

The Philosophical Category of “Faith” at the Origins of Modern Scepticism

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Toward a New Interpretation of the Cartesian Novelty

IT IS OFTEN SAID that modern philosophy represents a rupture with the whole of the preceding tradition, classical and Christian, mainly through the epistemic turn performed by René Descartes with the *Discours de la méthode*, launching the long process that leads to the primacy of the subject and to immanentism.¹ This historiographic interpretation boasts a tradition of several decades and is supported by many qualified authors.² I supported it myself more than once, always in connection with the historical developments in epistemology.³ Even so, upon closer consideration, this interpretation is not altogether satisfactory

¹ Translated by Juan Francisco Franck.

² Cf. Cornelio Fabro, *Introduzione all'ateismo moderno*, II ed., 2 vol. (Rome: Edizioni Studium, 1966); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Ideality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Referring to Fabro, and quoting his celebrated motto—“*Incipit tragoedia moderna*”—Ralph McNerny wrote recently: “Descartes famously sought the beginnings of certain knowledge its primary instances, as the result of the application of a method. The application of this method to the contents of his mind, the inventory of cognitive claims he and others would make, revealed them all to be dubitable. This means that every claim to know for certain has been shown to be mistaken. More precisely, all knowledge claims dependent on sense perception and all mathematical propositions are susceptible of doubt, it is imaginable or conceivable that they are false, and therefore they must be set aside. No one has any warrant simply to assert that he knows these to be true.” See “Implicit Philosophy,” in *Sensus communis* 3(2002): 56.

³ See A. Livi, *Filosofia del senso comune: Logica della scienza e della fede* (Milan: Ares, 1990); *Il senso comune tra razionalismo e scetticismo: Vico, Reid, Jacobi, Moore* (Milan: Massimo, 1992); *Il principio di coerenza: Senso comune e logica epistemica* (Rome:

because it does not tell the whole truth. After having studied the ventures of modern epistemology in more depth (the developments of rationalism and of empiricism, their final stages in skepticism, criticism, and idealism), I became convinced that the rupture, which certainly exists, is not so much with medieval philosophy—even if the polemics against the Scholastic characterize the time of Renaissance humanism, up through Descartes himself—but with classical philosophy. We must indeed admit that the epistemological question, so essential to modern thought, revolves around the problem of certainty, and that the problem of certainty, as set out by Descartes and by all philosophers who follow his method, consists specifically in the attempt to *determine the conditions of assent to what is not, or is not considered, self-evident*. In other words, it is the problem of faith, understood precisely as the firm assent to what is not self-evident. Now this problem does not exist in classical Greek philosophy but is instead at the core of Christian thought.

Christian revelation, with its novelty and speculative fecundity so well brought to light by Étienne Gilson in the thirties,⁴ has not only had a positive impact in philosophy at the level of metaphysical, anthropological, and ethical notions, but also at the level of logical notions, among which the most important is doubtless that of “faith.” It is here that, in my opinion, modern philosophy so radically differs from classical philosophy, whereas it is homogeneous with Christian–medieval philosophy.⁵ Therefore, the rupture with tradition produced by the Cartesian method must be considered *within the Christian philosophical universe*. This universe, in turn, is at the roots of the modern theoretical framework, distinctly different from the pre-Christian philosophical universe and not reducible to it.

In this article I will examine an emblematic case, that of skepticism. My conviction is that the origins of modern skepticism are to be found in the hypothesis—induced from the typically Christian problem of faith—that *what is essential lies beyond the immediate* and that *the certainty about the essential is reached after a long critical journey and with the decisive participation of an act of free choice*.

Modern Skepticism as Catholic Fideism

Even if in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries skeptically oriented philosophers were called “Pyrrhonists,” thus recalling ancient skepticism,

Armando, 1997); *La filosofia e la sua storia*, vol. II: *La filosofia moderna* (Rome: Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 1999).

⁴ See Etienne Gilson, *L'Esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (Paris: Vrin, 1931–1932).

⁵ See A. Livi, *Il cristianesimo nella filosofia: Il problema della filosofia cristiana nei suoi sviluppi storici e nelle prospettive attuali* (L'Aquila: Japadre, 1969).

modern skepticism, having developed within Christian culture, is very different from its pre-Christian precursor, since the latter, as Brochard pointed out, never denies completely the metaphysical value of common sense.⁶ The new elements in modern skepticism have been brought to light by the historian Richard H. Popkin,⁷ who has examined philosophical thought in a specific moment of transition, the years 1500 to 1675. During these years the reappearance in Europe of the works of Sextus Empiricus provoked a renewed interest in Hellenistic skepticism, precisely when the discussion about the epistemological problems raised by the Reformation was most intense. The main epistemological problems raised by the Reformation were about individual conscience and subjective certainty about faith, but the problem of philosophy and in general that of reason outside the domain of Revelation, and the problem of the doctrinal authority of tradition and of the Magisterium were also raised. Simona Morini, summarizing Popkin's research, remarks that "at the origin of modern thought and science there is not a conflict of science and faith in the first place, but a religious one, a problem *within* faith."⁸ I agree with this interpretation; furthermore, I extend it to the whole philosophical venture that begins with the encounter between Greek thought and Christian faith, which has given birth to entirely new problems and solutions, in relation to pre-Christian classical times. In particular, in the general context of the influence of Christianity on philosophy, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represent the beginning of modern philosophy, characterized—always through the influence of Christianity—by the primacy of gnoseology. One typical trait of the period from the mid-1500s to the end of the 1600s is precisely the skepticism of a large part of Catholic philosophical thought, whereas Catholic theological thought strengthened its dogmatism. Both dimensions—skepticism in philosophy and dogmatism in theology—seem to come from the crisis of religious conscience, and, more particularly, from the heightening of the problem of certainty about the "truth that saves": namely, its sources, the channels through which it is transmitted, the criteria of verification, and the space for freedom of interpretation.

