

A DEFENSE OF TOLERATION ON THE BASIS OF SKEPTICISM: THE CASE OF MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE*

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between the concepts of toleration and skepticism. Since the emergence of toleration, around the 16th and 17th centuries, skepticism has been one of the foundations on which toleration was based. However, because skepticism questions the possibility of acquiring knowledge with certitude, toleration that is based on skepticism is always on shaky grounds. Accordingly, one can always advance the thesis that “if it is impossible to know, then, perhaps intolerance may not be a bad thing”. Thus, it can be seen that the relationship between toleration and skepticism is not a direct one. In order for us to reach toleration that is based on skepticism, we need to have a certain interpretation of skepticism. Michel de Montaigne provides us with such an interpretation. Therefore, Montaigne’s justification of toleration that is based on skepticism forms the main focal point of this article.

Keywords: Toleration, skepticism, pyrrhonism, academic skepticism, Montaigne.

Öz

Şüphencilik Temelinde Hoşgörünün Bir Savunusu: Michel de Montaigne Örneği

Bu makale, hoşgörü kavramı ve şüphencilik arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektedir. Hoşgörünün 16. ve 17. yüzyıllar civarında ortaya çıkmasından bu yana, şüphencilik onun üzerinde temellendirildiği zeminlerden birisi olmuştur.

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Bununla beraber, şüphecilğin kesin bilginin imkanını sorgulamasından dolayı, şüphecilik üzerinde temellendirilen hoşgörü daima sallantılı bir zemin üzerindedir. Buna göre, bir kimse “eğer bilmek mümkün değilse, belki de hoşgürsüzlük kötü bir şey olmayabilir” şeklindeki bir tezi daima ileri sürebilir. Böylece, hoşgörü ve şüphecilik arasındaki ilişkinin doğrudan olmadığı görülmektedir. Şüphecilik temelinde hoşgörüye ulaşabilmemiz için şüphecilğin belli bir yorumuna ihtiyacımız vardır. Michel de Montaigne bize böyle bir yorum sunmaktadır. Bu nedenle, Montaigne’in şüphecilik temelinde hoşgörü meşrulaştırması bu makalenin ana odak noktasını oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Hoşgörü, şüphecilik, pyrrhonism, akademik şüphecilik, Montaigne.

INTRODUCTION

This article will display a justification of toleration on the basis of skepticism. It will be clear shortly that the relationship between toleration and skepticism is not a direct one. To reach toleration based on skepticism requires a certain interpretation of skepticism. The French Socrates, Michel de Montaigne, provides us with such an interpretation. Thus, Michel de Montaigne’s defense of toleration on the basis of skepticism comprises one of the main themes of this work.

In this context, in the first step, a brief analysis of the concept of toleration will be given. Then we will turn to present skepticism. In presenting skepticism, we will first focus on its origins, i.e. ancient skepticism, and then, on its revival in the modern times. Finally, after presenting both the concept of toleration and skepticism, we will discuss Montaigne’s defense of toleration.

I. A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT OF TOLERATION

Toleration comes from the Latin word *tolerantia*. According to King (1976: 12), in the earlier history of this expression what this word and its derivatives were broadly intended to label was the general notion of enduring, or putting up with various items. In contemporary English, there are two nouns that derived from Latin *tolerantia*: tolerance and toleration. Generally, while tolerance refers to an attitude, toleration refers to an action. More specifically, tolerance is a willingness or ability to tolerate; toleration is the practice of tolerating.¹

In general, toleration is presented as a deliberate decision to refrain from prohibiting, hindering or otherwise coercively interfering with conduct of which

one disapproves, although one has power to do so (Horton 1998). Langerak (1997: 116) sums up this position in one sentence as follows: “I disagree with your position on this matter which I care about but I will not attempt to coerce your behavior.”

Breaking the concept of toleration into its main components, we have a tolerating and a tolerated subject, each could be an individual, a group, an organization or an institution; an object of toleration which can be an action, a belief or a practice; a negative attitude in the form of dislike or disapproval towards the object of toleration on the part of the subject who tolerates; and a significant degree of restraint in acting against it.

With regard to tolerating subjects, the criterion in determining an entity as one of a tolerating subject lies in its ability to exhibit *agency*. In other words, to be able to tolerate, an entity must be capable of doing something, of acting. The simple reason is that to be intolerant towards an object requires the capacity to act against it. However, in order to be tolerated an entity does not need to exhibit agency. For example, as a group, gays and lesbians can be a subject of toleration in the sense of being tolerated. That is, they can be the target of intolerant behavior of those who disapprove of their way of life. However, they cannot be tolerating subjects. The reason is that they lack the necessary structure to act as a group against a subject of toleration who/which is in the position of being tolerated (Oberdiek, 2001: 40-41).

It is possible to identify two different perspectives regarding the concept of toleration by looking at what kinds of differences are seen as legitimate candidates for the application of toleration. These perspectives are the narrow and broad perspectives. In the narrow perspective, the differences that form the object of toleration should involve important moral matters (Weale, 1985: 18). In other words, according to the narrow perspective, to be tolerant means accepting differences that really matter to us. The differences in religious beliefs and practices, sexual preferences, and political ideologies are examples of the differences that can potentially cause moral disapproval. In this sense, the differences in tastes cannot be a proper object of toleration. It is ridiculous to talk about tolerating a person for his/her² choice of color of dress.

