

Chapter 2

Charron's Academic Skeptical Wisdom

2.1 The Ancient Greek Source of Charron's Academic Skeptical Wisdom

Is a skeptical wisdom, a wisdom based on suspension of judgment (*époché*), possible? A quick look at the history of philosophy seems to exclude this possibility since not only possession of knowledge, but certain possession of knowledge, appears as the essential part of the concept. Renaissance philosophers were well aware of the classical definition of wisdom as knowledge of things human and divine and their causes.¹ But there is another concept of wisdom, probably shared by Stoics and Academics, which plays a central role in the French Renaissance. This is the view that stresses not the identification of wisdom with knowledge but its opposition to opinion. This view is, like the other, also related to an ideal of infallibility but opens the possibility of maintaining the ideal in a pessimistic scenario about human knowledge. Because opinion (*doxa*) is by definition deprived of epistemic ascertained ground (contrary to knowledge understood as *episteme*, *scientia*), the wise man never opines because if he does he may fall in error. In order to avoid any risk of holding false views he must restrict his assent to that which cannot be possibly doubted. If nothing meets this standard, he must suspend judgment. This is the specific Academic view of wisdom if we do not go along with Pierre Couissin (1929, 1983) influential view of Academic skepticism as merely dialectical. Couissin's interpretation has been attacked by some recent scholars. A.M. Ioppolo (1986) has claimed that Arcesilaus held views of his own, denying that he argued always *ad hominem* against the Stoics. She provides non dialectical interpretations for all the main concepts related to Arcesilaus' position. Carlos Levy (1997) and Roberto Bolzani Filho (2013) have also argued that Arcesilaus did hold a positive view on wisdom. There are indeed a number of passages in Cicero's *Academica* that can be

¹ Cicero, *De Officiis* I.153 and *De finibus bonorum et malorum* II.37; Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, letter 89.5; Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists*, I.13.

cited in support of this interpretation. The first of these is Ac I.45 which is very important because it states the reasons which lead Arcesilaus to introduce *epochè* in Plato's Academy.

It was entirely with Zeno, so we have been told, ... that Arcesilaus set on foot his battle, not from obstinacy or desire for victory ... but because of the obscurity of the facts [*rerum obscuritate*] that had led Socrates to a confession of ignorance, as also previously his predecessors Democritus, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and almost all the old philosophers, who utterly denied all possibility of cognition or perception or knowledge, and maintained that the senses are limited, the mind feeble, the span of life short, and that truth (in Democritus's phrase) is sunk in an abyss ... Accordingly Arcesilaus said that there is nothing that can be known, not even that residuum of knowledge that Socrates had left himself—the truth of this very dictum; so hidden in obscurity did he believe that everything lies, nor is there anything that can be perceived or understood, and for these reasons, he said, no one must make any positive statement or affirmation or give the approval of his assent to any proposition, and a man must always restrain his rashness and hold it back from every slip, as it would be glaring rashness to give assent either to a falsehood or to something not certainly known, and nothing is more disgraceful than for assent and approval to outstrip knowledge and perception.

Although the passage makes clear that Zeno's philosophy was what motivated Arcesilaus' position, it does not appear *ad hominem* in the passage. First we see Arcesilaus holding the view of the obscurity of things and of the weakness of the human understanding, a view held outstandingly by Socrates (this being the essential link between the Academy and skepticism) but also by Socrates' predecessors. Arcesilaus reacts to Zeno because the Stoic broke with this philosophical tradition when he advanced his epistemological theory of the cognitive impression. Second, as the other passages I cite below also make clear, Arcesilaus appears to hold a view of wisdom as contrary to opinion or belief (*doxa*), this being another connection between him and Plato. Assent to that which lacks indubitable evidence is mere belief and so contrary to wisdom.² The following three positive views lead Arcesilaus to *epochè*: the obscurity of things, the weakness of human understanding, and the normative view that the philosopher should avoid any risk of erring.

Arcesilaus' commitment to intellectual integrity appears still more clearly when he is told to have considered "both true and also honorable and worthy of a wise man" the view that "it is possible for a human being to hold no opinions, and not only that it is possible but that it is the duty of the wise man" (Ac II.77). According to Couissin, suspension of judgment would result from Zeno's own (not Arcesilaus') conception of wisdom according to which a wise man shall suspend judgment when he cannot have a clear and distinct impression. But Ac II.77 makes quite clear that Arcesilaus actually agreed with this view of wisdom, the difference between him and Zeno lying only on whether there was any kind of assent that would not constitute mere fallible opinion.³ Such passages corroborate Bolzani Filho's claim

²This is the principle of intellectual integrity, alleged by skeptics and dogmatists alike but, according to the skeptics, actually held only by them. The principle rules that doctrines or propositions not fully warranted by reason shall not be held by the wise man for if he did assent to them he might commit an error. Intellectual integrity is fully stated by Cicero in Ac II.8, a passage which will be often cited and commented in this book.

³See also Ac II.67: "If the wise man ever assents to anything, he will sometimes also form an opinion; but he never will form an opinion; therefore he will not assent to anything." This syllogism

(2013, 75) that “there is a concept of *sapientia* for the Academic, a concept that does not introduce any dogmatism but what results from a rational and unbiased investigation: the suspension of judgment, the refusal of an affirmative definitive speech.”⁴ Charron's *Wisdom* is a full-fledged development of this Academic skeptic concept of wisdom adapted to his time. Its foundation lies precisely on rational unbiased examination which can be exercised fully only by those who have suspended judgment. *Épochè* is thus the central characteristic of the wise man.⁵

The first precondition of Charron's skeptical wisdom appears in the preface to the work, in particular in its extended version in the second edition. Charron dissociates the philosophical conception of wisdom from its entrenched dogmatic view.

Arcesilaus used to approve, for he used to accept both the major premiss and the minor. ... But the major premiss ... both the Stoics and their supporter Antiochus declare to be false, arguing that the wise man is able to distinguish the false from the true and the imperceptible from the perceptible.” Note that Arcesilaus is said to approve the minor premise, that the wise man will never form an opinion. Agreeing with the Stoics on this conception of wisdom, Arcesilaus disagrees that man can have knowledge, that is, clear and certain grasp of the truth, because of his view of the obscurity of things. The following statement also seems unequivocal in attributing this concept of wisdom to Arcesilaus: “the strongest point of the wise man, in the opinion of Arcesilaus, agreeing with Zeno, lies in avoiding being taken in and in seeing that he is not deceived—for nothing is more removed from the conception that we have of the dignity of the wise man than error, frivolity or rashness” (Ac II.66).

⁴The translation is mine. See also Levy (1997, 192–193): “A partir de sa critique de la représentation *cataleptique*, Arcésilas aboutissait donc à la définition d'un sage philosophe, chercheur obstiné d'une vérité insaisissable dans le flux des représentations et des arguments humains. Il pouvait ainsi objecter aux Stoïciens qu'il était le seul à réaliser concrètement le travail philosophique de lutte contre les opinions.”

⁵d'Angers (1976, 44–52), Horowitz (1971, 1998, 223–237), and Iofrida (1978) have wrongly concluded from apparently Stoic passages in *De la Sagesse* that Charron's view of wisdom is Stoic. This would be mainly the case in chapter 3, book II, titled “Vraie et essentielle preud'homie: première et fondamentale partie de sagesse,” in which Charron claims that the wise man should follow nature, “entendant par nature l'équité et la raison universelle qui luit en nous, qui contient et couve en soy les semences de toute vertu, probité, justice, et est la matrice, de laquelle sortent et naissent toutes les bonnes et belles loix, les justes et equitables jugemens, que prononcera mesmes un idiot” (S, II, 3, 424). Charron uses Stoic language to describe a concept of wisdom which is mostly Academic since to follow nature is to follow a reason conceived in the Academic fashion, namely, capable of eliminating opinion but not capable of establishing the truth. The main source of this passage is Cicero (*Tusculanarum disputationum*, III.1–2) who accepted Stoic doctrines on ethics but under the Academic mode, namely, provisionally, as probable and not as true. For instance, in the *Tusc disp* V.33, Brutus challenges Cicero to be coherent with what he says in *de Finibus* about the only verbal dispute between Stoics and Peripatetics. He replies: “You are confronting me with sealed documents, and putting in as evidence what I have sometime said or written. Take that way with other people who are handicapped in argument by rules: I live from day to day; I say anything that strikes my mind as probable; and so I alone am free” (*nos in diem vivimus; quodcumque nostros animos probabilitate percussit, id dicimus, itaque soli sumus liberi*). This figures as the epigraph of La Mothe Le Vayer's dialogue “Le Banquet sceptique” in DIA, p. 63. See Chap. 4. Supporters of the view that Charron's wisdom is mostly skeptical are Popkin (1954, 2003), Taranto (1987), Paganini (1991), Gregory (2000), Gontier (1999). None of these scholars (who approach the skepticism in *De la Sagesse* very differently) holds that this skepticism is more Academic than Pyrrhonian. Adam (1991) claims that Charron's wisdom is partially (and only strategically) Academic. Striker (2001, 172) claims that “le sage de Charron n'est pas un dogmatique manqué. Il est un sorte d'académicien qui n'a pas encore tout à fait accepté le probabilisme de Carnéade.”

In fact, the successive development of Stoicism, Neo-Platonism, and scholastic Aristotelianism that dominates the philosophical scene during the seventeenth hundred years that separate Arcesilaus and Charron rendered the work of dissociating wisdom from dogmatic knowledge much harder to the French than it was to the Greek. Charron maintains that although wisdom is related to knowledge (against the popular view that reduces it to prudent behavior) it is not and cannot be related to knowledge of things that lay beyond human limited intellectual capacity. In the preface to the first edition, Charron says that he does not take

ce mot [wisdom] subtilement au sens hautain et eslevé des Theologiens et Philosophes (qui prennent plaisir à descrire et faire peinture des choses, qui n'ont encores esté veuës, et les relever à telle perfection, que la nature humaine ne s'en trouve capable, que par imagination) pour une cognoissance parfaite des choses divines et humaines, ou bien des premieres et plus hautes causes et ressorts de toutes choses. (S, 25–26)

Charron thus sets aside the traditional dogmatic view of wisdom related to metaphysics and speculative theology. In the extended preface to the second edition, he distinguishes divine from human wisdom, defining each as the proper subject of, respectively, theology and philosophy. The philosophical viewpoint is inadequate to access divine wisdom as the theological viewpoint is inadequate to access human wisdom. Charron makes a double movement. On the one hand, he confines theology to what lies beyond human nature, the realm of the supernatural, thereby legitimizing only positive or revealed theology and excluding natural theology.⁶ On the other hand, he restrains philosophy to what lies within the natural grasp of human mind, thereby legitimizing only practical philosophy (in the large Lockean sense of what concerns man's life in man's natural condition in this world) and excluding dogmatic philosophy in general (which pretends to attain the truth) and metaphysics in particular, which pretends to deliver first principles and causes.⁷

In the next section I outline the two major Renaissance sources of Charron's Academic skeptical view of wisdom.

2.2 French Renaissance Sources of Academic Skeptical Wisdom

The ancient Academic view of wisdom was well known during the Renaissance mainly due to Cicero's great influence at the time. It gained plausibility during the sixteenth century because of the crisis of scholastic Aristotelianism,⁸ and

⁶For a different view, which points out elements of natural theology in *De la Sagesse*, see Belin (1995) and Magnard (1999).

⁷According to Barbara de Negroni (1986), Charron is neither a skeptic nor a dogmatist. He believes man is capable of the truth, but needs to rely on experience and tradition.