It is well-known that Luther, against whom Erasmus of Rotterdam argued, denied the authority of the Church, or of any human magisterium

⁶ See Victor Brochard, *Les Sceptiques grecs*, II ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1923), 413.

⁷ See Richard H. Popkin, *History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (New York: Assen, 1960).

⁸ Simona Marini, *Introduzione* to Richard H. Popkin, *La storia dello scetticismo: Da Erasmo a Spinoza*, Italian translation from the second English edition (Milan: Anabasi, 1995), 12.

whatsoever, in interpreting the Scriptures. After Luther, then, Christianity faces the problem of the *regula fidei*": What is the criterion by which one can identify the true doctrine of faith? The criterion of truth taken up by Lutherans was subjectivist and individualistic: For the believer only that is true which his conscience constrains him to believe from the reading of the Scriptures. Erasmus, on the contrary, considering the insurmountable difficulties in determining the true meaning of Scripture, embraced skeptical wisdom and advised trusting the apostolic succession (Tradition), submitting oneself to the interpretation given by the Church. In this sense, Erasmus can be seen as the founding father of a tradition of Christian-Catholic fideism that extends throughout modernity and eventually becomes the prevailing position in Catholic culture in post-modern times. After him, many "will use the skeptical argument to defend their own faith: in the absence of incontrovertible rational arguments in favor of one confession instead of another, why not trust faith or tradition?"⁹ Paradoxically, a significant number of Catholic thinkers argued against the Lutherans on their same ideological ground, marked by antidogmatism and irrationalism.¹⁰

However, it is Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) who expresses at the time of Erasmus the attitude of skeptical modern Catholics (the "*nouveaux pyrrhoniens*") in all its radicalism. He writes that "man's plague is the conceit of knowledge" and the only way we have to know ourselves is God's Revelation: "Everything we see without the light of his grace is nothing but vanity and madness."¹¹ The priest Pierre Charron (1541–1603) and the bishop Jean-Pierre Camus (1530–1600) were followers of Montaigne. The former, in a book written immediately after the death of his teacher Montaigne, extolled "the marvellous beauty of the union between skepticism and Catholicism."¹² The latter, who was also secretary of the bishop Saint Francis of Sales, argues against "protestant rationalism" and tries to protect Catholic faith from the dangers of a conceited human reason. The best thing, in his opinion, is a faith that does not rely on human certainties, easy to be destroyed, since the only truths that men know are those which God wanted to reveal to us: "All

⁹ Armando Massarenti, "Il dogmatismo (non la religione) è il vero nemico," *Il Sole-24 Ore* (February 26, 1995): 28.

¹⁰ See Ramón García de Haro, *Historia teológica del modernismo* (Pamplona: Eunsa, 1969); R. Popkin, "Fideism, Quietism, and Unbelief: Skepticism For and Against Religion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in ed. Marcus Hester, *Faith, Reason, and Skepticism*, (Pennsylvania, PA: Temple University Press, 1992).

¹¹ Michel de Montaigne, *Apologie de Raymonde Sebond*, I, 3.

¹² Pierre Charron, *Les trois livres de la Sagesse*, III, 1.

the rest is nothing but dream, wind, smoke and opinion."¹³ In France, Montaigne's, Carron's, and Camus's skeptical perspective becomes in the first decades of the 1600s the philosophy of the "erudite libertines," including Gabriel Naudé (Richelieu's and Mazzarino's librarian), Guy Patin (rector of the School of Medicine at the Sorbonne), Léonard Morandé (Richelieu's secretary), Pierre Gassendi (the famous priest, scientist, and philosopher, who corresponded with Descartes), Isaac la Peyrère (secretary to the Prince of Condé), and François de la Mothe le Vayer, for whom "the soul of a Christian skeptic is like a field clear of weeds, devoid of the dangerous axioms that cram the minds of so many cultivated people, and therefore ready to receive the dew of divine grace with much more happiness than if it were still full of the presumption that it has certain knowledge of all things and no doubts of any sort."¹⁴ Few succeeded in opposing the cultural hegemony of the "Pyrrhonian" Catholic intellectuals. The Jesuit François Garasse dared to stigmatize Charron's "alleged piety," calling it a "very bad service done to his Country and to his faith." Another religious, François Ogier, replied to Garasse in an irritated way: "Charron's works are too elevated for a low and vulgar mind like yours." Even Saint-Cyran reacted violently against Garasse, and his criticism of the Jesuit was so insistent that the authority of the Sorbonne finally censured Garasse. Meanwhile, the work of the Portuguese Francisco Sánchez (1560–1632), published in Lyon in 1581 and, significantly, titled *Quod nil scitur*, was becoming popular. This work expressed for the first time the idea of a voluntary and systematic doubt,¹⁵ which certainly inspired Descartes for his *Discours de la méthode*.

Apologetic Attempts and Skeptical Value of the Cartesian Method

In his history of skepticism, Popkin describes Descartes as somebody who, while claiming to have "triumphed over skepticism," remained substantially its prisoner, to the point of becoming a "*sceptique malgré lui*."¹⁶ This interpretation, if correct, entails a clear characterization of rationalism in terms of skepticism. Rationalism, accordingly, would be much closer to British empiricism (Locke, Berkeley, Hume) than critics

¹³ Jean-Pierre Camus, *Essay sceptique*, I, 2, 3.

¹⁴ "Cinq dialogues à l'imitation des Anciens," Frankfurt 1606, in *Oeuvres*. vol. 1 (Mons 1671), 275.

¹⁵ Francisco Sánchez, *Quod nihil scitur, ad lectorem*: "Ad me proinde memetipsum retuli, omniaque in dubium revocans, ac si a quopiam nil unquam dictum, res ipsas examinare coepi, qui verus est sciendi modus."

¹⁶ See Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, chap. 10.

usually say. Moreover, this interpretation would offer a better account of how the “critical” Kant could perform a synthesis between the rationalism inherited from Wolff and the empiricist stances coming from the reading of Hume. In short, the novelty of transcendental philosophy would have to be severely reassessed, in the sense that it would be evident that the true “Copernican revolution” was the one brought about, well before Kant, by René Descartes with his new method.

