

# Feijoo, medicine, and skepticism<sup>1</sup>

## Feijoo, medicina y escepticismo

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### Abstract

Benito Feijoo (1676-1764) was one of the most important mediators to the public of the latest scientific and philosophical ideas in Spain in the eighteenth century. A self-conscious critic of all sorts of ideas and a member of the republic of letters, he also called himself a skeptic. At first, that meant allying himself with physician Martín Martínez, a famous critic of Aristotelianism in medicine who also called himself a skeptic. After supporting Martínez's view of skepticism in medicine against his critics, Feijoo seems to have abandoned the term, perhaps because he learned more about what the term could mean and realized it could be understood in some quarters to undermine the Catholic church and support atheistic materialism. He explored what skepticism could mean in medicine in some detail, but avoided using it in philosophical and theological matters.

**Keywords:** Benito Feijoo, medicine, skepticism, Martín Martínez.

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## Resumen

Benito Feijoo (1676-1764) fue uno de los divulgadores de las ideas científicas y filosóficas más importantes del siglo XVIII español. Lúcido crítico de todo tipo de ideas y miembro de la República de las Letras, se tenía a sí mismo por escéptico. En un primer momento, se alineó con el médico Martín Martínez, famoso por su crítica al aristotelismo médico, que también se autodenominó escéptico. Tras defender contra sus adversarios la medicina escéptica de Martínez, Feijoo abandona el término, tal vez porque intuyó que podría ser entendido en algunos ámbitos como una defensa del materialismo ateo y una forma de socavar las ideas de la Iglesia católica. Asimismo, investigó con detalle qué podía querer significar ser escéptico en medicina, aunque evitó usar el término en asuntos filosóficos y teológicos.

**Palabras-clave:** Benito Feijoo, medicina, escepticismo, Martín Martínez.

The reception of ancient and early modern skepticism in the work of Benito Jerónimo Feijoo (1676-1764) was mediated by his interest in medicine. This should not be too much of a surprise: our major source for ancient skepticism, Sextus Empiricus, was a physician, and early modern skeptics (in one way or another) such as Francisco Sánchez, Thomas Sydenham, and John Locke were physicians, too. Ernst Platner, one of the most important late-eighteenth century skeptics, was also a physician. The most important skeptical physician for Feijoo was Martín Martínez (1684-1734), one of the people who introduced Descartes and Gassendi to Spain in the early Enlightenment.

## Martín Martínez

Martínez received his medical degree from Sigüenza in 1705 and obtained a Chair at the General Hospital in Madrid, at first from 1714 on a part-time basis and finally in full in 1733. He became a member of the Royal Academy of Sevilla in 1717 and served as its president from 1725 to 1728. In 1723 he became a Physician to the Royal Family. Although his career was quite distinguished, he never held a chair at a university, surely because of his expressed hostility to the medical faculties of his day (Cruz del Pozo, 1997, Cruz del Pozo, 1999, and Laursen, 2003.)

Martínez's first publication was *Noches Anatómicas* of 1717, a complete course in medical anatomy, and then he wrote a short piece on vipers in 1721, but it was not published until 1723 (Martínez, 1717, Martínez, 1723). His second major work was *Medicina Sceptica y Cirugia Moderna*, which consisted

of 312 pages divided into 16 conversations among a Galenist, a Chemist, and a Hippocratic skeptic (who represents Martínez's ideas) concerning the major medical controversies of the day (Martínez 1722). It was reprinted in 1727 and 1748. Two years later he published a *Compendium y Examen nuevo de Cirurgia Moderna* (Martínez, 1724) and then in 1725 he brought out Volume Two of *Medicina Sceptica* (Martínez, 1725). It was also reprinted in 1727 and 1748.

In 1726 Martínez published a *Carta Defensiva* which was an attack on parts of Feijoo's *Teatro Crítico Universal*, in 1727 he brought out a *Juicio Final de la Astrología*, and in 1728 a "Juicio crítico" of the work of Oliva de Sabuco (1562-1622) which was published in an edition of her *Obras* in 1728 (Martínez, 1726, Martínez, 1727, Martínez, 1728a). His *Anatomía Completa del hombre* of the same year became a widely used medical school text and was reprinted eight times (Martínez, 1728b). His last work was *Philosophia Sceptica, extracto de la Physica Antigua y moderna, recopilada en dialogos, entre un Aristotelico, Cartesiano, Gassendista, y Sceptico para instrucción de la curiosidad Española* (Martínez, 1730), which was reprinted in 1750 and 1768. Much of the modern secondary work in philosophy focuses on this work (Benitez, 1997), but it was not mentioned by Feijoo in his writings on Martínez.

Martínez was publishing in the 1720's and as late as 1730, so he knew nothing about later skeptics of the High Enlightenment such as David Hume, Denis Diderot, Ernst Platner, or Immanuel Kant. But his work ought to count as part of the early Enlightenment, bringing advanced scientific and philosophical ideas to Spain. Thus, his career was part of the history of enlightened skepticism in Spain.

## Martínez on skepticism

The first question anyone might have about Martínez's *Medicina Sceptica* might be, "what does he mean by skepticism?". The paratexts at the beginning of the book start right away with answers (Martínez, 1722). The first "Aprobación", by Father Juan Interian de Ayala, praises Martínez's skepticism in philosophy and natural science, noting that the author sets the Holy Teachings outside of the reach of skepticism. Father Interian displays his knowledge of skepticism with references to Cicero, Seneca, Diogenes Laertius, and Sextus Empiricus. The "Censura" by Miguel Marcelino Boix, approves of the "more Sceptico, & Hippocratico" of Martínez. He describes Galen as a skeptic or Pyrrhonist in his early work who degenerated into rationalist dogmatism. The second "Aprobación", by Father Gaspar Luis de Nabas, consists of 19 pages with 63 footnotes to authorities from the ancient Greeks to Augustine and Erasmus to the effect that only God knows what is hidden in nature, most claims about

medicine are subject to doubts, and even the doctors of the Church approve of skepticism about nature.

In his own Preface, Martínez asserts that “todo el saber humano es saber dudar; pero no decir. Esta doctrina es la de los ingenuos Scepticos, en cuya tranquila *Epoche* he encontrado seguro puerto” (Martínez, 1722, unnumbered third page). But very soon he makes it clear that “de Sacra Escripura no pongo... porque aborrezco la necedad de mezclar lo Sagrado con lo profano” (Martínez, 1722, unnumbered eighth page). His skepticism is insulated from his faith.