⁸See Gilson (1947, 93–94) on the divorce between wisdom and knowledge in the Renaissance due to the crisis of Aristotelianism.

also because of the intellectual crisis posed by the Reformation and by the discovery of the new world.⁹

One of the remarkable originalities of Pierre Charron's *De la Sagesse* in the context of the receptions of ancient skepticism is the proposition of a consistent and fully developed skeptical wisdom. The uniqueness of the project can be evaluated if we look both backwards and forwards in the history of skepticism. Looking forward into the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, that is, until Descartes's doubt takes over the philosophical skeptical scene, the tremendous success of Charron's *Wisdom* is largely due to its proposition of a clear and systematic skeptical wisdom. Indeed, for those thinkers opposed to dogmatism—and there were many at a time of crisis of Aristotelian scholasticism—Charron's view that skepticism is not only a viable mode of life but the wise mode of life could not but appear attractive. The remaining chapters of this book show the preeminent role of Charron in the first half of the seventeenth century, both in its main skeptical (La Mothe Le Vayer) or partially skeptical (Gassendi and Pascal) philosophers and in the main anti-skeptical philosopher (Descartes).¹⁰ Looking backwards, skepticism in the Renaissance, with the remarkable exception of Montaigne,¹¹ is usually instrumental for scholarly, philosophical or religious ends alien to skepticism itself. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola and Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim for instance, in reviving skepticism to combat Aristotelianism, were interested mainly in apologizing for, respectively,

⁹For the role of the religious controversies in the development of skepticism in the period, see Popkin (2003, 3–16); for that of the discovery of the new world, see Marcondes (2009). For a variety of receptions and uses of ancient skepticism in the Renaissance, see the collective volume organized by Paganini and Maia Neto (2009). Floridi (2002) gives a very complete relation of the manuscripts of the works of Sextus Empiricus during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

¹⁰If we consider the history of ideas after the second half of the seventeenth century, Montaigne is by far the most influential among those who rehearsed ancient skeptical views. Recent studies specifically on Montaigne's skepticism are numerous. I mention the main monographic and collective books published after Popkin's pioneer study: Brush (1966), Laursen (1992), Brahimi (1997, 2001), Mienowski (1998), Giocanti (2001), Demonet and Legros (eds.) (2004), Carraud and Marion (eds.) (2004), Eva (2004, 2007), and Romão (2007). Paganini (2008) provides a very comprehensive and erudite study of early modern skepticism, highlighting the importance of Montaigne.

¹¹Montaigne is the main source of Charron's conception of a skeptical wisdom. Kaye (1982) gives quantitative analysis of the citations of Montaigne's *Essays* by Charron. Most of these citations are about skepticism and the single essay most cited by far is the "Apology for Raymond Sebond." Despite Charron's debt to Montaigne, the charge of plagiarism which haunted Charron since the seventeenth century—Bayle says that "il y a dans les livres de la *Sagesse* une infinité des pensées qui avaient paru dans les *Essais* de Montaigne" (*Dictionary* article "Charron," remark B) and in remark O of the same article, reports Sorel's view that "Charron n'était que le secrétaire de Montaigne et de du Vair," that he "a pris beaucoup de sentences philosophiques mot pour mot des *Essais* de Montaigne"—is no longer considered by Montaigne and Charron scholars who have pointed out numerous and important differences between the two. For example, Barbara de Negroni (1986) and Giocanti (2001, 21) hold that Charron, unlike Montaigne, is not a skeptic. See also the contributors to Demonet and Legros (2004) for a variety of differences (even oppositions) between the two authors' views of human beings.

prophetic knowledge and hermetic theology.¹² For Charron, skepticism, Academic in particular, was not merely strategic. It was the position that accomplished human natural intellectual limited excellence, namely, the “perfection de l’homme comme homme” (S, 32), that is, abstraction made of the benefits human nature could acquire supernaturally, through grace.¹³ The perfection of the human cognitive faculties does not require, against Aristotle’s view, assent to the truth. Truth is the prerogative of God and superior spiritual natures. It cannot be fully apprehended by fallible human beings. This limitation does not imply, however, that the human intellectual faculties are defective. Divorce from the truth is not a privation, only a negation. The faculties can function perfectly (and can only function perfectly) if no assent to something as true is given. As indicated above, Charron takes above all from Academic skepticism (Arcesilaus and Carneades) the foundations of this wisdom, basically, the view of the *rerum obscuritate* to limited human faculties and that therefore the only way to make sure that the wise man does not fall in error is to suspend judgment—*epochè*.

Besides Cicero’s *Academica*, Charron’s main sources of Academic skepticism are two: (1) Montaigne’s reception of ancient skepticism, which Charron learned from the *Essays* and maybe also directly with Montaigne in Bordeaux.¹⁴ (2) The crisis in the Paris university which took place from 1540 to 1562 due to Pierre de la Ramé’s criticism of scholastic Aristotelianism and proposal of a reform of the curriculum. The most relevant aspect of this movement for Charron is Ramus’ close associate Omer Talon’s claim that such reform was in accord with the pedagogical model of the New Academy.¹⁵ Charron may have been influenced by Talon’s ideas either directly (for he was a student in Paris at the occasion) or through Talon’s edition and commentary of Cicero’s *Academica*. In the remaining part of this section I deal with these two French sources, first the earlier Parisian, then the later from Bordeaux.

Gabriel de la Rochemaillet claims that Charron was born in Paris in 1541 and was instructed there “dès son ieune aage aux bonnes lettres: tellement qu’ayant appris en peu de temps les langues Grecque & Latine, dont y avoit lors de celebres Professeurs en l’Université de Paris, il fit bonne provision des sciences

¹² On Gianfrancesco Pico, see Schmitt (1967), Popkin (2003, 20–27), and Cao (2009). On Agrippa, see Compagni (2009). For the scholarly interest in the early revival of Sextus Empiricus by the Italian humanists, see Granada (2001).

¹³ These are the matter of divine (not human) wisdom according to Charron’s types of wisdom related above.

¹⁴ According to Charron’s biographer and friend Gabriel de la Rochemaillet, Charron met Montaigne in Bordeaux in 1589, that is, one year after the publication of the three books of the *Essays*. Charron “prit cognoissance, & vescu fort familièrement avec Messire Michel de Montaigne, Chevalier de l’ordre du Roy, Auteur du Livre intitulé, les Essais, duquel il faisoit un merveilleux cas” (Eloge, non paginated, in Charron 1970). Apart from Rochemaillet’s rapport, which has been challenged by Philippe Ducoux (cf. Faye 1998, 260), we have the exemplar of a book by Bernardino Ochino’s (*Il Catechismo, o vero institutione christiana*, Basilea, 1561) dedicated by Montaigne to Charron with the former’s indication that it is a “liber prohibitus.”

¹⁵ The Hellenistic philosophical school New Academy thus recovered (above all against the Stoic school) the true Academic (in the sense of the educational institution) spirit exemplified by Plato’s Socratic dialogues.

liberales & humaines, & mesmes de la Logique, Ethique, Physique & Metaphysique” (Charron 1970, Eloge, not paginated). Considering that students went to college aged 10–12 and that the course took about 7–8 years, this must have happened sometime between 1551/1553 and 1558/1561. The upheaval caused by Ramus in the University of Paris took place in print and in classrooms from the early 40s to the early 60s. In 1543, Ramus published his *Dialecticae institutiones*, in which he proposed a reform of the discipline, and *Aristotelicae animadversiones*, both condemned the following year. But thanks to the protection of the Cardinal de Lorraine, Ramus was appointed professor of philosophy and rhetoric at the College Royal in 1551 and also kept a position at the College des Presles, which was subordinated to the University of Paris. Ramus worked very closely with Omer Talon, who published an *Institutiones oratoriae* in 1545.¹⁶ The editorial and teaching projects were articulated. While one taught dialectics, the other taught rhetoric, following the humanist Ciceronian (and anti-scholastic) view that these two disciplines should be brought together. Talon also published a commented edition of Cicero’s *de Oratore* in 1553 and earlier in 1547 a commented edition of Cicero’s *Academica* in which he relates Ramus’ project of the reform of the university curriculum to the Academics’ conception of philosophy.

The university crisis caused by Ramus and Talon must be placed in the context of the influence of humanism in scholasticism and the reaction by traditional teachers. Lisa Jardine, in a paper on Lorenzo Valla’s *Dialectica disputationes* (written in 1444 and published in 1500) and Rudolph Agricola’s *De inventione dialectica* (1479), shows that these two influential dialecticians changed “the focus of dialectic from syllogism and validity into the murky waters of probable and convincing arguing of a case” (Jardine 1983, 276).¹⁷ They attempted to unify rhetoric and Academic epistemology, according to a project held by Cicero himself. In *Tusculanarum disputationum*, II.9, Cicero claims that he choose the method of examining the two sides of every issue (*in utramque partem*) because this is the way to find the probable and because it is the best oratory practice.¹⁸ Though according to Schmitt (1972, 79–80), Ramus, unlike Talon, did not claim to be an Academic himself, he and Talon were charged with being so by the Paris University teacher—and former dean—Pierre Galland.¹⁹

The coincidence of this Parisian fuss about Academic skepticism and Charron’s studies in Paris sheds light on important views exhibited in *De la Sagesse*. The first of these is the pedagogical nature of the work. The view that skepticism provides a valuable model of education is also present in some of Montaigne’s essays such as “De l’institution des enfants,” but the *Essays* as a whole do not have a preeminent

¹⁶ These biographical data about Ramus come from Sellberg (2011).

¹⁷ See also Panizza (1978). For criticism of the view of Valla as an Academic skeptic, see Nauta (2006).

¹⁸ See also Cicero, *De Oratoria* 12, *Nat deo* II.168.

¹⁹ *Pro schola Parisiensi contra novam academicam Petri Rami oratio*, published in 1551. See Schmitt (1972, 92–102). Schmitt also analyzes another work on Academic skepticism published at the same occasion—and probably related to the same context—by Guy de Brués (Schmitt 1972, 102–104). For the whole controversy around Ramus and Talon, see also Huppert (1999, 37–49).

pedagogical intent. Charron's work, on the contrary, is entirely pedagogical. Its aim is to instruct those few who are capable (I return to this point below) to become wise men. The second and main book of *De la Sagesse* gives "the instructions and general rules of wisdom."²⁰ The foundational rules are Academic for they instruct not on how to learn knowledge but on how to unlearn acquired opinions. The first two rules of book II are: "1. Exemption et affranchissement des erreurs, et vices du monde, et des passions, premiere disposition à la Sagesse. 2. Universelle et pleine liberté de l'esprit, tant en jugement, qu'en volonté: seconde disposition à la Sagesse." Charron presents these rules after showing, in the first book about knowledge of oneself and human nature, the internal (the limits of our intellectual faculties, the bad influence of the passions, etc.) and external (the influence of the institutions responsible for our education, the influence of the climate, of social status, etc.) causes of our great susceptibility to hold and become attached to uncertain and false opinions.²¹ The basic feature of Charron's wisdom lies in being able to resist the tendency to take as if it were true what appears with verisimilitude. "L'ordre et la pertinence c'est l'effect de sagesse, et qui donne pris à l'ame, et sur tout se garder de presumption, opiniâtreté ... plustost se tenir au doute en suspens" (S, III, 6, 632).²²

The skeptical Academy appealed to Talon and Charron as the best educational model mainly because its distinctive feature was abhorrence of authority in philosophy, the defense of the *libertas philosophandi* against any kind of previously established dogma or doctrine, which in the context was mainly Aristotelian.²³ Schmitt (1972, 88) points out that Talon's main interest in reviving Academic skepticism lied in its providing a pedagogical model, much more open than the scholastic one thus established. This is first the practice of arguing *in utraquem partem*, which Ramus and Talon attributed not only to Plato and his Academic school but also to Aristotle in the *Topics* but which was not, unfortunately, observed by Aristotle's scholastic followers at the time. This practice was seen as providing the development of rationality, once taken in account that certain possession of truth is not naturally available to human beings. Indeed, Aristotle claims that the method of arguing the two sides is proper when *scientia*, certain cognition from necessary causes, is

²⁰ The title of book II of *De la Sagesse* is "Livre Seconde, contentant les instructions et regles generales de Sagesse."

²¹ For the internal constraints, see in particular chapters 14, 16, 17, and 18; for the external ones, see the "Cinquesme ... consideration de l'homme," chapters 41–62 of book I *De la Sagesse*.

²² The suspension of judgment proposed by Charron as the perfect condition of the mind achieved by the wise man includes, in the Ciceronian/Philonian way, acceptance of the probable ("vraysemblable"). The assent is mitigated. It does not compromise the wise man's intellectual integrity and philosophical independence with respect to the philosophical schools and doctrines. See S, II, 2, 399–400 and its source in Cicero's *Academics* II.7–8.

