

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02465-6 - Doubt and Skepticism in Antiquity and the Renaissance

Michelle Zerba

Excerpt

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Introduction

Doubt comes cheap in our time. We toss it about in attitudes and behaviors that range from suspicion about whether our government, religious leaders, and media may be trusted to the vagueness with which we question the existence of a higher power in the universe and the truth of scientific discovery. The latter has produced consumers who pick their way through the marketplace of opinion about what ails them with a desire for gratification that is immune to deep exploration or with confused dismay about the sheer multiplicity of advertised remedies. In this environment, the ubiquity of doubt paradoxically begins to look like its opposite, certainty, because it is taken for granted and accepted uncritically. Nihilism, depression, and cynicism are symptoms of this condition, no less real for often being amorphous. The propensity toward unreflective doubt and its coupling with generalized anxiety may be related for an unfocused or impatient failure to examine what we question is capable of generating a floating dread that something bad is about to happen.

This was the view of Søren Kierkegaard in a variety of provocative works extending back to the mid-nineteenth century. They were nearly all pseudonymous creations in which invented authors became the object of invented editors and compilers who were set in contradiction to one another, and they typically made use of prefaces, forewords, appendices, and postscripts to complicate matters of perspective and intellectual property. The purpose of such disorienting endeavors was to undercut not only the easy doubt of non-scrutiny, which produced what Kierkegaard thought were pseudo-individuals, but also the grandiose doubt of Georg Wilhelm Hegel's dialectical master system, which aspired to make absolute knowledge possible through a science or logic. In treatises and essays ranging from *Fear and Trembling (Frygt og Bæven)*, by Johannes de

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Silentio, to *The Concept of Anxiety* (*Begrebet Angst*), by Vigilius Haufniensis, the Danish philosopher produced a rich body of thought that probed what it means to face doubt without becoming facile, terminally despairing, or delusionally authoritarian. While he was famous for his hard version of Christianity, Kierkegaard's views were also deeply indebted to the Greeks and to Socrates, in particular. It is an inheritance that scholars of his work have long acknowledged. But neither Kierkegaard nor his critics have attempted to lay out more fully what he calls in the Preface to *Fear and Trembling* "the dexterity of doubt" (*den tvivlende Færdighed*), literally, "the doubting skill," a quality he ascribes to the ancient Hellenes by virtue of their being a society of veteran combatants who bequeathed to us a spirit marked by militant testing and questioning on every human front.¹ We take for granted a legacy that required entire lives and centuries to amass. Like much that comes to us long after someone else's labor, we have not paid the cost of its original purchase. It was the Greeks who paid. They were the ones who taught us how to doubt, how to look behind appearances, how to philosophize about wonder, and how to suffer but also laugh in the face of uncertainty. By placing these remarks on the Greeks in a Preface that introduces his treatment of the Abraham and Isaac story, Kierkegaard engages Hellenic, Christian, and Judaic views in ways that resonate with his other strategies of confronting doubt, including irony, tragic contestation, and comic bombast.

Though it left Kierkegaard behind, this book began as an exploration of his approach to the Greek inheritance and of Roman and Renaissance works that reveal a comparable investment in the power of doubt to shape human experience in consequential ways. As such, it participated during its formation in what has become a widespread resurgence of interest in Greece and Rome as cultures that respond compellingly to the challenges of living in a twenty-first-century world fraught with multicultural conflicts of the sort they were deemed inept at negotiating only half a generation ago, when it was common to treat the ancients as philosophical one-noters with compulsive self-referencing proclivities. Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum, and Alexander Nehamas have all been pivotal in this development, which Michel Foucault heralded in the years before his death by looking to the Athenian understanding of "free" or "frank speech" (*parrhēsia*) to

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 23. I am grateful to my colleague Mary Sirdridge for help with the Danish.

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illuminate his study of power and to Hellenistic philosophy for insight into how therapies of self-care (*epimeleia heautou*) might be put to use today.² In the wake of such reorientations, a new historicism has arisen among classicists both different from the movement that has reshaped criticism in what is now generally referred to as the early modern period, but also different from the positivist approaches of the old philology. These reorientations have produced two bodies of work that bear importantly on the subject of doubt and that compel a reassessment of the early modern as a category with strong leanings toward postmodernity – leanings that have tended to minimize continuities between the ancient world and our own and to privilege Machiavelli, Shakespeare, and Montaigne as our contemporaries.

