

PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTICISM AT THE END OF THE 20TH CENTURY¹

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Abstract: *The skepticism represented a strong philosophical movement, at the twilight of Antiquity, within the school of Pyrrhon, its subsequent apparitions within the history of philosophy being just some minor throbs. But skepticism is not yet dead. During the last century one finds on the stage of philosophy a thinker who was born in Romania and would later become famous, in France. We are dealing with a thinker – Emil Cioran – who speaks about philosophy, writing, birth, life, death, suicide, history, civilization, God, etc. in a skeptical manner, even if it's a moderate skeptical one. It is a solitary phenomenon, and also a surprising one, totally against the optimistic stream of thought of Western society which was at its peak of civilization and of the triumph of prosperity.*

Keywords: *Skepticism, Life, Death, History, God.*

1. Skepticism appears, within ancient philosophy, as an “extreme position” in a context in which the two main streams – Platonic and Aristotelian – end up in ethical approaches aimed towards finding a way of life and peace of mind². Following the line of contesting cognition, started by the sophists and continued, more or less convincing, by the megarians and cynicists, the skeptics are the most radical, aiming to prove that we can have no certitude at all. Here is Diogenes Laertios' exposal of pyrrhonian doctrine: “Thus, the skeptics continuously tried to demolish the dogmas of all schools, but they would utter none. Although they reached the point of displaying and exposing the dogmas of the others, they did not utter nothing precise, not even the fact that they would not establish anything [...] saying, for example: «We do not define anything, since this way we would slip into defining, but we do expose the theories of the others with the very intention of showing our prudent attitude [...]». Thus, by the expression «we do not define anything» one points towards their state of indifferent equilibrium, which is equally marked by the other expressions: «One thing means no more than another one», «All statements have their opponents» a. s. o.”³

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² Anton Dumitriu, *History of logic*, Ed. Tehnică, Bucharest, vol. I, 1993, p. 320.

³ Diogenes Laertios, *Despre viețile și doctrinele filosofilor*, XI, 74, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 1997.

Sextus Empiricus states in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*: “The principle of skeptical attitude is the conviction that to any valid argument one can oppose an equally valid one. Starting here – it seems – we stop having dogmatic opinions”⁴. In this case the skeptic finds himself within a fundamental impossibility of deciding which argument is better and, as a consequence, he stops his approval, renounces to state anything, suspends all judgement and reaches the peace of mind, *ataraxia*.

This prudent attitude is extended over all domains, not necessarily related to knowledge; in ethics, for instance, abstention is further active: “[...] the skeptic philosopher, noticing such a great diversity in considering things, refrains from asserting that there is something better or worse by nature and, in general, if one must or must not act; by refraining from the rush of assertion specific to dogmatic philosophers, he obeys – without having any personal opinions – to natural customs of life and so he remains unmoved by the problems pertaining to opinion and, if in certain circumstances necessity forces him, his emotions are moderate”⁵. Nevertheless, ancient skepticism is at first a gnoseologic pessimism, differing from the ontological one, which one finds, for instance, at Schopenhauer.

2. Skepticism represented a strong philosophical movement at the twilight of Antiquity, within the school of Pyrrhon, its subsequent apparitions within the history of philosophy being just some minor throbs, by Montaigne during the Renaissance, and by Hume or even Pascal within the modern period. Montaigne, for instance, tried to resuscitate and make popular the Greek skeptical theories. In his essay *Apology of Raymond Sebond*, (a Spanish rationalist theologian, whose work Montaigne himself had translated), exposing the limits of reason, revives the idea of doubt, but not under the badge of “I do not know anything”, but under that of “what do I know?”⁶. In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume disputes the possibility of grounding a knowledge based upon our sensuous experience, since we are able only to examine the psychology of our beliefs over the world. Of course, one must not forget two important moments of the 19th century, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, since they had philosophical perspectives that are related to skepticism, which were of a good statute, as concerning their importance, within the history of philosophy.

The force of skepticism faded more and more as time went by, thus today, consistent skepticism of an ancient type came to being considered as one of the sources of non-logical thinking, together with evasive agnosticism, cynicism, naïve optimism a. s. o.⁷ Even the books dedicated to the history of skeptical thinking usually stop somewhere during the modern era⁸.

⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Ed. Academiei, Bucharest, 1965, 1, 12.

⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of pyrrhonism*, III, 235.

