

22.  
Continental  
thought  
began with  
scepticism.

Francis Bacon, quite different conditions prevailed on the Continent. There a pronounced scepticism as to the capacity of the human intellect to reach certainty in matters of fundamental importance had got hold of men's minds. It found expression mainly in French learned and polite literature: in the writings of a man of the world like Michel de Montaigne<sup>1</sup> (1533-1592); of Pierre Charron<sup>2</sup> (1541-1603), a lawyer and preacher; and of François Sanchez<sup>3</sup> (died 1632), a professor of medicine and philosophy at Montpellier. Out of this general scepticism, which rested more on the uncertainty that pervaded the thought of the age than on the fruitlessness of the philosophy of the schoolmen or on the want of advance in useful knowledge in the dark ages, it is the great merit of Descartes to have sought a way to

<sup>1</sup> Montaigne's 'Essais' appeared in 1580, an augmented edition in 1588. "As the most important among them may be considered the 'Apologie de Raymond Sebond' (ii. 12), which contains important discussions on Faith and Knowledge. Montaigne founds his doubt upon the diversity of individual views: every one has a different opinion, whereas truth can only be one; there is no certain, no generally admitted knowledge. Human reason is weak and blind in all things, knowledge is deceptive (especially contemporary philosophy, which explains explanations and not things); and the laws of the country, which reason advises us to follow, are a seething ocean of opinions of a people or a Sovereign" (Falckenberg, 'Geschichte der Neueren Philosophie,' 1886, p. 34). If theoretical certainty is impossible, practical conduct must rely on nature and revelation.

<sup>2</sup> Charron develops Montaigne's

sceptical and practical position into a system. In his work 'De la Sagesse' (1601), "doubt has the double purpose to keep alive the spirit of research and to lead us to Faith. As reason disposes of no means by which to distinguish truth from falsehood, it follows that we are born to search for truth but not to possess it. Truth abides only in the bosom of the Deity, &c., &c." (Falckenberg, *ibid.*)

<sup>3</sup> The principal work of Sanchez is entitled 'Tractatus de multum nobili et prima universali scientia quod Nihil Scitur,' and appeared one year after the first edition of Montaigne. It is directed against Aristotle and scholastic philosophy. Another work, intended to give the true philosophy, never appeared. It is interesting to see how views independently expressed by more recent thinkers can already be found in these the earliest representatives of the modern critical spirit.