

# The Politesse of Scepticism

*How to act when you don't know what to do*

Joost De Raeymaecker

*It was a teenage wedding, and the old folks wished them well  
 You could see that Pierre did truly love the mademoiselle  
 And now the young monsieur and madame have rung the chapel bell  
 'C'est la vie', say the old folks, it goes to show you never can tell*

—Chuck Berry

## 1. Introduction: The Politics of Scepticism

Bruno Latour argues in *Down to Earth* (2018) that we have all become climate sceptics. Either because we cast doubt on our involvement in the meteorological changes taking place, or because we *do* acknowledge our involvement but fail to act accordingly. Despite the harmful effects of fossil fuels, for instance, we knowingly and willingly get into our cars every morning for our daily commute. Our world leaders are no exception to this; they burn hundreds of thousands of litres of kerosine to attend a climate summit where they discuss the very problem of this burning. We may say it is important to do something about climate change. We may even stress its urgency and devise the greatest of plans to start doing something about it. Yet none of this catches us in the act itself.

As climate sceptics we sport politics of questioning and criticising that form a highly corrosive concoction capable of crippling even the strongest urges to make change. This destruction has, at times, served us well. Debunking various dogmatic religious views during the early modern period, for instance, it paved the way for the age of reason. Revaluating all values, Nietzsche—philosopher, philologist, critic and sceptic—even proudly boasted: *I am the destroyer par excellence*.<sup>1</sup> Considering our failure to act on the challenges of the Anthropocene, however, the question arises if we should continue these destructive ways. When we seek to part with these politics of scepticism, a particularly tacky problem presents itself: we risk becoming sceptics of scepticism and critics of criticism. As a result, we find ourselves fighting its *iconoclasm*, as Latour likes to call it, with more iconoclasm, not having changed anything. *'Whether we go from murder to entertainment, from war to gymnastics, from ritual to language, from spilled blood to philosophy, behaviour as well as passions remain constant'*, Michel Serres laments.<sup>2</sup>

It seems we can point nor wave our finger. But as the challenges of the Anthropocene urge us to act, we cannot remain silent either. Something has to give: we must find a way to escape the Wittgensteinian deadlock and learn to speak about things whereof we cannot speak. We must learn to act without knowing what to do. Any transformation of the destructive politics of scepticism will, however, be put to the test

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 145.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser with William Paulson (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1997), 83.

immediately. For we cannot exclude those who appear hostile or indifferent to our undertaking. Looking at the climate sceptic specifically, this means that our construction cannot just take the form of a belief system or ground as he would reject it right away. Sceptics and believers, for that matter, cannot resolve their differences through reasoning; not in so far as this reasoning appeals to a philosophy reduced to a theory of knowledge. The believer doesn't 'know' truth in the epistemological sense—in the mind of the sceptic he doesn't even seek to know—he *believes*. Even if we say that both have their own reason, we must add that these reasons are, to a certain extent, incompatible and even mutually exclusive<sup>3</sup>. This sends us down the path of toleration, for instance. Pierre Bayle famously championed this concept, arguing in his four-part commentary of *Compel Them to Come In, That My House May Be Full* (St. Luke, XIV), against a literal understanding of 'to compel' as to involve 'Threats, Jails, Fines, Banishment, Cudgelling, (and) Torturing'<sup>4</sup>. Writing against the backdrop of the religious conflicts in sixteenth and seventeenth century France, he argued that these forms of (religious) coercion are incompatible with reason. Because faith is a private matter for Bayle, he can then argue that when two Christians hold opposing beliefs about truth and only one of them can be right, they must tolerate each other's beliefs nonetheless, because the one who is mistaken and acts in error, does so innocently.

Toleration, however, can be said to risk giving up on equality entirely. It is a modern concept that relates someone who has found enlightenment and knows that all is in doubt, to someone who still believes and, in the view of the sceptic, still dwells in dark ages. In other words: toleration follows after judgement and merely hides that the very destruction we seek to suspend, already took place<sup>5</sup>. Tolerance is something that logically but passively follows from scepticism. A volatile result rather than an active practice that does not stop the ticking clock of the Anthropocene.

