



A case against skepticism: On Christian August Crusius' logic of hermeneutical probability[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an account of the Enlightenment dispute over hermeneutical skepticism with particular reference to the idea of hermeneutical probability in the philosophical work of Christian August Crusius. The essay sheds new light on the hermeneutical issues addressed in the philosophical school of the so-called Thomasians based mainly in Leipzig in the first half of the eighteenth century (*inter alia* Rüdiger, Hoffmann, and Crusius). The paper deals with Crusius' wide-ranging efforts to cope with the uncertain character of most parts of human knowledge and his attempts to construct a workable theory of hermeneutical probability. This raises points of central interest relating to probabilism in the methodology of textual interpretation and connects Crusius to contemporary discussions of hermeneutical skepticism.

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Introduction

Different conceptions of probable knowledge, i.e. knowledge not aspiring to certainty, stand out in Early Modern epistemology and methodology. In recent decades, research in the history of science has drawn an increasingly clear picture of a 'probabilistic revolution' in the Early Modern period. The development of *quantitative* concepts of probability has been broadly discussed in connection with the history of mathematics and the natural sciences. As yet, an adequate appreciation of *qualitative* theories of probable knowledge, which are firmly rooted in the methodology of the humanistic disciplines, has not been provided. This paper will give an account of some of the qualitative approaches to the concept of probability which have been developed in eighteenth-century German methodology. In particular, the paper will focus on the group of the 'Thomasians' who insisted on the uncertain character of most parts of human knowledge and hence on the importance of constructing a theory of probability for the methodology of the humanities. In their quest to ward off the threat of exegetical skepticism, their response was not to dispel all doubts concerning the possibility of certain knowledge. Their strategy – as a close examination of some aspects of the methodological work of Christian August Crusius makes clear – was not to claim certainty but, in a somewhat weaker mode, probability for claims of hermeneutical knowledge. In conclusion, this elaborate conception of sufficiently safe, albeit not certain modes of knowledge, is set against a recent type of hermeneutical skepticism.

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Early Modern probability as a remedy for skepticism

Among the questions concerning the development, circulation, organization, categorization, and control of knowledge, those relating to the certainty of knowledge form a central issue in the history of knowledge.¹ If one doubts the validity of claims to certain knowledge, as many scholars and philosophers in Early Modern times have done, this might result in an outright skepticism towards these claims.² In the case which I will be discussing, skepticism relates chiefly to the domain of the written word in Scripture and secular writing. The form of skepticism that I am interested in is hermeneutical skepticism. As one can imagine, this specific form of skepticism was thought to have very important implications for the study of the Bible and consequently for the foundations of Christian belief. Sometimes, Early Modern skepticism is in part conceived of as a reaction to the development of different denominations, as a consequence of the overall uncertainty caused by contradicting and irreconcilable knowledge claims touching fundamental questions of faith. In this context, hermeneutics turns out to be a humanistic discipline, which is supposed to resolve the conflicts generated by different interpretations of the Holy Scriptures. Skepticism relating to the epistemic status of hermeneutical knowledge claims turns out to be one of the most important problems confronting Early Modern methodology.

One way to address the problem of hermeneutical skepticism without abandoning all hope for hermeneutical knowledge is, of course, to argue that certainty remains a conceivable epistemic goal for the hermeneutical enterprise. Another way to address skepticism of the hermeneutical kind is to claim that – although the ideal of certain knowledge is not attainable in the hermeneutical realm – this does not mean that knowledge claims relating to the interpretation of texts cannot aspire to be knowledge at all. From this point of view, there still remains another weaker, more mitigated mode of knowledge which the interpretation of texts can attain: hermeneutical probability. This type of uncertain knowledge can be characterized as moral certainty (*certitudo moralis*), probability (*probabilitas, verisimilitudo*), or as a mitigated ('constructive') form of skepticism. With the establishment of forms of rationality which do not require absolute certainties, the strictly disjunctive epistemic dichotomy of knowledge/belief is replaced by epistemic trichotomies, or with a more or less homogeneous continuum of epistemic degrees or grades of probability. At any rate, in addition to apodictic certainty (i.e. the certainty of logical propositions that are contradictory if negated), which was – at most – admitted in mathematics or metaphysics, various types of 'weak' knowledge were recognized. In this kind of knowledge, absolute certainty was not obtainable.