In his Introduction, Martínez begins his dialogues with the Hippocratic skeptic’s assertion that he is only interested in refuting the least verosimile things that the others say, distinguishing the phenomena (or sensible) from the noumena (or only intelligible), and aspiring to skeptical *epoché*. When the Galenist cites Galen’s charge that the skeptics are obstinant, arrogant, and chatterers, the Hippocratic cites Galen from the same book to the effect that Pyrrho “no era así, sino muy humano, y de un animo sossegadísimo y que nada hablaba, si no lo pedía la ocasión” (Martínez, 1722, unnumbered second page). The Hippocratic skeptic cites Hippocrates, Erastistratus, Celsius, Boyle, Sydenham, Capoa, Silvio, and Gassendi as belonging to his school. The Skeptics “dan razón de las cosas, creyendo a los sentidos, y observación” mientras “los Dogmaticos no solo creen lo sensible, y lo observado, sino lo que les parece se sigue por racional consecuencia; y que las mas veces engaña” (Martínez, 1722, unnumbered third page). “El Sceptico ò Pyrrhónico dice, que el azúcar es dulce, como dice el Aristotelico; solo que este dice lo es por naturaleza, y el otro segun su parecer” (Martínez, 1722, unnumbered seventeenth page). The dogmatists write in terms of conclusions and truths, and the skeptics say “Parece; Quizás; Es verisimil” (Martínez, 1722, *ibid.*). Claiming to follow Sextus Empiricus, he asserts that skeptics “no nos resistimos a las tradiciones, y nuevas invenciones de las Artes”, which in fact adds “new inventions” to what Sextus had said, in order to save the new discoveries of medicine such as the circulation of blood (Martínez, 1722, *ibid.*). But all of this does not change the fact that, like the ancient skeptics, who followed the local customs, “creemos infaliblemente las verdades reveladas” but they “engendran en nosotros fè, no ciencia” (Martínez, 1722, *ibid.*).

In the first of the dialogues after the introduction, the speakers address the Aristotelian question of the number of elements in the world. After the Galenist and Chemist review claims about those elements, the Hippocratic, speaking for Martínez, protests “No gastemos el tiempo en cuestiones inútiles” and adds that “en todas las Obras de mi Hippocrates no he visto tal question exagitada” (Martínez, 1722, 3). When the Galenist and Chemist disagree on the number of elements, the Hippocratic points out that his interlocutors, as

well as Fludd, Telesio, and Descartes, all have different lists of elements, and that Hippocrates, “como verdadero Sceptico”, avoided such useless disputes (Martínez, 1722, 12). “Nuestro famoso Sceptico Sidenham” also said that true knowledge of how the Most Wise Maker made the world is beyond mortal abilities (Martínez, 1722, 13). Robert Boyle, Francis Mercury van Helmont, and Chancellor Bacon are cited for arguments against philosophical doctrines of the elements (Martínez, 1722, 16-18). The Hippocratic observes that the philosopher may want to know about what the elements are in themselves, but the physician only wants to know if and when they will help with cures (Martínez, 1722, 19).

The second dialogue deals with the mixture of elements, many of them traced back to Aristotle. The Hippocratic declares that “A quien no causará admiracion considerer el grave circumspecto Claustro de una Universidad gastar una entera tarde, proclamando nerviosamente este problema, no solo inutil, sino dificultosissimo de decidir, mientras no tengamos idea sensible de la mixion, la qual nos es imposible” (Martínez, 1722, 30). The third dialogue evaluates the scholastic question of whether parts of a mixture are mixed. Bacon is again invoked about the uselessness of the question and Celsus quoted as saying that experience is enough, and philosophical reasons are unnecessary (Martínez, 1722, 35). The Hippocratic also cites Hippocrates and Campanella against the possibility of knowing the temperament of individuals, and Bacon and Celsus again for the principle that actual experience is more useful than general principles (Martínez, 1722, 51-53). “Mas vale la observacion Sceptica, que vuestros silogismos dogmaticos, pues ellos muchas veces engañan”, he asserts (Martínez, 1722, 53).

Martínez’s Hippocratic skeptic never tires of expressing his impatience with philosophical questions and asks “¿Que provecho trae à un Medico, que ha de curar al cuerpo viviente, considerer la accion, y reaccion de la partes antes del calor influente, si nunca ay esto *in rerum natura*?” (Martínez, 1722, 62). In the following pages, the Hippocratic cites “nuestro ingenuissimo Sceptico Gasendo” and quotes Samuel Sorbière on Gassendi’s rejection of medicine derived from the schools of politics and rhetoric in favor of experiment (Martínez 1722, 94, 97). In the seventh and eight dialogues there is a constructive side to skepticism. Although the Hippocratic rejects syllogism and prefers experience, he also relies on “autoridades, experiencias, y razones” (Martínez, 1722, 120). He also takes some stands: the most verosimile is that “animal spirits” do not exist, and are only a product of custom, and he adds that they are not necessary to explain anything (Martínez, 1722, 150, 153). In the last dialogue of the first part of the book the Hippocratic concludes that we do better to confess our ignorance than try to explore such profound puzzles as the origin of life (Martínez, 1722, 175, 179). He has no patience for disputes that

do not contribute to cures (Martínez, 1722, 179).

The rest of Martínez's book does not offer much for interpreting his skepticism. The Hippocratic continues to criticize the others for failing to come up with cures, and seeks only such causes as experience indicates (Martínez, 1722, 184-5, 192). The latter part of the book is a treatise on surgery, a dogmatic exposition by the Chemist on how to carry out a variety of surgical procedures.

Volume Two of *Medicina Sceptica* came out in 1725. Once again Martínez's text is preceded by a "Censura" from a priest who defends the skepticism of knowing what one does not know, cites Columbus as a skeptical explorer, and concludes that Martínez's book contains nothing against the Catholic Church (Martínez, 1725, front matter). The "Approbation" praises Martínez's distinction between submission to the church in matters of faith and skepticism in matters of philosophy and medicine (Martínez, 1725, front matter). The first half of the book is an Apologema directed against Bernardo López de Araujo's *Aristotelian Medical Sentinel Against the Sceptics* (*Centinelá Médico-Aristotélica contra Scépticos*) of 1725. In dialogue form like the first volume, the Chemist argues that medical skeptics are not rigid or extreme skeptics: unlike Academic skeptics, true skeptics accept the possibility of acquiring knowledge (Martínez, 1725, 11). "Admitimos verdades reveladas, verdades metaphysicas, verdades patentes, o de instrucción natural, como que hay hambre, sed... solo damos lugar a la duda en las cosas phisicas, y dogmas" (Martínez, 1725, 12).