Seeking to amend the destructive politics of scepticism, as we do in this essay, it no longer suffices for philosophy to be a theory of knowledge, mere critical reflection, or an endless opposition of 'on the one hand...but on the other hand...' Philosophy now must reinvent itself and show itself to act directly on matters: it must create concepts. This entails a change of perspective: instead of considering, from the sceptic's point of view that philosophy is a theory of knowledge and that all is in doubt, we must consider, from the perspective of philosophy *as it is challenged by the Anthropocene to act*, all contributions and show them to cohere<sup>6</sup>. We attempt to do so by meeting and consulting three sceptic figures. Each has its own reason, yet they all demonstrate the aforementioned paradox that we will investigate: how to act when you don't know what to do. The first figure is a welcoming servant who cannot be said to hold a general theory, yet his practices *can* be said to be systematic. We will attempt to make sense of this with the help of Michel Serres' model of hydraulics. This, however, raises the question if the welcoming servant cannot be said to hold a theory after all. To answer, we turn to Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrronism*, because this question runs parallel to the question of how to be a sceptic without regressing into dogmatism. Through Sextus we meet the second figure: an examining apostle who shows us, in

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance: Tim De Mey, 'De relevantie van relevantie'. In: *Wijzgerig Perspectief*, vol. 56, nr 1, 2016. 'This is exactly why differences of opinion between sceptics and antisceptics are impossible to resolve. The sceptic can't possibly accept the restriction that only relevant alternatives can be considered, the antisceptic can't possibly consider sceptic alternatives as relevant.' [translation my own]

<sup>4</sup> Bayle, *A Philosophical Commentary*, chapter 2, §4

<sup>5</sup> See for this line of argumentation: Isabelle Stengers, 'The Curse of Tolerance' in: *Cosmopolitics II*.

<sup>6</sup> Simondon, Gilbert. "The Genesis of the Individual," in Jonathan Crary & Sanford Kwinter (eds.), *Incorporations* (New York: Zone Books, 1992): 297–319. 300. 'Instead, we would try to grasp the entire unfolding of ontogenesis in all its variety, and to understand the individual from the perspective of the process of individuation rather than the process of individuation by means of the individual'.

addition, that to act *sans fond* doesn't involve getting further away from matters by critically debunking them, but getting closer to them by caring for them instead. The third and final figure is a betraying diplomat who shows that to commune and to act on the challenges of the Anthropocene requires ridding us of ourselves. That is, in the words of Isabelle Stengers: to care for the consequences of our actions instead of personal gains. Together, the ways of these figures amend the destructive politics of scepticism, resulting in the *politesse* of scepticism.

## 2. Careful Gestures: welcoming

Let us begin by looking more closely at Bayle's argument for toleration. Indeed, 'compelling to come in' is now laced with toleration. The master's den has become a place that 'houses everything', as Huub Oosterhuis would say<sup>7</sup>. But has Bayle not created something else in the process as well? We may discover that he has, in fact, reinvented the servant in the gospel of Luke. In Bayle's hands, the servant is no longer an aggressive dogmatist whose 'compelling' involves destruction. Rather, he is a welcoming servant. He doesn't adhere to a general theory, to a premeditated *scepticism* of sorts, nor is he keen to produce one. Yet his practices of welcoming can be said to be systematic, and they show him to be a sceptic... After all, he suspends his judgement about the truth-claims of the various believers and invites them in. Bayle's servant, therefore, is not an epistemological sceptic concerned with the knowledge of truth. Instead, his actions show him to be a sceptic figure whose thought is indistinguishable from his practice and whose words are deeds. What others consider to be clearly and distinctly ordered and separated, the servant shows to be mixed. This mix refers not just to his own assemblage of theory and practice but to his master's house as well; it is now full of strange and intermingling bodies. The servant, it seems, revokes Plato's opposition of Heraclitus and Parmenides as philosophers of change and permanence by saying yes to both of them: 'everything flows, there is a canon', as Serres put it<sup>8</sup>. The servant shows himself unsure of the modern European critical tradition in so far as *κρίνειν* means to order, to separate and to judge. In fact, does he not shake the foundations of western philosophy as he shows there to be no logos without mythos?