²³ In "De l'institution des enfans," Montaigne says that "[A] Qu'il luy face tout passer par l'estamine et ne loge rien en sa teste par simple autorité et à credit; les principes d'Aristote ne luy soyent principes, non plus que ceux des Stoiciens ou Epicuriens. Qu'on luy propose cette diversité de jugements: il choisira s'il peut, sinon il en demeurera en doute. [C] Il n'y a que les fols certains et resolus" (E, I, 26, 151). See also Montaigne's "Apology for Raymond Sebond". (E, II, 12, 539–541)

not available.²⁴ In the Academic skeptical scenario, no *scientia* is possible, so the correct employment of reason is not grasping and fixing the truth,²⁵ but the examination in view of finding the most probable. Since probability can eventually be found in any opposing school (Aristotelian, Stoic, Epicurean), all should be given an equal hearing and examined. This practice of inquiry and study, exhibiting intellectual freedom, is, according to Talon in the dedicatory letter of his edition of Cicero's *Academica* to the Cardinal de Lorraine, Cicero's Academic one.²⁶

The authority of Aristotle was seen as a major obstacle to the teaching of philosophy. Under the New Academic model, any authority was suppressed or, according to some interpreters who followed Augustine's view of the New Academics, hidden, this being, according to these interpreters, the reason the Academics did not teach (at least outwardly) Platonic doctrine. As indicated, the method of arguing *in utraque partem* in Cicero aimed at discovering the most probable opinion. Cicero thus replies to the following objection in *Academica* II.60:

There remains their statement that for the discovery of the truth it is necessary to argue against all things and for all things. Well then, I should like to see what they have discovered. 'Oh,' [the Academic] says, 'it is not our practice to give an exposition.' What pray are these holy secrets of yours, or why does your school conceal its doctrine like something disgraceful?' 'In order,' says he, 'that our hearers may be guided by reason rather than by authority.'

The main issue behind this educational model is the view of philosophy and rationality. The Academic skeptics held a view of philosophy deprived of doctrines. Philosophy consisted in rational examination that exposes the lack of

²⁴ See Aristotle. *Topics*, I–II, 100a–101b.

²⁵ The Academics opposed the Stoic view that the essential feature of the wise man is to have knowledge. "But you deny that anybody except the wise man *knows* anything; and this Zeno used to demonstrate by gesture: for he would display his hand in front of one with the fingers stretched out and say 'A visual appearance is like this'; next he closed his fingers a little and said, 'An act of assent is like this'; then he pressed his fingers closely together and made a fist, and said that that was comprehension ...; but then he used to apply his left hand to his right fist and squeeze it tightly and forcibly, and then say that such was knowledge [*scientiam*], which was within the power of nobody save the wise man". (Ac II.145)

²⁶ "Horum novorum Academicorum institutum erat de rebus obscuris utrinque disputare, philosophorum placita, non deorum oracula putare, nullam scholam perpetuò sequi, & tamen in omnibus scholis, quod verum aut verisimile videretur, liberè sequi: Defendat quidem, ait Cicero, quod quisque sentiat: sunt enim libera hominum iudicia: nos institutum tenebimus, nullisque ullius disciplinae legibus astricti, quibus in philosophia necessariò pareamus: quid sit in quaque re maximè probabile, semper requiremus. Idem, Cum Academicis incerta luctatio est, qui nihil affirmant, & quasi desperata cognitione certi, id sequi volunt, quodcunque verisimile videatur" (Talon 1550, 6). By holding a view as probable, the Academic keeps himself detached from it, so in conditions to change the view when something more probable appears. This detachment is the freedom of judgment so appreciated by the Academics. See Ac II.7–8 and note 3 above. According to Montaigne, "[A] Cicero mesme, qui devoit au sçavoir tout son vaillant, Valerius dict que sur sa vieillesse il commença à desestimer les lettres. [C] Et pendant qu'il les traictoit, c'estoit sans obligation d'aucun parti, suivant ce qui luy sembloit probable, tantost en l'une secte, tantost en l'autre: se tenant tousjours sous la dubitation de l'Academie". (E, II, 12, 501)

grounds of the various beliefs.²⁷ This would be true philosophy, etymologically, the search for (not the possession of) wisdom understood as knowledge. As true knowledge cannot be acquired in this world because of the body, wisdom becomes the Socratic emancipation of the pretention to knowledge held by the various philosophical sects, the mind's liberation of attachment to opinions. Talon indicates the division of labor between him and Ramus. While the latter worked in the new dialectics and "& Aristotelicis animadversionibus,"²⁸ he presents to the Cardinal de Lorraine his commented edition of Cicero's *Academica* as an effort to recover the true view and practice of philosophy as the use of reason to liberate one from attachment to opinions.²⁹

The recovery of Academic skepticism as a pedagogical tool happened about 10 years before the translation and publication of Sextus' works in Latin. As Naya (2008, 155) has pointed out, the main of these editions, that of Gentien Hervet in 1569, also dedicated to the Cardinal de Lorraine, "confounds" the Pyrrhonian and Academic traditions in recommending Sextus' work as pedagogically useful to the extent that "it can serve also to improve the learning and comprehension of the philosophy taught today in the schools and the entire circle of the so called disciplines. The best way to learn is to treat the object of study under the form of disputations among opposing points of view."³⁰ Hervet links the pedagogic utility of skepticism to Christian apologetics. This rational exercise will lead to the most probable, which, in its turn, will make possible access to the truth presupposed in the *verisimile* (Cicero's synonym of *probabile*).³¹ Hervet's interpretation of Academic probability most certainly derives from Augustine's use of the doctrine to connect Plato and the New Academy. The Platonic/Christian truth lies not in that which appears *verisimile* to the senses, but in the pure intelligible ideas which are the pattern of sensible things.³² Talon also makes this point, ranging the Stoics, Epicureans and (crucially in the context) Aristotelians on the side of the body and the New Academics and Plato on the side of the mind.³³ This epistemic interpretation

²⁷ The Pyrrhonians also hold the view of philosophy deprived of doctrines but their view was therapeutic. They wanted to get rid of opinions because of the disturbance they brought (see PH I.12). They do not emphasize the ideal of critical rationality as the Academics did.

²⁸ These correspond to the two works published by Ramus in 1543.

²⁹ "Ego vero pro mea parte curavi, ut istam quoque rationem adiuverem: nam ut homines pertinaces, & certis opinionibus in philosophia mancipati, addictique indigna servitute liberarentur, intelligentque verum philosophandi genus iudicio & aestimatione rerum liberum esse, non autem opinione & affectione constrictum, libellum quandam Academiae". (Talon 1550, 4)

³⁰ Hervet, "Dedicatory letter of Sextus' *Adversus Mathematicos* to the Cardinal de Lorraine," English translation in Popkin and Maia Neto (2007, 91).

³¹ "Haec cum fiant, necesse est ut haec exercitatio magnam vim habeat, ad excitanda & acuenda adolescentum ingenia, qui tum demum poterunt verum discernere, cum quae sunt probabilia & verisimilia, ab iis quae secus sunt, dijudicaverint & ex multis probabilibus & verisimilibus latens verum tandem eruerint" (Hervet 1569, preface not paginated).

³² Augustine, *Contra Academicos* III.37.

³³ "Contra hos igitur homines [Stoics, Epicureans and Peripatetics] Archesilas, caeterique viriliter & fortiter Socratis exemplo, & virtute sese armarunt, ut nos ab eorum latrunculorum servitute liberate,

of Carneades' probabilism is criticized by Montaigne in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" (E, II, 12, 561–562), which is one of the various Montaignian philosophical positions maintained by Charron.³⁴ The main point of the recovery of Academic skepticism in Charron is the model of rationality exhibited by Socrates and the Academic skeptics, a critical rationalism (in the Popperian sense) or rationalism without dogmas that was much more emphasized by Talon than its eventual Platonic/Christian apologetic use.³⁵

Augustine's interpretation of the unity of the Academy certainly brought prestige to Academic skepticism. He believed the New Academics hid and preserved the Platonic doctrine from the materialism of the other Hellenistic schools until the development of Neo-Platonism and the arrival of Christianity could, respectively, recover the purely intelligible truth and make it fully and widespread available.³⁶ The skepticism of the school, according to this interpretation, posed no threat to the metaphysical truths such as the existence of an immaterial God and an immaterial soul. It was limited to sensible knowledge, strategic and provisional. Its reappraisal by Talon in his and Ramus' battle for intellectual freedom certainly added still more prestige to the school. The high status of Academic skepticism is clear in Montaigne, and this is an ascertained source of Charron's skeptical wisdom. Montaigne says that the end of the Academics is "la foiblesse et humaine ignorance; ce party a eu la plus grande suyte et les sectateurs les plus nobles" (E, II, 12, 502). Charron echoes Montaigne in claiming that "c'est une belle chose, que sçavoir bien ignorer et douter, et la plus seure, de laquelle ont fait profession les plus nobles Philosophes" (S, III, 6, 633). Montaigne says that the skeptical view (Academic and Pyrrhonian) that there is no reason "qui n'en aye une contraire" is the "plus sage party des Philosophes" (E, II, 15, 612; emphasis added). Charron highlights "la modestie Academique tant requise au Sage... fondee premierement sur ces propositions tant celebre [sic] entre les Sages. Qu'il n'y a rien de certain, que nous ne sçavons rien, que la seule certitude et science est qu'il n'y a rien de certain, et que nous ne sçavons rien, *solum certum nihil esse certi, Hoc unum scio quod nihil scio*, que nous ne faisons que quester, enquerir ... que la verité n'est point de nostre acquies"

& in naturae, quam veteres illi sumopere probaverant, libertatem praestantiamque restituerent: est enim verae philosophiae proprium, homines à opinione ad veritatem, à sensibus ad mentem, à singulis rebus ad universitatem, à caducis & mortalibus ad constantiam & aeternitatem convertere" (Talon 1550, 9). The scholastic Aristotelians held the famous epistemological doctrine that "nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu."

³⁴ In Charron's works "o cristianismo não é verossímil entendendo-se por este conceito a similaridade ao verdadeiro, o espelhamento da verdade, sentido criticado por Montaigne e jamais adotado pelos cétricos acadêmicos... Por outro lado, compreendendo-se como verossímil o que é convincente, o que pode ser sustentado por argumentos mais impactantes e melhores que outros o cristianismo é sim a religião mais verossímil". (Loque 2012, 192)

³⁵ "Se pose alors le but avoué d'une telle diffusion du scepticisme néo-académicien, qui a pour effet paradoxal—mais significatif de la place laissée au scepticisme dans un contexte catholique tridentin—de faire de la σκεψις le moyen privilégié de la refondation du rationalisme. C'est avant tout la promotion de la liberté de pensée, face au dogmatisme obtus de la tradition scolastique, qui est visée par Talon" (Naya 2008, 153).

³⁶ Augustine, *Contra Academicos* III.38–42.

(PTS, 838–839). Because the most relevant source of Charron's skeptical wisdom is Montaigne's view of the skeptic in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" as attaining the limited natural perfection of human nature, I now examine this view in detail.

Montaigne's description of the ancient skeptics in the Apology begins dialectical. His arguments seem specifically targeted at those who claim that human beings can know the truth and thus substitute true arguments for those presumed false ones proposed by Sebond. Can man achieve the truth? Montaigne proceeds empirically examining what real men have achieved on this regard, and to this effect he concedes to his opponents the case most favorable to their cause. Rather than looking at the views of brute and vulgar men, he proposes the examination of those who excelled in sharpness of mind, virtue and learning, those in whom "loge la hauteur extreme de l'humaine nature" (E, II, 12, 502). These are the philosophers in general but first and foremost the ancient skeptics. Montaigne's argument is that if the human beings who most excelled in reason and investigation did not find the truth, truth is hardly achievable by human beings. This is the manner Montaigne introduces the ancient skeptics in the Apology for it turns out that it is precisely in them that human nature finds "la hauteur extreme."³⁷ Indeed, if Montaigne's argument begins dialectical, that is, specifically designed to target the critics of Sebond, the continuation of the argument, that is, the favorable and sympathetic way he describes the ancient skeptics, suggests that Montaigne thought that they did achieve "la hauteur extreme de l'humaine nature." The ancient skeptics are portrayed as those who exhibited and exercised the human faculties (cognitive and moral) in their perfection, that is, fully and correctly, without pretending to achieve with them what they cannot naturally achieve, viz., the truth.³⁸ It is to this view that I now turn.

