

## Descartes and Skepticism

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### Abstract:

In this paper, I present an interpretation of Descartes that deemphasizes his skepticism. I analyze a selection of remarks from Descartes' correspondence in which he makes judgments about the skeptics. I argue that such remarks display Descartes' attitude of contempt for skeptical philosophy. Since Descartes associates the skeptics with the activity of constant and total doubting and yet presents scenarios that seemingly arise from extreme doubt—like the malicious demon hypothesis—I look at what Descartes says in the correspondence about his own use of doubt in his published works. Descartes distances himself from the skeptics because he claims that whereas they doubt everything and, in so doing, act heretically, he uses doubt for a noble purpose. I suggest that although Descartes is influenced by skeptical ideas and considers skeptical argumentation to be useful, his strategic use of such argumentation should not lead us to believe that he condones skepticism. Quite the contrary, most of his remarks on the subject show that Descartes is highly critical or dismissive of skeptical ideas. Therefore, I argue that it is more accurate to characterize Descartes as a philosopher generally opposed to skepticism.

**Keywords:** Descartes, skepticism, doubt, Montaigne, Cicero, Academic, Pyrrhonism

The opening line of Bernard Williams' essay, "Descartes's Use of Skepticism," reads, "Descartes was not a skeptic. One has to take a distant and inaccurate view of his writings to suppose that he was." (Williams 1983, 337) I agree with Williams. Descartes was not a skeptic. However, though he acknowledges that Descartes was not a skeptic, Williams believes that skepticism was of fundamental importance to both Descartes' reasoning and his philosophical approach. Skepticism, Williams says, was first "the extreme dramatization of uncertainty, an uncertainty which, largely independent of any philosophical discipline or exercise, already existed, and which Descartes felt he had to confront. It was, second, part of his method for overcoming uncertainty and attaining knowledge." (Williams 1983, 338)

There are many Cartesian scholars and historians of early modern philosophy who accentuate the role of skepticism in Descartes' thought. For example, in his classic book on early modern philosophy, *The History of Scepticism*, Richard Popkin argues that Descartes realized the danger of skepticism "to the cause of both science and religion" and, as a result, attempted to "set in motion

his philosophical revolution by discovering something ‘so certain and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions brought forward by the sceptics were incapable of shaking it.’” (Popkin 2003, 144–145) Popkin argues that Descartes was deeply concerned with skepticism and, in fact, that his philosophical project was primarily motivated by a skeptical threat.

It is understandable that Descartes’ skepticism should be a topic of such pronounced scholarly engagement. Descartes’ skeptical method of doubt in the First Meditation is often viewed as having been revolutionary for its time—a highly original means of turning inwards in order to arrive at the discovery of a self-evident and internally intuited first principle of philosophy (the *cogito*). Cartesian scholar Roger Ariew questions the historical accuracy of such an account. Through an exposition and an analysis of the writings of two other well-known seventeenth-century thinkers, Jean de Silhon and Antoine Sirmond—both of whom also make use of *cogitos* in their works—Ariew shows this type of portrayal of Descartes to be misleading. “That image of Descartes,” he says, “does not mesh very well with some of what Descartes says about the *cogito* or with the reality of the reception of his philosophy in the seventeenth century.” (Ariew 2011, 313) Ariew argues that most of the seventeenth-century critiques of Descartes focus on his metaphysical claims and their incompatibility with Scholastic and Aristotelian principles as well as Church doctrines. Even so, Ariew is perfectly aware of the current and prevalent view that Descartes’ philosophical endeavors are closely connected to skepticism. He says, “Descartes’ attempt to answer the skeptic by establishing that he exists as a thinking thing is often considered emblematic of modern philosophy.” (Ariew 2011, 312)

In her article, “Descartes and Skepticism,” Marjorie Grene points to the numerous differences between Descartes and the ancient skeptics in order to argue that Descartes was not a skeptic. Yet, Grene also recognizes the tendency for today’s philosophers to associate Descartes with skepticism. “The hyperbolic doubt of the First Meditation,” she says, “is often taken for the epitome of skepticism.” (Grene 1999, 553) I argue that too much is made of Descartes’ skepticism, but it is apparent that Descartes was influenced by skeptical ideas. To say otherwise would exhibit a misinformed view of his writings. Descartes utilizes hyperbolic doubt in the First Meditation, and he uses skeptical arguments and reasoning in both the *Discourse on Method* and the *Principles of Philosophy*. I would suggest that in the *Discourse* he echoes the language of Michel de Montaigne, who was well known during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for his skeptical writings, and the ideas of both Sextus Empiricus, a Greek Pyrrhonist from the second century A.D., and Cicero, a Roman Academic philosopher from the first century B.C.