It is argued that, if the concept of toleration is going to be ‘a moral ideal’, the proper objects of toleration must involve important moral matters (Nicholson, 1985: 160-161). Therefore, toleration is limited to the cases which involves moral disapproval, excluding feelings like dislike, distaste and disgust. As Nicholson (1985: 160-161) puts it, “toleration is a matter of moral choice, and our tastes and inclinations are irrelevant . . . such feelings are not morally grounded, and cannot be the ground of a moral position.” Thus, the argument

that we can talk about toleration only in the circumstances where there is a moral disapproval depends on the idea that a clear distinction between the moral and non-moral can be drawn. Furthermore, this argument implies that while what is moral is subject to rational argument, what is non-moral is simply a matter of emotion, feeling, or sentiment, and thus not subject to rational argument (Mendus, 1989: 10).

According to the broad perspective, toleration can arise in cases which involve mere dislike, distaste, or disgust as well as disapproval. One example of the broad perspective can be found in Warnock (1987). In advancing this perspective, Warnock (1987: 25-26) rejects the claim that a clear line between the moral and the non-moral can be drawn. On the contrary, she thinks, moral judgments may themselves be based on strong feeling. Following David Hume, Warnock claims that “morality is more properly felt than judged of, and moral distinctions are not grounded in reason” (Mendus, 1989: 11).

However, as Mendus (1989: 11-12) indicates, in suggesting that moral judgments themselves may be based on feeling, Warnock does not claim that all cases of toleration are of equal value. It may be true that some moral judgments are based on feeling and some feelings are unimportant. However, that does not mean that all moral judgments are trivial. With these considerations in mind, Warnock makes a distinction between ‘strong toleration’ which involves the cases with moral disapproval and ‘weak toleration’ which involves cases of dislike or distaste.

Another point that must be presented is that we do not exercise toleration towards the differences about which we do not care. We are simply ‘indifferent’ to them. Allowing the different practices of others without objecting to them, disapproving of them or finding them disgusting is not to tolerate them, but simply to be in favor of liberty (Mendus, 1989: 8).

Furthermore, in order to describe a person or an institution as a tolerating subject, we must be able to show that the subject is in a position to impose his/her/its will on the tolerated subject (Mendus, 1989: 9). This condition can be illustrated by an example drawn from the realm of religious differences: A subject can be said to tolerate a religious belief or practice only when that subject refrains from interfering with the belief or practice that is disapproved of despite the fact that the subject has power to stop it (Mendus, 1989: 9). In Weale’s (1985: 18) words, “those who are tolerant could get their way if they chose. This is the distinction between acquiescence and toleration.” In this sense, tolerance is different from resigning oneself to what one disapproves of out of a sense of helplessness. To be tolerant implies that one believes, perhaps

falsely, that one could interfere in some way with the disagreeable behavior (Langerak, 1997: 117).

I.2. THE PARADOX OF TOLERATION

The fact that toleration requires someone to refrain from prohibiting, hindering or otherwise coercively interfering with exactly what one disapproves of presents the so-called ‘paradox of toleration’. On one side of the equation lies the object of toleration, that is, an act or belief that causes disapproval, dislike or disgust; and on the other side lies the conscience of the tolerating subject. The conscience of the tolerating subject is a battleground where a fierce fight takes place between the moral values of the tolerating subject, which strongly urge the person to stop the object of toleration, and the demands for toleration. In order for the demands of toleration to come out victorious from this battle, the conscience of the tolerating subject must be provided with some good reasons. In fact, the reasons that are presented to overcome the paradox of toleration are different ways of justifying toleration.

One argument that is presented to overcome the paradox of toleration is based on skepticism. Very briefly, the tolerating subject may believe that s/he has no rational ground to justify her/his intolerance towards the object of toleration. This is the skeptical attitude. Thus, as long as one does not want to commit injustice through imposing her/his own arbitrary position on others, one should be tolerant towards different ways of lives. In order to understand the connection between toleration and skepticism, a presentation of skepticism is now in order.

II. A PRESENTATION OF SKEPTICISM

Skepticism is a particular epistemological attitude. As Annas and Barnes (1985: 4) indicate “epistemology discusses the questions of cognition: What is knowledge? How much can we know? Of what can we be certain? In what circumstances our beliefs are justified?” There are two basic positions with regards to these questions: Skepticism and dogmatism.³ While these two positions are in agreement about the answer to the first question, they are literally at the opposite poles in terms of the answers that they give to the rest of the questions. Both skeptical and dogmatist positions accept that if someone asserts a statement *p*, but is wrong, that person cannot be said to know that *p* is true. In this sense, one of the main features of the concept of knowledge is that it is impossible to know what is not true (Popkin and Stroll, 2002: 40). If I state

that the capital of Turkey is İstanbul, this statement, being mistaken, cannot be a piece of knowledge.

The second point of agreement between the skeptics and the dogmatists concerns the criterion of certainty. This criterion is connected with the former. If it is possible to be mistaken about p , then one cannot know that p . If I know p , I know that p with certainty. The possibility of being mistaken implies an uncertainty in one's awareness of a given situation, and therefore, corresponds to a lack of knowledge (Popkin and Stroll, 2002: 40). According to this criterion, such a statement as "The capital of Turkey might be Ankara", although it is correct, cannot qualify as a piece of knowledge.

