adfirmare aut negare, vel nihil prorsus definire quamquam evidentes adsint definiendi rationes."

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 5. In footnote: "J'en sai trop pour être Pyrrhonien, j'en sai trop peu pour être Dogmatique."

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 24.

*Evangelica* (1672), to provide geometric proofs of the veracity of Biblical history, scholars increasingly believed that the humanities, and history in particular, could not command indubitable demonstrations. Bierling claimed that in history one was incapable of obtaining the level of certainty possible in mathematics and physics. He maintained that historical demonstrations could only reach a high degree of probability, one that no rational person could doubt in good faith (moral certainty or *certitudo morale*), but these demonstrations could never reach complete metaphysical certainty. Bierling's French contemporary, the erudite Nicolas Fréret, explained the peculiar position in which history found itself with respect to the sciences:

Nevertheless, the sciences most important to man, such as ethics, politics, economics, medicine, criticism, jurisprudence are incapable of obtaining the certainty identical to geometrical demonstration. They all have their own distinct dialectic, as Mr. Leibnitz noted, and their demonstrations never extend beyond great probability. But this probability has such a [demonstrative] power in these matters that reasonable minds would never refuse to submit to it...<sup>321</sup>

Such a position freed historians from the burden of maintaining the untenable proposition that their accounts offered indubitably certain and accurate representations of the past. History, as a human science, would have its own standard of proof.

Bierling, in turn, noted that the discrepancy between history and physics lay in the fact that physical phenomena were perceived directly by the senses, while historical causes and motives often lay hidden from view.

Therefore, it seems unsuitable to compare historical truths to physical ones. Physical effects affect the senses, most of the causes lay hidden. Likewise, we learn from the accounts of historians, things that are either facts or events; however the true circumstances of things, like those that might imprint the first movement to the machine, are not always revealed.<sup>322</sup>

He saw the impossibility of perceiving original causes as the fundamental reason for the lack of scientific certainty in historical studies.

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<sup>321</sup> Nicolas Fréret, "Réflexions sur l'étude des anciennes histoires, & sur le degré de certitude de leurs preuves," *Mémoires de littérature tirez des registres de l'Académie royale des inscriptions et belles-lettres* VI (1729), 184–185. "Cependant les sciences les plus importantes à l'homme, la Morale, la Politique, l'Oeconomie, la Médecine, la Critique, la Jurisprudence sont incapables de cette certitude identique des démonstrations de Géométrie, elles ont chacune leur dialectique à part, comme l'a remarqué M. Leibnits, & leurs démonstrations ne vont jamais qu'à la plus grand probabilité ; mais cette même probabilité a une telle force dans ces matières, que les esprits raisonnables ne refuseront jamais de s'y soumettre...."

<sup>322</sup> Bierling, *Commentatio de Pyrrhonismo Historico*, 68–69. "Non inconueniens igitur videtur, historicas veritates cum physicis comparare. Physici effectus in sensus incurrunt, caussae maxima ex parte latent. Eadem ratione ex historicis discimus, hoc vel illud factum & gestum esse, verae autem rerum circumstantiae, quae toti quasi machinae primum motum impresserunt, non semper aperiuntur."

Since, as Bierling had argued earlier, it was not unreasonable to exercise moderate reservations and doubts in all inquiries, then history, due to its epistemologically inferior status to mathematics, was no exception. The certainty of historical events depended on human authority, which could either deceive in reporting the facts, or err in the understanding of the events. Bierling argued that the majority of uncertainties about the past arose from the faults of human nature: vanity, prejudice, and superstition,<sup>323</sup>

Indeed, the reliability of ancient and modern historians came under increasing scrutiny toward the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as scholars continued to find errors, inaccuracies, and falsities in historical accounts. Some blamed the emotions and prejudices of historians for corrupting their narratives, laying particular stress on the tendency to attribute false glory to one's fatherland and to make inaccurate or false statements out of enmity for other nations.<sup>324</sup> In his critique of the history of Calvinism by ex-Jesuit Louis Maimbourg, Pierre Bayle noted the prevalence of religious prejudice against the Reformed faith. He suggested that all historical scholarship suffered from partisanship, as each side attempted to paint their adversaries in a bad light. Discussing the historical disputes about the Wars of Religion, Bayle claimed that he wished to withdraw himself from the debate: "...as for myself, I wish to be a Pyrrhonian, I affirm neither one nor the other [side]..."<sup>325</sup> It is such bias and a diversity of conflicting opinions that, according to Bayle, made Historical Pyrrhonism so appealing to his contemporaries:

As for the rest, I am not alone who gives into this kind of Historical Pyrrhonism. The peculiarity that appears in the majority of Historians brings a great number of learned men to this sect. This partiality begins because of the great disorder in the newspapers, and it spreads from there into the works of malicious historians who compose their rhapsodies based on these miserable sources. These are historians who care nothing for the truth, but their great number attains them a certain merit, which makes one oppose them to the authority of a good historian, and from there things become problematic.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>324</sup> See for example : Peter Friedrich Arpe, *Pyrrho sive de dubia et incerta historiae et historicorum veterum fide argumentum* (1716), 11–13.

<sup>325</sup> Pierre Bayle, *Critique generale de l'histoire du calvinisme de Mr. Maimbourg* (Villefranche: Pierre Blanc, 1682), 19. "Dispute là dessus qui voudra, pour moi je veux être Pirhonien, je n'affirme ny l'un ny l'autre & cela me suffit pour ne trouver dans toutes ces Guerres aucun prejugué legitime contre la Divinité de ma Religion."

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 27. "Au reste je ne suis pas le seul qui donne dans cette espece de Pyrrhonisme Historique. La particularité qui se remarque dans la plupart des Historiens entraîne dans cette secte là un tres-grand nombre de gens d'esprit. Cette partialité commence avec son plus grand desordre dans les Gazettes, & se répand de là au long & au large dans une infinité de méchants Historiens qui ne composent leurs Rhapsodies que de ces miserable pieces. Ce sont des Histoires qui ne valent rien à la verité, mais leur grand

Bayle did not deny the existence of an objective reality of historical events, but argued that the unreliability of historians made true and certain knowledge of the past virtually unattainable.<sup>327</sup>

Furthermore, Bierling and his contemporaries noted that ancient histories, even those written by the most reputed authors, contained grave errors, inconsistencies, and uncritical recitations of myths and fables. The inability of earlier historians to distinguish between fact and fiction rendered the problem more difficult, challenging not only historians' sincerity, but also their critical abilities. Given such contemporaneous critiques of scholarly reliability, Bierling argued that historical investigations could only command hypothetical demonstrations, not absolute proofs: "No one denies that there are very probable things in history, or ones that are morally certain, both of which approach to the point of the highest probability."<sup>328</sup> Bierling insisted that scholars adopt a mild Pyrrhonist position that consisted in a careful examination of the facts, a circumspect judgment of all accounts, a meticulous weighing the relevant evidence, and, most importantly, an understanding of the limits of what could be known.<sup>329</sup> Furthermore, he proposed a scale of degrees of probability, dividing historical facts into three classes.

The first class contained facts that were narrated either by contemporaries or by trustworthy historians and that included no elements that could be held as uncertain. For instance, one had no reason to doubt that Caesar or Pompey had existed and that they had waged war against each other, just as one had no evidence to deny that Alexander the Great had defeated Darius in battle. However, Bierling noted, even this class of facts could be subject to doubt. He provided several examples, most notably the Jesuit Jean Hardouin's claim that the majority of ancient works had been forged by 13<sup>th</sup> century monks. Nevertheless, he dismissed Hardouin's extreme Pyrrhonism, suggesting that it was much more likely that the Jesuit's hypothesis was wrong than that almost the whole ancient corpus had been fabricated.<sup>330</sup>

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nombre leur tient lieu d'un certain merite qui fait qu'on les oppose à l'autorité d'un bon Historiographe, & par là les choses deviennent problematiques."

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>328</sup> Bierling, *Commentatio de Pyrrhonismo Historico*, 27. "Nemo negat, esse in historia rex maxime probabiles, siue moraliter certas, quae summum versimilitudinis gradum attingunt."

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 33–36.

