(Un)orthodox Scepticism

The Reception of Sextus Empiricus’ Pyrrhonism in the *Examen vanitatis* (1520) of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola

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Introduction

“Enemy of my enemy…”

-“Doesn’t make it a friend.”

– Royce (Adrien Brody) and Isabelle (Alice Braga) in Nimród Antal’s Predators (2010)

The Renaissance is usually seen as the precursor to a time of enlightenment. The religious fervour of the Middle Ages was supposedly tempered, and the first steps were made towards a more worldly perspective. The Renaissance did indeed see great changes in the intellectual climate of Western Europe – most importantly perhaps the renewed interest in the study of classical Greek language and literature. However, the scholastic tradition of Mediaeval times was not immediately expelled from humanist discourse. Instead, it coexisted with the reinvigorated literary and philosophical traditions from antiquity. In a similar manner, the Italian humanists of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century did not step away from the otherworldly framework of Christianity. Those who studied classical philosophy had to validate their chosen subject within the framework of Christian truths. And whereas most fifteenth-century humanists attempted to reconcile their philosophical activities with their Christian faith, there were those who renounced the union of Christianity and pagan material. One of the authors who belongs to this latter group is Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469-1533).

In the latter half of his life, Pico worked on his magnum opus, the Examen vanitatis doctrinae Gentium, et veritatis Christianae disciplinae (“Examination of the vanity of the doctrines of the pagans, and of the truth of the Christian discipline”), published in 1520. In this work, the humanist attacks the whole of pagan philosophy and subsequently posits Christianity as the sole doctrine that leads to true knowledge. Pagan thinkers, he posits, argue and bicker among each other, whereas the word of God provides singular and satisfying answers. However, despite his renunciation of pagan philosophical thought, Pico makes heavy use of the arguments of one particular pagan philosopher: Sextus Empiricus. Sextus was a proponent of the Hellenistic school of philosophy called scepticism, specifically the strand known as Pyrrhonism. He has left a large corpus of texts which all deal with scepticism. His Outlines of Pyrrhonism (Πυρρώνειοι Υποτύπωσεις) sketch the particular strand of sceptical philosophy
that Sextus subscribes to. The various works that are together known under the title of Against the Mathematicians (Πρὸς Μαθηματικούς) form an enormous arsenal of arguments against dogmatic philosophy – that is, philosophy which is based on firm belief and assent to its own basic claims. In contrast to dogmatic philosophy, Sextus proposes indifference towards philosophy: the sceptic does not assent to any dogma at all but rather acts and believes according to what appears right at any given moment.

The bulk of scholarly work on Pico’s massive treatise against philosophy focuses mainly on the humanist’s refutation of Aristotelian philosophy. For Pico spends the entire second half of his 600-page treatise on refuting the arguments of the Peripatetic philosopher and his many followers. In contrast, I follow in the footsteps of more recent research, which instead looks at the first half of Pico’s work, in which all of philosophy is shown to be inconclusive. It is in these first three books that the scepticism of Sextus comes to the fore. But how do the arguments of a pagan philosopher fit into an anti-philosophical treatise? What role does Sextus’ scepticism play in Pico’s work, and what meaning do this philosophical school and its arguments have for Pico? What is scepticism in the anti-philosophical treatise of Pico? These are the questions I shall attempt to answer in this thesis. Unlike my scholarly predecessors, I do not analyze Pico’s interaction with Sextus as a process that goes in one direction. In other words, I am not simply interested in stating which elements of Sextus’ sceptical philosophy survive in Pico’s work, and whether Pico himself should subsequently be called a sceptic or be fitted into the supposed sceptical tradition. Instead I analyze Pico’s work as a reception piece. By that I mean that Pico’s work exists in an entirely different context from Sextus’ original writings. The scepticism of Sextus acquires a new meaning in Pico’s context. I shall illustrate what new status scepticism has in the context of Pico’s work, and how Pico subsequently uses the arguments of Sextus in his own writings.

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to an overview of the scholarly research that has already been performed on Pico. Here I discuss the various viewpoints that researchers have held on Pico’s interaction with scepticism. The second chapter explains my own approach in more detail. I shall explicate why I approach Pico’s work as a reception piece, and how the perspective of reception studies brings new insight into the text. Before I
can discuss the text itself, an overview of the intellectual developments leading to the publication of Pico’s *magnum opus* must be provided. Pico’s arguments are informed by the anti-intellectual discourse of his time, in which he himself participated, and thus a full understanding of his writings can only be attained if the intellectual context of his work is known. The third chapter will elucidate this intellectual context. This chapter deals with the relationship between the ruling Christian tradition and the study of pagan philosophy in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Special attention will be given to the rediscovery of the writings of Sextus and their reception before Pico. The fourth chapter delves into the works of Sextus and Pico themselves. First, I shall give a comprehensive overview of scepticism as defined by Sextus and of the structure of Pico’s work. Then I shall analyze how Pico makes use of the texts of Sextus and how he incorporates sceptical ideas into his own work. The fifth chapter illustrates which elements of the sceptical philosophy are either reduced or discarded entirely by Pico, and for what reasons. Conversely, the sixth chapter will analyze which elements of sceptical philosophy Pico takes an interest in and how Pico shows such interest. In the final chapter I shall attempt to answer the questions I posited earlier. Sextus refutes the philosophers. Pico refutes the philosophers. They share a common enemy, but does that make them friends?\(^1\)

\(^1\) The works of Sextus Empiricus are cited from the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, specifically the Teubner-editions by Mutschmann. When cited, Roman numerals following the abbreviations given by the LSJ: P. (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*) and M. (*Against the Mathematicians*), designate the book, and Arabic numerals designate the paragraph number as given by Mutschmann (e.g. P. I.18). The *Examen vanitatis* is cited mainly from the 1573 edition printed in Basel, which was reprinted in 2005 (see the bibliography). I have used an online copy of the original 1520 version for comparison, in order to spot any printing errors in either version of the text. When cited, Roman numerals following the abbreviation EV designate the book, followed by an Arabic numeral designating the chapter, and the relevant page numbers of the 1573 edition (e.g. EV II.20, 852-53). Unless stated otherwise, all translations are mine.

I want to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Maarten De Pourcq and Guy Claessens. Both men have done a tremendous job in keeping me to the mark. Their astute criticism, remarks, and tips have greatly improved my approach and the theoretical framework of my thesis, as well as my interpretations of the texts of Sextus and Pico. I am also thankful to prof. De Pourcq for his willingness to supervise my thesis and return to the university to discuss my findings despite his having his hands full during his sabbatical.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to my father, Henri, whose previous research into the history of scepticism sparked my own interest in the ancient philosophy and eventually lead me to the figure of Pico. Furthermore, he was willing to sacrifice quite a number of hours to comb through various versions of my thesis in order to detect errors in both my writing and my translations.
1 – Status Quaestionis

The scholars Charles Schmitt and Richard Popkin have made tremendous progress in charting the fortunes and misfortunes of sceptical thought from the recuperation of both the Academic and Pyrrhonist strands of classical scepticism (mainly through Cicero and Sextus Empiricus) onwards. Nevertheless, a complete history of sceptical thought in the Renaissance, which fits the conclusions drawn by Popkin and Schmitt into a cohesive whole has yet to be written. Significant work has been done regarding the writings of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola in the years since Popkin and Schmitt initiated research into Renaissance scepticism. Schmitt’s own treatise on Gianfrancesco Pico’s critique of Aristotle in the *Examen vanitatis* must be mentioned here. Apart from this “pioneering monograph” the most important scholarly work on Pico’s *Examen vanitatis* is undoubtedly the impressive catalogue of the quotations from Sextus, written by Gian Mario Cao. Cao has also published extensively on both Pico and Sextus. Other scholars have mostly devoted no more than one or two chapters of larger studies to Pico’s interactions with sceptical thought. The first chapter of my thesis contains a survey of the most important studies of Pico’s interaction with Sextus’ *Outlines* and *Against the Mathematicians*.

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2 The differences between Pyrrhonian and Academic scepticism will be explained in a later chapter (see section 3.1).
3 I refer to the three editions of Popkin’s seminal *History of Scepticism* and to Schmitt’s 1972 *Cicero Scepticus* (see the bibliography). Whereas Schmitt favours the Academic strand of scepticism, Popkin mainly directs his attention to the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus.
4 Gianni Paganini and Maia Neto state that “even if specific pieces of research have given and are still producing significant results, an overall synthesis comprising the entire Renaissance period has not been achieved yet” (Paganini and Neto 2009, 5).
5 I refer to Schmitt 1967 (see the bibliography).
6 Cao, in Paganini and Neto 2009, 128.
7 I refer to Cao 2007 (see the bibliography), which is discussed in detail below. Examples of other works by this Italian scholar on Gianfrancesco Pico include the article referred to in the previous note, which is titled “*Inter Alias Philosophorum Gentium Sectas, Et Humani, Et Mites: Gianfrancesco Pico and the Sceptics*”, in Paganini and Neto 2009, 125-48 (see the bibliography), and also *Pico della Mirandola goes to Germany, with an Edition of Gianfrancesco Pico’s De Reformandis Moribus Oratio*, Il Mulino, Bologna (2004). Regrettably, I was unable to access the latter.
8 Examples include Popkin’s monumental studies and Luciani Floridi’s efforts to elucidate the diffusion of the writings of Sextus in the Renaissance.
1.1 – Richard Popkin: the first founding father of scholarship on Renaissance scepticism (1964)

In the 1960s, Richard Popkin and Charles Schmitt faced a great challenge when they set out to chart the history of scepticism in the Renaissance. Before then, scholars had paid little attention to the history of sceptical thought, concentrating instead on the rediscovery of other philosophical currents of antiquity. Thus, as the first work of its kind, Popkin’s *History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* is a milestone in the history of scholarship on scepticism. It was reprinted twice and both times greatly expanded.\(^9\) Showing a clear predilection for Pyrrhonian rather than Academic scepticism, Popkin charted the fortunes of sceptical thought from the recovery of Sextus Empiricus during the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century to Descartes. In the 1979 edition, Popkin extended his survey to include Spinoza, while the final edition of 2003 expanded the chapters on the recovery of Sextus in the fifteenth century and the use of scepticism by the Florentine friar Savonarola and his devoted follower, Pico. Perhaps in response to previous scholars who equated scepticism with irreligion,\(^10\) Popkin’s aim was to prove that scepticism and religious faith were not incompatible. Instead, the influential scholar suggested that Renaissance scepticism could be equated with fideism.

For Popkin, “fideism” denotes the idea that someone questions the act of “attaining knowledge by rational means, without our possessing some basic truths known by faith (i.e. truths based on no rational evidence whatsoever).”\(^11\) In other words, according to Popkin, Renaissance fideists considered reason alone to be insufficient for attaining true knowledge. The fideist had two options. He could base any kind of reasoning on assumptions based on faith in order to attain conclusive knowledge of something. Alternatively, he could denounce rational thinking altogether in favour of knowledge based entirely on faith.\(^12\) Popkin places Pico in the latter category, since Pico uses the arguments of Sextus to argue against the rational methods of the ancient philosophers.

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\(^9\) In his review of the 2003 edition, John Christian Laursen reflects on the fact that it was Popkin’s work which made it impossible for scholars of Renaissance philosophy to ignore scepticism in their inquiries: “more and more people expect to hear as well about what the skeptics said on any issue” (Laursen 2004, 107).


\(^11\) Popkin 2003, xxi.

\(^12\) *Op. cit.*, xxi-xxiii.
This reliance on pure faith as an infallible source of truth initially made Pico a figure of little interest to Popkin, despite the fact that the humanist was (and still is) the first Renaissance thinker to make extensive use of classical scepticism in his writings. Initially, Popkin heavily emphasized the role of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the rebirth of sceptical thought. The proponents of the Reformation called into question the truths that had been posited by Papal authority, and in these discussions, sceptical ideas prospered. Pico’s *Examen vanitatis* was published on the eve of the Reformation, but the author had been working on the book for at least a decade (and possibly more than that) and thus he was not in the first place concerned with the erosion of papal authority. By the time of the final edition of Popkin’s work, new research by, among others, Charles Schmitt, Luciani Floridi, and Gian Mario Cao forced Popkin to devote more attention to Pico and Savonarola. Nevertheless, these scholars did not change Popkin’s stance, and Pico’s “Christian pyrrhonism”, as Popkin calls it, remained “a most curious use of scepticism.”

Popkin’s treatment of Pico, short as it was, lacked nuance. First and foremost, the relatively marginal role Popkin ascribes to Pico has been contested by Charles Schmitt. Furthermore, Popkin’s equation of scepticism with fideism and his emphasis on the importance of the Reformation in the resurgence of sceptical thought have been criticized. Emmanuel Naya, for example, argues that Popkin presented an image of Renaissance scepticism that unnecessarily generalized a great variety of sceptical thinkers, not all of whom were fideists or influenced by the ecclesiastical crisis of the sixteenth-century. The latter criticism especially applies to the case of Pico, as he developed his “Christian Pyrrhonism” before the heated debates surrounding the Reformation.

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13 Popkin starts his history, in all three editions, by explicating the events of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation and their importance in the rise of sceptical thought; see Popkin 2003, 3-16.
15 Cao considers the context of the *Examen vanitatis* to be “pre-Lutheran” (Cao, in Paganini and Neto 2009, 128).
16 Popkin 2003, 21).
1.2 – Charles Schmitt: the second founding father of scholarship on
Renaissance scepticism (1967)

A more detailed survey of Gianfrancesco Pico’s *Examen vanitatis* was needed, and that was exactly what Charles Schmitt provided.\(^{20}\) Whereas in Popkin’s *History* Pico was an oddity outside of the Reformation that enabled the rise of sceptical fideism, Charles Schmitt presented the humanist as an ambiguous thinker, reactionary in his anti-intellectualism yet also revolutionary in the criticism that he levelled against Aristotelian doctrines.\(^ {21}\) Since Pico’s critique of Aristotle holds Schmitt’s main interest, the use of Sextus in the *Examen vanitatis* is only dealt with in a succinct introductory chapter covering Pico’s general attitude towards philosophy.\(^ {22}\) In this overview, Schmitt seems decidedly less eager to call Pico’s philosophy “Pyrrhonism” – as Popkin had done – or even “scepticism”. In Schmitt’s opinion, Pico saw in scepticism “merely an instrument to be used in the demonstration that the unique source of truth is found in Christianity and beyond this function it is of no interest to him.”\(^ {23}\)

Yet in the following chapters Schmitt often seems unable to call Pico’s critique of Aristotelianism anything other than “Pyrrhonism” or “scepticism”, although he admits that some of the arguments Pico raises do not belong to the realm of “Pyrrhonic uncertainty”.\(^ {24}\) Nevertheless, with the exception of the sixth and final book of the *Examen vanitatis*, the second half of the work does contain arguments against Aristotelianism which Pico, according to Schmitt, lifted from Sextus. Pico’s philological critique of the Aristotelian corpus, for example, represents “an interesting application of Pico’s theoretical scepticism to a more practical matter.”\(^ {25}\) However, Schmitt’s suggestion that Pico’s critique of Aristotle in the last three books of the *Examen vanitatis* has some sceptical basis has been questioned by later scholars. Cao feels that “Pico’s refutation of the Aristotelian encyclopaedia does not fall within the range of a Pyrrhonian campaign”\(^ {26}\) due in large part to the fact that the “chain of quotations and paraphrases from Sextus’

\(^{20}\) The importance of Schmitt’s monograph has already been emphasized in the above.

\(^{21}\) Aristotle had already faced competition from other rediscovered schools of philosophy and was to lose his sovereignty over philosophy in the rest of Europe from the sixteenth century onwards.

\(^{22}\) Schmitt 1967, 32-54.


\(^{26}\) Cao, in Paganini and Neto 2009, 140.
PH and M are eventually interrupted at the beginning of book IV, where [Pico’s] anti-Aristotelian tirades start.”

Henri Oosthout also affirms that the critique of Aristotle is grounded less firmly in Sextus’ Pyrrhonism than Schmitt at times suggests: “in zijn kritiek op Aristoteles verlaat Pico de door Sextus Empiricus gebaande paden.”

Schmitt further expanded upon Popkin’s survey of the *Examen vanitatis* by suggesting two points of influence from which Pico drew his anti-intellectual attitude and his knowledge of Sextus: his uncle Giovanni Pico and the friar Girolamo Savonarola. Some scholars, including Cao, have questioned Schmitt’s emphasis on the elder Pico and Savonarola as the only people who inspired Gianfrancesco’s sceptical campaign against classical philosophy. Both Giovanni Pico and Savonarola will be discussed in the third chapter, where I shall evaluate what role both men actually played in the genesis of Pico’s anti-intellectualism and his predilection for the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus in the first half of the *Examen vanitatis*.

Schmitt’s monograph on Pico was a monumental step forward in academic interest in the sceptics of the Renaissance, not in the least because it “effectively placed the watershed of Renaissance scepticism before and not after the intellectual crisis represented by the reformation.” The focus of the study was ultimately on the critique of Aristotelianism that Pico crafted and the way it heralded Aristotle’s fall from grace in the sixteenth century and beyond. Unlike Popkin, who considered Pico a Christian Pyrrhonist, Schmitt notes that to Pico scepticism is only a tool for the devout writer to achieve his primary goal: the refutation of all rational thought and the validation of Christian doctrine. Nevertheless, the brevity of his overview of the first three books of the *Examen vanitatis* leaves the reader with an appetite for more details that elucidate how

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28 Oosthout 2010, 192.
30 Cao 2007, 128-29.
31 I shall say more on this matter in the third chapter.
32 A second, and arguably more influential, work of Schmitt’s is his 1972 *Cicero Scepticus*, already mentioned in passing above (see the bibliography), which shed some much needed light on the rediscovery of Academic scepticism, related in Cicero’s *Academica*, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This work brought Academic scepticism back into the spotlight of scholarly research, next to the interest in Pyrrhonic scepticism that Popkin had resuscitated.
33 Paganini and Neto 2009, 4.
Pico can have little interest in scepticism an sich and yet entertain a “theoretical scepticism”.34

1.3 – Studies on Gianfrancesco Pico after Popkin and Schmitt (1990s and 2000s)

Charles Schmitt painted an image of Pico that designated (parts of) the anti-intellectual program of the author as sceptical – with the caveat that Pico’s fondness of scepticism should most certainly not be overstated. Eugenio Garin is far more positive in his judgement of Pico’s Examens vanitatis.35 This renowned Italian scholar finds in the writings of Pico a “systematic Pyrrhonism” and a “radical skepsis” that make the Examens vanitatis “really one of the most important philosophical works of the century”.36 Garin claims that Pico reintroduced sceptical reason in the sixteenth century and was thus responsible for its rise to prominence in that era. It should be noted, however, that there is no clear consensus on the amount of influence that Pico actually had on the return of sceptical thought in the Renaissance, so I caution the reader to approach this statement of Garin’s with a healthy dose of scepticism. Schmitt has similarly argued for the influence of the Examens vanitatis on later thinkers from Mario Nizolio to Leibniz.37 Richard Popkin, on the other hand, disagrees with Schmitt on this matter and feels that “Pico was not one of those who made scepticism a major issue of the day.”38

Although Garin concedes that Pico’s goal is ultimately to prove the complete superiority of faith over reason, he nevertheless considers Pico’s arguments to be in line with the scepticism of Sextus, since, according to him, Pico’s method of criticism is as “subtle and merciless” as Sextus’ was.39

Pico also pops up in the writings of Luciani Floridi and Gian Mario Cao as they trace the diffusion of the manuscripts of Sextus’ works in the early Renaissance.40 Little is said on Pico’s supposed scepticism in the Examens vanitatis.

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34 Popkin 1967, 66.
35 I refer to Garin, in Verdon and Henderson 1990, 523-32 (see the bibliography).
36 Op. cit., 531, 527, and 529, respectively.
39 Garin, in Verdon and Henderson 1990, 531. Garin does not give any specific examples of comparable subtleties and signs of mercilessness in the works of Sextus and Pico.
40 I refer to Floridi 1995 and 2002 and to Cao 2001 (see the bibliography).
vanitatis there, since the scholars focus mainly on the spread and reputation of the
texts of Sextus in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, although both affirm Pico’s
status as one of the first humanists to create a philosophical reading\[41\] of Sextus.

1.4 – Gian Mario Cao: Pico is not a sceptic (2007)

The most important study on the role of Sextus in the *Examen vanitatis* since
Schmitt’s monograph has been provided by Gian Mario Cao.\[42\] The Italian scholar
has devoted himself to gathering all verbatim and free quotations from Sextus by
Pico, and he has written an article which gives Pico’s reading of Sextus “a proper
appraisal”.\[43\] Cao also places more emphasis on the context of the *Examen vanitatis*
than Schmitt (or Popkin, especially in the earlier editions) had done. Furthermore, Cao presents an overview of the possible manuscript sources for
Pico’s reading of Sextus, a result from his earlier work on the dissemination of
Sextus during the Italian Renaissance (see above).

