

DESCARTES AND MONTAIGNE ON DIVINE POWER AND HUMAN REASON¹

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GATTO, A.: Descartes and Montaigne on Divine Power and Human Reason
FILOZOFIA, 76, 2021, No 2, pp. 137 – 150

This article aims to analyze the philosophical relationship between Descartes and Montaigne on divine power and human reason. Within Cartesian historiography, a relationship was usually established between Descartes and Montaigne to cast more light on the originality of the approach that Descartes introduced to the philosophical scene. On the contrary, the main goal of this article is to show how Descartes' theory of eternal truths positively incorporated and preserved some aspects of Montaigne's reflection on divine power. Were this the case, the historiographical interpretation that tends to establish a link between the two authors in order to separate Descartes from Montaigne would at least need to be integrated. This does not mean denying the originality of Cartesian approach, but more broadly defining the context in which Descartes voices his opinion.

Keywords: Montaigne – Descartes – History of early modern philosophy – Divine power – Human reason

I. Descartes and Montaigne: a different perspective

The relationship between René Descartes and Michel de Montaigne has been the subject of a considerable number of studies. Starting from the commentary on the *Discourse on Method* by Étienne Gilson,² many scholars have sought to find traces of the influence exercised by Montaigne in the Cartesian text.³ Gilson underlined the implicit presence of Montaigne's reflection in the *Discourse* and the debts owed by Descartes to the sceptical tradition. Léon Brunschvicg, furthermore, was convinced that the bond between the two authors was so clear that Descartes' contemporaries would immediately grasp the connection with Montaigne without having to openly make it explicit.⁴ The approach of Gilson and Brunschvicg was further pursued by Richard

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous referees who gave me valuable feedbacks.

² Gilson (1925).

³ There is still the notable exception of Baudry (2017), who denied any direct influence of Montaigne on Descartes. We move in the opposite direction, following on the heels of the approach defended by Kambouchner (2018).

⁴ Brunschvicg (1942, 115).

Popkin in his history of scepticism. As he had it, Descartes was to have taken Montaigne's Pyrrhonian scepticism to its extreme so as to be able to more effectively put it to flight.⁵

Following Popkin's tack, two issues (among many others) have often been at the centre of the work of sifting through the texts to gauge the relationship between Descartes and Montaigne: on one hand, the difference between human beings and animals; on the other, the sceptical arguments used to question a pre-philosophical approach to the world and knowledge. As far as the first aspect is concerned,⁶ it was Descartes himself who suggested the possibility of comparing his position on the matter of animals with that of Montaigne. Although Montaigne's name does not appear in any of the works published by Descartes, he refers to the author of the *Essays* in a letter sent to the Marquess of Newcastle on 23 November 1646.⁷ The letter came almost ten years after the publication of the *Discourse on Method* (1637); nevertheless, its contents strongly suggest that the position on animals upheld by Montaigne in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond* provided a *critical* accompaniment to the drafting of the fifth part of the *Discourse*.

Similar reasoning can be formulated with regard to Cartesian scepticism. What Geneviève Rodis-Lewis described as the "*machine de guerre*"⁸ of Cartesian doubt was thought to have drawn all its strength from the radicalization of many topics belonging to the sceptical tradition of the time. The main difference lies, however, in the presuppositions and goals of the two approaches. While Montaigne's scepticism strives to make us recognize the ignorance innate in human nature in order to affirm the fragile essence of human beings, Descartes uses sceptical tools in order to overturn scepticism. The keen dialogue that Descartes weaves with scepticism, and with Montaigne's *Apology* in particular, is therefore deemed to aim to throw out all the implications linked to that current of thought once and for all. Furthermore, the heuristic nature of Cartesian doubt led him to formulate a truly hyperbolic *dubitatio* that was much more radical than that of the sceptical tradition of the time.⁹

The fact that Montaigne and Descartes drew up different positions on the relationship between humans and animals, and that Descartes' methodological scepticism cannot be equalled to the scepticism presented in the *Apology*, has resulted in a good part of Cartesian historiographers comparing the two authors in order to separate them

⁵ Popkin (2003, 148).

