# Synthesis of *Academic Skepticism in Hume and Kant. A Ciceronian Critique of Metaphysics. Springer, 2022.*

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In *Academic Skepticism in Hume and Kant. A Ciceronian Critique of Metaphysics,* I examine the influence of the skepticism of the New Platonic Academy, through Cicero's works, on David Hume's and Immanuel Kant's critiques of metaphysics. Traditionally, it is claimed that both philosophers were influenced by the Pyrrhonian school and its Modern adaptations, particularly in their treatment of epistemological problems, such as the status of causal inferences and the belief in the external world. In this book, I present a different approach, arguing that, contrary to standard interpretations, Academic skepticism significantly influenced these authors' critiques of metaphysics.

In recent decades, a newfound interest in the influence of Academic skepticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has emerged as contemporary historians of skepticism have begun reconsidering the conventional view that the revival of Pyrrhonism gave birth to Modern skepticism. As this literature is expanding, it has become increasingly clear that Academic skepticism did, indeed, have a strong influence on various Modern philosophers, both skeptics and non-skeptics. As Maia Neto has argued, despite the new interest in the works of Sextus Empiricus in the seventeenth-century intellectual *milieu*, Academic skepticism continued to play an essential role after the Renaissance (Maia Neto, 1997, p. 200). Smith and Charles have also documented the influence of Academic skepticism on a wide variety of Modern authors, such as Sanches, Charron, Montaigne, and Bacon (Smith and Charles, 2017, pp. xviii-ix). According to them, the Academic concept of "the probable," which, was closely related to rhetorical persuasion and practical advisability in Cicero, was introduced into the method of experimental science as a device to examine inductive hypothesis (Smith and Charles, 2017, xiii). In this way, Academic probabilism allied with modern science against the established Aristotelian system and rapidly spread in the Modern European world.

Given the scientific connotations of today's concept of probability, most accounts of the Academic influence on Modern philosophy focus on their skeptical method's use to evaluate empirical hypotheses. Without denying the significance of this concept for the foundation of natural science, in this book I invite the reader to bear in mind that the New Academy's criterion of the "persuasive" or "probable" (*to pithanon)* was primarily applied by Cicero to metaphysical issues such as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the highest end or *summum bonum*, and the problem of freedom. Some of his most widely-read dialogues during Modernity −*De Natura Deorum*, the *Tusculan Disputations*, *De Finibus*, and *De Fato* − were devoted to assessing the probability of the Hellenistic schools' metaphysical claims, such as the existence of God, freedom, and the immortality of the soul. Hence, the criterion was not only empirically deployed, but also metaphysically and practically.

Following this claim, I argue in the book that Hume and Kant adopted Academic skepticism to criticize traditional metaphysics and undermine the dogmatism of Christian theology, while safeguarding practical autonomy in religious and moral matters. I maintain that these philosophers' reasons for choosing Academic skepticism over Pyrrhonism were probably related to the skeptical schools' answer to the practical problem of how to act while suspending judgment. This problem is usually understood as the "*apraxia* objection"— the accusation that suspension of judgment would entail necessarily the skeptics' inability to act. Both schools established practical criteria to orient action *vis-à-vis* their purported *epochê*. Specifically, the Pyrrhonians decided to adopt subjective impressions (the so-called "appearances") and follow their community's laws and customs undogmatically. In contrast, the New Academy recommended "approving" the claims that best withstood skeptical examination, namely those that were sufficiently "persuasive" or "probable," for practical purposes.

During Modernity, Pyrrhonism's answer to the *apraxia* charge in religious matters inspired a form of "fideism" in philosophers such as Montaigne and Bayle (Popkin, 1979, 2003). In contrast, Enlightenment philosophers, like Hume and Kant, who advocated rational, practical autonomy, most likely favored the Academic response. Indeed, modern fideism's propensity for fanaticism and a blind obedience to the Church, meant for Hume and Kant an unnecessary and dogmatic renunciation of reason, whereas the Academy's recommendation of adopting for practical reasons the most persuasive or probable claims, without ascribing them the status of knowledge, cohered with their ideal of a progressive secularization. This secularization sought to set limits to metaphysical dogmatism and produce tolerant religious dispositions. Both Hume and Kant aimed to give a rational, civic foundation to morality and politics and, at the same time, grant individuals the necessary freedom to choose the religious creed that best suited their proclivities. Therefore, with the common objective of undermining religious dogmatism and preserving practical autonomy in these matters, Hume and Kant appropriated the moderate (or, to say it in Hume's terms, "mitigated") skepticism of the Academy.