If Garin entertained an ultra-positive reading of the presence of Sextus in
Pico’s writings, then Cao provides an ultra-negative reading, perhaps as a sort of
counter-balance. Cao states that his aim is to separate Pico from the tradition of
sceptical thinkers in which the humanist has been placed by Popkin and Schmitt.
Furthermore, the scholar specifically rejects Garin’s interpretation of the
*Examen vanitatis*.\[44\] The main line of Cao’s argument reads as follows: a Renaissance
thinker can only be considered a sceptical thinker “if the main tenets of ancient
scepticism [on which he bases his arguments] are explicitly mentioned and
endorsed – the equipollence of beliefs, the suspension of judgement, and the
tranquillity of the mind”.\[45\] The three concepts Cao mentions are central to the
main argument of Sextus’ *Outlines*,\[46\] and they are discussed to varying degrees by
other ancient sceptics as well. Since Pico intends to use scepticism to prove the
inferiority of reason in the face of Christian faith, he does not have the exact same
goals as Sextus. Cao thus sees Pico’s relationship with Sextus as nothing other

\[41\] Floridi prefers to call the reception of Sextus in this time “religious readings” (Floridi 1995, 32).
\[42\] I refer to Cao 2007, which contains a catalogue of quotations from Sextus by Pico, and to the
\[43\] Cao 2007, 13.
\[44\] Op. cit., 1 and 26, respectively.
\[46\] This will be discussed in section 4.1.1.
than “embryonic”.\textsuperscript{47} The scholar would be no kinder to Pico two years later, when he suggested that “Pico’s understanding of Sextus’ writings cannot but betray his close-mindedness bordering, even, on bigotry.”\textsuperscript{48} Cao inspects Pico’s context from the same perspective. He only discusses the elements of the context of the \textit{Examen vanitatis} that fostered Pico’s supposed “bigotry”. The discussion of the context of Pico’s treatise does not nuance Cao’s reading of the work.

The argument proposed by Cao is clear: Pico is most certainly not a sceptic thinker. Instead of suspending judgement, and subsequently finding tranquillity by suspending judgement, Pico seeks to illustrate the superiority of Christian faith over pagan reasoning, since the latter cannot provide the certainty that God can. Unlike Sextus, Pico does adhere to the idea that certain knowledge can be attained. “He does not doubt.”\textsuperscript{49} It must be noted that here, as well as at the point where Cao suggests that “uncertainty” is “the very possibility of scepticism,”\textsuperscript{50} the scholar seemingly confuses ancient philosophy with its mediaeval and modern counterparts. Ancient scepticism is a practical philosophy.\textsuperscript{51} The ancient sceptic suspends his judgement as a solution to the irreconcilable controversies between the philosophers that keep him from being at peace. He does not consider doubt and uncertainty as epistemological concepts.\textsuperscript{52}

The ancient sceptic would rather remain indifferent to such philosophical notions. A theoretical type of scepticism focusing on doubt as an epistemological challenge arose in the Middle Ages, and it was not initially connected to the writings of the Pyrrhonists from antiquity.\textsuperscript{53} Despite this possible mistake on the part of Cao, his main point stands. The three main concepts of Sextus’ scepticism – “the equipollence of beliefs, the suspension of judgement, and the tranquillity of the mind”\textsuperscript{54} – do not recur in the \textit{Examen vanitatis}.

With his analysis, Cao provides a counterweight to the ideas of Popkin and Garin, who answer the question of whether Pico has a place in the tradition of Classical scepticism affirmatively. Cao establishes an unfixable divide between

\textsuperscript{47} Op. cit., 40.
\textsuperscript{48} Cao, in Paganini and Neto 2009, 141.
\textsuperscript{49} Cao 2007, 21.
\textsuperscript{50} Op. cit., 27.
\textsuperscript{51} This point will be revisited in sections 4.1.1 and 6.2.
\textsuperscript{52} See Oosthout 2010, 90-92.
\textsuperscript{54} See note 40.
Pico’s belief in the superiority of Christian prophecy and the distaste for dogmatism found in the original works of Sextus Empiricus.

Cao’s approach ultimately strikes me as limited. Although he has made an invaluable contribution to the corpus of research on Pico in the form of the catalogue of borrowings from Sextus in the *Examen vanitatis*, his reading of Pico suffers from his desire to see the classical philosophy that Pico uses as a benchmark that Pico’s own convictions must pass. This results in an overly negative analysis of Pico’s use of scepticism, one that is content to chastise the humanist for deviating from the sceptical norms set out by Sextus – and reinforced by Cao – without considering the mechanisms with which Pico steps in a new direction. Cao warns that Pico is not a sceptic, but a dogmatic thinker. He does not explain how the humanist turns scepticism into dogmatism.
2 - The approach of the thesis

The aim of this thesis is to re-evaluate Gianfrancesco Pico’s appropriation of sceptical thought for an attack on philosophy. To do so, I shall approach the *Examen vanitatis* from the perspective of classical reception studies. When reception studies, now a fully-fledged discipline in their own right, arose within classical studies, the only available framework was that of the “Classical Tradition”, a term coined by the British classicist Gilbert Highet in 1949. A tradition-oriented method mainly consists of a top-down approach to the classical work that is received by a postclassical author or artist. From this perspective, the ancient work has a “linear progression of ‘influence’” through later times. In other words, the meaning of a classical work is like a river, flowing down through the works of later authors, who pass the classical material on – the term “tradition” comes from the Latin *tradere*, which means “hand over” or “pass down”. Gian Mario Cao takes an approach that fits rather well into this framework. For Cao dismisses the notion that Pico can be called a sceptic on the basis that the new writings of the humanist do not hold up to the standard that is the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus. Pico does not fit into the “linear progression of influence” of Sextus, because he deviates from the main tenets and goals of that classical philosopher.

Reception scholars expanded on the framework of Highet’s classical tradition, which had fallen “out of fashion” by the late 1990s. Reception studies can be seen as a “resistance within literary studies against uncritical notions of tradition and the classical” or, in other words, a re-evaluation of the relations between classical works and the works of later authors who receive classical themes, motifs, and notions in their own works. Reception studies do not emphasize the “original” meaning of a classical work and the river of influences that survive in later works, but rather “the different meanings, functions and forces an ancient element acquires at the moment of reception.” A reception scholar analyses how a postclassical author or artist interprets ancient sources and

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55 Hardwick 2003, 2. See also De Pourcq 2012, 220.
56 The metaphor of the river was first applied by Hilbert himself in his 1949 study *The Classical Tradition* (De Pourcq 2012, 221).
57 Hardwick 2003, 2.
58 De Pourcq 2012, 220.
gives those sources new meaning, but also how the works of the recipient helps the reception scholar to see the parameters of the “original” classical work in a new light.\textsuperscript{60} In his 2016 \textit{magnum opus}, the Dutch reception scholar David Rijser rightly cautioned that reception studies must not lead to total relativism, something modern scholars are trying to avoid by balancing this impetus for relativism with a desire to reconstruct some sense of cultural cohesion.\textsuperscript{61} A well-constructed reception study thus nuances the notion that a postclassical work is no more than a scion of its classical forbearer. It does so through a reading that compares the meaning of the classical and postclassical works and studies the intricacies of the adapation process that lead to the reshaping of the classical elements to fit into the postclassical work.

In this thesis, I shall not consider the scepticism of Sextus to be a rigid “original”, set in stone, to which Pico either does (according to Popkin and Garin) or does not adhere (according to Schmitt and, to a much larger extent, Cao). Rather, I shall consider the \textit{Examen vanitatis} as a reception piece, a work that on the one hand receives classical ideas and philosophical arguments, specifically the sceptical arguments of Sextus, and gives those ideas new meaning to fit a new context, and on the other hand “holds up a mirror” to an age in which scepticism did not have to respect the boundaries that Christian doctrine imposed on it and in which Christian truths, presupposed as universal, were not present.

The main goal of the thesis is thus to \textbf{re-evaluate the use of the arguments of Sextus Empiricus by Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola in his \textit{Examen vanitatis} from the perspective of reception studies}. To achieve this goal, the thesis shall first reconstruct the intellectual context in which Pico wrote his \textit{Examen vanitatis}. In other words, I shall analyze the debates on the value of pagan philosophy leading up to the writings of Pico’s \textit{magnum opus}. With \textit{Examen vanitatis}, Pico clearly participates in an anti-intellectual discourse that arose at the start of the sixteenth-century, and this discourse informs Pico’s argument against philosophy. The discussion of Pico’s intellectual context will incorporate the suggestions of Schmitt and Cao, but it will also be broader in scope. Both scholars mostly focused on people and events that (supposedly) directly influenced Pico. I shall discuss those people and events, and then

\textsuperscript{60} See Rijser 2016, 11-16.
deliberate on the broader contrast between philosophy in antiquity and philosophy in a world that is fully enveloped in the reigning Christian doctrine. I shall thus consider some cases of reception of other pagan philosophies in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{62} In the second, and largest, part of the thesis I shall concern myself with a detailed reading of the first three books of the \textit{Examen vanitatis}, which deal with the critique of pagan philosophy through arguments taken from the sceptical writings of Sextus Empiricus. As stated above, these writings consist of the \textit{Outlines of Pyrrhonism}, which elucidate the workings of scepticism and the disagreements between the other philosophers, and the writings taken under the general title of \textit{Against the Mathematicians}, which expand on Sextus’ critique of the other schools of ancient philosophy.\textsuperscript{63} The last three books of Pico’s \textit{Examen vanitatis}, which contain the humanist’s critique of Aristotelian thought, will not be discussed, for multiple reasons. Firstly, Pico’s criticisms of Aristotle have already been analyzed extensively and satisfactorily by Charles Schmitt. Secondly, despite Schmitt’s suggestions, it is unclear whether scepticism and Sextus Empiricus retain a presence in the latter books of the \textit{Examen vanitatis}, as has been suggested by other scholars.\textsuperscript{64} Finally, there are the simple matters of time and size.

This reading of Gianfrancesco Pico’s \textit{Examen vanitatis} will be a detailed one, following in the footsteps of Cao and venturing beyond his somewhat one-dimensional treatment of the philosophical mechanisms of Pico’s attack on (pagan) reasoning. I shall analyze what new purpose the scepticism of Sextus has in the \textit{Examen vanitatis} and how it fits into the anti-intellectual program of the devout Christian humanist. What elements does Pico appropriate from Sextus, and how does he place them into his own agenda?\textsuperscript{65} What additions or changes does Pico make to the arguments of Sextus to reinforce the new purpose of scepticism in his work? Secondly, I shall consider how the work of Pico sheds new light on those of Sextus and their original context. What elements from the works of

\textsuperscript{62} I concur with Schmitt and Cao that Gianfrancesco Pico wrote his \textit{Examen vanitatis} too early for the ecclesiastic crisis of the Reformation to have a lasting impact on the worldview of the humanist, hence my insistence on one reigning Christian dogma that the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus must be adapted for.

\textsuperscript{63} I shall introduce the works of Sextus, as well as the \textit{Examen vanitatis} of Pico, in more detail in the introductions to the next two chapters.

\textsuperscript{64} As attested by Cao, Oosthout (see above), and even (though only implicitly) by Schmitt himself.

\textsuperscript{65} This extends to both Sextus’ philosophical arguments and to the many examples that Sextus gives, of which Pico appropriates (and repurposes) some in his own work.
Sextus did not survive in Pico’s vision and why? What measure of authority does Pico ascribe to his source and the “original” sceptis? How does he justify the use of classical philosophy in an argument that invalidates all classical philosophy and thus, logically speaking, its own scepticism? And how can the anti-dogmatism of classical scepticism accommodate the dogma of Christian faith?

“Gianfrancesco Pico’s critical attitude towards Aristotelianism caused much ink to be spilled”, as Cao nicely phrases it.66 Gianfrancesco Pico’s use of scepticism, while acknowledged by all involved, has so far not seen a reading as detailed as the one which Charles Schmitt performed on the critique of Aristotle. Scholars mostly differ on whether any label including the word “scepticism” can be applied to the Examen vanitatis. The essay of Gian Mario Cao may be the first “proper appraisal” of Pico’s appropriation of Sextus Empiricus, given that it is more detailed than previous analyses of that aspect of the Examen vanitatis, but its approach limits its results, and Cao’s attitude towards Pico occasionally seems almost spiteful. I hope that in the following chapters the reader will find a more nuanced scrutiny of the reception of scepticism by Gianfrancesco Pico.

66 Cao, in Paganini and Neto 2009, 139.
3 - Unifying Christianity and Philosophy: The Context of the

*Examen vanitatis*

In order to discern “the different meanings, functions and forces an ancient element acquires at the moment of reception,” one must first know the moment of reception itself. Of all the researchers discussed in the *status quaestionis*, Popkin is perhaps the scholar who exemplifies this approach the best, given that he attempts to ground the re-emergence of sceptical thought in the ecclesiastical revolution of the Reformation. It is unfortunate that this close connection to the Reformation does not apply to Gianfrancesco Pico. In the case of Pico, Schmitt afforded the moment of reception less attention than Popkin, only directing the reader to two thinkers who (might have) inspired an anti-intellectual attitude in Pico. Cao, however, is interested in scepticism, and he directs more attention to the context in which Pico wrote the *Examen vanitatis* than others before him. As I have already stated in the previous chapter, I find Cao’s approach in reading the *Examen vanitatis* limited.

This chapter will present an overview of Pico’s intellectual context. I shall discuss the factors that shaped Pico’s opinions of the relation between Christian faith and pagan philosophy and persuaded him to take up reading Sextus in order to fulfil the goal of his *Examen vanitatis*. I will first discuss Pico’s life and his personal network of connections. For, as we shall see, Pico’s connections to figures such as Girolamo Savonarola and Pope Leo X greatly influenced how he approached pagan philosophy. I shall also discuss the broader philosophical developments of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. For during the philosophical debates of the Italian Renaissance, the relationship between Christian doctrine and pagan philosophy became increasingly tense. As more and more philosophical schools were rediscovered, some took issue with the more heretical expressions of ancient authors. Pico, as well as his most important allies, participated in these debates. Thus, the two main elements of Pico’s context that I

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67 De Pourcq 2012, 221.
68 As discussed in the previous chapter, later scholars have proven that Renaissance scepticism was far too varied in its particular occurrences to be tied in its entirety to the Reformation, thus proving Popkin’s thesis untenable.
69 In the case of Giovanni Pico, as is discussed below.
discuss here are the people and institutions who directly influenced his thought, and the broader debates that led to the stances of Pico and his allies.

Since Pico’s goal is to use scepticism to argue against all reason and thus prove that faith is the only viable source of true knowledge, I shall focus on the relationship between Christian faith and philosophy in the Renaissance, particularly in the century leading up to the publication of the *Examen vanitatis*. After a succinct introduction to Sextus Empiricus and classical scepticism, the ancient element that Pico receives, I shall outline the moment of reception. The following chapters will then centre around the different meanings, functions, and forces the ancient element acquires at this moment.

### 3.1 – Introduction

#### 3.1.1. – Classical scepticism

Classical scepticism\(^{70}\) derives its name from the Greek σκέπτομαι, which literally translates as “look carefully at” or “consider”.\(^{71}\) Sceptical philosophy arises out of a feeling that the truths which are proclaimed by other philosophers are deficient and require further enquiry – hence the school of thought is called the φιλοσοφία σκεπτική.\(^{72}\) This enquiry results in dissatisfaction with the truths espoused by other philosophers, on which follows the suspension of judgement that is associated with scepticism.

Scepticism has a rather fragmentary history, insofar as it is known to us, with entire centuries lacking evidence of sceptical activity. Ancient scepticism is generally divided into two categories, namely Pyrrhonism and Academic scepticism. The strand of Pyrrhonism owes its name to the first known sceptical philosopher, Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 360-275 B.C.).\(^{73}\) No writings of Pyrrho have...
survived, but we possess some fragments of his pupil Timon of Phlius. Pyrrho and Timon supposedly upheld a practical scepticism in which the sceptic refuses to proclaim assent to any one opinion, for the opposite opinion may equally be true. Sceptics of this ilk do not reject all opinions and feelings, for such an attitude would make normal life impossible. The sceptic simply allows opinions and feelings to come and go: he takes them as they appear to him without passing judgement on their nature.\textsuperscript{74}

Shortly after Pyrrho and Timon, Academic scepticism rose to the fore. Arcesilaus of Pitane, born ca. 315 B.C., became the fifth rector of Plato’s Academy. He steered the institution away from the dogmatic interpretation of Plato’s teachings and towards the scepticism that, according to him, had been the original tenet of the teachings of Socrates.\textsuperscript{75} The theory of Arcesilaus, like that of Pyrrho, rested on the belief in equal weight (ἰσοστρέφεια) of two opposing positions, which forces the sceptic to suspend his judgement on the matter (Sextus calls this ἐποχή), as neither position can be proven superior. Yet the scepticism of the Academic philosophers was more systematic than the practical indifference of Pyrrho and Timon had been. The Academics turned their sceptical arguments into weapons with which they assailed the doctrines of the dogmatic philosophers – primarily the Stoics – whereas Pyrrhonists simply abstained from Stoic doctrine and discussion. Later sceptics such as Sextus Empiricus would denounce the Academics as veiled dogmatists who had fashioned the notion “nothing can be known” into a dogma.\textsuperscript{76} No evidence survives of “Pyrrhonists” during the sceptical period of the Academy. The philosophers of the Academy themselves eventually abandoned scepticism. In the first century B.C., they turned towards a

\textsuperscript{74} Op. cit., 38-43.
\textsuperscript{75} Op. cit., 49.
\textsuperscript{76} Sextus Empiricus, \textit{Outlines of Pyrrhonism} I.220-35.
combination of their Platonic roots and Stoicism. Classical authors do not always distinguish between Academic and Pyrrhonist scepticism. However, the great influence of the writings of Sextus – which formed one of the most comprehensive and complete sources on classical scepticism – did much to solidify the distinction between the two types of ancient scepticism.

3.1.2 – Sextus Empiricus

Sextus Empiricus is one of the most valuable sources of information on classical philosophy that survives to this day, and not just concerning scepticism. Other philosophical schools – especially the Hellenistic school of philosophy known as Stoicism and individual thinkers have also been saved from oblivion thanks to Sextus. Of the man himself we unfortunately know very little. His work is the most complete account of the fortunes of Pyrrhonism that survives, and many gaps in Timon’s account of Pyrrho are filled by Sextus – despite the considerable temporal distance between the two writers. It is through Sextus that we know of the Pyrrhonists Aenesidemus and Agrippa, who each designed a set of τρόποι (often translated as “Modes”), which were ways through which a sceptic could come to suspension of judgement (ἐποχή), which results in peace of mind (ἀταραξία). On scepticism as Sextus defines it, including the τρόποι of Aenesidemus and Agrippa, I shall say more in the introduction to the following chapter.

3.1.3 – Gianfrancesco Pico

We jump forward in time from the second century to the sixteenth and find ourselves at the point where the – previously Italian – Renaissance spreads through Europe. Before I take a broader look at the interplay between Christianity and ancient philosophy in the Italian Renaissance, I introduce the figure of

77 Oosthout 2010, 65.
79 Sextus is an important source on Stoicism more so than on the rivalling school of Epicureanism, since Lucretius’s De Rerum Natura constitutes a first-hand account of the Epicurean doctrine.
80 It is known that he was a Greek philosopher who lived in the second half of the second century A.D.
81 Some information about Aenesidemus can also be found in the writings of Diogenes Laërtius. In the case of the sceptic Agrippa, however, Sextus is our only extant source.
Gianfrancesco Pico, the protagonist of this thesis. This humanist was born in 1469 as the son of Galeotto I Pico and Bianca Maria d’Este. The Pico family reigned over the city-state of Mirandola, which nowadays is a part of the province of Modena. Despite Pico being only six years younger than his uncle Giovanni Pico – a humanist whose philosophical writings have made him the most famous fifteenth-century philosopher after Marsilio Ficino – a fatherly relationship arose between both Pico’s. To his uncle Pico owed not only his education but also his network of connections. It was also through Giovanni Pico that Gianfrancesco came into contact with the friar Girolamo Savonarola at the end of the fifteenth century. The younger Pico was to become an ardent follower of the friar and his beliefs, which included a disdain for the writings of the ancient philosophers and their deviations from the word of God. Pico lost both mentors before the turn of the century. Giovanni Pico passed away at a young age in 1494 (rumour had it that he was poisoned). At the same time, Savonarola’s rise to power in Florence in the 1490s brought the friar into conflict with the Papacy, and in 1498 he was publicly hanged despite Pico’s efforts to soothe the mind of the Pope and to rouse public support for Savonarola.