⁶ Gontier (1998).

⁷ See AT IV, 569 – 576; PWD 3, 302 – 304.

⁸ Rodis-Lewis (1971, 227).

⁹ Paganini (2008, 229 – 348); Spallanzani (2013); Moriarty (2016).

better. In other words, a relationship was established between Descartes and Montaigne to cast more light on the originality of Cartesian approach. I set a different goal in this article: I want to present a comparison between Montaigne and Descartes which takes their respective reflections on divine omnipotence as the term of comparison in order to bring them closer, namely, to establish a line of continuity between the two authors.

When discussing the notion of divine omnipotence in Descartes, it is impossible not to refer to his theory on the free creation of eternal truths. In this connection, a large part of scholars have concentrated either on the authors criticized by Descartes' doctrine, to then make a comparison between his *nouvelle idée de Dieu*¹⁰ and the approach defended by Second Scholasticism,¹¹ or on the critical reception of the doctrine in order to assess the consequences at the epistemic level.¹² Save some exceptions, linked above all to the search for neo-Platonic and Renaissance origins,¹³ few studies have sought to identify a possible *positive* point of reference for the theory.

Hence, in the endeavour to integrate the studies already published on the matter,¹⁴ I want to undertake a comparison between Descartes and Montaigne in order to assess whether the Cartesian doctrine of eternal truths bears a trace of the arguments presented by Montaigne in his *Apology*. Naturally, it is not my aim to establish whether Montaigne had already presented the Cartesian theory on eternal truths; my goal is instead to verify if Descartes' theory *positively* incorporated some aspects of Montaigne's reflection on divine omnipotence. Were this the case, the classical historiographical interpretation that tends to establish a link between the two authors in order to confirm Descartes' instrumental approach towards Montaigne – in reality, to separate Descartes from Montaigne – would at least need to be integrated. Hence, I will analyse the works of the two authors so as to provide some textual examples supporting my interpretation.

II. Descartes and the created nature of the eternal truths

While taking his distance from the approach defended by Second Scholasticism, Descartes affirms in his letter to Mersenne on 15 April 1630 that the truths of mathematics were established by God and depend on him, like any other creature: "Indeed to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn

¹⁰ Gilson (1984, 224 – 233).

¹¹ Among others, Gilson (1913); Cronin (1966); Marion (1981) and Wells (1981).

¹² Among others, Schmaltz (2002); Nadler (2008) and Easton (2009).

¹³ Faye (1999); Gontier (2005); Gress (2012, 287 – 294 and 323 – 329).

¹⁴ Curley (1978, 38 – 39 and 68 – 69); Carraud (2004); Marion (2008, 109 – 110 and 171); Bouchilloux (2009). Curley and Marion restrict themselves to hinting at the proximity between Montaigne and Descartes on divine omnipotence without investigating it further.

and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates [*Destinées*]” (AT I, 145; PWD 3, 23). As we will see, Descartes does not randomly make reference to the *Destinées*. Once created, the eternal truths are inborn in our minds and the basis of our knowledge; “the greatness of God”, on the contrary, seems to escape the intellectual grasp of our reason. In this letter, the main attribute that characterizes Cartesian analysis is incomprehensibility: divine power is considered “beyond our grasp”. The English translation does not render the original text to the letter, which would, instead, play a decisive role in the comparison with Montaigne. In Descartes’ words, the power of God “*est incompréhensible*”, “it is incomprehensible”. Hence, if “we can assert that God can do everything that is within our grasp [*tout ce que nous pouvons comprendre*]”, we cannot assert “that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp [*qu’il ne peut pas faire ce que nous ne pouvons pas comprendre*]. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power” (AT I, 146; PWD 3, 23). There is a gap between what of divine power we can “grasp” and what divine power can effectively do.

