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► **To cite this version:**

François-Xavier de Peretti. Stop Doubting with Descartes. Topoi, 2022, 10.1007/s11245-022-09822-0 . hal-03839276

HAL Id: hal-03839276

<https://amu.hal.science/hal-03839276>

Submitted on 2 Dec 2022

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Stop Doubting with Descartes

François-Xavier de Peretti¹

Accepted: 10 August 2022

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Abstract

Did Descartes manage to overcome the skeptics? If we understand “overcome” in the sense of “refute,” the answer is no, since his hyperbolic doubt harbors several blind spots and is, therefore, not as radical as is commonly argued. In this way, the victory of the *cogito* is perhaps less decisive and fruitful than it is claimed. If we understand “overcome” in the sense of “remove” or “move beyond,” the answer is yes. Descartes has overcome skepticism, but at the cost of a decision, a sort of bet made in favor of reason based on a confidence in the human mind that is never really subverted. This faith in reason, truth, and specific epistemological principles in Descartes’ philosophy constitute what Wittgenstein calls “hinges,” which are indispensable for doubting and searching for truth. In this sense, Descartes’ anti-skepticism is more a confidence in reason in order to save the possibility of science than the result of a logical refutation.

Keywords Skepticism · Wittgenstein · Descartes’ bet · Persuasion · Doctrine of knowledge

1 Introduction

Descartes aimed to defeat the skeptical tradition—reinvigorated by the neo-skepticism of the Renaissance—once and for all, but it remains to be seen whether he really managed to slay the skeptical hydra. It is generally considered that the audacity of his decision in this matter was to fight skepticism on its own ground and to accomplish the reversal operated by the *cogito* by a tour de force consisting of overcoming doubt by following a doubt exercised in its greatest radicality. With this victory over skepticism, Descartes is reputed to have established the principles or foundations of a new apodictic science. On closer inspection, however, things may be less clear-cut and therefore more complex than they appear. We propose here to argue, as a counterpoint to this dominant interpretation, that Cartesian doubt is sidelined and that it is, consequently, more suppressed than radically vanquished.

Thus, in the first section, entitled “the radicality of the doubt in question” we will ask ourselves if Cartesian doubt is as radical as it seems to be or as we would like it to be.

Are there not blind spots that would leave two types of principles sheltered from the repeated assaults of doubt: a first type of principle necessary for the exercise of doubt itself and a second type necessary for moving beyond doubt? The kind of principles we will discuss are not yet true and demonstrated propositions but rather the means of discovering such principles. Less than truths, they are epistemic tools that form a frame of reference to build knowledge. These principles are not what Descartes calls the foundations of his first philosophy, namely the existence of the human soul distinct from the body, the existence of a veracious God, and the general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true, which are all principles in the sense of first truths for a mind that reasons by order. The principles that we are evoking, in contrast, are clear and distinct but not demonstrated as true or false; this should not be puzzling because we are not yet in certain science, but in the forming through the exercise of doubt, and the progressive output of such an exercise. The movement toward science is not itself science (Beyssade 1979, p. 75). In other words, the admitted and unquestioned principles, which constitute a frame of reference for determining the true and the false, enjoy an extraterritoriality in respect to the science of true and false. They form the background, the base, or even the rules of the game that Descartes presupposes in order to distinguish the true from the false.

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In a second section, entitled “the question of the exit from doubt”, we will examine precisely how the exit from doubt takes place in Descartes and if the victory of the *cogito* is as decisive and fruitful as one could claim. Indeed, what are we assured of beyond the *cogito*? What has escaped doubt falls on the side of thought alone, namely, the existence of a thinking substance and a general rule asserting that what is clearly and distinctly conceived will be taken as true. The blade of doubt seems to have created a cut between thought and things that is very difficult to close. Therefore, it will remain to be considered how Descartes authorizes himself to pass from knowledge to existence.

To end, we will suggest that the exercise of reasoning is based on a sort of reasonable reason that dispels skeptical doubt by placing its trust in the experience that we have of intellectual evidence when we conceive of a thing in a perfectly clear and distinct manner.

2 The Radicality of the Doubt in Question

The presence of blind spots in the exercise of Cartesian doubt is not at all negligible; in fact, it is quite the contrary. We suggest that what enjoys a certain immunity in the face of doubt has a fundamental epistemic importance, as they concern (i) the validity of good sense, in other words, our ability to distinguish the true from the false and, consequently, the knowledge of the truth itself and (ii) the two principles of causality and conformity of our ideas with their objects.

2.1 On the Immunity of Reason and Truth

In her book *Le Doute en question*, Claudine Tiercelin claims that (contrary to what philosophical skepticism maintains) there is no doubt that does not cease. As a matter of fact, our beliefs give us the means to neutralize our doubts by furnishing criteria to verify what seems suspicious, strange, bizarre, or inappropriate to us and by appealing to beliefs of the same type as those we doubt. If I doubt my spouse’s love for me, I can put it to the test and obtain proofs of love that in my mind stand firm; if I doubt the existence of God because of the presence of evil in the world, I can invoke, for example, my belief in human freedom, which explains the existence of evil, or my belief that all evil is necessary for a greater good. Thus, my doubt always unfolds against a background that I consider correct and to which I can turn to eliminate or neutralize my doubt.