Pico’s fortunes did not improve with the turn of the century. The passing of his father Galeotto in 1499 left him as the rightful ruler of Mirandola, but his younger brothers, Lodovico and Frederico conspired against him, backed by their mother Bianca. The brothers successfully usurped Mirandola in 1502 and exiled Pico, depriving the humanist of the time he needed for his studies, as he now had to travel around Italy and gather enough support to reclaim his city. It was not until he had sworn allegiance to Pope Julius II and served in the Papacy’s war against the French that he regained his Duchy. In 1511, Pope Julius besieged Mirandola and reinstated Pico as its rightful ruler. Pico’s troubles had not yet ended. In the same year, a second usurpation of Mirandola – this time by Lodovico’s father-in-law, Gian Giacomo Trivulzio – forced Pico to give up part

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82 I am indebted to the aforementioned 1967 study by Charles Schmitt (see the bibliography) for the information in this introductory section. Unless stated otherwise, all of the data in this section are taken from the chapter “Gianfrancesco Pico’s life” (Schmitt 1967, 11-30) and from the appendix “The Works of Gianfrancesco Pico” (op. cit., 183-230).
83 Copenhaver 2016.
84 Pico had bought the inheritance of the city-state from his uncle Giovanni.
85 Schmitt suggests that Pico may have started writing the Examen vanitatis in 1502 (Schmitt 1967, 193). This would mean that Pico’s exile delayed the writing of the magnum opus significantly, since it was not published until 1520.
of the city-state in a deal in 1514. In 1533, Pico’s nephew Galeotto II entered the city and murdered his uncle, ending the troubled reign of the humanist.

Despite his troubled life, Pico left a surprisingly large oeuvre. He wrote theological and religious works, a number of which are dedicated to Julius II’s successor, Pope Leo X. This indicates a continued alliance between Pico and the Papacy. He wrote biographies of both Giovanni Pico and fra Savonarola. Of his philosophical works the *De studio divinae et humanae philosophiae* (published in 1496) shows the roots of Pico’s anti-intellectual attitude. Here, the humanist separates human philosophy (as practiced by the ancients) from divine knowledge, although he still saw some value in human philosophy at this stage in his life. His most important (and largest) philosophical work is the *Examen vanitatis*, which is the main focus of this study.

3.2 – The Italian Renaissance: ancient philosophy rediscovered

Now we must take a broader look at the Italian Renaissance and the relationship between ancient philosophy and Christian faith. Classical scepticism arose at a time when philosophers moved away from the realm of theory to practical matters. It was meant to assist those lost in contradictory opinions and the toils of reason and help them to attain ἀταραξία through abstinence from dogmata. Such an approach is especially clear in the writings of Sextus Empiricus. Sextus helps the unfortunate soul who finds himself stuck in a maelstrom of different doctrines and explanations of the world. Should one subscribe to Epicurean or rather to Stoic ethics? Sextus argues that one should subscribe to neither. There were multiple philosophical schools and multiple ways of explaining how the world works, but no particular school of philosophy had a clear primacy over the others. This situation, however, was to change. As the Christian religion gained strength and became ubiquitous, the presence of a single doctrine that overruled all others eliminated the ἰσοσθένεια of various strands of thought and thus the need for sceptical ἐποχή. Writers such as Tertullian and Lactantius denounced the

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87 Henderson and Bury relate that Epicureanism, Stoicism, and scepticism arose as practical successors to the more theoretical schools of thought that Plato and Aristotle embodied, in large part due to worsening “social and political conditions” (Henderson and Bury 1939, xxii) which lead the philosophers to focus more on things of human interest (op. cit., xxii-xxii). For example, peace of mind was an important goal for all the Hellenistic schools of philosophy – i.e. Epicureanism, Stoicism, and scepticism.
sceptics, and Augustine reshaped the “nothing can be perceived” of the Academic sceptics into “nothing can be known through the senses” – thus allowing for otherworldly knowledge through faith.

The texts of Sextus Empiricus and (to a far lesser extent) the writings of Cicero on the Academic sceptics fell into oblivion during the Middle Ages. Augustine’s hegemony in philosophy during the early Middle Ages and that of Aristotle in later centuries eliminated any ἴσοσθενεία that might arise between schools of thought – Aristotle greatly overshadowed all other classical philosophers in the studies of the scholastics. Of course, the statements and doctrines of Aristotle frequently clashed with the teachings of the Bible, and figures such as Siger of Brabant chose a radical Aristotelianism over the decrees of the Church. There was, however, no ἴσοσθενεία between Aristotle and God. Christian authorities could overrule or outright excommunicate theologians and philosophers who deviated too far from the Christian doctrine. The reverse was unthinkable.

The hegemony of Aristotle was brought to an end in the Italian Renaissance. The first Italian humanists owe their reputation as harbingers of monumental change primarily to their efforts to rediscover classical manuscripts that had long lain hidden in monasteries and libraries. The humanists rejected the esoteric reflections of the scholastics and set their sights on endeavours decidedly more literary in nature. Influential figures such as Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), Colucio Salutati (1331-1406), Leonardo Bruni (ca. 1370-1444), and Poggio Bracchiolini (1380-1459) saw more value in the attainment of the classical eloquentia, exemplified by authors such as Cicero and Vergil, since literary excellence would improve their person and their skills. Eloquentia and knowledge were not concepts ruminated on purely within the confines of the university. Literary experience was a practical asset in the political career of the humanist.

The most monumental change from the Middle Ages to the Italian Renaissance was the renewed interest in Ancient Greek. Mediaeval writers in

88 Oosthout 2010, 104.
91 This importance of Aristotle in the philosophical disciplines had been diminished by the presence of the various other rediscovered schools of thought, but the effects of his hegemony were still felt in Pico’s time – hence Pico’s extensive critique of Aristotelian thought.
92 The condemnation of 297 Aristotelian theses in 1277 by the Parisian bishop Stephen Tempier is a good example (see Thijssen 2016).
Western Europe knew no Greek and only read Latin. The aforementioned Colucio Salutati implored his students to learn Greek, and his pupil Leonardo Bruni was one of the first (and one of the best) translators of rediscovered Greek sources. This interest in Greek was made possible by renewed contact between the churches of the East and the West. The Byzantines, uneasy because of the rising threat of the Turks, sought an allegiance with the western Papacy. This contact lead to the immigration of Greeks and Byzantines to Italy, and the immigrants brought with them a wealth of previously unknown masterpieces from antiquity. These immigrants also taught Greek to the first generation of Italian humanists. Furthermore, before the fall of Constantinople some illustrious Italian humanists had already travelled to the East in search of lost manuscripts.

Among the classical works that were recovered – and the number of works that was collected by these studious humanists is enormous – were the writings of ancient philosophers. New manuscripts of Plato became available. Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* shed light on the doctrines of the Epicureans. The texts of Sextus Empiricus brought Pyrrhonism back out of the shadows. Suddenly, Aristotle was no longer the only philosopher whose writings were studied at Italian universities.

### 3.3 - Renewed ἀσοσθένεια: The Plato-Aristotle controversy

The rediscovery of these classical works of philosophy diversified the philosophical discipline beyond Aristotelianism. Humanists now knew of a greater variety of schools of thought than their scholastic predecessors had done. Such a variety in philosophical doctrines inevitably recreated the philosophical environment in which classical scepticism had thrived: a multitude of competing ideas and doctrines became available to the curious philosopher.

This multitude of dogmata lead to conflict – as it had done in antiquity – such as the controversy between the Greek émigrés George of Trebizond and Cardinal Bessarion that raged in the 1450s and ‘60s. After settling in Italy, George

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93 Manuel Chrysoloras is perhaps the most well-known émigré who taught Greek. He was brought to the Florentine university in 1397 by Salutati, and the Italian humanist implored his students to attend the lectures of Chrysoloras to learn Greek. Leonardo Bruni was one of those students.

94 Poggio Bracchiiolini was (and still is among Renaissance scholars) especially famous for the enormous amount of classical sources that he brought to the fore.

95 As it still does for us today.
of Trebizond became a staunch proponent of Aristotle and scholasticism. He intensely disliked Plato, and exposed the foul nature of Platonism in his *Comparatio philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis* (1458). Upon reading George’s *Comparatio*, Bessarion felt compelled to prove that Platonism was not a heretic philosophy and that the teachings of Plato were, in fact, more compatible with the teachings of the Scriptures than the doctrines of Aristotle. Bessarion’s *In calumniatorem Platonis* became a well-known work, thanks in part to the efforts of his ally Nicolo Perotti.

What is interesting in this case is that both humanists deny any *ἰσοσθένεια* between Plato and Aristotle by arguing for the greater or lesser compatibility of their philosopher with the Christian doctrine. Scholars in our secular 21st-century society tend to study Christianity as one of multiple religions and doctrines, rather than as the one true source of knowledge. The Italian humanists most certainly did not share this worldview. In the public consciousness, the Renaissance is sometimes thought of as the birthplace of secularisation, and the Reformation did indeed weaken the all-encompassing doctrine of the Church. But Christian doctrine was still as strong in the fifteenth century as it had been in the Middle Ages. The Christian doctrine did not stand on equal footing with the ancient schools of philosophy. It stood above those schools. In the debate between George and Bessarion, there was no clash of different truths as there had been during the times of the Hellenistic schools of thought. The truth of God was undisputed. The question was now which classical doctrine aligned with that truth. Thus, the Plato-Aristotle controversy revolved not around an *ἰσοσθένεια* of truths but rather around an *ἰσοσθένεια* of subordinate doctrines.
3.4 – Christianity and philosophy united: Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico

Since philosophical truths did not hold equal weight to Christian faith, philosophers in the fifteenth century needed to reinterpret the variety of philosophical writings that were rediscovered, lest they risk evoking the wrath of the Papacy. In the fifteenth century, the “moment of reception” was undeniably Christian. The disputes on which school of ancient thought was best suited to this Christian context settled down in the 1460s. Platonism and Aristotelianism were taught concurrently at universities such as the Studio of Florence, and there Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) became perhaps the most prominent of all philosophers of the Italian Renaissance. Ficino was initially interested in four sects of philosophy – Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism and Epicureanism – but it was ultimately Plato who dominated Ficino’s thought. Ficino went on to translate multiple texts of Plato into Latin, and he produced an impressive body of commentaries on Plato. Furthermore, Ficino composed a Theologia platonica, which was printed in 1482. Ficino’s goal was to connect Platonism to Christian faith, and thus he reinterpreted the classical school of thought for the Christian context of the fifteenth century.

Giovanni Pico was a friend of Ficino’s and a fellow philosopher. Like Ficino, Giovanni Pico reshaped classical philosophy and made it coexist with the truths found in the Scriptures. For Giovanni Pico, philosophy formed the first step

102 The academy of Pomponio Leto in Rome, for example, was disbanded by Pope Paul II in 1468 for alleged “Epicureanism, republicanism, irreligion, [and] neopaganism” (Hankins 2011, 34-35, bracketed addition mine).
103 Celenza 2015.
104 A number of these commentaries have been published as part of the I Tatti Renaissance Library. See the bibliography for a few examples.
105 In the prooemium of his Theologia platonica, Ficino writes:

Ego vero, cum iampridem Aureliana auctortitate fretus summaque in genus humanum caritate adductus Platonis ipsius simulacrum quoddam christianae veritati simillimum exprimere statuissem, ad illa quae dixi duo prae ceteris diligenter incubui, ideoque universum opus Platonicam theologiam de immortalitate animorum inscribendum esse censui (emphasis mine).

When I set out to create an image of Plato himself as close as possible to the Christian truth, relying on the authority of Augustine and spurred on by the highest adoration for the human race, I dedicated myself diligently to those two subjects that I have mentioned over the others, and thus I felt that the work should be called the Platonic theology on the immortality of souls.

An example of Ficino’s Christian reception of Platonism is his placing Plato in “a venerable sequence of interpreters who added to a store of wisdom that God allowed progressively to unfold” (Celenza 2015). Ficino’s close friend Cristoforo Landino (1424-1498), teacher at the Florentine Studio, also equated a Platonic assent to the summum bonum with reaching the divinity of God (Field 1988, 240-41).

106 The relationship between Giovanni and Gianfrancesco Pico has been discussed in section 3.1.3.
in the ascent towards the divinity of God, as it had done for Ficino. Unlike Ficino, who equated the ascent to God’s divinity with the “higher theurgy of the Neoplatonic philosophers”, Giovanni Pico combined Platonism and Aristotelianism with the Judaic Kaballah, a system of mysticism, which formed the next step to God after the mystic had started with the contemplations of the classical philosophers. Here too, then, the various classical schools of thought were repurposed into a doctrine subordinate to the Christian dogma. Giovanni Pico further avoided the ἰσοσθενεία of these schools of thought by arguing for their similarities rather than their differences. In his De ente et uno (1492), for example, he aimed for a “Platonis Aristotelisque concordia”.

Giovanni Pico’s hope of concord between the strands of ancient philosophy and the higher doctrine of Christianity clashed with the beliefs of the aforementioned Girolamo Savonarola, whom Giovanni had brought to Florence and with whom both Picos built a close relationship. Savonarola listened to Giovanni’s orations on ancient theology and its function as preparation for Christian truths, but he ultimately dismissed the philosopher’s ideals of concordance. For Savonarola saw in classical philosophy the ἰσοσθένεια that had plagued the sceptics, and subsequently declared such doctrines false and erroneous, severing their connection with Christianity.

Gianfrancesco Pico’s bibliography of Giovanni Pico notes that the elder Pico eventually converted to Savonarola’s views on philosophy, rejecting the notion that pagan thought was a fit companion to faith. Charles Schmitt also points to a letter written by Giovanni Pico to his nephew in 1492, in which the uncle implores Pico to always have the Scriptures in hand so as not to get lost in the deceiving world (mundus fallax). Schmitt suggests, on the basis of this letter, that Giovanni Pico became an anti-intellectualist and subsequently inspired his nephew to follow in his footsteps and write a critique of reason and ancient thought, which was to become the Examen vanitatis. It must be noted, however, that few other scholars support this claim. Eugenio Garin clearly states that there

107 Copenhaver 2016.
109 Schmitt 1967, 32. See also Copenhaver 2016.
113 Schmitt 1967, 33-34.
was a divide in the way Giovanni Pico and Savonarola approached ancient philosophy: “between Giovanni Pico and Savonarola, Gian Francesco chose Savonarola.”

114 Brian Copenhaver warns that the image of Giovanni Pico that is presented by his letters must be approached carefully, since Gianfrancesco Pico edited the letters of his uncle before publication. 115 The Giovanni presented in the edited letters and in the younger Pico’s biography is “a Savonarolan saint who came almost too late to salvation but finally rejected the world, the flesh and the devil. This is not the Pico who travelled to Rome a few years before to take on the whole world in a failed philosophical extravaganza; nor the Pico who bungled an attempt to carry off a married woman whose husband was named Medici—no less; nor the Pico with whom Ficino bantered about his missteps and misfortunes in letters loaded with astro-mythological allusions.”

116 In my view, we cannot definitively state that Giovanni Pico subscribed to Savonarola’s anti-intellectualism, and the uncle may not have inspired that same attitude in his nephew. Savonarola himself inspired the younger Pico; that much is clear.

3.5 – Christianity and philosophy opposed: Girolamo Savonarola

As stated, fra Savonarola stepped away from the concordia between classical philosophy and the wisdom of God that philosophers such as Bessarion, Ficino, and Giovanni Pico sought. After the friar came to Florence in the 1490s on the behest of Giovanni Pico, he quickly built a loyal following through his sermons, where he delivered apocalyptic prophecies and called for a reform not just of the Florentine way of life but also of the Papacy in Rome. 117 After the ruling Medici family was driven from Florence by the invading French army of King Charles VIII in 1494, Savonarola parlayed with the occupying forces and used his popularity to influence the new governing body of the city-state, having become the de facto ruler of Florence by 1494 despite never holding office. 118 He used this power to reshape Florence into a theocracy. Savonarola’s growing influence brought him new enemies, such as Pope Alexander VI. Savonarola’s refusal to

114 Garin, in Verdon and Henderson 1990, 529.
115 I have already referred to the 2011 study by Jeroen De Keyser (note 100), which illustrates that humanists sometimes edited the letters of others before publication to further their own goals.
116 Copenhaver 2016.
117 The details of Savonarola’s life as I recount them here are taken from the 1911 study by Horsburg and from Mulchahey’s introduction to Savonarola’s Apologetic Writings in the 2015 I Tatti-edition (see the bibliography).
118 “Savonarola’s word was law” (Horsburgh 1911, 160).
obey the Pope’s commands to come to Rome and to cease his sermons in Florence resulted in his excommunication in 1496. Savonarola was initially defiant, insisting that he had committed no crime. By 1498, his situation had deteriorated, and after he had made a futile attempt to regain the favour of Alexander, he was finally sentenced to death by the Florentine signoria and publicly hanged.

Savonarola’s attitude towards philosophy marked a shift from the concordia between various strands of philosophy and the greater framework of Christianity. Savonarola saw in the various strands of classical philosophy not material that would set the contemplative soul on a path to God, but rather a wildly varied set of conflicting opinions and erroneous notions that obscured God’s truth. Savonarola thus saw in classical philosophy the sort of conflict that had encouraged the Pyrrhonists to abstain from dogmatizing altogether. Unlike the ancient sceptics, Savonarola did have a dogma to fall back on, namely that of the Scriptures, which espoused a doctrine that surpassed the earthly contemplation of the philosophers. According to Schmitt, “such an outlook will be taken over with little change (...) by Gianfrancesco Pico.”119 For Pico was among those who had been swayed by Savonarola’s thinking during the friar’s stay in Florence, and Pico was to expound this divide between the conflicts inherent to classical philosophy and the clarity of faith in his Examen vanitatis.

3.6 – The early sixteenth century: Gianfrancesco Pico and the Papacy united against classical philosophy

Savonarola was not the only proponent of an interpretation of classical philosophy as incompatible with Christian faith.120 The Papacy was generally quite tolerant towards the study of pagan writings and ancient philosophy in the fifteenth century,121 although occasional outbursts of hostility did occur.122 The sixteenth century, however, saw an increased clampdown on the liberties of those who

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120 Gian Mario Cao feels that “scholars have tended to overstate this connection [between Savonarola and Gianfrancesco Pico]” (Cao, in Paganini and Neto 2009, 128).
121 For example, the Church did not denounce the translations and studies of such classical authors as Lucian in the fifteenth century, whose biting satire was popular among authors such as Leon Battista Alberti (Robinson 1979, 82-94).
122 I refer to the example given above, namely the disbanding of the academy of Pomponio Leto in Rome (see note 92).
studied pagan writings. At the Fifth Council of the Lateran (1512-1517), Pope Leo X issued the *Apostolici regiminis* (1513), a bull that affirmed the immortality of the soul and ordered any student of philosophers who felt otherwise to announce the falsehood of their claims. This bull is generally seen as a response by the Pope to the writings of Pietro Pomponazzi, a professor at Bologna in the early 1500s. Pomponazzi proposed a reassessment of Aristotle’s writings that included the conclusion that the soul is essentially mortal. The Pope was not pleased with such heretical expressions.

Gian Mario Cao suggests that the vagueness of the bull, which does not specify Pomponazzi as a target, is intentional and allows for a much broader interpretation of the order to denounce philosophical falsehoods. The bull centres on the issue of the mortality of the soul, but it could reasonably be interpreted as an order for any scholar of classical philosophy to announce the falsehood of the claims of the ancient philosophers. Cao certainly sees it that way. “As for the philosophers, whether in their institutional activities or not, when dealing with controversial topics such as the unity and mortality of the soul (or even the eternity of the world, and the like), and when faced with principles or philosophical conclusions not in agreement with right Faith, they are to clarify with all their power the relevant Christian truth, teach it in the most persuasive possible manner, and resolve the philosophical arguments *pro viribus* (“to the full extent of their energies”), since all these arguments can be resolved. So in terms of the Bull, it is possible to refute the philosophers’ arguments.” The relationship between Christianity and philosophy on the whole shifted from one of *concordia* to one of incompatibility in the early sixteenth-century, and not just amongst the followers of Savonarola.

Gianfrancesco Pico was himself an ally of the Papacy. I have already shown that it was Pope Julius II who reinstated Pico as rightful ruler of Mirandola after the *coup* by Lodovico and Frederico Pico. Perhaps Pico saw in Julius II “a

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123 The writings of Lucian, for example, were no longer warmly received by all readers. While the translations of Lucian’s writings into Latin by Erasmus and Thomas More in 1505 and 1506 were certainly popular, people such as Martin Luther vehemently denounced Lucian for his anti-religious satire and those who followed in the footsteps of the ancient author (Thompson 1939, 855 and 1974, xlv; Robinson 1979, 82-84).

124 See Perfetti 2012.

125 Cao 2007, 34.
sort of Hegelesque *Weltgeist zu Pferde.*" Pico also maintained relations with Julius’s successor, the aforementioned Leo X, to whom he dedicated several of his works. Furthermore, Pico wrote a speech called *Oratorio de reformandis moribus,* which was to be delivered at the council as a sign of Pico’s alliance to Leo X and to the Papacy.\(^{127}\)

### 3.7 – Classical scepticism in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century philosophy

Gianfrancesco Pico wrote his *Examen vanitatis* at a time when the chances of reconciling ancient philosophy with the greater doctrines of God became increasingly smaller. Savonarola had put an end to the wish of philosophers such as Ficino and Giovanni Pico to unite ancient philosophy with Christian faith, portraying classical thought instead as a mess of contradictory opinions. Meanwhile, the Papacy became stricter in its condemnation of any philosophy that did not align with the Christian worldview, thus further driving a wedge between the ideas of the ancients and those expounded in the Holy Scriptures. But what role did classical scepticism play in these developments?