### **Montaigne, Sextus, and Cicero in the *Discourse on Method***

It is not my view that Michel de Montaigne was a skeptic. Although Montaigne praises the intellectual attitude of the Pyrrhonists in his essay, the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, such admiration does not justify characterizing him as a Pyrrhonist or as a skeptic. Some of Montaigne’s motivations are non-skeptical. Much of his writing in the *Apology* is intended to admonish man for

his intellectual arrogance and to point him towards faith in, and reliance on, God. In addition, many of Montaigne's *Essays* aside from the *Apology* point to the influences of non-skeptical traditions, including Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Montaigne was known in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for his use of skeptical reasoning in the *Apology* and, insofar as his discussions about—and approval of—Pyrrhonism in that work are concerned, we can say that he was certainly influenced by skeptical ideas.

There are no clear-cut or foolproof indications from Descartes' writings to support this view, but I would suggest that in the beginning of the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes' choice of words demonstrates the impression made on him by the writings of Montaigne.<sup>2</sup> He opens the *Discourse* with the following reflections: "Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world, for everyone thinks himself to be so well endowed with it that even those who are the most difficult to please in everything else are not at all wont to desire more of it than they have." (Descartes 2000, 46) Compare this to what Montaigne says in his essay, *On presumption*: "It is commonly held that good sense is the gift which Nature has most fairly shared among us, for there is nobody who is not satisfied with what Nature has allotted him." (Montaigne 2003, 746) There is no hint of skeptical reasoning in either of these statements, but Descartes' phraseology is strikingly similar to that of Montaigne, and it seems to suggest Montaigne's influence on him.

In Part Three of the *Discourse*, Descartes explains the reasons why, in practical life, he chose to live by a certain "provisional code of morals," the first two maxims of which, respectively, are quite similar to some of Sextus Empiricus' statements from the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and Cicero's remarks in the *Academica*. (Descartes 2000, 56) In Part One of the *Discourse*, Descartes explains the specific method he had used "to conduct his reason well" as well as his delimiting of that method to the search for—and attainment of—scientific and philosophical truth. (Descartes 2000, 47) Where such kinds of truth are concerned, Descartes argues that only certain knowledge is acceptable and that there can be no room for opinions or probabilistic reasoning. "Concerning philosophy," Descartes states, "considering how many opinions there can be about the very same matter that are held by learned people without there ever being the possibility of more than one opinion being true, I deemed everything that was merely probable to be well night false." (Descartes 2000, 49) However, while he shunned probability, accepted only certain knowledge, and diligently practiced his method in search of philosophical truth, in everyday life Descartes says that he chose to settle on probabilistic reasoning and follow commonly accepted opinions.

Descartes describes the pragmatic reasons for his decision to adhere to a provisional code of morals while pursuing philosophical truth. "In order not to remain irresolute in my actions," he explains, "while reason required me to be so in my judgments, and in order not to cease to live as happily as possible during this time, I formulated a provisional code of morals, which consisted of but three or four maxims." (Descartes 2000, 56) The first of these maxims is "to obey the laws and customs of my country, constantly holding on to the religion in which, by God's grace, I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in everything else according to the most

moderate opinions and those furthest from excess—opinions that were commonly accepted in practice by the most judicious of those with whom I would have to live.” (Descartes 2000, 56) Compare Descartes’ first maxim to Sextus’ description of how the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics chose to live according to the customs and laws handed down to them: “Attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions – for we are not able to be utterly inactive. These everyday observances seem to be fourfold and to consist in guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching kinds of expertise.” (Sextus 2000, 9) Just as Descartes governed himself in public life according to commonly accepted opinions, the Pyrrhonists followed, “by the handing down of customs and laws...from an everyday point of view,” common opinions including, for instance, the opinion that “piety is good and impiety bad.” (Sextus 2000, 9)

