Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent is a provocative book, both in its attacks on "modern dogma" and in its own affirmative rhetoric. As I read Modern Dogma, the attack on what Booth takes to be governing presuppositions of modern thought is meant to clear the decks for a rhetoric of assent and to lay the groundwork for a series of affirmations. Among modern dogmas, "a kind of unproved and unprovable conviction that thought doubts; that that's its job" (57) is of central importance in the overall plan of Modern Dogma. Booth especially identifies this dogma with Bertrand Russell, among twentieth-century philosophers, but sees Russell's views about doubt and certainty as arising from "a tradition willed to him by centuries of western skepticism" and "brought to a head" by Descartes in his method of systematic doubt (55). The Cartesian method of systematic doubt is apparently regarded by Booth as constituting the dominant methodological dogma of modern philosophy. As an alternative to it, he proposes a diametrically opposed method of systematic assent. And in opposition to a "habit of negative rhetoric" (as manifested in the negative political rhetoric of the 1960s, but also in more "metaphysical" modern nay-saying about the meaning of human life), he means to affirm rhetorical and epistemological policies of communal yea-saying, as well as to engage in some significant yea-saying of his own.

So Modern Dogma attempts a clearing away of "dogmas of doubt," to make way for an assentive rhetoric, but also in preparation for Booth's own experiment in assenting—assenting to propositions that give rise to the conception of man as "essentially" rhetorical, as "a rhetorical
animal," created and defined symbolically in interaction with other persons. The rhetoric recommended in *Modern Dogma* purports to be a rhetoric of good reasons; and the introduction of his method of assent is meant to provide justification for an outbreak of assenting in chapter 4.

Some aspects of the early stages of *Modern Dogma* are worthy of hearty approval, such as the treatment of the dogma of "motivism." And some of the details of the constructive program of the later parts seem to me also to be important and able to stand on their own, independent of what goes on in earlier chapters. In particular, much of what is said in chapter 4 about ethical and emotional proof seems important and essentially correct. But the critique of the method (and attitude) of Cartesian doubt and the attempt to replace it with a method of systematic assent strike me as highly problematic. In any case, it is the conception of a *method of systematic assent*, along with the suggestion that there can and ought to be one, which I find to be a most provocative aspect of *Modern Dogma*, and which I would like (as a self-confessed "analytic" philosopher, I must add) to examine in this chapter.

**The Method of Systematic Doubt**

A Cartesian method of systematic doubt, Booth claims, underlies and gives the impetus in modern thought to both "scientism" and irrationalism, in both cases by engendering a kind of skepticism about values and about discussion of questions of value. But just what is this method of doubt, and what really are its tendencies? What other attitudes does it, by its nature, and also historically, tend to produce?

The skeptical method of Descartes's first Meditation is self-consciously Pyrrhonistic. That is to say, it is a method that has its earliest origins in the views of the Greek skeptic Pyrrho of Elis and its classic formulation in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and other works of Sextus Empiricus. Descartes does not, as anyone who has read the *Meditations* knows, end up in skepticism. That he ends up not a skeptic but a dogmatist has more often been taken as evidence that his commitment to the method of doubt is less than wholehearted than as evidence that systematic doubt leads to dogmatism, scientism or Fideistic. But more about that shortly.

Descartes says in the first of his Meditations that, when he came to the realization that many of the opinions he had accepted in his early life were mistaken, he determined that the only way he would come
to a true knowledge was by undertaking to "set aside all the opinions which I had previously accepted" (75) and to "start again from the very beginning," putting aside, as he says later (Meditation 2, 81), every belief in which he can "imagine the least doubt" and assenting only to propositions that he finds it impossible to doubt.\(^3\) Now, in the early Meditations, we find sometimes the language of doubt and sometimes the language of denial. Early along he speaks of abstaining from belief in what is not entirely certain (75), and later he says that if he achieves no other result at least he will have the power in the end to "suspend judgment" (80). But then he also says that, to counterbalance the force of his longstanding habits of belief, it may not be enough to "consider that they are what they really are—that is, somewhat doubtful," that it might be better if he "deliberately took the opposite position" and deceived himself, "pretending for some time that all these opinions are entirely false and imaginary" (79).