As indicated above, skeptics and dogmatists agree only on the answer that they give to the question "what is knowledge?" On the questions of certainty, they radically disagree. At their extreme points, skeptics argue that it is impossible to know anything because it is impossible to attain certainty. They argue that one can never tell whether what one claims to know is true or false; thus, knowledge is impossible. This is the position of 'radical skepticism'. As Popkin and Stroll (2002: 57) put it "the radical skeptic doubts that any piece of information is any better than any other." However, there is another strand of skepticism according to which some pieces of knowledge are better than others. This is called 'mitigated skepticism'. Generally speaking, a mitigated skeptic is committed to the view that information is to be presented in probabilistic terms. Hence, the more probable a piece of information is, the more reliable it is. However, these skeptics continue to believe that no matter how high on the scale of probability, we never reach the realm of knowledge grounded on certainty (Popkin and Stroll, 2002: 57).

The dogmatist claims that knowledge is possible and one who knows something knows that thing with certainty. There may be secular and religious forms of dogmatism. In the former form, a dogmatist may believe in the existence of a fixed truth in nature or science. In religious dogmatism, revealed religion provides all the information with certainty that one needs to know. Secular dogmatism relies ultimately on reason. According to the secular dogmatists, the senses are not reliable tools for attaining the truth due to the fact that the objects of sense perception are subject to constant change. However, knowledge must be about fixed phenomena. Otherwise what we know right now as true will be false in a moment, violating the first criterion of knowledge, namely, one cannot know that which is false. Religious dogmatists may also employ reason. However, their motivation for doing so is always to find explanations that prove the truth of sacred religion.

It is often thought that there is at least an emotional kinship between skepticism and toleration (Tuck, 1988). As indicated earlier, the core of the skeptical argument for toleration is that there is no rational ground for justifying our moral values, and therefore, any attempt to impose our own value system on others forms an arbitrary behavior on our part and corresponds to injustice. If we do not want to commit injustice, we should tolerate the beliefs and/or actions that we believe to be wrong.

Nevertheless, as Mendus (1988: 2) indicates “the link between skepticism and toleration is not unproblematic . . . There is in fact no straightforward move from moral or religious skepticism to toleration.” Alan Levine (2001: 14-15) illustrates this point by a reference to Dostoyevsky. In **The Brothers Karamazov**, Dostoyevsky states that “if nothing is true, everything is permitted.” In other words, the skeptical stance may also involve the toleration of intolerance. According to this mode of reasoning, if we can never have the knowledge of the truth, or if there is no truth about such matters to be discovered, then there is nothing wrong in enforcing uniformity of belief (Horton, 1998: 432).

Therefore, in order for skepticism to lead to tolerance rather than to intolerance, it needs to be interpreted in a certain way. Michel de Montaigne provides us with a brilliant example of this kind of interpretation. His justification of toleration on the basis of skepticism will be presented in the last part of this article.

II.1. Ancient Skepticism

There are two different traditions of skepticism that flowered in ancient Greece: Academic skepticism and Pyrrhonism. Although Pyrrho of Elis (360-270 B. C.), from whom Pyrrhonians get their name, lived before the emergence of Academic skepticism, it was the Academic skeptics who formulated skepticism as a philosophical methodology for the first time in the third century B. C. Beginning with Arcesilaus (315-240 B. C.), the Academics embraced the Socratic remark: “All that I know is that I know nothing,” as their motto. For a further two hundred years, the Academy remained skeptical. Another notable leader of the Academy after Arcesilaus in this new era was Carneades (214/13-129/8 B. C.) (Annas and Barnes, 1985: 14). Although we do not possess the writings of either Arcesilaus or of Carneades, as Popkin (1967: 449) indicates, later writings by Cicero, Sextus Empiricus, and Diogenes Laertius provide a fairly good idea of the kinds of arguments that they put forward. Thanks to these writings, we know that Arcesilaus attacked the Stoics, and Carneades criticized heavily both the Stoics and Epicureans.

As dogmatists, the Stoics claimed that there are certain sense perceptions which could not possibly be false either per se or as signs of the true nature of reality. Arcesilaus and Carneades responded to this claim by pointing out that there are no secure criterion that can be established with the purpose of differentiating such kind of perception from another (Popkin, 1967: 450). As a result, the Academics concluded that we must suspend judgment about whether reliable representations of objects actually exist. According to the Academics, this situation confirms that no knowledge claims about what is happening beyond our immediate experience is certain. Depending on the information that we gather through our senses we cannot have knowledge but merely reasonable belief. All information that can be gained must be described in probabilistic terms. Thus, Academic skepticism formed a kind of mitigated skepticism (Popkin, 1967: 450).

According to Annas and Barnes, the Academics were not positive skeptics, believing that nothing should be asserted. As Annas and Barnes (1985: 14) state it

Rather, they were essentially critics. . . . Typically, they would take hold of one of the doctrines of a dogmatist philosopher (the Stoics were their usual target) and attempt to reduce it to absurdity. ‘If you Stoics are right’, they would argue, ‘and such-and-such is the case, then we cannot know the truth about so-and-so. You Stoics are committed by your own principles to skepticism.’

Our knowledge about Pyrrhonism comes from the writings of three ancient thinkers: Sextus Empiricus, Cicero, and Diogenes Laertius. The last great Pyrrhonist from antiquity was Sextus Empiricus. While not all of his writings survived, those which did provide us with a good understanding of ancient skepticism. The **Outlines of Pyrrhonism**, a general introduction to Pyrrhonism in three books, and a further group of eleven books known collectively as **Against the Mathematicians** are the two works by Sextus that have come down to us. Along with these two works, Cicero’s **Academica**, and Diogenes Laertius’ **Life of Pyrrho** form our main sources of ancient Greek skepticism (Annas and Barnes, 1985: 16; Schmitt, 1983: 226).