Martínez domesticates skepticism for religion. If Aristotle can be Christianized, why can't the skeptical Socrates? (Martínez, 1725, 13). In Martínez's hands, St. Augustine is a reformed, Christianized Academic Skeptic: "el gran caudillo de los Scepticos christianizados" (Martínez, 1725, 15). "Según el Santo, la Medicina es Sceptica" (Martínez, 1725, 15). The Hippocratic adds to the conversation the point that "los Modernos Pyrrhonianos Catholicos, confessan las verdades de la religion Catholica Romana" (Martínez, 1725, 24). It was the skeptical Socrates who taught us to doubt everything, but believe in the gods (Martínez, 1725, 14).

In the following dialogue, the Chemist explains that skeptics can be good Catholics: where a dogmatic philosopher will argue that one cannot be three, a skeptic can understand that maybe one can be three, as in the Trinity (Martínez, 1725, 31). The Hippocratic quotes Saint Jerome, Saint Bonaventura, Cayetano, Nicolas de Lyra and more in defense of the skeptical argument that we cannot know much about the world (Martínez, 1725, 37-42). Respected figures including Diego de Saavedra y Fajardo, Francisco Sánchez, and Quevedo are quoted as skeptical philosophers (Martínez, 1725, 48-50). The Hippocratic does not deny general metaphysical syllogisms, but asserts that they do not apply to the world. "De singulares no ay ciencia", and "todas las cosas Phisicas, y

Medicas son particulares, y contingentes” (Martínez, 1725, 52-53, 57). In the last dialogue, the Chemist cites Celsus, Sylvio, Gassendi, and Sydenham for the point that medicine needs only natural logic, not the artificial logic of the schools (Martínez, 1725, 104-107).

The second part of Volume II, on fevers, repeats many of the arguments we have seen above. The Hippocratic quotes “Pyrrhon, el caudillo de los Scepticos”, and asserts that “en lo que no está demostrado, mas yerra el que assiente, que el que duda” (Martínez, 1725, 167-168). Answering a French physician’s demand for more research on digestion, he writes that “los Scepticos tenenos por inutil disputer como digerimos, sino buscar por la experiencia, que alimentos nos sean mas provechosos” (Martínez, 1725, 220). From what we have seen, Martínez is a skeptic and defends the history of skeptical thinking for the purposes of suppressing the Aristotelian philosophical approach to medicine in favor of the practice of medicine based on experience.

## Feijoo

Feijoo’s first publication was a defense of vol. 1 of Martínez’s *Medicina Sceptica*. In *Apología del Escepticismo Médico* of 1725 Feijoo defended Martínez against the charges of incompetence and atheism in Bernardo López de Araujo’s *Centinela Médico-Aristotélica contra Scépticos*, the same volume that Martínez answered in his Volume Two (Feijoo, 1725). He starts with the observation that Araujo evidently did not read more than the first nine pages of Martínez’s Introduction, because that is all he refers to and there are answers to his charges in later pages (Feijoo, 1725, 205). Feijoo’s main argument is that Araujo assumes the “falso supuesto” that Martínez applies “una duda o suspension de asenso generalísima hacia todos los objetos, cual la profesaron los rigurosos Escépticos o Pirronianos” (Feijoo, 1725, 206). Araujo wants to accuse Martínez of atheism because the skeptics doubt everything, although the latter has made it clear, as we have seen, that “el Escepticismo del Dr. Martínez no sale del recinto de la Física” (Feijoo, 1725, 207). When Araujo cites El Divino Valles against Martínez, Feijoo quotes from Valles to exactly the same effect as Martínez (Feijoo, 1725, 207-208). Beyond that, Martínez distances himself from Pyrrho in specific ways (Feijoo, 1725, 208). “El Escepticismo, pues, del Dr. Martinez no alcanza a negar el conocimiento cierto de varios fenómenos, o efectos sensibles, sino de sus causas físicas, y del íntimo modo de obrar, o acción de ellas” (Feijoo, 1725, 209). Araujo should “guardar todas sus citas y argumentos, tales cuales son ellos, para cuando encuentre un Escéptico que dude universalmente de todo; y yo aseguro que jamás le encuentre” (Feijoo, 1725, 210). But “la Escéptica mitigada que profesa el Dr. Martínez, no estorba



que dé asenso probable a muchas aserciones controvertibles” (Feijoo, 1725, 210).

Martínez attacks dogmatists “con harta razón”, according to Feijoo, “quedándose él en el medio de un Escepticismo racional, pues ni de todo duda, ni a todo asiente. Cree aquellos fenómenos que la observación y experiencia persuaden; duda de sus íntimas causas” (Feijoo, 1725, 212). As for Araujo’s charges of atheism, “es artifice vulgar de Filosofastros desnudos de razones acudir luego a que la sentencia que impugnan, es contraria a los sagrados dogmas” (Feijoo, 1725, 212). Theology might need to study Aristotle’s dialectic, but medicine does not: “en esta Facultad no es necesario desenredar sofismas, sino descubrir verdades... y buscar remedios oportunos” (Feijoo, 1725, 218-219, 224). And even if Descartes’s universal doubt as a propaedeutic to philosophy “tiene mal olor” and may “disminuye mucho el Poder soberano”, “en aquellas cuestiones que no tienen conexión alguna con los dogmas, podrá cada uno sentir como quisiere, y seguir, o abandonar a Aristoteles como se la antojare” (Feijoo, 1725, 227-228). Feijoo observes that “hay más riesgo en abrazar inconsideradamente las nuevas opiniones [de Descartes], que en defender obstinadamente las antiguas [de Aristóteles]”, but neither really threatens religion (Feijoo, 1725, 231). When Araujo says he does not like something Martínez has said, Feijoo cites the same thing from Aquinas (Feijoo, 1725, 232).

One of the big problems with dogmatic thinkers is that they are prone to make judgments “sobre una experiencia sola”, which, “mal entendida”, they use to found “un teorema falso, deduciendo precipitadamente lo que a su parecer se infería de ella por racional consecuencia” (Feijoo, 1725, 237). The moderns, “manteniéndose sobre las reglas de una prudente Escéptica, miraron y remiraron aquel fenómeno, combinándole con otros experimentos” before they make a judgment (Feijoo, 1725, 237). One kind of philosopher “de una experiencia sola, mal entendida, deducen una conclusión filosófica”, but others “suspenden el asenso hasta que un sutil y sólida reflexión sobre varios experimentos los determine a formar dictamen” (Feijoo, 1725, 239). It is because of “la diligencia de los modernos en repetir sus experimentales observacions” that we have better knowledge of physics than before (Feijoo, 1725, 240). What Feijoo is endorsing here seems to be the scientific method.