The Cartesian method, implicitly based on an a priori choice, namely the choice to privilege the certainty of self-consciousness (the consciously exercised indubitability of doubt) over the certainty of the “things” present to consciousness, represents indeed a turn of prime importance in the history of philosophy. From then on, the history of philosophy presents all thinkers necessarily aligned for or against the new methodological starting point, for or against “Cartesianism.” It being a question of choice—as Del Noce justly observed—modern philosophy after Descartes has always been aligned either for or against this choice of making the “*primum cognitum*” a pretext for affirming the subject’s freedom, for releasing consciousness from every dependency on the object.¹⁷

As is known, for Martin Heidegger this is not the essential point of the turn Descartes inaugurated. For Heidegger, the essential point was rather shifting the focus from the question of truth to the question of certainty, or, in other words, giving up of the Greek notion of truth as manifestation of being (*aletheia*) and adopting instead the Scholastic notion of “conformity” of thought to the object (*adaequatio intellectus ad rem*), but exaggerating the subjective dimension: namely, the dimension in which the object of thought is not “being” but only the “representation” of being.¹⁸

I do not want to focus now on the concept of truth proposed by Heidegger, which is compatible with the concept of truth as conformity of the thought to its object;¹⁹ neither do I want to discuss here Heidegger’s interpretation of the Cartesian turn, regarding which I would refer to Messinese’s accurate historiographical and critical study.²⁰ In my opinion, Descartes’s turn consists rather in the substitution of the certainties proper to the common sense—which refer to the indubitable presence of

¹⁷ See Augusto Del Noce, *Cartesio* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1989).

¹⁸ See Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. A. Schuwer and R. Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); and *Nietzsche*, trans. D. F. Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

¹⁹ See A. Livi, *La ricerca della verità: Dal senso comune alla dialettica* (Rome: Leonardo da Vinci, 2001).

²⁰ See Leonardo Messinese, *Heidegger e la filosofia moderna: L’“inizio” della soggettività: Descartes* (Milan: Mursia, 2000).

things in the world—with the certainty of the “*cogito*.” Cartesian “*cogito*” is nothing else but *the doubt itself assumed as a limit that cannot be transcended*, or, in gnosiological terms, *thought without an object different from itself*. So, even if the declared aim of Descartes’s philosophy was to overcome the skepticism of his time and to elaborate a new apologetics of Catholic faith,²¹ this aim finally turns out to be substantially frustrated. Skepticism remains the substance of the method adopted by Descartes, even if his skepticism and that of his followers are radically different from the ancient one. In fact, Descartes’s skepticism was born and developed in the context of problems related to faith in Revelation and its defense from rationalistic criticisms. It must be acknowledged that post Cartesian skepticism is truly a new form of skepticism, theorized above all by Catholic thinkers who have followed Descartes’s method. In this regard, the different view adopted by Giambattista Vico is very interesting because this Neapolitan thinker dialectically opposed Cartesianism by focusing, not on its final outcomes, but precisely on its methodological principles.

We can and must admit without suspicion that Descartes was entirely sincere when he declared that the final aim of the *Discourse on Method* is to remake the whole building of science, “first philosophy” at its head, upon a new and most certain alethic foundation.²² The problem with his alethic foundation, that is, with the indubitability of thought in act (the “*cogito*”), is that it does not recover what has been hopelessly lost at the beginning with the hyperbolic doubt, namely *the object of thought (as knowledge)*, which primarily consists (*primum cognitum*) in the reality of the world. The “*cogito*,” in fact, is thought closed in upon itself, a thought that remained “empty,” having expelled from itself, via the “*volo dubitare de omnibus*,” the reality of the object. Certainly, this thought in act, *from the point of view of formal logic*, appears as indubitable. However, considered in relation to its content, that is, *from the point of view of material logic*, the “*cogito*” is nothing else but the same doubt with which the Cartesian investigation has begun its journey; the same doubt that has excluded all possible certainty about the world and all other evidences of common sense, considering them incapable of adjusting themselves to the concept of evidence previously adopted by Descartes. For this reason, I admit that

²¹ “Not only the aim of the Cartesian doubt differs from the aim of the sceptical doubt, but its method is not the same either.” See E. Gilson, in René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode (Texte et commentaire)*, VI ed., ed. Etienne Gilson (Paris: Vrin, 1925, 1987), 269.

²² Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. D. A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980), (II, 15) 8: “My plan has never been more than to try to reform my own thoughts and to build upon a foundation which is completely my own.”

Descartes sincerely (from a psychological point of view) set out to overcome skepticism in a rigorous and definitive way. But he actually continued to revolve within a skeptical logic, whose reasons he accepts and grants altogether. The novelty of his method to find the alethic foundation of knowledge lies precisely in the extreme radicalization of the skeptical stance, with the conscious (and voluntary) acceptance of doubt even from the foundations of knowledge, to the point of holding back the assent to the "*primum cognitum*." The "hyperbolic" doubt is therefore the most explicit expression of skepticism as universal "*epoché*." It suffices to think that the rules of public morality and the dogmas of catholic faith are only *pragmatically* secured, that is prescinding from its truth. Such truth could eventually be recovered in a second moment, but only as conclusions that dialectical reasoning obtains from the certainties resulting from the new method: namely, the certainty of the thinking self and the certainty of the existence of God as an innate idea. Let us recall how Descartes refers to the maxims of provisional morality and to the dogmas of catholic faith:

After having assured myself of these maxims and having put them aside, along with the truths of the faith, which have always held first place in my set of beliefs, I judged that, as far as the rest of my opinions were concerned, I could freely undertake to rid myself of them.²³

In these words the typical traits of "Catholic Pyrrhonism" are easy to recognize. Faith is separated from philosophical reason, in the sense that whereas faith means to profess certainty (only externally?) without any rational foundation, philosophical reason adopts as starting point the "*doute hyperbolique*."