Descartes’ second maxim of his provisional morality is “to be as firm and resolute in my actions as I could, and to follow the most doubtful opinions, once I had decided on them, with no less constancy than if they had been very well assured.” (Descartes 2000, 57) With regard to how he would practice this rule in his practical life, Descartes expounds on and defends his decision to rely on probabilistic reasoning. He says, “And thus the actions of life often tolerating no delay, it is a very certain truth that, when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable; and even if we notice no more probability in some than in others, nevertheless we must settle on some, and afterwards no longer regard them as doubtful, insofar as they relate to practical matters, but as very true and very certain, because the reason that made us decide on them appears so.” (Descartes 2000, 57) Parallels can be drawn between the reliance on probability encouraged by Descartes’ second maxim and the views of the Academic skeptics described by Cicero in his *Academica*. Cicero characterizes the Academic philosophers as remaining firm in their conviction “that nothing is apprehensible” and yet also admitting that some accounts or arguments seem more likely than others. (Cicero 2006, 40) “While there are no impressions allowing for apprehension,” Cicero says, “there are many allowing for approval. It would be contrary to nature were there no persuasive impressions.” (Cicero 2006, 58) Though they deny their ability to know with certainty the truth of accounts or arguments, the Academic skeptics approve of or assent to them based on persuasiveness or probabilistic reasoning.

In addition to these commonalities between Descartes and the skeptics, it can be argued that both Descartes and the Pyrrhonists are aligned in their desired goal: tranquility. For the Pyrrhonists, there can be no doubt that the end or aim of their pursuits is tranquility. Sextus says that such peace of mind, or *ataraxia*, is that for the sake of which the Pyrrhonists philosophize in a particular manner: “The causal principle [of Pyrrhonism] we say is the hope of becoming tranquil.” (Sextus 2000, 5) In Part Six of the *Discourse*, Descartes describes tranquility as that which he “esteem(s) above all things.” (Descartes 2000, 80) However, Descartes and the Pyrrhonists hold different views concerning what leads to tranquility. The Pyrrhonists argue that equipollence and the suspension of judgment naturally lead us to tranquility whereas Descartes says that the “perfect peace of mind I

am seeking” can possibly be attained through his forthrightness with the public about the motivations for his philosophical work. (Descartes 2000, 80) Of course, whereas the Pyrrhonists posit tranquility as their ultimate goal, there are many places in Descartes’ writings that show he had several different goals in his philosophical and scientific pursuits. For example, in a letter to the Marquess of Newcastle, from October of 1645, Descartes says, “The preservation of health has always been the principal end of my studies.” (Descartes 1991, 275) Additionally, it goes without saying that Descartes often repeats the refrain of a desire to seek after and attain truth above all else.

There are similarities between Descartes, on the one hand, and both the Pyrrhonian skeptics and the Academic skeptics, on the other. Descartes’ provisional morality harkens back to the attitudes of both the Pyrrhonists, as evidenced by Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines*, and the Academics, as understood through Cicero’s *Academica*. In addition, although they held different views about what exactly would lead to it, both Descartes and the Pyrrhonian skeptics sought after tranquility. Besides the *Discourse*, Descartes’ other published works, including the *Meditations* and the *Principles of Philosophy*, present skeptical arguments that remind us of some of the characteristic Pyrrhonian “modes” of reasoning.<sup>3</sup> For example, in the Third Meditation, in order to challenge our claims to knowledge based on the senses, Descartes compares our two ways of thinking about the size of the sun. He argues that whereas our sense perception (in this case, eyesight) shows us that the sun is of approximately one size, astronomical reasoning reveals the sun to be, in fact, much larger.<sup>4</sup> In the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus also presents arguments to show how our senses are inadequate for providing us with certain knowledge. However, Sextus’ views in this regard are different from those of Descartes. Concerning objects in the world, including the sun, and how they appear to us, Sextus says, “We shall be able to say what the existing objects are like as observed by us, but as to what they are like in their nature, we shall suspend judgment.” (Sextus 2000, 17) Although there is common ground between Descartes and the skeptics, it can only indicate so much when it comes to the influence of skepticism on Descartes’ thought.

