DESCARTES'S MODAL RELIABILISM*

El confiabilismo modal de Descartes

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ABSTRACT

This paper's objective is to undermine the standard reading on Descartes's *Meditations*, a reading which, abstracting from the skeptical challenge of a reduction of reason to absurdity which Descartes is responding to, overstresses the epistemological priority of the *Cogito* argument, and which, ignoring the anti-skeptical strategy deployed by Descartes, is blind to the fact that, instead of trying to garner better support for nuclear propositions, he attempts to subtract grounds for doubt, working himself into an enlightened position from which those radical scenarios no longer make sense. Descartes's proposal is a *modal or metaphysical version of reliabilism* analogous to the contemporary one defended by Ernest Sosa, a position capable of overcoming skepticism without a vicious circle and which demonstrates that a correct use of reason yields a theory on how things are in the world which precludes the unreliability of our cognitive faculties.

Key Words: Descartes, Ernest Sosa, Global Scenarios, Reliabilism, Skepticism.

RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es cuestionar la lectura tradicional de las *Meditaciones metafísicas*, una lectura que, abstrayendo del reto escéptico de una reducción de la razón al absurdo al que se enfrenta Descartes, magnifica la prioridad epistémica del argumento del *Cogito*, y que, haciendo caso omiso de su estrategia anti-escéptica, es incapaz de apreciar que, más que la recopilación de mejores evidencias a favor de las proposiciones nucleares, su función es la de sustraer razones para dudar, de tal forma que el Investigador adquiera una posición ilustrada desde la que los escenarios escépticos carezcan de sentido. Descartes propone una *versión modal o metafísica de confiabilismo* análoga a la defendida en el panorama contemporáneo por Ernest Sosa, una posición capaz de superar sin circularidad el escepticismo y que muestra cómo el uso correcto de la razón

desemboca en una teoría ontológica que elimina la posibilidad de que nuestras facultades cognitivas no sean fiables.

Palabras clave: Confiabilismo, Descartes, Ernest Sosa, Escenarios globales, Escepticismo.

1. Introduction

The common narrative on Descartes' *Meditations* is nowadays as trite as were the skeptical arguments provided in the First Meditation (and taken from the writings of ancient Academics and Pyrrhonists) in the context of the Seventeen Century philosophical environment.[1] When I first came to think about how to organize the material of this essay and on the best way of dealing with its subject I deemed this fact as an unquestionable reason for omitting this tedious and well-known topic and for presenting my reading proposal without more ado, only counting on the text and on the epistemological context (the revival of skepticism in late Renaissance[2]) Descartes is responding to (his background materials) for backing my claim. But, after a while, a more compelling cluster of arguments led me to an opposite conclusion. It was not only that from a pedagogical point of view *repetition* is always better than *obscurity*; but that from a philosophical standpoint this specific *exercise in repetition* was, at least in two senses, necessary. *First*, because contemporary philosophers are so utterly infatuated with particular problems raised by the *Meditations* (How to solve, or dissolve, the Dream Hypothesis? Is the *Cogito* an inference, an intuition or a performance? Is Descartes an advocate of the so-called "myth of the ghost in the machine."[3]? What are the relations between Descartes' philosophy and the foundations

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[1] "Now the best way of achieving a firm knowledge of reality is first to accustom ourselves to doubting all things, especially corporeal things. Although I had seen many ancient writings by the Academics and the Sceptics on this subject, *and was reluctant to reheat and serve this precooked material*, I could not avoid devoting a whole Meditation to it." (Emphasis added) Descartes, R., *Meditations on First Philosophy with Objections and Replies*, in J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch (eds.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Volume II)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, p. 94. Descartes, R., *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*, in C. Adam, P. Tannery (eds.), *Oeuvres de Descartes. Meditationes de Prima Philosophia (VII)*, J. Vrin, Paris, 1996, p. 130. (Thereafter, and according to the normative usage in Cartesian scholarship, we'll cite as follows: AT, volume and page and CSM, volume and page).

[2] *Cfr*. Schmitt, C. B., "The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times", in M. Burnyeat (ed.), *The Skeptical Tradition*, University of California Press, Berkeley / Los Angeles, 1983, pp. 225-251.

[3] *Cfr*. Ryle, G., *The Concept of Mind*, Penguin Books, London, 1990, pp. 17-25.