It seems clear that to Feijoo, skepticism is a method by which observers “miran, y remiran la naturaleza en sus fenómenos, suspendiendo el asenso, hasta que experiencias reiteradas los relevan do toda duda” (Feijoo, 1725, 244). The ancient skeptics never arrived at this stage of the elimination of every doubt, but rather remained in suspension of judgement. But Feijoo claims that Martínez is justified in calling those who experiment until there are no doubts skeptics, thus making the scientific method a form of skepticism (Feijoo, 1725,



244). And finally, he defends such skepticism against charges that it leads to atheism. On the contrary, “los Escépticos Físicos están más dispuestos a render el asenso a las verdades revelados” because, “conociendo la insuficiencia de su discurso para alcanzar las cosas naturales, están más distantes de presumirse con capacidad de decidir contra la realidad de los misterios” (Feijoo, 1725, 247).

At least in his early years, the terms “critical” and “skeptical” were siblings in Feijoo’s project of the intellectual analysis of the issues of his day (Zazo, 2024). That included the exposure of historical, political, and philosophical impostures of every sort (Arttime, 2024). They are best understood in the context of his participation in the Republic of Letters, not as technical terms in philosophy (Bahr 2024). As another scholar put it, “son scepticisme se situe plus au niveau de la communication avec ses semblables qu’à celui d’une théorie de la connaissance” (Sánchez-Blanco, 2010, 172).

From the foregoing we have learned that Feijoo’s first publication was an in-depth encounter with both medicine and the traditions of skepticism. Skepticism emerges as a propaedeutic to scientific discovery, not an end state or merely destructive method. It does not threaten religion. He continued to engage with medicine and skepticism throughout his writing career, without much change of perspective, but with some change of vocabulary: unless he was prompted to use the words “skeptical” or “skepticism”, he eventually abandoned them. In the following, we will follow these matters in Feijoo’s writings.

### Feijoo’s engagement with medicine, philosophy, and skepticism in the *Teatro Crítico*, 1726-1739

The next time Feijoo dealt with medicine was the next year, 1726, in Discurso 5 of the first volume of the *Teatro Crítico Universal*, con el título “Medicina” (I.5).<sup>3</sup> His purpose was to demonstrate how fallible medicine was in its present status of imperfection. He cites the Roman doctor Jorge Ballivio for the point that medical books are full of errors and the English physician Thomas Sydenham on the “incertidumbre, y perplejidad” of illnesses (TCI.5.II.6-7). He quotes the French doctor Le Francois on doctors that “en

<sup>3</sup> Feijoo, “Medicina”, *Teatro crítico universal*, Tomo 1, 1726, 5<sup>th</sup> discourse. Feijoo published nine volumes under the title *Teatro crítico universal* in the years 1726-1740 and five volumes under the title *Cartas eruditas y curiosas* in 1742-1769. Accessed at <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjf000.htm> (accessed February 2022). Cited hereafter in parentheses in the text as follows: *Teatro Crítico* cited as TC with volume number in Roman numerals, Discourse number in Arabic numerals, section number in Roman numerals, and paragraph number in Arabic numerals. *Cartas eruditas* cited as CE with the volume number in Roman numerals, Letter number in Arabic numerals, and paragraph number in Arabic numerals. The first time each Discourse or Letter appears the title will be indicated in order to orient the reader.

el ejercicio de su arte andarán como a ciegas” (TCI.5.II.9). He reports that Martín Martínez “doctísimamente dio a conocer al mundo la incertidumbre de la medicina” (TCI.5.II.11). “Todo en la Medicina es disputado: luego todo es dudoso”, he concludes (TCI.5.III,14).

Feijoo proceeds to review the history of medicine, passing through the schools of ancient medicine such as the rationalists and the Methodists, the Galenists, the Arab physicians, the Chemical School, and then their early modern followers plus new schools of Paracelsians and Helmontians. “Bastan tantas contradicciones, como hemos apuntado, para conocer la grande incertidumbre de la Medicina” (TCI.5.III.23). Taking blood-letting and purging as cases studies, he reports at great length on the multiple theories about these medical procedures and their successes and failures. He cites Dr. Martínez for the assertion that the number of people killed by blood-letting was higher than the number killed by the artillery (TCI.5.VI.32). The arguments on both sides are listed, just as in the skeptical practice of *isosthenia* or the listing of equal counter-arguments for every assertion, and they seem about equal (e.g. TCI.5.VI.31-32). Martínez is again quoted on the doubtful necessity of purges, and concludes that in “el uso de los purgantes todo está lleno de dudas, y riesgos” (TCI.5.VII.44). He concludes that “en fin, no hay cosa segura en la Medicina” (TCI.5.VIII.48).

Feijoo brings in the literary figures who have lambasted medicine, from Quevedo to Petrarch to Montaigne and Molière (TCI.5.XI.61). But he also insists that “yo no estoy mal con la Medicina; antes la amo mucho. Sé que el Espíritu Santo la recomienda”, but he is against the claims of physicians to know more than they do (TCI.5.XI.66). He concludes by threatening doctors who try to do more than they really know that the angels will accuse them before God after their deaths for killing innocent people (TCI.5.XI.73).

Ezequiel de Olaso analyzed some of the many qualifications Feijoo used in his discussion of skepticism in medicine, such as “moderate skepticism”, “mitigated skepticism”, “rigid skepticism”, and more (Olaso, 1976). He pointed out that Feijoo’s skepticism was not by any means an argument against the possibility of improving the practice of medicine. Rather, “con la observación y la experimentación es posible realizar pequeños pero interesantes progresos. Esta alianza de escepticismo y empirismo es típicamente moderna” (Olaso, 1976, 299). As Olaso put it, Feijoo’s doubt about medicine “es una confesión de modestia que involucre una colosal pretension: el saber científico es limitado, pero autónomo. ¿De qué? Por de pronto, de la autoridad; en segundo término, de la metafísica” (Olaso, 1976, 299). Feijoo’s “skepticism” was a form of liberation from the tyranny of philosophy in medicine.

Nevertheless, this attack on medicine was too much for Martínez. He responded to Feijoo in a *Carta Defensiva* that was printed as the second-to-last

item in Tomo Segundo (1728) of the *Teatro Crítico Universal* (TCII.*Carta*).<sup>4</sup> First, Martínez demonstrated his erudition by commenting briefly on the other discourses in the volume, calling Feijoo the “nuevo Verulamio Español” (TCII.*Carta*.323). These were the comments of a man of letters of broad reading, not limited to medicine, and often bringing in quotes from ancient sources. He often agrees with Feijoo, as for example on the foolishness of astrology and the similarity of women to men. He is a strong critic of Descartes on several points, going as far as to refer to one of his doctrines as a “ingeniosa fantasía” and “un entusiasmo Filosófica” and asserts that “con mucha razón los Escépticos despreciamos estas Físicas ideales” (TCII.*Carta*.331, 333).