The instances of a skeptical reasoning and argumentation in Descartes’ writings do not provide adequate or sufficient evidence to claim that Descartes held a favorable view of the skeptics. Nor do such skeptical marks in his works imply that Descartes was seriously concerned with skepticism. The respective projects of Descartes, on the one hand, and both the Pyrrhonian skeptics and the Academic skeptics, on the other, are patently dissimilar. Whereas the Pyrrhonists and the Academics provide particular modes of reasoning that display our ignorance about claims to knowledge, Descartes presents skeptical arguments to show that the senses are deceptive but that the understanding—when properly utilized—is more reliable than sense perception for acquiring knowledge. In fact, Descartes argues not only that certain knowledge can be attained, but also that he has attained it. Unlike the Pyrrhonists, who suggest that equipollence and the suspension of judgment—both of which result in reaffirming our ignorance—lead to tranquility, Descartes suggests only that frankness with the public about the motivations for his philosophical project might bring about such peace of mind. The Pyrrhonian skeptics lived in accordance with the

customs and laws handed down to them, but they did so because despite the fact that they were unwilling and apparently unable to make claims to knowledge about anything, they were “not able to be utterly inactive.” (Sextus 2000, 9) Descartes’ provisional code of morals, which is similar in spirit to some aspects of the Pyrrhonian and Academic ways of life, helped him to live day to day “as happily as possible” by accepting the most moderate and most commonly accepted social customs. (Descartes 2000, 56) Yet, unlike the Pyrrhonian skeptics, he lived in this manner while practicing a method of philosophical inquiry that would in fact lead him to certain knowledge.

### **Descartes’ Views on Skepticism: The Correspondence**

Descartes mentions skepticism several times in his correspondence. He discusses doubt even more. Based on the indications from his writings, Descartes seems to have believed that the activity of doubting was the primary characteristic of skepticism. In the *Discourse*, he distinguishes his method and his goals from what he considered to be those of the skeptics. Descartes says, “I...rooted out from my mind all the errors that had previously been able to slip into it. Not that, in order to do this, I was imitating the skeptics who doubt merely for the sake of doubting and put on the affectation of being perpetually undecided; for, on the contrary, my entire plan tended simply to give me assurance and to cast aside the shifting earth and sand in order to find the rock or clay.” (Descartes 2000, 59)

In a letter to Hyperaspistes from August 1641, Descartes explains why his use of a particular kind of hyperbolic doubt precludes him from being called a skeptic, and he both characterizes the skeptics as doubting everything and criticizes them for doing so disingenuously: “You cannot have a sceptic saying, ‘Let the evil demon deceive me as much as he can,’ because anyone who says this is by that token not a sceptic since he does not doubt everything...It is only in name, and perhaps in intention and resolve, that [the skeptics] adhere to their heresy of doubting everything.” (Descartes 1991, 196–197) These examples reveal Descartes’ view that skepticism is typified by incessant and total doubting as well as his desire to distance or disassociate himself from the skeptics. Instead of examining every reference to skepticism or doubt in Descartes’ correspondence, in the following sections I will focus on statements Descartes makes that carry judgments about the skeptics, skepticism, and the use of doubt. In so doing, I will show how Descartes’ stated views reveal that he had a dismissive and contemptuous attitude towards skeptical philosophy.

Where Descartes writes on the subject in his correspondence, it is usually within a context in which the main topic of exchange is not skepticism but other aspects of his work. In some of these letters, Descartes responds to specific questions asked of him and objections made against arguments in his published works, whereas in others he defends himself for what he thought were unfair or slanderous charges brought against him. As a result, in some of his letters Descartes’ tone is cordial whereas in others it seems guarded or even antagonistic. Readers of the correspondence can gauge distinct differences in attitudes and personal likes or dislikes between Descartes and his correspondents. With regard to our understanding of Descartes’ views on skepticism, these

differences are significant. In most of the correspondence where skepticism is mentioned, whether Descartes is writing to a friend or foe, there is consistency in Descartes' judgments: his opinions about skepticism are consistently negative.

To get a sense of the contrast in attitudes just mentioned, take one example: two letters that show two different sides of Descartes. The first of these letters is from May of 1637 and was written by Descartes in response to his friend, Jean de Silhon. Descartes begins his message with acknowledgement and agreement: "I agree, as you observe, that there is a great defect in the work you have seen, and that I have not expounded, in a manner that everyone can easily grasp, the arguments by which I claim to prove that there is nothing at all more evident and certain than the existence of God and the human soul." (Descartes 1991, 55) Descartes answers Silhon's questions by providing an explanation as to why, in the recently published *Discourse on Method*, he did not more clearly explain to the reader the arguments that demonstrate God's existence and the existence of the human soul. "I did not dare to do so," Descartes says, "since I would have had to explain at length the strongest arguments of the sceptics to show that there is no material thing of whose existence one can be certain." (Descartes 1991, 55) Descartes closes his relatively brief letter to Silhon, "As for intelligent people like yourself...they will come to the same conclusions as I did. I shall be glad, as soon as I have time, to try to explain this further. I am pleased to have had this opportunity to show you that I am, etc." (Descartes 1991, 56) It seems plain enough from the tone of this letter that there is a feeling of mutual respect and a sense of civility between Descartes and Silhon.