Claudine Tiercelin emphasizes how much Wittgenstein and Peirce insist on the following point: “Doubt occurs in a context, on a background regarded as fundamentally correct. If you doubt something, something else must ‘stand

firm.’ All doubt presupposes the existence of the means to eliminate it, because we believe that our general picture of the world is correct – or enough in any case – to give us reasons to doubt and the means to potentially put an end to these doubts” (Tiercelin 2005, p. 49). Wittgenstein himself argues, “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty” (1969/1975, §. 115); he further claims that “the questions that we raise, and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn” (1969/1975, §. 341). However, these undoubted, unquestioned hinges, which are sometimes not even formulated but implicitly accepted, do not benefit from their status in accordance with their own nature but only in a certain context, and they are neither true nor false. They remain unfounded and therefore form an ultimate ground of convictions, which less supports the edifice of the thought than it is supported by it, as foundation walls carried by the whole house. Thus, it is often difficult to become aware of them (1969/1975, §§. 248, 253). Wittgenstein thus rejects any foundational approach that ultimately remains the common and presupposed requirement of both skepticism and dogmatism, with the difference that skepticism concludes that any foundation is impossible. Nevertheless, skepticism opens its investigations by following the same basic requirement as dogmatism before declaring this requirement unsatisfied. In a certain way, the relation of skepticism to dogmatism can be read as a form of disappointment—a form of a desire for a dogmatic foundation that is impossible.

These unfounded certainties, neither true nor false, neither reasonable nor unreasonable, are simply there, claims Wittgenstein: “It is there-like our life”, (*Ibid.*, §. 559). They are not even warranted, and he adds that “it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are indeed not doubted” (1969, *Ibid.*, §. 342). And Wittgenstein returns to the image of the hinges : “If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put” (*Ibid.*, §. 343). From such a perspective, the practice of a systematic skeptical doubt obviously becomes impossible, and there is no reason to think that Descartes could have exempted himself from this impossibility. This naturally calls into question the Cartesian thesis, according to which the skeptics would not have overcome doubt because they did not doubt enough. Moreover, the impossibility of a systematic skeptical doubt calls into question the thesis according to which Descartes would have succeeded in overcoming doubt by systematizing it and radicalizing it to the point of turning it back on itself and finally against itself in pointing out the impossibility of doubting that he is doubting. As a matter of fact, two arguments seem to authorize the possibility of calling into

question the existence of a systematic and radical doubt in Descartes.

First, the exercise of Cartesian doubt necessarily presupposes a use of reason and an adherence to what reason conceives, since the exercise of doubt consists precisely in seeking and using reasons to doubt, in arguing rationally to nourish doubt. This use of reason in order to doubt requires that reason should not be totally subverted and radically disqualified, even if it will be temporarily mistreated by the hypothesis of a deceiving God and by the fiction of the evil demon. Because it furnishes doubt with the arguments it cannot do without, one can consider reason as one of those hinges without which, as Wittgenstein claims, the game of doubting would be impossible. The enterprise of doubt refers, at its bottom, to the need to recognize in reason the capacity to provide doubt with reasons to doubt.

Second, this putting of reason out of play, which authorizes the game of doubting, is not implicit but is, in some way, admitted by Descartes. This is seen from the first sentence of the *Meditations* when the protocol for doubting is not yet engaged. It is actually the very first thing that Descartes comes to consider: “Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last” (1641/1991, p. 12). The temporal indications that Descartes delivers here go well beyond simple biographical evocations. The anteriority of the experience of error envelops a position of principle. From the outset, Descartes claims to have been able to distinguish the true from the false, using the natural light of his understanding, before undertaking any systematic critical examination of knowledge. He would never have been able to begin doubting if he had not already experienced error—that is, distinguished the true from the false. Thus, according to us, Descartes does not oppose false beliefs to true beliefs but errors to truths. The Latin text simply says “*multa falsa pro veris*” and does not evoke false opinions (“*fausses opinions*”) like the French text which can encourage to the conflation of “*falsa*” and beliefs. No decisive textual clue seems to favor the interpretation that Descartes is dealing with things that seem to him false and things that seem to him to be true. The strongest sense that we propose to give to the first sentence of the *Meditation* agrees with the following theses: “(1) With regard to Cartesian doubt, it is appropriate to get rid of or at least to beware of a certain optical illusion, characteristic of this doubt and surely organized by Descartes. (2) For a part that should not be neglected or underestimated, the dramaturgy of the

Meditations has classical aspects: it is part of a tradition, which takes away from it the character of a solitary adventure. (3) In Descartes’s view, the reality of human knowledge was never really threatened” (Kambouchner 2017, p.10). Kambouchner insists on this last point: “Given this doubly scholarly character of the Cartesian operation, what reality should we grant to abyssal threats to human knowledge? Quickly said: not a lot” (*Ibid.*, p. 19).