Then Martínez gets to what Feijoo said about physicians. “Nada halaga más mis pensamientos que la doctrina Escéptica”, he writes, but Feijoo goes too far (TCII.*Carta*.339). In what must have seemed to Feijoo an attempt to defeat him on his own ground, Martínez starts with quotes from the Bible and other Christian sources for the point that “el intento del Libro Sagrado es apartarnos de la desconfianza que el Teatro Crítico quiere infundirnos” (TCII.*Carta*.339). Again displaying his erudition, he observes that the Egyptians made their physicians priests, and that Medean, Arab, and Persian kings often practiced medicine, and so forth (TCII.*Carta*.340). And even though Hippocrates spoke a lot about doubts, he was given the same godlike honors as Hercules (TCII.*Carta*.340-341). Generals kill more in a day than doctors in 100 years, he asserts, in evident answer to Feijoo’s quote from him about physicians killing more than the artillery (TCII.*Carta*.342, TCI.5.VI.32). Explaining himself, he says that “ninguno más a favor de la duda, y el Escepticismo, que yo (como tengo esforzado en mis dos tomos de Medicina Escéptica), pero sólo la llevo hasta los precisos límites de la experiencia” (TCII.*Carta*.344). Among his many efforts to express the exact nature of his skepticism he asserts that “confieso la ignorancia de las causas morbificas... pero admito los caracteres por donde experimentalmente se distinguen, y curan” (II.*Carta*.344). “Aborrezco los Dogmas y Sistemas fundados en pensamientos de hombres; pero aplaudo las racionales experiencias, e inducciones” (II.*Carta*.344). Martínez asserts that Etmulero and Sydenham, cited by Feijoo in favor of doubts about medicine, should not have published their works if they did not think that they contained some truths (II.*Carta*.345-346). To distinguish himself, he asserts that he follows “en la Medicina la secta media, y más benigna, de modo que entre los Médicos Dogmáticos (dígoles así) soy el mayor Escéptico, y entre los rígidos Escépticos el mayor Dogmático” (TCII.*Carta*.346). He is trying to define a middle way.

<sup>4</sup> This “Carta” does not have a discourse number or include paragraph numbers, so it is cited here in parentheses by page number, which may be found in brackets in the text.

Physicians do have their success stories, Martínez asserts, and are usually able to cure pain, dysentery, venereal disease, and other illnesses that respond to particular time-honored cures (TCII.*Carta*.347). In a jab at Feijoo's recommendations for how to hire a physician Martínez asserts that they might be helpful for a "comunidad de doctos", but probably are above the heads of the "vulgo de ignorantes" (TCII.*Carta*.351). And finally, medicine is no more vulnerable to criticism than jurisprudence or ethics, and if anything can be said in favor of some limited useful knowledge in those fields, it can also be said about medicine (TCII.*Carta*.352). The whole is an attempt to work a middle way between excessive confidence and excessive distrust of medicine.

Naturally, Feijoo could not let this criticism of his criticism go by without response, and he answered it in almost as many pages in the same volume of the *Teatro Crítico*, titled "Respuesta al Doctor D. Martín Martínez" (TCII.*Respuesta*). He agrees that he and Dr. Martínez are fundamentally not far apart, but then he insists on the value of recognizing that physicians do not have much firm knowledge. "En lo que yo acaso soy singular es en que estoy persuadido a que para lograr la utilidad, importa que todo el mundo conozca la incertidumbre" (TCII.*Respuesta*.II.5). He asserts that "en la Medicina va mucho más expuesto al error el Dogmático presumido, que el Escéptico receloso" (TCII.*Respuesta*.II.6). He explains: "A mí se me nota de que quiero introducir en el mundo una general desconfianza de los Médicos. No intento tanto. Lo que yo digo es que entonces deberá confiar el mundo de los Médicos, cuando los Médicos desconfien de sí mismos" (TCII.*Respuesta*.III.7). The idea is that if they are not overconfident, they will make fewer mistakes. Doctors speak with complete confidence, but in medicine "no hay en toda ella ni una proposición sola, que, a buen librar, no sea dudosa" (TCII.*Respuesta*.III.9).

In answer to Martínez's comparison of medicine to theology and the law, Feijoo observes that "en la Teología el topo encuentra con la certeza: en la Medicina el lince no puede pasar de la conjetura" (TCII.*Respuesta*.VI.16). Even politics and military matters are clearer than medicine: "procede con mucha mayor obscuridad el Médico en su Arte, que el Caudillo en la suya" (TCII.*Respuesta*.VI.18; see also II.*Respuesta*.VI.21). He even quotes Martínez's own writings for contradictory evaluations of the relative harm done by a bad general vs. that done by a doctor (TCII.*Respuesta*.VI.19). And he agrees with Martínez that "el vulgo" are not qualified to judge doctors (TCII.*Respuesta*.VII.21).

Since Martínez has charged him with being too rigid a skeptic, he answers that "es cierto que no lo soy" (TCII.*Respuesta*.VIII.28). "No es ese mi carácter; pues algo juzgo cierto en la Medicina, y admito desigualdad en lo que es puramente probable (TCII.*Respuesta*.VIII.28). But if "es verdad que inclino mucho al Escepticismo, y no hallo modo de remediarlo", it is the

doctors themselves that provoke it (TCII.*Respuesta*.VIII.28). “Véolos casi generalmente discordes en toda la práctica del arte” y “si leyera más, dudaría más” (TCII.*Respuesta*.VIII.28). Nevertheless, there are one or two things all doctors agree on: one of them is the use of mercury for curing venereal disease (TCII.*Respuesta*.VIII.34, IX.57). He is not a complete skeptic.

“El Escepticismo moderado”, Feijoo insists, “no solo es inevitable, pero útil en el Médico”, keeping the physician from being too self-confident (TCII.*Respuesta*.VIII.41). He also asserts that “el que más ha estudiado es el que más duda” (TCII.*Respuesta*.VIII.42). He quotes from Cicero’s *Academica* on how some doctors are incapable of recognizing the truth in any school of medicine but the one they were trained in, which makes them “incapaces de hacer recto juicio en las cosas de medicina” (TCII.*Respuesta*.VIII.44).

