

## THE ATHEISM OF THE CARTESIAN *COGITO*

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In the opening paragraph of his chapter on the atheism of the Cartesian *cogito*, from his book *God in Exile*, Fr. Cornelio Fabro writes:

*The philosophical thought of Descartes is the real starting point of the adventure of modern thought which owes its origin to this Cartesian thinking . . . Before Descartes, there were only hints, only the ferment of elements and free radicals. This seething mass was waiting for the interpreter who could penetrate to its nucleus, grasp its radical novelty and consistently structure all man's problems starting from man himself, seizing the yawning gulf of man's freedom and filling it with satisfying meaning for man.<sup>1</sup>*

As Fr. Fabro writes above, Descartes effectively and definitively opened the so-called “Pandora’s Box” of modern thought, of metaphysical immanentism, triggering a series of chain-reactions and ramifications which are still being felt to this day.

Descartes was born into a tumultuous time. This, according to Fr. Fabro, was the “meeting point” of all manner of critical and skeptical inclinations toward religion in general and Christianity in particular. The Reformation spirit had met with a skeptic and atheistic thought not seen since antiquity. Considering the philosophical mood, it is not surprising that Descartes should have intended his system to be a counter to those skeptics and atheists. To achieve this, Descartes sought a sure and certain knowledge. “*I wished to give myself entirely to the search after truth*”, he wrote.<sup>2</sup> He desired to build a system of thought where nothing was presupposed except that which was already self-evident and

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<sup>1</sup> C. Fabro, *God in Exile*, pg. 91

<sup>2</sup> *Discourse on Method*, IV

unquestionable. The entire system would be composed of organically-connected parts and would be impervious to the destructive effects of skepticism.<sup>3</sup> A genius mathematician, Descartes believed that the methods used in mathematics were applicable in philosophy. In fact, he wrote that all sciences, taken together “*are identical with human wisdom which always remains one and the same, however applied to different subjects.*”<sup>4</sup> He saw science as a tree: the root of the tree was metaphysics, the trunk was physics, and the branches were the various other sciences.<sup>5</sup> Here is an immediate divergence with Aristotelianism, which holds all sciences as different, each requiring its own appropriate method.

Descartes would rely on his own reasoning ability and completely break away from the previous systems and authorities that were in use. His system would avoid confusing what is clear and evident with what is merely conjectural, which was an accusation he levelled at the Scholastics. Only certain knowledge was of any interest to Descartes, and thus, his system would deal only with clear and evident truths. It is important to note that this was not a complete rejection of what the previous authorities taught. Rather, Descartes believed that these truths needed to be “rediscovered” in an orderly and systematic way. Descartes did not seek to replace Scholasticism or Aristotelianism, but rather, to put forth what he considered to be a structured, certain, and well-ordered philosophy, to combat the rampant skepticism of the time.<sup>6</sup>

Philosophy is a science and a science necessarily requires a method. Descartes’ method was the famous methodic doubt.

*Because I wished to give myself entirely to the search after truth, I thought that it was necessary for me to adopt an apparently opposite course and to reject as absolutely false everything concerning which I could*

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<sup>3</sup> F. Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, vol. 4, pg. 66

<sup>4</sup> *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, 1

<sup>5</sup> F. Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, vol. 4, pg. 67

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pgs. 67-69

*imagine the least ground of doubt, in order to see whether afterwards there remained anything in my beliefs which was entirely certain.*<sup>7</sup>

Faced with this method, we must ask: how far can this doubt go? Our senses can deceive us, Descartes says, so they cannot be trusted. Human authority cannot be trusted either, since humans are imperfect and prone to error, ignorance, and bias. In fact, Descartes extends this doubt so far as to suppose a so-called “evil genius” or “all-powerful demon,” who is deceiving you in every possible aspect and in every part of life. Faced with such a hypothesis, we must conclude that nothing can be trusted. This level of doubt implies a certain violence against the mind committed by a willful decision made by the subject. The mind naturally tends outward, toward creation, and ultimately, through creation, to God. Methodic doubt forces the mind back in on itself on the premise that nothing “out there” can be trusted.

So, what is to be the starting point for Descartes? If he doubts everything, where can he start building his philosophy of certain knowledge? Descartes finds a certain truth, something that cannot be doubted no matter how much he may try. This truth would serve as the base and foundation of Descartes’ whole system and would have serious consequences for years to come. Descartes’ first and most fundamental truth was *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). No matter how much you may doubt your own senses, other people, the external world, or even self-evident truths like the rules of mathematics (for example, that one plus one always equals two), you could never doubt your own existence. Indeed, the very act of doubting your existence proves your existence.