There are, then, two quite different methods recommended in the first Meditation, a method of systematic doubt and a method of systematic denial. It would be a misreading of Descartes's intentions, however, to regard the method of denial as anything more than a propaedeutic. The method of systematic denial in Meditation 1 is on a level with the "evil genius" hypothesis; it is a device with a specific purpose. The real method of the first Meditation is a method of systematic doubt, not a method of systematic denial. Denial is, in the face of a program of systematic doubt, simply another form of affirmation; and negative propositions (that the sky, the air, the earth, are nothing but illusions, for example, or that God does not exist) are on an equal footing with affirmative ones, disallowed if unaccompanied by the appropriate credentials. Now it is probably unfair to accuse Booth of confusing doubt with denial and consequently with misrepresenting the skeptical method. On the other hand, it is perhaps fair to say that some readers of Modern Dogma might get the impression that its author attributes a method of systematic denial to Descartes, a kind of systematic metaphysical naysaying, a program of disbelief rather than one of nonbelief. This would, among other things, make the method look less plausible than it is, since disbelief (being itself a form of belief) carries a much heavier epistemic burden than nonbelief, the suspension of belief.

So the method of systematic doubt, in the hands of Descartes (or in the hands of later philosophers, for that matter) is not so negative as a careless reader of Booth's account might suspect. Furthermore, Descartes, like many of the classical skeptics whom it was his intent to
refute, has a positive program, one that he can implement even if he cannot get beyond his skepticism. And that positive program is one that in a sense preserves a commitment to values (which is at least part of what Booth wants to do with his method of assent). In part 3 of the *Discourse on Method* ("Some Moral Rules Derived from the Method"), Descartes says that he decided in implementing his method that "while reason obliged me to be irresolute in my beliefs, there was no reason why I should be so in my actions" (18). He then sketches a "provisional morality," whose first principle is "to obey all the laws and customs of my country, constantly retaining the religion which I judged best . . . , and in all other matters to follow the most moderate and least excessive opinions to be found in the practices of the more judicious part of the community in which I would live" (18). The second principle is to act as resolutely on these principles as if he were certain of their correctness: "when we cannot determine the course which is certainly best, we must follow the one which is probably the best; and when we cannot determine even that, we must nevertheless select one and follow it thereafter as though it were certainly the best" (20).

These are not the words of a man left awash in the wake of the application of his method of systematic doubting; they constitute, in fact, a kind of affirmation. And they have their counterpart in the truly skeptical philosophies of late antiquity, as well as in the views of sophisticated skeptics of later periods (and even in the skeptical rhetoric of the old Sophistic). According to the reports left to us by Sextus Empiricus, Cicero, and others, Academic skeptics of the post-Aristotelian period, while denying that we can be certain about anything more than appearances, adopted a policy of "living with the appearances," some going so far as to judge that there is a kind of "reasonable justification" for taking some appearances more seriously than others and for choosing some courses of action and policies over others. Sextus reports that the Academic skeptic Arcesilaus "says that one who suspends judgment about everything will regulate choice and avoidance and actions in general by 'the reasonable'; and that by proceeding in accordance with this criterion he will act rightly" and that Carneades found grounds for distinguishing "merely convincing" impressions or appearances from "undiverted impressions," which were to be taken more seriously, and those from the weightiest of all, "thoroughly explored" impressions (Long and Sedley 451, 453). The significance of these reports and others like them is that they are evidence of the tendency of systematic doubt, after having illegitimimized assent, to legitimize another order of affirmation.
Whether skeptics are consistent in this is open to debate; but the point is that systematic doubt does not inevitably engender a rhetoric of negation (on either of the levels Booth is concerned about). Systematic doubt need not provide the basis or impetus for the dogmas of scientism or for irrationalism; it can as easily generate a logic or rhetoric of "appearances" (as something akin to it did in the older Sophists) or clear the way for a logic and rhetoric of probabilities (giving the impetus to works such as Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion* or Newman's *Grammar of Assent*). (It is historical, causal connections we are concerned with here, not logical entailments, because it is on the grounds of the former that Booth impugns the program of systematic doubt.) One might even argue for an identification of the "appearances" of Academic skepticism and those of Sophistic rhetoric, and even for a kinship of both of those with the kind of probabilistic rhetoric that we find in Butler (though I would not be so bold as to advance such a hypothesis).