As is well known, Montaigne follows closely the first book of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* when he presents ancient skepticism. He begins endorsing Sextus' tripartite division of philosophy in which the Academics are held negative dogmatists for holding that truth cannot be found.³⁹ This alignment with Sextus does not prevent Montaigne from using Cicero's *Academica* as a crucial source. In defending ancient skepticism against its detractors, it is mainly Cicero's report of the Academics that Montaigne follows.

[B] Pourquoi ne leur sera il permis, disent ils, comme il est entre les dogmatistes à l'un dire vert, à l'autre jaune, à eux aussi de douter? ... Et, où les autres sont portez, ou par la coustume

³⁷ This position or strategy of Montaigne's both to introduce skepticism and to contravene dogmatism comes straight from Cicero's *Academica*: "Enough about authority—although you had put the question to me whether I did not think that with so many able minds carrying on the search with such zealous energy, after so many ages since the old philosophers mentioned, the truth might possibly have been discovered". (Ac II.76)

³⁸ By perfection I mean the integrity or entirety of the faculty essential to human beings, the faculty of judgment. Perfection here thus has the Aristotelian sense of full accomplishment of a nature but does not agree with Aristotle's own view of the perfection of the intellect. For according to Montaigne it is not natural to human reason to have knowledge (truth). The perfection of human reason is exercised in the search for the truth, not in its possession, which is a prerogative of God.

³⁹ The division derives from the philosophers' position with respect to the truth. The Dogmatists claim to have found the truth, the Academics claim it cannot be found, the Pyrrhonians keep searching (PH I.2–3).

de leur païs, ou par l'institution des parents, ou par rencontre, comme par une tempeste, sans jugement et sans choïs, voire le plus souvant avant l'aage de discretion, à telle ou telle opinion, à la secte ou Stoïque ou Epicurienne, à laquelle ils se trouvent hippothequez, asserviz et collez comme à une prise qu'ils ne peuvent desmordre—[C] “*ad quamcunque disciplinam velut tempestate delati, ad eam tanquam ad saxum adhaerescunt*”—[B] pourquoy à ceux cy ne sera il pareillement concedé de maintenir leur liberté, et considerer les choses sans obligation et servitude? (E, II, 12, 503–504)⁴⁰

Note that the “right of the skeptic to doubt” is first introduced as being at least equal to that of the dogmatist to assent. However, in defending this right Montaigne construes skeptical *epochè* as a much more favorable mental state than belief. As the passage from Cicero’s indicates, his apology for skeptical *epochè* is based on Cicero’s own defense of Academic skepticism, specifically on a crucial passage of book II of *The Academics* in which Cicero introduces his key notion of intellectual integrity (Ac II.7–9). The traditional charge against skepticism is that it is harmful to (not to say incompatible with) ordinary life. Beliefs in the strong sense of assenting to propositions or presentations as true are considered essential to securing ordinary life. So the dogmatic philosopher who ideally holds only to true beliefs is in the best possible position on this regard whereas the skeptic who holds no beliefs at all is (as far as active life is concerned) in a position even worse than that of the vulgar man who holds mostly false beliefs. Cicero’s line of defense to this charge (followed here closely by Montaigne) is to reverse it, arguing for the superiority of suspension over assent on the very moral level where the objection is raised.

The reasons alleged by Cicero and Montaigne to justify the superiority of Academic *epochè* over dogma turn out to be crucial in early modern philosophy, in particular because it becomes the heart of Charron’s conception of wisdom. First Cicero and Montaigne show the non-epistemic grounds of assent, often given before intellectual maturity. Montaigne cites custom, instruction of parents and chance. Cicero cites the emotional (non-rational) influence of some friend or a first hearing

⁴⁰ Cicero complains to the Stoic Lucullus: “For you it will be obligatory to ... defend [Stoicism] as you would your life and honour, while to me it is not even left to doubt” (Ac II.119). Defending Pyrrho against the anecdotes related by Diogenes Laertius about Pyrrho’s extravagant way of life such as being followed by friends to keep him from falling into precipices, being hit by cars and attacked by dogs (*Lives* IX.62), Montaigne cites Cicero. “Ils le peignent stupide et immobile, prenant un train de vie farouche et inassociable, attendant le hurt des charretes, se presentant aux precipices, refusant de s’accommoder aux loix. Cela est encherir sur sa discipline. Il n’a pas voulu se faire pierre ou souche; il a voulu se faire homme vivant, discourtant et raisonnant, jouissant de tous plaisirs et commoditez naturelles, embesoignant et se servant de toutes ses pieces corporelles et spirituelles [C] en regle et droicture. [A] Les privileges fantastiques, imaginaires et faux, que l’homme s’est usurpé, de regenter, d’ordonner, d’establir la vérité, il les a, de bonne foy, renoncez et quittez” (E, II, 12, 505). Montaigne’s view of Pyrrho is that he uses his body and mind plainly in accord to human natural capability. Montaigne’s sources are Academic: “For he [the Academic] is not a statue carved out of stone or hewn out of timber; he has a body and a mind, a mobile intellect and mobile senses” (Cicero, Ac II.101). The saying is Homeric as indicated by Socrates in Plato’s *Apology*. Socrates tells his judges that “[t]o quote the very words of Homer, even I am not sprung ‘from an oak or from a rock’, but from human parents, and consequently I have relatives—yes, and sons too, gentlemen ... but all the same I am not going to produce them here and beseech you to acquit me” (Plato, *Apology*, 34d). Socrates means that he will remain strictly rational in his apology, not appealing to the emotions of the judges.

at an early age of some philosopher lecturing on non-evident things.⁴¹ The major evil consequence of this premature and rash assent is the damage it causes in the faculty of judgment (*iudicandi potestas*). The idea is that early commitment to doctrines, philosophical or vulgar, compromises the full-fledged use of reason, that is, its natural capacity to objectively and dispassionately examine the epistemic merits of doctrines. The use of reason subsequent to commitment to doctrines is biased in favor of these doctrines and at least partially blind to conflicting views and facts.⁴² Because commitment to doctrines compromise inquiry, those who suspend judgment are in a better condition to exercise intellectual integrity, which means here first the ordinary sense in epistemology of not giving assent to that which is not warranted by reason,⁴³ and also in that (this being implicit in the first point) his intellect will not be employing its natural full capacity as that of the Academic. Integrity has therefore the normative meaning presupposed in philosophical inquiry and the epistemological one of entirety (full-fledged capacity) of reason. A third aspect of intellectual integrity (a more strictly moral one) is also remarked by Cicero. Assent given before fully examining the pros and cons of a doctrine results from an external (i.e., non-rational) imposition on the intellect. The ultimate ground of this external imposition is authority. Suspension of judgment thus means that the Academic's faculty of judgment or intellect is, unlike the dogmatist's, free from prescriptions by other men, usually the leader of some philosophical school. This explains Talon's revival of Academic skepticism in his fight against scholastic Aristotelianism.

Montaigne is mostly interested in these epistemological and moral aspects of intellectual integrity which he emphasizes and develops further. He cites two lines of this Ciceronian passage (Ac II.8–9), one describing the dogmatist, the other the skeptic, in order to reverse the charge against the latter by showing the superiority of suspension over assent. The dogmatists “cling as to a rock to

⁴¹ “For all other people in the first place are held in close bondage placed upon them before they were able to judge what doctrine was the best, and secondly they form judgements about matters as to which they know nothing at the most incompetent period of life, either under the guidance of some friend or under the influence of a single harangue from the first lecturer that they attend”. (Ac II.8)

⁴² The source of this Academic position is Socrates' attitude exhibited above all (though not exclusively) in Plato's early dialogues and, in particular, in the digression on the philosopher in Plato's later dialogue the *Theaetetus*, 172c–177c. In the digression, the philosopher is contrasted with a lawyer. The latter is previously committed to some cause and interest, so his use of reason is entirely compromised by his non-strictly epistemic commitments. The philosopher, by contrast, has no interest and commitment whatsoever except the commitment to the truth. In the footsteps of the digression on the philosopher in the *Theaetetus*, Bayle opposes the dogmatist to the Academic skeptic philosopher by comparing the former to a lawyer and the latter to an impartial reporter of facts and views. See Montaigne's Essays, II, 12, 566; Bayle's *Dictionary*, article “Chrysippus,” note G and Maia Neto (1999, 271–272).

⁴³ “the Academic School [was] well advised in ‘withholding assent’ from beliefs that are uncertain; for what is more unbecoming than ill-considered haste? and what is so ill-considered or so unworthy of the dignity and seriousness proper to a philosopher as to hold an opinion that is not true, or to maintain with unhesitating certainty a proposition not based on adequate examination, comprehension and knowledge?” (Cicero, *Nat deo* I.1). See also Ac I.45, II.66–68, 77; *De Officiis* II.7–8, III.20; *Tusc disp* II.95, IV.7, V.33.

whatever theory they are carried to by stress of weather.” The skeptics “are more free and untrammelled in that [they] possess [their] power of judgement uncurtailed [*integra nobis est iudicandi potestas*].” The metaphor of the world as a stormy sea or wind where human beings are adrift is a traditional skeptical one.⁴⁴ Because beliefs change (sometimes quite abruptly and radically) the world of experience is like a deep and moving sea where we cannot get hold to anything stable but are rather carried out from here to there until we hold fast to some “rock” (some philosophical doctrine) which, from our distressing perspective, appears to provide a safe harbor from this moving sea.⁴⁵

The main problem of dogmatism according to Cicero and above all Montaigne is that holding doctrines under such conditions is to mortgage (Montaigne’s expression is “*hippothequez*”) our *iudicandi potestas*, thus compromising intellectual integrity. This is precisely what the skeptic does not do. Thus he alone (1) can adequately (uncommittedly) rationally inquire into things (this is the main Ciceronian point) and (2)—a Montaignean development crucial to modern thought—in *epochè* the skeptic finds a safe harbor from the moving world. This harbor is not—like the dogmatists’—some external doctrine in which his intellect is mortgaged or alienated but his own intellect whose integrity takes the place of changing precarious external beliefs as the solid ground of the philosopher’s *ethos*.⁴⁶ Montaigne opposes the autonomy of the skeptic (who finds assurance inwardly, in the integrity of his *iudicandi potestas*) to the heteronomy of the dogmatist (whose assurance depends on something other and external to himself). This integrity is recovered in the dialectical denial of beliefs which are considered artificial (non-natural) obstacles to the full employment (the integrity) of reason. Montaigne thus construes a view of human perfection (in the sense of perfection of a limited nature) on the basis of skeptical *epochè*. Indeed, his description of ancient skepticism emphasizes *epochè*. “[A] Leur mot sacramental, c’est *epochè*, c’est à dire, je soutiens, je ne bouge” (E, II, 12, 505). This description emphasizes the stability it brings to the skeptic’s mind. This stability results from the capacity of the act of suspending judgment to integrate the self: “Je soutiens.” Montaigne follows closely Cicero’s rendering of *epochè* as *sustinere*, which describes the Academic’s capacity to hold back assent from appearances that momentarily strike as true but sooner or later, under different conditions, will appear false. Because of this changing world one is eager to hold to some doctrine. The Academic avoids the evil of rashness by holding back his assent. Montaigne reads in the Academic action of *sustinere* the architectonic constitution of the intellect in its integrity.

⁴⁴ There is a report in Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives* (IX.71) that it begins with Homer. See also Plato’s *Theaetetus* 152e, introducing the Heraclitian doctrine of the flux.

⁴⁵ It is no wonder that Cicero uses this image to report the Academic tradition. For Cicero the position of the so called Academic skeptics is basically that of Socrates and Plato. The image agrees with Plato’s view of the world of becoming of which human beings can have no stable knowledge. The main source for this view is again the *Theaetetus*, in particular the doctrine of the flux that Plato attributes to Protagoras. This doctrine is directly cited by Montaigne in the conclusion of the “Apology for Raymond Sebond”. (E, II, 12, 601–603)

⁴⁶ “Je ne suis pas sujet à ces hypotheques et engagements penetrans et intimes”. (E, III, 1, 792)

Montaigne's view of the skeptic as attaining the limited perfection of human cognitive faculties is restricted to one of his dialectical attacks on Sebond's critics in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond."⁴⁷ Charron takes this view as a model for human beings in general. His master piece, *De la Sagesse*, is designed to teach how to achieve this skeptical perfection and to detail its various practical aspects and implications.