In contradistinction to the Academic skeptics, Pyrrhonian skeptics presented a positive skepticism, thinking that nothing should be asserted. As a skeptical tradition, Pyrrhonism emerged under the leadership of Aenesidemus in the first century B. C. during the Roman period. Aenesidemus who probably taught in Alexandria is reported to have attacked both the Academic skeptics and the dogmatic philosophers. He criticized the Academics because they were sure that what is probable and what is improbable can be distinguished from one

another, and the dogmatic philosophers because they claimed to have discovered the truth (Popkin, 1967: 450).

As indicated earlier, Pyrrhonians claim to be the followers of Pyrrho of Elis. None of his works survived and virtually all we know about him comes from the writings of later skeptics, mainly from Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus. In **Outlines of Pyrrhonism** (Book I, 7), Sextus Empiricus states that “Pyrrho appears to us to have applied himself to skepticism more thoroughly and more conspicuously than his predecessors.” Pyrrho accepted an extreme skepticism and lived by it. He rejected all assertion and belief, and as a result, he led a tranquil life. Indeed, one of the basic principles of Pyrrhonism, i.e. the life of *ataraxia*, consists in this attitude. The word *ataraxia* is commonly translated into English as ‘unperturbedness’. The goal for the Pyrrhonians was to attain unperturbedness through *epoche*, i.e. suspension of judgment.⁴ In his **Outlines of Pyrrhonism** (Book I, 8), Sextus Empiricus summarizes this point as follows:

Skepticism is an ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgments in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of ‘unperturbedness’ or quietude.

The Pyrrhonian view that tranquility will be found in the suspension of judgment stands in explicit opposition to the widespread Greek view that there is a positive connection between knowledge and fulfillment. According to this latter view, happiness (*eudemonia*), which is the goal of life, comes from virtuous activity, and virtuous activity necessitates the knowledge of what virtue is. In this view, a philosophical life, that is, the life of inquiry with the purpose of acquiring knowledge based on certainty, is indispensable for the attainment of happiness. However, the Pyrrhonians believe that our troubles are caused exactly by that which is supposed to bring about happiness, i.e. the quest for knowledge with certainty (Hookway, 1990: 5). Making human happiness dependent on knowledge leads to failure in the attainment of happiness, because it *seems* that it is impossible to gain knowledge that is based on certainty.

Faced with the appearance that all attempts to answer questions with certainty remain elusive, the Pyrrhonians suspended judgment and hoped to achieve tranquility (Annas and Barnes, 1985: 17; Hookway, 1990: 5). The suspension of judgment is consistent with a kind of passive acceptance of the world as it is. In Popkin and Stroll’s (2002: 55) words, “one lives in this world, acts in it, takes it as it is without reflection.” Thus, *epoche*, i.e. suspension of judgment, leads one to conform to the prevailing customs and standards of

one's society; and to base one's life on sensory appearances and bodily needs and desires (Hookway, 1990: 6). In this regard, it is not misleading to say that the Pyrrhonian way of life is essentially conservative in its consequences.

II.2. The Revival of Skepticism in the Early Modern Period

The last time ancient Greek skepticism exerted serious influence before its rediscovery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was when St. Augustine attacked Academic skepticism in his **Contra Academicos**. In this work, the famous theologian presented a powerful argument against the skeptical position which was so brilliantly stated in Cicero's **Academica**. From the appearance of St. Augustine's **Contra Academicos** to the Renaissance, the ancient skepticism was practically absent from the circles of the learned. As Schmitt indicates, "the writings of Sextus Empiricus, by far the most important and most detailed of the three, exerted no visible influence during the Middle Ages . . ." (Schmitt, 1983: 227). However, when rediscovered, it was Sextus Empiricus' works that exerted the greatest influence on the emergence of modern skeptical philosophy. (Schmitt, 1983: 233)

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the three sources mentioned above were brought into the daylight and disseminated in the Christian West; and during the following century "skepticism emerged as an important philosophical movement, which had a significant impact not merely on philosophical thought, but on theology, science, and literature as well" (Schmitt, 1983: 228). Perhaps the biggest reason that increased the speed in which ancient skepticism was disseminated in the sixteenth century is the skeptical crisis that was created by the religious confrontation created by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation (Popkin, 1993: 15).

Some other factors that contributed to the skeptical crisis of the sixteenth century were the new astronomical theories and geographical discoveries. The Judeo-Christian conception of the universe, and humankind's place in it was shaken by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) and Galileo (1564-1642) in the realm of astronomy; and by Vasco da Gama, Christopher Columbus, Sir Francis Drake and others in the realm of geography (Popkin and Stroll, 2002: 59). However, at this point, it should be emphasized that in opposition to the contemporary belief that skepticism undermines the religious faith, skepticism, as it developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, did not generally have anti-religious connotations. As Schmitt (1983: 229) puts it "in fact, it was more often used in behalf of religion. In later times- in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries- skepticism came to have an increasingly antireligious tinge, but such was not the case for earlier period."