In a subsequent letter, sent to Mersenne on 27 May 1630, Descartes provides further specifications. He claims that God creates eternal truths as an efficient cause and introduces an important distinction between “know[ing] something” and “grasp[ing] something” (AT I, 152; PWD 3, 25). In this connection, Descartes asserts that he knows that God is the author of everything and that, since these truths are something, they have been created by God; nevertheless, “I say that I know this [*je le sais*], not that I conceive it or grasp it [*je le comprends*]” (AT I, 152; PWD, 25). Just as we can touch a mountain with our hands but cannot put our arms around it as we would with a tree, we can know that God exists but cannot grasp or comprehend His nature. The premises of Descartes’ discourse are metaphysical, that is, the result of purely rational investigation. So, even if we cannot comprehend God as a whole through reason alone, we can nevertheless draw conclusions in light of what we know. In this specific case, the omnipotence of God enables us to assert that God “was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal – just as free as he was not to create the world” (AT I, 152; PWD 3, 25). According to Descartes, in order to preserve both His omnipotence and incomprehensibility, no distinctions must be made between the divine intellect and will, and the act of creation: “In God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually [*ne quidem ratione*]” (AT I, 153; PWD 3, 25 – 26).

Descartes would begin to develop this aspect of theory in his *Fifth* and *Sixth Replies*. In particular in the *Sixth Replies*, Descartes introduces another divine attribute – indifference – and upholds that “the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence” (AT VII, 432; PWD 2, 292). At the moment of creation, the divine will was wholly indifferent: there was no logical, metaphysical

or moral priority present in His intellect that drove God to create this world and these laws rather than another world and other laws. Besides, if God were not indifferent, He would not really be omnipotent, because His creative action would somehow have suffered from the existence of an idea, a truth, an inclination destined to bind and hence limit His action. Hence, God does not create the world on the basis of a logical and metaphysical model, or by following His moral nature; the logical, metaphysical and moral models become intelligible in the light of an indifferent creation. Creation has then no reason, because the very notion of *ratio* depends on the indifferent omnipotence of God. At the same time, the fact that the eternal truths have been freely created and did not exist *ab origine* in the mind of the creator, denies human beings a tool to approach the nature of God.

In a later passage of the *Sixth Replies*, Descartes returns to the same problem: if everything depends on the omnipotence of God, He will be the efficient cause of “all order, every law, and every reason for anything’s being true or good [*rationem veri et boni*]”. Given that the eternal truths “would not be truths if God had not so established” (AT II, 138; PWD 3, 103), if God had wanted, He could have created some truths in contradiction with what we currently consider true. For example, He could have made it so that four times two did not come to eight. We cannot comprehend how it would have been possible, but that does not entitle us to rule it out and restrict the scope of divine omnipotence. We must simply limit ourselves to acknowledging it (AT VII; 436; PWD 2, 294).

It is Descartes’ priority to prevent the human impossibility of conceiving of something from being used as the criterion to decide what would have been impossible for God. In a letter from 2 May 1644, Descartes explains to Mesland why we cannot rule out that, in his indifference, God could have made it so that the three angles of a triangle did not equal two right angles or that He could have made a contradiction:

It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible (AT IV, 118; PWD 3, 235).

This consideration produces two consequences. First of all, if the power of God is not limited by anything, neither has it been limited by what we consider impossible; as a consequence, God could have acted differently. Second, given that our mind is finite and defined by what has been created, we cannot comprehend how that could

have been possible; we must simply accept that God could have acted in a different way. It is undeniable that the principle of non-contradiction is a necessary truth, but this does not imply that God was necessitated to create it, giving it the properties that we acknowledge of it. As Descartes specifies, “even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it” (AT IV, 118 – 119; PWD 3, 235). God decided what to make true (and therefore conceivable) and good (and hence desirable). Nevertheless, this does not mean that these notions – now necessary – were necessarily willed. Therefore, we cannot uphold that God would not have been able to create what we now consider contradictory. Of course, we cannot conceive of it, but not ruling out this incomprehensible possibility is sufficient for us to preserve a correct notion of divine omnipotence.