The hinge of the validity of reason thus articulates in tandem with a second hinge, which is nothing less than the knowledge of truth, given that reason or intellect, terms that we hold here as equivalent,¹ is in Descartes the only faculty that allows us to discern the truth. While Descartes had to practice the exercise of doubt to sift through the foundations of his opinions, there was no need to begin by doubting in order to know how to distinguish the true from the false and to distinguish between true, false, or plausible opinions. Doubt is about eliminating our false opinions since we already know what the truth is. Thus, it is not a question of saying that we already know everything that is true but what the truth is. The idea of truth is clear and distinct; it is not doubtful. All I can doubt is the knowledge of what the is true according to the idea of what the truth is. The truth stands firm in all circumstances, and the *Letter to Mersenne of 16 October 1639*, where Descartes considers the notion of truth so transcendently clear that it is impossible to ignore it, helps to confirm this. In fact, Descartes maintains that we could not learn anything about truth if we did not already know it, since to determine what we could learn from it requires that we have an idea of what the truth is. Therefore, we cannot give any definition of the truth in logical terms that would help us to know its nature. The truth belongs to those notions so simple and clear that they are naturally known, such as figure, movement, place, time, etc. One can only obscure such notions, instead of making them clearer, in attempting to define them. The truth is always already given, and doubt changes nothing. On the contrary, doubt finds its own condition of possibility in the knowledge that we have of the truth, knowledge constitutive of the natural light of our mind. Rather than not knowing what the truth is, the difficulty lies in examining if we are *de jure* able to know which things are true (metaphysical question) and how (epistemological question of the method).

2.2 On the Immunity of Clear and Distinct Perceptions

We would now like to insist on fundamental principles that also remain outside the exercise of Cartesian doubt. If

¹ “I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason (*mens, sive animus, sive intellectus, sive ratio*)”, *Second Meditation*, (1641/1991, p. 18).

doubting begins during the *First Meditation*, the regime of hyperbolic doubt naturally extends beyond it, as long as the hypothesis of a deceiving God is not eliminated before the end of the *Third Meditation*, much later than the fiction of the evil demon, who is defeated a first time by the *cogito* at the beginning of the *Second Meditation* and then definitively defeated with the general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true at the beginning of the *Third Meditation*². However, Martial Gueroult is right to dwell on the fact that the principle of causality and the principle of correspondence between idea and object are never really called into question by the exercise of doubt. Indeed, their respective validities are affirmed without demonstration, even before the existence of a veracious God is itself demonstrated. Descartes explicitly writes that these two principles, absolutely determining and closely associated in the demonstration of the first proof of the existence of God from the innate presence of his idea, are manifestly known only by the natural light of our mind (Gueroult 1953, vol. 1, pp. 194–198).

Nevertheless, natural light does not constitute, strictly speaking, a foundation of knowledge; rather, it designates its medium. What Descartes maintains here, therefore, is not a foundational approach to knowledge but a kind of phenomenology of knowledge and truth through the description of what becomes manifest to our mind disposing of clear and distinct ideas. We shall examine in more detail this phenomenology of human knowledge founded on clear and distinct perception when we consider the *persuasio* as perfect certainty below. Regarding the principle of causality, Descartes writes in the *Third Meditation*: “Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause? And how could the cause give it to the effect unless it possessed it? It follows from this both that something cannot arise from nothing, and also that what is more perfect — that is, contains in itself more reality — cannot arise from what is less perfect. And this is transparently true not only in the case of effects which possess what the philosophers call actual or formal reality, but also in the case of ideas, where one is considering only what they call objective reality” (1641/1991, p. 28). This claim of the validity of the principle of causality is almost immediately followed by the claim of the validity of the principle of correspondence between idea and object, in virtue of the same evidence that the natural light of our mind gives us: “And although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there

cannot be an infinite regress here; eventually one must reach a primary idea, the cause of which will be like an archetype which contains formally and in fact all the reality or perfection which is present only objectively or representatively in the idea. So, it is clear to me, by the natural light, that the ideas in me are like pictures or images which can easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which they are taken, but which cannot contain anything greater or more perfect. The longer and more carefully I examine all these points, the more clearly and distinctly I recognize their truth reality” (1641 *Ibid.*, p. 29).

The principle of causality and the principle of correspondence between idea and object are indeed presupposed as valid, similar to our reason and our knowledge of truth. Unlike reason and truth, however, these two principles do not contribute to the implementation of doubt as its conditions of possibility. They belong to a doctrinal background never subverted or shaken by doubt, and their function is in a way diametrically opposed to that of the adherence to reason and truth known using reason, since they guarantee not the entry into doubting but the exit from it. The principle of causality’s immunity to doubt means that “it alone [associated with the principle of correspondence between the idea and its object] makes it possible to emerge out of the self,” as Gueroult points out (1953, vol. 1, p. 202). It sets our knowledge free from the limits of subjectivity. “It is by the force of the principle of causality alone that the jump into the objectivity is accomplished and that the objective value of the conclusions is founded, drawn from the principle of the correspondence between the idea and its object”, emphasizes Gueroult once more (*Id.*). In fact, if we go one step further than Gueroult, the doctrinal background allowing the principle of correspondence is given from the beginning of the *Third Meditation*, on the model of the *cogito*, with the truth rule: “I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So, I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true” (Descartes 1641/1991, p. 24). The content of the truth rule is immediately applied in the *Third Meditation* even before the rule will be demonstrated at the end of the *Fourth Meditation*, as announced in the *Synopsis of the following six Meditations*: “A further requirement is that we should know that everything that we clearly and distinctly understand is true in a way which corresponds exactly to our understanding of it; but it was not possible to prove this before the *Fourth Meditation*”, *Ibid.*, p. 9). This distortion between the