2.3 The Limited Perfection and Excellence Required by Wisdom

Although Charron discards the elevated conception of wisdom held by natural theologians and metaphysicians, he by no means gives up the idea that wisdom implies excellence and perfection.⁴⁸ The excellence and perfection of something does not require its location in a high position in some questionable ontological hierarchy but the full flowering of its proper nature, even if this nature is limited. Applying this to man, and to man's essence, reason, this means that human excellence and perfection does not presuppose the attainment of certain knowledge, as the dogmatist would claim, but only full accomplishment of its integrity. This explains why knowledge of one self and of the human nature, title of book I, is indicated by Charron as a major previous requirement for wisdom. This is the knowledge that points out the limited nature of man's faculties, thereby showing that the kind of wisdom imagined by the dogmatists—certain knowledge of things human and divine—does not belong to man's nature.⁴⁹ This justifies the "modest" Academic wisdom (as Charron often calls it) presented in book II (2, 401, 410). Given that man cannot achieve the truth, the point of wisdom becomes to avoid error. This further justifies the detailed study of human being carried out in book I, which shows the many internal (such as the passions and the weakness of our intellectual faculties) and external (common beliefs) causes of error. The passages cited in the beginning of this chapter show that this is precisely Cicero's view of Academic skepticism. What is probably original in Charron is his view, derived from Montaigne's view of the skeptics, that once this recognition of the limits of the

⁴⁷I argue in Maia Neto (2012, 2013) that through Sebond these critics in fact target the Roman Catholics for the book of Sebond was used in support of Catholic doctrines such as the Eucharist which were being attacked by the Reformers.

⁴⁸For an interpretation of Charron's wisdom which emphasizes human perfection in contraposition to theology, see Faye (1998, 252–274).

⁴⁹One may wonder if this knowledge of the self is compatible with a *skeptical* wisdom. Demonet (1999) claims that it is not, based on a careful analysis of book I. I think that Charron's claims about the excellence and universality of man and self-knowledge, though probably incompatible with Pyrrhonism, are not incompatible with Academic skepticism. They should be read as having the status of Academic probability and not of truth, as he points out in the *Petit Traité* (I cite the relevant passage at the end of next section). However, I shall not argue for this view here since the focus of this book is not on the coherence of Charron's skeptical wisdom but on its influence.

human faculties is reached and error avoided through *epochè*, man achieves his perfection and excellence because human reason attains its full flowering. Unlike Arcesilaus, Charron appears less troubled by the eventual accusation of holding positive views and much more interested in presenting his Academic skeptic wise man as achieving the summit of human limited perfection.⁵⁰ Charron thus gives an anthropological base to his skeptical wisdom.

Cette sagesse humaine est une droiture, belle et noble composition de l'homme entier, en son dedens, son dehors, ses pensées, paroles, actions, et tous ses mouvemens c'est l'excellence et perfection de l'homme comme homme, c'est à dire selon que porte et requiert [sic] la loy premiere fondamentale et naturelle de l'homme, ainsi que nous disons un ouvrage bien fait et excellent, quand il est bien complet de toutes ses pieces, et que toutes les regles de l'art y ont esté gardées: celui est homme sage qui sçait bien et excellemment faire l'homme: c'est à dire, pour en donner une plus particuliere peinture, qui se cognoissant bien et l'humaine condition se garde et preserve de tous vices, erreurs, passions, et défauts tant internes, siens et propres, qu'externes, communs et populaires; maintenant son esprit net, libre, franc universel, considerant et jugeant de toutes choses, sans s'obliger ny jurer à aucune. (S, 32–33)

To be wise is to “faire l'homme comme homme,” that is, to fully develop human nature, neither leaving underemployed our intellectual faculties nor attempting to reach what are not proportional to them. The knowledge of the human nature provided in book I is thus required for the achievement of wisdom for at least three reasons. (1) It reveals what reason cannot attain—certain knowledge of things, in particular of first principles and causes—and the precise limit of what reason can attain: the *phenomena*.⁵¹ (2) Knowledge of human nature also shows human proneness to assent in the absence of evidence, that is, the force of non-epistemic factors (passions, interest, and education) over the mind.⁵² Awareness of this tendency to rashness or precipitation allows the wise man to contravene it by an effort of the will, by virtue of which he resists dogmatism, making the firm resolution of not to take as truth that which just appears true, the *verisimile*.⁵³ This active aspect of Charron's *epochè* has been remarked by Popkin (1954) and Paganini (1991, 26–30) as a

⁵⁰ Another explanation for Charron's difference from the ancient Academics on this point is the influence of Renaissance humanism.

⁵¹ “l'homme ne sçait et n'entend rien à droict, au pur et au vray comme il faut, tournoyant tous-jours et tatonnant à l'entour des apparences, qui se trouvent par tout aussi bien au faux qu'au vray: nous sommes nais à quester la verité: la posseder appartient à une plus haute et grande puissance”. (S, I, 14, 138)

⁵² See Book I, chapter 14, in particular, pp. 140–144. According to Pyrrhonians and Academics alike, *proptérian*, which has been translated to English as rashness and precipitation, lies at the root of dogmatism.

⁵³ The impression that strikes or appears as true and therefore causes an inclination to assent is what Carneades calls the *pythanos* impression, translated by Cicero as *probabile* and *verisimile*. Charron's wise men will rather “douter et tenir en suspens leur creance, que par une trop molle et lasche facilité, ou legereté, ou precipitation de jugement, se paitre de fausseté, et affirmer ou se tenir asseurez de chose, de laquelle ils ne peuvent avoir raison certaine” (S, I, 43, 292). This requires “preud'homie,” defined as “une droite et ferme disposition de la volonté, à suivre le conseil de la raison” (S, II, 3, 429). I argue in Chap. 5 that this position of Charron's was crucial for Descartes.

peculiar feature of his skepticism (absent from Montaigne's *Essays*) and an important one to the extent that it announces Descartes's methodic doubt. However, this aspect can also be traced to ancient Academic skepticism. Indeed, the Academic skeptics positively argued so that "facilius ab utraque parte ad sensio sustineretur" (Ac I.45), in a way similar to Charron's who gives "four or five" considerations to suspend judgment (S, II, 2, 407–409).⁵⁴ (3) The result of the study of human nature in book I is not only negative. As the wise man finds out what reason is not adequate for, namely, discovering the truth, he finds out for what it is fitted to: unbiased rational inquiry. In this activity he finds the perfection of reason through which he gets rid of wisdom's enemies portrayed in the frontispiece of the book: opinion, science, superstition, and passion.⁵⁵

2.4 Socrates, Arcesilaus and Carneades

The main link between the New Academics and Plato's original Academy is Socrates' pedagogical method, which Plato in *Theaetetus* (148e–151d) calls maieutic. Socrates' followers are not like those of Theodorus', from whom they learn mathematics, much less like those of Protagoras', from whom they learn technics of persuasion. As far as doctrine is concerned, they learn nothing from Socrates. What they learn is that "a life without this sort of examination is not worth living."⁵⁶ They learn a rational critical attitude—to examine any view as much as possible—and intellectual integrity: to accept nothing not warranted by reason. This rigorous examination leads in all cases to the exposition of the lack of rational grounds of the view. So what Socrates induces in his companions is not only to be rational but also (as a consequence) the elimination of previously held beliefs.⁵⁷ This Academic view of Socrates is recovered and updated by Talon, Montaigne and Charron. The first claims that as Socrates attacked the sophists of his time because their pretended knowledge was mere false opinion, so Arcesilaus and Carneades exhibited the same modesty in combatting Stoic dogmatism (Talon 1550, 7–8).⁵⁸ Talon and Ramus thus rehearse this same practice, turning it against the Aristotelian scholastics.

⁵⁴ Another source of Charron's move is Montaigne's translation of *sustinere* as *soutenir*, hold fast by oneself, examined above.

⁵⁵ This frontispiece was briefly discussed in the Introduction. Opinion is the dogmatism of the ordinary men, Science is the dogmatism of philosophers (in particular, the Aristotelians), and Superstition is the dogmatism of the religious men. In the case of Passion, Charron builds on Sextus' argument (M XI.141–167) that skepticism about values suppresses anxiety to get what one dogmatically considers as good as well as (in case one already possesses what one takes to be good) the fear of losing it.

⁵⁶ Plato, *Apology*, 38a.

⁵⁷ In the *Sophist* (230b–d), the Stranger says that the Socratic method makes possible a "purification through argument."

⁵⁸ For contemporary scholarship on the Academic skeptics' view of Socrates, see Annas (1992) and Bett (2006).

Montaigne presents the skeptics as exercising Socratic rationality without dogma. He claims that the immobility of *epochè*, which in his “Apology for Raymond Sebond” he presents as the most favorable human mental state, is the immobility of the faculty of assenting, that is, holding something as true or false, not of the faculty of reasoning. The mobility of reason is crucial in Montaigne’s view of the skeptics and of the perfection (in the Aristotelian sense aforementioned) of reason. “Ils se servent de leur raison pour enquerir et pour debatre, mais non pas pour arrester et choisir” (E, II, 12, 505). According to Montaigne, this is exactly Socrates’ procedure: “Socrates ... va tousjours demandant en esmouvant la dispute, jamais l’arrestant” (E, II, 12, 509). Socrates is the founder of the pedagogical model that inspired the New Academics.

[C] Il m’est avis qu’en Platon et en Xenophon Socrates dispute plus en faveur des disputants qu’en faveur de la dispute; et, pour instruire Euthydemus et Protagoras de la connoissance de leur impertinence plus que de l’impertinence de leur art. Il empoigne la premiere matiere comme celui qui a une fin plus utile que de l’esclaircir, assavoir esclaircir les esprits qu’il prend à manier et exercer. [B] L’agitation et la chasse est proprement de nostre gibier: nous ne sommes pas excusables de la conduire mal et impertinemment; de faillir à la prise, c’est autre chose. Car nous sommes nés à quester la verité; il appartient de la posseder à une plus grande puissance. (E, III, 8, 927–928)

The first thing to note when we have in view Charron’s view of wisdom is Montaigne’s Ciceronian view that it was Socrates who “ramena du ciel, où elle perdoit son temps, la sagesse humaine, pour la rendre à l’homme, où est sa plus juste et plus laborieuse besoigne, et plus utile” (E, III, 12, 1038).⁵⁹ The object naturally proportioned to human reason is not that of metaphysics or of dogmatic natural philosophy but human morals and life. Second, Socrates exercises reason perfectly. The perfect use of reason is inquisitive. Coming to a conclusion means stopping the investigation, so reason either stops functioning or stops functioning perfectly since any subsequent inquiry will be biased by the achieved conclusion. This is the reason Socrates’ maieutic requires that he remains sterile.⁶⁰ It is also an important part of Socrates’ maieutic Montaigne’s point that Socrates “dispute plus en faveur des disputants qu’en faveur de la dispute.” Socrates’ teaching does not aim at instilling some knowledge in the disciple. His major pedagogic goal is to “esclaircir

⁵⁹“Socrates was the first person who summoned philosophy away from mysteries veiled in concealment by nature herself, upon which all philosophers before him had been engaged, and led it to the subject of ordinary life” (Ac I.15).