As stated above, the Pyrrhonist writings of Sextus Empiricus were all but unknown during the Middle Ages, only to be rediscovered by humanists through the renewed contact with the Byzantine empire. Francesco Filelfo came to possess a manuscript containing the writings of Sextus in 1527.\(^{128}\) Multiple manuscripts of Sextus were subsequently discovered, and a number of prominent humanists owned a manuscript of Sextus.\(^{129}\) As the years passed, manuscripts were copied with increasing frequency. By the end of the sixteenth century, at least 78 manuscripts containing passages from Sextus’ writings existed.\(^{130}\) The first two Latin translations of Sextus, by Henri Estienne and Gentian Hervet, respectively, were published halfway through the fifteenth century (in 1562 and 1569).

Unlike the Academics, whose scepticism influenced humanistic dialectic writings through Cicero,\(^{131}\) Sextus was seldom read for his scepticism in the fifteenth century. Humanists were instead interested in using Sextus as a

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\(^{127}\) Cao 2007, 31-32 and in Paganini and Neto 2009, 128-29. The *Oratio* was published in 1520 and dedicated to the Pope.

\(^{128}\) Oosthout 2010, 177.

\(^{129}\) See Floridi 1995 and 2002, and Cao 2001. Bessarion was one of the humanists who owned a manuscript containing the works of Sextus (Cao 2001, 236-49).

\(^{130}\) Floridi 2002, 29.

\(^{131}\) See Schmitt 1972, 43-54 for the interest of Italian philosophers in Cicero’s *Academica.*
doxographical source, since the Pyrrhonist discussed a great number of the views that were held by the dogmatic philosophers of his time. Philosophers such as Ficino and Giovanni Pico knew of Sextus, but the disagreements between the various philosophers that Sextus emphasized were of little use to thinkers who wished to unite the various strands of philosophy with each other and with Christian faith. It was not until Savonarola rejected the notion of concordia between the various schools of philosophy and Christian doctrine, that interest in scepticism arose again. For Savonarola saw some use in the arguments of a classical author who explicated the contradictions that the friar knew to run rampant in philosophy. He “invited people to read Sextus” in order to understand the dissent inherent to philosophy. In his biography of the friar, Pico writes:

Quippe qui audientes Graeca quaepiam Sexti Philosophi monumenta asservari, in quibus universae doctrinae humanitae inventae confutatae essent, ea e graeco transferri in latinum, paululum antequam moreretur, mandaverat, perosus multorum, qui se scire iactabant, ignorantiam.

(Gianfrancesco Pico, Vita Fratris Hieronymi Savonarolae Ferrrariensis, in Schisto 1999, 112-13 lines 35-43)

For when Savonarola heard that certain Greek writings of the philosopher Sextus had been preserved, wherein all doctrines invented by man were refuted, he mandated, shortly before he died, that they be translated from Greek into Latin, since he despised the ignorance of the many who claimed to know things.

132 Angelo Poliziano, for example, looked to Sextus as a source for his own history of philosophy (Floridi 1995, 77 and 2002, 30-31; Cao 2001, 261-64).
133 In his De voluptate (1457), Ficino outlines three styles of philosophizing. On the sceptics, he states:
Tertium vero genus Scepticorum maxime proprium est, qui cum omnia indifferentia esse putent, nec certum, aut probable habeant quicquam quod sequantur, ea enim, quae naturae ordine se inventa distinctaque sunt confundunt atque permiscunt ab excellentioribus, quibusque Philosophus reiciuntur (Ficino, De Voluptate, in Opera 1570, 986).
The third style is especially the domain of the sceptics, since they believe that all things are indifferent, and therefore had nothing certain or probable that they could follow. For they confounded and mixed those things which are, by the order of nature, separate and distinct according to more excellent philosophers, by whom they are rejected.
134 Floridi 2002, 32. Floridi remarks that one of the judges in Savonarola’s trial, Gioacchino Torriani, borrowed a Sextus manuscript (now lost) from the Vatican Library in 1494 to prepare himself. Floridi takes this as a sign that the judge “took him [i.e. Savonarola] seriously” (op. cit., 33).
Savonarola asked Giorgio Antonio Vespucci to perform the task. Unfortunately, Savonarola was executed before the translation of Sextus’ writings could be completed. This, in turn, left Pico with no other option than to read the works of Sextus in Greek when he composed his *Examen vanitatis*.\(^{135}\)

### 3.8 – Pico’s manuscript source

Pico most likely read Sextus from the manuscript owned by Vespucci, known as Laurentianus 85.11. It contains all of the *Outlines* and *Against the Mathematicians* in Greek, although the text is divided into ten books – not, as modern editors would have it, in fourteen.\(^{136}\) According to Cao, Laurentianus 85.11 was the only manuscript available when Pico wrote his *Examen vanitatis* that contained the writings of Sextus but not “the anonymous Δισσοὶ λόγοι (*Contrasting arguments*), which are often appended to the end of manuscript sources.”\(^{137}\) Since Pico shows no sign of having read those appended texts, Cao suggests that the Vespucci codex was most likely Pico’s source on the writings of Sextus. If Cao’s suggestion is true,\(^{138}\) Pico had access to all of Sextus’ *Outlines* and *Against the Mathematicians* in Greek.

### 3.9 – Conclusion

Scepticism was of little interest to the foremost philosophers of the fifteenth century, as it only hindered their quest to bring about a *concordia*, both within philosophy itself and between philosophy and Christianity. But by the time Pico set out to compose his *magnum opus*, such dreams of concordance had become unattainable. At this particular “moment of reception”, classical philosophy was subordinate to the dogmata of the Holy Scriptures. Ficino and Giovanni Pico sought to realize a *concordia* between the philosophy of the ancients and the new reigning framework of faith. Savonarola’s rise to power in Florence and Pope Leo’s subtle rejection of any philosophical conclusion that challenged the word of God shifted the discourse in a new direction. Whereas Bessarion and Ficino had looked at the correspondences between the various philosophical schools,

\(^{135}\) It would be another sixty-four years before Henri Estienne published the first Latin translation of Sextus (see above).

\(^{136}\) Cao, in Paganini and Neto 2009, 129-30. This also explains Pico’s statement that he had read ten books by Sextus (*decem et ego Sexti sceptici libros perlegi*; Pico, *EV* I.2, 737).

\(^{137}\) Cao, in Paganini and Neto 2009, 132.

\(^{138}\) The scholar admits that “such a conclusion is not proof” (*op. cit.* 133).
Savonarola saw contradictions and conflict between those same schools. Whereas Giovanni Pico had aimed for the affirmation of the Jewish Kaballah in the ascent to God, Leo’s bull called for the refutation of any pagan theory that deviated from the Christian paradigm. The most important aspects, then, of the moment at which Pico receives the writings of Sextus are the following. The Renaissance had brought a large number of forgotten philosophical teachings back into the spotlight, recreating the multitude of dogmata that had plagued the ancient sceptics. Those dogmata now existed in a discourse that was fundamentally Christian, and pagan thought could not overrule the superior authority of God. Finally, the sixteenth century saw a rise in hostility towards pagan thought. Philosophy no longer supplemented Christian faith. It was instead rejected on the basis of its being a deviation from Christian faith.

The ancient sceptics warned of the insurmountable ἴσοσθένεια between the philosophical doctrines, and Savonarola and Pico saw those same contradictions rise again as the fifteenth century had brought the wealth of differing opinions from antiquity out of the shadows. There was, however, one essential difference between the sceptics of old and Pico. The ἴσοσθένεια of the various philosophical doctrines left the sceptics with no dogma to subscribe to, but Pico did have a dogma that transcended that of the philosophers: the word of God.
4 – Sextus Empiricus and the Sceptics in the *Examen vanitatis*

The context of Gianfrancesco Pico has been established, and it is time to delve into the *Examen vanitatis* itself. This chapter will inquire into the overall presence of Sextus Empiricus in the *Examen vanitatis* and Pico’s attitude towards the sceptic. Is Sextus described as a trustworthy source on ancient philosophy? How important are the sceptical borrowings in Pico’s general argument? It will be shown that the sceptics have a varying amount of authority in the *Examen vanitatis*, creating a paradoxical image of their worth. Before I illustrate these points, an introductory section must be devoted to an outline of the works of Sextus and the treatise by Pico.

4.1 – Sextus and Pico: Overview of their works

4.1.1 – Sextus’ definition of scepticism and overview of his *Outlines* and *Against the Mathematicians*

Sextus’ scepticism contains two lines of argument.

Τῆς σκεπτικῆς οὖν φιλοσοφίας ὁ μὲν λέγεται καθόλου λόγος ὁ δὲ εἰδικὸς, καὶ καθόλου μὲν ἐν ὧν ὁ τόν χαρακτῆρα τῆς σκέψεως ἐκτιθέμεθα, λέγοντες τίς ἔννοια αὐτῆς καὶ τίνες ἀρχαὶ καὶ τίνες λόγοι, τί τε κριτήριον καὶ τί τέλος, καὶ τίνες οἱ τρόποι τῆς ἐποχῆς, καὶ πῶς παραλαμβάνομεν τὰς σκεπτικὰς ἀποφάσεις, καὶ τὴν διάκρισιν τῆς σκέψεως ἀπὸ τῶν παρακειμένων αὐτῆς φιλοσοφιῶν· εἰδικὸς δὲ ἐν ὧν ὥστε ἐκαστὸν μέρος τῆς καλομένης φιλοσοφίας ἀντιλέγομεν.

(Sextus Empiricus, P. I.5)

Of the sceptical philosophy one is called the general argument, the other the specific argument. In the general argument, we explain the nature of scepticism, stating what its intent is, what its principles, its arguments, its criterion, and its goal are, what the modes for suspension of judgement are, and in what sense we use the sceptical expressions, and what the difference is between Scepticism and the philosophies that surround it. In the specific argument, we refute each part of the so-called philosophy.

In the first book of his *Outlines*, Sextus presents the general argument of scepticism. Firstly, Sextus defines scepticism as follows:
The sceptical ability is one which opposes appearances and opinions in any way whatsoever, and as a result we come, through the equal strength of the opposed occurrences and arguments, first to suspension of judgement, and then to peace of mind.

The goal of the sceptic is to obtain peace of mind (ἀταραξία), a goal shared by other philosophical schools in the Hellenistic era. However, unlike the Stoic or Epicurean, the sceptic finds no peace through adopting a prescribed dogma. He sees that neither the Stoic nor the Epicurean doctrine outweighs the other. Because the Stoic position and the Epicureanism have equal strength (ἰσοσθένεια), the sceptic cannot conclusively judge which path to his coveted ἀταραξία is the right one. Should he walk down the path of the Stoics, or the path of the Epicureans? Ἡσοσθένεια is essential to Sextus’ general argument, for he believes that it applies to all human knowledge. For any proposition, an opposite proposition exists that is equally likely to be true (συστάσεως δὲ τῆς σκεπτικῆς ἐστιν ἀρχή μάλιστα τὸ παντὶ λόγῳ λόγον ἱσον ἀντικεῖσθαι). Thus it is impossible for the sceptic to say that any dogmatic proposition is the superior one.

The sceptic ultimately decides not to choose any doctrine, and suspends his judgment (ἐποχή) instead. This suspension brings about the desired ἀταραξία, since the sceptic no longer needs to worry whether he should adopt a Stoic or an Epicurean lifestyle. Sextus explains this process through the anecdotal story of Apelles the painter.

Ὅπερ οὖν περὶ Ἀπελλοῦ τοῦ ζωγράφου λέγεται, τοῦτο ὑπήρξε τῷ σκεπτικῷ. Φασί γὰρ ὅτι ἐκείνος ἦπον γράφων καὶ τὸν ἄφρόν τοῦ Ἱπποῦ μιμήσασθαι τῇ γραφῇ βουλήτεις οὕτως ἀπετύχανεν ὡς ἀπειπεῖν καὶ τὴν σπογγόν εἰς ἣν ἢμέμεισε τὰ ἀπὸ τοῦ γραφείου χρώματα προσφέρεια τῇ εἰκόνι· τὴν δὲ προσωπαμένην ἱπποῦ ἄφρος ποιήσας μίμησα. Καὶ οἱ σκεπτικοὶ οὖν ἦλπιζον μὲν τὴν ἀταραξίαν ἀναλήψεσθαι διὰ τοῦ τὴν ἀνομαλίαν τῶν φαινομένων τε καὶ νοομένων ἐπικρίναι,
What is said about the painter Apelles, applied to the sceptic. For they say that he [i.e. Apelles] was painting a horse and wanted to mimic the horse’s foam with his pencil. He was so unsuccessful that he gave up and threw his sponge, which he used to wipe the paint off of his brush, at the painting. After getting stuck, it [i.e. the sponge] produced the image of a horse’s foam. And the sceptics hoped to obtain peace of mind by making a decision regarding the inconsistency between the appearances and opinions. Having failed to do so, they suspended their judgement, and peace of mind, as by chance, followed upon their suspension of judgement, just as a shadow follows after a body.

Sextus presents Apelles’ fruitless efforts to recreate methodically the image of a horse’s foam as a metaphor for the pointlessness of methodical dogmatism. The painting of the foam represents the peace of mind that the sceptic seeks. The attempts to paint the foam represent the sceptics’ attempts to attain ἀταραξία by choosing one philosophical dogma over the other. Because no philosophical dogma outweighs another, however, the sceptic cannot choose, just as Apelles fails to recreate the desired image. In frustration, the painter gives up his efforts entirely, and throws his sponge at the painting. Similarly, the sceptic gives up on the philosophical debate entirely. And just as Apelles’ sponge unexpectedly created the image of the foam by getting stuck on the painting, the decision of the sceptic to suspend his judgement unexpectedly brings him ἀταραξία.

Yet even the sceptic must at some point make judgements in order to live a functional life. To say that your sensation of cold might not be true results in you not dressing warmly enough, for example. The sceptic desires a cold no more than any other person. Certain sensations, Sextus says, cannot be put in doubt. The sensation of cold, for example, is unavoidable.140 These “unavoidable passions, caused by the appearances” (κατὰ φαντασίαν κατηναγκάσμενα πάθη), as Sextus calls them,141 befall the sceptic, and he does not doubt them. On the other hand, any proposition regarding the true nature of things beyond the way they appear to us is subject to the sceptical ἰσοσθένεια. Honey tastes sweet to a healthy person,
but sour to a sick person. Our own individual sensations of sweet and sour cannot be doubted, but the differences between our sensations and those of someone else do lead us to conclude that we cannot know the origin of that sensation, i.e. the true taste of honey. The nature of such external objects (ὑποκείμενα) is not evident (ἀδηλόν) to the sceptic, and he cannot judge them. The ὑποκείμενα also extend to abstract concepts such as “goodness” or “badness”. The sceptic might, for example, suffer the sensation of cold, but he cannot conclude that coldness is in its essence “bad”.

Οὐ μὴν ἀόρατον πάντη τὸν σκεπτικὸν εἶναι νομίζωμεν, ἀλλ’ ὅχλεσθαι φαμεν ὑπὸ τῶν κατηναγκασμένων· καὶ γὰρ ῥίγον ποτε ὁμολογῶμεν καὶ διψήν καὶ τοιούτοτροπά τινα πάσχειν. Αλλὰ καὶ ἐν τούτοις οἱ μὲν ἰδίωτα δισσαίς συνέχονται περιστάσεσιν, ὑπὸ τὸ τῶν παθῶν αὐτῶν καὶ οὐχ ἥττον ὑπὸ τοῦ τάς περιστάσεις ταύτας κακὰς εἶναι φύσει δοκεῖν· ὁ δὲ σκεπτικὸς τὸ προσδοξάζειν ὅτι ἐστὶ κακὸν τούτον ἐκαστὸν ὡς πρὸς τὴν φύσιν περικρῆν μετριώτερον καὶ ἐν τούτοις ἀπαλλάσσει.


However, we do not suppose that the sceptic is untroubled at all times. Instead, we say that he is troubled by unavoidable passions. For we agree that at some point he is cold, or suffers thirst or any affliction of that kind. But in these cases, ordinary people are affected by twofold circumstances, namely by the sensations themselves and no less by their believing that those circumstances are bad by nature. The sceptic, on the other hand, rejects the belief that each of these [circumstances] is by their very nature bad, and escapes in these cases too with less discomfort.

By suspending his judgement on the non-evident nature of coldness – which cannot truly be known, since, according to Sextus, for each proposition regarding that nature an equal counterproposition exists – the sceptic is not troubled by the idea that his feeling cold is a bad thing. Because of the ἵνασθεῖα between all propositions that do not concern the unavoidable (individual) sensations, the sceptic cannot truly define the underlying nature of something. Ἐποχὴ is the only available path to peace of mind.

Having established the goals of his scepticism, Sextus dedicates a large section of the first book of his Outlines to an overview of the various methods or
arguments (τρόποι)\textsuperscript{142} – generally translated as “Modes” – which earlier sceptics used to suspend their judgement. The most extensive set of modes is that of the sceptic Aenesidemus,\textsuperscript{143} ten in number and all revolving around the ἰσοσθένεια of various appearances or accounts that originate from an external object. The first mode, for example, focuses on the contradictory sensations various animals have because of the constitution of their bodies, while the second mode highlights the differing sensations and beliefs (regarding the same object) of human beings based on their physical and mental dispositions, and the tenth mode focuses on conflicting laws, customs, and doctrines. Other sets of sceptical modes are reported, such as the five modes of the sceptic Agrippa, which elucidate not only the disparity between opposed arguments, but also the deficiencies of individual arguments. The second and fifth modes of Agrippa, for example, state that every proposition requires some sort of proof. That proof itself must also be true or false. Further proof is required to prove the truthfulness of the first proof. This forces the dogmatic philosopher into either an infinite regress or a circular argument.

Sextus closes the general argument of scepticism by emphasizing the difference between scepticism and dogmatic belief. First, he discusses a number of expressions usually made by the sceptics,\textsuperscript{144} such as “ἐπέχω” (I suspend judgement) and “οὐδὲν ὁρίζω” (I determine nothing). Sextus expressly states that the sceptic does not consider those statements to be universally true. Instead, they reflect the situation as the κατηναγκάσμενα φαινόμενα make it seem to the sceptic at that moment.\textsuperscript{145} The final section of the book discusses the differences between sceptical philosophy and related philosophical schools.\textsuperscript{146} Again, the main argument is that other philosophical schools espouse dogmas and state universal truths, whereas the sceptic only explains what appears to be at any given moment. This refusal to dogmatize makes the general argument of scepticism more a

\textsuperscript{142} Op. cit., I.31-186.
\textsuperscript{143} Bury 1933, xxxvii.
\textsuperscript{144} Sextus, P. I.187-209.
\textsuperscript{145} At the start of the P., Sextus writes (op. cit., I.15):

Τὸ δὲ μέγιστον, ἐν τῇ προφορᾷ τῶν φαινόν τούτων τὸ ἐαυτῷ φαινόμενον λέγει καὶ τὸ πάθος ἀπεργεῖλει τὸ ἐαυτῷ ἀδοξάστως, μηδὲν περὶ τῶν ἔξωθεν ὑποκειμένων διαβεβαιούμενος,

And most of all, in the uttering of those expressions, he [i.e. the sceptic] states what appears to himself and enunciates his own experience without firm belief, drawing no conclusion regarding the external realities.

guideline than a set of rules. As a sceptic, Sextus cannot state that the general argument is universally applicable, but to him it seems evident that it is.

The specific argument is far more extensive, consisting of a critique of the dogmatic beliefs of all other philosophers. The second and third books of the Outlines attack dogmatic philosophy by deconstructing the veracity of concepts used by all philosophers. In the second book, Sextus questions the idea that a conclusive criterion (κριτήριον) for anything can be known— a criterion is that by which one determines the veracity and nature of something. He then uses the sceptical modes established in the general argument, such as the arguments of infinite regress and circular reasoning, to show that various κριτήρια proposed by dogmatic philosophers are not universally conclusive. In doing so, he illustrates that every new κριτήριον is equally inconclusive, necessitating sceptical suspension of judgement. Sextus uses this line of argument continually in his treatises, illustrating that opposing dogmas are equally inconclusive, leading the sceptic to conclude: “ἐπέχω”. Other topics treated in the remaining capita of the Outlines include truth, proof, motion, and the division between “good”, “bad”, and “indifferent”.

Sextus elaborates upon his critique of philosophy in the many books that are collected under the title Against the Mathematicians. There he attacks grammarians, mathematicians, ethicists, musicians, and professors of many other arts. Once again, he presents opposing arguments and then deconstructs each individually to illustrate their equivalent deficiency. The result is a suffocating succession of dogmatic arguments and sceptical counterarguments, as each dogmatic position is placed opposite a counter-position and then deconstructed through one of Sextus’ sceptical τρόποι. Although this elaborate approach is tiring, it is necessary to illustrate the supposed ἴσοςθένεια between the dogmas of the philosophers. To refute one philosopher with less force than the others would threaten this equipollence. The suffocating abundance of

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152 I concur with Bury that Sextus “wearies the reader by his way of piling argument upon argument” (Bury 1933, xlii).
philosophical arguments on display assists Sextus’ cause in a subtler sense, since oversaturated readers will not be in the mood for any further philosophizing.