The second category contained causes and circumstances surrounding events in the past. Since these facts could be either hidden or disputed in divergent testimonies, one could suspend judgment about them, whenever appropriate. Bierling offered several near contemporary examples. He argued that while it was certain *that* Charles V abdicated the throne, historians provided multiple explanations for his decision. Some maintained that it was out of a desire for peace and rest; others attributed it to his ill health; still others noted his son's thirst for power. Similarly, those writing about Henry VIII offered several possible reasons for his divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Catholic historians blamed his uncontrollable lust for Ann Boleyn. Protestant historian Gilbert Burnet maintained that Henry's consciousness did not allow him to remain married to his dead brother's wife. Still others mentioned Catherine's inability to bear a child and the monarch's desire to become independent from Rome.<sup>331</sup> In cases where different possible motives were not mutually exclusive, one could end up with multi-causal explanations.

Finally, the third class included facts and circumstances that could not be ascertained without difficulty and that remained in doubt. Bierling used the example of the conflicting accounts of George Buchanan and William Camden about Mary Stuart. While Camden, whose work was commissioned by Mary's son James II of Scotland, attempted to defend her from all charges, Buchanan accused her of various crimes and justified her execution. In cases such as this, Bierling argued, evidence for and against was of equal weight, so a suspension of judgment was the most prudent solution. This final class of historical facts was the main reason, Bierling noted, why Pyrrhonism had a useful place in history.<sup>332</sup> Using this classification, he was able to preserve historical scholarship against extreme skepticism, while simultaneously allowing for mitigated skepticism to be used as a tool to obtain a more stable knowledge of the past.

Having enumerated a variety of examples that reinforced the necessity of a mild Pyrrhonist attitude in historical investigations, Bierling also proposed rules for applying skeptical doubt to historical facts. First, he noted that, no matter how well reputed the historian, no single authority could be entirely reliable. Even the most honest and able historians could be influenced by the passions or commit errors.<sup>333</sup> Second, in order to check the reliability of historical accounts, one had to consider the motivations and the

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 37–46.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 30–49.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 251–257.

character of historians who reported the events.<sup>334</sup> Third, given the various potential biases of historians, Bierling emphasized that it was the responsibility of the reader to distinguish truthful accounts from panegyrics and satires. He also urged readers to compare contemporaneous evidence with secondary accounts in order to check the reliability of historians. Finally, he argued that the mere persistence of historical traditions and the consensus surrounding historical events could not, in themselves, guarantee their veracity, providing instances where traditions had been refuted by recent scholarship.

Given the extent and limits of historical knowledge presented in his treatise, Bierling concluded that the quest for probable knowledge was the most prudent goal that a historian could pursue. He rejected both extreme dogmatism and radical skepticism: “Indeed, to no purpose work those who seek anything certain, or those others who fiercely contend that each fact or thing is equally probable.”<sup>335</sup> By navigating between these two extremes, Bierling insinuated, philosophers and scholars could come to obtain more reliable knowledge.

### **Pyrrhonism or Academic Skepticism?**

Bierling’s definition and application of mitigated skepticism renders the distinction between Pyrrhonism and Academic skepticism problematic. Although he explicitly defended the former, his understanding of skepticism is much closer to the Academic tradition. In his seminal article on Academic Skepticism Jose Maia Neto identified five common features used by early-modern Academic skepticism, all of which appear in Bierling’s exposition of Pyrrhonism and its application to the study of history. Neto relied primarily on Simon Foucher’s critique of Cartesianism in order to outline the essential elements of Academic skepticism, since Foucher was the foremost explicit advocate of this school in the late-17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>336</sup> Interestingly, Foucher’s exposition proves to be extremely similar to Bierling’s defense of Pyrrhonism.

First, Bierling, like Foucher, did not deny the existence of an objective reality but questioned the human ability to have access to it. He doubted not whether particular events happened, nor whether there were concrete motives that drove historical actors.

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>335</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Bierling, *Dissertatio de Iudicio Historico* (Leipzig, 1724), 332. “Unde frustra laborant, qui in talibus certi quidpiam quaerunt, aut cum aliis de rebus et factis in utramque partem aequè probabilibus accerime digladiantur.”

<sup>336</sup> Neto, “Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy,” 204–208.

Instead, he questioned the ability of both contemporaneous witnesses and of historians to perceive the facts and the circumstances surrounding them. He thus urged historians to suspend judgment about some events in the past because there was insufficient information to confirm their veracity.