The moves of Bayle's servant remind of *Elvis-the-pelvis*; they are part aggressive and part sexual. First he approaches believers, aggressively drawing their attention, then he *swerves* to his master's house, seducing them to follow him and enter. This swerving motion is not unlike that of Lucretius' famous clinamen that make the atoms collide and create turbulence in what is otherwise a laminar flow. Studying Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (99-55 BC), Serres develops a model of hydraulics, most notably in *The Birth of Physics* (La Naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrèce, 1977)<sup>9</sup>. Not only does he start from fluids instead of solids, from heterogeneous becoming instead of homogenous being, but the vortices affect us, move us and complicate us. What is more: they cohere order with chaos.

Serres' model of hydraulics is interwoven with his appreciation for the elements and for those who live and work amidst them. For the vortices or *tourbillonnaires* that comprise this model are part of the *meteora*. The lofty things that science overlooks when it busies itself with either the fall of bodies or the

<sup>7</sup> Huub Oosterhuis, *Een huis waar alles woont* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Serres, *Birth of Physics*, 69

<sup>9</sup> See, Serres, *Birth of Physics*, specifically chapter 4

orbit of the stars. As it shuts itself inside laboratories, away from rain, snow and mud, science turns to abstract thought and understands the laws of nature as universal formulae to which it consecutively subjects nature. Science thereby represses the contingent and chaotic phenomena that escape its grasp. Serres' model of hydraulics, instead, brings these into relation. The meteora, for instance, are mixed phenomena that can both be said to fall and to lift, that are neither completely stable nor unstable, and that surround us in our daily lives. That is, those who do not live sedentary lives indoors or huddle in their cars, but who work out in the open. This is also why Serres opposes scepticism as a philosophy for the lazy, and why he advocates that thinking is not merely for the elite.

Criticism and scepticism are part of what Serres calls *philosophies of suspicion*. The problem, for him, is twofold. First, philosophies of suspicion give rise to the philosophical detective. They create a kind of police state where a detective looks over our shoulder, suspicious of everything we do. The best detective is a criminal; his goal is to convince us that he has no shoulder to look over as to make himself invulnerable to the kind of criticism he is practising himself<sup>10</sup>. Reason becomes self-sufficient. The second problem Serres mentions, is that criticism is a practice for the lazy. The critic can just call things into question and put them between parentheses, without going down the workplace, getting his hands dirty and doing any of the hard work of the creator himself<sup>11</sup>.

Order and separation in the name of clarity and distinction, obscure and confuse precisely, in so far as they are clear and distinct, that there exists what Serres refers to with *Le Tiers-Instruit* (1991).<sup>12</sup> An excluded third part(y) that mixes and precedes the dominant two, often exemplified by the natural and human sciences—*principium tertii exclusi*. This third party has many guises in the work of Serres. Sometimes embodied by the messenger god Hermès, sometimes by the hermaphrodite, the troubadour or his often quoted northwest passage. Each is a middle between opposites—a meddling middle, a middle becoming a *milieu* where life thrives and entropy declines. In this sense Serres is Nietzschean; he, too, is *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. But whereas Nietzsche proclaims to be 'dynamite' and the 'destroyer par excellence', like a prodigious son of Mars would, Serres' irenic philosophy shows him to be a son of Venus instead. While the former tries to achieve this 'going beyond' by polemicising with the priests that promote the organisational scheme of good and evil, the latter aims at confabulating a passage between these opposites instead. A northwest passage entails no longer skirting the coastline of islands but developing a logic of sense that allows one to traverse the seas between them.

What Serres' model explicates is that we are dealing with a form of rationality that is not of the modern, epistemological kind. *'The kind that implies that rationality only exists in the sciences and nowhere else'*, Serres remarks in his conversations with Latour<sup>13</sup>. Serres objects fiercely to this 'hijacking of rationality' and elaborates that one can also find reason and excellence outside canonical science and, inversely, one can find many myths in the latter as well. The best contemporary myth, he says, is the idea of a science purged of all myths. *'In a certain way reason is, of all things in the world, the most equally distributed. No domain*

<sup>10</sup> Serres & Latour. *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*. p133

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 135.