First, the interest in *parrhēsia* has stimulated a variety of scholarly arguments about the close bond between the openness of Athenian democracy and the rise of political rhetoric and drama.³ Here the emphasis has been on dissent as fundamental to Athenian institutions, including the theater and the popular assembly, and to the formation of interpretive communities whose horizons were shaped by the continuous public voicing of opposed arguments.⁴ Historically, this involved the questioning of authority, especially in the form of received beliefs whose truth

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1990), and *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and the essays in *Philosophy in the Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. James Tully and Daniel Winestock (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité: le souci de soi*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) and *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2001); and Pierre Hadot, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002).

³ The scholarly literature on *parrhēsia* reveals the controversy that surrounds the term. See *Why Athens? A Reappraisal of Tragic Politics*, ed. D. M. Carter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Arlene Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity*, ed. R. M. Rosen and I. Sluiter (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

⁴ See D. M. Carter, “Plato, Drama, and Rhetoric,” 45–67, and Peter Burian, “Athenian Tragedy as Democratic Discourse,” 95–117, in *Why Athens?*; and Elton Barker, *Entering the Agon: Dissent and Authority in Homer, Historiography and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2–20. For comedy, see Niall Slater, *Spectator Politics: Metatheatre and Performance in Aristophanes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); and *The City as Comedy: Society and Representation in Athenian Drama*, ed. Gregory Dobrov (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

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was grounded in their antiquity. But dissent also contributed to a debate about the limits of democracy itself, a key example of which took the form of the exclusion from the political realm of women and their common appearance on the Greek stage, sometimes lamenting or lambasting their own condition. This is a subject to which we will return. While dissent from norms was always susceptible to being absorbed by the institutions in which it was performed, the remarkable achievements of fifth-century Athens bear witness to how often contradictions were left open as provocations.⁵

Dissent, however, is not doubt. In fact, it appears to be on the other side of the spectrum, for it suggests holding a position that is contrary. Doubt, on the other hand, implies division within an individual or a group conceived as a collective unit with a common mind. It may take shape in a trajectory leading to dissent or in the wake of countenancing dissent. It may be theoretical or practical, a matter of testing abstract truth or of negotiating incompatible moral claims. It may also be the result of regret, loss, or carnival topsy-turvydom. But rather than staking out ground and moving cleanly from dilemma to decision, it registers the persistence of questioning and the admission of something unresolved or unresolvable. This brings us to the closest Greek word for doubt: *aporia*, literally, “waylessness” or “impassibility,” and *aporia* is, famously, the terrain of Socrates.

Socrates, it may be said, has hogged doubt, so much and so peculiarly so that when we go looking for it in Greek culture, it is frequently in an attempt to situate it with respect to him. In this sense, doubt among the ancient Greeks has received considerable attention, but often at the cost of scant attention to what surrounds it. Socrates has done for Greek doubt what Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has done for Renaissance doubt: owned it. Warranted as such dominance may be, it has tended to relegate much around it to the shadows – the shadows of a doubt that deserves consideration on its own terms. Recent scholarship on dissent has not quite brought us there, nor have studies of its close cousin, pluralism, which has also been shown to have deep roots in the Hellenic world.⁶ Both areas of inquiry, vital as they have been in bringing new perspectives to bear on antiquity, take us to the edge of doubt, but not over it. Once we cross, we learn that doubt has its own landscapes and affective palettes, its own recesses and promontories, many of them distinctly non-Socratic

⁵ See especially Peter Wilson, “The Glue of Democracy: Tragedy, Structure, and Finance,” in *Why Athens?* 18–43.

⁶ See Lauren Apfel, *The Advent of Pluralism: Diversity and Conflict in the Age of Sophocles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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and not all of them provoked by dissent or the pressures of pluralism. Moreover, turning to fifth-century Athens in discussion of such matters, while more rewarding than staying within the closure, however loose, of the early modern, downplays the importance of Homeric epic, which is sometimes treated as an expression of incipient forms of dissent later realized more fully in the context of democracy.