I repeat that at the psychological level there is no difficulty in admitting that Descartes's programmatic intention is actually that of finally overcoming the skeptical doubt. The fact is that, contrary to his good intentions, he will never be able to get out of a doubt that embraces the evidences of common sense. The new certainties are of a different kind, as are different the criterion of truth and the credentials that those certainties can exhibit (in fact, such certainties will be abandoned one by one by those modern thinkers who adopted the Cartesian method).

Regarding sixteenth-century Catholic skepticism, which was more ideological than theoretical, the Cartesian method presents itself as the powerful and suggestive synthesis of two opposite stances: on the one hand, the deconstructive stance, which leads to the hyperbolic extension of doubt; on the other hand, the constructive stance, which leads to the

²³ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, (III, 29) 15.

ambitious project of a total science based upon absolutely incontrovertible foundations. The possibility of uniting both opposed rational stances (which the Baroque defines as the humility or weakness of human reason, opposed to pride or self-consciousness of one's own faculties) lies in having changed the place of the verification of truth from the domain of *knowledge* (relation of thought with the object *extra mentem*) to the domain of *consciousness* (relation of thought with itself as representation, in the immanence of the object in the mind). With the methodical doubt the immediate presence of extramental reality to consciousness is eliminated, and so for the first time in the history of philosophy all certainties of common sense are disqualified in their pretension to truth. They had been until then, for all philosophers—Greek and Christian, the certainties that had to be rightfully considered, from a logical point of view, the primary, absolutely incontrovertible self-evident truths. For the first time then, philosophy expresses an act of *freedom of thought*: which means that thought emancipates itself from the metaphysical presence of things, of the self, of God, and of the moral law. The Cartesian revolution changes the way of understanding alethic logic. The world and all other objects of experience—until then a starting point of absolute alethic value for philosophical reflection—become with Descartes precarious and provisional conclusions one can obtain starting from the "*cogito*," considered as a founding certainty and model of truth in general. From then on, the itinerary of the mind, for those who accept the Cartesian method, is *from the self to the world* (with the mediation, for Descartes, of divine truthfulness), where the "self" means thought in act, or thought as act (of "representing," of "identifying" the object).²⁴

Since we had previously mentioned the Catholic intellectuals (including clerics) who in the seventeenth century professed skepticism, we now want to point out that the Catholic Descartes, despite all his precautions, was finally subject to the condemnation of the Church, who could not help noticing that the Cartesian method, with regard to revealed dogma, implies the voluntary decision of doubting also faith, which for a Catholic equals to an act of apostasy. (In 1680 all Descartes's works were

²⁴ The language of scientists is still borrowed from that of the philosophers who continue to hold the Cartesian turn as necessary and irreversible. See among others the Italian philosopher Virgilio Melchiorre, from the Catholic University of Milan, who has recently written: "That philosophy has regenerated herself finding the own starting point in the certainty of the cogito, is to be understood firstly as an essentially methodological gain, rather than as an ontological one." See *Dialettica del senso: Percorsi di fenomenologia ontologica* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2002), 16).

included in the *Index librorum prohibitorum*.) But what is more interesting for us is that from a specifically logical viewpoint Descartes doubts the certainties of common sense, which have a capital importance for faith, as they are its necessary premises. Indeed, it can be said that the logic of common sense is even more fundamental than the *notional contents* of common sense, which constitute the “*praembula fidei*.”²⁵ This logic can be condensed in the modern philosophical formula of “realism,” understood as Gilson did, namely as “methodical realism,” that is as the only method that allows philosophy to be seen as a “search for the truth” about the world, man and God.²⁶ Metaphysical realism is indeed faith’s own logic, insofar as divine revelation is addressed to man with a language that presupposes in him a true experience of the world and of himself, and that he knows God as different from the world, as the first Cause and the ultimate End of everything—and all this with his natural reason alone, even if “as through a mirror, and in mystery.”

The Cogito as “Thought Without Object”

We now have to analyze Descartes’s way of expressing his conviction of having overcome skepticism, even though he had begun with hyperbolic doubt; that is, with the discovery of the evidence his mind has of the doubt itself: “I think, therefore I am [*Je pense, donc je suis*].” Let us read what he writes:

And noticing that this truth—I think, therefore I am—was so firm and so certain that the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were unable to shake it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.²⁷

The doubt—here lies the force of the Cartesian argument—is *thought in act*, and as such it is indubitably present to consciousness (presence of thought to thought). However, since this act of thought is a doubt—that is, a holding back of the judgment about the hypothesis of knowledge—it cannot be the thought of *something*; it can only be the thought of nothing (of nothingness as object of thought, of nothingness as true). The

²⁵ See, about these contents, what John Paul II teaches in the encyclical *Fides et ratio*; see A. Livi, “Filosofia e fede nella *Fides et ratio*: Un’analisi epistemologica,” in *DT* 95 (1999): 123–45; “Verità della fede e verità della ragione: Considerazioni di logica aletica in margine alla *Fides et ratio*,” in *Aquinas* 44 (2001): 175–97.

²⁶ See E. Gilson, *Le Réalisme méthodique* (Paris: Ed. Téqui, 1935). See A. Livi, “Il realismo gnoseologico, oggi,” in *Aquinas* 40 (1997): 221–35; Maria Antonietta Mendosa, *Un sentiero interrotto: l’impossibile esito realistico del “cogito”* (Rome: Aracne, 2000).