This self-affirmation of existence is confirmed in several quotes by the French philosopher: In the *Meditations* he writes: “*I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly*

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<sup>7</sup> *Discourse on Method*, IV

*be the case that if I ceased entirely to think, I should likewise cease altogether to exist.*"<sup>8</sup>In the same mediation, he says "I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it or that I mentally conceive it."<sup>9</sup>Finally, in the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes writes "If I had only ceased from thinking, even if all the rest of what I had ever imagined had really existed, I should have no reason for thinking that I had existed."<sup>10</sup>

Fr. Fabro declares that "Descartes set as the beginning or 'absolute starting point', the bare *cogito* or consciousness as a capacity devoid of all content."<sup>11</sup>Descartes removes the outside world with his method of doubt and proceeds to enclose reality within the *cogito*. Knowledge is an act that requires the complementarity of subject and object, but the enclosed *cogito* has no object and thus the *cogito* itself becomes the foundation for all knowledge. The Stigmatine priest declares that when the mind turns in on itself and rejects all extra-mental data, such as the external world, then the mind loses all connection with real content and has to rely on itself for any sort of knowledge, and on its own subjectivist criteria to decide whether that knowledge is true or not. The mind, or consciousness, begins with nothing and then creates its own content.

In the words of Fr. Fabro:

*It is a reflexive principle, this acceptance of the cogito in all its implications, which blocks at the outset the movement of the natural inclination to the Absolute, by swerving the mind in a diametrically opposite direction, so that the thinker is bound to arrive at the terminal conviction that there is no such being as God in the sense of a transcendent Principle, that the problem of the Absolute is therefore meaningless, even that God must be denied in order to guarantee man's freedom.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> No. II

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>10</sup> No. IV

<sup>11</sup> C. Fabro, *Selected Works of Cornelio Fabro*, pg. 29

<sup>12</sup> C. Fabro, *God in Exile*, pg. 26

This immanence, of the mind being the beginning and end of its knowledge, would have severe and inevitably atheistic results, as Fr. Fabro points out at a later point in *God in Exile*:

*Cartesian immanentism concentrated itself in man's most intimate and all-embracing act, that of willing; it was therefore bound to close to man all avenues of escape from the long straight road leading down to d'Holbach, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Sartre. Atheism was going to be nothing more than thoroughgoing immanentism, consequential immanentism, which is a theory of the will radically aware of its own inescapable internal logic.*<sup>13</sup>

Descartes certainly never intended his system of thought to lead to the atheistic conclusions that Fr. Fabro saw as both logical and inevitable. So it is an interesting paradox that the early Cartesian philosophers tried to prove the existence of God using this inherently atheistic system. Since Cartesian doubt prevented them from trusting anything outside of the *cogito*, they had to prove the existence of a God who would not let them be deceived, who would protect them from “all-powerful deceiving demons”. Only then would they be able to reach nature and knowledge of reality. However, we only reach God through nature. Descartes’ *cogito* reverses that process: since we cannot trust the external world around us, we must first prove the existence of God and then go to nature through him, using Him as a means to understand nature. Descartes removed the road by which man reaches God and forced him to travel a new path “*beving the royal road of ontological truth out of the very fabric of the human subject and confining it entirely to the realm of self.*”<sup>14</sup>

Fr. Fabro analyzes and sums up the overall plan of Descartes for proving the existence of God:

*Descartes is convinced that he can legitimately conclude to the existence of God from the idea of God because the idea that I have of God is not an idea like other ideas; it is not a contingent idea of contingent*

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 92

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 92

*things, but rather a necessary Idea of the necessary Being and must therefore be admitted to be able to be produced only by necessary Being, for it certainly cannot come from nothingness which is not, nor yet from us, who are contingent.*<sup>15</sup>

Descartes, trapped within the limits of the *cogito*, must strive to prove the existence of God using nothing more than his own mind. He argues that the idea of a perfect being cannot come from us, who are not perfect, as the more perfect cannot proceed from the less perfect.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, he claims that our own imperfections lead to the knowledge of God, who must possess these perfections perfectly and therefore, must exist.<sup>17</sup> Finally, he attempts to prove the existence of God using the truths of geometry and mathematics, arguing that these principles have a real and determined nature which was not produced by his mind.<sup>18</sup>

The result is the same for all of these. Descartes' idea of God ends up being an amalgamation, or a synthesis, of the many various infinite perfections which make up our concept of God. Fr. Fabro says that:

*in the context of the Cartesian method, it is more proper to speak always of the 'idea of Being or universal Perfection abstracted by the reasoning mind out of being of every kind' rather than of the idea or concept of God; this idea of Being or universal Perfection is not 'the idea of God . . . But rather the idea of supremely universal Being which cannot exist at all outside of created things themselves, with which the idea itself is identified.'*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 101