However, such professional courtesy cannot be observed in the letter from Descartes to Voetius from May of 1643. In this letter, Descartes seems clearly offended by his correspondent. At the start of it, he says, "Even if the philosophy at which you rail were unsound, which you have failed to show at any point, and never will manage to show, what vice could it possibly be imagined to contain great enough to require its author to be slandered with such atrocious insults?" (Descartes 1991, 220) Cordiality and mutual respect are nonexistent. Instead there is a sense of indignation on Descartes' part brought on by the belief that Voetius had made insulting remarks about him and inaccurate statements about his work.

The contrast in attitudes that comes across in this example is to some extent indicative of Descartes' correspondence in general. Because of such interpersonal differences between Descartes and his correspondents—his friendliness with some and defensiveness towards others—and, even more so, the consistency in his opinions about skepticism nonetheless, I would argue that the correspondence provides us with an authentic representation of Descartes' views on skepticism. The correspondence as is presents a more realistic picture of Descartes' opinions on skepticism than we would have, for instance, if all of his correspondents were well-liked colleagues.

### **On the Pyrrhonists, the Sceptics, and Skepticism**

In the letters where Descartes shares his opinions about the Pyrrhonists and the sceptics, he does so by describing such philosophers as ineffective, disingenuous, or heretical. Judgments like

these provide clear indications that Descartes did not view skeptical philosophy in a positive light. We can get a sense of Descartes' disdain for the skeptics' way of life from what he says about them in the Reply to the Fifth Set of Objections to the *Meditations*. "For when it is a question of organizing our life," he says, "it would, of course, be foolish not to trust the senses, and the sceptics who neglected human affairs to the point where friends had to stop them falling of precipices deserved to be laughed at." (Descartes 1984–1985, 243) Descartes seems to be referencing the stories told not only about the Pyrrhonian skeptics but also about Pyrrho, the *de facto* founder of Pyrrhonism. In the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, which was written sometime between the second and fourth centuries A.D., Diogenes Laertius describes Pyrrho as having led his life in the following manner: "going out of his way for nothing, taking no precaution, but facing all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, dogs or what not, and, generally, leaving nothing to the arbitrament of the senses; but he was kept out of harm's way by his friends who...used to follow close after him." (Diogenes 1995, 475) Descartes could not see the virtue in both choosing not to trust the senses and deliberately adhering to no beliefs in the course of one's practical life. He did not find anything laudable about this way of life. In fact, Descartes thought that the Pyrrhonian skeptics should be mocked for behaving in the ways described.

In a letter to Renieri for Pollot, from April or May of 1638, Descartes answers questions and responds to criticisms about his recently published *Discourse*, a text in which he showed nascent signs of the hyperbolic doubt that was to come later in the First Meditation. In part of his response to Renieri, Descartes criticizes the Pyrrhonists for perpetually doubting and, as a result, never arriving at any certainty. For Descartes, to be constantly lacking in certain knowledge akin to the Pyrrhonists would not be a state of affairs to be content with but rather an obvious reason to aspire to knowledge. However, "although the Pyrrhonists reached no certain conclusions from their doubts," Descartes says, "it does not follow that no one can." (Descartes 1991, 99) In the Second Meditation, after implementing his skeptical method and reflecting on his agonizing doubts, he presses on: "Great things are...to be hoped for if I succeed in finding just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken." (Descartes 2006, 13) Descartes was after certain knowledge in philosophy and the sciences, and he recognized that Pyrrhonian or skeptical doubt could be strategically used and presented to support his claims to such knowledge.