² However, some scholars claim that the fiction of the evil demon will only be eliminated once the existence of a veracious God is proven (Gueroult 1953, vol. 1, pp. 195, 291, 337 ; Frankfurt 1970/2008, p. 243).

admission of the content of the rule and his proof could be puzzling, but it does not have to be. What is immediately admitted is the absolute certainty of the human mind that clear and distinct ideas are true: “Yet when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction” (*Ibid.*, p. 25). And again: “Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light—for example that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on — cannot in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true” (*Ibid.*, p. 27). The nature of my mind is so made that I cannot have clear and distinct perceptions without being sure they are true. They do not need to be guaranteed³. Clear and distinct perceptions enjoy an immunity in the face of doubt while they are effectively present to my mind. Without this doctrinal background, never being questioned, nothing could ever be demonstrated. That is why Descartes claims that his reasoning in the *Third Meditation* is not a circle founding the truth of clear and distinct ideas on the veracity of God and vice versa. The validity of the truth rule will need to be proved to be useful for not for present but for previous clear and distinct perceptions when they are no longer present to our mind⁴.

In light of these considerations, we can see that Cartesian doubt, methodical and hyperbolic as it is, cannot be considered perfectly radical and that it leaves outside its field of practice, like blind spots, two hinges (validity of reason and knowledge of what the truth is) and the principles that we have just examined founded on the certainty of the truth of our clear and distinct ideas. Without the formers, we could not even get into the exercise of doubt. Without the latter, we could not get out of it. In other words, Descartes does not beat the skeptics on the terrain of radical doubt despite the remarkable tour de force of the *cogito*, which turns doubt against itself by turning it on itself.

³ On this central interpretation, see: O Hamelin (1911/1921), p. 136–166), Gilson (1925, p. 312–313, 353–354, 360–362; 1930, rééd. 1984, p. 234–244), Gouhier (1962, p. 293–319), Rubin (1977, p. 197–208) C Larmore (1984, p. 61–74), H Frankfurt (1987, p. 395–411), Bennett (1990, p. 75–108), Loeb (1992, p. 200–235), J.-L Marion (1996, *Index des Méditations*, p. XI–XII; *Questions cartésiennes II*, p. 51), Della Rocca (2005, p. 1–33).

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the “Cartesian circle”, we refer to: F.-X de Peretti (2018, pp. 27–52).

2.3 The Assertoric Character of Reason

Among the critical interpretations of the Cartesian exercise of doubt, Michel Meyer’s compelling reading allows us to discern an additional aspect of the presuppositions or blind spots that we have highlighted so far. In a section concerning the very meaning of the entire foundational approach on which Descartes based his search for truth, Meyer writes, “The Cartesian approach indisputably responded to a crisis in the foundations of knowledge in its time, it still illustrates, beyond some of its outdated results in the sciences, what is meant by philosophical foundation” (1982, p. 136). However, adds Meyer, with the choice to make the *cogito* the ultimate and unshakable foundation of knowledge, Descartes forced himself to close what he nevertheless seemed to have opened with the hypothesis of a deceiving God and the argument of the evil demon, namely a kind of radical questioning: “Descartes is not simply at the origin of a model in crisis, but he is also the one, the first, who gave the example of a radical questioning that, of course, very quickly fell back on the initial assertoric character of truths of reason; a questioning which, although repressed, is nevertheless present in an underlying way” (*Id.*).

In our view, this questioning, kept open as much as possible in the *First Meditation* and a part of the *Second Meditation*, is closed in the *Third Meditation* by the affirmation of the validity of the principles of causality and correspondence between ideas and their objects. The argumentation proposed by Meyer is nevertheless significantly different from the reading we have made for two reasons: (i) it characterizes the initial moment of Cartesian questioning as totally open, whereas we have identified the presence of blind spots that limit such an opening; (ii) it does not attribute the abandonment of doubt to the affirmation of the validity of our clear and distinct ideas and of the principles of causality and correspondence between ideas and their objects, but to the *cogito*. Descartes, claims Meyer, perpetrates a *coup de force* by diverting doubt from its radicality and transforming it, with the *cogito*, into the affirmation of a proposition, in other words, into an assertion: In doubting, I think, therefore I am. Thus, to doubt, with Descartes, would no longer simply and authentically be to doubt but to affirm. Doubt as a search for an apodictic truth is dissolved by an inaugural proposition: “Doubt sticks closer to its affirmation, to its expression, but then it cannot claim to suppress it: to express one’s doubt is not to affirm a proposition, but to engage in a pure and simple questioning which says nothing other than itself [...] there is here, however, a real affirmation like any other, which moreover makes assertability the model of reason, since it emerges from radical doubt as that which, paradoxically, must escape her even though she poses it” (Meyer 1982, p. 47).