<sup>16</sup> *Meditations*, III

<sup>17</sup> *Meditations*, IV

<sup>18</sup> *Meditations*, V

<sup>19</sup> C. Fabro, *God in Exile*, pg. 104

Fr. Fabro concludes, “*The Cartesian proofs, therefore, conclusively prove exactly nothing! Descartes transforms God into a thought, into an intelligence, but how can an intelligence or a thought be conceived without a subject in whom these properties subsist.*”<sup>20</sup> Descartes believes that we can conceive of God “only as a form communicating itself a little at a time to the parts of the universe” and continues later on by saying that “God cannot be understood as extended except in the sense that extension is predicated of the fire in a piece of iron; the fire has no other dimensions than those of the iron itself.” God becomes imprisoned in His very creation, and Descartes can be easily charged with declaring that there is no other God than nature. In the end, Descartes destroys his own proofs for the existence of God. The *cogito* cuts man off from the world around him, and since we can only go to God through the natural world, we are, therefore, effectively cut off from God as well.

The *cogito* is an attempt to force God into the limits of reason. God is now explained by my conception of God and this rationalism leads into the constructive atheism of modern thought, an atheism which not only denies God, but builds up a new god in His place: the human consciousness. With this “new god” comes a new meaning to freedom. Previously, freedom was the ability of man to tend toward what is true. Now the *cogito* defines what is true and freedom becomes the ability to shape reality to what we want it to be. The moral compass is destroyed as morals become completely subjective based on the minds of different men. Man is now able to cast off the world, and subsequently God, having obtained this “*new notion of freedom.*”<sup>21</sup>

Descartes the man is Catholic and proceeds to an affirmation of God’s existence. However, Descartes the philosopher moves in the opposite direction, to a denial of God. For Fr. Fabro, it was

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 108

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 119

the philosopher who was the true man and declares that *“the evolution of modern thought has provided the proof of it.”*<sup>22</sup>

To counter this interpretation of Cartesianism in an atheist strain, the Cartesians of the Catholic schools offered a theistic interpretation which is inspired by Augustinianism. Fr. Fabro is convinced that any attempt at comparing the “ontologism” of the Cartesians with that of the Augustinians involved a “radical equivocation” as the approaches of these two schools of thought proceed from drastically divergent inspirations. Whereas Augustine moved from the theological sphere and aimed to ground man totally in God, Descartes moves from the realm of modern science and from a new conception of freedom whose conclusion is the release of the world and man from any sort of dependence on God, other than perhaps that of a “first mover”.<sup>23</sup> For Fabro:

*. . . the revolution of the cogito had come full circle: the atheists of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French materialism were convinced that they were the legitimate heirs of the Cartesian revolution and it is hard to fault them on the basic point. The rupture between the world and the ego revealed the rupture between the body and soul, between man and God . . . The cogito did in fact hide within itself much more deep-cutting demands for the direct and definitive expulsion of any view or prospect of the Absolute, even as the dialectic of modern idealism was to do later in comparable ways.*<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, Descartes sought to create a philosophy that was *“an organically connected system of scientifically established truths, that is to say, of truths so ordered that the mind passes from fundamental self-evident truth to other evident truths implied by the former.”*<sup>25</sup> His goal was to oppose the skepticism and atheism of his time. Ironically, he himself, and his followers had to defend against charges of atheism from the

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 119

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 119

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 116

<sup>25</sup> F. Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, vol. 4, pg. 69

theologians of the time. Crippled by the very system they were using for their defense, they were unable to sufficiently refute the charges of atheism and the true inheritors of their philosophy became the atheists and the free-thinkers. These philosophers, in the ensuing years, would latch onto the *cogito* as the foundation for their own increasingly atheistic philosophies.

So, I leave you with this last quote from Fr. Fabro, as a final summary of his view of the nature of the Cartesian *cogito*:

*Modern thought is in essence simply the progress of the claim to that radical freedom pinpointed by Descartes as that open-ended ability of man to make and unmake the first step of the pilgrimage of truth. As it forces the immanentist principle to its logical conclusion which is its disintegration, this radical libertarian tendency will gradually reveal itself as responsible for that positive and constructive atheism which is typical of modern philosophy. This modern philosophy can appropriately be called 'the philosophy of freedom, considering freedom an ultimate and therefore viable first principle.' Such a philosophy, therefore, has neither need nor use for God as principle or foundation; hence it is atheist.<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup> C. Fabro, *God in Exile*, pg. 91