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of modern physics and between his epistemological project and radical democracy?), that they are prone to forget that these topics are not isolated items, but wheels and clogs in a complex machine whose meaning is determined by their functions and whose sense depends on the sense of the whole, and so, because in many cases they don't see the wood for the trees, to give an outline of the *Meditations* as a whole made sense. *Second*, and apart from this, the case I wanted to defend gained an *additional support* from the failures implicit in the traditional narrative, or, in other words, because the common model I wish to reject is interlocked with several insurmountable problems which question (at a very basic level) Descartes' capacity as philosopher, to contrast it with an alternative model which, shedding light on the text, shows that Descartes is innocent of preposterous blunders, it pays huge dividends: on the one hand, the *anxiety* resulting from those supposed blunders helps the reader to overcome his hermeneutical prejudices (the resistances of the will which prevent us from coming to see something as something else and which hinder our liberation from a mesmerizing scheme) and thus, smoothing the transition between ingrained views and arrangements of familiar things in unfamiliar patterns, it prods the reader to welcome fresh perspectives; on the other hand, the *principle of charity* plays the role of an external criterion, of a neutral court of appeal which, at least, is capable to put an end to disputable questions *by default* (but without arbitrariness). To recap: (i) it's better to make sense of a text without getting nonsense in return than to shed light on senseless doctrines; (ii) to draw comparisons between different systems is equivalent to provide *tacit* arguments.

I'll divide this paper in four parts. First, I'll give an *outline* of the traditional reading on Descartes' *Meditations*, underlining several problems (apparently for Descartes, really affecting his critics) raised by this narrative. In second place, I'll describe the *skeptical challenge* Descartes is trying to cope with, that is to say, the skeptic's attempt at a *reduction of reason to absurdity*, thus providing the necessary *background* in order to understand the epistemological conditions Descartes is responding to. Next, I'll apply those conditions to the riddle of the *Cogito*, showing how, because it doesn't meet them, its *incorrigibility* doesn't entail *indubitability*, and thereby, how in the *Meditations* there is neither such a thing as a "first certainty" nor such a thing as a quixotic task of attempting to establish the existence of the external world from the invulnerable but isolated peak of a pure subjectivity. Finally, I'll show that the question which Descartes faces concerns *reason's capacity of validating reason*; how, because his strategies are (in a certain sense) *successful* without circularity, his argument is not open to crushing *procedural objections*; how his procedure is (ironically) akin to the one

employed by his deflationary critics in order to show that the conundrums he posed are *meaningless* (Descartes is not trying to garner new and better support for nuclear propositions; on the contrary, he attempts to *subtract* grounds for doubt, working himself into a position from which these hypotheses *no longer make sense to him*); and, last by not least, I'll attempt to clarify why the existence of an *omnipotent and necessary God* as a deliverance of reason constitutes the *keystone* of his epistemic building.

I want to be clear from now, stating some disclaimers: (i) I'm not going to talk about the particular proofs provided by Descartes in order to demonstrate God's existence. My topic is quite different: what is the function of God in his epistemological project, or, in other words, what role plays God from the point of view of the whole. (ii) In fact, although I think that there is no difficulty in principle about Descartes' procedure in the *Meditations*, I'm not an advocate of his substantive arguments for the existence of a nondeceiving God, reasons which I deem deeply defective. In this respect, I think that Descartes made a great discovery, that he opened the only possible path to coping with radical skepticism, but stopping short of his goal. It would be fair to state that he bestowed the compass and the vessel on us, but not a land which still is waiting to be gained. (iii) At last, I would like to remark that, if only half of the things I'm about to say are true, Descartes cast longer shadows on philosophy than the ones we suspected in our wildest dreams. The implications of his epistemological position, which could be labeled as *modal or metaphysical reliabilism*, go well beyond this area, transforming for the better such distant fields as modal logic, theory of argumentation, philosophy of language or ethics.

2. The *Meditations'* epistemological project according to the standard reading

According to the standard interpretation of the *Meditations* the Cartesian project is as clear as unfeasible. It could be divided in three consecutive sections, although I'll focus (owing to their relevance for the reconstruction of the text) in the proceedings to raise a radical skepticism, proceedings which constitute the first section.

In the First Meditation Descartes introduces a *fictional character*: the Meditator, who stands for *every human being* detached from any particular upbringing and schooling, innocent of philosophical commitments and in control of his perceptual and rational faculties, that is to say, with his cognitive powers intact[4]. This rhetorical device performs several tasks: it dissociates Descartes

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[4] In the incomplete dialogue *The Search for Truth by Means of the Natural Light* this character is called *Polyander*, a Greek name which means "Every Man". *Cfr.* AT X, p. 499. CSM II, p. 402.