In 1562 Sextus Empiricus' the **Outlines of Pyrrhonism** was translated into Latin for the first time by Henri Estienne. Seven years later, Gential Hervet presented Sextus Empiricus' the **Adversus Mathematicos** to the Latin reading circles of the learned. As Schmitt (1983: 237) points out

This is really the crucial event in the development of Renaissance and early modern skepticism, for now by far the most important work of ancient skepticism was generally available for the first time. . . . once the translations were in print we see a direct development of skepticism as a more potent force in European life..

It was not long after the translation of Sextus' works into Latin that two distant cousins, namely, Francisco Sanches (ca.1550-ca.1623) and Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) advanced their skeptically oriented views (Popkin, 1967: 452; Schmitt, 1983: 237). Sanches' **Quod Nihil Scitus** was published in 1576. In this treatise, Sanches attacked the Aristotelian understanding of science which had claimed that it was possible to grasp the necessary causes behind the natural phenomena through deduction from the first principles that are gained by induction (Popkin, 1967: 452). In Popkin's (1993: 20-21) words,

. . . , he showed that, in Aristotle's sense of 'knowing', nothing can be known; premisses of syllogisms could not be known to be true unless the conclusions drawn from them were known to be true. (For example, to tell that 'All men are mortal' is true, one would have to know 'Socrates is mortal' is true.) Hence, there was an unavoidable circularity at the base of Aristotelian theory that prevented it from being a way to knowledge.

Instead of pursuing knowledge based on certainty, Sanches argued, men should gather factual information based on observation, draw generalizations from these facts, and then test these generalizations against further observations of the phenomenon under investigation. This process would lead to a limited kind of knowledge. According to Sanches, we could not know the true nature of reality and must base our actions on appearances rather than the truth. Sanches called this process the 'scientific method' (Popkin, 1993: 21).

Perhaps the biggest blow to the ancient dogmatist traditions of philosophy, such as, Aristotelianism, Platonism and various forms of Renaissance naturalism, came from Michel de Montaigne. As Popkin (1993: 15) states

central issues in modern thought such as the epistemological basis of certitude, the kinds of evidence that can be obtained to support basic beliefs such as the existence of an external world, were proposed in the initial

Renaissance presentations of ancient skepticism by Montaigne and his followers.

Furthermore, Montaigne found a ground in skepticism on which a thorough defense of toleration can be based. In fact, Michel de Montaigne is not the first modern thinker who developed an understanding of toleration on the basis of skepticism. Before Montaigne, Sebastian Franck and Sebastian Castellio had defended toleration towards religious dissidents on the basis of skepticism. Both Franck and Castellio emphasized that religious truth was not easy to be discovered and many doctrines contained in Scripture were too obscure to be grasped with certitude. Given this veil of obscurity over the religious truth, labeling certain people ‘heretic’ and persecuting them afterwards was bound to remain unjustified. Thus, for both Franck and Castellio, in order to avoid shedding the blood of innocent human beings in the name of ambiguous doctrines, we ought to extend toleration to those with whom we disagree on religious matters (Kamen, 1967: 77).

What makes Montaigne different and more interesting than his predecessors lies in the fact that he was the most significant thinker that was responsible for the revival of ancient skepticism in the 16th century (Popkin, 1964: 44). To the extent that he was the most important thinker who advanced skeptical views in the 16th century, his defense of toleration on the basis of skepticism merits special treatment. A close examination of Montaigne’s defense of toleration on the basis of skepticism will let us understand the connections between skepticism and toleration better. Therefore, we will now present his understanding of skepticism and then discuss his notion of toleration.⁵

III. MONTAIGNE’S SKEPTICAL DEFENSE OF TOLERATION

Montaigne’s examination of ancient skepticism will be found in his longest essay, “Apology for Raimond de Sebonde”, in the **Essays**. The apparent reason for Montaigne in writing this essay is to defend Raimond de Sebond, a Spaniard theologian whose **Theologia Naturalis** Montaigne had translated into French, against two main criticisms. As Montaigne (1991b: 491) informs us, in **Theologia Naturalis** Sebonde “undertakes to establish against the atheists and to show by human, natural reasons the truth of all the articles of the Christian religion.”

The first criticism toward Sebonde’s undertaking consists in the argument that true Christians do not need to prove rationally the articles of their religion

because these articles can only be conceived by faith and divine revelation. This is the argument of fideism in favor of the religion. Montaigne (1991b: 492) agrees with this point to a great extent by stating that “Only faith can embrace, with a lively certainty, the high mysteries of our religion.” Furthermore, Montaigne (1991b: 557) states, “Our religion did not come to us through reasoned arguments or from our own intelligence: it came to us from outside authority, by commandments.” However, Montaigne thinks that it is an honorable act to put our natural capabilities into God’s service. Thus to the extent to which Sebonde’s book is seen as a rational supplement to the divinely revealed truth, it can be excused. According to Montaigne, we advance our arguments in favor of divine religion not because God needs our arguments, but as an attempt to honor him through our intellectual service (Montaigne, 1991b: 557).

The second criticism from which Montaigne defends Sebonde is concerned with the strength of the rational arguments that Sebonde advances. According to Montaigne, some think that Sebonde’s arguments are rather weak to serve the purpose for which Sebonde employs them. Montaigne finds a greater threat in this criticism and thinks that it is more dangerous and malicious than the first criticism (1991b: 500). As Popkin (1964: 46) points out, Montaigne claims that “since all reasoning is unsound, Sebonde should not be blamed for his errors.” Indeed, this second criticism provides Montaigne with the opportunity to develop his skeptical attack on dogmatism.