⁶⁰“the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth. For one thing which I have in common with the ordinary midwives is that I myself am barren of wisdom. The common reproach against me is that I am always asking questions of other people but never express my own views about anything, because there is no wisdom in me; and that is true enough. And the reason of it is this, that God compels me to attend the travail of others, but has forbidden me to procreate. So that I am not in any sense a wise man; I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom” (*Theaetetus* 150b–d). Cicero comments on this in Ac I.16 and Plutarch in *Platonic Questions* I.

les esprits qu'il prend à manier et exercer" (E, III, 8, 928).⁶¹ Again, it is the plain, full, use of reason that Socrates wants his disciples to exhibit (refuting their opinions is the practice and requirement of this use). As Montaigne says in the same passage, to possess the truth is a prerogative of God. The proper of man is to search (to inquiry) after it. In fact, the most remarkable feature of Socrates' for Montaigne is his focus on human issues, his recognition that truth lies beyond human reach. So he was the wisest of men precisely for not having the pretension of achieving what lies beyond human nature. And his practice was to combat this pretension. "Socrates estoit homme; et ne vouloit ny estre ny sembler autre chose" (E, III, 5, 892). In keeping to the limits of human faculties, Socrates—like his true disciples, the skeptics—exhibits human perfection.⁶² Referring to the way Socrates argues in Plato's *Apology*, Montaigne says that "[l]à loge l'extreme degré de perfection et de difficulté: l'art n'y peut joindre" (E, III, 12, 1055).⁶³ He says that "l'ame de Socrates" is "la plus parfaite" which he knows.⁶⁴ Montaigne's skeptical academic view of Socrates sheds light on Charron's vindication of a human wisdom, which is not attained in knowledge of natural and metaphysical things but in self-knowledge which is mainly moral since it reveals the anthropological, moral and epistemic limits of human beings, thereby combating arrogance. This consists in "l'excellence et perfection de l'homme comme homme," "celuy est homme sage qui sçait bien et excellemment faire l'homme" (S, 32–33). This excellence and perfection, which is mainly of the mind, does not comprise assenting to the truth, for "la verité n'est pas un aquest, ny chose qui se laisse prendre et manier, et encores moins posséder à l'esprit humain. Elle loge dedans le sein de Dieu" (S, I, 14, 138). The view that truth is a prerogative of God is Socrates' view presented by Plato in his *Apology*, a view that justifies his ignorance and critical rationalism that exposes the lack of rational justification of the beliefs held by his interlocutors.⁶⁵ Socrates, "le Docteur de sagesse" (S, I, 46, 306) is Charron's main model of the wise man. "[A] Le plus sage

⁶¹ According to Charron, "[c]ette façon d'instruire par demandes est excellemment observée par Socrates (le premier en cette besongne) comme nous voyons par tout en Platon" (S, III, 14, 697). Charron's view of Socrates' maieutics, like Montaigne's, is also influenced by Plutarch: "C'est cette belle et grande qualité ou suffisance donnée par preciput à Socrates le Coriphee des Sages, par l'adveu de tous les Sages, duquel il est dit, comme discourt Plutarque, qu'il enfantoit point, mais servant de sage-femme à tous autres les faisoit enfanter". (PTS, 839)

⁶² Socrates "prise comme il doit la volupté corporelle, mais il prefere celle de l'esprit, comme ayant plus de force, de constance, de facilité, de variété, de dignité". (E, III, 13, 1113)

⁶³ Charron claims that "Socrates en justice mesme ne le voulut faire [des faux soupçons et accusations] ny par soy ny par autrui, refusant d'employer le beau plaider du grand Lysias; et ayma mieux mourir". (S, I, 37, 247)

⁶⁴ For Montaigne's view of Socrates in "De la physionomie," see Faye (2009).

⁶⁵ "I have gained this reputation, gentlemen, from nothing more or less than a kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom do I mean? Human wisdom, I suppose. It seems that I really am wise in this limited sense [viz. of learned ignorance]" (Plato, *Apology* 20e). "whenever I succeed in disproving another person's claim to wisdom in a given subject, the bystanders assume that I know everything about that subject myself. But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle [that Socrates is the wisest of men] is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value" (*Apology*, 23a).

homme qui fut onques, quand on luy demanda ce qu'il sçavoit, respondit qu'il sçavoit cela, qu'il ne sçavoit rien" (E, II, 12, 501).⁶⁶

The devise of the wise man, which figures in the frontispiece of the work, is "je ne sais." Charron points out that this is Socratic ignorance.⁶⁷ He claims that the wise man's statement "Je ne sçay" is "une sorte d'ignorance et de doute, plus docte et assurée, plus noble et genereuse que tout leur [the dogmatists'] science et certitude: c'est ce qui a rendu Socrates si renommé et tenu pour le plus sage: c'est la sciences [sic] des sciences et le fruit de tous nos études: c'est une modeste, candide, innocente, et cordiale reconnoissance de la hautesse mysterieuse de la verité, et de nôtre povre condition humaine, plaine de tenebres, foiblesse, incertitude" (S, II, 2, 402). Charron develops the same points alluded to by Cicero in the passage cited at the beginning of this chapter (Ac I.45) to explain Arcesilaus' introduction of *epochè* in the Academy and in the *Tusculan Disputations* to contrast human beings (who can attain only the probable) and God (who alone have the truth).⁶⁸ Two differences are, however, worth mentioning. (1) The "mysterious" obscurity of the truth and the weakness of man causing the disproportion between truth and human reason, though already exhibited by Socrates in some of Plato's dialogues and characteristic of the kind of skepticism extant among middle Platonists such as Plutarch,⁶⁹ is reinforced by Christian doctrine in Charron's description.⁷⁰ (2) Charron departs from Arcesilaus' position in taking Socrates as the main model of the wise man, affirming his ignorance: "je ne sais."⁷¹ Arcesilaus considered the obscurity of things so overwhelming that he could not know even if he couldn't really know. Charron seems less worried than Arcesilaus with logical problems of consistency and more

⁶⁶ See also *Sagesse* I, 47: "Socrates fut jugé le plus sage des hommes, non pour estre le plus scavant et plus habille, ou pour avoir quelque suffisance par dessus les autres, mais pour mieux se cognoistre que les autres, en se tenant en son rang, faire bien l'homme."

⁶⁷ See Montaigne's commentary: "Après que Socrates fut adverti que le Dieu de sagesse luy avoit attribué le surnom de sage, il en fut estonné; et, se recherchant et secouant par tout, n'y trouvoit aucun fondement à cette divine sentence. ... Enfin il se resolut qu'il n'estoit distingué des autres et n'estoit sage que par ce qu'il ne s'en tenoit pas; et que son Dieu estimoit bestise singuliere à l'homme l'opinion de science et de sagesse; et que sa meilleure doctrine estoit la doctrine de l'ignorance, et sa meilleure sagesse, la simplicité". (E, II, 12, 498)

⁶⁸ After presenting different views on the soul, Cicero says: "*Harum sententiarum quae vera sit deus aliqui viderit: quae veri simillima magna quaestio est*" (*Tusc disp* I.23). This view is much emphasized by Plutarch, as in the long citation of "The E apud Delphos" that concludes Montaigne's "Apology for Raymond Sebond."

⁶⁹ See Domini (1986) and Opsomer (1998).

⁷⁰ Although Charron's skepticism is not Christianized as Pascal's and Kierkegaard's (see Maia Neto 1995, 37–64), it receives a significant influence of the Christian religion and theology (more on this in Chap. 4). This theology certainly has a connection with negative theology (as Charron indicates in his *Trois Vérités* and *Discours chrétiens*, and in passing also in *De la Sagesse*). However, on what concerns morals, which is the basic subject and concern in *De la Sagesse*, its affinity is with Molinism not with Augustinianism. I therefore disagree from Saint-Cyran's (d'Haurane 1626) and Christian Belin's (1995) interpretation of this work of Charron's.

⁷¹ But note that Socrates is the main inspiration of Arcesilaus' Academic skepticism, as it is clear in this very passage on the obscurity of things (Ac I.45) for Socrates is the first philosopher cited as avowing this obscurity.

interested in giving to his wise man an assured intellectual and moral position, contrary to the irresolution usually associated to skeptical doubt and made plain by some passages in the *Essays* (cited below) where Montaigne refers to his own irresolution. He thus introduces Socratic ignorance as opposed to the objection—referred to in the *Petit Traité*—that he teaches “icy une incertitude douteuse et fluctuante, telle que des Pyrrhoniens, laquelle tient l’esprit en grande peine et agitation” (PTS, 858). Charron distinguishes his position from that of the Pyrrhonians and argues that the *epochè* of his wise men “ne leur est point peine, ains au contraire un séjour, un repos, c’est la science des sciences, la certitude des certitudes” (PTS, 859).⁷² The certain science in case is not that of any external thing but of oneself, of the integrity of one’s own reason.

Thus far I have argued that Charron’s wisdom develops and adapts to his context views held by Arcesilaus and Socrates according to the New Academics’ view of the latter. I conclude this section with another Charronian Academic position which comes from Carneades: probability. As indicated above, Carneades’ conception of probability has nothing to do with the modern concept of probability as an objective, statistic, measure of the likelihood of something. *Probabile* is one of Cicero’s translations of Carneades’ *pythanos* (the other is *verisimile*) which refers to the impressions or views which have the appearance of truth and therefore induce assent. We learn from Photius’ summary of Aenesidemus’ *Pyrrhonian Discourses* (of which only this summary survived) that the doctrine was relevant in Aenesidemus’ break from the Academy in order to establish (or re-establish) the Pyrrhonian school.⁷³ Sextus denies that there is any difference in impressions concerning probability and Carneades’ doctrine certainly counts on his view of him as a dogmatist whereas he considers Arcesilaus much closer to the genuine skepticism of the Pyrrhonians.⁷⁴ According to Cicero, there was a debate among Carneades’ immediate followers whether the doctrine implied rupture from *epochè*. While Metrodorus and Philo of Larissa believed that it did, since assent was given to the probable impression, Clitomachus argued that Carneades just followed or “approved” the probable impression in practical matters but did not assent, which technically would meant to take it as true.⁷⁵ Cicero’s position is that Carneades kept Arcesilaus’ view

⁷² “il y a difference entre mon dire et l’avis des Pyrrhoniens, bien qu’il en ait l’air et l’odeur, puisque je permets de consentir et adherer à ce qui semble meilleur et plus vray-semblable”. (PTS, 858)

⁷³ Photius, *Bibliothèque* III.212.

⁷⁴ Carneades’ probabilism is one of Sextus’ main grounds to differentiate Pyrrhonism from the New Academy. “And as regards sense-impressions, we say that they are equal in respect of probability and improbability, so far as their essence is concerned, whereas they assert that some impressions are probable, others improbable” (PH I.227). Sextus recognizes that, unlike Carneades’, Arcesilaus’ “way of thought is almost identical with ours”. (PH I.232)

⁷⁵ Cicero considered Clitomachus’ interpretation truer to Carneades’ view. He cites a book by Clitomachus on suspension of judgment which is no longer extant. The key passages quoted from Clitomachus’ book are Ac II.99 and the following one: “‘The Academic school holds that there are dissimilarities between things of such a nature that some of them seem probable and others the contrary; but this is not an adequate ground for saying that some things can be perceived and others cannot, because many false objects are probable but nothing false can be perceived and known.’

of the wise man as not assenting—for this would be to opine and thus to run the risk of committing an error. However, he found “not ... negligible” Philo’s view that that wise man cannot but assent to what is not certain, “that is, ... hold an opinion, but with the qualification that he will understand that it is an opinion and will know that there is nothing that can be comprehended” (Ac. II.148). These opinions have the status of *probabile* or *verisimile*, this meaning that he was well aware they might be false, so that his assent was provisional and detached.⁷⁶

Charron’s position is very much that of Cicero’s: “je permets de consentir et adherer à ce qui semble meilleur et plus vray-semblable, tousjours prest et attendant à recevoir mieux s’il se presente” (PTS, 858). This does not mean that he takes the probable as true for this would be harshness, a move the wise man must avoid in order to remain free from error. As he says in the passage, this distinguishes his wise man from the Pyrrhonian, and to this very extent associates him to Carneades’ probabilism taken in the Philonian/Ciceronian fashion. Charron’s probabilism is also the ground of his reply to the classic objection of how can a skeptic present positive views. Charron gives the status of probability to the views presented in the work. He says in the Preface that “tout ce que je propose, je ne pretends y obliger personne, je presente seulement les choses, et les estalle comme sur le tablier: je ne me metz point en cholere si l’on ne m’en croit, c’est à faire aux pedants” (S, 41). By considering the views contained in *Of Wisdom* as probable he is aware they may be false so he does not assent to them as truth. Consequently, he is not attached to these views which, therefore, do not compromise his intellectual integrity. The knowledge of man in book I and the presentation of the rules, presuppositions and applications of wisdom in book II, systematic as they are, do not contradict the content of the skeptical wisdom thereby proposed.⁷⁷ Whereas taking a doctrine as true (believing it) causes attachment to this doctrine, taking it as probable implies detachment, preserving autonomy and freedom. That this attitude with respect to his own position is seen by Charron as specifically Academic is clear in the Preface when he says that many of the objections raised against the first edition of the book resulted from the fact that the critics took for “resolution et determination” what had been proposed

And accordingly he [Clitomachus reporting Carneades’ views] asserts that those who say that the Academy robs us of our senses are violently mistaken, as that school never said that color, taste or sound was non-existent, but their contention was that these presentations do not contain a mark of truth and certainty peculiar to themselves and found nowhere else. After setting out these points, he adds that the formula ‘the wise man withholds assent’ is used in two ways, one when the meaning is that he gives absolute assent to no proposition at all, the other when he restrains himself from replying so as to convey approval or disapproval of something, with the consequence that he neither makes a negation nor an affirmation; and that this being so, he holds the one plan in theory, so that he never assents, but the other in practice, so that he is guided by probability, and whenever this confronts him or is wanting he can answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ accordingly” (Ac II.103–104). See also Ac II.108. See Ac II.78 for the debate that opposed Clitomachus on the one hand, and Metrodorus and Philo on the other, about Carneades’ position on belief. For secondary literature, see Frede (1984) and Bett (1990).