The book devotes two chapters to each philosopher in the discussion: Cicero, Hume, and Kant. The first chapter in each pair describes the skeptical theory developed or used by the author, while the second examines the theory's application to metaphysical matters. Following this outline, in the first chapter I present an introduction to the general problem of the book. In the second chapter, I give an account of the fundamental aspects of the skepticism of the New Academy by offering an analysis of Cicero's *Academica* (45 BCE). The chapter begins with an overview of the Middle and New Academy's skeptical arguments against Stoic epistemology and moves to analyze their respective answers to the *apraxia* objection. My central claim is that Carneades developed a moderate form of skepticism in order to give a more robust answer to this objection than Arcesilaus's. Such a response is based on "the persuasive" (*to pithanon*) impression and a set of criteria to determine their degree of persuasiveness or probability. After this account, I describe the most prominent differences between the Academy's and Pyrrhonism's responses to the objection, spelling out their respective criteria for action and concluding that Pyrhonism's answer can be interpreted as a non-dogmatic but voluntary practical heteronomy, whereas the New Academy's involves instead a non-dogmatic practical autonomy.

In the third chapter, I describe Cicero's application of the New Academy's skeptical method to metaphysical issues, such as the nature of the Gods and the soul's immortality, in *De Natura Deorum* and the first book of the *Tusculan Disputations* respectively. I begin by describing both discussions and move to analyzing their different philosophical approaches. Briefly, the first treatise exhibits

a traditionally skeptical argumentation, with arguments pro and con, while the second one is more constructive, justifying the plausibility of two opposed but complementary theses on the soul's (im)mortality. This apparent incongruency is explained through the influence of Aristotle's rhetoric on the Academy, particularly on Carneades and Cicero. Finally, I describe the Academics' and Pyrrhonians' practical responses to religious matters and illustrate them with passages from Thornton Wilder's novel *The Ides of March* (1948).

The fourth and fifth chapters investigate the influence of Academic skepticism on David Hume. This influence, which Hume himself clearly expressed, has been long neglected by the interpretative tradition. Following Popkin's famous article "David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and his Critique of Pyrrhonism" (Popkin, 1951, pp. 385-407), Hume's naturalism became intertwined with Modern Pyrrhonism in ways that far exceeded his own views. To refute this interpretive trend, I argue in the fourth chapter that Hume's Academic skepticism can be clearly appreciated by focusing on Hume's *normative* theory of belief, which intended to evaluate the legitimacy of metaphysical claims. I also offer an analysis of Hume's diagnosis of Pyrrhonism's undesirable consequences –*apraxia*, melancholy, and ostracism – and examine Hume's praise of Academic skepticism in the first *Enquiry*. The chapter concludes with an account of Hume's normative theory of belief's main features, namely, his typology of beliefs into "knowledge," "proofs," and "probabilities," and his "rules for judging of causal inferences."

In the fifth chapter, I examine how Hume applied this theory of belief to the theological argument of the universe's design in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. I begin with a general assessment of Hume's indebtedness to Cicero by discussing his correspondence, essays, and autobiography. After drawing the most important similarities between Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* and Hume's *Dialogues*, I continue with a general analysis of Hume's skeptical arguments, showing how the normative theory of belief outlined in the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* is at work in the *Dialogues*. My thesis is that Hume saw the belief in a God who created the universe as a "probability" and not as a "natural belief," and that his Academic skepticism inclined him to accept a form of "non-dogmatic, anti-religious deism," as the most probable or persuasive theological doctrine.

The sixth and seventh chapters are devoted to the influence of Academic Skepticism, on Immanuel Kant's critique of metaphysics, via Hume. The sixth chapter discusses the possible skeptical influences on Kant's characterization of the "skeptical method." I explore, first, Kant's remarks about Pyrrhonism in the *Lectures on Logic* and the possible Modern sources of his acquaintance with this school; second, the Modern discussions on Zeno of Elea's paradoxes concerning the infinite divisibility of time, space, and matter, which informed Kant's conception of the mathematical antinomies; and, third, Kant's references to Cicero and his comments about suspension of judgment also in the *Lectures on Logic*. The chapter closes with a discussion about the source of Kant's 'awakening from his dogmatic slumber' where I conclude that Hume's arguments on freedom and necessity, in the first *Enquiry*, were probably an important source for this awakening.

The seventh chapter is the most exegetical one, and I argue there that Kant's resolution of the Antinomies of Pure Reason can be seen as an Academic response to the *apraxia* objection in metaphysical and religious matters. To maintain this thesis, I analyze, first, Kant's Dialectic of Pure Reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, particularly the Antinomies and their theoretical solution through Transcendental Idealism. Secondly, after a discussion of this solution's insufficiency from the practical point of view, I examine what I consider to be Kant's *practical resolution*,

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namely Kant's claim that it is valid to sustain the beliefs in freedom, God, and the immortality of the soul as incentives for moral action in the second *Critique*.

Finally, in the book's conclusion (chapter eight) I suggest that the most important legacy of Academic skepticism to the Enlightenment is the distinction between theoretical and practical justifications for beliefs. In my view, to accomplish the Enlightenment's goal – attaining practical autonomy in all spheres of social life – Hume and Kant adopted Academic skepticism and gave a solution to the *apraxia* objection that involved non-dogmatically accepting religious beliefs for practical motives, while limiting human knowledge to the realm of experience.

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