In Meyer's interpretation, Descartes assumes from the outset what he discovers with the *cogito* (1982, p. 52). Descartes finds and proves only what he presupposes (1982, p. 55) so that the radical quest for apodicticity is betrayed in a certain manner, or at least blocked, by the resolution of a questioning known in advance, contradicting the announced desire to doubt everything. According to Meyer, certainty, which now implicitly precedes the doubt that is supposed to logically precede it, touches upon the necessity of apodicticity, the ideal of truth sought by doubt. In fact, the *cogito* is the process by which "thought asserts itself as a necessity to affirm necessity as the foundation of all discourse" (Meyer 1994, p. 46). The search for an apodictic point of view is paradoxically presupposed and therefore fatally devoid of apodicticity since presupposed (*Id.*, p. 46). The necessity of apodicticity is not necessary but simply posed, even imposed. If what is presented as apodictic, starting with the *cogito*, derives from the assertoric character of the need to give a necessary character to what we think, the truths of reason can only enjoy an illusory apodicticity. In this case, we must accept that what we think does not derive from any necessity and that it is impossible to assign an ultimate foundation to truth despite the Cartesian effort. The principle according to which, in the search for truth, we must inquire about an absolute foundation is already a prejudice. Thus, it is true that Descartes does not push his doubt to the extreme point of radicality that would call into question the principle on which the very project of the search for truth is based.

For that, it will be necessary, in our estimation, to wait for Nietzsche's attack on the prejudices of the philosophers: "The will to truth that still seduces us into taking so many risks, this famous truthfulness that all philosophers so far have talked about with veneration: what questions this will to truth has already laid before us! [...] In fact, we paused for a long time before the question of the cause of this will – until we finally came to a complete standstill in front of an even more fundamental question. We asked about the value of this will. Granted, we will truth: why not untruth instead? And uncertainty? Even ignorance? The problem of the value of truth came before us [...]. And believe it or not, it ultimately looks to us as if the problem has never been raised until now, – as if we were the first to ever see it, fix our gaze on it, risk it. Because this involves risk and perhaps no risk has ever been greater" (1886/2002, p. 5). Nietzsche will, in a certain way, accomplish the radicality of doubt initiated by Descartes. Consequently, he will also accomplish the radicalization of the conception of the will as the will-to-power and the interpretation of the essence of truth as an act and decision of the will, an act of evaluation. Jean Beaufret maintains, in this sense, that Nietzsche owes the task of undermining truth to Descartes, who was the first to

make truth depend no longer on understanding alone, but on judgment and, from this fact, on an act of the will (Beaufret 1967). The truth, from Descartes to Nietzsche, becomes a matter of will, of decision. Nietzsche's claim to the subjective essence of truth then strangely finds its first germ in the Cartesian theory of knowledge and judgment.

We arrive here at an intermediate conclusion, which can be presented in the following way: despite the brilliance and the tour de force that constitutes the *cogito*, Descartes could not endow doubt with the radicality needed to overcome its skeptical instantiation and reach the apodicticity of the truths of reason by going to the extreme of doubt. In the exercise of his doubt, he left out several hinges and principles (validity of rational knowledge, knowledge of what is truth, principle of causality, principle of correspondence ideas/objects, ideal of apodicticity) that form the basis of his undertaking. In this case, he hasn't yet overcome the skeptical threat, and so it remains to be seen how he achieved this.

3 The Question of the Exit from Doubt

If the *cogito* remains a victory over doubt, how can we start from this victory to build bridges toward the world outside of our thought, over the trenches dug by doubt? This is the challenge that Descartes faced. We will argue here that, although it cannot be rationally founded in an absolute manner, the Cartesian decision to hold as true what we clearly and distinctly conceive is nonetheless highly reasonable and that the need to resort to a reasonable use of reason is confirmed both in the exercise of doubt and in knowledge. For this, we will examine the *Letter to Clerselier* of 12 January 1646, relating to the Gassendi's *Metaphysical Disquisition; or Doubts and Instances Against the Metaphysics of René Descartes and Responses*, as well as a passage from the *Replies to the Second Set of Objections*. These two texts—where Descartes is pushed to his last entrenchments by his objectors—indeed suggest that if radical skepticism is not logically and absolutely defeated, it is nevertheless validly overtaken and exceeded by the Cartesian refusal to consider the hypothesis that the truth can be absolutely different from what it is universally for any human mind correctly using of reason, a decision that is the price to pay to save science.

3.1 A Reasonable Use of Doubt

To doubt is a threat to knowledge and certainty, but as well to reason, from which knowledge and certainty proceed. In this sense, the shadow of doubt envelops rationality and weighs it down with an always possible hypothesis of irrationality or, at least, of a-rationality. When the specter of madness crosses briefly, like a flash, the itinerary of the

First Meditation, it threatens reason as the possibility of all knowledge. If this passage of the *First Meditation* is so disturbing, perhaps it is because the hypothesis of madness is not only a reason to doubt but also a mirror-like revelation, on a second level of reading, of the unreason of the skeptical doubt itself. It is like a mirrored image that the doubting and meditating subject receives from himself, an image of himself that he no longer masters, of which he is dispossessed and which dispossesses him of himself: it represents the madness of doubt that would make us doubt everything according to an attitude that would in no way refer to our natural attitude toward the world, which consists precisely in not doubting everything. Descartes becomes aware that the hypothesis of madness is, in fact, a mad hypothesis. The hypothesis of unreason is declared unreasonable and rejected as such: “But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself” (1641/1991, p. 13). Therefore, it is necessary for Descartes to know how to maintain a sense of proportion.

