

CHARRON'S *EPOCHÉ* AND DESCARTES' *COGITO*: THE SCEPTICAL BASE OF DESCARTES' REFUTATION OF SCEPTICISM

JOSÉ R. MAIA NETO

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte

The influence of Charron's *De la Sagesse* on Descartes' thought has been noted by many scholars at least since Gilson's classical commentary on the *Discours de la Méthode*.¹ Few, however, have examined the issue in which this influence is most interesting and important: scepticism and doubt. The exception is Richard Popkin one of whose first publications on early modern

¹ Descartes, René, *Discours de la Méthode*. Texte et Commentaire par Etienne Gilson (Paris: Vrin, 1987 – first edition: 1925). The following are the main scholars who have pointed out textual and thematic connections between Descartes and Charron: Sirven, J., *Les années d'apprentissage de Descartes: 1596-1628*. Paris: Vrin, 1928, pp. 262-273 (provisional morals); Boase, Alan, *The Fortunes of Montaigne. A history of the Essays in France, 1580-1669*. London: Methuen, 1935, pp. 209-237 (a number of issues in the *Discours* and the *Cogitationes privatae*); Battista, Anna Maria, *Alle Origini del pensiero politico libertino: Montaigne e Charron*. Milano: Giuffré, 1966, pp. 205-206 (politics); Adam, Michel, *Etudes sur Pierre Charron*. Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1991; Id., "René Descartes et Pierre Charron", *Revue Philosophique*, vol. 4, 1992, pp. 467-483 (several connections, including the suggestion that Charron's doubt is methodical, intermediary between Montaigne's and Descartes'); Rodis-Lewis, Geneviève, "Descartes et Charron", *Archives de Philosophie*, vol. 57, 1994, pp. 4-9; Id., *Descartes*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995), pp. 71-76 (the influence of Charron's *Sagesse* in Descartes' intellectual autobiography presented in the *Discours*); Belin, Christian, *L'Œuvre de Pierre Charron 1541-1603. Littérature et théologie de Montaigne à Port-Royal*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1995, pp. 229-238 (generosity) and Faye, Emmanuel, *Philosophie et Perfection de l'Homme. De la Renaissance à Descartes*. Paris: Vrin, 1998, pp. 293-324 (morals).

scepticism deals precisely with the issue.² Popkin shows that the idea of a methodic doubt in the sense of a doubt conceived as means to something else is quite central in Charron. He points out two basic differences between Charron and Descartes on methodic doubt: the radical nature of the Cartesian doubt and the fact that in Descartes, in contradistinction to Charron, the result of the sceptical elimination of belief is not a *tabula rasa*. This second difference is generalized in Popkin's *History of Scepticism* to the whole tradition of sceptical fideism in the period. In Descartes, he says, "the process of doubting compels one to recognize the awareness of oneself, compels one to see that one is doubting or thinking, and that one is here, is in existence. The discovery of true knowledge is not miraculous, not a special act of Divine Grace. Instead the method of doubt is the cause rather than the occasion of the acquisition of knowledge. Its truth ... is the result of Divine intervention, but not of sudden, new intervention, but rather a continuous and permanent act of Grace which sustains our mind with its innate ideas, and with its natural light that compels us to accept as true that which we are unable to doubt. Thus, the method of doubt leads naturally to the cogito, and not supernaturally to truth as the 'nouveaux Pyrrhoniens' claimed".³

I agree with Popkin's first difference (the radical nature of Cartesian doubt) but disagree that the result of Charron's doubt is a *tabula rasa* waiting for the miraculous reception of grace. Both in Charron and in Charron's disciples La Mothe Le Vayer and the Gassendi of the *Exercitationes*, sceptical *epoché* is not properly a *tabula rasa* and it is not a means to something different from scepticism itself.⁴ If we keep strictly to

² Popkin, Richard H., "Charron and Descartes: the fruits of systematic doubt", *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 51, 1954, pp. 831-837. It is rather odd that such an important connection has not been explored in the recent boom of Charronian scholarship. One remarkable exception is Gianni Paganini's *Scepsi Moderna. Interpretazioni dello scetticismo da Charron a Hume* (Cosenza: Busento, 1991), pp. 28-29, who indicates some innovations that Charron introduces in the sceptical tradition that become crucial in Descartes' methodic doubt, notably, the active role of the will.