⁷⁶ Cicero claims this kind of provisional and detached assent in virtually all his philosophical works. Some examples are Ac II.7–9 and 66; *Tusc disp* I.23, V.33; *De Officiis* II.7–8, III.20.

⁷⁷ For a different view, see Giocanti (2001, 21).

“problematiquement et academiquement” (S, 43).⁷⁸ Probability is thus the means to present views without compromising *epochè* and intellectual integrity.⁷⁹ In the *Petit Traité de Sagesse*, commenting on the two basic foundations of wisdom, namely, to examine everything and assent to nothing, he claims that they protect the wise man “de deux escueils contraires, ausquels tombent les fols et populaires, sçavoir testuës opiniastretes, honteuses desdites, repentirs et changemens, et se maintient libre” (PTS, 841). The wise man may thus have opinions but will never be opinionated, which is a consequence of holding the opinions as true. Being rational, he will easily accept having an opinion of his refuted—“il se rend à la raison, et sa confession n’est jamais honteuse, car il n’a jamais affirmé ny opiniastreté” (PTS, 854).

Arcesilaus rejected Socratic ignorance probably because he feared that it contradicted suspension of judgment.⁸⁰ The doctrine of probability was not yet available to him. This doctrine—another Academic view which mainly through Charron was quite influential in early modern philosophy—allows Charron to incorporate the original and major model of the Academic wise man (Socrates) in his own elaboration of wisdom.

2.5 How Charron's *Wisdom* Is Mainly Linked to Montaigne's *Essays*

I claimed above that Charron took Montaigne's description of Socrates and the ancient skeptics in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond” as his model of the wise man. But wisdom is not for everybody: “tous ne sont capables d’entendre, d’advouër, et encores moins de bien pratiquer” (S, II, 2, 386) the freedom of judgment necessary for becoming wise. One of the chapters of book I (chapter 43 of the second edition) divides human beings according to intellectual capacity. Most people is on the lower degree, the vulgar men, “esprits foibles et plats, de basse et petite capacité, nez pour obeir, servir et être menés” (S, I, 43, 291). On the middle there are the “pedants,” who, instead of exercising reason, furnish their memory with scholastic and erudite knowledge. These are “de l’eschole et du ressort d’Aristote; affirmatifs, positifs, dogmatistes.” On the top are the few who are “de l’eschole et ressort de Socrates et Platon,” the *esprits forts* who “aymans mieux douter et tenir en suspens leur creance, que par une trop molle et lasche facilité, ou legereté, ou precipitation de jugement, se paitre de fausseté, et affirmer ou se tenir assurez de chose, de laquelle ils ne peuvent avoir raison certaine” (S, I, 43, 292). These are precisely

⁷⁸ See also the *Petit Traité de Sagesse*, 863: “en toutes telles choses, je n’y oblige personne, ny ne pretends les persuader, bien loing de les dogmatiser.”

⁷⁹ “You, Lucullus, if you have accepted the views of your associate Antiochus, are bound to defend these doctrines as you would defend the walls of Rome, but I need only do so in moderation, just as much as I think fit” (Ac II.137).

⁸⁰ “Accordingly Arcesilaus said that there is nothing that can be known, not even that residuum of knowledge that Socrates had left himself—the truth of this very dictum” (Ac I.45).

those whose *esprit* is strong enough to keep their judgment suspended, not giving assent as true to that which strikes as plausible (probable) but which may be false. In short, they are the few capable of keeping up to intellectual integrity in the epistemological, anthropological and moral senses that I have indicated in Montaigne's description of the ancient skeptics (Sect. 2.2).

Charron's tripartite division comes, indeed, from Montaigne.⁸¹

Les sçavans à qui touche la jurisdiction livresque, ne connoissent autre prix que de la doctrine, et n'advouent autre proceder en noz esprits que celui de l'erudition et de l'art: ... Qui ignore Aristote, selon eux s'ignore quand et quand soyemesme. Les ames communes et populaires ne voyent pas la grace et le pois d'un discours hautain et deslié. Or, ces deux especes occupent le monde. La tierce, à qui vous tombez en partage, des ames réglées et fortes d'elles-mesmes, est si rare que justement elle n'a ny nom, ny rang entre nous: c'est à demy temps perdu, d'aspirer et de s'efforcer à luy plaire. (E, II, 17, 657)

Charron gives a name to this third type, the Academic wise man, endowed with an *esprit* strong enough to avoid error by suspending his judgment. He is the philosopher deprived of doctrines and whose rationality, therefore, is wholly critical, that is, plain. The crucial link between *De la Sagesse* and the *Essays* is that whereas Montaigne is pessimistic about this third superior type,⁸² Charron, though finding very difficult to maintain oneself clean of false beliefs, does think that a few can attain this wisdom and these are those who may most profit from his book.⁸³ If Academic skeptical wisdom is available just for a few according to Charron, it is probably for nobody according to Montaigne. Indeed, important contemporary Montaigne scholars who examined Montaigne's skepticism such as Sylvia Giocanti and Frédéric Brahami have argued that *époque* is not tenable according to Montaigne precisely because of anthropological reasons.⁸⁴ In the essay on virtue, Montaigne doubts that Pyrrho could maintain the indifference attributed to him in reports by Diogenes Laertius (II, 29, 706).⁸⁵ Furthermore, Montaigne does not present himself as a skeptic or as belonging to the top class in the tripartite division. On the contrary, he claims that "[C] ... nous sommes tous du vulgaire" (E, II, 12, 570). In the "Apology for Raymond Sebond," Montaigne gives himself as an example of how

⁸¹ Charron makes other divisions of human beings. One derives from different geographical locations, for which he relies on Juan Huarte (book I, chapter 42). Two others (chapters 44, 52 and 53) are based on different social positions, professions and other contingencies.

⁸² "[B] Certes il est peu d'ames si réglées, si fortes et bien nées, à qui on se puisse fier de leur propre conduite, et qui puissent, avec moderation et sans temerité, voguer en la liberté de leurs jugemens au-delà des opinions communes. Il est plus expedient de les mettre en tutelle". (E, II, 12, 559)

⁸³ Kogel (1972, 67) notes that Charron relies on Montaigne's "Apology for Raymond Sebond" to make the diagnostic of man as miserable and irresolute but that whereas Montaigne argued that man should conform to this condition Charron proposes that it be overcome through the rules and instructions of wisdom.

⁸⁴ *Époque* is not tenable in Montaigne according to Giocanti (2001, 32–35, 64–73) because of Montaigne's view of the irresolution of the human mind; according to Brahami (1997), because of Montaigne's view of human beings as "believing animals."

⁸⁵ For a detailed analysis of the complexity of Montaigne's view of Pyrrho, see Gori (2009).

easily we change our mind in a description quite contrary to Charron's ideal wise man (more on this below).⁸⁶

Charron's *Wisdom* is mainly directed at those who are capable of wisdom but were not born naturally disposed to it,⁸⁷ and therefore had to acquire it through the hard pursue of a philosophy such as that provided in *De la Sagesse* which teaches how to revert human tendency to precipitation and error. Not surprisingly, the model of the acquired way to attain wisdom is Socrates. "[Q]ui a esté favorablement estrené de nature, et est d'un temperament bon et doux ... il se trouve tout porté à la sagesse." The rules of Wisdom are thus mainly for those "[q]ui autrement, doit avec grand et laborieux estude et exercice du second [pursue of philosophy] rabiller et suppleer ce qui luy défaut, comme Socrates un des plus sages disoit de soy, que par l'estude de la Philosophie il avoit corrigé et redressé son mauvais naturel". (S, 37)

The preeminent role of Socrates and his followers Academic skeptics in *De la Sagesse* points out its distance from the Pyrrhonian tradition. The main problem of the latter from the viewpoint of Charron's wisdom was its association with disquieting doubt, which was strengthened and more diffused after Montaigne's picture of the Pyrrhonians in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond."⁸⁸ Montaigne's view of the Pyrrhonian as doubting their very doubt (E, II, 12, 503) is clearly contrary to Montaigne's own conception of *epochè* as perfection. The simultaneous presence of these two contradictory views of the ancient skeptics in the same text may have two reasons. First the fact that he first pictured the skeptic mainly in terms of Sextus' Pyrrhonism and then, in the 1588 [B] and posthumous [C] editions, added Cicero's view of the Academic skeptic to this same picture. The second and probably main reason is a difference that must be made between Montaigne's view of the ancient skeptic and his own condition as a skeptic—much less stable than that of his ancient precursors—which may have contaminated his description of the latter.⁸⁹

The view of the ancient Pyrrhonians is an example of a superficial reproduction by Charron of Montaigne's view. Charron transcribes key terms and even whole phrases from the *Essays* in his characterization of the wise man. However, if we

⁸⁶ "Ce que je tiens aujourd'huy et ce que je croy, je le tiens et le croy de toute ma croyance; tous mes utiles et tous mes ressorts empoignent cette opinion et m'en respondent sur tout ce qu'ils peuvent. Je ne scaurois ambrasser aucune verité ny conserver avec plus de force que je fay cette cy. J'y suis tout entier, j'y suis voyrement; mais ne m'est il pas advenu, non une fois, mais cent, mais mille, et tous les jours, d'avoir ambrassé quelqu'autre chose à tout ces mesmes instrumens, en cette mesme condition, que depuis j'aye jugée fauce?" (E, II, 12, 563). I argue in Maia Neto (2012) that the larger context of this claim is a dialectical move offered to Marguerite de Valois in order to provide her with an argument to justify her keeping Catholic even if Calvinism is shown more probable to her. This kind of skeptical fallibilist argument about our cognitive faculties is employed by Descartes in his methodical doubt.

⁸⁷ Because of "de la semence des parens, puis au laict nourricier, et premiere education". (S, 35)

⁸⁸ Another major problem with Pyrrhonism was its association with irreligion. Though this was a problem related to skepticism in general, the New Academy was less liable to the charge because of its Platonic and Christian use and qualified approval by some Church Fathers, notably Augustine.

⁸⁹ A third reason is the fact that in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" the Pyrrhonians are used by Montaigne in an attack against reason whose aim is to contravene Huguenot rationalism. See Maia Neto (2012).

look closer at the two texts, crucial differences appear. Charron makes subtle but radical transformations in Montaigne's text for whereas Montaigne's interest in this section is to make an apology for the ancient skeptics, Charron's interest is to give a solid moral and intellectual base to his *sage*.⁹⁰ In the following passage, Charron opposes the view that suspension of judgment is an unstable frame of mind, arguing that, on the contrary, it is the most stable frame of mind possible to man. (I italicize the words which appear also in Montaigne).