In the same letter to Renieri from 1638, Descartes continues along these lines by suggesting that Pyrrhonism (which, according to him, is primarily characterized by doubting everything) might in fact be used to arrive at certain knowledge. He says, "I would try now to show how these doubts [of the Pyrrhonists] can be used to prove God's existence." (Descartes 1991, 99) In this letter, then, Descartes indicates what would later appear in the *Meditations*, where he indeed uses Pyrrhonian or skeptical arguments—in conjunction with his method of hyperbolic doubt—to support his demonstrations of the existence of the soul, God, and the material world.

To return to the letter to Hyperaspistes from August of 1641: in addition to characterizing the skeptics as disingenuous, Descartes implies that they are atheistic and describes them as heretical.



The skeptics, according to Descartes, “would not have doubted the truths of geometry if they had duly recognized God, because since those geometrical truths are very clear, they would have had no occasion to doubt them if they had known that whatever is clearly understood is true.” (Descartes 1991, 196) Yet, according to Descartes, such skeptics did in fact doubt obviously true propositions, including geometrical demonstrations, “even though they clearly understood them.” (Descartes 1991, 196) Thus, Descartes concludes, “It is only in name, and perhaps in intention and resolve, that they adhere to the heresy of doubting everything.” (Descartes 1991, 196–197)

In the previously referenced letter to Voetius from May of 1643, Descartes points out the faulty reasoning of those skeptics who would deny the self-evident *cogito*:

You deny that anyone can rightly conclude, from the fact that he is thinking, that he exists; for you want the sceptic to conclude merely that he *seems to himself to exist* – as if anyone using his reason, however sceptical he might be, could seem to himself to exist without at the same time understanding that he really exists, whenever this seems to him to be the case. Thus you deny what is the most evident proposition there could possibly be in any science. (Descartes 1991, 222)

In this passage, Descartes points to a generally accepted and well-known characteristic of the Pyrrhonian skeptics: their willingness to state how things seem to them (or what is apparent to them) but their unwillingness to make claims about reality. In the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus puts it this way: “What [the Sceptics] investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent.” (Sextus 2000, 8) For instance, the Pyrrhonian skeptics would not deny that sunlight seems to give warmth. What they disputed were claims that the dogmatists would make as a result of that apparent warmth—for example, the claim that the sun actually does possess, produce, and provide heat or warmth. Descartes implies that such reasoning, when it concerns the question of one’s own existence, is self-deceptive, disingenuous, inane, impossible, or all of the above. No one can honestly say to himself, “I seem to exist,” without admitting that, in fact, he necessarily exists. This selection from the letter to Voetius, then, provides clear evidence of Descartes’ dismissive attitude towards skeptical philosophy.

In a letter to Chanut from November 1, 1646, Descartes expresses his extreme dissatisfaction with critics who misinterpret his work and slander him. He laments the fact that “a certain Father Bourdin thought he had good reason to accuse me of being a sceptic, because I refuted the sceptics.” (Descartes 1991, 299) In this letter, Descartes suggests that having his words twisted by people like Bourdin has given him enough reason to stop publishing his works altogether. “The best thing I can do henceforth is to abstain from writing books,” he says. “I shall pursue my studies only for my own instruction, and communicate my thoughts only to those with whom I can converse privately.” (Descartes 1991, 300) Based on such remarks about the skeptics in his correspondence, we can see that Descartes expresses his desire not to be associated with them. Descartes denies that he is a skeptic, and he explains why his particular use of skeptical reasoning absolves him from the charge of being

a skeptic. In addition, Descartes' statements on the subject in the correspondence reveal his slighting views of—and his contempt for—skepticism.

### **On the Use of Doubt**

I have drawn attention to the judgments about skepticism and the skeptics that Descartes expresses in his correspondence. At this point it should be fairly clear that Descartes disapproved of skeptical philosophy. He held negative views about the skeptics, believing them to be disingenuous, ineffectual, foolish, and even heretical. As far as I can tell, Descartes has not written a single word about skepticism or the skeptics to suggest any kind of approbation on his part. However, unlike his opinions about skepticism, his views on the use of doubt are not so one-sided or straightforward.

As previously discussed, one of Descartes' views about the skeptics is that they primarily doubt everything—even those things like the self-evident certainty of the *cogito* for which, according to him, doubt would be inconceivable. However, Descartes does utilize doubt in his published works, and in the *Meditations* he even presents an extreme form of hyperbolic doubt through the malicious demon hypothesis. What Descartes says in the correspondence about his use of doubt reflects the fact that although he looked down on the skeptics for incessantly doubting everything, he recognized the value of using doubt strategically.