4.1.2 – Outline of the Examen Vanitatis and the arguments made therein

Gianfrancesco Pico also discourages his reader from philosophizing, though his reasons for doing so are different from Sextus’. Pico opens his treatise with the human quest for truth.

Tanta est percipiendae veritatis hominibus innata cupiditas, quicunque praestare ingenio videbatur, is et eius inveniendae, et aliis patefaciendae negocium libenter susceperit.

(Gianfrancesco Pico, EV I. prooemium, 717)

Such is the desire to perceive truth, innate to human beings, that whoever appeared to excel in intelligence, freely took up the task of discerning it [i.e. truth] and of uncovering it for others.

As it turns out, this quest for truth has lead humanity into an abyss of strife and conflict. According to Pico, the many philosophers of antiquity each took their own road in their search for truth, causing dissent. The multitude of dissenting opinions grew continuously, creating not just a truncum (“trunk”), but also ramos et folia (“twigs and leaves”) of misplaced opinions and vanity. This metaphorical tree has to be cut down, according to Pico:

Ideo existimavi me gratum bonis ingeniis facturum, illam ipsum si fieri posset, ut eruerem, eiusque fibras rationis acie tanquam duro ferro convellerem, quod equidem non difficulter posse fieri arbitror, si universam Gentium doctrinam, superstitione, incertitude, falsitate, labare, hoc ipso quod in manibus habemus opere monstraverimus.

(Op. cit. I. prooemium, 718)

Thus I presumed that I would be providing a service to brilliant men by unearthing it [i.e. the metaphorical tree of reason], if that could be done, and pulling out its fibres with the sharpness of reason as a seasoned blade, which, I think, can be done without much difficulty at all, once I have demonstrated in this very work that we

153 This section is shorter than the previous one: the Examen vanitatis will be analyzed in greater detail in the following sections and chapters.

154 Pico, EV I. prooemium, 717-18.
hold in our hands, that the entire doctrine of the pagans falters because of superstition, uncertainty, and falsehood.

Like Sextus, Pico launches a thorough critique of philosophy and simultaneously proposes his own view of the world. Yet his Christian faith is dogmatic rather than sceptical. The author also does not distinguish between a “general” and a “specific” argument, as Sextus does. Whereas Sextus detailed the general argument of scepticism before embarking on the critique of ancient philosophy, Pico distributes affirmations of Christian faith throughout his treatise. Arguments for the superiority of Christianity are not necessarily ubiquitous in the *Examen vanitatis*. There are entire capitata that focus solely on the critique of ancient philosophy. Nevertheless, the Divine doctrine is mentioned frequently enough that its veracity is always on the mind of the reader.

The first book of the *Examen vanitatis* enumerates the endless dissent between the ancient philosophers. Pico attacks the whole of philosophy, bringing numerous philosophers to the fore and playing their arguments against those of other thinkers. The range of topics under discussion is wide, as Pico examines subjects such as truth, good and evil, and the soul. The division of ancient philosophy into its sub-disciplines (and the dissent among philosophers regarding this subject) is also discussed. Each chapter deals with a certain topic and illustrates the many differing views held by the philosophers.

The second book has a narrower focus than the first. Here, Pico refutes the notion that philosophy can provide any form of criterion (iudicatorium) with which to judge truths and falsehoods. In the first nineteen chapters of the second book, Pico employs the same strategy as in his first book. He enumerates the various iudicatoria proposed by the philosophers in order to prove that philosophy

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159 Pico’s iudicatorium designates the same concept as Sextus’ κριτήριον. The first chapter of the second book is titled *Quod iudicatorium κριτήριον a Graecis vocatum multis capitur modis, et quid eo agendum, quidque hoc ipso libro tractandum, et quomodo* (“That the criterion, called kriterion by the Greeks, is taken in many ways, and what should be argued against it, and what should be discussed in this same book, and in what way”). In this capitut, Pico confirms that it is the same concept as the one that is refuted by the sceptics (*op. cit.* II.1, 819):

   Inde Scepticorum contradictiones afferentur in campum, adversus eos qui affirmavere veritatis esse κριτήριον…

   Then, the contradictions mentioned by (literally: of) the Sceptics will be brought into the field, against those who have affirmed that there is a criterion for truth…
cannot provide a single universal criterion for judgement. In chapters twenty to thirty-five, the sceptics enter the spotlight. Here Pico embarks on what is essentially a translation of Sextus’ sceptical arguments, occasionally fortified by examples from other authors or by Pico’s own arguments.

Scepticos apud antiquiores, decem sive modi, sive loci, sive typi, ad assensum cohibendum custodebantur, de quibus mentionem facit in Pyrrhone Diogenes, sed nec explicat eos, nec eo ordine utitur quo Sextus in primo πυρρωνίων ὑποτυπόσεων, quae nos magna ex parte, quantum ad hoc praesertim attinet securi, et ex Graecis ipsius libris transferemus, et aliis ex authoribus addemus, quae opportuna et consentanea rei de qua agimus videbuntur.

(Op. cit. II.21, 854)

Amongst the elder sceptics, ten modes – or topics, or types – to attain suspension of judgement were observed, which Diogenes [Laërtius] mentions in his Life of Pyrrho, although he does not explain them. He also does not give them in the order that Sextus uses in the first book of his Outlines of Pyrrhonism, large parts of which I shall translate from the Greek of Sextus himself, following him insofar as it pertains to the present task, and I will add arguments from other authors, when those appear to be opportune for and in line with the subject we are discussing.

After his extensive translation of the sceptical modes enumerated by Sextus, Pico moves on to Sextus’ specific argument, translating passages from the second book of the Outlines which argue against the existence of a criterion and of concepts of truth.

Structurally the third book is similar to the first. Once again various subjects are discussed, and the dissent amongst the philosophers regarding these topics is illustrated. However, as in the second half of the second book, the arguments in these capita are translated directly from Sextus’ writings – predominantly Against the Mathematicians, although some arguments from the third book of the Outlines are also included – with occasional additions by Pico.
4.1.3 – *The Examen vanitatis* in relation to Pico’s context

Pico’s time was marked by increased hostility between Christian faith and pagan philosophy.\(^{160}\) Both the papal authority and thinkers such as Savonarola rejected the fifteenth-century quest for *concordia* between faith and philosophy. Instead, they emphasized the divide between the word of God and the expressions of the philosopher. The former was obviously superior. Savonarola felt that knowledge should not be sought in the treacherous depths of reason. Pope Leo X explicitly condemned the Aristotelian notion of a mortal soul and ordered that such a foolish expression be thoroughly refuted. As stated in the previous chapter,\(^{161}\) the latter act can also be seen as a show of force to all who wanted to consider philosophical enquiry. Pico’s *Examen vanitatis* is rooted in this newer, hostile discourse, and it explicitly references the shift from embracing philosophy to rejecting it.

Hic quod ab aliis fieri posse creditum est magis quam probatum, et pollicitus fuerat et servasset, hoc est Aristotelis et Platonis dogmata conciliare, quod negotium ad præsentem usque diem multis difficillimum, nonnullis etiam supra humani captum ingenii creditur esse. Mihi autem venit in mentem consentaneum magis esse, et utile magis, incerta reddere philosophorum dogmata, quam conciliare, ut patruus volebat.

(Pico, *EV* I.2, 738)

He [i.e. Giovanni Pico] had promised and had committed himself to do, what others had believed rather than proven to be possible, that is to reconcile the doctrines of Aristotle and Plato, a task which to this day has been considered most difficult by many and by some even above the grasp of human understanding. But I came to the conclusion that it is more sensible, and more useful, to render the doctrines of the philosophers uncertain than to reconcile them as my uncle wanted to do.

The time of reconciling the doctrines of Aristotle and Plato (*Aristotelis et Platonis dogmata conciliare*) is over. Pico’s treatise exists in a context that would rather refute the proclamations of the philosophers than reconcile them. The desire to render the doctrines of the philosophers uncertain (*incerta reddere philosophorum*...
dogamata) is rooted both in the teachings of Savonarola and in the anti-intellectual discourse of the Papacy. Pico borrowed the idea that human reasoning is uncertain from Savonarola. The active desire to refute – evident from incerta reddere – on the other hand, corresponds to Pope Leo’s call for arms in the battle against philosophy.\textsuperscript{162} The Pope and his vision of philosophy are also referenced in the Examen vanitatis in a number of ways.

Firstly, Pico directly refers to the papal bull Apostolici Regiminis when he discusses the dissent between the commentators of Aristotle regarding the immortality of the soul. Those who entertain the notion that the soul is mortal, Pico says, have already been condemned by the Pope, whose speech had attended himself.\textsuperscript{163} Secondly, Pico echoes the language of the bull itself. I previously discussed a passage wherein Pico uses the metaphor of a tree that has to be uprooted to illustrate the actions he will take to combat the excesses of reason. Pico owes this metaphor to the Apostolici Regiminis, wherein weeds that must be uprooted also signify the actions that must be taken against heretical pagan expressions.\textsuperscript{164} The Pope ordered that any scholar who had discussed erroneous philosophical statements, should illustrate with all his power the truth of Christianity (veritatem religionis Christianae omni conatu manifestam facere) and that he should refute and dissolve the arguments of the philosophers to the best of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Savonarola was not too keen on philosophy, but he humoured Giovanni Pico and was at least willing to discuss the philosophers, even if he could not condone their alliance with Christianity; Garin 1990, 525-27.
\item Pico, EV I.14, 781:
Nec desunt nostra tempestate qui blatterent eorum opinionem saltem secundum philosophiam veram esse, quasi Averrois et Alexandri schola sit universa philosophia, et quasi verum possit esse adversum vero, quorum errorem etiam nuper Leo decimus Pontifex Maximus in Laterano concilio condemnavit, anno a Christiana salute tertio decimo supra millesimum et quitengentesimum, quarto decimo Kal. Ianuarii octava in sessione, in qua et ipse sedi, et pronunciari decretum ipsum vidi.
Nor does our time lack those who spouted the nonsense that their [\textit{i.e.} Alexander of Aphrodisias and Averroës, commentators of Aristotle] opinion at least adheres to the truthful philosophy, as if the school of Averroës and Alexander of Aphrodisias encompasses all of philosophy, and as if something contrary to the truth can be true. Pope Leo the Tenth recently condemned their opinion in the council of the Lateran, in the year of our Lord 1513, on the 9th of December, during the eighth session, which I myself attended and where saw him declare that decree.
Note that Pico here implies both that dissent is inherent to philosophy (the opinions of Alexander of Aphrodisias and of Averroës cannot apply to all of philosophy) and that philosophy is the falsehood that is opposed to Christian truth.
\item Cao 2007, 36-37.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
his abilities (*pro viribus excludere atque resolvere*).\(^{165}\) Pico states that this is exactly what he intends to do.

De quibus omnibus praesenti libro disseremus non authoritatiibus duntaxat nixi, quod fecimus libro superiore, sed argumentis ipsorum usi, quae ubi pro viribus explicuerimus, veritatem ipsam, ex sacris haberis litteris posse, indeque petendum esse subsignabimus.

*(Op. cit. II. prooemium, 817)*

In the current book, I will discuss all of these things, not only relying on authorities, as I have done in the previous book, but making use of their own arguments. Once I have explained those to the best of my abilities, I shall underscore the truth itself, which can be obtained from the sacred Scriptures and must be sought there.

Pope Leo’s admonition to disclose the arguments of the philosophers *pro viribus* and prove the superiority of faith recurs in the *Examen vanitatis*. Pico’s treatise essentially realizes what the bull implied: a refutation of the arguments of the philosophers. Since the superiority of the Christian faith is presupposed, obvious even, the main objective of the *Examen vanitatis* is the refutation of philosophy. The affirmation of Christian faith is a secondary goal.

4.2 – Pico’s attitude towards Sextus

Pico takes a paradoxical attitude towards Sextus and the sceptics. On the one hand, more than half of Pico’s critique of philosophy would crumble if one were to take out all the sceptical arguments and borrowings from Sextus’ works. On the other hand, Pico is careful to remind the reader that the author whose writings provide him with so many arguments is still subject to the conflicts and falsehoods inherent to philosophy.

4.2.1 – *The first book of the* Examen vanitatis

As stated above, Sextus does not get centre stage until halfway through the second book. Yet Pico’s approach in refuting the statements of the philosophers in the

\(^{165}\) See op. cit., 34 and note 5 (*ibidem*).
first book already resembles Sextus’ own.\textsuperscript{166} Despite this resemblance, Sextus has no greater presence in the first book of the \textit{Examen vanitatis} than other philosophers. In fact, Pico shows his extensive knowledge as a humanist by referencing a great many sources, both ancient and contemporary, in his enumeration of the various arguments of the philosophers.\textsuperscript{167} Pico borrows from the writings of Sextus a number of times,\textsuperscript{168} often without acknowledgement. However, in the first book, Sextus amounts to little more than a source of information. Citations are mostly doxographical in nature – \textit{i.e.} Pico cites Sextus when the sceptical author himself recounts the arguments of other philosophers. Such citations are also far less extensive than in the following two books, nor do they occur with the same frequency.\textsuperscript{169}

In contrast to the dogmatic philosophers, Sextus escapes from Pico’s critique relatively unscathed. This is largely because Sextus himself offers no truths or dogmatic propositions to rival the word of God, which deprives Pico of the opportunity – or the need – to play Sextus against his dogmatic rivals. Sextus cannot be accused of proclaiming false truths because he proclaims no absolute truths. Pico generally treats Sextus as trustworthy source of information, and occasionally, even, as a superior source. The commentators Simplicius and Gellius, for example, recount the wrong origin for the term “Pyrrhonists”, even thought Sextus, according to Pico, stated the correct origin clearly enough.\textsuperscript{170}

\textsuperscript{166} “Although Sextus Empiricus’ presence only becomes explicit in the \textit{Examen vanitatis} at chapter XX of book ii, the sceptical motif that inspires Pico’s argument is clear from the start” (Cao 2007, 6).

\textsuperscript{167} Pico references classical sources in both Greek and Latin, as well as a number of post-classical writers. The Greek sources include Xenophon, Aristotle, Sextus, and Plutarch. Among the Latin sources are Cicero – to whose \textit{Academica} Pico partly owes his knowledge of Academic scepticism (see also Schmitt 1972) – Iamblichus, Pliny, Seneca, Augustine, and Simplicius. The postclassical sources include Thomas Aquinas, John Don Scotus, Bessarion, and Giovanni Pico.

\textsuperscript{168} See Cao 2007, 41-104 for the complete list of Pico’s borrowings from Sextus’ \textit{Outlines} and \textit{Against the Mathematicians}. In the first book, Pico cites or paraphrases passages from Sextus 31 times, beginning in the second chapter (page 736). The citations range from a few sentences to full \textit{capitata} from Sextus’ \textit{Outlines} and \textit{Against the Mathematicians}. The borrowings also appear mostly in clusters. For example, pages 757-60 contain 11 citations from the works of Sextus. The next cluster of citations starts on page 806, with only two solitary citations in between those clusters, on pages 755 and 782.

\textsuperscript{169} The second book of the \textit{Examen vanitatis} contains a total of 122 borrowings from Sextus. The third book contains 146 citations. Often the majority of the text of Pico’s \textit{capitata} in the second and third books consists of these borrowings.

\textsuperscript{170} Pico, \textit{EV I}.2, 734:

\textit{...iidem et Pyrrhonii [dicti sunt], non quod author sectae fuerit Pyrrhon ut visus est existimasse Simplicius in Aristotelis Categorias, ut etiam Gellius in decimo, sed quod eis iam inventae et amplificator et declarator extiterit, quod aperte satis habetur a Sexto philosopho in primo πυρρόνιοι ύποτευκόμενοι.}
Nevertheless, Pico underscores Sextus’ status as a member of the philosophers that he wishes to refute. He calls his source both *Sextus scepticus* and, more tellingly, *Sextus philosophus*. Although Sextus has no dogma that can be uprooted, Pico finds other ways to destabilize the idea of Sextus as a source of truthful information. When possible, Pico pits the opinions of Sextus against those of other philosophers, involving Sextus in the controversy of the philosophers. For example, Sextus suggests that there are three possible results of philosophical enquiry: the philosopher either assents to the result, rejects the result, or continues the enquiry.

Toίς ζητοῦσι τι πρᾶγμα ἢ εὑρέσιν ἐπακολουθεῖν εἰκός ἢ ἄρνησιν εὑρέσεως καὶ ἀκαταληπτικός ὁμολογικός ἢ ἐπιμονήν ζητήσεως. διὸ περί ἑαυτῶν κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν ζητοῦμεν... ὅθεν εὐλόγως δοκοῦσιν αἱ ἀνοτάτῳ φιλοσοφίᾳ τρεῖς εἶναι, δογματικὴ Ἀκαδημαϊκὴ σκεπτικὴ.

(Sextus, P. I.1-4)

For those who inquire into a matter, it is natural to either accept the result [of the enquiry], or reject the result and agree with the fact that it [i.e. the matter] is inapprehensible, or to continue the enquiry. So too regarding the matters of philosophical enquiry...hence it seems logical that there are three main types of philosophy, the dogmatic type, the Academic type, and the sceptical type.

Pico cites Sextus’ division and then illustrates that, in contrast, Galenus proposes a quadripartite division of philosophical enquiry.

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…those same philosophers were also called Pyrrhonists, not because Pyrrho was the founder of the sect, as Simplicius seems to have thought in his *Categories of Aristotle* and also Gellius in his tenth book, but because Pyrrho was the trailblazer and announcer of a sect that had already been invented, which is held clearly enough by Sextus the philosopher in the first book of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.

171 Pico clearly ranks the sceptics among the pagan philosophical schools (*ibidem*).
172 See, for example, *Pico EV* I.2, 734 (cited above, in note 170).
173 Pico also picks up on the lack of information surrounding Sextus’ identity, and he emphasizes the ambiguity around the sceptic. For example, he points out various contrasting accounts of Sextus’ full name. Galenus calls him “Sextus Empiricus Afer”, but some sources suggest the name “Sextius” or “Sestus”, according to Pico (*op. cit.* I.2, 737; see also Cao, in *Paganini and Neto* 2009, 134). It was not unusual for sources to provide contradictory names of ancient authors. Still, although the discussion of the various names given to Sextus is relatively innocuous on its own, it contributes to Pico’s general desire to destabilize the pagan philosophers.
174 Interestingly, Cao does not mention this reference to Sextus in his catalogue of Pico’s borrowings, despite the fact that the citation was present in the original 1520 edition, which Cao studied (Cao 2007, 41).
Here Sextus distinguished three primary parts, as some would say that a matter can be apprehended, some would deny that it can, and others would question and doubt it. But in his History of Philosophy, Galenus preferred four parts, for besides the affirmative dogmatic part and the dubitative sceptic part, he adds a combative or contentious part, and a part that is a mixture [i.e. of the other parts].

In conclusion, Sextus’ role in the first book of the Examen vanitatis is that of a doxographical source of information. While his writings are relatively inoffensive to Pico’s anti-intellectual sensibilities, the humanist is careful not to embrace his source of information too closely.

4.2.2  – The second and third book of the Examen vanitatis

The sceptics are referenced scarcely in the first half of the second book, when Pico enumerates the various criteria for judgement proposed by ancient philosophers. Nevertheless, he continues to cite doxographical passages from Sextus, often without acknowledgement. The situation changes completely in the twentieth chapter. As stated above, Pico embarks on what is essentially a translation of the arguments of Sextus. All sceptical modes for suspending judgement discussed by Sextus in his general argument are covered here, as well as Sextus’ misgivings regarding the concept of a κριτήριον in his specific argument. Unlike the first book, the second and third book abound in actual sceptical arguments. From the twentieth chapter of the second book to the end of the third book, every caput consists of a selective translation from Sextus’ works, with an occasional addition from other sources. Here Pico does not simply transcribe information from Sextus’ Outlines and Against the Mathematicians, but also the philosopher’s refutations of dogmatic positions.

175 Note that Pico here reformulates Sextus’ continued enquiry (ἐπιμονή ζητήσεως) as doubt (quaeerent et dubitarent) aimed at the conclusion of the enquiry. This places the central focus on the sceptical rejection of philosophical dogma rather than the drive to continue the enquiry.
For example, both the first and third book contain a chapter which refutes the grammarians.¹⁷⁶ Pico’s own critique of the grammarians in book one is substantially shorter than Sextus’, and it consists only of a summary of the various opinions of the philosophers, taken from the start of Sextus’ own chapter.¹⁷⁷ Here Pico is content to emphasize that the philosophers disagree with one another. For example, he states that:

Dionysius Thracius existimavit Grammaticam esse ἐμπειρίαν, hoc est peritiam experimentiamve eorum quae apud poëtas plurimum versarentur. Contradixit Ptolemaeus peripateticus ἐμπειρίαν non esse Grammaticam aperte contendens, cui et nonnulli assensere, inter quos Asclepiades.