(the man and his personal history) from his rational voice, giving a wider scope to the research (which, unlike the *Discourse on the Method*, is not an intellectual memoir), avoiding the parochialism of time or space and reducing hypothetical qualms about secret and personal agendas; it helps the identification between *any* reader (independent of his circumstances) and this sketchy "ghost"; it minimizes the risk of dialectical tricks and legerdemains (so common in philosophical dialogues where the author concedes external authority to some characters and deploys a technical jargon overwhelming but unconvincing); it softens the transition between common sense and metaphysical doubts; it colors the investigation with a dramatic (or ethical) tone; and, finally, it justifies the procedural decisions of sidestepping the epistemological scrutiny of each possible individual judgment and of undertaking the "general demolition" of opinions undermining "the foundations of *(the)* building",[5] foundations which, of course, are common to all human beings independently of their conditions.

The Meditator starts a dangerous voyage which, at the end of the First Meditation, brings him to the harbor of utter despair: he is compelled by reason to withhold assent to all his beliefs. This uninspiring and depressing result comes from a gradual deepening of skeptical scenarios, a progression into abyss through three discernible stages:

(a) In the first stage the Meditator casts doubts on beliefs concerning "objects which are very small or in the distance."[6] These are *empirical doubts*, namely, doubts which are raised pointing to some *uneliminated but eliminable possibility* that can defeat a cognitive claim, which could be appeased recurring to *better evidential support* (or to a better cognitive position), thus presupposing that everyone knows *in advance* what would count as a definitive proof for or against a claim and what would be the *correct (or ideal) method* for solving the proposed question, which, because even in the most bizarre of the cases we would know what the skeptic is demanding from us, are sensible and understandable in ordinary contexts (they don't imply madness, at most only a harmless eccentricity), and which are *noninfectious doubts*, that is to say, which, because they are incapable to damaging the foundations of our cognitive building, don't affect to our *perceptual judgments* in unbeatable circumstances or to our senses as a whole. I could doubt that the thing I'm pointing to is a bird, because I didn't check it, ruling out the possibility of an automaton which behaves like a bird and looks a bird. I don't know if I'm really the person I think I am because

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[5] AT VII, p. 18. CSM II, p. 12.
[6] *Ibídem.*

I never excluded the possibility of a mix-up at the hospital. I could doubt that the thing I see through the telescope is truly a planet, because the same data agree with alternative explanations: an artificial structure or a shallow surface. All these doubts make sense for a while (or under conditions fixed by a narrative), but after checking the bird, travelling to the planet or visiting the hospital for several DNA tests they are spurious. Moreover, since what is unknown is also uncheckable and owing to the fact that the first requirement which a reasonable doubt has to meet is to offer some conjectural explanation of how it is that we might erroneously believe the proposition which is being targeted by the argument we appeal to, it's of no avail to try to construct an *unmitigated skepticism* recurring to the abstract and indefinite possibility of checkable but unchecked defeaters (defeaters which we aren't aware of).[7] In short, these doubts are limited, that is, the procedure deployed for raising them is incapable of shattering beliefs which "*(also)* are derived from the senses –for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown."[8]

(b) In the second stage the Meditator entertains a global scenario, *the dream hypothesis*, which raises rational doubts over perceptual judgments in unbeatable circumstances and which overthrows our whole evidential and perceptual system. This scenario is weak (unlike empirical scenarios, it is not easy for it to be true), but, because its mere logical possibility is more than enough for justifying uncertainty and because deployment of evidences in order to overcome it is forbidden on pain of falling into the traps of circularity, infinite regress or arbitrary assumption, it is both *too close for comfort and irrefutable*. In other words, if this argument provides a reason for doubt the present experience (appealing to the impossibility for the subject of getting *sure signs* for distinguishing perceptions and dreams, that is, signs incapable of being replicated in dreaming: after all, there are coherent and vivid dreams), then, because if I may be dreaming now I may be dreaming at any time, it provides also a reason to doubt whatever experience we appeal to in order to rule out that possibility (for instance, I could be dreaming of pinching my ear or walloping my face as means to settle the question whether I'm fast sleep or awake). This notwithstanding, two remarks are apposite here: (i) Doubts regarding my body or the existence of the external world (beliefs

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[7] This is why the neo-pyrrhonian attempt to create a variety of skepticism as wide as the Cartesian one without recurring to global scenarios is a misfire. *Cfr*. Fogelin, R. J., *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*, Oxford University Press, Oxford / New York, 1994, pp. 192-204.