Feijoo also goes through many of the figures that Martínez had claimed were physicians who became princes or princes who became physicians, and rejects his claims for a variety of reasons, admitting that maybe there were a few who held both roles, but that is not the rule (TCII.*Respuesta*.IX.47-49). As for Martínez’s claims that the Holy Scriptures prove that God gave medicine to the world, he quickly shows that what the book of *Ecclesiastes* indicates about what God did does not necessarily have anything to do with medicine as it is practiced in his own times (TCII.*Respuesta*.IX.55-56). But this does not mean, he assures Dr. Martínez, that he does not believe that there can be any progress in medicine (TCII.*Respuesta*.X.60). He holds out the hope that the Royal Academies in Paris and London, and even his own Regia Sociedad de Sevilla, may add to certain medical knowledge over time (TCII.*Respuesta*.X.60). He expresses confidence in the work of Ballivio, which he has quoted often (TCII.*Respuesta*.X.61). And with that he has staked out his position of moderate skepticism.

Jean-Pierre Grima Morales has pointed out that Feijoo’s skepticism drew heavily on the English scientific skepticism of Bacon, Boyle, Locke, Sydenham, and Glanvill (Grima Morales 2013, 379). Of these, Boyle had titled one his books *The Sceptical Chymist* (1661). In Discurso 15 of Volume II of the *Teatro*, “Mapa intelectual y cotejo de Naciones”, Boyle is mentioned along with John Locke as English scientists, but no mention is made of his skepticism (TCII.15.VIII.36-37). In his “Respuesta” he called Boyle “el mayor de todos los Físicos”, but again did not mention his skepticism (TCII.*Respuesta*.IX.56), and in “Examen filosófico...”, Discurso 8 of volume 6 of the *Teatro* he is mentioned again (TCVI.8.VI.32). At this point it is enough to observe that these English scientists were in the back of his mind throughout his career, and he did not exclude Protestant authors from his work on account of their heresy (Menéndez Viso, 2024). We shall ret Menéndez Viso y García-Alonso urn to mention some of them in the *Cartas Eruditas* below.

In Volume 3 of the *Teatro Crítico* (1729), Feijoo added another answer to critics of his first writings on medicine. “La Verdad Vindicada contra la Medicina Vindicada” was his own translation of a Latin text that he had written in response to several attacks on his work, especially the *La Medicina Vindicada* of Dr. Ignacio Ros (TCIII.*Verdad*). He desired ardently that someone could show him that he was wrong about the uncertainty of medicine, but it had not happened yet (TCIII.*Verdad*.I.1). In one of the answers to Ros he objects that his claim that medicine is uncertain does not mean he is claiming that it is entirely “falsa, inútil y nociva” (TCIII.*Verdad*.II.9). As practiced by a very few physicians, it is not, but as practiced by the majority, it is (TCIII.*Verdad*.VI.29). He is even ready to admit that “algo se ha mejorado en la Medicina”, mostly because of the gradual abandonment of too many blood-lettings and purges (TCIII.*Verdad*.VI.32).

Feijoo’s answer to the claim that the Bible endorses the art of medicine is that the medicine that the Bible referred to was not the same as our medicine, a point he develops at some length (TCIII.*Verdad*.II.10-14, III.17-19). He does not use the word “skeptical” now, but rather “incertidumbre” and “incierta”. “La Medicina carece enteramente de Cánones fijos”, he asserts (TCIII.*Verdad*.VII.35). He defends himself against the charge that he had claimed that purges and bloodletting are always bad by saying that “yo no condené absolutamente el uso de estos dos remedios; sólo afirmo que son inciertos, y muchas veces peligrosísimos” (TCIII.*Verdad*.VIII.40). If he has exaggerated at any point, Feijoo asserts, it is because he wants to “moderar la nimia confianza de los vulgares en los Médicos, y a reprimir la temeridad de infinitos Médicos”, but some small number of them can actually cure people: “hago siempre excepción de los Médicos sabios, expertos, sagaces, y piadosos” (TCIII.*Verdad*.XV.61, XVI.64). He wants to undermine the confidence of sick people “respectivo sólo a los Médicos malos” (TCIII.*Verdad*.XVII.68). Skepticism about medicine has become a healthy distrust of some doctors and some remedies, rather than something across-the board and determinative.

We have noticed that by volume 3 of the *Teatro Crítico* Feijoo can discuss medical uncertainty without using the word skepticism. It may be that he is avoiding it deliberately. The same volume 3 also contains an essay on “Escepticismo filosófico” (TCIII.13). He had evidently studied more about skepticism in a wider sense than Martínez’s limited sense, and maybe for that reason he did not want to be especially associated with it. The problem, he points out in the first sentence, is that “hay tanta latitud en el escepticismo, y son tan diferentes sus grados, que con este nombre, según la varia extensión que se da a su significado, se designan el error más desatinado, y el modo de filosofar más cuerdo. El escepticismo rigido es un delirio extravagante; el moderado una cautela prudente” (TCIII.13.I.1). He reviews various reports on Pyrrho,



Arcesilaus, and Carneades in order to suggest that they were not as skeptical as some have charged. Pyrrho could not have been as skeptical as some say because he lived 90 years, Feijoo asserts (TCIII.13.II.7). Besides, “nadie puede dudar de su propia existencia” (TCIII.13.III.8). All of his assertions are at least debatable, but the point is that he is trying to prove that no sane person is a complete skeptic. And he has an ulterior reason for this: “quien duda de todo, es evidente que no profesa Religión alguna” (TCIII.13.III.9). After dismissing anyone who tries to undermine religion, which is a “depravada intención”, he proceeds to treat of skepticism about physics, which he supports.

Skepticism about physics is healthy, and has no impact on religion, Feijoo argues. “Lo que afirma el sistema Escéptico físico es, que en las cosas físicas, y naturales no hay demostración, o certeza alguna científica, sí sólo opinión” (TCIII.13.I.1). “Probó esta conclusion [...] el Doctor Martínez en el Segundo Tomo de *Medicina Escéptica*” (TCIII.13.VII.32). Church Father Lactantius approves of Arcesilaus’s skepticism as long as it is limited to physics (TCIII.13.VIII.33). Campanella, Gassendi, and the Cartesians are brought in to bring out doubts about physics, but additional doubts are raised by the fact that they do not agree among themselves (TCIII.13.XV.63). “Nada afirman unos, que no nieguen otros” (TCIII.13.XVI.64). Bringing in his religious sensibility, he asks: “¿Qué hemos de hacer, sino suspender el asenso hasta que un Angel decida el litigio?” (TCIII.13.XVI.64). Aristotelian answers are no better (TCIII.13.332-333). This means that “nuestra Filosofía no es otra cosa que un tejido de falibles conjeturas” (TCIII.13XXII.86). Thus, “la Aula de la Física es un Teatro, donde sólo se enseña a dudar sin término” (TCIII.13.XXIII.87). But this is not wholly bad, since “el mayor enemigo de la Religión es la desordenada confianza de la razón” (TCIII.13.XIV.88). But this does not mean we should not proceed with scientific investigations. “Ni yo sé, ni nadie puede saber, sin revelación, los limites justos del entendimiento humano en el orden a las cosas naturales” (TCIII.13.XXV.97). Feijoo is threading the needle here between science and religion, and skepticism serves his purpose only when it does not lead to doubts about religion. So this may be the reason why he abandons the use of the term in his discussions of medicine in Tomo III and later volumes. He does not need it, and does not want to subject his arguments to the criticism that he promotes extreme skepticism.