<sup>12</sup> Translated as *The Troubadour of Knowledge* in English.

<sup>13</sup> Serres & Latour. *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, 128

can have a monopoly on reason, except via abuse. In this regard each region is a mixed body<sup>14</sup>. Again we may detect Serres' fondness for our communality and the artists, craftsmen, scientists and athletes that contribute to it. Bayle's servant is one of them as well. He doesn't adhere to a sound theory yet his welcoming shows him to have reason. He acts, yet he doesn't know exactly what to do; he merely *welcomes*. In doing so, he not only shows himself to be a mixed body—a true bastard—but the creator of mixed bodies as well: a Serresian troubadour. His mime appeals to λεκτά or *expressibles*, reaching beyond the physical world of bodies, causes and effects. These are not concepts from a time long gone; Serres suggests that De Rerum Natura 'is not behind us, it is ahead of us'.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Careful Gestures: examining

The welcoming servant shows great potential for our amendment of the destructive politics of scepticism. We do, however, need to answer a few more questions. So far, we have said that the servant doesn't hold a general, premeditated theory and that his practices show him to be a sceptic. We have related his welcoming to Serres' theory of turbulence, but does this not paradoxically show him to hold a theory after all? This question is crucial. Not only will it shed light on what kind of sceptic he is but on his system as well. The question of how to amend the politics of scepticism without repeating its destruction, as it turns out, runs parallel to the question of how to be a sceptic without regressing into dogmatism.

The latter is the prime concern of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrronism*. Bayle's servant, as we will see, comes close to the Pyrrhonian sceptic. Sextus distinguishes between Dogmatists, Academics and Sceptics. The sceptic way is *zetetic*; an activity of questioning without end. In contrast to the Dogmatist and the Academic, who either think they have found their truth or consider it to be unattainable, the Sceptic keeps searching. What is more, the sceptic way is a disposition to oppose phenomena and noumena to one another. This equipollence of arguments, or *isostheneia*, is central, since 'the chief constitutive principle of scepticism is the claim that to every account an equal account is opposed; for it is from this, we think, that we come to hold no beliefs'<sup>16</sup>. All is in doubt, precisely because each argument (or, in case of the servant, each believer) is opposed with another of equal weight. Unlike what one would expect, the goal of this sceptic way is not a *crise Pyrrhonnienne*. Rather, it is to reach first *epoché* and second *ataraxia*. The former is a kind of state of the intellect on account of which we neither confirm nor deny anything and we suspend our judgement, while the latter is an untroubled and tranquil condition of the soul. 'No tranquilliser or sedative works better...than scepticism, the soft, sweet, soothing poppy flower of scepticism.', Nietzsche says.<sup>17</sup> This opiate-laced parallel is quite telling. Immediately we see how scepticism is not only related to good health, but to intoxication as well. It is a *pharmakon*, a concoction that cures and poisons alike. It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that Pyrrhonism, too, is a mixed bag. Instead of a theoretical program or a philosophical school, it is an *agōgē*, a way of life.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, Trans. David Webb and William Ross (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd., 2018), 90