This kind of uncertain knowledge was categorized either pessimistically, as a mere *second best*, due to the limited ability of human insight under conditions *post lapsum* (as, for instance, with regard to a Christian anthropology).³ Or it could be characterized in a rather optimistic way as the highest level of knowledge a human being can reach concerning contingent empirical facts and events of an ever-changing world. Furthermore, probable knowledge was also perceived from a purely pragmatic point of view, as the highest degree of certainty for guiding the actions of rational beings which are forced to act under conditions of insecurity and uncertainty. The concept of 'probability' oscillates, then, between a substitute for real knowledge, knowledge in an emphatic sense (i.e. the 'real thing'), or rules of thumb for orienting everyday action.

Recent research on Early Modern probability

Although it is still controversial where the formulation of the modern calculus of probabilities and the modern mathematical concept of probability were first developed, it is largely accepted that the astounding progress in the

¹ P. Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge. From Gutenberg to Diderot* (Cambridge, 1997), 197–212.

² Richard Popkin's *History of Scepticism*, which first appeared in 1960 and was re-issued in revised form in 1979 and in 2003, is the founding document of contemporary research on Early Modern skepticism. Cf. R. H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism. From Savonarola to Bayle. Revised and expanded edition* (Oxford, 2003). The powerful theses of this volume have been discussed and challenged from various points of view. According to Popkin, Early Modern philosophy was haunted by a 'Pyrrhonian crisis': this crisis resulted from the conflicts of religion arising during the Reformation, the challenging of certainties of faith, the vulnerability of the certainty of historical testimonies and chronological constructions, and the dismantling of claims of certainty through the growing number of contradictory documents (*copiae librorum*) due to the contemporary transformation of media. It was also triggered by the rediscovery, in the middle of the sixteenth century, of the writings of Sextus Empiricus, the most important ancient source of Pyrrhonian skepticism and by their translation into Latin in the 1560s and their application to epistemological problems (R. Wittwer, 'Zur lateinischen Überlieferung von Sextus Empiricus PYRRWNEIOI YPOTYPWSEIS', *Rheinisches Museum* 145 (2002), 366–73). Popkin's theses have been subject to various forms of criticism (D. Perler, 'Was There a "Pyrrhonian Crisis" in Early Modern Philosophy?', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 86 (2004), 209–20), but a general tendency can be observed: the apparently homogeneous history of skepticism turns out to be a great deal more intricate than Popkin initially thought. It seems reasonable to speak of various divergent forms of skepticism rather than one big skepticism in Early Modern intellectual history. The necessary differentiation concerns various levels: It seems to be of utmost importance, to specify the domain upon which doubt is focused: Is it a global skepticism, challenging the possibility of any kind of knowledge, or rather a local form of skepticism, concerning specific realms of inquiry? And in this last more specific case, one has to ask which realms of knowledge are concerned: Does it affect the possibility of knowledge in Philosophy, Theology, Medicine, Law, History, or Philology? In other words: Does this kind of skepticism refer to the book of nature, the book of history, or the books of Holy Scripture? And is it an exclusively theoretical doubt or does it affect everyday life as well? Is it a 'merely' philosophical problem or does it have ramifications for 'real' life practices? Cf. M. F. Burnyeat, 'The Sceptic in his Place and Time', in *Scepticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. R. H. Popkin, Ch. B. Schmitt (Wiesbaden, 1987), 13–43. C. Larmore, 'Scepticism', in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, 2 vols., ed. D. Garber, M. Ayers (Cambridge, 1998), ii, 1145–92. D. Perler, 'Wie ist ein globaler Zweifel möglich? Zu den Voraussetzungen frühneuzeitlichen Außenwelt-Skeptizismus', *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 57 (2003), 481–512.

³ P. Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Oxford, 2007).

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