⁶ Carlos Levy, *Les scepticismes*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2008, p. 98.

⁷ See, for instance, D.Q. McInerney, *Being Logical. A Guide to Good Thinking*, Random House, New York, 2004, p. 91-92.

⁸ See, for instance, Carlos Levy, *Les scepticismes*.

3. Thus, the 20th century is even more pale when it comes to manifestation of skeptical thinking. We may even speak about some kind of opposition coming from famous personalities; for example, when he was writing his *History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell was concluding his chapter on Nietzsche – a thinker whose view was related to skepticism, as we have already mentioned – by saying: “His disciples had their period of glory, but we can hope its end is near”⁹.

But skepticism is not yet dead. During the last century one finds on the stage of philosophy a thinker who was born in Romania and would later become famous, in France: Emil Cioran. It is a solitary phenomenon, and also a surprising one, totally against the optimistic stream of thought of Western society which was at its peak of civilization and of the triumph of prosperity. One must by chance mark here the following sequence: at a certain moment, during the ‘70s, when Cioran was completely unknown in Spain, Fernando Savater (Cioran’s translator in Spanish) had to make serious efforts to prove that such a thinker really exists and he is not one of his fancies.

Emil Cioran admits his Pyrrhonian legacy and he adds a barely plastic and also rather poetic manner of expression to his way of thinking, discarding the way of conceptual clarifications to which Sextus Empiricus, for instance, was so committed.

We are dealing with a thinker that speaks about philosophy, writing, birth, life, death, suicide, history, civilization, God, etc. and who cannot be read without prudence in a skeptical manner, given the classical meaning of the word.

In short, *philosophy*, a reign of reason, avoids feeling, the only one that matters within the development of the universe, and avoids it even in its most dramatic form, suffering: “I turned my back on philosophy when I realized that it is impossible to discover in Kant any human weakness, any trace of true sorrow; in Kant and in all other philosophers”¹⁰. Philosophy is impersonal, neutral, resulted from the common sense of reason, a flee from life, an avoiding of existence by means of explanations. The philosopher has an honorable profession, which is also prudent, with no destiny, which offers him a comfortable lack of implication within the important matters of life: he just debates upon the universe, explains it “by a mere proliferation of words, by subtle mutations of meaning”; his originality is reduced to “forging terms”; he is a “garrulous spirit”, while “the being is mute”.

But he wrote mainly upon philosophical matters; he did it out of his will to get salvation by means of confessing some intense experiences, tensed ones, having “a tendency to explode”, as the “tormenting” and unbearable obsession of death, but not only that. Thus *writing* becomes a therapy, helping to discharge, to free; the expression becomes a cure, even a “revenge” against the world and against himself.

Furthermore, *birth*, the primordial moment of human tragedy is, according to Cioran, absolutely undesirable: “Not to be born is, beyond any doubt, the best

⁹ Bertrand Russell, *The History of western philosophy*, vol. II, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 2005, p. 284.

¹⁰ Emil Cioran, *Treatise on Decay*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 1992, p. 76.

formula that there is. Unfortunately, it is not at anybody's disposal"¹¹. "Not-being-born" is preferable to life and death, as he states somewhere else¹², and this formula is in perfect consistency with that of Schopenhauer, regarding the same issue: "[...] we have to lesser enjoy the existence of the world than to bewail it, since its non-existence would be preferable to its existence"¹³. Every new-born is "one more unhappy person, just as one dead man is one unhappy less [...] Condolences for birth, congratulations for death" is another shocking formula of his¹⁴.

What mainly characterizes *life*, states Cioran, is above all the multiplicity of its forms, within a productive process of giving birth to some and destroying some other. This continuous productivity of life must not be taken as creativity, since "the successive forms do not gather around into a global structure, they are not grasped in a synthetic totality"¹⁵. It is a "devilry" of production and destruction, a becoming that has no transcendent goal, developing itself at a immanent level: "there is no life beyond the multiplicity of its forms". The irrational of life is manifested in this very devilry of forms with no transcendent intentionality from where the relativity of contents and forms of life follows.