Once the exercise of doubt enters the cycle of hyperbole, the question of its legitimacy arises. Is it a rationally and theoretically legitimate doubt, or does it only have legitimacy as a practical exercise whose real interest is to accustom us to detaching the mind from the senses, as the *Synopsis of the following six Meditations* suggests (*Ibid.*, p. 9). The fact that the last attempt to doubt, with the hypothesis of a deceiving God, is not so decisive as we could hope and give way to the fiction of the evil demon suggests how much doubt is running out of steam and how unreasonable it has become. “My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom. I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions, so long as I suppose them to be what in fact they are, namely highly probable opinions—opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has just been shown, it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny” (*Ibid.*, p. 15). The fiction of the evil demon is neither a traditional reason inherited from the skeptical tradition nor a new reason to doubt, but a means of doubting or rather of lasting in doubt (Beyssade 1979, p. 92). Once past the immediate consideration of the reasons to doubt, our old beliefs and habits come back, and the doubt cannot easily continue. This explains the choice to resort to a fiction, the evil demon, which is not a metaphysical hypothesis, but a methodological artifice (which does not correspond to any real being) in order to ensure the persistence of doubt (Gouhier 1962, pp. 119, 121). It is not a reason to doubt for the understanding, but a means of doubting for the will. Thus, Descartes tries in a last burst of energy to maintain the exercise of questioning his old

opinions, which indicates that the last reasons to doubt do not have the force that one would like them to have. Their argumentative power is not up to the psychological effect that we should be able to expect if the force of doubt had an increased crescendo, otherwise there would be no need to appeal to the crutch of the will embodied in the figure of an evil demon.

In this sense, there are degrees of doubt, just as there are degrees of knowledge. It is not the same thing to doubt the reliability of my senses or my mathematical judgments and to wonder about the real existence of my body, my mind, or about the reality of mathematical entities. It seems reasonable to introduce degrees into our doubts: some are apparently more legitimate, more reasonable than others (Tiercelin 2005, pp. 14–15). Wittgenstein argued, “There are cases where doubt is unreasonable, but others where it seems logically impossible. And there seems to be no clear boundary between them” (1969/1975, §. 454). Wittgenstein thus blurred the boundary between reasonable and rational, or rather between unreasonable and irrational. In Descartes, the hypothesis of madness is perhaps in such a place of ambiguity and confusion. The Cartesian defense of rationality on behalf of a certain reasonableness in the exercise of doubt, announced by the rejection of the hypothesis of madness in the *First Meditation*, will find confirmation in the *Replies to the Second Set of Objections*, where Descartes pleads for the use of a reasonable reason against an unreasonable and suicidal reason that would maintain an excessive doubt. He maintains that there are doubts which one cannot theoretically eliminate but which one must nevertheless ignore, and which one can even, in fact, only ignore: “What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged ‘absolute falsity’ bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it?” (Descartes 1641/1991, p. 103).

This extract of *Replies to the Second Set of Objections* exposes the same approach that Descartes will again adopt in the *Letter to Clerselier of 12 January 1646*. It always remains possible that the perspective of our clear and distinct ideas does not present what really exists, absolutely speaking. This is what the extract evokes by referring to the truth from the point of view of God or angels. It is always possible to say the same thing about simple natures, which we find in our minds, as what Descartes says about the reality of sensible qualities in his physics, namely, that they are in us and not in things. The fact remains that we have no other measure or standard of reality than those simple general, material, or intellectual natures of which our mind innately disposes, so that they must necessarily serve us as tools to know reality. It’s that or nothing. To admit, indeed, without

an absolute foundation, that our thought tells us what is true or something of what is true is the bet that Descartes agrees to make. This bet may be perceived as a form of dogmatic idealism, but it is, in the first place, as we said, the price to pay to save science itself, which necessarily rests on a confidence in the power of the human mind.

3.2 A Reasonable Use of Reason

Among the criticisms of Cartesianism, many dwell on the axiom of the general rule of truth and on the guarantee of our knowledge by the knowledge we have of the existence and veracity of God. Richard Popkin's survey, *History of the Skepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, shows that it was these points that were critiqued by the pens of Mersenne, Arnauld, Gassendi, Bourdin, Malebranche, Huet, Bayle, and Hume (2003, chap. X). We know Popkin's thesis, which detects in Descartes the existence of a skeptical problem about the type of certainty we can achieve, although he also wonders if Descartes was aware of it or not. In particular, Popkin considers a passage from Descartes' *Letter to Clerselier of 12 January 1646* (1646/1991, pp. 269–277), serving as Descartes' response to Gassendi's *Metaphysical Disquisition*⁵ where Descartes treats, according to his own expression, the "objection of objections" (*Ibid.*, p. 275)⁶, formulated in a collection of problems extracted from the *Metaphysical Disquisition* by friends of Gassendi. The major objection suggests that Descartes' mathematical physics may not correspond to anything real outside of thought. In other words, as Popkin argues, if we agree with Descartes that our clear and distinct ideas are true, we are nevertheless never able to say whether they are so elsewhere than in our thoughts (2003, pp. 167–168). The "objection of objections" invites us to consider that any rational structure is never more than a set of beliefs that we are obliged to hold as true, even though there is no bridge between the outside world and our thoughts. Descartes measures this gap, adds Popkin, but

the former can do nothing more than say that he does not surrender, for better or for worse, with or without reason, by clinging to his personal certainty, whole but subjective (2005, p. 166). Descartes has not rid himself of the skeptical menace that undermines his system from within and remains skeptical despite himself.