The argument of this book takes the view that doubt, and not just dissent, inhabits Western thought from very early on in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and gives rise to ways of thinking that are both part of the Western canon and critical of canonicity. Moreover, Homer's inaugural gestures enact doubt in ways that were consequential for later Greek, Roman, and Renaissance minds. This inheritance enriches what might be said about the Western tradition through the sixteenth century from postmodern points of view where *aporia* has become shorthand for the deconstructive turn. Moreover, it cautions against an a priori assumption that doubt is necessarily aporetic, just as it invites us to look beyond Socrates and Hamlet into areas such as political theory where doubt has rarely been examined.

If the body of scholarly work related to *parrhēsia*, dissent, and pluralism has provided us with an expanded context for the treatment of doubt, so has a second field of research connected with the revival of interest in Cicero and republicanism. It is the Skeptical side of the humanist tradition that is of importance to my study because it illustrates how a certain kind of doubt came to permeate the highly rhetorical cultures of antiquity and the Renaissance. The phenomenon may be summed up by reference to the idea of a rhetorical self, a construct that emerges from theory and praxis in communities where human agency is conceived as a social composite of subject positions mobilized by contingency and situational ethics. In the various manifestations we encounter of rhetorical selfhood in the works we will be examining, humans are often imagined as possessing tendencies that endure over time, but that are being constantly adjusted in keeping with a world of flux and the conditions of persuasion, especially in politics. Within this context, life appears as a dialectical interplay between the probabilistic and the apodeictic, and in it we are guided by a search, not for truth, but by verisimilitude conceived according to standards of decorum.⁷ Academic Skepticism was

⁷ See Joel Altman, *The Improbability of Othello: Rhetorical Anthropology and Shakespearean Selfhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), for an impressive and extended treatment of these ideas.

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the orientation that guided action in such a world, and though this stripe of Skepticism was not invented by Cicero, it came to bear the marks of a distinctly Ciceronian mind-set in the late Roman Republic, one that made a significant impression upon the sixteenth century. These intersections have begun to claim the study they deserve not only in recent assessments of Machiavelli, but also in treatments of Shakespeare and Montaigne as political thinkers.⁸ I build upon these efforts in a fundamentally new interpretation of Roman and Renaissance views of republicanism and civic virtue.

We can lay a more substantial groundwork for this investigation by looking briefly at experiences of doubt in classical and Renaissance works that pave a way to the more specific claims of this book. Machiavelli's prince invites some preliminary observations. From an existential perspective, the prince is compelled to act in often urgent circumstances where accident rules and predictive power is limited. Grappling with fear, anger, and the spine-straightening awareness that no amount of experience can tame surprise, he fashions himself a political pugilist who, in the teeth of fortune and the absence of certitude, contrives new modes and orders. Galileo captures a related dimension of doubt when he remarks that doubt is the father of invention.⁹ He means that it drives the scientist in a search for discovery whose outcome is a kind of birth. Anticipation, a keenness for winning, and apprehension are common emotions that accompany this quest, and they color a cognitive state exemplified by Galileo himself when he pondered what he knew of the principles of refraction and produced a series of telescopes with increasingly greater powers of magnification that in a short time were in high demand. A fanciful version of such uncertainty-induced wonder occurs when Alice, having grown tired of sitting on a bank while her sister reads a book with no pictures or conversations, sees a rabbit pull a watch out of his waistcoat pocket and disappears down a hole after him. This exit is also an entrance to a world whose enchantment both satisfies and intensifies a need for imaginative stimulation.

⁸ See, for example, *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*, ed. David Armitage et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Joy Connolly, *The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Alan Levine, *Sensual Philosophy: Toleration, Skepticism, and Montaigne's Politics of the Self* (New York: Lexington Books, 2001).

⁹ Stillman Drake, *Galileo at Work: His Scientific Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 405.

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While a successful outcome is possible in these scenarios, things can also go wrong. Those who seize upon fortune may be destroyed by it, just as those who let doubt guide them in scientific pursuits may be led to unpleasant consequences or unorthodox discoveries that are treated punitively by the powers that be. Montaigne tells us, in an anecdote that closely resembles some found in Machiavelli, that François de Guise, having diffused one conspiracy against him by using mercy to good political end, was assassinated in another by adopting the same strategy, thereby illustrating that identical designs have differing outcomes.¹⁰ Galileo died serving a term of life imprisonment for having advanced a Copernican view of the universe, which his telescopes enabled him to explain and refine. As for Alice, she narrowly escapes the Queen of Heart's preferred treatment of those who annoy her – beheading, which may also be read as an expression of a punitive superego upon a girl's desire for forbidden pleasures.