The general point is that an attitude or method of systematic doubt tends to have a loosening effect. Its natural tendency, I suggest, is toward legitimizing a logic and rhetoric of probabilities, in some form or other, despite its ostensible commitments to a standard of certainty. Its partial failure to do so in the case of Descartes is his failure rather than a failure of the method or attitude.

Nor does a method of skeptical doubt inevitably generate the kind of "metaphysical" nay-saying with which Booth is concerned in the last chapter of *Modern Dogma*. A kind of optimism was actually more typical of the Pyrrhonistic and Academic skeptics. It was their view that systematic doubt liberates the mind, that it is therapeutic, that it provides the basis for inner tranquility (*ataraxia*). Its influence in modern philosophy has at least sometimes been in that same direction. Whose works in modern philosophy are more pervasively cheerful than those of Hume, for example (or those of Bertrand Russell, for that matter)?

The truth of the matter seems to be that systematic doubt leads nowhere in particular. Skepticism provides a pretext sometimes for scientism, sometimes for Fideism, sometimes for irrationalism, sometimes for a rhetoric of angst, sometimes for moral cynicism; but among its purest devotees, I have meant to suggest, it has, if anything, tended to generate affirmation more than denial, and to clear the decks for a rhetoric of probabilities. It has tended, that is, to undermine the antirhetorical rhetoric of certainties. The pervasive effect, and enduring value, of skeptical doubt has always been that it undermines dogmatism, even if it at the same time tends to undermine itself. "The skeptics
from Sextus Empiricus to Montaigne, Bayle, Hume, and Santayana," writes Popkin, "have pointed out that the strength of skepticism lies not in whether it is tenable as a position but in the force of its arguments against the dogmatic claims of philosophers" ("Skepticism" 457).

Let us grant, however, that there are certain important matters, certain metaphysical questions, and certain questions of value that seem to demand some more solid foundation than can be provided by the skeptic's "living by the appearances," that seem to call for some more vigorous and sustained affirmation than the systematic doubter seems entitled to provide. How is such a foundation to be provided? In particular, can it be provided by the method of systematic assent that Booth wants to counterpoise to the method of systematic doubt? And what exactly is this method of systematic assent?

**SYSTEMATIC ASSENT**

In the introduction to *Modern Dogma*, Booth endorses the view that "the primary mental act of man is to assent to truth rather than to detect error" (xvi). This brings to mind James's claim, in *The Principles of Psychology*, that "all propositions, whether attributive or existential, are believed through the very fact of being conceived, unless they clash with other propositions believed at the same time" (290). Let us grant that assent is the primary mental act, that it is our nature to assent to whatever propositions confront us, until we have reason to do otherwise, that the habit—even the act—of dissenting or of suspending belief has to be acquired, and that dissent and even doubt are in some sense parasitic upon assent. But to say that it is our nature to assent and that we have to learn to doubt is not to say that we ought to assent unless, as Booth puts it, we "cannot not doubt" (111). So the question remains whether assent ought to, or even can, occupy the kind of methodological position that doubt occupies in the method we have been considering in the previous section.

Booth's suggestion (40) that we consider what would happen to our "moral and intellectual life" if we "reversed that formula" (of systematic doubt) is a real conceptual eye catcher, though its impact is diminished somewhat by qualifications he immediately adds. Before looking at the method as Booth actually develops it, however, I would like to consider what it would mean to employ a method of systematic assent that was truly the logical counterpart to the method of systematic doubt.

In the first place, we need to remind ourselves again that the method
The Logic and Rhetoric of Systematic Assent

The Logic and Rhetoric of Systematic Assent of systematic doubt is not a method of systematic denial. The logical opposite of a method of systematic denial would perhaps be a method of systematic assertion. Such a method (either of assent or of denial), purely considered, would be logically incoherent. In theory, at least, every proposition that confronts us as a possibility confronts us also, by implication, with its negation, the proposition that asserts that what it asserts is not the case. A real unimpeded procedure of systematic assent would yield exactly the same incoherent results as a real procedure of systematic denial, an assenting to both every proposition confronting us and to its negation as well. (Bear with me if I seem for a moment to be "logic-chopping"; the point is to get at the logic of Booth's proposal. I know very well that such a procedure is not what Professor Booth has in mind; but I want to discover the logic of what he does have in mind.)