The problem posed in the *Letter to Clerselier of 12 January 1646* goes far beyond the question of the existence of the external world and the skeptical arguments of the *First Meditation*. The problem concerns the effective correspondence between things and our ideas about them. Clerselier's friends, the authors of the main remarks and criticisms contained in Gassendi's *Disquisitio*, reproach Descartes for his conception of extension on which all his physics rests because, they say, it is a pure mathematical construction with no reality outside of our thought. It is only an abstraction, a hypostasis regarding the nature of bodies, meaning that all Cartesian physics is consequently imaginary. As a matter of fact, Descartes does not reify space as an intellectual reality unrelated to physical extension, but rather holds that mathematical space, as we conceive it, allows us to know physical space. Moreover, he finds a certain satisfaction with the blame of Clerselier's friends in that they will at least have understood that Cartesian physics is indeed a mathematical physics: "But at least I can console myself with the thought that my critics here link my physics with pure mathematics, which I desire above all that it should resemble" (1646/1991, p. 275).

In the matter of his doctrine of knowledge, Descartes obviously knows that, with the objection of the ideality of his physics, we reach the bottom of the whole problem of knowledge when he declares, perhaps with a touch of irony, that this is "the objection of objections" (*Id.*). This problem touches upon the objective value of our knowledge and the legitimacy of the affirmation that the inference from knowledge to existence holds. How does Descartes reply to this? He begins with the consequences of the objection. If the objection is admitted, there is nothing we can still hold to be true. Geometry, along with all the other sciences, will then have to be considered imaginary. One might as well conclude, argues Descartes, that "in other words we must entirely close the door to reason" and be content, taking as true what we do not conceive, to be like monkeys, which imitate without knowing what they imitate, or like parrots uttering words they do not understand (*Id.*).

Descartes decides to hold as true what imposes itself on the perception of our mind as certain because of its clarity and distinction. This decision, the Cartesian bias of an assumed confidence in the natural light of our mind and in the possibility of a science erected by humans, proceeds from an *contrario* reasoning: it is reasonable, if not absolutely rationally founded, to subscribe to the truth of our

⁵ Gassendi's *Metaphysical Disquisition; or Doubts and Instances Against the Metaphysics of René Descartes and Responses* was completed on 15 March 1642. They circulated first in a small circle of friends, before being published, with a reprint of the *Meditations*, in 1644, in Amsterdam. Answers to answers, they reply to the answers made by Descartes to Gassendi's *Fifth Set of Objections*. Here, Descartes replies only to Clerselier about a compendium of difficulties extracted from Gassendi's *Metaphysical Disquisition* by friends of Clerselier. The text of this collection has not been preserved or found. Descartes was aware not only of the anonymous collection, but of the *Metaphysical Disquisition* itself.

⁶ Descartes notes that this objection formulated by the authors of the compendium does not appear in the *Metaphysical Disquisition*, but that it is very similar to that of Gassendi: "But at the end my critics add a thought which, as far as I know, the author of the *Counter-Objections* has not included in his book, although it is very similar to his objections" (1641/1991, p. 274).

clear and distinct ideas, because it would be totally irrational and unreasonable to subscribe to the truth of what our mind is not able to conceive clearly and distinctly. Certainly, an argument a *contrario* is not completely decisive from a logical point of view, but it nevertheless has a certain value. In the Cartesian attitude, there is a reasonable reason on which reasoning reason must ultimately, and more or less implicitly, be based, forming what we could call the framework of Cartesian rationality.

Descartes's comments refer to a fundamental decision, one that allows for the founding establishment of science. It is important to emphasize again that truth in Descartes is a matter of judgment and that the latter is a matter of decision because it is based on the affirmation or the negation, by a free will, of what the understanding presents to it. By introducing the will into the act of judgment, the Cartesian doctrine of judgment makes truth a decision. From this point of view, the founding decision to hold our clear and distinct ideas as true and the Cartesian theory of judgment respond to each other at two different but complementary levels in a coherent Cartesian doctrine of knowledge that is unified by the same fully operational principle of voluntary decision. In a certain manner, each particular judgment in matters of knowledge doubles, on a case-by-case basis, the establishment of the truth as a decision.

3.3 *Persuasio* as Perfect Certainty

If we now examine the consequences specific to the status of knowledge arising from what we have considered so far, we will be sensitive to the insistence in which Descartes, evoking the ultimate foundation of rational certainty, has recourse to the lexicon of belief and to the Latin term *persuasio*, which, in his writing, becomes the equivalent of certainty. The notion of belief in the strongest sense, or persuasion, is at the heart of the exposition of what constitutes the most perfect certainty. Thus, the notion of persuasion recurs, in the form of noun, verb, or adjective, seven times in the first eighteen lines of the second sequence of the fourth point in the *Replies to the Second Set of Objections* (1641/1991, p. 103), mentioned above, concerning the foundation of rational knowledge. We can break this sequence down into six successive propositions that define the highest certainty as an unshakeable belief:

1. Descartes asserts that a clear and distinct conception engenders our belief or persuasion in it: "First of all, as soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced (*persuademus*) that it is true."
2. The strength of this belief or persuasion is such that it definitively extinguishes all possibility of doubting:

"Now if this conviction (*persuasio*) is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced (*persuademus*) of, then there are no further questions for us to ask."