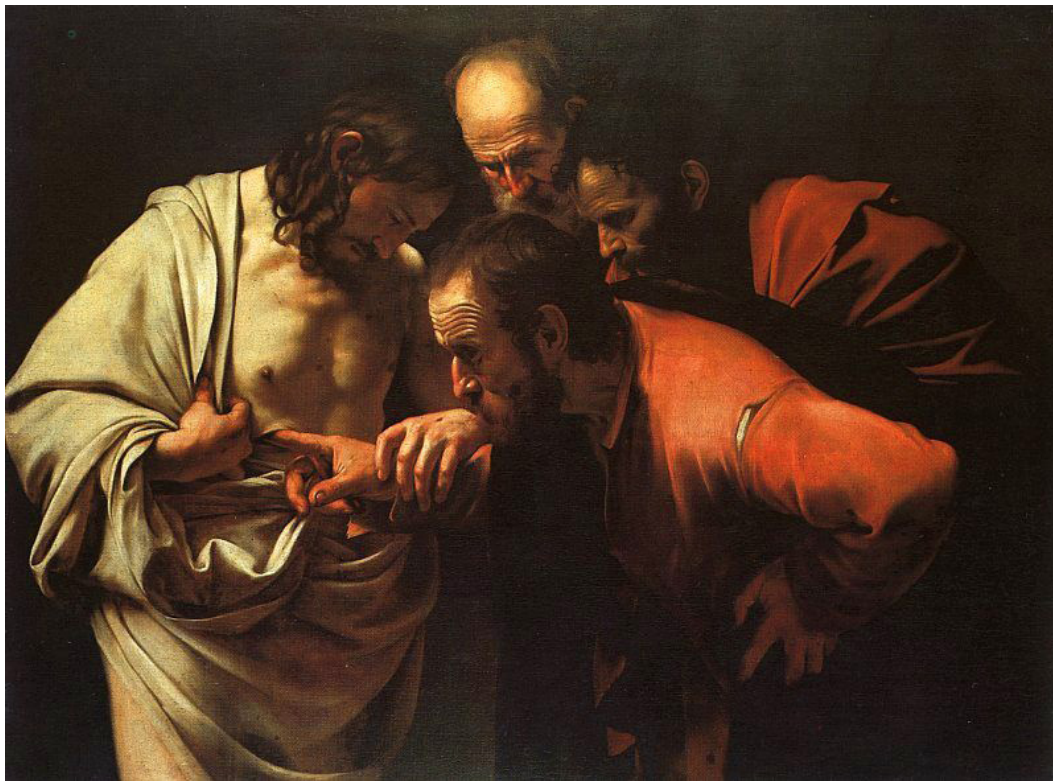
<sup>16</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 100.

<sup>18</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7.

Pyrrhonian skepticism (...) emerges from a practice that is not itself theoretically motivated; it is not grounded upon first principles to begin with (...). Moreover, its practice is integrated into rather than insulated from the Skeptic's ordinary activities; it is woven into the fabric of a human life characterised by well-being. Its aims, then, reach beyond the narrow confines of epistemology-as-conceptual analysis.<sup>19</sup>

Jessica Berry's words, lifted from *Nietzsche and the Ancient Sceptical Tradition* (2011), bring together several things we have seen with Bayle's servant. The Pyrrhonist is, like Nietzsche, uninterested in a philosophy reduced to a theory of knowledge.<sup>20</sup> His scepticism emerges instead from practices that are an integral part of his daily activities. Sextus exemplifies this when he shows that Pyrrhonism is akin to the tradition of medical empiricism. Holding no beliefs, the Pyrrhonist acts on appearances. For example, he grants that honey is sweet because he senses the sweetness, contributing to a common sense. Whether it is sweet in so far as this has to do with a philosophical theory, however, is questioned. The methodic physician acts likewise, undogmatically examining his patients and acknowledging what he encounters. While the Pyrrhonist is led, in accord with the compulsion of his *pathé*, to quench his thirst and to still his hunger, the physician is led to 'loosen up what is tight' and to 'seek refuge in heat from a cold-induced attack of cramping'<sup>21</sup>. The untroubled state of the soul or ataraxia, therefore serves as a goal for both.



Caravaggio (1571-1610) - *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601-1602)

<sup>19</sup> Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Sceptical Tradition*, p17

<sup>20</sup> *A philosophy reduced to "epistemology," which is really no more than a timid epochism and doctrine of abstinence; a philosophy that does not even get over the threshold and scrupulously denies itself the right of entry—that is a philosophy in its last gasps, an end, an agony, something to be pitied.* Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2002. p95

<sup>21</sup> Sextus Empericus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, §34 Whether Medical Empiricism Is the Same as Scepticism

We may find a particular example of this examining in Caravaggio's famous *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* (1601-1602). Here we encounter the apostle Thomas, who does not believe the man standing before him really to be the returned Jesus Christ. 'Because you have seen me, Thomas, you have believed: blessed are those who have not seen and have believed', Christ says (John 20:29). Whether belief refers to the word of Christ or a philosophical theory doesn't matter. It is Thomas' questioning and subsequent examining we are looking for. While the other disciples tell him they have seen the Lord, Thomas replies: 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.' (John 20:25). We have reversed the chronological order of the quotes to show what Caravaggio does. Other paintings of the same scene usually portray Thomas merely pointing at the wound, but Caravaggio's incredulous Thomas *penetrates* Christ. Much like the welcoming of the servant, his examining is an event that creates mixed bodies and that we cannot understand through a mere opposition of believing and disbelieving alone. Contrary to what Christ says, Caravaggio's incredulous Thomas sees, but—reversing the dialogue—does not believe.