[8] AT VII, p. 18. CSM II, p. 13.

under the scope of the dream hypothesis) are remote, but *imaginable*; that is to say, we know what it would be like for those beliefs to be false (I can imagine a state of affairs where, keeping all the experiences I have, I'm a brain in a vat in Alpha Centaury or where I'm suffering all the deceptions we are familiar to after *The Matrix*). (ii) According to Descartes, this procedure has limits: arithmetical truths, logical laws and the very extant of my inner experiences (sensations, intentions and reflections), and whatever (in the last examples) could be their origins and their truth-values, are indubitable in spite of the dream hypothesis, that is, independently of the existence of a world beyond my mind. In Descartes' words: "For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false."[9]

(c) It seems quite impossible. But is it really impossible? In the last stage the Meditator finds a way to cast doubts over these *psychologically compulsive beliefs*: the possibility of an omnipotent demon whose task is deceiving him on the most evident matters, making him to believe that the deliverances of reason are true when in fact (because our minds are, under this hypothesis, unreliable instruments) they don't correspond with the world. Unfortunately, in this cognitive story this scenario plays the role of the "ugly duckling" and the interpreters are prone to turn aside with relief from what they consider a mere rhetorical device. After all, either because he endorsed a *psychological and subjective conception of proof* (unshakeable convictions like the *Cogito* are certain because unshakeable) or because he employed rational arguments for demonstrating the *Cogito* and God's existence without a qualm, Descartes himself (we are told) gave to this scenario little serious consideration. Critics only pay attention to this hypothesis in the proximity of the Cartesian Circle (since this scenario is still in operation at the beginning of the Third Meditation, Descartes cannot appeal to intuitions in order to demonstrate a God whose function is to back intuitions without begging the question), but even in this case their point is only procedural: the real drawback for the Cartesian proofs of God it is not that they are arguments, but that they are *bad arguments*. Anyway, this explains why epistemologists, from Moore to Sosa,[10] think that the Dream Argument is the "big game". A

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[9] AT VII, p. 20. CSM II, p. 14.
[10] *Cfr.* Moore, G. E., "Proof of an External World", in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers*, George Allen & Unwin LTD, London, 1959, pp. 127-150. *Cfr.* Sosa, E., "Dreams and Philosophy", in E. Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology. Apt Belief and reflective Knowledge, Volume I*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 1-21.

serious mistake, because this means that they weren't able to identify the *serious challenge* Descartes has committed himself to face.

After this point procedures are easily reconstructed. In the Second Meditation (corresponding to the second act of the play), the Meditator finds an Archimedian Point beyond the scope of the skeptical flooding: the *Cogito*. The rest of the writing (third act) is devoted to regain (with the only help of the First Certainty) those beliefs overthrown by the metaphysical doubts raised in the First Meditation, beliefs which, by the end of the work, are not only psychologically strong but philosophically warranted. The process looks like an *inverted image* of the Method of Doubt: from the foundations of judgment to the disputable parts of the cognitive building. First, and reflecting about the origins of his ideas, the Meditator comes to demonstrate the existence of a *benevolent God*,[11] capable to warrant our "clear and distinct" ideas and to justify the reliability of our reason (mathematical and formal truths are regained). In second place, the same resource is employed to prove the existence of the external world: because a God like Berkeley's, who produces coherent sets of ideas, would still be a deceiving (or, at least, a misleading) God, since those ideas do not correspond to external reality and we are strongly inclined to assent them, the benevolence of God is inconsistent with the Dream Hypothesis, and thus, perceptual judgments in unbeatable circumstances and the general belief in a external reality is warranted. Obviously, neither the world so-well regained corresponds exactly with the commonsense world (after all, we know by now that qualities are *subjective* and that the physical world is *colorless*) nor the empirical doubts are dismissed. But nothing important is missed: (in general) senses seem justified.

Nonetheless, something is fishy in this account. I recount some specially disquieting problems: (i) If Descartes thought that the Second Meditation did put his own existence beyond reasonable doubt, why does he explicitly mention (in a disconcerting passage at the beginning of the Third Meditation), among logical and arithmetical propositions which are still doubtable, a principle which has a direct bearing with the *Cogito* ("So long as I think that I am something, I am not nothing"), adding that, at this stage of the argument, the members of this set (including the *Cogito*) are doubtful?[12] (ii) Whether

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[11] In fact, God is not a deceiver because His benevolence, but for the sake of His omnipotence. Only a powerless being has to deceive in order to achieve his goals. This implies that the Demon Scenario is conceptually contradictory: a deceiver wouldn't have enough power to break the veracity of our rational beliefs.