(Op. cit. I.6, 749)

Dionysius of Thrace considered the art of grammar to be experience, that is understanding or experience of most of the expressions which are used by the poets. Ptolemaeus the peripatetic opposed him, clearly contending that the art of grammar was not experience. Some agreed with Ptolemaeus, such as Asclepiades.

Sextus’ critique of the Grammarians, on the other hand, continues as a diligent dissection of the various propositions of the philosophers. Unlike Pico, who merely wants to illustrate the dissent between the philosophers, Sextus must prove that the opposing propositions are equally unsatisfying. For example, Sextus discusses the same dispute between Dionysius of Thrace and Ptolemaeus the Peripatetic. He does not simply note the dispute, but he also questions and criticizes both Dionysius’s proposition that the art of grammar means knowledge of a certain amount, namely the majority, of the expressions used by the poets and Ptolemaeus’s counter-proposition that the art of grammar simply entails knowing any amount of the expressions used by the poets. By defusing both arguments, Sextus proves that neither is conclusive, and that sceptical suspension of judgement is necessary. In the third book Pico translates these counterarguments to the propositions of the grammarians.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Pico, EV I.6, 748-50 and III.3, 925-40.
¹⁷⁷ Sextus, M. I.66-75.
¹⁷⁸ Pico, EV III.3, 926.
Scepticism becomes the crux of Pico’s argument, and the author attempts to amplify Sextus’ writings with additional examples. Pico even brings examples from his own life to bear, such as the unusual tastes of his son Alberto, or the allergy of Cardinal Oliviero Carafa which makes him unable to appreciate spring flowers like other people do. These examples seemingly show an effort on Pico’s part to contribute actively to the sceptical argument that is presented here. However, the humanist rarely brings more to the table than examples. “No attention is paid to the intrinsic difficulties of Aenesidemus’ argument,” and “Pico’s exposition also pays little attention to the context of Aenesidemus’ reasoning.” This lack of a critical engagement with the sceptical arguments of Sextus can also be seen in Pico’s style of translation. He translates the writings of Sextus without a critical eye, and as a result errors in Pico’s manuscript source slip unnoticed into the Examen vanitatis. Cao points out one such error in Pico’s first book. There, the author faithfully translates κατὰ περμήδοτον (“in the same way as ‘Permedotus’”) as sicuti Permedotus. However, κατὰ περμήδοτον is “an untenable reading that Sextus’ modern editors correct as κατὰ τῶν περὶ Μηνόδοτον (‘against the school of Menodotus’, or ‘in opposition to Menodotus’) but that Pico trustfully embraced.”

Pico becomes more proactive in the third book, when he starts to add actual arguments of his own – as well as arguments from his uncle – to expand on Sextus’ critique. However, he does so not to fortify Sextus’ reasoning, but because he feels the philosopher’s critique of philosophy was not thorough enough. Additional arguments against the professors of geometry do not support the sceptics so much as they support the philosophical controversy (ducı possunt...
in controversiam) that Pico wants to unearth.\footnote{Pico, EV III.6, 954.} Sextus’ arguments against the Astrologers are explicitly deemed insufficient.\footnote{Op. cit. III.8, 960: Praetermittunt autem ea ratione, quod illi satis contradictum sit, quandu
Arithmeticae, et Geometriae contradixerunt, ex quibus ipsa constituitur, quod mihi quidem videtur longe
secus.
The sceptics pass over this type of reason, as if it had been sufficiently contradicted when
they refuted arithmetic and geometry, from which this type \textit{i.e.} Astrology is constituted;
but this most certainly does not seem to be the case to me.}

Despite his overreliance on sceptical arguments, Pico continues to be (rightfully)\footnote{See sections 3.5, 3.6, and 4.1.3.} hesitant to associate himself with a pagan thinker such as Sextus, and he continues to underscore Sextus’ status as a philosopher. Doubt is sown on Sextus’ trustworthiness as a source, despite the fact that Pico has generally presented him as a reliable informant and continues to do so elsewhere. Pico remarks that Sextus might not convey true information \textit{(si vera a Sexto relata sunt)}.\footnote{Pico questions Sextus’ value as a source during a discussion of the arguments raised by the Academic sceptics against the Stoic criterion for distinguishing knowledge from opinion \textit{(op. cit. II.14}, 842):
Contradixit \textit{[Stoicos]} Archiselaus ostendens compræhensionem non esse iudicatorium inter
scientiam et opinionem, in hunc modum \textit{(si vera a Sexto relata sunt)} argumentatus (my
emphasis)... Archiselaus contradicted the Stoics by showing that comprehension was no criterion for
judgement between knowledge and opinion, arguing in this way \textit{(if Sextus has recounted
these things correctly)...}} On its own, the statement is no more than an innocuous remark of the
fact that Sextus is a second-hand source of Academic thought, which is the object of discussion in this passage. Yet the repeated emphasis on the untrustworthiness of pagan sources of knowledge in the \textit{Examen vanitatis} makes such a remark seem less innocuous.

Most importantly, Pico has this to say about his source before he starts his translation.

\begin{quote}
Inter hos \textit{[Scepticos]} Pyrrhon magnum habuit momentum, deinde et Aensidemus,
et aliis permulti, ultimus quod sciam in eorum secta Sextus Empiricus, quem cum pleriiisque aliis adhiberi in ecclesia nostra ad fastum et vanam curiositatem consuevisse, dolet Gregorius Nazianzensus, et recte quidem, quando vitia illa extirpanda sunt, non fovenda. Ad Philosophorum vero repelendam arrogantiam, et excellentiam fidei Christianae monstrandum, possunt esse utiles...
\end{quote}
\begin{quote}(Op. cit. II.20, 852-53)\end{quote}
Among those sceptics Pyrrho was of great influence, followed by Aenesidemus and many others, and as the last of their sect – as far as I know – Sextus Empiricus. In our church, Sextus, along with most of the others, was usually applied to pride and vain curiosity, which grieved Gregory of Nazianze, and rightfully so. For such vices must be eradicated, not nurtured. The sceptics can be useful, however, to repel the arrogance of the philosophers and demonstrate the excellence of Christian faith.

Here Pico effectively states that scepticism can have no other use than as a tool in the Christian argument against philosophy. Previous Christian scholars had made use of sceptical arguments for the pursuit of a sinful type of curiosity, and he does not want to follow in their footsteps. The notion of *vana curiositas* can be traced back to Augustine, whom Pico has studied.191 Augustine discusses the vice of curiosity in the tenth book of his *Confessions*.

\[
\text{Praeter enim concupiscentiam carnis, quae inest in delectatione omnium sensuum et voluptatum, cui servientes depereunt qui longe se faciunt a te, inest animae per eosdem sensus corporis quaedam non se oblectandi in carne, sed experiendi per carneg vana et curiosa cupiditas nomine cognitionis et scientiae palliata.}
\]

(Augustine, *Confessiones* X.35.54)

For besides the strong desire of the flesh, which lies in the pleasure of all the senses and delights, whose [i.e. the desire of the flesh] servants, who remove themselves far from You, perish, there lies in the soul, through the same senses of the flesh, and cloaked in the name of knowledge and learning, a certain vain and curious desire, not for having pleasure in the flesh, but for experimenting through the flesh.

A desire for knowledge is not in and of itself sinful. However, as Augustine emphasizes, there is a type of enquiry that leads one away from God (*qui longe se faciunt at te*). The good Christian seeks knowledge of God and transcendental things. He does not merely want to know the material world.192 If knowledge is not pursued in order to reach God, but purely for its own sake, then it is *curiositas*, a vice that must be stamped out.

Pico adopts Augustine’s division between knowledge that leads to God and worldly knowledge pursued for its own sake, and he applies it to the use of

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191 See note 167.
192 See also Moran, in Shand 2003, 162.
scepticism in the Church. As he states, there is a right way and a wrong way to use sceptical arguments. On the one hand, one may use sceptical arguments in order to further or settle philosophical arguments. However, such an endeavour does not lead to the ascension to God. To entertain sceptical arguments for the sake of worldly discussions is to pursue knowledge (or peace of mind) for its own sake. That is, as Augustine wrote, a *vana et curiosa cupiditas*. Alternatively, the user of sceptical arguments may actually use those arguments to further the goals of the Christian doctrines. In doing so, he will serve God and thus avoid the vice of the *vana curiositas*.

Pico does not intend to devote himself to sceptical enquiry for its own sake. The arguments of Sextus are a tool to use in an argument against dogmatic philosophy. For Pico’s criticism of philosophy leads to an affirmation of Christian faith and services God. The arguments of Sextus Empiricus are useful in that respect, but they must not be nurtured on their own. Thus Pico takes care not to analyze the arguments of the sceptics too critically and constructively, as Cao correctly stated. Had he done so, he would have risked slipping into *vana curiositas*.

In summary, the writings of Sextus are useful to Pico insofar as he can draw information on the dogmas of the philosophers and arguments against those dogmas from the *Outlines* and *Against the Mathematicians*. The specific argument of Sextus’ scepticism can be copied uncritically and aimed once again at the philosophers. The general argument of scepticism, on the other hand, is pushed aside by Pico. For, unlike the destructive specific argument, the general argument constructs non-dogmatic guidelines for the sceptic to follow. Those are guidelines written by a pagan and lead to pagan knowledge, as Pico points out. Augustine condemned pagan knowledge that does not have God as its goal, and thus the tenets of Sextus’ general argument are *vitia* that *extirpanda sunt, non fovenda*. 
5 – The Reduction of Sextus’ General Argument

Cao finds it regrettable that Gianfrancesco Pico’s “commerce with Sextus remained embryonic”. The three concepts that form the core of Sextus’ general argument, “the equipollence of beliefs, the suspension of judgement, and the tranquillity of the mind” are all diminished in Pico’s treatise. This leads to Cao dismissing Pico’s scepticism as “a watered-down transcription of its source.” I have already discussed how Pico presents Sextus as no more than a source for counterarguments to the dogmas of the philosophers. Here, I will analyze how Pico underscores the divide between Christianity and philosophy, as called for by the Papal bull. For Pico’s substantiation of Christian superiority further supports his statement that what amounts to the general argument of scepticism should not be nurtured.

5.1 – God versus Man

In the previous chapter, I discussed Pico’s division of philosophical arguments by their goal – i.e., one can pursue scepticism either to affirm the truth of God’s doctrine, or for sinful curiositas. Pico’s division also applies to the different ways one can attempt to acquire knowledge. One can claim to seek knowledge through faith in God, or one can claim to gain wisdom by human means. In order to distinguish Christian dogma from those of the philosophers, Pico distinguishes faith from reason. The former paves the road to wisdom granted by God. The latter cannot lead to the truth, since it employs the inferior methods of man. This fundamental division between gaining knowledge through God and seeking it through reason founds both Pico’s argument against philosophy as a whole and his reason for neglecting the general argument of Sextus.

In order to destabilize all rational thought, Pico, as stated previously, subscribes to Savonarola’s opinion that reason and philosophy constitute a doctrine that is multiform and discordant. The Christian doctrine must, by contrast, be one and concordant, for its founder is God himself. Pico assumes that the truth is singular and that the method to divulge truth must consequently be

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193 Cao 2007, 40.
simple and internally consistent. The multiplicity of philosophy inevitably results in disagreement, Pico states, which makes it impossible to divulge the truth.

Nam cum una tantum veritas et sit, et habetur, multae tamen sunt viae, quibus ad eam pervestigandam accessit antiquitas, atque hinc quanquam diversitas manavit opinionum, eis tamen et scientiae, et sapientiae, et doctrinae, appelationes indiderunt, honesta illa quidem nomina, si quod sperabant fuissent consecuti, sed non tot inter illos bella, nec tot seculis vigissent.

(Op. cit. Iprooemium, 719)

For even though there is, and there is held, only one truth, there are multiple roads which antiquity took to decipher it, and although from there a diversity of opinions has flown, they nevertheless called those “science”, “wisdom”, and “doctrine”. Those words would certainly be honest, had they followed through on what they hoped, and had there not raged so many wars between them for so many generations.

Christian dogma, on the other hand, consists of only one road to truth.

Quando unum dogma ex Mosaicis, Propheticis, Evangelicis, Apostolocis litteris in examine positum, omnibus qui in altera lance collocari queant Gentium doctrinis, longe praepondere.

(Op. cit. I.20, 814)

For the single dogma from the Mosaic, Prophetic, Evangelic and Apostolic writings, when placed on the scale, by far outweighs all doctrines of the pagans that can be placed on the opposite scale.

Pico’s task is thus to show that the simplicity of faith is indeed the reason for its reliability by disproving the arguments on the opposite scale (altera lance). He must illustrate that the multiple doctrinae Gentium are indeed riddled with discord, and that the philosophers pro uno et vero plures et falsos invexerunt (“put forward things that are multiple and false in the place of something simple and true”; op. cit. I.1, 724). Then the simple and unanimous Christian faith will clearly be superior.

196 I disagree with Cao’s statement that according to Pico “philosophy would be false even if it spoke with one voice” (Cao 2007, 9). That statement neglects that fact that Pico’s entire argument rests on the assumption that philosophy is a multiform entity from which many dissenting voices
Pico has no intention of aggravating the Papacy, and thus he wilfully ignores that the Christian tradition has known its own internal dissenting opinions. Pico repeatedly refers to the Scriptures as a concordant source of truth, making no mention of the existence of apocryphal writings. However, the humanist is aware of the fact that theologians disagree with each other just as philosophers do. He counters this argument by asserting that any disagreement between men of faith is caused exclusively by their interaction with philosophy:

\[
\text{Si quid vero inter ipsos Theologos discordiarum emersit, id totum fluxit a fontibus philosophorum.}
\]

\textit{(Op. cit. I.20, 814)}

If indeed any sort of discordance arose between those theologians, it flowed forth entirely from the wells of the philosophers.

The superiority of Christian doctrine and worldly reason also suffices, in Pico’s eyes, to validate using philosophical arguments in a treatise that denounces philosophy. In the previous chapter I discussed the passage where Pico warns that scepticism is of itself a \textit{vana curiositas} and must not be nurtured, and that it is only useful as a weapon against other philosophical schools. Pico continues:

\[
\text{...eiusque desiderio magni olim viri et praeclari tenebant, ut alibi scripsimus, quando hostibus ecclesiae nostrae nocere queunt, et contra ecclesiam si retoqurentur, nihil haberent virium, neque enim nostrae principia fidei pendent ab homine, sed ab ipso Deo, nec sensu habentur aut phantasia, aut humana inventione, sed revelatione Divina.}
\]

\textit{(Op. cit. II.20, 853)}

And there was a time when great and illustrious men kept to the desire to do so \textit{[i.e. use scepticism to refute the philosophers]}, as I have stated elsewhere. For the sceptics can harm the enemies of our Church, and if they were turned against the Church, they would have no power, since the principles of our faith derive not from man, but from God himself. They are not obtained through sense or appearance or human invention, but through Divine revelation.

emanate. It seems more likely to me that Pico would consider the idea of philosophy speaking “with one voice” as absurd.
The sceptics attack the dogmatic philosophers, whose arguments are based on reason, a human invention. The object of the sceptical critique is dogmatism, but the Christian dogma cannot, according to Pico, be ranked among those of the philosophers. For the dogmatic philosophers whom the sceptics criticize constitute their dogmas through rational thought, which is a human method. The faith of the Christian is something else entirely, granting knowledge through Divine revelation. In short, the sceptics designed arguments against human dogma, but those same arguments cannot overthrow the obviously superior Divine dogma.\footnote{Again Pico willfully ignores the cracks in his argument. Sextus does actually extensively discuss the concept of God and the various Gods proposed by his peers (Sextus, M. IX.1-194). Pico is only interested the arguments that Sextus raises against the Gods of the philosophers, and even then his borrowings in this caput are more succinct than in other chapters of the third book (Pico, EV III.11, 982-84).}

Pico never explicitly renounces Sextus’ concept of ἱσοσθένεια. Many of the sceptical arguments borrowed by Pico are, as stated previously, designed to illustrate the equal deficiency of two opposing philosophical arguments. On the other hand, the humanist makes little effort to strive for ἱσοσθένεια himself. As discussed in the previous chapter, in his first book Pico is content with illustrating that there exists dissent between the philosophers. This makes sense, for Pico’s ultimate condemnation of pagan philosophy results, as stated previously, not from equality of arguments but, conversely, from the superiority of faith over reason. Sextus had no superior Christian dogma to fall back on and thus needed to stress the equal strength of opposing philosophical doctrines to validate his call for suspension of judgement. Pico merely needs to prove that those doctrines are opposed. He does not necessarily need to show their ἱσοσθένεια, only their discordia. Their deficiency in the face of faith will then be clear.

5.2 – Et securius, et sanctius

ἲσοσθένεια is not the only sceptical concept that is neglected in the Examen vanitatis. Pico’s exhibition of the sceptical arguments starts with the sceptical modes for suspension of judgement, but Cao is not wrong in stating that assensus cohibere – Pico’s term for ἐποχή\footnote{Pico occasionally uses other verbs in place of cohibere, such as suspendere, compescendere, and retinere.} – is far less vital to Pico’s argument than it was to Sextus’. For Sextus, suspension of judgement was the lifeline that leads the sceptic to ἀταραξία, away from the suffocating controversy of the philosophers.
Pico is already free from philosophy, and his critique approaches the discipline from the outside. This becomes apparent in the prologue to Pico’s third book, when the humanist gives his own meaning to the metaphor of Apelles the painter. For Sextus, Apelles’ struggle to paint the horse’s foam symbolized the struggle of the sceptic-to-be who was unable to settle the disputes of philosophy, and the act of throwing the sponge at the painting symbolized the desperate sceptic suspending his judgement. For Pico, who is not trapped in the dispute of philosophy as Sextus’ sceptic was, the metaphor denotes something else.

Ita mihi magna ex parte in re dissimili contigisset si dicerem, iure fortassis non culparer, quamquam non casui quod sum dicturus, sed et certis causis, et Divinae demum providentiae acceptum refferi volo. Fueram ego diu animi dubius si quae de philosophis Gentium concepissem, an chartis commitere debem, et aliis legendum tradere?

(Op. cit. III. prooemium, 919)

Thus this applied to me to a large extent in a dissimilar matter, if I may say so – be it that I am not, by chance, rightly accused, although I do not want what I am going to say to be told by chance, but accepted in certain causes and to no less than Divine providence. I myself was in doubt for a long time: should I commit the arguments I had conceived regarding the pagan philosophers to paper and pass on something that should be read by others?

In Pico’s version of the story, the horse’s foam stands for the answer to the question of whether the philosophers could and should be refuted. Pico’s coyness in admitting this doubt stems from the worry that his faith might be called into question, but it also once again underscores the fact that Pico approaches philosophy from the outside, whereas Sextus seeks to help the sufferer who is trapped inside philosophy. For Pico, the decision to commit his refutation of philosophy to paper was the proverbial act of throwing the sponge.

Quare iacta iam spongia non quidem indignatione, quippe quae Deus perpeti me voluit, eius ipsius gratia conatus sum aequo animo et patienter ferre: iacta inquam laboris et studii spongia, pars prima equinae spumae confecta, fuerat.

(Op. cit. III. prooemium, 920)

199 See the fourth chapter (section 4.1.1).
Hence the sponge was not thrown because of indignation. Rather, I tried, with the grace of God, to confer patiently and with equanimity the things He wanted me to endure; the sponge, I say, of labour and study was thrown, and the first part of the horse’s foam was created.

This passages also explains why Pico does not seek peace of mind through ἐποχή as Sextus does. The sceptic only attains ἀταραξία by desperately throwing the sponge of ἐποχή at the philosophers. Pico, on the other hand, already has a calm mind (conatus sum aequo animo) when he throws the proverbial sponge, because he is blessed with the grace of God (Eius Ipsius gratia).

Pico’s alliance to God grants him the peace of mind that the sceptic, buried under philosophical dogma, sorely lacks. As a result, Sextus’ ἐποχή is of no use to Pico. The word of God shows him a path that is more universal than the ultimately individualistic²⁰⁰ suspension of judgement that the sceptic has to settle for.

Suscipiunt Sceptici patrias leges, patriis moribus simpliciter et nulla disquisitione acquiescunt, num et hoc nostri; sed et securius, et sanctius qui divinas voces sine scrupuloso rationis examine admittendas iubent…

(Op. cit. III.14, 1006)

The sceptics abide by the laws of their country,²⁰¹ and they are simply and without further investigation at peace with the customs of their country. Do our people not do the same? But they do it more securely and more piously, they who order that the Divine Voices be accepted without the scrupulous enquiry of reason.

Pico is not searching for peace of mind. His faith is a more secure and pious (et securius, et sanctius) than Sextus’ ἀταραξία. Nevertheless, and contrary to Cao’s suggestion, the sceptical modes for suspension of judgement can have other uses

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²⁰⁰ Floridi sharply observes that, because of its refusal to humour any dogmatic proposition, “Skepticism is an individualistic philosophy, which requires subjective responsibility and ‘social space’ – the possibility of living a private life without necessarily interacting publicly with other people – to develop its nondogmatic tranquillity” (Floridi 2002, 32).