Second, Foucher presented Academic Skepticism as a middle ground between dogmatism and radical Pyrrhonism. This is precisely what Bierling did in his discussion of the variants of skepticism, but he simply substituted Pyrrhonism for Academic skepticism. In Foucher's presentation it was the Pyrrhonians who ceased all examination and submitted to a universal doubt. In Bierling's, it was the Pyrrhonians who continued to search for truth. For both authors, however, a quest for knowledge was one of the essential characteristics of mitigated skepticism. Bierling argued that a historian should examine events without prejudice or passion and attempt to discover the most probable course of events. In case that there was insufficient evidence, one had to suspend judgment and seek information necessary to reach a more certain conclusion.

Neto identified Foucher's rejection of the Cartesian pretension to know the essence of things as the third feature of his Academic skepticism. Foucher sought to refute the possibility of knowing any essences, but he also attacked the immodesty of Cartesian claims. Similarly, Bierling explicitly denounced the definitive pronouncements of various dogmatic schools, arguing that one could only make conclusions in philosophy and in history based on the appearance of things.<sup>337</sup>

Fourth, according to Foucher, Academic skeptics limited inquiries to those questions that were potentially discoverable to the human mind, putting aside matters that could not be resolved fully through observation and analysis.

But one must not raise questions that one sees cannot yet be decided, no matter how interesting or important they may be. Because this begins interminable disputes and cannot result in any true conclusion.<sup>338</sup>

By taking irresolvable questions off the table, Foucher hoped to limit philosophical inquiries to those problems that could be solved by observing the available evidence and consulting known principles. Bierling's tripartite division of historical facts resembled this distinction between the knowable and the unknowable,

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<sup>337</sup> Bierling, *Commentatio de Pyrrhonismo Historico*, 6.

<sup>338</sup> Foucher, *Dissertations sur la recherche de la vérité*, 147. "Mais c'est que l'on ne doit point agiter des questions que l'on voit bien ne pouvoir encore décider, quelque curieuses ou importantes qu'elles soient: parceque cela engage à des disputes interminables, & qu'il n'en peut resulter aucune veritable décision."

serving, in a way, as a practical application of Foucher's rule. By separating doubtful facts from probable and certain ones, Bierling identified the questions and ideas that should be subject to scholarly inquiry and those that needed to be abandoned.

Finally, Neto noted that the Academic skeptics emphasized the avoidance of errors over the acquisition of truth.<sup>339</sup> Indeed, Foucher's first academic principle was to never cease the search for the truth, while subjecting all acquired notions and ideas to doubt until their veracity was thoroughly demonstrated.<sup>340</sup> Such a circumspect attitude would serve as a bulwark against admitting potential falsities as truths. In turn, Bierling's goal in promoting a mitigated skepticism in historical research was precisely to avoid mistakes that both distorted the historical record and justified a more radical skepticism with regard to the past. By only admitting those facts whose high probability could not be doubted while suspending judgment about the rest, historians could avoid accepting and perpetuating erroneous accounts.

## Conclusion

While Bierling did not cite Foucher in his text and relied on Sextus Empiricus for his presentation of skepticism, his understanding of the appropriate nature and purpose of skeptical doubt came very close to Foucher's. Bierling's redefinition and application of a mitigated skepticism to history certainly makes the distinction between Pyrrhonism and Academic Skepticism in the early-modern period more problematic. While it is clear that the sources of the two traditions were distinct, this example shows that the characteristics of the two schools could be conflated or even inversed. Thus, it is important to remember that, while philosophical distinctions between the different kinds of skeptical schools (or other schools of philosophy) may appear as self-evident to contemporary scholars, early-modern readers could have perceived these distinctions in rather different ways. By considering the self-identifications of these thinkers, we might obtain a better historical understanding of the ways in which ancient skepticism was disseminated and appropriated in the early-modern period. We might even find that the mitigated Pyrrhonism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century came very close to resembling the Academic tradition, in so far as early-modern philosophers understood the goals of the two schools.

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<sup>339</sup> Neto, "Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy," 207.

<sup>340</sup> *Dissertations sur la recherche de la vérité*, 146.