At this point, I can sum up the salient features of the theory, while concentrating on those aspects that shortly we will find again in Montaigne’s *Apology*. 1) Descartes’ God is not Jupiter, a pagan divinity subject to Destiny, but an omnipotent Creator who is the efficient cause of all eternal truths. 2) Divine omnipotence creates eternal truths from an act of indifference. The eternal truths are not the reasons for creation, but they exist and are necessary because of creation. 3) The created nature of the eternal truths rules out human access to the divine essence. While we can know that God exists, we cannot comprehend His nature: divine power is incomprehensible. 4) God was able to create everything that humans can conceive of; nevertheless, this does not imply that he was not able to create what humans now cannot conceive of. The limits of human knowledge are not the measure by which to judge the range of action of God’s omnipotence.

III. Montaigne and divine incomprehensibility

Descartes’ theory is perhaps the most radical analysis on the implications of divine omnipotence that had been made hitherto. Nevertheless, this does not mean that he had not used an existent mode of interpretation which he then reformulated in order to present his own personal point of view. As indicated in section I, I believe that Descartes incorporated some premises taken from the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*.

The *Apology* is a defence of the *Theologia naturalis* by Raymond Sebond published in 1487. Montaigne’s explicit objective is to respond to the objections levelled against the work by the Catalan theologian. One of the problematic issues highlighted concerned the intrinsic weakness of the theories supported by Sebond. In his apology, Montaigne does not dwell so much on Sebond’s opinions as on the legitimacy of being able to criticize them using the authority of reason alone. Montaigne’s goal is

to crush and trample underfoot human arrogance and pride; to make them feel the inanity, the vanity and nothingness, of man; to wrest from their hands the puny weapons of their reason; to make them bow their heads and bite the ground beneath the authority and reverence of divine majesty [A] (CEM, 327).

This quotation contains Montaigne's project in a nutshell: on one hand, the desire to reduce human claims and the arrogance characterizing these claims; on the other, to do so while referring, among other things, to divine power.

The argument in the first section of the *Apology* concentrates on the question of animals, in particular the prejudice that considers human beings superior to the animal kingdom. According to Montaigne, the superiority established by human beings over animals is not dictated by true reasoning but is simply the fruit of human arrogance. By themselves, that is, without the contribution of the Revelation, human beings have no right to claim any privilege over other creatures. The incompatibility between these reflections and Descartes' approach jumps out at us. Nevertheless, Montaigne's analysis does not stop here, but indicates other reasons for circumscribing and limiting what human reason claims to be true.

The part of the *Apology* we are most interested in is the central one, in which the critique of reason results in fideism as the only 'reasonable' outcome of the investigation. Montaigne has it that "the plague of man is the opinion of knowledge. That is why ignorance is so recommended by our religion as a quality suitable to belief and obedience [A]" (CEM, 360). And even if ignorance were not recommended, it should nevertheless be the outcome of every attempt to really know the Creator. In effect, "our powers are so far from conceiving the sublimity of God, that of the works of our creator those bear his stamp most clearly, and are most his, that we understand least [A]" (CEM, 368). The words that we use to describe God cannot properly capture the divine essence. Since they are nevertheless the only words available to us, we should be aware that we cannot encapsulate the nature of God in our discourses to then go on to judge it. In this connection, we can speak of 'power', 'truth' and 'justice' and refer these concepts to God, but it is "something we neither see nor conceive at all [*nous ne la voyons aucunement, ni ne la concevons*] [A]" (CEM, 369).