²⁰¹ Although Sextus abolishes the treatment of law and custom as dogmas to be followed – the tenth trope of Aenesidemus specifically targets law and custom (see Sextus, P. I.145-63) – he does not forbid the sceptic to follow the laws of his country as long as doing so appears to be beneficial (op. cit. I.17): Ἀκολουθοῦμεν γὰρ τινὶ λόγῳ κατὰ τὸ φαινόμενον ὑποδεικνύντει ἣμῖν τὸ ἐξεν πρὸς τὰ πάροικα ἐθῆ καὶ τοὺς νόμους καὶ τὰς ἀγορὰς καὶ τὰ ὀικεῖα πάθη.

For we follow an argument which, on the basis of the appearances, shows us the life that is in accordance with the customs of our country, and its laws and institutions, as well as our private feelings.

61
in the *Examen vanitatis*. As part of the general argument of scepticism – which, in Pico’s context, pales in comparison to the divine dogma of Christianity – they have little to offer. Yet the modes for suspension of judgement also serve as the foundation for Sextus’ specific argument. That specific argument is useful for Pico’s cause. Thus he removes the sceptical modes from their original context – Sextus’ general argument – and places them directly in the critique of the criteria for judgement of the philosophers. Thus, what were once guidelines for the dishevelled sceptic become “an exhibition of force, a military parade”. In more nuanced terms, Pico salvages the modes for suspension of judgement, because they can serve as the building blocks of Sextus’ specific argument, from which Pico, as stated above, cites extensively in his treatise. The modes are now the *viae ad tollendum iudicatorium stratae* (“the roads paved for overthrowing the criterion”; *op. cit.* II.20, 853). Their role as the path to ἀταραξία is reduced, since for all his merits, Sextus is only a philosopher. If Savonarola and the Papacy have taught Pico anything, it is that God is a far greater guide than the general argument scepticism can ever be.

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202 See chapter four (section 4.1.1).
203 See section 4.1.2. The second book of the *Examen vanitatis* opens with an exhibition of the various criteria for judgement proposed by the dogmatic philosophers, and then expounds Sextus’ arguments against a philosophical criterion, including passages from Sextus’ specific argument. This specific argument is preceded by a translation of the passages from the *Outlines* that discuss the sceptical modes.
204 Cao 2007, 11.
205 See section 4.2.
6 – *Pico scepticus*?

It seems that, although Pico uses Sextus’ critique of the philosophers for his own ends, scepticism itself is of little value to him. Pico’s goal is to refute the arguments of the philosophers *pro viribus*, and copying the sceptical arguments of Sextus is a way to reach that goal. I have discussed how Sextus’ specific argument is, according to Pico, useful in the fight against the dogmatic philosophers. Yet it seems that “beyond this function [scepticism] is of no interest to him.” Sextus’ critique of the philosophers may have been copied, but his general argument does not lead to God and is therefore a *fastus et vana curiositas* that must be avoided. However, if one reads between the lines of Pico’s anti-intellectual *tour de force*, one may see a number of implicit connections between Pico’s Christian doctrine and the sceptical lifestyle advocated by Sextus Empiricus.

6.1 – The Apelles-allegory

In the previous chapter, I discussed Pico’s use of the Apelles-metaphor and how his interpretation of the story contrasted to that of Sextus. Let us look at it again. In the *Outlines*, the metaphor of Apelles and his painting are an important part of Sextus’ general argument. As I have discussed, the story of Apelles and the horse’s foam symbolizes the struggle of the sceptic in his quest for ἀταραξία. Unlike most of the sceptical arguments brought over into the *Examen vanitatis*, this allegory is given a new interpretation by Pico, in a more involving form of reception than the way Pico generally receives Sextus. Here the humanist appropriates the sceptical metaphor and applies it to his own situation, thus creating a stronger link between himself and Sextus than follows from his other borrowings.

I have already discussed the differences between Sextus’ Apelles-metaphor and Pico’s Apelles-metaphor. There are also similarities. Most importantly, both Sextus and Pico face an unyielding opponent in the form of philosophy. Can the sceptic settle the disputes between the philosophers and attain ἀταραξία? Can Pico unearth the incorrigible nature of the philosophical disputes and confirm the truth of God? For both, the answer lies outside of philosophical dogma. The sceptic refuses to entertain a dogmatic train of thought and instead

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chooses the radical option of suspending his judgement entirely. Pico is at first uncertain if he can mount a sufficient argument against philosophy, but he is spurred on by the public value of such an exercise and his love for truth (*et publica utilitate, et amore veritatis*). The equanimity required for such a task is given to him by God.

The fact that Pico appropriates the sceptical metaphor here is highly interesting. One may argue that it fits Sextus’ argument far better than Pico’s. Both the sceptic and the painter perform a final act of desperation that results in an unexpected windfall. The humanist, on the other hand, turns the act of indignation into an act of faithfulness and diligence, as I have discussed earlier (*iacta iam spongia non quidem indignatione*). In doing so, he reshapes the essential elements of the sceptical allegory: the abruptness of suspension, and the fact that suspension unexpectedly results in peace of mind. Pico was granted peace of mind from a Divine source before his proverbial throwing the sponge, as discussed above. He also redefines the forming of the horse’s foam as a process with multiple steps (*pars prima equinae spumae confecta*). Pico’s own situation mirrors Apelles’ original predicament only in the broadest sense. And yet, Pico takes care to redefine the allegory for his own ends.

Why would an opponent of pagan thought resort to using the metaphors of the very peoples that he refutes? As Pico has proven in his first book, he most certainly did not lack sources to pull from. I have already discussed an example of a metaphor Pico borrowed from his Christian sources. Furthermore, the metaphor of a painter who produces the image of an animal’s foam through the act of throwing a sponge at his painting is not unique to Sextus. Yet the version where Apelles is the frustrated painter is the version told by Sextus. Pico must have seen some value in Sextus’ metaphor, or he would not have incorporated it into his own text. He chose this specific version of the “painter and the foam”-story and redefined the meaning of the allegory, which, in its original state, only broadly reflected his own disposition regarding the problem of pagan philosophy.

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208 See note 167. Pico’s critique of Aristotle in books four through six further shows how studious the humanist was. See Schmitt 1967, 55-159 for a detailed analysis of this critique and the various sources – classical, medieval, and contemporary – that Pico employed.
209 See section 4.1.3.
210 For example, a similar story of the painter Protogenes and the simulated foam of a dog’s mouth appears in Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia* (II.103, lines 8-15).
The most important element that remains constant between Sextus’ Apelles-allegory and Pico’s Apelles-allegory is the fruitlessness of dogmatic philosophy. Perhaps Pico felt some kinship to the sceptic because of their shared misgivings with dogmatic philosophy.

Signs of respect for the sceptical way on Pico’s part seem to come to the surface elsewhere in the *Examen vanitatis*. When Pico discusses the sceptical dismissal of the Stoic assertion that man is inherently better than animal, he writes:

Canem Sceptici ducunt in medium et ex adverso maxime Stoicorum constituant odoratui praestantem hominibus, et visu citius feras conspicantem, audientemque celerius; quod autem attinet ad rationem, et quoad spectat ad eam quae intus est, et quoad pertinet ad illam quae foras exprimitur, utraque illos pro viribus incessunt.


The sceptics bring the dog to the fore and, in sharp contrast to the Stoics, posit that it surpasses human beings in sense of smell, that with its sight it spots threats faster, and hears more swiftly. As far as reason is concerned – insofar as one looks at the reason that is internal, and insofar as pertains to the reason which is expressed as foreign – the sceptics attack the Stoics on both fronts to the best of their abilities.

Here Pico denotes the sceptical critique of philosophy with similar terms (*pro viribus incessunt*) to those the Papal bull employed in its call for a refutation of philosophy. The presence of the phrase *pro viribus* is not a conclusive indication of the fact that one is discussing a Christian critique of philosophy, but it is nevertheless interesting that Pico applies the phrase to the sceptics in this manner. Compare *pro viribus incessunt* to the previously discussed phrases *pro viribus excludere atque resolvere* in the Papal bull and *pro viribus explicuerimus* in Pico’s own mission statement. All three passages discuss, to varying degrees, the critique of philosophy. If one takes this implied connection between the sceptical critique of philosophy and Pico’s own to its logical extreme, the passage comes to imply that Pico considers Sextus, to a certain extent, an equal in the fight against philosophy.

Elsewhere in his treatise, Pico shows more overt admiration for the sceptics. At the start of the third book, he discusses the misgivings of both the
Epicureans and the sceptics with the *artes liberales*. Concerning the *Pyrrhonii*, he writes:

Nam nulla secta eruditior, inter omnes aliorum philosophorum gentium sectas diligentissime versata, et omnium experientissima: neque iracundiae aut superbiae causa, quando habiti sunt inter alias philosophorum gentium sectas et humani, et mites.

(*Op. cit. III.1, 924*)

For no sect is more learned, and among all the sects of the other pagan philosophers the sceptical school goes about the most diligently, and it is the most proficient of all; and not for the sake of ire and pride, since they have been held as both human beings and warriors among the other sects the of the pagan philosophers.

We must not ignore that Pico once again underscores Sextus’ status as a pagan philosopher, through *aliorum philosophorum gentium sectas* and *alias philosophorum gentium sectas*. However, the other schools of philosophy are not afforded compliments of being the most proficient of all (*omnium experientissima*). Here scepticism is ostensibly separated from other, inferior philosophical schools. It seems that Pico, for all his misgivings with philosophy and pagan thought, appreciates his sceptical source to an extent.

**6.2 – Scepticism and faith**

Beyond Pico’s reception of the Apelles-metaphor and the occasional hint of respect for the sceptics, the *Examen vanitatis* may hold more similarities to Sextus’ sceptical discourse. The story of Apelles is perhaps not the only element that connects Sextus’ general argument to Pico’s critique of philosophy. I have displayed throughout the previous chapters that Pico disassembles philosophical arguments in order to affirm the superiority of Christian doctrine. As stated, Christian knowledge is attained not through the prowess of human reasoning but by the grace of God. According to Pico, the Divine source provides a large amount of evidence for its truthfulness. Pico discusses the tradition of the
Scriptures, which, according to him, predates even the philosophical tradition.\footnote{67} The appearance of Jesus Christ, his sacrifice, and the many miracles he performed also prove the truth of the Christian doctrine.\footnote{211} However, one form of proof Pico posits is especially interesting: faith (\textit{fides}).

In 1983, Terrence Penelhum\footnote{213} expanded on Richard Popkin’s comparison of scepticism and fideism.\footnote{214} As stated in the \textit{status quaestionis}, Popkin’s fideists do not think that the act of “attaining knowledge by rational means, without our possessing some basic truths known by faith (i.e. truths based on no rational evidence whatsoever)”\footnote{215} is a fruitful one. Penelhum expands upon the notion of sceptical fideism by suggesting that Sextus’ scepticism has a number of things in common with Popkin’s fideism. Both the sceptic and the fideist advocate withdrawal or even abstinence from philosophy and instead seek their criterion for judgement elsewhere. “Both involve dissatisfaction with the disturbance and anxiety associated with the commitments of the world of secular common sense. Both recommend, as a cure for these anxieties, not physical disengagement from the commonsense world, but a kind of participation in it that requires inner detachment or otherness from it.”\footnote{216} Though Penelhum does not name Pico in his discussion of these themes – he focuses instead on thinkers such as Erasmus, Montaigne, Bayle, Pascal, and Hume – I feel that his hypothesis can be applied to the \textit{Examen vanitatis}.

\footnote{67}{There are a number of passages in the \textit{Examen vanitatis} where Pico underscores the fact that the Christian doctrine, which originated from the Judaic peoples, is far older than any philosophical dogma. For example (Pico, \textit{EV} I.1, 723):

\begin{quote}
Illam vero Hebraeorum revelatam divinitus sapientiam multi ex nostris probaverunt, non Graecorum modo celeberrimos authores anteire vetustate, sed etiam eos quos suorum deorum antiquissimos variis erroribus delusa vetustas autemaverat.
\end{quote}

Many of us have proven that this Judaic wisdom, revealed by God’s grace, not only precedes the most famed authors of the Greeks in sanctitude, but even those of their gods whom antiquity, deluded by various lapses, considered the most ancient. Again Pico’s (feigned?) naiveté is frustrating. If the philosophical tradition could not avoid the pitfalls of dissent and discord, how could the Christian tradition? After all, the Christian corpus of written and oral sources is not maintained purely by God. Many human authors have added to the tradition, and not all of their works were universally accepted. Apocryphal works are again ignored by Pico.}
\footnote{213}{See Penelhum, “Skepticism and Fideism”, in Burnyeat 1983, 287-318. The article discusses some of the points made in Penelhum’s own study \textit{God and Skepticism}, published in the same year. Regrettably, I was unable to access the latter.}
\footnote{214}{See section 1.1 for further details.}
\footnote{215}{Popkin 2003, xxii.}
\footnote{216}{Penelhum, in Burnyeat 1983, 297.}
6.3 – Faith and the φαινόμενα versus dogmatism

Both Pico and Sextus exhibit, to an extent, Penelhum’s “dissatisfaction with the disturbance and anxiety associated with the commitments of the world of secular common sense.”217 Although Pico and Sextus propose different criteria for judgement, both posit their criterion as an alternative to the deficient indicatoria of the dogmatic philosophers.

Sextus’ criterion for judgement is the appearance (φαινόμενον). As I have pointed out in the fourth chapter,218 the sceptic cannot doubt everything. He assents to the sensation of cold, though he does not make any judgement regarding the origin of this sensation. Thus, these appearances or impressions are the sceptic’s criterion for judgement.

Κριτήριον τοῖνον φαμέν εἶναι τῆς σκεπτικῆς ἀγωγῆς τὸ φαινόμενον, δυνάμει τὴν φαντασίαν οὕτω καλούντες· ἐν πείσει γὰρ καὶ ἄβουλήτω πάθει κειμένη ἀξίητητός ἔστιν.

(Sextus, P. I.22)

We say, then, that the criterion of the sceptical school is the appearance, by which we virtually mean the impression of that thing. For this impression belongs to the realm of persuasion and involuntary feeling, and is therefore unquestionable.

Although the sceptic suspends judgement regarding the cause of his feeling cold, he assents without question to the sensation itself. This applies to all sensations. Honey might taste sweet to me and bitter to you. Its true taste is shrouded in mystery, but both of us must each assent to our individual sensations.

Sextus contrasts his φαινόμενα to the criteria proposed by his opponents, the dogmatic philosophers. The sceptic assents to involuntary feelings, not to the objects of rational enquiry.

Lambda μὴ δογματίζειν τῶν σκεπτικῶν οὐ κατ’ ἐκεῖνο τὸ σημαινόμενον τοῦ δόγματος καθ’ ὁ δόγμα εἶναι φασὶ τινὲς κοινότερον τὸ εὐδοκεῖν τινι πράγματι (τοῖς γάρ κατὰ φαντασίαν κατηναγκασμένοις πάθει παύθει συγκατατίθεται ὁ σκεπτικός, οἷον οὐκ ἂν εἴποι θερμανόμενος ἢ ψυχόμενος διὶ δοκῶ μὴ θερμαίνεσθαι ἢ ψύχεσθαι), ἀλλὰ μὴ δογματίζειν λέγομεν καθ’ ὁ δόγμα εἶναι φασὶ τινὲς τὴν τινι πράγματι τῶν

217 Ibidem.
218 Specifically, section 4.1.1.
κατὰ τὰς ἑπιστήμας ζητουμένων ἀδήλων συγκατάθεσιν (οὐδὲν γὰρ τῶν ἀδήλων συγκατατίθεται ὁ Πυρρόνειος).

(Op. cit. I.13)

We say that the sceptic does not dogmatize, not with that meaning of the word “dogma”, according to which some say that “dogma” is approval of a thing in a broader sense. (For the sceptic assents to the passions that are unavoidable because of the impressions. He would, for example, not say “I do not believe that I am warm or cold” if he was warm or cold.) Instead we say that he does not dogmatize in the sense according to which some say that “dogma” is assent to something among the non-evident objects of rational enquiry (for the Pyrrhonist assents to nothing that is not evident).

The sceptic only assents to that criterion which involuntarily imposes itself on him and is thus unquestionable. The dogmatic philosophers, on the other hand, construct criteria that supposedly reveal the underlying nature of things through rational enquiry. The underlying nature of things (ὑποκείμενον) is, according to Sextus, not immediately evident (ἀδήλων), and he thus rejects the questionable criteria of the dogmatic philosophers in favour of his indubitable φαινόμενα.

Pico proposes a different criterion for judgement: Divine revelation and faith. The humanist repeatedly refers to the light of faith (lumen fidei) as the path to truth. The term lumen fidei stems from the concept of Divine enlightenment (illuminatio), which, like the previously discussed vana curiositas can be traced back to the teachings of Augustine.219 In the epilogue to his third book, Pico underscores the veracity of his criterion:

Illo etenim divino lumine quo fides nititur, quo animi oculis aeterna videntur et sperantur: et signa quoque ab Apostolis, et Apostolicis viris in fidei probationem adducta Divinitus a patre luminum descendisse contemplamur, cui et ratio, et humana omnia argumenta succumbunt. Eas igitur literas amplecti debemus, quorum studio cum veritatem sequi recta falsitate, tum felicitatem consequi ablegata miseria, et debemus, et possumus.

(Pico, EV III.14, 1009)

219 For an overview of Augustine’s epistemology, including his notion of illuminatio, see Mendelson 2016.
For by that same Divine light, on which faith rests, and through which the eternal things are seen and sought by the mind’s eyes, we observe that the signs, brought forward by the Apostles and their followers for the demonstration of faith, has descended by Divine hand from the Father of light, to whom both reason and all human arguments yield. Thus we must embrace these Scriptures, and through the study of them we can and must both follow truth after falsehood has been corrected, and pursue happiness after misery has been banished.

As elsewhere, Pico distinguishes superior knowledge based on faith from inferior knowledge gained through human means. In this instance, Pico contrasts his Divine light (divinum lumen) to the criteria founded on the arguments of human reason (humana argumenta). Only the light of faith can illuminate eternal truths. This lumen fidei certainly does not equal Sextus’ φαινόμενα. The latter give the sceptic individual feelings rather than eternal knowledge. Furthermore, as Pico has stated before,220 scepticism is itself a human practice, and all human means are inferior to the Divine light (humana omnia argumenta succumbunt). On the other hand, Pico, like Sextus, contrasts his faith to the criteria of the dogmatic philosophers.

Cuius luminis beneficio non ambigimus vera esse omnia quae sub fide clauduntur, non sensus tenebras, non ullius sive inconvulsilis, sive obambulantis, sive captatrixis phantasias, furuas et opacas nubes, non ulla argumentorum crepuscula quærantantes, quando nihil certum magis, aut inconcussum esse reptenum.

(Pico, EV II.37, 916)

Because of the blessing of this light [of faith], we do not doubt that all things contained in faith are true, and we seek not the shadows of sense-perception, not the dark and opaque clouds of whatever either unshakeable or incidental or compelling impression, no dusky heap of arguments. For we ought to think that nothing is more certain or beyond doubt.

Pico’s criticism of impressions or sensations as criteria is clearly directed at dogmatic philosophers here. For sense-perception and impressions have been proposed as universal criteria for judgement by ancient philosophers such as Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics. Pico’s captatrix phantasia, for example, refers to the Stoic concept of the φαντασία κατάληπτική (“comprehensive

220 See section 4.2.2.
impression").\textsuperscript{221} This impression, unlike the individual impressions of the sceptics, allows its recipient to know the underlying nature of things and grasp universal truth.

Pico and Sextus both contrast their criterion for judgement to those of the dogmatic philosophers. As with their differing interpretations of the Apelles-story, we cannot state that this makes Pico’s illuminating faith equal to Sextus’ individualistic φαινόμενα. The sceptical impressions are an invention of human reasoning, whereas Pico’s criterion flows forth from Divine revelation. Nevertheless, the φαινόμενα parallels, to an extent, the \textit{lumen fidei}. As with the Apelles-allegory, Pico and Sextus stand alongside each other in their opposition to the dissatisfactory criteria of the dogmatic philosophers.

\textbf{6.4 – Num et hoc nostri}

The aforementioned parallel between the criteria of Pico and Sextus stems primarily from my interpretation of Pico’s writings. Elsewhere in the \textit{Examen vanitatis}, however, Pico himself explicates the parallel between his and Sextus’ opposition to dogmatic philosophy. He does this while discussing how the sceptics approach the laws of their country.