Death, he says, cannot be understood unless we see life as a long agony. Agony refers to the dramatic moments of the quarrel "between life and death, when the phenomenon of death is consciously and painfully experienced. True agony is that in which you pass into nothingness through death, when the feeling of exhaustion is irreversibly consuming you and death wins. In all veritable agony there is a triumph of death, even if after those moments of exhaustion you keep on living"¹⁶. Thus, death is not something outside life, ontologically different from it, death is not a reality that is autonomous in relation to life¹⁷. "To enter death" does not mean, as in the case of Christianity, "to pass out" and to move, triumphant even, into another realm than life, a transcendent one, but to discover in life a road to death, an immanence of it or, as Cioran would put it, *You cannot live unless by dying. Death begins at the same time with life*¹⁸.

One more time surprising, he says about *suicidal* that it is really important to us at first because it helps us to keep on – paradoxically – living. "Born in a prison, with burdens on our shoulders and into our minds, we would not be able to reach even the end of one day, unless the capacity to finish it all anytime would determine us to start over the next day... The chains and the non-breathable air of this world take everything away from us except the freedom to suicide; and this freedom gives us a force and a self-esteem that overcome the burdens that crush us [...] It helps us bear the days and, even more than that, the nights; we are no longer poor or crushed by the hostile fate; we have supreme resources at our

¹¹ Emil Cioran, *The Inconvenience of Being Born*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 1993, 223.

¹² Idem, *Notebooks II.1966-1968*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 2005, p. 194.

¹³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Ed. Moldova, Iași, 1995, III, p. 384.

¹⁴ Emil Cioran, *Notebooks. 1957-1965*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 2005, p. 277.

¹⁵ Idem, *Solitude and destiny*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 1991, p. 80, 81.

¹⁶ Emil Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 1990, p. 24.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

¹⁸ Idem, *Solitude and destiny*, p. 243.

disposal. An even if we would never exploit them and we would finish life by passing out according to tradition, at least we would have had, within out renunciation, a treasuries there a greater richness than the suicidal everybody bears within inside?”¹⁹

He has a tragic conception over *history*, based on the opposition between moral and history, this being one of the reasons that entitles his fame as moralist: “History is the negation of moral. If you go through into history, if you reflect upon it, it is simply impossible not to be pessimistic. An optimist historian is a contradiction in terms. I cannot even conceive such a thing. I have discovered history as a theoretical science rather late, during my youth I was too proud to read the historians [...] and I must say that I was *astonished*. It is the greater lesson of cynicism one can imagine. Take any historical era, study it thoroughly and you will see what awful conclusions one draws from it”²⁰. History is a chain of “catastrophes” that repeat themselves in waiting for a final one, would state the philosopher on another occasion²¹, further invoking the Christian perspective on history, in which the Devil is the lord of the world, and Jesus Christ waits until the end of the world to decisively intervene, at doomsday.

Left at the will of becoming, of history, man lives a continuous decline, and *civilization* in which he buries himself merely polishes this situation. He rushes towards the future with love for the idea of evolution without realizing that he goes towards noting, towards perdition. But civilization relies on his aspiration for useless and unreal, and he does not understand that, in order to last, he forces himself to create within himself ever new needs. With every desire, civilization estranges him from his essence, ties him up on a new object, limiting his horizon. Objects dominate him, turn him into a slave of the instrument that he manufactured and handled himself.

As for *divinity*, the creation of this scandalous world, as it is considered by Cioran in full Gnostic manner, it cannot be the fruit of a good Lord, of the “Father”. The good Lord was unable to create such a world. Here the real Creator takes the floor, the Demiurge, “the subordinate and fussy god, instigator of the events”, which we can imagine, in order to create, “submissive to evil, which is change, but also to good, which is inertia”.²² (One needs this character at least as a “working hypothesis”, in order to understand a few things from “the visible world”²³.) The result is a creation ruled by evil, from which we cannot exclude the presence of good; thus, creation itself appears as a sin, but one that shades the original sin committed by man – “a minor version of an even graver crime”.²⁴

4. Cioran could never define himself always in a strict manner as an authentic skeptic, since he had doubts about himself, being even contradictory, although he was moving around this area: “My attitude towards skepticism is not quite clear to

¹⁹ Idem, *Treatise on decay*, p. 59-61.

²⁰ *Interviews with Cioran*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 2004, p. 56.

²¹ *Interviews with Cioran*, p. 122.

²² Emil Cioran, *The Evil Demiurge*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 1995, p. 8-9.

²³ Idem, *Notebooks II*, p. 270.

