



## Critiquing Cartesian Rationalism

Miguel de Unamuno

The defect of Descartes' *Discourse of Method* lies not in the antecedent methodical doubt; not in his beginning by resolving to doubt everything, a merely intellectual device; but in his resolution to begin by emptying himself of himself, of Descartes, of the real man, the man of flesh and bone, the man who does not want to die, in order that he might be a mere thinker—that is, an abstraction. But the real man returned and thrust himself into the philosophy.

“*Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée.*” Thus begins the *Discourse of Method*, and this good sense saved him. He continues talking about himself, about the man Descartes, telling us among other things that he greatly esteemed eloquence and loved poetry; that he delighted above all in mathematics because of the evidence and certainty of its reasons, and that he revered our theology and claimed as much as any to attain to heaven—*et prétendais autant qu'aucun autre à gagner le ciel*. And this pretension—a very laudable one, I think, and above all very natural—was what prevented him from deducing all the consequences of his methodical doubt. The man Descartes claimed, as much as any other, to attain to heaven, “but having learned as a thing very sure that the way to it is not less open to the most ignorant than to the most learned, and that the revealed truths which lead thither are beyond our intelligence, I did not dare submit them to my feeble reasonings, and I thought that to undertake to examine them and to succeed therein, I should want some extraordinary help from heaven and need to be more than man.” And here we have the man. Here we have the man who “did not feel obliged, thank God, to make a profession (*métier*) of science in order to increase his means, and who did not pretend to play the cynic and despise glory.” And afterwards he tells us how he was compelled to make a sojourn in Germany, and there, shut up in a stove (*poêle*) he began to philosophize his method. But in Germany, shut up in a stove! And such his discourse is, a stove-discourse, and the stove a German one, although the philosopher shut up in it was a Frenchman who proposed to himself to attain to heaven.

And he arrives at the *cogito ergo sum*, which St. Augustine had already anticipated; but the *ego* implicit in this enthymeme, *ego cogito, ergo ergo sum*, is an unreal—that is, an ideal—*ego* or I, and its *sum*, its existence, something unreal also. “I think, therefore I am,” can only mean “I think, therefore I am a thinker”; this being of the “I am,” which is deduced from “I think,” is merely a knowing; this being is knowledge, but not life. And the primary reality is not that I think, but that I live, for those also live who do not think. Although this living may not be a real living. God! what contradictions when we seek to join in wedlock life and reason!

The truth is *sum, ergo cogito*—I am, therefore I think, although not everything that is thinks. Is not consciousness of thinking above all consciousness of being? Is pure thought possible, without consciousness of self, without personality? Can there exist pure knowledge without feeling, without that species of materiality which feeling lends to it? Do we not perhaps feel thought, and do we not feel ourselves in the act of knowing and willing? Could not the man in the stove have said: “I feel, therefore I am”? or “I will, therefore I am”? And to feel oneself, is it not perhaps to feel oneself imperishable? To will oneself, is it not to wish oneself eternal—that is to

say, not to wish to die? What the sorrowful Jew of Amsterdam called the essence of the thing, the effort that it makes to persist indefinitely in its own being, self-love, the longing for immortality, is it not perhaps the primal and fundamental condition of all reflective or human knowledge? And is it not therefore the true base, the real starting-point, of all philosophy, although the philosophers, perverted by intellectualism, may not recognize it?

And, moreover, it was the *cogito* that introduced a distinction which, although fruitful of truths, has been fruitful also of confusions, and this distinction is that between object, *cogito*, and subject, *sum*. There is scarcely any distinction that does not also lead to confusion. But we will return to this later.

For the present let us remain keenly suspecting that the longing not to die, the hunger for personal immortality, the effort whereby we tend to persist indefinitely in our own being, which is, according to the tragic Jew, our very essence, that this is the affective basis of all knowledge and the personal inward starting-point of all human philosophy, wrought by a man and for men. And we shall see how the solution of this inward affective problem, a solution which may be but the despairing renunciation of the attempt at a solution, is that which colours all the rest of philosophy. Underlying even the so-called problem of knowledge there is simply this human feeling, just as underlying the enquiry into the “why,” the cause, there is simply the search for the “wherefore,” the end. All the rest is either to deceive oneself or to wish to deceive others; and to wish to deceive others in order to deceive oneself.

And this personal and affective starting-point of all philosophy and all religion is the tragic sense of life. Let us now proceed to consider this.