It would not do, I think, to suggest that it is only the affirmative propositions, as opposed to the negative ones, that are to be assented to in this method, unless we are equipped with a procedure for deciding which propositions are truly affirmative and which truly negative. While this might seem easy enough with respect to certain classes of propositions (even though it isn't), its difficulty becomes apparent in the case of the kinds of propositions that are mainly in question in Modern Dogma.

"A man ought to covet his neighbor's wife." "We should always act only for our own interests." "Ugliness is better than beauty." Are these affirmations or negations?

The bare fact that a proposition is affirmative rather than negative (if we can even make that differentiation with confidence) does not in itself count either for it or against it, does not make it any more or any less likely to be true. Assertion is inseparable from denial. Every act of affirmation is at the same time an act of negation. To assert that \( p \) is to deny that \( \neg p \), and to deny that \( p \) is to assert that \( \neg p \). Distinguishing \( ps \) from \( not-ps \), moreover, is notoriously problematic, especially with respect to questions of value. The relevance of all this to Booth's program is this: the question, at the earlier stages of his game, is not really a question about the difference between affirming and denying; it is more a question about the status of certain foundational beliefs, beliefs that have already provided the foundations for our thinking about matters of value, or beliefs Booth wants to use as foundations for certain kinds of "yea-saying." The way in which Booth wants to qualify his methodological recommendation, which we will look at shortly, should make it clear that a contrast between "yea" and "nay" is not the real issue; the real issue is one of presumption.

But, in any case, a method of systematic assent cannot be the logical
counterpart of a method of systematic doubt. We can withhold assent from both a proposition and its negation; we cannot yield assent to both a proposition and its negation. A method of systematic doubt may be impracticable if taken too seriously, but at least it makes sense. At least it is not in itself logically incoherent. Let us turn now, though, to the proposed method of systematic assent as Booth actually describes it.

The first real characterization of the proposed method of assent in *Modern Dogma* is at the end of chapter 1, in a passage from which I quoted earlier:

> But I ask you to think a bit . . . about what would happen to your intellectual and moral life if you reversed that [the skeptical] formula, cultivating a benign acceptance—perhaps temporary and tentative, but real—of every belief that can pass two tests: you have no particular concrete grounds to doubt it (as distinct from the abstract principle to doubt what cannot be proved); and you have good reason to think all men who understand the problem share your belief. (40)

Now the caveat "perhaps temporary and tentative" significantly closes the gap, I think, between the kind of procedure Booth seems to have in mind and the skeptic’s "living with the appearances." But it is the second of the two "tests" to which I particularly draw attention. What is the real character of this test, how is it to be applied, and what are the likely results? What will constitute good reasons for thinking that all persons who understand the problem share my belief? *Motivists* (proponents of the first of the five dogmas attacked in *Modern Dogma*) surely have good reason to think that all who understand the problem share their belief, since it is the way in which they conceive the problem of believing that gives rise to, which entails, motivism. A simpler procedure is this: Believe what all right-thinking people believe; by "right-thinking people" I mean people whose beliefs on the question at hand are correct. "It is reasonable," Booth says later (101, at the start of the book's most full-blown account of the method), "to grant (one ought to grant) some degree of credence to whatever qualified men and women agree on, unless one has specific and stronger reasons to disbelieve."

The qualification, "whatever qualified men and women agree on," is highly problematic. Booth openly acknowledges a "deliberate embrace of circularity" (101). Circularity indeed; these formulations encourage a kind of begging of the question with respect to philosophical doc-
trines. But, that problem aside for a moment, it is not at all clear that this is a method of assent any more than it is a method of dissent or of doubt. A consistent adherence to the policy will oblige us to follow qualified men and women in their disbeliefs and doubts as well. (That is to say, we will be obliged, unless we have specific and stronger reasons not to do so, to assent to their beliefs about what is false and what is doubtful.) It is misleading, I say again in this context, to speak here of a method of systematic assent. I understand the point of a kind of application of that terminology later in the book, when Booth wants to promote rhetorical optimism and cooperativeness; but I do not understand it at this earlier stage, when the point is to offer an alternative to the philosophical method of systematic doubt.