My previous discussions of the sceptical criterion may have created the impression that the sceptical φαινόμενα belong purely to the realm of sense-perception. This is not true. For a φαινόμενον can generally be both an impression of sensation and an impression in the mind: the aforementioned Stoic comprehension (καταλήψις), for example, is primarily a mental process. More importantly, the sceptic does not simply undergo impressions of sense-perception. As Myles Burnyeat observes,\textsuperscript{222} sensations are not the only impressions a sceptic can experience. Mental impressions also come upon the sceptic.

\begin{quote}
Τοὺς φαινομένους οὖν προσέχοντες κατὰ τὴν βιωτικὴν τήρησιν ἀδοξάστως βιοῦμεν, ἐπεὶ μὴ δυνάμεθα ἀνενέργητοι παντάπασιν εἶναι. Ἐσοικε δὲ αὐτὴ ἡ βιωτικὴ τήρησις τετραμερής εἶναι καὶ τὸ μὲν τι ἐχεῖν ἐν ψυχήσει φύσεσιν, τὸ δὲ ἐν ἀνάγκῃ παθῶν, τὸ δὲ ἐν παράδοσι νόμων τε καὶ ἔθων, τὸ δὲ ἐν διδασκαλίᾳ τεχνῶν, ψυχήσει μὲν φυσικῇ καθ’ ἣν ψυχικῶς αἰσθητικοὶ καὶ νοητικοὶ ἔσμεν, παθῶν δὲ ἀνάγκῃ καθ’ ἣν
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{221} See Baltzly 2014 for an overview of Stoic epistemology, including the concept of the φαντασία καταληπτική.

\textsuperscript{222} Burnyeat, in Burnyeat 1983, 125-29.
We thus live undogmatically, adhering to the appearances according to the rule of life, since we cannot remain completely inactive. Apparently, this rule of life is fourfold. One part lies in the guidance of nature, one in the necessity of passions, one in the tradition of laws and customs, and one in education in the arts. Through the guidance by nature we are naturally capable of sensation and thought. Through the necessity of the passions hunger drives us to eat and thirst to drink. Through the tradition of laws and customs we consider living a pious life to be something good and living an impious life something bad. Through education in the arts we do not remain inactive in the arts that we adopt. We say all this undogmatically.

At first sight, this passage is difficult to decipher, since Sextus later introduces modes for suspension of judgement that attack the reliability of sense-perception and, more importantly, that of laws and customs. Nevertheless, he here states that the sceptic assents to a desire to conduct one’s life in a pious manner. It seems that the sceptic adheres, without question, to convention and custom, insofar as those customs appear right to him. One must keep in mind, as Penelhum correctly notes,\(^{223}\) that Sextus’ Pyrrhonian scepticism is more concerned with providing practical advice than “theoretical enlightenment”.\(^{224}\) Like Epicureanism, the sceptical philosophy shows its disciple the road to mental peace in daily life rather than to a higher plane of existence – something a Neoplatonist would concern himself with. And in daily life, the sceptic cannot remain wholly inactive (μὴ δυνάμεθα ἀνενέργητοι παντάπασιν εἶναι).

In a previously discussed passage, Sextus explains that the sceptic assents uncritically to the sensation of cold, while leaving aside any worries about the underlying nature of that sensation. This passage should be interpreted similarly. The sceptic, Sextus explains, adheres as an individual to the customs, laws, and arts that appear to him through tradition and education, while leaving aside any worries about their universal or theoretical applicability. If we follow this

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\(^{223}\) Penelhum, in Burnyeat 1983, 290-91.

interpretation of the passage, there are, as Penelhum states, two major consequences. Firstly, the sceptical attitude is in the first place a practical attitude. By this I mean that the sceptic follows passion and custom in his daily life insofar it appears to him that he should do so. For he cannot control what φαίνομένα he receives. Even the desired ἀταραξία comes upon him unexpectedly after his suspension of judgement (as detailed in the Apelles-metaphor). Secondly, this practical adherence to appearances most likely results in the sceptic taking up an attitude of complacency, or conformity. “This is because the Skeptic will starve all tendencies he may have to evaluate the habits he has acquired.” In other words, the sceptic will not abandon a learned practice or custom because he is dogmatically convinced of its wrongness. Instead, he conforms by necessity to whatever custom or law the impressions imprint on him and only discards the tradition if it involuntarily appears to him that he should do so. The sceptical attitude is a practical attitude, and the sceptic is essentially someone who attempted to elevate himself through dogmatic philosophy, found it to be inconclusive, and subsequently returned to an ordinary life. In the words of Penelhum: “he is someone who returns to common practice after extinguishing his wish to judge it.”

Although Pico is generally careful not to embrace scepticism too much, he discerns some value in this tendency towards passivity, conformity, and, most importantly, abstinence from dogmatic philosophy in Sextus’ general argument. I have previously discussed a passage in which Pico discusses the laws that the sceptics abide with and the laws that his own people follow. There, I emphasized how Pico’s divine laws contrast with the individual assent that the sceptic entertains. In light of the current discussion, that passage must now be analyzed again.

Suscipiunt Sceptici patrias leges, patriis moribus simpliciter et nulla disquisitione acquiescunt, num et hoc nostri; sed et securius, et sanctius qui divinas voces sine scrupuloso rationis examine admittendas iubent…

(Op. cit. III.14, 1006)

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226 Ibidem.
227 Ibidem. A sceptic can certainly entertain radically progressive ideas, but only if it appears to him that it is right or profitable to do so.
The sceptics abide by the laws of their country, and they are simply and without further investigation at peace with the customs of their country. Do our people not do the same? But they do it more securely and more piously, they who order that the Divine Voices be accepted without the scrupulous enquiry of reason.

The words *et securius, et sanctius* emphasize the superiority of Pico’s criterion over Sextus’, but what is important to note here is *num et hoc nostri* (“do our people not do the same”). These words imply a clear correspondence between Pico and the sceptics: both abide by the laws of their country (*suscipiant leges*) in the same way. It seems that Pico has interpreted the aforementioned Sextus-passage as I have, for he notes that the sceptic uncritically preserves the customs he was taught (*simpliciter et nulla disquisitione*). He advocates the same attitude towards faith. The Divine voices constitute a criterion for truth that, like the sceptical *φαινόμενα*, is not hampered by the nebulous and dissatisfactory constructs of rational enquiry (*examine rationis*). The passage implies that, instead, those voices are passively accepted and complied with, so that the devout Christian can be simply at peace with the laws of God, without considering the merits of the truths he has accepted.

In summary, the rare signs of respect for the writings of Sextus – Pico’s adoption of the Apelles-metaphor and his designation of the sceptics as the best among the philosophers – seem to stem from Pico’s appreciation of the sceptical rejection of dogmatic philosophy. Among the numerous differences between the positions of Sextus and Pico – the goals and criteria of Sextus all contribute to sinful *curiositas* in contrast to the faithful life Pico leads – the one constant correspondence between Pico and Sextus is the fact that both reject dogmatic philosophy on the same grounds. Dogmatic philosophy proposes doubtful and therefore untrustworthy criteria that threaten to lead both the sceptic and the Christian astray. The sceptic loses sight of his desired *ἀταραχία*. The Christian is pulled away from God and persuaded to pursue *vana curiositas*. I must stress that Pico only occasionally points explicitly to possible comparisons between the sceptical position and his own – the *num et hoc nostri*-passage is a rare exception. Yet, if we entertain this interpretation of the selected passages, we might state that Pico’s unquestioning adherence to faith is closer to the sceptical position than at first appears. Previous chapters may have implied that, despite the fact that the arguments of Sextus are a useful weapon against philosophy, Pico puts little value
on the philosophical school. As I have shown here, however, Pico actually does appreciate his sceptical source to an extent – enough so as to redefine Sextus’ most important allegory and use it in his own story. The sceptics may have been stuck with mere human criteria for judgement and a life without God, but at least they recognized the errors of the dogmatic philosophers.
Conclusion

Quos quidem Philosophos Scepticos tametsi in plerisque non probo, eatenus tamen non improbo, quatenus eorum qui vel omnia, vel plurima scire se tenereque profitebantur arrogiantiam obtunderent.

(…)

Improbant alios Philosophos Sceptici, qui se scire quicquam profitentur vi humanae philosophiae; num hoc, sed multo clarius, efficacius, verius, sacrae literae?

(Op. cit. III.14,1005-6)

Although in most cases I do not approve of the sceptic philosophers, I nevertheless do not disapprove of them to the extent that they felled the arrogance of those who proclaimed that they knew and held either all things or most things.

(…)

The sceptics disapprove of the other philosophers, who proclaim that they know something through the capacity of human philosophy. Do the Sacred Scriptures not do the same? But they do it more clearly, more efficiently, and more truthfully.

This passage illustrates the various aspects of Pico’s attitude towards the sceptics, and the role that Sextus’ writings have in his own Examen vanitatis. Pico sees in Sextus’ scepticism two contrasting aspects. On the one hand, the sceptic refuses to adhere stubbornly to one belief. This attitude invites inquisitiveness and openness to new ideas, and it does not lead to God. On the other hand, the sceptic follows a lifestyle that stands in opposition to that of the dogmatic philosophers.

Firstly, there is the fact that scepticism is founded on human arguments. Of this aspect of the philosophy Pico vehemently disapproves (plerisque non probo). Sextus’ scepticism is a practical philosophy above all, and suspension of judgement opens the door to a daily life marked by tranquillity. This modest sceptical goal of ἀταραξία has no relation whatsoever to God. Augustine stated that a righteous enquiry must have as its goal the approach to God’s divinity. Any method that leads to worldly goals for their own sake is no more than a vain and curious desire (vana et curiosa cupiditas). Pico rejects the worldly goals and tenets of the sceptical philosophy – ἀταραξία and, to a lesser extent, ἐποχή and ἰσοσθένεια – when he echoes Augustine’s words and states that the sceptical

228 Augustine, Confessiones X.35.54.
discipline on its own constitutes a vice that must be uprooted, rather than nurtured (vitia extirpanda, non fovenda).\textsuperscript{229}

Such a worldly approach to customs and dogmata does not suit Pico’s cause. The attitude of the sceptic is far removed from the enlightened obedience to the Divine laws of the Scriptures that Pico calls for. The humanist provides, with his \textit{Examen vanitatis}, an answer to the call of the Papal bull for a dogmatic assertion of Christianity over philosophy. Pope Leo X is not the only Christian figure whose influence can be felt in Pico’s highly dogmatic faith. Savonarola stated that one should not make Plato or Aristotle into Christians, “because they are not”.\textsuperscript{230} Nevertheless, Pico’s dependence on the Papacy – after all, it was Pope Julius who helped him reclaim his city-state, Mirandola – was likely the strongest motivation for his uncritical assumption that the Christian tradition formed a unique and concordant whole.\textsuperscript{231} The sceptical ἀταραξία, brought about by a refusal to dogmatize, is of no use to a thinker oriented toward the Divine, such as Pico. It is also likely because of this aspect of the sceptical school that Pico produces a “watered-down”\textsuperscript{232} transcription of the sceptical modes for suspension of judgement. Sceptical ἐποχή does not lead to the kind of dogmatic fervour that Pico promotes. It was Pico’s rejection of the worldly goals of the sceptical lifestyle that motivated Cao to denounce the humanist’s “close-mindedness”.\textsuperscript{233} Such an accusation is justified, if one interprets “close-minded” to mean a rejection of the sceptical openness to new ideas in favour of a harshly dogmatic adherence to the dominant doctrine. The sceptic is open-minded, whereas Pico remains close-minded. This is also presumably what Popkin has in mind when he states that, to Pico, scepticism is “merely an instrument”.\textsuperscript{234}

Yet there is the other aspect of Sextus’ scepticism, the strand of passivity, of uncommitted conformity to laws and customs, and, most importantly, of aversion towards dogmatic philosophy. It is this aspect that Penelhum has in mind when he seeks to equate scepticism and fideism, and what I had in mind when I

\begin{footnotesize}
229 Pico, \textit{EV} II.20, 852.
231 Savonarola called for reform even within the Papacy. He was thus slightly more critical of the lifestyle endorsed by the Church. See also Horsburgh 1911.
232 Cao 2007, 15.
233 Cao, in Paganini and Neto 2009, 141. “A presumption of universal guilt ends up overturning uncertainty itself; in other words, the very possibility of scepticism and philosophy” (Cao 2007, 27).
234 Popkin 1967, 54.
\end{footnotesize}
attempted to compare Pico’s reliance on Divine revelation and Sextus’ reliance on the φαινόμενα – both stand in contrast to the criteria of the dogmatic philosophers, which are constructed through rational enquiry. “[The Skeptic] is someone who returns to common practice after extinguishing his wish to judge it.”235 Sceptical ἐποχή, on the one hand, leaves the philosophical discussion open for later revision, but on the other hand, it removes the sceptic from the discussion entirely. Apelles did not throw his sponge at his painting with the idea that he would continue his craft afterwards. Similarly, it was this aversive attitude to philosophy that lead Sextus to write down so many arguments against the various philosophers, and it is the same attitude that appeals to Pico (tamen non improbo).

For the greatest similarity between Sextus’ ἐποχή and Pico’s Christian faith is that they are both opposites of dogmatic philosophy – sceptical suspension is the undogmatic opposite to dogmatic philosophy, and Pico’s Christian knowledge is the Divine and concordant opposite to discordant human dogmatism. Thus Pico makes use of Sextus’ Apelles-story at the start of his third book to explain his own disposition when he embarked on his endeavour. The sceptical refusal to follow rational dogmas also prompted Pico to write the aforementioned passage in which he notes that the sceptic is the wisest philosopher of all (nulla secta eruditior).236 Most importantly, it is the shared rejection of philosophical dogmatism that Pico refers to when he mentions that his people abide by the laws of their country just as the sceptics do (num et hoc nostri), without philosophical enquiry (nulla disquisitione and sine scrupuloso rationis examine).237 This point is repeated in the passage at the start of this chapter, where Pico again states that the sceptics are dismissive of rational philosophy just as the Scriptures are (num hoc sacrae literae).

Thus, part of Sextus’ scepticism is offensive to Pico’s sensibilities – the aspect by which the sceptic refuses to assent to a doctrine dogmatically – but another part corresponds to his own needs and desires – the aspect by which the sceptic removes himself from philosophy and resigns himself to an involuntarily accepted criterion for judgement. If one focuses on the num et hoc-passages in the Examen vanitatis, could one then say that the sceptic, to Pico, is a proto-Christian

236 Pico, EV III.1, 924.
in the way that Plato was to Ficino? Is Sextus, to Pico, a source that, despite its deviation from the laws of God, can be salvaged and used in a way as close as possible to the Christian truth (in Ficino’s words, *christianae veritati simillimum*)? The potential for such an interpretation of scepticism is certainly present in the *Examen vanitatis*. Sextus’ scepticism is, in a way, the handmaiden of Pico’s Christian doctrine. For it assails the philosophical doctrines that threaten to usurp faith’s position as the source of truth. The sceptical arguments of Sextus remove unwanted desires to philosophize, at which point the mind of the reader is free to give itself entirely to the revelations of faith. The structure of Pico’s argument supports such a suggestion. For his objective is first to refute philosophy and second to affirm the only remaining alternative: the laws of God. Although the sceptical lifestyle is inferior to the one prescribed by the Scriptures (*clarius, effacius, verius*), it could be presented as a parallel to Pico’s anti-philosophical subjection to Christian doctrine. If Plato provided Ficino with a stepping stone to Christian theology, then scepticism could provide Pico with a stepping stone to a philosophically ascetic Christian lifestyle.

The potential for such a reading of scepticism is never fully realized. Pico is no Erasmus. The latter was to state, only four years after Pico published his *Examen vanitatis*, that he was inclined to side with the sceptics whenever the Christian doctrine allowed him to. In other words, Erasmus saw in the sceptical attitude a companion to his Christian notions. Pico never makes such a statement. His tutor Savonarola had, after all, said that one should let pagans be pagans and not try to make them into Christians. Furthermore, his constant struggles for dominion of the city-state of Mirandola likely ensured that he wanted to uphold his alliance to the Papacy. Had Pico tried to bring pagan writings and Christian rule together less than a decade after Pope Leo X called for a clamp-down on deviant philosophical statements, he would undoubtedly have upset one of his

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238 Ficino, *De Voluptate*, in *Opera* 1570, 986.
239 Erasmus, *De liberio arbitrio* I.a.2:

Et adeo non defector assertionibus, ut facile in Scepticorum sententiam pedibus discessurus sim, ubiqueque per divinarum scriptarum inviolabilem autoritatem, et ecclesiae decreta liceat, quibus meum sensum ubique libens submitto, sive assequor quod praescribit, sive non assequor.

And I am so sparsely delighted by assertions, that I would easily set foot in the sceptical point of view, wherever the unshakeable authority of the Divine Scriptures and the edicts of the Church allow it. To those I submit my belief willingly, whether I understand what they prescribe or not.

See also Oosthout 2010, 200-3.
most important allies. Thus, Pico undermines his own source. He keeps Sextus on the sidelines throughout the first book of the *Examen vanitatis* and rarely adds any real philosophical substance to the arguments he transcribes in his second and third books. Although he occasionally praises Sextus as a wise philosopher (*nulla secta eruditior*) or a trustworthy source of information (*quod aperte satis habetur a Sexto philosopho*), and compares the Christian compliance to Sextus’ own (*num et hoc nostri*), he never identifies with the sceptical *sententia* in the way that Erasmus does.

In conclusion, we may ask: what new “meaning, functions, and forces” does classical scepticism acquire in Pico *Examen vanitatis*? Is the relationship between Pico’s Christian doctrine and Sextus’ scepticism “embryonic”, or does it form “the foundations of a new system of critical reason”? Cao’s suggestion that Pico’s interaction with scepticism is no more than embryonic is rather simplistic. For Pico actually manages to find a use for the sceptical arguments despite the fact that his discourse denounces all pagan thought. On the other hand, Pico’s use of scepticism cannot be seen as the foundation of a revolutionary system of critical reason. For Pico rejects all critical reason as *vana curiositas* in favour of an epistemological method based on faith and illumination.

Ultimately, the scepticism of Sextus is brought into a very uneasy alliance with Christian doctrine. Pico rejects the open-mindedness of sceptical ἐποχή, choosing instead to utilize the sceptic’s aversion to dogmatic philosophy, as he recounts the sceptical arguments against philosophy and praises the sceptics’ unquestioning compliance with native laws. Had Pico focused only on this latter aspect of the sceptical discipline – i.e. the aversion to dogmatic philosophy – classical scepticism could have been the handmaiden of Christian faith. This unfulfilled potential is perhaps what frustrated Cao so much that he resorted to accusing Pico of bigotry. The *Examen vanitatis* does not simply discard scepticism as a pagan vice. It relies on Sextus’ arguments heavily and even suggests a certain amount kinship, but Pico ultimately rejects the sinful practice of his source. Sextus’ work provides a useful tool for Pico in the fight against philosophy. The potential for a closer collaboration between Pico and his source is

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240 Pico, *EV* I.2, 734.
241 De Pourcq 2012, 221.
242 Cao 2007, 40.
present in the subtext of the *Examen vanitatis*, but it remains unfulfilled. An “enemy of my enemy”-argument can be made for the incorporation of Sextus into the Christian doctrine. But Pico cannot ignore the less desirable aspects of scepticism, including its pagan nature. And in a discourse that is as harshly polemical and anti-intellectual as Pico’s, stating that an ancient author is the enemy of your enemy does not make that author your friend.
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Summary of the thesis

In his *Examen vanitatis* (1520), Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola argues that pagan thought is inferior to and incompatible with the reigning Christian doctrine. Yet despite Pico’s rejection of pagan thought, the *Examen vanitatis* borrows heavily from the arguments of the pagan thinker Sextus Empiricus. This sceptical philosopher opposed the various dogmata of the other philosophers and adopted an attitude of indifference through suspension of judgement.

Previous scholars have analyzed the presence of scepticism in the *Examen vanitatis* with a tradition-oriented approach. They pondered whether Pico deserves the label of “sceptic”. I seek to broaden and nuance this question by analyzing the *Examen vanitatis* from the perspective of reception studies. In my thesis, I elucidate the new meaning Pico assigns to Sextus’ ideas and how he validates using the philosopher’s arguments despite their pagan nature.

The thesis is divided into six chapters, plus the introduction and conclusion. The first chapter discusses the scholarly research that has already been performed on Pico. The second chapter explains my own approach in more detail. The third chapter provides an overview of the intellectual developments leading up to the publication of Pico’s *magnum opus*. The fourth chapter delves into the works of Sextus and Pico themselves. First, I give a comprehensive overview of scepticism as defined by Sextus and of the structure of Pico’s work. I then analyze how Pico makes use of the texts of Sextus. Pico presents Sextus as a pagan philosopher, yet he incorporates a large number of sceptical arguments into his own work. The fifth chapter discusses to what extent Pico rejects the main goals of the sceptical philosophy and why he does so. Conversely, the sixth chapter will analyze how Pico shows interest in other aspects of the sceptical doctrine.

Ultimately, the thesis shows that the anti-philosophical Pico and the sceptical Sextus make for uneasy allies. Pico is interested in the part of scepticism that revolves around opposing dogmatic philosophy, since his faith stands in opposition to the same. However, because Pico designates any enquiry not in service of God as sinful, he must also distance himself from the original goals of scepticism. Pico thus distinguishes sceptical philosophy from its dogmatic counterpart, but he cannot fully embrace the pagan arguments. The sceptic and the humanist share a common enemy in the form of dogmatic philosophy, but that does not make them friends.

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