²⁷ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, (IV, 32) 17.

certainty of the *cogito*, therefore, does not refer to anything outside the mind (*aliquid extra mentem*), let alone the realities from which hyperbolic doubt had freed itself. As has been rightly observed, "the *cogito* is not an act of reflection, it does not consist in thinking of the thought—since this would require a mental word—but it consists directly in pure thought, free from every thought object."²⁸ If somebody were to object that this interpretation is arbitrary, one should answer that it is Descartes himself who validated it. Indeed, to the objection that "there is no thought without object" he replied: "I deny that the thinking substance is in need of anything other than itself in order to perform its own activity."²⁹

The concept of "empty thought" misses a characteristic of subjectivity that I highlighted elsewhere,³⁰ and that had already been analyzed by Antonio Millán-Puelles,³¹ namely that *the subject*, properly speaking, is *never to himself an immediate object of knowledge*. The reason is that the (human) subject knows himself only by reflecting upon his own acts (especially thoughts and wishes), which have the material world as their proper object. The (human) subject, accordingly, knows directly not himself (i.e., the source of thought and free will) but an object of his own knowledge. In other words, the knowledge that the subject has of himself is a second intention knowledge attained by reflectively focusing on his acts of knowing the world—this is the logical order that must be respected in philosophy.³² Now, this feature of human self-knowledge does not prevent thought from being "full" rather than "empty." Empty thought is postulated only when the thinking self (*res cogitans*) wants to make of the existence of his own thought the first certainty absolutely speaking, in place of the certainty of the existence of the world. But this "empty thought" makes the very notion of "subject" meaningless, as well as that of "knowledge."³³ As Rafael Corazón incisively observes, "as long as the thought focuses on something, on an object, self-consciousness is

²⁸ Rafael Corazón, "Naturaleza de las ideas innatas cartesianas," in *Anuario filosófico* 62 (1993): 49.

²⁹ Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy, Ad II Obiectiones, Responsiones*, in ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes*: vol. VII (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964), 136.

³⁰ See A. Livi, *Filosofia del senso comune*.

³¹ See Antonio Millán-Puelles, *La estructura de la subjetividad* (Madrid: Rialp, 1970).

³² See Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 87, aa. 1, 3.

³³ On this point, see Alberto Caturelli, "Meditaciones sobre el sentido y el alcance del cogito cartesiano," in ed. Juan Fernando Ortega and Marco Parmeggiani, *Retorno crítico a los orígenes de la modernidad* (Málaga: Contrastes, 1997), 123–44; D. Murdoch, "The Cartesian Circle," in *Philosophical Review* 29 (1999): 234–45; A. Livi, "Verità e certezza nella dialettica cartesiana," in *Sensus communis* 2 (2001): 263–75.

impossible, because the subject is never object: Descartes seizes the act of thinking, not the thought being thought of [*il pensiero pensato*].”³⁴ Corazón concludes his analysis of the *cogito* (which he locates in the doctrine of innate ideas) as follows: “If the *cogito* is indeed an act of self-consciousness, thought is immediately known, without reflection: consequently, there is no thought thinking itself [*pensiero pensato*], because what appears is only thinking thought [*pensiero pensante*]. What is distinctive in this, as well as in the other innate ideas, is that they are not ideas as objects of thought, they do not lie ‘in front of’ the thought. The reason is that, were they objects of thought, Descartes would have fallen again into the state of doubt; now, instead, he cannot absolutely doubt that he doubts, i.e. that he thinks.”³⁵

It should be noticed that, unlike ancient skepticism, Descartes’s does not consist in extending doubt to the widest possible range of objects of knowledge, but in remaining within thought, having removed its object. If it is true that Descartes, in so doing, finds a most certain starting point, which is a judgment of existence (as alethic logic requires), it is also true that, unlike the concept of first judgment in ancient philosophy—that is, a judgment that allows for the research of an always wider and better knowledge, starting from a most certain knowledge, or a *primum cognitum*, with objective value—the Cartesian judgment is, strictly speaking, the elimination of knowledge.

The logic of founding science on the *cogito*, then, turns out to be a complete epistemic rupture with the whole of classical tradition, above all pre-Christian one. As a French critic points out: “[I]n the *dubito*, or *cogito*, thought is grasped in a pure state, as gold after being purified from the slag. It is a first and absolute notion, because it is perceived independently of everything that is not itself. . . . It is a notion that presupposes none other before.”³⁶ We are therefore completely immersed in the realm of a “logic of presupposition” to which I referred elsewhere as the foundation of alethic logic,³⁷ and which consists in looking for the “first uncaused cause” of the cognitive process. This cause is, for Descartes, thought perceived as actual by the thinking subject. This is the authentic revolution in the

³⁴ R. Corazón, 49–50.

³⁵ R. Corazón, 51. For similar (and even more radical) criticisms to Descartes, see Leonardo Polo, *Evidencia y realidad en Descartes*, II ed. (Pamplona: Euns, 1983), 92–97, and Ferdinand Alquié, *La Découverte métaphysique de l’homme chez Descartes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 185.

³⁶ Jean Laporte, *Le Rationalisme de Descartes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 17.

³⁷ See A. Livi, *Verità del pensiero: Fondamenti di logica aleutica* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2002), 12–34.

history of philosophy, the complete reversal of the logical order, starting from the self-evident perception of the self that comes before the self-evident existence of the world. And, since this self is understood as pure thought without the world as its object, it is empty thought nourished by its sole self-consciousness. Let us see again how Descartes's argument goes:

I will now close my eyes, I will stop my ears, I will turn away my senses from their objects, I will even efface from my consciousness all the images of corporeal things; or at least, because this can hardly be accomplished, I will consider them as empty and false; and thus, holding converse only with myself, and closely examining my nature, I will endeavor to obtain by degrees a more intimate and familiar knowledge of myself.³⁸

When Descartes says that he "will consider empty and false" "all the images of corporeal things," he makes a judgment of alethic value (or disvalue) about the immediate self-evident truth of the world. In this way, this truth is condemned to be insignificant, whereas the self-evident truth of thought (of an empty thought) is privileged.

That this thought is empty results from a careful reading of a passage of the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* in which Descartes, arguing for the certainty of the self, makes recourse to the hypothesis of an evil genius:

But there is some deceiver or other who is supremely powerful and supremely sly and who is always deliberating deceiving me. Then too there is no doubt that I exist, if he is deceiving me. And let him do his best at deception, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something.³⁹

The key words in this text are "so long as I shall think." Descartes is clearly referring to the act of thinking. It is *thought in act* that is self-evident to itself, that is always self-evident in and of itself, independently of its content, whatever it may be; even independently of having a content at all.