One need not be a Machiavellian prince or a Galileo to appreciate that doubt in the strong sense can impart a needed tension to life by bringing us to attention, providing us with a sense of novelty, and occasioning acts of boldness. Because it involves the questioning of what was once taken as known or trusted, it can also protract decision making or interfere with comprehension, thereby weakening confidence in the ability to invent altogether. Shakespeare gives expression to this thought in *Measure for Measure* when one of the principals, Isabella, vacillates about whether she is in a position to save the life of her imprisoned brother, Claudio, and is told by the fantastic Lucio, “Our doubts are traitors, / And makes us lose the good we oft might win, / By fearing to attempt” (1.4.77–9). Most of us comprehend through experience that doubts may be traitors. In some cases, however, they can go well beyond ordinary fear and induce conditions of phobia or obsession. When doubt takes a turn in an extreme direction of this sort, it can lead to mental distortions that seem a far cry from the unknowns that drive the philosophical activity of scrutinizing belief or a critically minded willingness to take risks. And yet it is not difficult to imagine a scientist or philosopher suffering in the grip of corrosive doubt while engaged in acts of ostensibly rational creativity. Isaac Newton was torn by a desire for recognition and fame, on the one hand, and an inability to tolerate criticism of his work, on the other. In the aftermath of heated disputes he had in the Royal Society regarding his optical research and especially his theory of light and color, he had

¹⁰ The example is taken from Montaigne's *Essays*, 1.24.

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a nervous breakdown. His colleague William Whiston once said of him, “Newton was of the most fearful, cautious and suspicious temper that I ever knew.”¹¹ In his autobiography, the philosopher John Stuart Mill records how he moved at the age of twenty from enthusiastically fashioning himself a “reformer of the world,” an eagerness inspired by his reading of Jeremy Bentham, to a doubt so deep that it brought him to the edge of suicide. Quoting Coleridge’s *Dejection: An Ode*, he describes his emotional condition as “A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear, / A drowsy, stifled, unimpassioned grief, / Which finds no natural outlet or relief / In word, or sigh, or tear.”¹² Genius and self-doubt not infrequently go hand in hand. Bertrand Russell captured this wryly when he observed, “One of the signs of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one’s work is terribly important.”¹³

The comment turns tragically inclined doubt in the direction of comedy by suggesting that its debilitating effects emanate from an exaggerated sense of one’s singularity and significance. The “self” in self-doubt is the problem, for it estranges us from the ordinariness of our affairs and the conglomerate condition of our existence, both of which can harbor healing power by immersing us in something larger and less harsh than our own sometimes sadistic inner voices. In comedy, the self is a distorting inflator, predisposing us to exaggerate our worth in ways that require downsizing. There may be comic geniuses, but there are no geniuses in comedy; the ones who appear are parodied or so overdrawn as to be ridiculous. Even Aristophanes’ big dreamers, who are nobodies on fantastic adventures, do not escape this effect, simultaneously raised and leveled as they are by their outrageousness. They amuse, but they do not command reverence – and this is a good thing, since reverence can induce that most mercilessly flogged of comic weaknesses, vanity. Self-doubt comically undone takes many forms, but they are almost always other-directed, turning the morbid tendencies of the ego’s absorption with itself into a target for mockery. In comedy, uncertainty is typically registered not within as a form of psychic disruption, but in interactions with a social or political environment whose categories and life-destroying laws become the object of humorous interrogation. This often happens by transmuting their authority into meaningless or

¹¹ James Force, *William Whiston: Honest Newtonian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 194.

¹² John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, in *The Collected Works*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Liberty Fund, 2006), Chapter 5.

¹³ Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930; repr. New York: Norton, 1996), 61.

self-contradictory babble via such comic techniques as word mongering, mock stylization, and logical discontinuity. Aristophanes' plays are an especially good example of the ways in which polyphonic dissent, publicly expressed through the conventions of Old Comedy, stimulates the internalizing of opposed viewpoints, thus promoting a vigorous form of communal questioning and doubt about authority.