According to Montaigne, in any philosophical inquiry there are three distinct outcomes that can be arrived at: either the inquiring person will conclude that s/he has found the truth, or that truth is impossible to be found, or that s/he continues to search for truth. These three positions correspond to the positions of dogmatism, the Academic skepticism, and Pyrrhonism respectively. According to Montaigne, the Peripatetics, i.e. Aristotelians, Epicureans, Stoics, and others subscribe to the dogmatist position. As Montaigne puts it, “they founded the accepted disciplines and expounded their knowledge as certainties” (1991b: 559). On the other hand, the Academics including Clitomachus, Carneades argued that truth cannot be gained by human capabilities. Yet these two positions, that is, that of the dogmatists and the Academics are criticized by the Pyrrhonians.

Pyrrhonians think that the dogmatists who concluded that they have found the truth are infinitely deceived. On the other hand, the Academics who claim that nothing can be known with certainty fail to avoid the dogmatist’s malady because of their opinion about the status of human knowledge, which they hold with certitude. In Montaigne’s words, Pyrrhonians believe that “ignorance which is aware of itself, judges itself, condemns itself, is not complete

ignorance: complete ignorance does not even know itself” (1991b: 560). Therefore, Pyrrhonians abstain from making any assertion. They doubt, and inquire, and do not make themselves sure of anything.

One line of Montaigne’s skeptical attack on dogmatism is based on a comparison between human beings and the animals. This comparison is intended to reveal the vanity and presumptuousness of human beings (Popkin, 1964: 47). Unlike the ancients who had defined human beings as ‘rational animals’ and placed them above all other animate creatures due to their exclusive possession of reason, Montaigne thinks that rather than being a characteristic that privileges human beings over other creatures, rationality is the very reason that makes them miserable. What is worse is that human beings are not aware of this state of themselves. They think that they know everything and all other creatures are in their service. They place themselves at the center of the universe. According to Montaigne (1991b: 501), this presumption is “the very foundation of the tyrannous rule of the Evil Spirit . . .”

Let Man make me understand by the force of discursive reason, what are the grounds on which he has founded and erected all those advantages which he thinks he has over other creatures and who has convinced him that it is for his convenience, his service, that, for so many centuries, there has been established and maintained the awesome motion of the vault of heaven, the everlasting light of those tapers coursing so proudly overhead or the dread surging of the boundless sea? Is it possible to imagine anything more laughable than that this pitiful , wretched creature -who is not even master of himself, but exposed to shocks on every side- should call himself Master and Emperor of a universe, the smallest particle of which he has no means of knowing, let alone swaying (1991b: 502).

As Levine (2001: 57) indicates, if there is any difference between human beings and the animals, Montaigne believes, it is to human beings’ disadvantage. Animals lead the life that nature has prescribed for them. They follow their instincts and stay in the limits of their nature. They attend to their natural needs and desires. As Montaigne (1991b: 526) puts it, “Animals obey the rules of Nature better than we do and remain more moderately within her prescribed limits . . .” On the other hand, human beings run after what is unnatural. Instead of attending to our natural desires that we share with other animals, such as, eating, drinking and procreating, we create “superfluous and artificial” desires. To the extent that they are superfluous and artificial, they necessarily fail to be satisfied. This, in turn, creates anxiety.

We are never ‘at home’: we are always outside ourselves. Fear, desire, hope, impel us towards the future; they rob us of feelings and concern for

what now is, in order to spend time over what will be -even when we ourselves shall be no more. (Montaigne, 1991a: 11).

As Oberdiek (2001: 73) points out, for Montaigne, the culprit is imagination. We have a tendency to worry about the future. This tendency, which is caused by the natural faculty of imagination, fills us with all sorts of fear, desire, and hope. These take us away from the here and now.

Another line of Montaigne's skepticism is found in his distrust in the capabilities of human reason. As Levine (1999b: 58) indicates Montaigne cites certain internal and external factors that cause our reasoning to be unreliable. The distortion that is involved in our sense perceptions, the condition of our body, that is, being sick or healthy, and our emotional state affect the functioning of our reason. The fact that the same object is perceived differently by different people testifies to the distortions that are taking place in the process of sense perception. Similarly, a person thinks and behaves differently in the face of the same situation when s/he is physically sick or emotionally depressed. Thus due to these internal factors human reason is vulnerable to err.

Two external factors that cause our understanding to be unreliable are time and place (Levine, 1999b: 58). Certain things have been perceived, interpreted and acted upon differently in different historical times by the same nation or person. Things that used to be socially unacceptable may be welcomed today. Similarly, a person's point of view may change in time and things that were unacceptable and morally wrong once upon a time may become acceptable and correct today. We also witness that the same things may be perceived, interpreted and acted upon differently at the same historical era by different nations. Who knows which action of the same nation in two different times, or which one of the two different nations' actions at the same time period is correct?

Reason cannot answer these questions by itself. Its biggest helper is our senses. In Montaigne's (1991b: 663) words, "now knowledge is conveyed through the senses: they are our Masters: . . . Knowledge begins with them and can be reduced to them." Yet Montaigne believes that "the senses are the proof as well as the main foundation of our ignorance" (1991b: 663).

Montaigne begins his examination of senses by questioning whether human beings are furnished with all natural senses. Observing that there are animals without sight or hearing yet functioning perfectly, Montaigne (1991b: 664) asks: "Who can tell whether we, also, lack one, two, three or more senses?" Since our senses provide us with the only tools in our search, we could never answer that question. Stated differently, our knowledge of our senses are

provided by our senses themselves. We are not aware of our sense of hearing through our sense of sight or any other capacity, but by the sense of hearing itself. Therefore, if we were missing any senses we could not be aware of that situation.