The correspondence that best presents Descartes' opinions about what he considers to be the proper use of doubt is his letter to Buitendijck from 1643. In this letter, Descartes responds to a question regarding “whether it is ever permissible to doubt about God.” (Descartes 2000, 212) Descartes explains how the answer to this question would depend upon one's reasons for doubting. “For if someone takes as his aim to doubt about God in order to persist in this doubt,” Descartes says, “he is sinning gravely since he wishes to remain in doubt on a topic of such importance. But if someone proposes to himself doubt as a means to pursuing a clearer knowledge of truth, he is doing something altogether pious and worthy, since no one can wish the end without also wishing the means.” (Descartes 2000, 212) In this part of the letter, Descartes implicitly refers to the skeptics. Though many of those who were of a skeptical bent would disagree with his characterization of them, Descartes' view of the skeptics is that they doubt “merely for the sake of doubting.” (Descartes 2000, 59) Unlike the skeptics, who “sin gravely” by doubting in their particular manner, Descartes claims to be using doubt in the *Meditations* and other published works for a noble purpose: to seek and attain “knowledge of truth.” According to Descartes, the motivations or intentions behind one's doubt are highly significant factors that must be considered in order to determine whether or not the use of doubt is permissible.

Descartes responds to another question posed by Buitendijck concerning “whether it is ever permissible to assume something false in matters that concern God.” (Descartes 2000, 212) This question contains an implicit reference to the malicious demon hypothesis from the First Meditation. In the First Meditation, Descartes supposes “not a supremely good God, the source of truth, but rather an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever...has directed his entire effort at

deceiving me.” (Descartes 2006, 12) In response to the question about the permissibility of positing the possible existence of an evil genius or a malicious demon, Descartes says this:

A person who invents a deceiving God (or even the true God, but not yet clearly enough known to himself or to others, for whose sake he is setting up his hypothesis) and who is not misusing this fiction for a bad purpose, in order to persuade others of something false concerning the divine power, but only in order to better illuminate his intellect, so that he may come to a better knowledge of God or show him more clearly to others, such a man, I say, is not really sinning, but acting so that good may come. For there is no malice in this; he is rather doing something absolutely good, and he cannot be reproached for this, except by slander. (Descartes 2000, 213)

We can see that Descartes provides a similar answer to the question about inventing a deceiving God as the one he gives in response to the question about doubting God’s existence. To fabricate a false, deceptive, or malicious God would be acceptable as long as the purpose in doing so was noble: to increase one’s knowledge and to know God better. Descartes defends his unique use of skeptical doubt because he doubts as a means rather than as an end. “We must make a distinction,” Descartes says, “between doubt as an end, and doubt as a means.” (Descartes 1991, 229) According to Descartes, the skeptics pursue and use doubt as an end in itself—they doubt “merely for the sake of doubting”—which is foolish and ineffectual because it keeps them in a state of uncertainty (or the appearance of a state of uncertainty). (Descartes 2000, 59) However, as a means, Descartes would gladly utilize skeptical doubt in order to show how certain knowledge can be attained and, as a result, that such doubt is unfounded. Just as the motivations for doubting must be examined in order to determine whether or not the use of doubt is permissible, so the recognition that doubt should only be used as a means and never as an end is equally important.

In a letter to Princess Elizabeth from May 10, 1647, Descartes expresses more than a little disconcertment over charges of atheism and heresy brought against him for his use of doubt in the *Meditations*. Descartes seems especially troubled by one theologian in particular, Jacobus Revius, who had been spreading inaccurate interpretations of his work: Revius would “make people believe that I said some things in [the *Meditations*] which are quite absurd and are contrary to the glory of God – for example, that we must doubt that there is a God. He would even have it that I want people to deny absolutely for a while that there is a God, and things of that sort.” (Descartes 1991, 317) Descartes’ response to Revius’ accusations indicates that his use of doubt in the *Meditations*, though strategic, is not sincere. The doubting of God’s existence is not necessary for Descartes, and it is certainly not advised. Nor is Descartes’ doubt meant to be taken seriously. To genuinely doubt or deny God’s existence, according to Descartes, would indeed be “contrary to the glory of God” and is not what Descartes intends for his readers to do. Rather, Descartes’ use of doubt in the *Meditations* is meant to show his readers how following exaggerated or hyperbolic doubt eventually reveals the absurdity of such doubt.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have explained my interpretation of Descartes' association with skepticism. By beginning with a discussion of the similarities between the writings of Montaigne, Sextus Empiricus, and Cicero, on the one hand, and the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes' first published work, on the other, I have shown that Descartes was influenced by skeptical ideas. However, although he was influenced by skepticism, on the whole he regards the skeptics with contempt. In his correspondence, Descartes trounces the skeptics for their inanity and disingenuousness. He calls them heretical for constantly doubting everything even when it would be absurd and impious to do so. Yet, Descartes also recognizes the value of using doubt as a means rather than an end. His use of doubt in his published works is strategic.