**THE METHOD**

Booth's method is neither truly *systematic* (in the relevant sense) nor truly a method of *assent*. But if it is not really a method of systematic assent, what kind of a method is it? Well, it seems to have two related aspects. On the one hand, it is an *ad verecundiam* method, a method in whose application we defer to authorities in matters of belief. On the other hand, it is a *conservative* method, a method weighted in favor of established beliefs. There is something to be said in favor of both of its aspects, although Booth's account of the first is problematic (partly for reasons already given, and partly on account of vagueness), and the relationship between the two is not very clearly established. It may be that qualified authorities are simply authorities who agree with the beliefs we already hold, in which case it is the conservatism of the method which really carries the weight. By virtue of both of its aspects, the method's application (by philosophers, at least) seems weighted in favor of some of the very dogmas under attack in *Modern Dogma*. But let me say more clearly what I mean by the claim that the method is really a method of conservation.

"Abstract commands to 'doubt pending proof'" are to be replaced in this method with "the ancient and natural command to 'assent pending disproof'" (101). But we have seen that the real issue is not whether to follow a policy of assenting as opposed to a policy of doubting. Perhaps we can distinguish two real issues. One is whether we ought (in "non-scientific" matters, let us say) to assent at all (and, if so, in what *sense* or how strongly we are entitled to assent). The other is the question
of what propositions or what sorts of propositions we ought to assent to, at the ground level, so to speak, in the application of this method. As to the first, let me say only that Booth's claim that modern dogmatists (Russell, for example) have "sliced the world into two unequal parts, the tiny domain of the provable, about which nobody cares very much, and the great domain of 'all the rest,' in which anyone can believe or do what he pleases" (85) is a straw man (see also 91). Even the older skeptics tend to reject, at some level, so absolute a dichotomy, to say nothing of Descartes or Russell, each of whom clearly affirms that, among propositions that are susceptible to neither proof nor disproof, and among possible courses of action, some are more reasonable than others.  

What sorts of propositions is it that Booth wants to have assumed innocent until proven guilty? Well, the way he begins to put the method into operation (starting on 111) is strikingly reminiscent of the "common sense" philosophy of Thomas Reid, or of G. E. Moore in the twentieth century. He runs through a series of propositions he thinks we all know very well that we know (even if we sometimes say otherwise): "Men are characteristically users of language," "Sometimes we understand each other," "What an adult man or woman is, in all societies, is in a large degree what other men and women have created through symbolic exchange," "We characteristically intend to change our fellows by symbolic devices," and so on. These propositions are not randomly selected; Booth is, as we guess pretty quickly, headed in a certain direction. But what recommends these propositions to us—or what exempts them from the need for a recommendation, we should say—is the fact that we and our fellows already believe that they are true or at least conduct our mutual affairs as if their truth were unquestionable. What Booth is suggesting is that there is a presumption in favor of such beliefs, that the burden of proof is on the person who questions them rather than on the person who assents to them, so that the very fact that we hold them, especially the fact that we hold them collectively, carries a certain amount of weight. Richard Whately's discussion of presumption in The Elements of Rhetoric comes to mind: "There is a presumption," says Whately, "in favor of every existing institution. Many of these . . . may be susceptible of alteration for the better; but still the 'Burden of Proof' lies with him who proposes an alteration; simply, on the ground that since a change is not a good in itself, he who demands a change should show cause for it" (114). Certain classes of propositions have a kind of "institutional" status from a commonsense philosopher's point of view. They cannot be abandoned, our attitudes toward them cannot
even be significantly altered (from confidence to doubt, for example), without serious doxastic and pragmatic consequences. Reasonable cause can be shown, of course, for alterations in belief; but there is, according to this policy, a heavy burden of proof that falls on the person who questions existing epistemic institutions.\(^9\)