Surely, in this first instance of knowledge, there is nothing but a certain clear and distinct perception of what I affirm.⁴⁰

More explicitly: "I only perceive the fact of perceiving, that is the fact that I think." The object of thought does not exist any more, or better it becomes irrelevant. Therefore, the doubt about the reality of the objects

³⁸ Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, (III, 35) 24.

³⁹ Ibid., (II, 25) 18.

⁴⁰ Ibid., (III, 35) 24.

of thought is not eradicated. The skeptical doubt, Descartes argues, may still remain, and the hypothesis of error and complete deceit may be admitted. In order to give the new science a foundation it is enough to be aware of doubting, of thinking in some way whatsoever.

Yet I certainly do seem to see [*certe videre videor*], hear, and feel warmth. This cannot be false. Properly speaking, this is what in me is called “sensing.” But this, precisely so taken, is nothing other than thinking.⁴¹

Not without reason do many scholars speak of Descartes’s substantial “skepticism.”⁴² In fact, the undeniable reality of the thinking self does not solve any problem about the truth of our knowledge; it just makes the subject “certain” (that is, it compels the subject to assent due to the intrinsic self-evident perception thought has of its own act of thinking). This interpretation is confirmed by the studies of those who have qualified the *cogito* as a mere *deixis* [*deissi*], that is, as something of a purely indicative nature [*di indicialità pura*], without any notional content, but with an exclusively pragmatic function. As Andrea Bonomi states,

The first guaranteed certainty is only possible on the basis of an experience that each of us can and should personally *have*. In this sense, the whole demonstration can be seen as an invitation to have this experience. . . . The use (essential here) of the *indexical* “I” makes this argument *pragmatic* in a double sense: first, in the ordinary one, since it prompts an activity, a “doing something” (which is basically a becoming aware from a first-person viewpoint); and, second, in the sense in which one speaks of pragmatic as opposed to syntax and semantics, as the argument is centered around the *indexical* “I,” which allows one to denote each time a different subject.⁴³

A further confirmation is the impossibility of moving from this individual subjective certainty to a universal criterion of certainty. A deep logical inconsistency immediately becomes manifest as soon as Descartes tries this step. Some have even spoken of an “ontological fall,” in the sense that the step from the *deixis* of the *cogito* to the ontology of *sum* looks like a realistic remainder Descartes probably inherited from the medieval Scholastics.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ibid., (II, 29) 20.

⁴² See Marjorie Grene, “Descartes and Skepticism,” in *The Review of Metaphysics* 89 (1999): 553–72.

⁴³ Andrea Bonomi, “Sul Cogito cartesiano: natura inferenziale e criteri di giustificabilità,” in ed. Gabriele Usberti, *Problemi fondazionali nella teoria del significato* (Florence: Leo Olschki, 1991), 27.

⁴⁴ See Michel Henry, *Généalogie de la psychanalyse: Le commencement perdu* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), 53–56.

A New Concept of Truth as "Methodology of the Unverifiable"

To conclude on this point, we should say that from a historical viewpoint great attention should be given to the reversal brought about in the concept of truth by the Cartesian revolution. Indeed, Descartes understands the truth of the *cogito* as merely *indicale* [indicative]. The "I" which is grasped with complete certainty is not a substance, but the act of thinking; thought in act. Consider the following sentence: "But doubtless I did exist, if I persuaded myself of something."⁴⁵ This and similar expressions should be interpreted in the light of what Descartes says immediately afterward:

I am, I exist—this is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking; for perhaps it could also come to pass that if I were to cease all thinking I would then utterly cease to exist.⁴⁶

As has been rightly observed, "the *cogito* is the paradigm of every truth, because if there is thought, there is necessarily a thinking subject. . . . It is not a matter of having a subject that is 'thought of,' or of having an idea of the subject. . . . The criterion is the facticity of the subject, its existence as a plain and empirical fact, so much so that the investigation of the nature of this subject comes subsequently, and is not included in the first self-evident knowledge. . . . The reflexive dimension of truth is substituted for in Descartes by self-consciousness, because in him, much more than in the philosophy before him, *truth resides properly in the faculty of knowledge, since reality is never known*. Truth in short is not conformity, but consists in the clarity and distinction of ideas, which allow the formulation of a judgment."⁴⁷ Using the same paradigm, the empiricist David Hume says that the simplest and most "vivid" sensations are those which deserve to be taken as "true," even if they do not provide us with the knowledge of substances and of causal processes.⁴⁸

The existence of the physical world is reached by Descartes only at the end of his new metaphysical construction. The world is admitted as a *conclusion of a demonstration*, which starts with the *cogito* and continues by deducing the existence of God from the innate idea of the infinite. This

⁴⁵ Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, (II, 25) 18.

⁴⁶ Ibid., (II, 27) 19.

⁴⁷ R. Corazón, 54–55.

⁴⁸ See, on this point, A. Livi, "L'uomo alla prova del metodo empirico," in *Nuntium* 18 (2002): 152–60.

long and winding way takes the world as “non self-evident.”⁴⁹ It is unavoidable, therefore, that the *certainty* about the existence of the world, which depends on an unlikely and complex demonstrative process, turns out to be a “faith,” a “belief” based upon the *will* to believe (in fact, William James in the twentieth century will speak of a *will to believe*). Among the Cartesians, David Hume was the first who called the belief about the existence of the world a “faith” (*belief*). Hume’s openly skeptical outcome brings to light the logic at the bottom of the Cartesian method, which we could define—borrowing the expression from Pietro Prini, who applied it to Gabriel Marcel—the “methodology of the unverifiable.”⁵⁰ Unverifiable, in Descartes, is not, as in the Christian philosophy of the Fathers and of the Middle Ages, the supernatural mystery—that is, God, Who absolutely transcends the world, and demands faith in His revealing word. It is rather the world itself that experience can no longer verify, and which is—hypothetically, in a precarious way—reached via a sequence of logical arguments that, incidentally, involve concepts (like “causality”) that in turn presuppose the knowledge of the world.⁵¹