[12] AT VII, p. 36. CSM II, p. 25.

he defended that the *Cogito* is certain because we cannot come to imagine what it would be like for it to be false or whether its invulnerability rests on the reliability of reason's deliverances, why didn't Descartes extend certainty to other compulsions (I cannot imagine what it would be like for two and three added together to be forty either) or to the principles of logic? (iii) Why didn't he mind his most radical (and novel) skeptical scenario? (iv) If the "big game" is the Dream Hypothesis, how did he make such a sketchy and patched job of rebuttal in two disconnected paragraphs at the very end of the Six Meditation?[13] Maybe *this* wasn't his main concern? (v) How to give account of the Circle's blunder, when Descartes was fully aware (from the first page) of the skeptical charge of *reciprocity*?[14] (vi) Finally, if we subscribed this narrative, what could we do of the Fifth Meditation, since it seems that the attempt to accommodate it to the strictures of this model is forlorn? Is it another blunder? Likely an extra piece of material, swiftly arranged, glued and botched?

There are too many questions and no answer. Let's start afresh.

3. The skeptical framework

Ancient skepticism played an essential role in the formation of Modern Thought. After the *editio princeps* of Cicero's philosophical works in 1471 (including *On Academic Scepticism*,[15] our best source concerning several varieties of skepticism which thrived under the shadow of the School founded by Plato) and the Latin translation of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*[16] published in 1562, radical skepticism became a powerful weapon in hands of those who tried to discredit natural reason in behalf of religion, faith and a complete confidence in Scripture. The writings of Pedro de Valencia, Francisco Sánchez, Michelle de Montaigne[17] and Pierre Charron are enough testimony to this trend.

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[13] AT VII, pp. 89-90. CSM II, pp. 61-62.

[14] AT VII, p. 2. CSM II, p. 3.

[15] *Cfr.* Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, in C. Brittain (ed.), *Cicero. On Academic Scepticism*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis / Cambridge, 2006.

[16] *Cfr.* Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, in J. Annas, J. Barnes (eds.), *Sextus Empiricus. Outlines of Scepticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005.

[17] "As for our participation in the knowledge of the truth, such as it is, it is not by our own powers that we have acquired it. God has taught us enough of that through the witnesses he has chosen among the common people, simple and ignorant, to instruct us in his admirable secrets: our faith is not our own acquisition, it is a pure gift of another's liberality. It is not by reasoning or by our intellect that we have received our religion, it is by external authority and commandment. The weakness of our judgment assists us rather than its strength, and our blindness, rather than our clear sight. It is through the mediation of our ignorance rather than of our knowledge that we are knowers of that divine knowledge." Montaigne, M., *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis / Cambridge, 2003, p. 61.

It would be preposterous even to try a thumbnail sketch of the motley collection of positions encompassed by the general concept of "skepticism" (positions which include therapeutic, hypothetic, externalist and substantive versions[18]), of the subtle strategies deployed by the skeptics in order to prove that the conditions established by Stoicism to define "knowledge" [we know that p if (i) p is true, (ii) it is caused by the fact which is its object in the relevant way, and (iii) it cannot be false, that is, we have conclusive reasons which rule out the possibility of believing that p while it is false] cannot be met, or of the skeptics' attempts to cope with the charge of being a self-refuting stance and to clarify how it is possible to live without assent. Owing to its special relevance to Descartes' understanding, I'll focus on a particular dimension of ancient skepticism: its *ethical goals* and the *rational pressure* it has to face because of them.

In contrast to Stoicism, which, so far as Nature is a rational, provident and necessary chain of correlated events, justifies our assent to whatever thing it could happen in our life (according to the Stoa, to wish something means to wish everything) and tries to reconcile the individual with his circumstances and to tighten the links between subject and world,[19] Skepticism attempts to cleave both realms, detaching the subject from the part he plays on the stage of the world. The Skeptic aspires to see his life from the perspective of the *spectator*, to play his role without personal or cognitive *commitments*, to repose in a "splendid isolation" which, at the price of hope, gets freedom, tranquility and peace of mind *(ataraxia)*. No more he is disturbed by the *compulsive drive to knowledge*. No more he is annoyed by the endless disputes among philosophical Schools. His sense of irony keeps him apart, approving (externally) everything without assenting (internally) to anything. With an exquisite organism too sensitive to pain, and unlike the Stoic, who overloads every event with a metaphysical meaning, the skeptic minimizes pain *avoiding metaphysical emphasis* (including what we could call "commonsense metaphysics"). Nonetheless, this attitude of detachment unmistakable for any form of *mystical or nihilistic exile*, needs to be warranted, moreover, the skeptic has to cope successfully with the suspicion of *wishful thinking* and *arbitrariness*. In other words, in order to be ethically comfortable, Skepticism has to be a *permanent stance*. This is why the skeptic, trying to secure his position, turns to the (modally strong) thesis of *akatalepsia*: it's not enough to state that just now we don't know