Mais aux sages, modestes, retenus, c'est au rebours la plus seure *assiette*, le plus heureux état de l'esprit, qui par ce moyen se tient ferme, *droit, rassis, inflexible*, toujours libre et à soy. ... C'est un tres-doux, *paisible*, et plaisant sejour, ou l'on ne craint point de faillir ni se mesconter, l'on est à l'abry et hors de tous dangers, de participer à tant d'*erreurs produits par la fantasie humaine*, et dont tout le monde est plain, de s'*infraquer* en querelles, divisions, disputes, d'offencer plusieurs partis, de se desmentir et desdire sa creance, de changer, se repentir se r'adviser: ... Bref c'est se sentir en repos et tranquillité d'esprit, loin des agitations et des vices qui viennent de l'opinion de science que nous pensons avoir des choses, car de là viennent l'orgueil, l'ambition, les desirs immodérés, l'opiniastreté, presumption, amour de nouveleté, rebellion, desobeissance: d'où viennent les troubles, sectes, heresies, seditions que des fiers, affirmatifs et opiniastres, resolut, non des Academiques, des modestes, indifferends, neutres, sursoyans, c'est à dire sages? (S, II, 2, 404).⁹¹

Charron's source is the following passage from Montaigne's "Apology":

[A] Or cette *assiette* de leur jugement, *droicte et inflexible*, recevant tous objects sans application et consentement, les achemine à leur Ataraxie, qui est une condition de vie *paisible, rassise, exempte des agitations que nous recevons par l'impression de l'opinion et science que nous pensons avoir des choses*. D'où naissent la crainte, l'avarice, l'envie, les desirs immoderez, l'ambition, l'orgueil, la superstition, l'amour de nouveleté, la rebellion, le desobeissance, l'opiniastreté et la pluspart des maux corporels. Voire ils s'exemptent par là de la jalousie de leur discipline. Car ils debattent d'une bien molle façon. ... Ils ne mettent en avant leurs propositions que pour combatre celles qu'ils pensent que nous ayons en notre creance. Si vous prenez la leur, ils prendront aussi volontiers la contraire à soustenir. ... Et, par cette extremité de double qui se secoue soy-mesme, ils se separent et se divisent de plusieurs opinions, de celles mesmes qui ont maintenu en plusieurs façons le double et l'ignorance. (E, II, 12, 503)

I want to call attention not to what Charron takes from Montaigne but to what he does not take or changes, appropriating Montaigne's text to his own purposes and views. To begin with, Montaigne's view of ancient skepticism is the main source of Charron's view of wisdom. But whereas Montaigne describes—or intends to describe—specifically the Pyrrhonians, even distinguishing them from the Academics (E, II, 12, 561–562), Charron's sage is modeled after the Academic skeptic. Accordingly, Charron omits the fact that Montaigne is here describing *ataraxia*, a concept specifically Pyrrhonian. Moreover, in the second half of the passage,

⁹⁰ Charron says in the preface to the first edition that he has "questé par cy par là, et tiré la plus part des materiaux de cet ouvrage des meilleurs auteurs qui ont traité cette matiere" (S, 33). He adds in the preface to the second edition that the second book, from which the passage under examination was taken, "est plus mien que les deux autres". (S, 34)

⁹¹ Here and throughout the book the italics are meant to show the similarities between Charron's text and that of the other philosophers discussed in the book.

where Montaigne is explicitly describing the Pyrrhonian dialectical approach—in contradistinction to the Academic—Charron not only omits this description but also explicitly attributes the skeptical wise position just described to “des Académiques.” For Pierre Charron—contrary to Pierre Couissin—the position of the Academics is not merely *ad hominem* for they hold the view of the obscurity of things and of the inability of human reason to reach the truth. Charron adds that in this Academic *epochè* human mind finds its perfection and excellence. This perfection and excellence belongs to the concept of wisdom as also the view that the mind of the wise man is stable in contradistinction to the phenomenal flux.⁹² A doubt—such as the one attributed to the Pyrrhonians by Montaigne—that turns against itself cannot be the firm pedestal that supports Wisdom in the frontispiece of the book.⁹³ On the contrary, it could be described as an “incertitude douteuse et fluctuante, telle que des Pyrrhoniens, laquelle tient l’esprit en grande peine et agitation” (PTS, 858). The general rules of wisdom given in book two are precisely the remedy to this pain and irresolution, so Charron confronts Montaigne, rejecting his dubitative devise “Que sais-je?” and adopting his own affirmative one “Je ne sais.”⁹⁴

Charron’s wise man’s Academic *epochè*—*je ne sais*—is the safe harbor from the stormy flux of the world. But as the description of *epochè* as perfection and excellence suggests, Charron’s characterization of this Academic skeptical wisdom is not only negative. By withdrawing assent from external precarious beliefs the *sage* recovers the integrity and force of his intellect. To use anachronistic but acute Hegelian language, the negation of everything which is external to the mind or spirit (Charron says the wise man judges everything and assents to nothing) expresses the affirmation of reason which entails liberation of the mind from acquired beliefs. Reason finds thereby its autonomous pure nature, that is, its integrity. This appears, for instance, when Charron examines the way the wise deals with science.

L’esprit foible ne sçait pas posséder la science, s’en escrimer, et s’en servir comme il faut, au rebours elle le possède et le regente, don’t il ploye et demeure esclave sous elle. ...
L’esprit fort et sage la manie en maistre, en jouyt, s’en sert, s’en prevaut à son bien et advantage,

⁹² The flux doctrine is in a sense also Academic—of the old Academy—for it is presented in Plato’s *Theaetetus* and *Cratylus*. According to some interpreters, it corresponds to Plato’s own view of the sensible world. See Cornford (1935).

⁹³ “J’ay le pied si instable et si mal assis, je le trouve si aysé à croler et si prest au banle...” (E, II, 12, 565). “Je ne puis asseurer mon object [that is, Montaigne himself]. Il va trouble et chancelant, d’une yvresse naturelle. Je le prens en ce point, comme il est, en l’instant que je m’amuse à luy. Je ne peints pas l’estre. Je peints le passage. ... Si mon ame pouvoit prendre pied, je ne m’essaierois pas, je me resoudrois” (E, III, 2, 805). Charron says that an obstacle to wisdom is “la crainte et foiblesse ... peu de gens ont la force le courage de se tenir droicts sur leurs pieds” (PTS, 841). “La sagesse conseille bien mieux de attendre [death] de pied ferme”. (S, II, 11, 523)

⁹⁴ If it is in a sense right to say that Charron is a kind of disciple of Montaigne’s, he certainly is not a docile one. Charron’s position here looks like a direct and explicit confrontation of Montaigne’s: “quand ils prononcent: J’ignore, ou: Je doute, ils disent que cette proposition s’emporte elle mesme ... [B] Cette fantasie est plus seurement conceuë par interrogation: Que sçay-je? comme je la porte à la devise d’une balance” (E, II, 12, 527). Charron thinks that, on the contrary, the assured way is “Je ne sçay,” which he “fait graver sur la porte de ma petit maison que j’ay fait bastir à Condom l’an 1600”. (S, II, 2, 402)

forme son jugement, rectifie sa volonté, en accommode et fortifie sa lumiere naturelle, et s'en rend plus habile. (S, 38)⁹⁵

L'esprit foible in this passage is the dogmatic sectarian philosopher who subordinates his reason to some doctrine, thus compromising its perfect functioning. *L'esprit fort* is the Academic skeptic who affirms himself by denying any external doctrine, Christian revelation excepted.⁹⁶ The *esprit foible*, be him a dogmatist or a vulgar man—to quote Cicero's *Academica*, “cling as to a rock to whatever theory they are carried to by stress of weather” (Ac II.8), whereas the *esprit fort*, the skeptic, escapes from this stress affirming himself as rational inquirer. Replying to those who found his book “trop hardy et trop libre à heurter les opinions communes” and its propositions “trop crues et courtes, rudes et dures pour les simples,” Charron says that “les plus fortes et hardies propositions sont les plus seantes à l'esprit fort et relevé ... C'est foiblesse de s'estonner d'aucune chose, il faut roydier son courage, affermir son ame ... juger toutes choses: tant estranges semblent elles: tout est sortable et du gibbier de l'esprit, mais qu'il ne manque point à soymesme” (S, 41). The relevance to early modern philosophy of Charron's affirmation “Je ne sais” is certainly much greater than it has been acknowledged. The skeptical epistemological criticism of philosophical doctrines that occur in the period is perhaps philosophically and historically less important than the affirmation of the self in Charron's Academic skeptical wisdom conceived as rational pure inquiry.

In the summary of wisdom given in the preface to the second edition of *De la Sagesse*, Charron indicates its foundation: “[juger] de toutes choses, sans s'obliger ny jurer à aucune” (S, 33). These are the axes of the philosophy pursued by Socrates which enable him to “redresser son mauvais naturel,” that is, his inclination to hold as true uncertain views which were only probable.⁹⁷ These two aspects are dealt with in the second chapter of book II, “Universelle et plaine liberté de l'esprit, tant en jugement qu'en volonté.” They constitute two of the three parts concerning freedom of judgment. The third, which results from these two, is “l'universalité d'esprit,” by which Charron means the wise man's cosmopolitanism, his detachment from any parochial view, considering the *diaphonia* of human beliefs without being disturbed by those in conflict with the views held in his place and time.⁹⁸ Charron

⁹⁵ Charron's source is Montaigne's essay “Du Pedantisme”: “[A] Or il ne faut pas attacher le sçavoir à l'ame, il l'y faut incorporer ... C'est un dangereux glaive, et qui empesche et offence son maistre, s'il est en main foible et qui n'en sçache l'usage”. (E, I, 25, 140)

⁹⁶ The exclusion of Christian authentic revelation from the scope of *époque* is a controversial issue among Charron readers (from Charron's time to today). This is a major point of disagreement between my view of Charron's skeptical wisdom and the very insightful one by Tulio Gregory's (1967, 1992).

⁹⁷ In the *Theaetetus* (149b–c), Socrates implies that he held views before he initiated his maieutic. After he began his maieutic, holding positive views become a hindrance to the practice. In *Phaedo*, 97c, Socrates says that he was once pleased by Anaxagoras' view of the cosmos.

⁹⁸ “le sage jette sa veüé et consideration sur tout l'univers, il est citoyen du monde comme Socrates, il embrasse d'affection tout le genre humain, il se promene par tout comme chés soy, void comme un Soleil, d'un regard égal, ferme, et indiferent, comme d'une haute guette tous les changemens, diversités et vicissitudes des choses, sans se varier, et se tenant tousjours mesmes à soy, qui est un livrée de la divinité, aussi est-ce le haut privilege du sage, qui est l'Image de Dieu en terre”. (S, III, 2, 406)

claims in the *Petit Traité de Sagesse* that to judge everything but assent to nothing expresses the traditional ancient conception of wisdom, that is, how the ancient Academic skeptics viewed Socrates in Plato's dialogues in which, as Cicero says, "nihil adfirmatur et in utramque partem multa disseruntur, de omnibus quaeritur, nihil certi dicitur" (Ac I.46). This universal *zetesis* and *epochè* work in conjunction in what could be characterized as a virtuous circle.⁹⁹ On the one hand, suspension of judgment, absence of any previously held belief, is a necessary condition for the full exercise of man's reason: unbiased rational investigation. On the other hand, universal investigation is necessary for the maintenance of the judgment suspended since an open, endless and rigorous examination will inevitably undermine the plausibility of any belief or doctrine to which one might feel inclined to adhere.¹⁰⁰ Charron founds his wisdom on Cicero's concept of intellectual integrity, whose key passage (Ac II.8) he cites in this chapter: "hoc autem liberiores et solutiores sumus quod integra nobis est iudicandi potestas." The integrity of man's capacity of rational examination is maintained in *epochè*. It is therefore in *epochè* that reason—therefore the human being—attains its fully fledged perfection and excellence.

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⁹⁹ Attribution of a *zetesis* to Charron's wise man does not distance him from the Academics. Sextus' claim that the Academics abandon the search after the truth to the extent that they hold truth to be inapprehensible has been widely challenged. "For even though many difficulties hinder every branch of knowledge, and both the subjects themselves and our faculties of judgement involve such a lack of certainty that the most ancient and learned thinkers had good reason for distrusting their ability to discover what they desired, nevertheless they did not give up, nor yet will we abandon in exhaustion our zeal for research". (Ac II.7)

¹⁰⁰ "qui juge bien et sans passion de toutes choses, trouve par tout de l'apparence et de la raison, qui l'empesche de se resoudre, craignant de s'échauder en son jugement, dont il demeure indéterminé, indifférent et universel". (S, II, 2, 387–388)

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