The things that Descartes doubts, at least insofar as the way in which his doubts are presented in his published works—for example, the way in which he appears to be uncertain about whether or not we are awake—are not things that are *actually* doubted by Descartes. In a letter to Mersenne from October 16, 1639, Descartes says, “For my part, I have never had any doubts about truth, because it seems a notion so transcendently clear that nobody can be ignorant of it.” (Descartes 1991, 139) If there were no need to doubt things that are obviously true, such as the certainty of our own existence, then why would Descartes utilize doubt in his published works? I suggest that the kind of doubt Descartes presents in his published works helps him to reveal the self-evident certainty of such truths as the *cogito*, particularly for those readers who find it difficult to realize those “transcendently clear” truths. In the same letter to Mersenne, Descartes says that his criterion of truth is the “natural light,” and that although everyone has this natural light, “hardly anyone makes good use of that light, so that many people – perhaps all those we know – may share the same mistaken opinion. Also,” Descartes continues, “there are many things which can be known by the natural light, but which no one has yet reflected on.” (Descartes 1991, 139) In a letter to Colvius from November 14, 1640, Descartes says, “In itself it is such a simple and natural thing to infer that one exists from the fact that one is doubting.” (Descartes 1991, 159) Yet, most people do not reflect on this truth. Descartes' method of doubt, then, is presented for the benefit of his readers—for their instruction—so that through such a method they may better realize the truths that are, or should already be, so plain to them: that they are thinking things who necessarily exist, and that God exists and is not a deceiver.

Unfortunately for Descartes, his use of doubt caused some of his contemporaries, including Pierre Bourdin, to peg him as a skeptic. Whether we describe skepticism according to Descartes' one-sided characterization or understand that tradition more comprehensively and accurately, it is clear that Descartes was not a skeptic. Not only was he not a skeptic, but in the correspondence he also makes it clear that he is fundamentally opposed to skeptical philosophy. Descartes derided the skeptics and attempted to distance himself from any association with them because he thought that his motivations were quite different from theirs, and more admirable. Whereas the skeptics were constantly in doubt, Descartes was not. The Pyrrhonian and Academic skeptics may have denied

that they had access to certain knowledge about reality, but Descartes both sought after such knowledge and claimed to have attained it.

### Endnotes:

1. See Montaigne 2003. Included among Montaigne's essays are *To philosophize is to learn how to die*, *On virtue*, *Observations on Julius Caesar's methods of waging war*, and *On three good wives*.
2. There are only two places in the correspondence that I know of where Descartes mentions Montaigne by name, both of which are in a letter to the Marquess of Newcastle, from November 23, 1646, and deal with claims about human and animal intelligence. Descartes explains his disagreement with the "opinion of Montaigne and others who attribute understanding or thought to animals." (Descartes 1991, 302) Later he says, "Montaigne and Charron may have said that there is a greater difference between one human being and another than between a human being and an animal; yet there has never been known an animal so perfect as to use a sign to make other animals understand something which bore no relation to its passions; and there is no human being so imperfect as not to do so, since even deaf-mutes invent special signs to express their thoughts." (Descartes 1991, 303)
3. On the skeptical modes, see Sextus 2000, 11–46.
4. See Descartes 2006: "I find within myself two distinct ideas of the sun. One idea is drawn, as it were, from the senses...By means of this idea the sun appears to me to be quite small. But there is another idea, one derived from astronomical reasoning...through this idea the sun is shown to be several times larger than the earth. Both ideas surely cannot resemble the same sun existing outside me; and reason convinces me that the idea that seems to have emanated from the sun itself from so close is the very one that least resembles the sun." (Descartes 2006, 22)

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