But it is the *will* to believe in the existence of the world (*res extensa*) that makes what in itself is unverifiable an object of “faith.” Precisely the same will sets in motion the deconstructive method of hyperbolic doubt (*volo dubitare de omnibus*), and, for Descartes, has a power of determination over the intellect:

[T]he will is also required, in order that assent may be given to the thing which has been perceived in some way. Moreover, complete perception of the thing is not required, at least not in order to judge [it] in some way or another; for we can assent to many things which we know only very obscurely and confusedly.⁵²

Many interpreters of Descartes oppose demonstrative reason, which confirms the existence of the world, to *faith*, which in no way is able to

⁴⁹ “The primordial and founding certainty, universally accepted by common sense—that is, the certainty of the existence of the visible world, made of matter—becomes problematic, and must be recovered by means of a complex reasoning, which is only possible at the end of the philosophical itinerary” See Salvatore Nicolosi, in ed. Angela Ales Bello, *Pensare Dio a Gerusalemme* (Milan: Mursia, 2000), 186.

⁵⁰ See Pietro Prini, *Gabriel Marcel o la metodologia dell'inverificabile* (Rome: Studium, 1968).

⁵¹ See A. Livi, *Il principio di coerenza*, 55–65.

⁵² Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, trans. V. Rodger and R. P. Miller (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1939), (I, 34) 16.

confirm the existence of what has been revealed through supernatural mysteries.⁵³ In reality, Descartes does not distinguish between demonstrative reason and faith, but assumes as the paradigm of "pure" or "separated" philosophy precisely what should only appertain to faith, namely the certainty of what is not self-evident.⁵⁴

Cartesianism at the Center of the Debate on Faith and Reason in France

After Descartes, the fortune of Cartesianism and anti-Cartesianism in France—related also to Spinoza's and Leibniz's philosophies—shows how rooted the persuasion was that philosophy should be confronted in the first place with faith: a confrontation that should take place in the field of the *certainty of what is not self-evident*. The results of this confrontation are called "dogmatism" (or rationalism), on the one hand, and "neopyrrhonism," on the other. These two approaches both assume the Cartesian *non-self-evident truth of the sensible world*, replaced by the equally Cartesian *self-evident truth of (empty) thought*.⁵⁵

An attempt to open new critical horizons can be seen in Blaise Pascal's (1623–1662) apologetic project. Pascal understood very well that the non-self-evident truth of the world was such only if one assumed deductive demonstration as the paradigm of rationality. We should recall the famous "thought" in which Pascal tries to distinguish the *intuitive* function from the *discursive* function (calling the former "heart," and leaving the term "reason" to the latter):

We know truth, not only by the reason, but also by the heart, and it is in this last way that we know first principles; and reason, which has no part in it, tries in vain to impugn them. The skeptics, who have only this for their object, labour to no purpose. We know that we do not dream. And however impossible it is for us to prove it by reason, this inability demonstrates only the weakness of our reason, but not, as they affirm, the uncertainty of all our knowledge. For the knowledge of first

⁵³ See Jean-Pierre Deschepper, "Comptes-rendus" in *RPL* 89 (2001): 758: "The strict delimitation of the comprehensible of first philosophy, regarding the incomprehensible of faith, opens the field of philosophy to the sole reason."

⁵⁴ See Thomas C. Vinci, *Cartesian Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); André Robinet, *Descartes, la lumière naturelle: Intuition, disposition, complexion* (Paris: Vrin, 1999).

⁵⁵ See, e.g., the arguments adopted by each party in two famous controversies: that of Geulincx against Spinoza (see Bernard Rousset, *Geulincx entre Descartes et Spinoza* [Paris: Vrin, 1999]); and that of Arnauld against Malebranche (see, Denis Moreau, *Deux cartésiens: la polémique entre Antoine Arnauld et Nicolas Malebranche* [Paris: Vrin, 1999]).

principles, as space, time, motion, number, is as sure as any of those which we get from reasoning. And reason must trust these intuitions of the heart, and must base on them every argument.⁵⁶

It is clear from this and many other passages that Pascal tried to give a new foundation to apologetics starting from the recognition of a “minimum” of natural, prescientific cognoscibility of reality, thus indicating to French philosophy of his time the way out of the false dilemma rationalism skepticism. Pascal proposes an attitude of trust in reason that may overcome skepticism, but without pretending to possess truth always and indubitably. He writes in another fragment: “This is our true state; this is what makes us incapable of certain knowledge and of absolute ignorance.”⁵⁷

But it is also clear that Pascal’s attempt was not able to succeed fully, due to the impossibility of avoiding, in his historical circumstances, the language and therefore the logical categories employed by Descartes.⁵⁸ No wonder then if we find as well in the *Pensées* clearly fideistic claims (selected and quoted later on by all those who, along the centuries, preferred to read Pascal as a fideist). For example: “Man is only a subject full of error, natural and ineffaceable, without grace. Nothing shows him the truth. Everything deceives him.”⁵⁹ The unity of the human intellect in its two different but not conflicting functions of intellectus and ratio was still in need of being recovered.

In this environment, and shortly afterward, a first outline of a philosophy of common sense came from the Jesuit Charles Buffier (1661–1737), who inspired the philosophy of Thomas Reid (1710–1796) and the Scottish School with his *Traité des premières vérités et de la source de nos jugements*, and who is still studied today with interest by those who look for a way out of fideism.⁶⁰ But in those years in France, neither Buffier nor any other Catholic intellectual could contain the rising tide of fideism, which many theologians and clerics saw as the sole alternative to Cartesian rationalism and to the persistent attempts by Cartesians to rationalize Christian faith. Among Protestants, too (both Lutherans and Calvinists), fideism was the prevailing position; and philosophical skepticism seemed to be the only possible option for Christian believers.