In Volume 7 of the *Teatro Critico* (1736), “De lo que sobra, y falta en la enseñanza de la Medicina”, Feijoo maintained his stance against abstractions and theory in medicine (TCVII.14). Reporting that in medical studies four years are spent on theory and only two on practice, he rejects all such theories that do not have practical implications, or implications about the practice of medicine. Most of the theoretical debates are useless, he asserts over and over, and the focus should be on usefulness. He favors the saying, “Donde acaba



el Físico, empieza el Médico” (TCVII.14.III.8). Physicians do not need much study of philosophy: “si Hipócrates, pues, fue un insigne Médico, sin estudiar la Dialéctica, y Física de Aristoteles, podrán serlo otros del mismo modo” (TCVII.14.III.12). Neither the atoms of Gassendi nor the vortices of Descartes help anyone cure a sick person (TCVII.14.III.13). Again without mentioning the word “skeptical” or skepticism, Feijoo talks of “la ceguera, o la ignorancia de los hombres” and uses the skeptical trope of citing authorities on opposite sides of important issues in medicine (TCVII.14.III-IV). It is “digno de lamentarse el triste malogro de aquel tiempo, que se da al estudio de la Filosofía” in medical studies (TCVII.14.V.15). His hope is that an emphasis on the practical will be promoted by the Regia Sociedad de Sevilla and the newly founded Academia Médica Matritense. What really helps is “la observación, y experiencia”, he asserts (TCVII.14.V.23).

At this point we have looked through the most substantial essays in the *Teatro Crítico* which focus on medicine, and one which focuses on philosophy and physics. As we have seen, his discussion of medicine often included discussion of physics and philosophy and in those discourses he generally tried to distinguish and distance medicine from them, at least from the more theoretical branches of those disciplines. He also wrote other discourses centered more on physics and philosophy without discussion of medicine, but it seems safe to say the point was usually similar (TCI.13, TCII.1, TCII.14, TCV.9, etc.). We do not have the space here to run through all of them, but throughout he likes physics and philosophy when they have practical implications, and does not care for debates about theory alone. He thinks the proper attitude toward physics and philosophy is a sort of skepticism, or doubt about certainties.

It should never be forgotten that religious belief and church dogma were fundamental to Feijoo’s positions, even, or maybe especially, when it looks like he is taking an “enlightened” position, such as, for example, his take on women’s rights (García-Alonso, 2024). Religion is always insulated from skepticism and critical doubts. As Fernando Bahr put it when describing Feijoo’s use of Bayle’s *Dictionnaire*, his purpose in drawing on wide philosophical sources was always to provide a “hispano-católica” version of the history and meaning of skepticism (Bahr, 2005, 8, 29). Bayle has long been interpreted as one of the key early figures in Enlightenment skepticism, although the exact nature of his skepticism has been much debated in recent years. For example, Antony McKenna argues that he was not at all skeptical about moral matters (McKenna, 2012). If this is true, Feijoo could be following Bayle when he recognizes moral truths. Feijoo uses Bayle’s ideas freely, often without mention of his source, but differing from Bayle in “his complete acceptance of Scripture and of the basic dogmas of the Roman Church” (Staubach, 1939, 92).

## Feijoo's engagement with medicine, philosophy, and skepticism in the *Cartas eruditas, y curiosas, 1742-1760*

Jumping ahead to Feijoo's last substantial discussion of medicine, Carta 21 of Vol. 5 of *Cartas eruditas*, "Sobre la mayor, o menor utilidad de la Medicina...", published in 1760, we see that his doubts about the certainty of medicine remain (CE.V.21). He insists on "la gran incertidumbre de esta facultad; incertidumbre, digo, que se hace visible en la variedad y oposición de opiniones de los profesores" (CEV.21.5). This is, of course, one of the skeptical tropes, but he does not mention that here, or use the word "skeptical" or "skeptical". His critics do not impress him: "cada día estoy más firme en el concepto de la grande incertidumbre de la Medicina" (CEV.21.14). There are not many certainties in medicine: he mentions quinine and mercury as usually good remedies for fever and venereal disease, but even then he recognizes that they do not work in every single case (CEV.21-22). But he does believe in progress and utility remains his focus. In the hands of good doctors, medicine "es bastante útil" (CEV.21.41). In the future its utility will be "mucho mayor" (CEV.21.47). So all he is asking for is caution and the avoidance of remedies that cause more harm than they alleviate. He must think it is unnecessary to label this "skepticism".

Interpreting other "Cartas" in the *Cartas eruditas* in this key, we see that there may be several reasons for his avoidance of the term "skeptical". One is that he knew more about the tradition of skepticism, and realized that it covered a lot of ground, only some of which was relevant to his purposes. Another is that he had learned more about and turned more against European philosophical materialism in these years. He may have realized that skepticism was often associated with atheistic materialism, and thus had another reason for distancing himself from it (Grima Morales, 2013). And finally, he may have realized that other terms might provoke less opposition and indignation among his readers.

So, for example, in "Sobre la ignorancia de las causas de las enfermedades", Carta 40 of the first volume of the *Cartas* (1742), he dealt with a practical issue (CEI.40). Based in part on his own experience, he could claim that most of the time we do not really know what caused any particular illness. Some say it was the heat, some the cold, some the humidity, some the dryness of the air (CEI.40.6). Feijoo's solution to the problem is that we do not really need to know the causes, just the cures. He even argues that a modicum of ignorance is good for the soul (CEI.40.10). There is no need to speak of skepticism: there is no doubt here, but rather almost complete ignorance. Rather than suspending judgment, he is calling for abandonment of the need for judgment about causes, and a focus on cures.