Here we find part of the vocabulary that we came across in Descartes: we cannot "conceive" [*concevoir*], "grasp" [*comprendre*] or "understand" [*entendre*] the divine essence nor pinpoint a trace of His nature in the world or in our reasonings. There is an immense difference between God and his creatures, a distance that prevents human

beings from obtaining full possession or a true image of their Creator. The premises for this reasoning are clarified in a subsequent passage of primary importance:

For what is there, for example, more vain than to try to divine God by our analogies and conjectures, to regulate him and the world by our capacity and our laws, and to use at the expense of the Deity this little shred of ability that he was pleased to allot to our natural condition? [...] Of all the ancient human opinions concerning religion, that one, it seems to me, was most probable and most excusable which recognized God as an incomprehensible power [*Dieu comme une puissance incompréhensible*], origin and preserver of all things [A] (CEM, 380).

We find two elements that allow us to establish a fully legitimate comparison with Descartes. First of all, Montaigne asserts that human beings cannot comprehend God using analogies or conjectures that only define our laws, and definitely cannot comprehend the cause that produced them. Second, the best description of God is that which identifies him as an incomprehensible power. While the first point bears witness to an *idem sentire*, a feeling shared by Montaigne and Descartes, the second enables us to trace a connection based on a clearly shared lexicon. Indeed, Montaigne does not restrict himself to recognizing that God is incomprehensible, he relates this attribute to omnipotence. Descartes would do the same in the letter from 15 April 1630. Furthermore, Montaigne describes the incomprehensible power of God as the origin of all things. Sure, he does not assert that God is the cause of the eternal truths, but nevertheless extends His causal action to the totality of that which has been created.

The impossibility of knowing divine essence and the definition of God as an incomprehensible power should in themselves be enough to point to Montaigne as a possible source for Descartes. But the examples present in the *Apology* do not stop here. As I underlined in section II, one of the objectives of Cartesian theory was to break the epistemic continuity between the Creator and creatures. Given that the eternal truths were created, it was no longer possible to transfer to God the limits that defined human knowledge. This requirement had been expressed on several occasions, and in the same context, by Montaigne too. Let us consider the following passage:

We prescribe limits to God, we hold his power besieged by our reasons [...]; we want to enslave him to the vain and feeble approximations of our understanding, him who has made both us and our knowledge. 'Because nothing is made of nothing. God cannot have built the world without material' What! Has God placed in our hands the keys and ultimate springs of his power? Has he pledged himself not to overstep the bounds of our

knowledge? Put the case, O man, that you have been able to observe here some traces of his deeds; do you think that he has used all his power and put all his forms and all his ideas into this work? You see only the order and government of this little cave you dwell in, at least if you do see it. His divinity has infinite jurisdiction beyond; this part is nothing in comparison with the whole [A] (CEM, 389).

By insisting on the attribute of omnipotence, the gulf that Montaigne gouges between God and creatures is immense. It is human beings who claim that God could not have created the world without matter, in the same way as He could not have created a mountain without a valley or a triangle without three angles. But humans are only entitled to make this claim by enveloping divine power in their own reasons, that is, by adapting the alternatives available to the omnipotence of God to what they can think. But were this the case, God would have exhausted all His power in the created universe. According to Montaigne, the opposite is true: beyond this, God reserved Himself an endless scope of action. It is this difference that keeps the incomprehensible transcendence of God alive and tramples upon the presumed autonomy of human reason.

As Descartes would do after him, Montaigne also provides examples to clarify the premises for his reflection: “‘God cannot die, God cannot go back on his word, God cannot do this or that’. I do not think it is good to confine the divine power thus under the laws of our speech. And the probability that appears to us in these propositions should be expressed more reverently and religiously [A]” (CEM, 392). A few lines later, Montaigne uses a numeric example that would then be found on several occasions in Descartes: according to the adversaries of religion, “‘God cannot do everything [...]; he cannot make two times ten not be twenty [A]” (CEM, 393). The quoted passages confirm Montaigne’s approach. It is our words that confine divine power within particular limitations; but every time we define the scope of action of God’s omnipotence, in reality, we are adapting His incomprehensible essence to the circumscribed dimension of our reason. In other words, we are performing an act of arrogance, in the conviction that God can exclusively do what we deem thinkable. Instead, we should approach divine nature with more reverence. Descartes would make the latter aspect his own too, immediately after presenting God as an incomprehensible power: “I want people to get used to speaking of God in a manner worthier [*plus dignement*], I think, than the common and almost universal way of imagining his as a finite being” (AT I, 146; PWD 3, 23). Descartes expresses the same requirement as Montaigne, underlining that God should be referred to with more reverence

or in a worthier manner than had previously been used, seeing as He was considered a finite being incapable of acting beyond human thought.