[18] *Cfr.* Brittain, C., *Philo of Larissa. The Last of the Academic Sceptics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 1-37.

[19] *Cfr.* Bevan, E., *Stoics and Sceptics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1913, pp. 13-44.

a thing, it must be demonstrated that we *cannot* know (and, of course, that we know that we cannot know).

Unfortunately, this requirement couldn't be met without abandoning the *unlimited suspension of assent (epoché)* which was associated with earlier versions of this position and which, because it also applied to *akatalepsia*, made sense of the self-description of Skepticism as a *dialectical and parasitical* attitude (and then, not as a doctrine among others). This problem was faced by Philo of Larissa, who, weakening the notion of *epoché* (we must withhold assent on disputable matters, but not regarding uncertain propositions) and introducing *akatalepsia* as a *defensible and probable hypothesis*, attempted to avoid the charge of "negative dogmatism" without relinquishing the ethical commitments of Skepticism. However, and because it could be extended to warrant reasonable assent to information from the senses and it entailed a remainder of *faith* and *arbitrariness* (after all, since we don't have conclusive reasons for *akatalepsia*, we are not compelled to assent to it), this conciliatory position was a total failure. The Skeptic had to bite the bullet: the scope of *epoché* couldn't be unlimited. Beyond its bounds the substantive thesis that knowledge is impossible remains.

Another defeat was waiting for the skeptic, but one of portentous consequences. In order to demonstrate that nothing can be known, the skeptic had to rely on the capacity of reason for raising *insurmountable scenarios* which, providing conclusive reasons to doubt in any occasion, question (for ever) that our minds are reliable instruments for the detection of truth. Nevertheless, these very scenarios also *question the reliability of reason for raising them*, and thus, they *cast doubts over themselves*: instead of *akatalepsia*, we receive its mere *possibility*.[20] This conclusion is deadly for the ethical pretensions of Skepticism, but it is of no avail for dogmatic philosophers: the possibility of a possibility (its shadow, I would like to say) is enough for a *rational nullification of reason*. As a matter of fact, the situation thus generated is much worse than a secure Skepticism: we can rest neither in the certainty that nothing is certain nor in substantive certainties.

This is exactly the framework described by Descartes when he wrote: "It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top."[21]

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[20] One could try to stop an implicit *regress to infinity* saying that reason proves that it is true that it is possible *akatalepsia*, but we must remind that this very truth is only a *possible* truth.

[21] AT VII, p. 24. CSM II, p. 16.

4. Reliabilism without circularity

At any rate, we have identified Descartes' target and the conditions to solving this conundrum. Descartes will counter the Skeptic by showing that the most rigorous use of reason does not lead to the conclusion that reason is unreliable, but leads, rather, to the conclusion that reason is reliable. If reason is capable of demonstrating God, the scenarios raised by the Skeptic, irreconcilable with this fact, are not even what they seem to be: *logical possibilities*. And nothing in this procedure smells of circularity: like the Skeptic, who uses (conditionally) reason for defeating reason, Descartes uses it without presupposing its reliability. A doubt must be grounded for counting as a doubt (that is, it has to compel our assent). Therefore, there is nothing wrong in deploying reasons which show that Skepticism is *groundless*.

Obviously, in this narrative the *Cogito* doesn't play any role: it is not something which, since it is equal in respect to rational force to the skeptical scenarios, we could keep *in spite of* doubt. This, in so far as the probative force of "God exists" is also equivalent to the assent we provide to the Demon Hypothesis, sounds funny. But we must remind that there is a *deep asymmetry* between the *Cogito* and God, an asymmetry in their *consequences*. While after the *Cogito* the Skeptic could (coherently) point to the Demon Scenario for balancing judgments, he couldn't do the same after the demonstration of God, since *at that stage* this option is not a possibility. In other words, unlike the case of the *Cogito*, where the Skeptic can give his assent both to the *Cogito* argument and to the skeptical possibility, he cannot assent to the demonstration of God without rejecting his previous arguments. This is the reason why if the proofs of God are (hypothetically) valid they are (from an absolute point of view) correct, why if they are *assent-compelling* they are automatically *valid*.