3. This force is so great that it is likely to satisfy us in the search for the truth and to dissuade us from expecting anything else: "we have everything that we could reasonably (*cum ratione*) want."
4. The possible attempt by anyone to deny the truth of this belief, born of a clear and distinct perception, has no effect on us when we experience it: "What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced (*persuasi*) of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false?"
5. The force of this belief is such that the assumption of an absolute falsity, from the point of view of God or the angels, exceeds the reach of our mind and cannot generate an inverse belief: "Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us, since we neither believe (*credamus*) in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it?"
6. When we experience such a belief or persuasion, we attain the most perfect degree of certainty that the human mind can reach: "For the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty."

This appeal to the lexicon of persuasion and belief, with the use of the Latin verbs *persuadere* and *credere* describing the certainty of our knowledge, is obviously not exclusive to this extract from *Replies to the Second Set of Objections*. We also find it, for instance, in the *Third Meditation* (1641/1991, p. 25), and in articles 13 and 15 of the first part of the *Principles of Philosophy*. For Descartes, belief in what we think is therefore the substance of our most certain and most true judgments as well as that of our most obscure and most false judgments. What is the difference, then, between the belief in false judgments and the belief in true judgments founded on reason? Belief in the obscure and confused objects of our senses does not come from a certainty based on the evidence of reason. Unreasoned, hasty, prejudiced, our will believes without knowing. It does not judge; it prejudices even before our reason has ruled. This type of belief is the lowest level of belief because reason is always able to produce ideas that can challenge it and allow it to be corrected. Belief in what the senses present is then replaced by true persuasion, which can no longer be questioned by any other faculty and is, in this regard, definitive. Reason imposes itself as the ultimate standard to which we can refer to make a judgment. Descartes recalls this at the beginning of the fourth point of the

Replies to the Second Set of Objections, following what he had already claimed in the *Third Meditation*: we have no other faculty than reason to put our trust in to distinguish the true from the false and which would teach us that what reason presents to us as true is not (1641/1991, p. 27). We cannot find a higher point of view than that of reason, which would envelop it and allow us to verify it. The search for truth stops at the level of reason. The impossibility of going beyond what reason provides in the experience of evidence, when we make use of reason according to the Cartesian method, entails that the experience of evidence offers the highest level of certainty that we can access by ourselves, without the grace of God.

4 Conclusion

Did Descartes overcome evil with evil, in other words, doubt with doubt? Apart from the *cogito*, the refutation of skeptical doubt is not located on the plane of a strict radicality leading to perfect apodicticity. Descartes could not be more skeptical than the skeptics. The status of the *cogito* remains an exception in the Cartesian device for getting out of skepticism, and this is certainly what has destined him to such posterity. Concerning the knowledge of things external to thought, Descartes had to decide, to take decisions, as we say. Moreover, a hermeneutical current has not failed to flourish in Anglo-Saxon philosophy in the last forty years, which has insisted on underlining the absence of a logical and definitive refutation of skepticism in Descartes' philosophy. In this sense, Popkin is not an exception but fits into a larger group of scholars, including, for instance, Rubin (1977), Charles Larmore (1984), Harry Frankfurt (1987), Loeb (1990, 1992), Bennett (1990), Della Rocca (2005). Their analyses converge on three points, drawing a common line of critical interpretation: (i) Descartes' contribution to philosophy is largely due to his questioning of the foundations of knowledge and to his problematic approach to the relationship between certainty and truth; (ii) Cartesian truth is measured, ultimately, by the power of our certainties generally interpreted as an indestructible and binding psychological fact; (iii) Descartes failed in his search for an objective and absolute foundation of knowledge, even if he succeeded in giving science, in the absence of a foundation, a certain stability and in consecrating the autonomy of reason with regard to the other faculties of the mind, on the one hand, and with regard to God, on the other hand.

The general tone of this interpretive line is negative, or at least reserved, in the judgments it makes regarding the results reached by Descartes' doctrine of knowledge. For our part, we will conclude more positively, underscoring that, in spite of these reservations, skepticism is nevertheless

removed by Descartes not arbitrarily but rather in a perfectly argued manner. We will summarize the Cartesian argumentation we have examined as follows: (i) on the one hand, it is useless to feign a point of view external to reason and to freely nourish doubt; (ii) on the other hand, we do not have a higher faculty able to correct reason; therefore, we must subscribe to what our mind conceives entirely clearly and distinctly. These two arguments are not only highly reasonable and acceptable in themselves, but they are also decisive in that they open the only possible way to the construction of science. The renunciation of the latter would certainly be infinitely more unreasonable for the human mind than a devotion to it. Descartes fought skeptical resignation with determination and, we will also say, with reason by denouncing the highly unreasonable and vain character of an unending doubt.

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