Before the theme of the mixed bodies culminates quite literally in the assembly of Christ and Thomas, Caravaggio develops it in several other ways elsewhere in the painting. For instance, we see Christ grasping Thomas' hand, expressing the interplay of forces. This gesturing of hands is a theme in itself, one that often returns in Caravaggio's mannerist paintings and one that would have suited a visual impression of Bayle's welcoming servant as well. The gestured expression of forces becomes even more apparent when we look at the three apostles. Because of Caravaggio's use of *chiaroscuro*—a technique or style that intensifies the contrast between light and dark, modulating the ideals of classical beauty—we can distinguish their heads while their bodies dissolve in a cloud of red robes. In contrast to Sextus Empiricus' Pyrrhonism, Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* does not have an outline. We cannot clearly separate the bodies; there is no decalcomania in Caravaggio. Rather, the apostles appear as a three-headed examining machine. They make a map, a cartography of a mere *examining*.

First and foremost, Thomas' finger is the pointing finger of identification nor the raised finger of critique. Beyond dogmatic belief and suspicious disbelief, his examining is a communion. Touching Christ, he nullifies the distance between them. Exchanging, as Latour says, matters of fact for matters of concern<sup>22</sup>. While the former refer to highly politicised and polemical interpretations by a subject opposite an object, the latter refer to a careful consideration of fuzzy, noisy things embedded in a milieu. Facts, we could say, are part of the epistemological vocabulary while concerns are part of the figurative vocabulary. This doesn't mean, of course, that Caravaggio's seventeenth century apostle is 'post truth'. Instead he shows there is no truth; there are only interpretations. Thomas' multisensoric 'seeing' is a seeing with several eyes. A perspectivism of which Nietzsche remarks: *the more affects we allow to speak about a matter, the more eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, that much more complete will our 'concept' of this matter, our 'objectivity' be*<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern'. In: *Critical Inquiry*, winter 2004, p246

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2006. p87

The mistake the critics make, Latour explains, is that they accept much too uncritically that facts are there to begin with and that they move away from them by debunking them.<sup>24</sup> As Caravaggio's incredulous Thomas makes explicit, the move beyond iconoclasm involves getting closer to things instead.

Now that we have seen how the sceptic figure relates to the Pyrrhonist tradition, we ask: do the event and the Serresian model of hydraulics not make him a dogmatist? Does the sceptic have a system? Sextus gives the following answer:

If one defines a system as an attachment to a number of dogmas that agree with one another and with appearances, and defines a dogma as an assent to something non-evident, we shall say that the Sceptic does not have a system. But if one says that a system is a way of life that, in accordance with appearances, follows a certain rationale, where that rationale shows how it is possible to seem to live rightly and tends to produce the disposition to suspend judgement, then we say that he does have a system.<sup>25</sup>

The conditions of this system hinge upon a rationale that shows the *right* way to live while suspending this very judgement simultaneously. We have seen this twice already: both Bayle's servant and Caravaggio's apostle act without knowing what to do. Perhaps this rationale of the excluded third is best understood, therefore, as an *unhinging*. One that reminds, for instance, of Herman Melville's Bartleby, who continuously repeats '*I would prefer not to*', refusing to say yes or no, unhinging the speech-act. Systematically welcoming and examining without dogma, both figures repeat differences. Their actions are best understood as a habit, continually engendered from its own manner; a *manerie*, neither generic nor particular<sup>26</sup>. This resonates directly with Serres model of hydraulics whose theory of flows and paths that '*is general, but forever in deviation from the general*' as Serres puts it.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. Careful Gestures: betraying