Several other Cartas on medical matters in volume 1 have even less reason for referring to skepticism. Carta 13, on curing by drinking water, makes the cautious point that water cannot be a guaranteed cure-all: often drinking a lot will cure, but not always, and sometimes too much drinking of water will be harmful. Carta 14, on the excessive drinking of water, Feijoo declares that “en materia de Medicina, ninguna regla admito como segura, sino la colección bien reflexionada de muchos experimentos” (CEI.14.2). This is not skepticism, because empirical evidence can make for strong claims. Carta 15, on the medical writings of Padre Rodríguez, asserts that it is a good thing that Rodríguez did not study medicine at the university because “muy ordinariamente de las Aulas no se saca luz, sino tinieblas” (CEI.15.3). Carta 16, on transfusions of blood, reviews reports of experiments in several times and places, most of which resulted in the death of the subject, and concludes that transfusions of blood have been rightly prohibited (CEI.16). Carta 17, on medical transplantatoria, is about a theory in Feijoo’s sources that one could “transplant” a disease out of a person and into a dog, a cat, a tree, or a mirror by proper procedures. He rejected theories that this was done by magnetism, and if it ever happened “puro mecanismo” was enough of an explanation (CEI.17.9). But he did not believe the mirror stories at all for lack of a physical nexus (CEI.17.10). All of these Cartas are enough to make the point that Feijoo is much more interested in practical medical experimentation and experience-based advice than in inquiries about philosophical principles. The only thing that could be labeled “skepticism” is charges of lack of any empirical proof, coupled with suspicion that what is at work is superstition (CEI.17.14).

In volume 2, Carta 17 on modern obstetrics also has no reflections on philosophy or physics, but follows up on points about women’s equality in his famous writings on women with the point that there is no reason to believe that women cannot be taught the medical art of obstetrics and thus solve the problem of women who are embarrassed to have a male physician see their private organs during childbirth (CEII.17). This is not a matter of knowledge or ignorance, but of social customs that could be more flexible than they are.

Volume 2, Carta 23, “Sobre los Sistemas Filosóficos”, spells it out that what Feijoo is against is “la investigación de los principios [en las materias Filosóficas], suponiéndolos absolutamente inaccesibles al ingenio humano” (CEII.23.3). All the great system-makers from Aristotle and Plato to Zeno and Pythagoras “no hicieron otra cosa, que tomar sueños por realidades, sombras por luces, ilusiones por aciertos” (CEII.23.4). Luckily, “advirtió el primero el Canciller Bacon, que eran descaminados los rumbos de todos los Sistemas” when what we need is empirical research (CEII.23.5). It is “el plan de Bacon” which is “el único que puede dar algún útil, y seguro conocimiento de la Naturaleza” (CEII.23.7). Feijoo praises the royal academies of Paris

and London for following this path, which is not about skeptical suspension of judgment, but concentrating on empirical research (CEII.23.7). Feijoo also defends Newton, pointing out that he relies on a first cause, and that means that he is not against religion. Feijoo confesses: “siempre he estado en que la mejor Filosofía es la que más claramente está acorde con la Religión” (CEII.23.14). He ends this Carta with a memory of Doctor Martínez, showing that he is still a warm supporter, but it is no longer necessary to refer to his skepticism (CEII.23.27).

There was one “Carta” in volume 3 in which Feijoo did use the terms “skeptic” and “skepticism”, and that was “Sobre el libro intitulado *El antiguo Académico contra el Escéptico moderno*” (CEIII.4). “El autor se cualifica a sí de *antiguo Académico*, y a mi de *moderno Escéptico*” (CEIII.4.5). He tries to prove five things against me, Feijoo writes, of which the first is that “la Medicina, como hoy se practica, esta en su perfección, y carece de incertidumbre” (CEIII.4.5). But “en ninguno de estos cinco asuntos he procedido como Escéptico, o dubitante; antes resueltamente he negado todo lo que el Autor” affirms (CEIII.4.5). Feijoo cites Boyle here with approval, saying that he has four volumes of his *Filosofía experimental*, but now referring to him as “el Hereje Anglicano” (CEIII.4.18). He insists that the fact that “la Medicina, a excepción de poquísimas reglas, es incierta” is not a matter of doubt (CEIII.4.21). It is a truth. There is very little certainty. And that the idea that “las oposiciones que hay entre los Médicos, que opinan diversamente, solo son aparentes” is false (CEIII.4.24). In proving his case, Feijoo has cited doctors such as Sydenham and Martínez on the uncertainty of medicine, but the author of this book has cited the same physicians against that uncertainty (CEIII.4.38). So Feijoo follows up with many pages of analysis of the works of physicians who count as authorities who contradict each other. Then, since the author has misunderstood the Cartesians, Feijoo explains that Descartes was not a skeptic. “Si a mí me califica de Escéptico, y como tal me impugna, para qué se mete con los Sistemáticos, y especialmente con Mr Descartes, el hombre más distante del escepticismo que hubo jamás, pues no vió el Mundo Filósofo alguno igualmente resuelto, y decisivo?” (CEIII.4.86). The author is consistently wrong on who is a skeptic and what skepticism is. This may be one of Feijoo’s reasons for avoiding the term in other writings.

In the same volume of the *Cartas*, Feijoo cites Boyle’s authority in Carta 30, “Reflexiones Filosóficas... en el vientre de una Cabra”, but only for an experiment on mercury (CEIII.30.7). No mention of skepticism.

In volume 4, Carta 15, “De los Filósofos Materialistas”, of 1753, Feijoo discusses and rejects philosophical materialism without any use of the words “skeptic” or “skepticism” (CEIV.15). It is interesting to see that he denies knowledge of “los modernos” who believe “este delirio”,

and refers back to Hobbes and Locke as his main targets (CEIV.15.4). As already mentioned, he may be distancing himself from skepticism because the public sees it as too close to the atheistic materialism that he was coming to fear (Grima Morales, 2013, 375). Their danger is that philosophical materialism leads to atheism, or at least to non-providentialism, or to the claim that the gods may exist, but they do not monitor human behavior. That raises the problem for morality that people will not behave well if they are not assured of punishment or reward in another life. Feijoo points out that these materialists are not skeptics, but rather Epicureans (CEIV.15.7). He does not mention Hume or Diderot, but he may have known something of their skepticism and of their materialism.

## Conclusion

We have seen that Feijoo's encounters with skepticism were largely mediated by his interest in medicine. It is safe to say that he was much more interested in medicine than in philosophical skepticism. If Martín Martínez had not titled his two volumes of *Medicina Sceptica* with that label, it may not have been of much importance to Feijoo. What we have seen in the trajectory of Feijoo's understanding of skepticism is that at first he enthusiastically accepted Martín Martínez's use of the terms to describe his medical practice; then he investigated further the tradition of skepticism; and then he developed better arguments for what he was trying to do. He was trying to bring down the highest dogmatic claims of philosophy and physics to be relevant to the practice of medicine, and this was easily done by undermining such claims and turning to empirical investigation. He quickly found that he did not need the vocabulary of skepticism to make his point, and it could in fact be misleading, partly because of the many meanings given to the term. It was better for him to make the point in other words, working through dogmatic claims and rejecting the need for them.

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