In order to conclude the analysis of the *Apology*, a last passage can be quoted that shows the proximity between the two authors even more clearly:

When we say that the infinity of the centuries both past and to come is to God but an instant, that his goodness, wisdom, power, are the same thing as his essence – our tongues say it, but our intelligence does not apprehend it. And yet our overweening arrogance would pass the deity through our sieve [...] How rashly have they [the Stoics] bound God to destiny [*attaché Dieu à la destinée*] (I would that none bearing the surname of Christian would still do it!), and Thales, Plato, and Pythagoras have made him slave of necessity [*l'ont asservi à la nécessité*]! This arrogance of trying to discover God with our eyes made a great man of our religion give the deity bodily form [A] (CEM, 393 – 394).

This passage in effect brings Montaigne's analysis on the infinite prerogatives to allot to divine power to a close. It is not only the context that is interesting, but also the examples and the terms used. Montaigne refers to the pagan authors who subjected God to destiny, making Him slave to necessity. Now, if we reconsider Descartes' letter from 15 April 1630, we do not only find the same requirement but literally almost the same reference. Montaigne speaks of those who have "*attaché Dieu à la destinée*" and "*l'ont asservi à la nécessité*"; Descartes sustains that considering the eternal truths independent from God's omnipotence is like "*l'assujettir au Styx et aux Destinées*". In the case under examination, we are dealing with the same argument (divine omnipotence), the same context (the necessity to preserve a correct notion of His prerogatives) and the same example (the reference to destiny). Considering that it is the same letter in which Descartes, following Montaigne, defined God as an incomprehensible power, it is difficult to deny that Descartes was not referring to the places we analysed in the *Apology*.

Once again, we can sum up the guidelines of Montaigne's reflection. 1) God is not a pagan divinity subjected to destiny and enslaved to necessity. He is an omnipotent God and the origin of all things. 2) God has an infinite scope of action that is not limited to the created world. His power is not restricted by any law or principle that human beings deem necessary. 3) Human beings cannot comprehend the essence of the Creator. Divine omnipotence is incomprehensible. 4) The limits of human reason are not the criterion with which to judge what God can realize thanks to His power.

If we analyse these four aspects of Montaigne's thought by relating them with those of Descartes, it is not difficult to note how many similarities there are between

the two approaches. They do not just sound similar, they really are close to each other, as is also confirmed by some lexical choices which are present in Montaigne and found again in Descartes. The presence of Montaigne in Descartes' work is therefore not limited to his critical analysis of the relationship between human beings and animals, or to his reformulation of the sceptical method as a tool to wear down the prejudices inherited from tradition. On the contrary, Montaigne's shadow also accompanies Descartes in the development of his positions on divine omnipotence. While ample attention has already been paid to identifying those authors criticized by the doctrine on eternal truths, I believe there is at least one positive point of reference in Descartes' theory. This does not mean denying the originality of his position, but more broadly defining the context in which he voices his opinion.

IV. Concluding remarks

The passages that I have highlighted from Montaigne show us how Descartes' reflection on eternal truths positively incorporated some elements of the *Apology*. Having said this – a consideration of no little importance in the search for Cartesian sources –, we must not therefore simply equate the two authors' reflections.¹⁵ Although Montaigne and Descartes attribute a central role to divine omnipotence and are convinced that the scope of God's action cannot be limited to the order of human knowledge, some substantial differences nevertheless remain, both in the premises and the goals of the two authors.