In closing, we meet the third and final figure: a betraying diplomat. She first appears at the end of Isabelle Stengers' seven part *Cosmopolitics*, that refer to what she envisages as an 'ecology of practices'. These involve encounters between the sceptic and the believer and place a constraint: they require the possibility of peace. Peace as possibility, not as necessity. Or, to bring it closer to our own vocabulary, as dogma. A local peace, therefore, that must risk its own deterritorialization. It cannot be a norm—however normless—to which everyone must comply. '*No one can introduce themselves by establishing conditions from which the possibility or impossibility of agreement would follow*'.<sup>28</sup> There is nothing more dangerous than to demand of others to express themselves like everyone else—even if this means to express themselves like everyone else *in the way only they can*, as Deleuze and Guattari say.<sup>29</sup> Stengers thus places a constraint on the Nietzschean warfare of her mentor as well. Not even the repetition of differences of the nomad

<sup>24</sup> Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern'. In: *Critical Inquiry*, winter 2004, p248

<sup>25</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 8

<sup>26</sup> See: Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2007), 27-31.

<sup>27</sup> Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, 119

<sup>28</sup> Stengers, *Cosmopolitics*, 347

<sup>29</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis (University of Minnesota Press) 1987. p200



may become a norm to which those leading an apolitical and sedentary life are held. Stengers shows herself to be a child of both Mars and Venus, then. Amending the ways of the former with that of the latter. This feedback loop indicates what is at stake: the move from critique to care, beyond iconoclasm, entails we no longer fixate on establishing grounds or conditions but, instead, care for the outcome. This care is to be understood as Christian *caritas* nor as life management but as grace, as courteous civility that contributes to a common sense.<sup>30</sup> Stengers' ecology of practices entails an art of consequences; a pragmatic philosophy that accepts as a constraint the exclusion of every idea that implies, among its consequences, a transmutation of reason into Reason.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, to care does not mean to become wholly uncritical or to abandon all scepticism. Rather it shows these grounds alone are not sufficient, something more is required.

And so Stengers comes to speak of the diplomat. This figure faces an intriguing paradox for she cannot be one with those she represents; she would be a mere extension and her profession would be empty. Rather, she must truthfully betray the country or group of people that sent her, and show herself to be a reliable partner for the other diplomats she interacts with. Her ways house an irreducible tension in the ways of the diplomat. In the end, she must return and offer a proposal to the ones who commissioned her. This proposal is a betrayal of the mandate she was sent out with and it will determine the success of her work; if it is not accepted, the diplomat will be rendered a traitor. Like the servant and the apostle, the diplomat is serviceable and contributes to a common sense. She does this, not by merely playing *by* the rules, but by playing *with* them as she goes along. The point of this is precisely not to cut anyone off and to 'get what she wants', but to reconceptualise the playing field and render everyone a participating player *on the same team*. The common sense she contributes to, is therefore vulgar knowledge nor *bon sens* but something cultivated instead. The diplomat is an artist's artist who doesn't say what everybody wants to hear but who creates a new audience: she speaks to a people that is missing, a 'people to come'<sup>32</sup>. Indeed, she will speak with sceptics and believers alike. And indeed, she will show them to have something in common. Better still: she will show them to *commune* (whether they like it or not). We stress that we mustn't imagine the diplomat—or ourselves for that matter—as a designer-God coming down on a cloud creating life, as a subject granting a voice to objects, as messenger of love and peace, of coherence and climate activism. When we speak of invention, creation and reconceptualisation, these actions are to be understood as habitual. The diplomat has no preconceived masterplan; instead her plan(e) of consistency emerges from her practices. This is why she cannot show sceptics and believers that they have something in common but why she can precisely only show them to commune. They do not 'have' anything in common in the same way as they do not 'have' themselves. Showing yourself to commune means communing; it entails 'getting rid of yourself', to various uncomfortable degrees<sup>33</sup>. For these reasons, diplomacy and communality have nothing to do with being politically correct or incorrect. They do not merely seek to harmonise and solidify or to disrupt and to liquify but to contest and thereby to cultivate heterogeneity. Its horizontality is brutal and requires immense faith and devotion.