³ Popkin, R.H., *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979, p. 184.

⁴ See Gregory, Tullio, "La sagesse scettica di Pierre Charron", *De Homine*, vol. 21, 1967, pp. 163-182, and "Il 'libro scandaloso' di Pierre Charron" in Id., *Etica e religione nella critica libertina*. Napoli: Guida, 1986, pp. 73-107. Both essays were translated to French and published in Gregory, T., *La Genèse de la Raison Classique de Charron à Descartes*. Paris: PUF, 2000. Christian Belin presents an interpretation contrary to Gregory's and – on the issue of the relation between doubt and faith – similar to Popkin's. He says that whereas Descartes unifies wisdom and science (in contrast to Charron, as was first pointed out by Gilson), "le discours sapientiel pour Charron reste un auxiliaire précieux du discours religieux, auquel il prépare" (*op. cit.*, p. 238). I disagree with both. Against Gregory, despite Charron's criticism of superstition, I argue in section 3 below that his scepticism cannot be viewed straightforwardly as anti-religious. Against Belin, I hold that in Charron

Popkin's description of the *cogito*, that is, if we set aside the fact that the *cogito* involves the metaphysical doctrine of the non-material essence of the soul, it could apply as well to Charron's *epoché*. So given my agreement with Popkin's first difference (the radical nature of Cartesian doubt), what I argue here is that Descartes is closer to the scepticism of his time not in the sceptical arguments he uses but in the way he refutes scepticism. I propose that the *cogito* can be seen as a metaphysical interpretation of Charron's *epoché* resulting from Cartesian hyperbolic doubt. It is hyperbolic doubt (absent from all sceptics from ancient times to his own) that allows Descartes to transform the most precious acquisition of the sceptics (*epoché*) into the single doctrine capable of refuting them.⁵

Charron's influence on Descartes concerns more the preambles of Cartesian philosophy than doctrinary Cartesianism proper (the exception being the *cogito*), that is, methodic doubt and everything relevant to it (provisional morals, political conservatism, rejection of established peripatetic philosophy, personal doubt, etc).⁶ The relevant Cartesian text is therefore the first three parts of the *Discours de la Méthode*. Sections 2 to 7 cover six topics that are relevant to Cartesian doubt. Another work in which Charron's presence is also noticeable is Descartes' unfinished dialogue *De la Recherche de la Vérité* in which he covers precisely the issues of doubt and the *cogito*. Section 8 below, in which I examine the relations of the *cogito* with Charron's scepticism is based above all on this work. Finally, it should be noted that some of the Cartesian passages and positions in which I detect Charron's presence are also exhibited in Montaigne's *Essais*. In these cases, Descartes could have got the position directly from Montaigne or indirectly through Charron.⁷ At least as far as doubt and the *cogito* are concerned, Charron is much more relevant to Descartes than Montaigne. First, it is Charron who in an explicit way proposes scepticism as a means to expurgate all acquired beliefs; second, it is Charron's Academic version of scepticism

human beings find the perfection of their nature in sceptical *epoché*, and this is achieved independently and autonomously *vis-à-vis* Christian faith and grace (see section 2 below).

⁵ My view of Descartes' relation to the sceptics of his time differs from Curley's who sees in Montaigne's scepticism a possible historical source for Descartes' dream and deceiver arguments and the *cogito* as Descartes' anti-sceptical reply. (See Curley, Edwin M., *Descartes Against the Sceptics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1978, in particular chapter 2). Note that I agree that Descartes' *cogito* is original and anti-sceptic. What I argue is that, unlike his sceptical arguments, the *cogito* can be viewed as a philosophical (metaphysical) interpretation of the *epoché* held by French early modern sceptics. This makes Descartes' refutation of scepticism even more suited to meet the sceptical challenge of his time.

⁶ I am not saying that Charron is not relevant for other parts of Descartes' doctrinary philosophy. Faye finds Charron crucial in Descartes' philosophical morals.

⁷ I do not give the exegetical analysis that would indicate Descartes' source for such analysis is not relevant for the purpose of this article.

The Return of Scepticism

From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle

Paganini, G. (Ed.)

2003, XXVIII, 495 p. 2 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1377-5