This awareness should lead us to conclude that what we are perceiving through our senses may not be the whole picture. We should not be so presumptuous. As Montaigne (1991b: 664) states, “our senses are privileged to be the ultimate frontiers of our perception: beyond them there is nothing which could serve to reveal the existence of the senses we lack. One sense cannot reveal another . . .”. A second point about the senses made by Montaigne is that, as already noted, the senses are vulnerable to distortion. From seeing that there are animals with much better sense of hearing or that of sight we can infer that our senses are not perfect (Montaigne, 1991b: 674). In the third place, sometimes our state of soul has an impact on how our senses work. As Montaigne puts it (1991b: 673), “When we are moved to anger, we do not hear things as they are: . . . Love someone and she appears more beautiful than she is: . . . And anyone we dislike appears more ugly.” Finally our senses contradict one another. How are we going to decide which one is closer to the truth?

In order to decide we need to have an adjudicative tool. However, how are we going to be sure that this adjudicative tool itself is correct? To prove that this tool has accuracy we need to have a demonstration. To prove this demonstration we need another tool. Thus we are in a cycle: “The senses themselves being full of uncertainty cannot decide the issue of our dispute. It will have to be Reason, then. But no Reason can be established except by another Reason. We retreat into infinity” (Montaigne, 1991b: 679).

Although Montaigne claims that nothing about the eternal essence of things can be known by human beings, he does think that one can know herself/himself. As Levine (2001: 5) indicates, “this knowledge is experiential and only of subjective phenomena as felt by a particular person at a particular moment in time.” Since all knowledge a person can attain is limited to her/his subjective experience, it is futile to strive for grasping the transcendental truth. For Montaigne, human beings’ natural end and thus interest is summed up in the Delphic injunction: Know Thyself. According to Levine (2001: 7), Montaigne thinks that this is self-interest properly understood.

It is the ability of self to search itself without interference from outside. It is potentially the most joyful, and at the same time, most frustrating activity for a human being. The reason for joy is that one discovers oneself, her/his individuality. The reason for frustration is that one may see the emptiness of oneself in that there is not any end-point from which our desires, passions, wills

come from (Levine, 2001: 7). As Screech (1991: xxxix) indicates, Montaigne had realized that “no creature ever *is*: a creature is always shifting, changing, becoming.”

In this understanding of self-interest we find one corner-stone of Montaigne’s theory of toleration. Human beings who are aware of the natural limits set on their ability to acquire universal truth will turn inward to search themselves instead. This requires one to be left alone. In order for one to discover herself/himself, one needs to have a private sphere in which one will be free from any outside intervention. Once a human being realizes that having a private sphere in which s/he can enjoy her/his individuality is the most valuable privilege s/he can have, s/he begins to respect the same privilege of her/his fellow human beings.

As Oberdiek (2001: 73) points out, for Montaigne, in this private sphere human beings can satisfy their animal needs, such as, eating, drinking, and procreating, and enjoy mental tranquility. Pyrrhonist ideal of *ataraxia* in which one frees herself/himself from anxiety, which is caused by the futile attempt to attain absolute knowledge, through suspension of judgment (*epoche*) corresponds to individual self-interest. Individuals who realize their innate inability to attain truth and understand that their self-interest lies in being left alone cannot be swayed by the calls for establishing universal justice by those who believe that they have found the truth.

One who realizes her/his own weakness will tolerate other persons’ weaknesses and approach them with neutrality. S/he will let others create their own subjective experiences and lead the lives that they desire. Since this toleration is based on self-interest properly understood, it rejects the Nietzschean definition of toleration as self-denial (Levine, 2001: 7-8). As Levine indicates, unlike Nietzsche, Montaigne does not think that self-creation is a violent process in which suffering is inevitable. And since what a human being finds in herself/himself is ignorance and impermanence, s/he does not have anything to force on others (Levine, 1999b: 64-65). Furthermore, any attempt to force one’s subjective reality onto another may cause the loss of the only chance of attaining happiness by leading to a “state of war”. In a state of war, no one can have a secure private sphere in which s/he can take her/his individual journey of self-discovery. Therefore, it is in one’s self-interest to tolerate others.

Provided that one is granted a private sphere, s/he can be expected to obey to the laws that order public sphere. Montaigne agrees with Hobbes who has the opinion that without law and order human beings would be at each other’s throat. Therefore, in order to secure continuous enjoyment of our

individuality in the private sphere, we need to submit our loyalty to the state in the public sphere. Civil disobedience is not an option for Montaigne. Furthermore, by following the state's orders, for Montaigne (1991b: 543), we do not sacrifice our individuality. What we are doing is only role-playing. Our consciences do not have to be insulted by that: "all other virtues are born of submission and obedience, just as all other sins are born of pride."

The state cannot control the consciences of its subjects but only their external actions. When we obey the state, it is not our conscience but our knees that bend. Montaigne chose to follow the customs and laws that were current in his own society. Given that it is impossible to enact absolutely just laws in the public realm, why bother with prescribing laws instead of going with the ones that are already in place? However, since he believes that self-knowledge is possible, Montaigne prescribes rules for himself in his private sphere and lets others prescribe rules for themselves in their own private spheres. In that regard, what the government form is does not bother Montaigne much. As long as government prevents anarchy, i.e. intolerance by other members in society towards self, and does not attempt to regulate consciences of its subjects, i.e. intolerance by the state itself, Montaigne is willing to submit his loyalty to it.