<sup>30</sup> See: Joke Brouwer en Sjoerd van Tuinen, *To Mind is to Care*. Rotterdam (V2\_Institute for Unstable Media/NAi Publishers) 2019. pp. 124-57.

<sup>31</sup> Isabelle Stengers, 'William James, An ethics of thought?' In: *Radical Philosophy*. Vol. 157 September/October 2009. p19

<sup>32</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 126.

<sup>33</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 2002), 66.

After consulting three sceptic figures and investigating how to act, not knowing what to do, we conclude in sum (and in style of Marcus Aurelius): from a welcoming servant we have learned how to act when we don't know what to do. That this paradoxical reason is not exclusively of the modern scientific kind. It is a mixed bag, so to speak, that sees philosophy mingle with science, art and religion. With the help of Serres we learned that while fluidity precedes solidity, heterogeneity takes the place of homogeneity. From an examining apostle we have learned that this model or system can be coherent without being undogmatic. It is closely tied to our daily practices as Sextus Empiricus showed, and best understood as a habit engendered from its own manner, as a repetition of differences. From a betraying diplomat, finally, we have learned that showing ourselves to commune and to act on the challenges of the Anthropocene—as opposed to merely planning to do so—requires ridding us of ourselves, of our grounds, of our beliefs and of our principles. To care for the consequences of your actions means to live a life of faith and devotion. In that sense the ways of these figures amount not to destructive politics of scepticism but to the *politesse* of scepticism. Keeping our hearts warm and our heads cool, the figures follow Ambrosius' sceptic slogan 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do'.

### Acknowledgements

The Politesse of Skepticism was written for the master's course 'The Politics of Skepticism'. I would like to thank professor Van Bunge for nominating the original version of this essay. Additionally, I would like to thank the editors of the ESJP and the external reviewer for their suggestions and their patience. The essay has changed and improved significantly as a result.

*Joost De Raeymaecker (Rotterdam, 1980) is an architect and philosopher. After obtaining a master degree in architecture at Delft University of Technology (2007), he has worked with smaller and larger offices in the Antwerp region on various (inter)national projects and competitions. In 2018, he obtained a bachelor degree in philosophy at the Erasmus School of Philosophy, where he has also served as editor-in-chief of fellow faculty magazine Twijfel. Currently he serves as a tutor in the bachelor and he is finishing the master in philosophy with a thesis on the philosophy of the event in the Anthropocene. The outside is already inside; you can catch Joost immersing himself in aesthetics at exhibitions and concerts, or spot him experimenting with ecophilosophy in gardens and windowsills.*

### References

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Translated by Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2007.
- Bayle, Pierre. *A Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke 14.23, 'Compel Them to Come In, That My House May Be Full'*, 1687. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/bayle-a-philosophical-commentary-on-these-words-of-the-gospel>
- Berry, Jessica. *Nietzsche and the Ancient Sceptical Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Brouwer, Joke en Sjoerd van Tuinen, *To Mind is to Care*. Rotterdam (V2\_Institute for Unstable Media/NAi Publishers) 2019.
- Coogan, Michael ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. New York (Oxford University Press) 2010.
- Deleuze, Gilles & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis (University of Minnesota Press) 1987.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Negotiations 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 126.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema I: The Movement Image*. London: The Athlone Press, 2002.
- Empiricus, Sextus. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. New York (Oxford University Press) 1996

- Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern'. In: *Critical Inquiry*, winter 2004.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2002.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2006.
- Oosterhuis, Huub. *Een huis waar alles woont* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 2003).
- Popkin, Richard. *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Serres, Michel & Bruno Latour. *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*. Translated by Roxanne Lapidus. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Serres, Michel. *The Troubadour of Knowledge*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser with William Paulson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Serres, Michel. *The Birth of Physics*. Translated by David Webb and William Ross. London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd., 2018.
- Simondon, Gilbert. "The Genesis of the Individual," in Jonathan Crary & Sanford Kwinter (eds.), *Incorporations* (New York: Zone Books, 1992).
- Stengers, Isabelle. 'William James, An ethics of thought?' In: *Radical Philosophy*. Vol. 157 September/October 2009.
- Stengers, Isabelle. *Cosmopolitics II*. Translated by Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.