We have seen that the vital longing for human immortality finds no consolation in reason and that reason leaves us without incentive or consolation in life and life itself without real finality. But here, in the depths of the abyss, the despair of the heart and of the will and the scepticism of reason meet face to face and embrace like brothers. And we shall see it is from this embrace, a tragic—that is to say, an intimately loving—embrace, that the wellspring of life will flow, a life serious and terrible. Scepticism, uncertainty—the position to which reason, by practising its analysis upon itself, upon its own validity, at last arrives—is the foundation upon which the heart’s despair must build up its hope.

Disillusioned, we had to abandon the position of those who seek to give consolation the force of rational and logical truth, pretending to prove the rationality, or at any rate the non-irrationality, of consolation; and we had to abandon likewise the position of those who seek to give rational truth the force of consolation and of a motive for life. Neither the one nor the other of these positions satisfied us. The one is at variance with our reason, the other with our feeling. These two powers can never conclude peace and we must needs live by their war. We must make of this war, of war itself, the very condition of our spiritual life.

Neither does this high debate admit of that indecent and repugnant expedient which the more or less parliamentary type of politician has devised and dubbed “a formula of agreement,” the property of which is to render it impossible for either side to claim to be victorious. There is no place here for a time-serving compromise. Perhaps a degenerate and cowardly reason might bring itself to propose some such formula of agreement, for in truth reason lives by formulas; but life, which cannot be formulated, life which lives and seeks to live for ever, does not submit to formulas. Its sole formula is: all or nothing. Feeling does not compound its differences with middle terms.

*Initium sapientiae timor Domini*, it is said, meaning perhaps *timor mortis*, or it may be, *timor vitae*, which is the same thing. Always it comes about that the beginning of wisdom is a fear.

Is it true to say of this saving scepticism which I am now going to discuss, that it is doubt?

It is doubt, yes, but it is much more than doubt. Doubt is commonly something very cold, of very little vitalizing force, and above all something rather artificial, especially since Descartes degraded it to the function of a method. The conflict between reason and life is something more than a doubt. For doubt is easily resolved into a comic element.

The methodical doubt of Descartes is a comic doubt, a doubt purely theoretical and provisional—that is to say, the doubt of a man who acts as if he doubted without really doubting. And because it was a stove-excogitated doubt, the man who deduced that he existed from the fact that he thought did not approve of “those turbulent (*brouillonnes*) and restless persons who, being called neither by birth nor by fortune to the management of public affairs, are perpetually devising some new reformation,” and he was pained by the suspicion that there might be something of this kind in his own writings. No, he, Descartes, proposed only to “reform his own thoughts and to build upon ground that was wholly his.” And he resolved not to accept anything as true when he did not recognize it clearly to be so, and to make a clean sweep of all prejudices and received ideas, to the end that he might construct his intellectual habitation anew. But “as it is not enough, before beginning to rebuild one’s dwelling-house, to pull it down and to furnish materials and architects, or to study architecture oneself ... but it is also necessary to be provided with some other wherein to lodge conveniently while the work is in progress,” he framed for himself a provisional ethic—*une morale de provision*—the first law of which was to observe the customs of his country and to keep always to the religion in which, by the grace of God, he had been instructed from his infancy, governing himself in all things according to the most moderate opinions. Yes, exactly, a provisional religion and even a provisional God! And he chose the most moderate opinions “because these are always the most convenient for practice.” But it is best to proceed no further.

This methodical or theoretical Cartesian doubt, this philosophical doubt excogitated in a stove, is not the doubt, is not the scepticism, is not the incertitude, that I am talking about here. No! This other doubt is a passionate doubt, it is the eternal conflict between reason and feeling, science and life, logic and biotic. For science destroys the concept of personality by reducing it to a complex in continual flux from moment to moment—that is to say, it destroys the very foundation of the spiritual and emotional life, which ranges itself unyieldingly against reason.

And this doubt cannot avail itself of any provisional ethic, but has to found its ethic, as we shall see, on the conflict itself, an ethic of battle, and itself has to serve as the foundation of religion. And it inhabits a house which is continually being demolished and which continually it has to rebuild. Without ceasing the will, I mean the will never to die, the spirit of unsubmitiveness to death, labours to build up the house of life, and without ceasing the keen blasts and stormy assaults of reason beat it down.

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