CONCLUSION

Toleration is presented as a deliberate decision to refrain from prohibiting, hindering or otherwise coercively interfering with conduct of which one disapproves, although one has power to do so. The fact that toleration requires someone to refrain from prohibiting, hindering or otherwise coercively interfering with exactly what one disapproves leads to the so-called 'paradox of toleration'.

One argument that is presented to overcome the paradox of toleration is based on skepticism. Very briefly, the tolerating subject may believe that s/he has no rational ground to justify her/his intolerance towards the object of toleration. Thus, as long as one does not want to commit injustice through imposing her/his own arbitrary position on others, one should be tolerant towards different ways of lives. This is the skeptical attitude. However, although there is an emotional kinship between the concept of toleration and skepticism, their relationship is not a direct one. Before we reach toleration on the basis of skepticism we need to have a certain understanding of skepticism.

As a skeptic, Montaigne thinks that it is impossible to have the knowledge either of the abstract ideas, such as justice, or of the natural

phenomena that are taking place around us. Neither reason nor our senses are reliable tools for achieving the truth. However, unlike a radical skeptic, who thinks that nothing can be known, Montaigne thinks that self-knowledge is possible. In fact, here lies the self-interest properly understood. For Montaigne, a person's ability of searching herself/himself constitutes self-interest. According to this view, happiness can be reached only when we give up looking for the ultimate truth. Rather we need to turn inward and discover ourselves. No one is any different from the other human beings in this respect. Thus, everybody needs a private sphere in which s/he will be tolerated for the beliefs and deeds that are involved in the journey of self-discovery. Thus, toleration becomes a basic necessity. Everybody wants to be happy, and everybody's happiness is dependent on being tolerated.

NOTES

¹ **The Oxford American Dictionary of Current English** (1999) New York: Oxford University Press, **The American Heritage Dictionary of The English Language** (2000) Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. As King indicates, these two nouns are confused very often with one another and this confusion is not worth combating. At the end of the day, King argues, these two nouns share the same verb, namely, to tolerate. Furthermore, there is only one adjective that describes the person who either has the attitude or performs the action: tolerant. In this respect, it is 'tolerable' to use tolerance and toleration interchangeably, and that is what will be done in this article.

² Except for direct quotations where the third person is specified as either she or he, throughout this article I will use s/he for the third person.

³ The words 'dogmatism' and 'dogmatist' in contemporary English have a pejorative tone. They hint at an irrational rigidity of opinion, a refusal to look impartially at the evidence (see Julia Annas, Jonathan Barnes, 1985,1). In the senses that I am using them here, being devoid of that pejorative tone, they merely refer to an epistemological position and to a person who subscribes to that epistemological position respectively.

⁴ The act of suspending judgment (*epoche*) in the Pyrrhonian skepticism has meant different things to different thinkers. For example, for Hookway, suspending judgment in the Pyrrhonian tradition corresponds to abandoning the pursuit of truth. According to Hookway (1990: 5), the Pyrrhonians give up on the project of inquiry when it appears to them that all questions remain open. On the other hand, for Montaigne, the suspension of a judgment on any topic does not mean turning away from the project of inquiry, i.e. the search for the truth. According to Montaigne (1991b: 560), what makes a Pyrrhonian different from others is that s/he never assents on any topic of investigation: "Now the Pyrrhonians make their faculty of judgement so unbending and upright that it registers everything but bestows its assent on nothing." In this understanding, a Pyrrhonian is a perennial seeker of truth. As Montaigne points out, the professed aim of the Pyrrhonians is to shake all convictions about the truth that are held by human beings (1991b: 560). In parallel to Montaigne's view, Annas and Barnes (1985: 1) state that, "inquirers (i.e. the Pyrrhonians, added by the author) persist in their inquiries because

they have neither discovered the object of their search, nor concluded that it lies beyond all discovery: they have, as yet, no opinion on the matter.”

⁵ Although scholars agree that Montaigne was a skeptic, they remain divided as to whether he was an Academic or a Pyrrhonian skeptic. Popkin (1964) believes that Montaigne was a Pyrrhonian skeptic. He points out that by revitalizing the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus during a time when the intellectual paradigm of the 16th century was losing ground, Montaigne deserved to be identified as one of the most crucial designers of modern thought. In Popkin’s (1964: 55) words, “Montaigne’s genial *Apologie* became the *coup de grace* to an entire intellectual world. It was also to be the womb of modern thought, in that it led to the attempt either to refute the new Pyrrhonism, or to find a way of living with it”. On the other hand, Levine argues that Montaigne was an Academic skeptic (Levine 1999a, 1999b, 2001). According to Levine (1999b: 56-57), although

Montaigne does use Pyrrhonist arguments and the Pyrrhonist mode of procedure throughout the ‘Apology,’ . . . Unlike the Pyrrhonists, however, Montaigne focuses his inquiries on human things. . . .

. . . Montaigne never thematically discusses Academic skepticism, because he is an Academic skeptic.

However, identifying Montaigne as a follower of the Academic or Pyrrhonian tradition is beyond the scope of this article, especially in light of Annas and Barnes (1985: 14) observation that “to outside observers there was little difference between the skeptical Academics and the Pyrrhonists.” It is important for and relevant to this study that Montaigne was a skeptic.

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