In short, Descartes would hold that even the proposition "I exist" is fully certain only if the rest of the argument of the *Meditations* goes through. We must buy all or nothing, that is, *God or nothing*.

Finally, I want to summarize the most relevant traits of my reading.

In Descartes' *Meditations* there are *three kinds of beliefs* which require *three different forms of doubt*: (i) Doubts regarding *empirical propositions* are imaginable, easily produced and removed and seriously considered by the individual who, doubting that p, actually vacillates between affirmation and denial, incapable of believing *while doubting*. (ii) Doubts regarding *a belief which we are strongly inclined to affirm but whose falsehood is imaginable* are different in nature. In such a case, reasons for doubt are *too remote*, and thus, because we don't take them seriously

enough, it is possible to conciliate our belief that *p* and the fact that we have doubts about *p*: we believe with reservations that *p*. Anyway, because the Will is not forced by the understanding to affirm these propositions, they are not compulsions. This is the place reserved by Descartes for particular perceptual propositions stated in unbeatable circumstances and for beliefs concerning the existence of the external world, beliefs which only might be false *under global hypotheses as the dream scenario*. (iii) Finally, *intuitions* (including the *Cogito*), that is, simple and evident truths whose falsehood is inconceivable and which are identified by our common incapacity to have *object-level doubts* concerning them, cannot be coherently denied, questioned or doubted.

Obviously, because Descartes' objective is to *justify* our reliance on rational intuitions; to demonstrate that our rational minds are reliable instruments for the detection of truth; that *reason is capable of self-validation* without appealing (with vicious circularity) to our reliance on reason's deliverances; or, in other words, because Descartes' main question is: *can we rely on our intuitions?*; he manages to show that, since such strong beliefs as the *Cogito* are members of a *class*, the general overthrow and justification of our cognitive capacities and the intuitions yielded by them makes sense without having to reject what seems obviously true: that we are unable to imagine a doubt concerning them.

In this respect, Descartes raises *meta-level doubts* asking if our compulsions *could be false* to God or to an angel, that is to say, if they might be, absolutely speaking, from the perspective of a pure enquirer or from the point of view from nowhere, false.[22] These theoretical doubts are enough *to questioning the epistemic authority of intuitions without compromising their psychological power*. They explain the epistemological importance of the Evil Demon hypothesis (a mere opinion concerning the possibility of a omnipotent deceiver capable to producing a *poorly designed instrument* for the detection of truth, namely, the human reason); the role played by the demon's advocate (a fictional character who, sane, shares our intuitions without sharing our unwarranted intellectual reliance on them[23]) in the

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[22] An analogous distinction can be found in *On Certainty*, the last collection of remarks written by Wittgenstein. Concerning hinge-propositions, that is, propositions which we cannot help to believe, he wrote: "What is odd is that in such a case I always feel like saying (although it is wrong): "I know that—so far as one can know such a thing." That is incorrect, but something right is hidden behind it." Wittgenstein, L., *On Certainty*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004, § 623.

[23] *Cfr.* Rubin, R., *Silencing the Demon's Advocate. The Strategy of Descartes'* Meditations, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2008, pp. 38-44.

strategy of Descartes' *Meditations*; and the reliabilist procedures which Descartes, unable to add support to his intuitions and forced to try to subtract grounds for doubting them, has to apply in order to rule out an as *remote* as *epistemologically relevant* scenario.

In fact, anticipating contemporary *reliabilism*, Descartes *replaces the center of epistemology*. There is a way of overcoming skepticism without a vicious circle. Instead of validating our rational power before using it, we might *take conditionally for granted* the results yielded by that faculty, and if *it is capable of validating itself*, that is to say, if following reason we come to demonstrate a *theory on how things in fact are in the world which precludes the unreliability of one's faculties*, then, because *reason is capable of providing its rational validation*, skepticism would be overcome.[24] The important thing is to have a *world view* capable of providing an explanatory account of how we acquire our beliefs and a *metaphysical or ontological warrant* of them (this role is played in Descartes's philosophy by the omnipotent God whose veracity guarantees knowledge, but, so far as this research goes, it might be played by the rational God-Nature which, according to Spinoza, backs both our reason and our perceptions). In any case, because the *mere opinions* which made general skepticism reasonable before reason's self-validation *would be irrational from this enlightened perspective*, global scenarios would be cognitively *defective* and irrelevant. The significance of global scenarios is *context-dependent*, which means that, once raised the epistemic bet, their effectiveness cannot be taken for granted.[25]