⁵⁶ Pascal, *Thoughts*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910), no. 282.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 72.

⁵⁸ See, A. Livi, *Il senso comune tra razionalismo e scetticismo*, 50–55.

⁵⁹ Pascal, *Thoughts*, no. 83.

⁶⁰ See Louise Marcil-Lacoste, *Claude Buffier and Thomas Reid: Two Common-Sense Philosophers* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University, 1982); R. McInerny, “Implicit Philosophy,” 47–65.

Indeed, this was the opinion expressed by Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) in his famous *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, first published in Rotterdam (1695–1697) and then in Amsterdam (1702).

On the Catholic side, Pierre-Daniel Huët's work (1630–1721) is emblematic. He was bishop of Avranches and a great friend of two other important ecclesiastics, Bossuet and Fénelon.⁶¹ Huët, who corresponded also with Leibniz, is known for having started his philosophical production as a Cartesian and for having ended up as an anti-Cartesian, by publishing in 1689 his renowned *Censura philosophiae cartesianae*. In reality, both at the beginning and at the end, the bishop of Avranches reasons according to the skeptical assumptions present in the Cartesian method, even though his primary source is Gassendi. In Huët's apologetic work, "the question at stake was the preliminary role that reason should have in the act of adhesion to faith. Huët was convinced that Cartesian reason, instead of being '*auxilium fidei*,' constitutes a hardly surmountable obstacle. . . . In reassessing the boundaries between faith and reason, it was necessary to bring that '*superbe raison*' back. . . . to the limitations of its own constitutive weakness, so that it could accept *sua sponte* the submission to revealed truth. Skepticism seemed to be a suitable instrument for that end, because it was able to show reason's insufficiency already in the natural sphere. . . . The originality of Huët's strategy was in this apologetic use of classical skepticism, reread and modernized through elements taken from Gassendi, and from Cartesian philosophy as well. Of the latter, Huët stressed its Pyrrhonist outcomes, thus attacking the Cartesian pretension of the self-evident [truth of the *cogito*], showing that it is impossible to reach it in any domain, and justifying at the same time the need of returning to tradition and authority."⁶² This is how Huët's argument proceeds. In his *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'entendement humain* he holds that philosophy is the "search for truth" but is unable to reach some truths with certainty; philosophy must thus yield the way to faith. "Man cannot know the truth with perfect certainty if he relies upon his Reason alone," because the senses deceive us, the intellect is fallible, and self-evident truth itself is frequently deceitful. For all these reasons we must admit that human reason is not capable of "true knowledge," insofar it lacks a "certain rule of the truth," that is, a procedure that would allow to distinguish truth from falsity in a definite way.⁶³

⁶¹ See Elena Rapetti's recent historiographic study, "L'epistolario di Pierre-Daniel Huet e la filosofia cartesiana," in *Rivista di filosofia neo-scolastica* 93 (2001): 257–79.

⁶² E. Rapetti, 266–67.

⁶³ Pierre-Daniel Huët, *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'entendement humain* (Amsterdam: Henry du Sauzet, 1723), 234.

The *Traité philosophique* came out in 1723, after Huët's death. The Jesuit Baltus published a commentary in 1726, recognizing that the cultured bishop was motivated by the good intention of humiliating human reason—so prone to pride—by inducing it to submit itself again to the authority of Tradition. However, Baltus points out, Huët tended to grant too much to the stances of the “*nouveaux Pyrrhonisme*.”⁶⁴ It is true—as Elena Rapetti rightly observes—that “Huët's apologetic work can be read as the history of a long battle against Cartesian self-evident [truth of the *cogito*], in the name of the certainty of faith and of the reassessment of the historical facts in which Huët saw the foundation of Revelation.”⁶⁵ It is true too that such reassessment of the historical facts related to Christian revelation is absolutely necessary, and deserved a better reception by Christian theologians and philosophers—who, due to the popularity of rationalism in the interpretation of Christianity (particularly after Lessing and Kant), preferred to follow instead other paths.⁶⁶ However, it is also true that the discussion opposing rationalism to skepticism should have been overcome by bringing it back to its source; that is, by means of a radical criticism of Cartesian method and its assumptions, thus allowing for the recovery of the epistemic foundations of every truth in the incontrovertible self-evident truth of the existence of the world. Such a foundation is only implicit in Saint Thomas's philosophy, because nobody, in ancient Greek and Christian thought, nor in Christian medieval culture, had yet formulated the philosophical hypothesis of denying the self-evident truth of the existence of the world as the starting point of metaphysics. But it is precisely by going back to Thomas's method that many philosophers of the twentieth century have been able to oppose post-Cartesian immanentism with a valid realist theory, capable of resisting the criticism of dogmatism and ingenuity that Descartes's heirs have always addressed against it.⁶⁷

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⁶⁴ See Jean-François Baltus, “Sentiment sur le *Traité de la faiblesse de l'esprit humain* à M. l'Abbé d'Olivet, de l'Académie Française,” in *Continuation des Mémoires de Littérature et della'Histoire de M de Salangre*, 1(1726), part I, 220.

⁶⁵ E. Rapetti, 279.

⁶⁶ On the historical dimension of faith, see A. Livi, *La ricerca della verità: Dal senso comune alla dialettica* (Rome: Leonardo da Vinci, 2001), 170–79.

⁶⁷ See Fortunato Tito Arecchi, “Truth and certitude in the scientific language,” in ed. F. Schweitzer, *Self Organization of Complex Structures—From Individual to Collective Dynamics* (London: Gordon and Breach, 1996), 3–20; A. Livi, *Tommaso d'Aquino: il futuro del pensiero cristiano* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997); *Il realismo come metodo necessario della metafisica: Riflessioni sul pensiero di Etienne Gilson*, in ed. Horst Seidl, *Realismus als philosophisches Problem* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2000), 131–38.