This book takes shape around several claims that emerge from these considerations. The first is that we can understand doubt most productively by examining representations of it in literary genres and modes and in philosophical vehicles such as the dialogue, the essay, and the technique of argument on both sides of the question (*disputatio in utramque partem*), which were invented to accommodate it. The structures associated with these forms operate as cognitive and affective filters that elucidate how doubt is engendered and processed, psychologically, socially, and epistemologically. What a poet or artist renders in narrative or in a charged image, a philosopher may render in the language of conceptual analysis. Thus, doubt may be temporized in terms of a point of origin, a succession of scenes, and an outcome; in a figure of thought with the pictorial power of "bringing before the eyes" (*enargia*); or in an abstract theory removed from the specificity of people and things. This is not to say that there is equivalence between such representations – that poetry and art are visualized philosophy or philosophy essentialized poetry and art. We expect from poetry, especially, a residue that is unsusceptible to paraphrase or abstraction, and this turns out to be an important element of its effectiveness in representations of doubt. Similarly, we expect from philosophy a power of rational articulation that poetry may diminish or complicate, but that is nonetheless vital to the paths of inquiry by which we become familiar with our world and learn to question it through rigorous argument.

Literature and philosophy, then, provide us with construals of reality or rhetorically shaped subject positions that illuminate the conditions and consequences of doubt. Such construals are both individual and relational. They function as points of view, typically highlighted as such, from which thought, decision, and action emanate, and they have about them the capacity for repetition, thus transmissibility, but also extemporaneous adaptation to an environment. When poets and philosophers invite us to regard such constructions from a vantage point in which their limitations, inadequacies, or sheer inconsistent variety become visible, they are exercising a version of what Friedrich Nietzsche calls, in the first chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil*, perspectivism. If the agents who

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mobilize them nonetheless lay claim to absolute truth, their systems may be sifted and abstracted, as was Hegel's by Kierkegaard, to demonstrate that when it is all over, they are nothing more than involuntary memoirs.¹⁴ Inflexibility in the face of such challenges may point to arrogance, mental dullness, a humoral imbalance, or what we call in our contemporary psychological jargon a dysfunctional engagement with life. Kenneth Burke borrows from John Dewey in describing certain manifestations of this dysfunction as "occupational psychosis," and he links the term to a trained incapacity to address anything beyond the dominant cognitive state bred by induction into the proprieties of a rule-governed group. Trained incapacity presents us with the paradox of abilities that function as inadequacies. Here, psychosis is not employed in the psychiatric sense; it rather points to a determining character of mind that is akin to being blindered.¹⁵ Construals, occupational psychoses, rhetorically shaped personas, and uses of perspectivism will be central considerations in the pages ahead. But they will be directed toward an appreciation of the cognitive and affective resources of genre in representations of doubt. This approach has affinities with Ludwig Wittgenstein's view that doubt always assumes a ground of belief and has consequences for thought and practice, which is one reason why he thinks the generalized *dubito* of a Cartesian sort is impossible.¹⁶

The second major claim of the book is one upon which we have already touched, namely, that the bifurcation of certainty in doubt is represented in vivid ways in the poems that lie at the beginning of the Western tradition, Homer's epics. While the *Iliad* presents us with a protagonist whose presence in the heroic world occasions a division of values that appears both incipient in the primary configuration and tragic in its consequences, the *Odyssey* launches its protagonist from the beginning into a realm of existential drifting where the capacity to meet multiplicity with corresponding splits of identity is enabling and comic in its consequences. *Aporia* is a chief feature of the action dramatized in the

¹⁴ For "construals," see John Lee, *Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of the Self* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 171–208, who builds upon the personal construct theory of George Kelly, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, 2 vols. (1955; repr. London: Routledge, 1991). More recently, Altman, *Othello*, has advanced arguments about early modern notions of selfhood derived from Renaissance appropriations of ancient rhetorical theory, some compatible with personal construct theory.

¹⁵ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 37–49.

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Uncertainty: Parallel Text*, trans. D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), paragraphs 115, 119–20, 255, 310–17, 322–3, 450–52.