²⁴ Idem, *The Evil Demiurge*, p. 8-9.

me. I have not written too much, but often have I spoken as a skeptic. I may be a *false* skeptic, although I take myself as an authentic one. If I consider my temper, I am not, as you see, a true skeptic. A skeptic man is a cold man, who submits all things to a deep analysis. Skepticism has played a great part for me, inasmuch as it has calmed me, from time to time. Universal doubt can be a means to calm. If you are convinced that there is no certitude, doubt is unavoidable. As for me, I always *voluptuously* doubted, and no skeptic ever does that. Someone can be called skeptic if he takes distance from his ideas and from what he indeed is. He doubts all, but he is his own master. He masters himself. This is not my case. And if my despair had serious grounds, doubt was my salvation. This is why I have such a great weakness for it, and since I am so grateful, I have made a profession of faith out of it, I have always remained faithful to it..."²⁵ He categorically rejected the nihilist label some dictionaries attached him, being willing to rather accept that of skeptic²⁶. Fluctuations in his self-defining as a skeptic can be better noticed alongside his *Cahiers*: he labels himself successively "an emptied spirit slipped into skepticism", "a skeptic and an ardent altogether", "an unleashed skeptic", a thinker "under the spell of No", "an overwhelmed enthusiast", "a stranger from all one does on this Earth", an "incomplete skeptic". These *Cahiers*, solitaire witnesses of his dispositions, unveil him either as a strong skeptic, an unleashed one, passionate, vocational and undoubtedly in love with doubt, or as a weak skeptic that sometimes evades towards living and certitude. To him, skepticism is, on the one side, the road to redemption, a "sedative" aimed to tame his impulses due to his temper, the cause of his outbursts of kindness, and, on the other side, a drug, a poison without which he would have needed something even more toxic, or it is also a result of the lack of imagination, a cruelty smoothly dissimulated or a voluptuousness of dilemma. Nevertheless, one has spoken about a radical skepticism regarding Cioran and his Paris period, when he presents himself freed from the temper-biased deed (which was required, during his youth, by the belief of "realization of a destiny at the level of the individual or nation"), a liberation announced by the very first chapter of his *Treatise on decay*, where he denounces all ideas that became beliefs submitted to deeds²⁷. In other words, he became a resigned and disappointed person, whose action failed.

5. Nevertheless, this kind of thoughts will isolate him in a world that ceaselessly believes in the force of good and truth. This is why a long time he did not reach the public, as he became aware in 1967: "If my writings have no echo, this is because they do not respond to the needs of my contemporaries. They are too subjective, i. e. inopportune. As I do not go with the tide, I do not belong to the era, except by frenzy. Next, I do not propose any illusion; or, people do not gather around a message that is lucid until annihilation"²⁸. Thus, we believe that if he eventually becomes a famous philosopher, this is due more to the attraction of his unreachable style. Skepticism as such has small chances of success for the

²⁵ *Interviews with Cioran*, p. 138.

²⁶ *Interviews with Cioran*, p. 37-38.

²⁷ Gabriel Liiceanu, „*The story of a nightmare*“, in „*Secolul XX*“, nr. 328-329-330, p. 85.

²⁸ Emil Cioran, *Notebooks II*, p. 177.

philosophy-loving audience or even general audience. If, during the antiquity, “it was a leading force”, this is only due to the historical Greek circumstances: it was about the decline of Greek society, the twilight of a civilization; what could be more suitable than a doctrine reflecting this state of facts? Or, during the 20th century, as we have said before, human society undergoes growing progress; therefore, what good a doctrine to disturb its sweet ascension?

But, beyond all these, we are faced with a theory that seems to finally describe the situation of humanity in its moral and historical circumstances. At the beginning of this millennium it does not seem strange to make appeal to a skeptic born next to the Carpathian Mountains in order to evaluate the ontic statute of human being abandoned to becoming. It is worth thinking, given the risk of becoming pathetic, if we really deal with a progress in moving forward in time or if we are going, as Cioran “predicts”, towards the end. It seems more and more obvious, too, the fact that civilization, of which we believed it represents the motor of fast forwarding of man towards a more beautiful future, is that which gets us closer and closer to the end of history. Progress, even the technological one, seems to be an illusion or a peak one happily reaches, but after that there is a fall into the abyss. All these words charged with a certain philosophical ambiguity find their correspondent in the everyday life, are noticed within statistics and bear names we are already familiar with.