As far as the presuppositions of the two approaches are concerned, Montaigne and Descartes take different points of reference. In the passages of the *Apology* dedicated to God's infinite possibilities, the debate fully revolves around the Christian tradition and concerns "the disputes we have at present in our religion [A]" (CEM, 393). Montaigne sets out to criticize those Calvinists who reject the dogma of transubstantiation, because they deem the real presence of Christ in two different places to be impossible, and therefore unrealizable. Montaigne aims to criticize the excessively rationalized content of theology, which causes human beings to judge divine power following their own reason alone. The question behind Montaigne's reflection is therefore theological.

Not so in Descartes. The objective of his polemic is an approach which had come to subordinate God to the eternal truths. According to this approach, supported by Francisco Suárez among others, the eternal truths are not dependent on divine intellect like in the Augustinian and Thomist tradition, but they are what they are – eternal and necessary – independently from God. As such, things are not possible because they

¹⁵ In this connection, see the opposing interpretations of Carraud 2004 and Brahami 2006.

are thought of by God, but God can only think of them because they are already possible. The author criticized in the theory clearly appears in the letter sent to Mersenne on 6 May 1630, in which Descartes quotes some passages from Suárez's *Disputationes metaphysicae* with an eye to overturning their meaning.¹⁶ Descartes' thesis must therefore be placed within the scholastic debate.

Furthermore, it is the very premises of the doctrine that change. In the letter from 15 April 1630, Descartes clearly states that "your question of theology is beyond my mental capacity, but it does not seem to me outside my province, since it has no concern with anything dependent on revelation, which is what I call theology in the strict sense; it is a metaphysical question which is to be examined by human reason" (AT I, 143-144; PWD 3, 22). If Descartes' theory fits into the scholastic debate, his premises are strictly metaphysical, namely, to be analysed *sola ratione*, without the aid of theological revelation or tradition. Once divine omnipotence is placed in the centre of the investigation, it is human reason that obliges us to recognize that the eternal truths are created. In Descartes, the scholastic debate and the metaphysical question of the eternal truths replace the theological context and the eucharistic dogma present in Montaigne's *Apology*.

Another difference that is worth underlining concerns the consequences of the two approaches. The incomprehensibility of divine power allows Montaigne to limit the arrogance of reason and forms the basis of his sceptical fideism. We cannot know or comprehend what God is; if we know something about His nature, it is certainly not due to our intellectual efforts: it was God who taught us. In Montaigne, it is revelation that defines the scope of our knowledge. However, it cannot be obtained by way of a reasoning, but thanks to a supreme act of authority: "The participation that we have in the knowledge of truth, whatever it may be, has not been acquired by our own powers [...] It is not by reasoning or by our understanding that we have received our religion; it is by external authority and command [A]" (CEM, 369).

Descartes, on the contrary, presents and develops the implications of his theory using reason alone. Hence, the doctrine does not come about to discredit human *ratio*, but to define its bounds. In other words, it serves to determine how far it is rationally possible to make use of it, for example, by avoiding judging divine possibilities when we are not authorized to do so. Furthermore, if we are to listen to Descartes' considerations in the letter from 15 April 1630, the theory on eternal truths should have formed the epistemic basis of his physics: "I hope to put this in writing, within the next fortnight, in my treatise on physics" (AT I, 146; PWD 3, 23). The doctrine is not

¹⁶ See AT I, 149 – 150; PWD 3, 24.

formulated to call reason into question, but to define the relationship between divine transcendency and the possibility of human *ratio*.

Differences aside, one point nevertheless has to stand firm: Descartes does not use Montaigne's reflections on the incomprehensible omnipotence of God in merely instrumental terms, as he did when he used the sceptical method for heuristic ends, or when he used the question of animals and the correlated examples in order to criticize it. In this particular case, there is no instrumentality. Instead, there is real and concrete acceptance of some aspects of Montaigne's thought. Naturally, this does not mean that the two authors say the same thing, but that Descartes took some elements from Montaigne's reflection that would be central to the presentation of his theory on the eternal truths. At the same time, far from denying the novelty of Descartes' doctrine, we are thus able to understand it within the historical context where it originated.

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