

AGAINST DESCARTES: MARTEN SCHOOCK'S *DE SCEPTICISMO*

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Published in 1652 as the first part of a larger work whose subsequent volumes were never to see the light, M. Schoock's *De scepticismo* is part of the furious polemic prompted by the first attempts to spread Descartes' philosophy in Dutch universities. This was not Schoock's only sally: as is known, he is also the author of *Admiranda methodus*, the first large-scale attack on the French philosopher, which triggered what has become known as the 'Utrecht controversy'. Descartes' reaction was violent and brought about two trials, one in Utrecht and the other in Groningen;¹ Schoock's testimony concerning his role in the affair is to some extent divergent, but it does agree on one fundamental fact: *Admiranda methodus* was inspired by Gijsbert Voetius, whose students adapted it during its publication, Schoock not following the process directly as he was professor at Groningen. It is therefore relevant to examine Voetius' position with regard to scepticism in general and to Cartesian scepticism in particular, in order to better understand its affinities and differences with Schoock's opinions.

Voetius dealt with these themes on various occasions: firstly in the *De atheismo* disputations, which were argued in 1639 but published in 1648 in the first volume of *Selectae disputationes*; then in a series of disputations discussed between 1655 and 1657, collected into the third volume of *Selectae disputationes*, which saw the light in 1659. From the start,

¹ Cf. Descartes, René – Schoock, Marten, *La querelle d'Utrecht*, ed. by T. Verbeek. Paris: Les impressions nouvelles, 1988; Verbeek, Theo, *Descartes and the Dutch. Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy, 1637-50*. Carbondale-Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press, 1992.

scepticism was considered one of the most frequent causes of atheism, both in its classic version of contesting the validity of human knowledge (the moral aspect of ancient scepticism, that is the search for tranquillity of the soul, appeared not at all to interest the Dutch theologian) and in the more modern versions. He included in this group both the scepticism of the 'esprits forts', which aimed not to be surprised at anything and not to admire anything, and that of the renaissance and early 17th-century 'curiosi', who dedicated themselves to abstract research that was impossible for man to conclude, instead of keeping within the sphere of what is accessible to a finite human nature that is also compromised by original sin.² If, by casting doubt on the human capability to know the truth, ancient scepticism and modern scepticism end up by denying that 'notitia Dei indita' which the whole of orthodox Calvinism recognised as indissolubly inscribed in the human soul (it is the presence of this notion that makes those persons guilty who, not having received the Revelation, worship divinities with different characters from those prescribed by natural theology). But that 'scepticismus loyoliticus' that does not believe the Scripture to be sufficiently clear to be read and understood by everybody without the mediation of the tradition and of the Church is equally dangerous.³ In the disputations argued between 1655 and 1657, this position was to be confirmed and enriched with further details: only the ignorance of what God has not revealed to us, in part or completely, through revelation or 'lumen naturae', is not guilty or dangerous for man; it may concern things that will remain unknown to us even in the future life, whereas we will be let into others after death. This type of ignorance may well be defined as "learned" (but it does not coincide with Cusanian ignorance); it may concern theological, historical, physical, or astronomical knowledge (Voetius takes this occasion to condemn those who, like the Cartesians and the Copernicans, have the temerity to oppose the Scriptures in the name of unverifiable theories) or geographical or linguistic knowledge, and is opposed to 'vana curiositas'.⁴ But the awareness of human limits and the pious recognition that fields of knowledge exist which it is better not to investigate does not weaken his condemnation of scepticism,

² Voetius, Gijsbert, *Selectarum disputationum pars prima*. Ultrajecti: apud Johannem a Waesberge, 1648, 125-27; but see also 131, 177-78. On these themes see Verbeek, Theo, "From 'learned ignorance' to scepticism. Descartes and Calvinist Orthodoxy", in Popkin, R.H. and Vanderjagt, A., eds., *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. New York, Köln, Leiden: Brill, 1993, 31-45 (31-34).

³ Voetius, *Selectarum disputationum pars prima*, cit.; in the third volume Voetius was to stigmatize Bellarmino's affirmation whereby faith is closer to ignorance than to knowledge as 'vox sane bovis, non hominis'. See also Voetius, G., *Selectarum disputationum pars tertia*. Ultrajecti: apud Johannem a Waesberge, 1659, 642.

⁴ Voetius, *Selectarum disputationum pars tertia*... cit., 637, 644, 669, 672, 681-90.

which indeed, as he had already sustained in 1648, may arise from the very claim of knowing things that are beyond our reach, a scepticism that, like twenty years previously, lies at the origin of all heresy and atheism, but that however starts to take on particular features. In fact, the supporters of 'theologia dubitante' are on one hand Catholics, the Remonstrants, the Socinians and the Anabaptists, on the other hand not only and not so much Descartes, but rather his followers, against whom Voetius wrote an appendix *De dubitatione philosophica*:⁵ the long and insistent confutation of the impiety of the Italian Renaissance naturalism and of the free thinkers, so obsessively present in the disputations on atheism of 1648 following in the footsteps of Mersenne, seems on the contrary definitely to have been put to one side. In these mid-seventeenth-century disputations, Voetius not only recalls the distinction he had previously set up between learned ignorance and sceptical doubt, but also stresses the novelty of the procedure adopted by Descartes with regard to the usual invitation to suspend judgement before reaching the truth: the first is in actuality a denial of uncertain principles, which are considered to be false, and inevitably leads to a contrast between theology and philosophy; the second on the contrary is a tool traditionally used in schools in conformity with Aristotle's teaching.⁶ Voetius determined two points of conflict: firstly the Cartesians, just as the Remonstrants, by extending doubt to the existence of God and of the external world, end up by undermining the basis of natural theology, which on the contrary should be held as being certain in its primary (God) and secondary principles (the 'lumen' and 'ratio naturalis').⁷ Voetius is aware that the Cartesians do not at all agree over determining the characteristics and extension of doubt (should it concern all truth, including universal and absolutely certain truth, or only metaphysical and physical truth? Should it be short-term, or last until we have found certain principles? Must it consist in the denial of all handed-down principles or not? etc.); but these differences, in his opinion, do not influence the certain consequences of such an approach: doubt ends up involving all common notions, theoretical principles and practical principles.⁸ Secondly, the Cartesians effectively extend the dubitative procedure to the interpretation of the Scriptures, overturning the correct hermeneutic process (the validity of a philosophical thesis should be measured on the basis of its compatibility with what emerges from a literal interpretation of the Bible, not vice versa) and once again showing themselves to be worthy followers of the Remonstrants and of Vorstius. The

⁵ *Ibid.*, 740, 746, 830 e 834-69 (the appendix is on pp. 847-69).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 836, 845-46, 851-52, 867.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 839-41, 844.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 853-57, 860, 864, 868.

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