I hope I have not distorted Booth’s view by putting it in these terms. The heart of the matter is a kind of epistemic conservatism, for which I believe there is something to be said. This heart is not really a question about assent, systematic or otherwise. The actual procedure in *Modern Dogma* is to focus on a carefully chosen subset of moderately institutionalized propositions and to lead us from them toward a certain conception of human nature (man the “rhetorical animal”).\(^10\) A critique of that constructive program is beyond the scope of the present discussion. However, I would like to make two comments about it in closing. First, it is ironic that the strategy of *Modern Dogma* is remarkably Cartesian, as it consists in an attempt to sweep away old prejudices and to lay and build upon new foundations. Second, it is also an irony that something like the kind of principle of conservation that the “method of systematic assent” really boils down to is, after all, endorsed by the chief foil of *Modern Dogma*, Bertrand Russell, from whose hold Booth has perhaps not gotten as free as he would like. In *The Problems of Philosophy*, after having pointed out that the view of the solipsist “cannot be definitively refuted,” and after having given probabilistic arguments for the “common-sense” view that there is a world of objects independent of us, Russell says the following:

The argument which has led us to this conclusion is doubtless less strong than we could wish, but it is typical of many philosophical arguments, and it is therefore worth while to consider briefly its general character and validity. All knowledge, we find, must be built up upon our instinctive beliefs, and if these are rejected, nothing is left. . . .

Philosophy should show us the hierarchy of our instinctive beliefs, beginning with those we hold most strongly, and presenting each as much isolated and as free from irrelevant additions as possible. It should take care to show that, in the form in which they are finally set forth, our instinctive beliefs do not clash, but form a harmonious system. There can never be any reason for rejecting one instinctive belief except that it clashes with others; thus, if they are found to harmonize, the whole system becomes worthy of our acceptance. . . .

This function, at least, philosophy can perform. (25)
Notes

1. I feel compelled, as in some respects an unrepentant Russellian, to ob­serve that Russell receives what has to strike some readers as rather shabby treatment in chapter 2, especially in what looks like an imagined dialogue between Booth and Russell, but which really consists in a run of text from the first chapter of Russell's *What I Believe* (1925) with a series of interruptions by Booth. As was observed long ago by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, a written text has the disadvantage of being unable to defend itself. One has to wonder whether Russell the man (who comes across as a fool in this little dialogue) would have done somewhat better in a face-to-face symbolic exchange.

2. The extant works of Sextus Empiricus are published in four volumes, trans. R. G. Bury, in the Loeb Classical Library. For a detailed treatment of the more immediate skeptical antecedents to Descartes, see Popkin, *History of Scepticism*.

3. All quotations from Descartes will be from the *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur.


5. There is a theme here that one might attempt to trace through a variety of sources. One might, for example, argue that Cicero’s defense of *honestas* in *De finibus* and *De officiis* is a kind of philosophical argument from appearances. The argument strategy of those two works consists largely in presenting the reader with examples of virtue and vice, the case for virtue being left to rest most heavily on the reader’s response (a kind of assenting, we might say) to the appearances. Arguably, it is at least in part the influence of Academic skepticism on his philosophical works that makes this sort of approach agreeable to Cicero. For a more detailed account of Cicero’s method (though without an attempt to make connections with skeptical doubt or a doctrine of “appear­ances”), see my “Cicero’s Use of Historical Examples in Moral Argument.”

6. “The Greek skeptic,” writes Nussbaum, “does not present himself as seeking an external justification for beliefs. He is seeking freedom from dis­turbance; and he wishes to attain this happy condition by suspending belief. The equal force of opposing beliefs achieves, for him, this effect” (481-82).

7. That Russell believes in and is committed to the giving of “good rea­sons” with respect to questions of value and matters of practice should be clear enough from his ethical and political writings. With respect to the supposed gap between this commitment and Russell’s commitment to a method of doubt, one ought to attend to Russell’s efforts at theorizing about morality. See Monroe, “Russell’s Moral Theories.” The Pears volume also contains a bibliography of Russell’s ethical, social, and political writings.

8. Compare, for example, G. E. Moore’s list of “truisms” in “A Defence of Common Sense.”

9. My characterization of Booth’s method is influenced somewhat by
Quine and Ullian, especially chap. 2, "Belief and Change of Belief," and chap. 6, "Hypothesis."

10. Among these propositions, some—such as the proposition that we are largely "created through symbolic exchange"—would have a strange ring indeed to ordinary people, as it is mainly among theorists of discourse that they are institutionalized.

Bibliography