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[24] Ernest Sosa explicitly recognizes his debt to Cartesian procedures, pointing to a "Cartesian key to the resolution of fundamental problems of epistemology" (Sosa, E., *Reflective Knowledge. Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Volume II*, Oxford University Press, Oxford / New York, 2009, p. 177), and providing a keen description (which also is a self-description) of his general strategy. He writes:

"Since Descartes wants not just reliable, truth-conductive *cognitio*, since he wants the enlightened attainment of reflective *scientia*, he needs a defense against skeptical doubts that target his intellectual faculties, not only his faculties of perception, memory, and introspection, but even his faculty of intuitive reason, by which he might know that $3 + 2 = 5$, that if he thinks then he exists, and the like. He thinks he can defend against such doubts only by coherence-inducing theological reasoning yielding an epistemic perspective on himself and his world, through which he might confidently trust his faculties. And these faculties must include those employed in arriving, via a priori theological reasoning, at his perspective on himself and his world, the perspective that enables confidence in the reliability of those very faculties. (…) Certain stages of the Cartesian project, seemingly incoherent at first blush, are defensibly coherent in the end." Sosa, E., *Reflective Knowledge. Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Volume II*, ed. cit., p. 141.

[25] In his Replies to the Seventh Set of Objections, written by Father Bourdin, Descartes

6. Conclusion

One last point: if, as I said in the Introduction, Descartes' attempt of validating reason ends in a failure, why to make such a fuss of nothing?

For, at least, three reasons: (i) He (like no one else, as far as I'm aware) was capable to understand what was *at stake* in the controversy with Skepticism and to fix the *conditions* which must be met for coping successfully with the skeptical challenge. If this is not a real *breakthrough* in epistemology, I don't know what could count as one. (ii) He bestowed on us a *novel conception of proof* (where something is proved if it compels assent whenever considered and it is such that we don´t have valid grounds for doubting it), a conception which (unlike traditional notions of proof) can be coherently applied to *norms* and *first principles* and which, so far as it doesn't implied that what is proved is the conclusion of an argument with premises, avoids the charges of infinite regress, circularity and hypothesis. (iii) He stated a novel conception of *modal logic*, one according to which neither the *logical space* is given in advance nor what is possible can be determined independently of the actual state of affairs (at least, not independently of the existence or nonexistence of God). By the way, this is why the ontological proof (which takes the logical space for granted) cannot be used to rule out the possibility of the Demon[26] and it has to wait after the validation of reason to be deployed.

Obviously, someone could ask why to waste our time in quixotic epistemological enterprises. My answers are: because we want to make

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says: "It should be noted that throughout he *(Bourdin)* treats doubt and certainty not as relations of our thought to objects, but as properties of the objects which inhere in them for all time. This means that if we have once realized that something is doubtful, it can never be rendered certain. But we should attribute all this to his good nature, and not to malice." AT VII, p. 473. CSM II, pp. 318-319.

The preceding quotation illustrates the thesis that, according to Descartes, the validity of a ground of doubt is *contextual*, that it varies depending on the epistemic context.

[26] The main difference between the proofs provided in the Third Meditation and the ontological proof is that, unlike the former, the last requires the impossibility of the Demon as a *premise of the argument*, something that at this stage cannot be taken for granted. The ontological proof shows that *if God is possible He has to exist*, but in order to demonstrate that He is really possible, and since the possibility of the Demon is irreconcilable with the possibility of God, it has to prove in advance that the Demon scenario is impossible, something which, *by hypothesis*, is forbidden. However, the other proofs share a *common and neutral ground* with the skeptic: a *conditional* use of reason. In other words, like in the case of the Skeptic who uses reason as a ladder for reaching scenarios which question the reliability of reason, nothing is wrong in deploying reason for refuting those scenarios in so far as those arguments work without taking notice of their (still possible) unreliability.

sense of our life and because, even if we cannot get knowledge and sense, we gain some valuable gifts: freedom, lucidity, distance and moderation. In a humorless and rushing world, the moral attitude of a gentleman is as excellent as rare. I prefer to be awake in doubts than to dream as a monster.