

THE SKEPTICAL PARADOX

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Abstract. In modern times, more precisely after the Cartesian revolution, some authors, still concerned with the problem of skeptical self-reference, explored the cogito in order to verify whether the skeptic had been refuted by Descartes. The question to be verified was the following: when establishing the cogito, would it be possible to subject it, once again, to doubt? The problem and the answer to the problem seem to have generated a paradox, which I will call here the “skeptical paradox”. The problem exposed here is in the foundation of reason and, in the absence of it, the skeptic’s alternative is in the use of reason in a pragmatic or instrumental way. However, I argue that when the skeptic dialogues against her opponent, she needs to consent to the same reason, whether of instrumental status or admitted as the basis of knowledge. Otherwise, she cannot hope to find any other conception of truth, at the risk of not knowing what she is looking for.

Keywords: skepticism • cogito ergo sum • paradox • Descartes • modern philosophy

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1. Introduction

The issue regarding the foundation of knowledge gained a new approach after the Cartesian revolution in the 17th century. The problem of widespread doubt posed by skeptics of the period highlighted a possible paradox: if I doubt everything, should I doubt that I doubt? Or else: if reason is a necessary condition for doubt, could the validity of reason not be subject to doubt?¹ Or even, if we must seek validation of reason, what would it be and how to establish it in an indubitable way? Descartes put the question in the first person in the “Metaphysical Meditations”: when trying to doubt everything, I think and exist² and was accused of not having doubted the “I”, but even taking reason in its metaphysical form [if there is doubt(s), there is thought(s) and there is existence(s)], the problem remains³.

In short, what I call the “skeptical paradox” consists of doubt about doubt, or rather, the attempt to cast doubt on the consciousness of being doubting. If this doubt is possible, what would be its consequences? If it presupposes second-degree doubt and so on indefinitely, it will lead us back to infinity. If, on the other hand, reason itself doubts itself, we would generate a vicious circle. Or if, finally, no doubt is possible



in this case, then the skeptic must give in to the certainty of the *cogito*, even if this contradicts her purpose of doubting all things.

These imputations that are being put to the skeptic above remind us of the three problems of validating knowledge, which were attributed to dogmatic philosophers by skeptics, and which are popularly known as “Agrippa’s Trilemma” or “Münchhausen’s Trilemma”, namely, that every attempt to substantiate knowledge can lead us to 1) a return to infinity; 2) a vicious circle; or 3) an arbitrary stop.⁴ Let us note that not only does the validation of knowledge become problematic in this situation, but also the doubt about doubt itself becomes embarrassing.

There are philosophers like David Hume who, faced with the fact that reason does not find its point of support, that is, that it does not find a basis based on human knowledge due to the impossibility of avoiding one of the three consequences mentioned above, think that we should grant victory to the skeptic, at least as long as these questions are debated and reflected in their own environments, as he says in his “Treatise of Human Nature”: “we have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all” (1978, p. 268). Passages by Michel de Montaigne, Blaise Pascal and Pierre Bayle also help us understand this skeptical dichotomy and offer support, as an alternative, in blind faith without a complete rational basis for belief, as understood, for example, by Richard Popkin⁵ (2003).

But, understanding that doubt about reason necessarily leads to a paradox, Descartes maintains that it is not possible to doubt reason itself, since it is necessary to use it to conceive doubt itself. Reason, therefore, would be the undoubted basis of human understanding. And, based on this certainty, Descartes reveals the existence of a thinking substance, *res cogitans*, which could not be doubted by any skeptic. As Shaftesbury says in his “Exercises” (*Askhmata*), if Pyrrho wishes to doubt the existence of the mind, he must use it to contradict this certainty (2014, p. 149). Spinoza also presents an interesting attack on the skeptic here: if all we have in our minds are ideas as sensations, doubt would be just the sensation of one idea confused with another, while certainty, the pure and clear intellection of an idea, the which would avoid the recurrence of the paradox (2000, p. 33).

In this article I will present possible ways of dealing with the problem, adopted both by the position that sustains the self-evidence of reason and skeptical in this aspect; however, embarrassments are generated by the two philosophical positions: because, while the dogmatist finds it difficult to prove that the *cogito* is self-sustaining, that is, that it does not need any other internal or external validation of knowledge, the skeptic, if she enters into a debate with whoever intends to find validation of reason, it also runs the risk of suffering criticism because, (1) it either uses reason of the same status in the debate against the dogmatic, so that it serves as a basis to substantiate any truth, or (2) it does not appear to be appropriate to dialogue philosophically, for not finding an adequate way to rationally conduct the debate.

Thus, based on the discussions between Descartes and Hume, Spinoza and Bayle, it is necessary to clarify what type of reason we are dealing with. Apparently, one of the serious problems in modern philosophy is the lack of clarity on this point. If by “reason” we are referring to a form of understanding that is useful and appropriate for us in all our practical and intellectual activities, not excluding philosophy, I believe that both skeptics and the so-called “dogmatists” could reach a consensus about many of their philosophical disagreements.

2. The Skeptical Paradox

The problem of skeptical self-reference was presented in a very clear and explicit way at the end of the 17th century by Pierre Bayle, but it also appears, in different forms, in other philosophers, such as Pascal, Hume and Montaigne.⁶ Bayle presents it in the article “Pyrrhon”, rem. C, from his “Historical and Critical Dictionary”.

When one is able to comprehend well all the tropes set forth by Sextus Empiricus for suspending judgment, one realizes that this logic is the greatest effort of subtlety that the human mind has been able to accomplish. But, at the same time, one sees that this subtlety is in no way satisfactory. It confounds itself; for if it were solid, it would prove that it is certain that we ought to be in doubt. There would then be some certitude; there would then be a criterion or sure rule of truth. Now this ruins that system, but do not fear that it will come to this, the reasons for doubting being themselves doubtful. We must then doubt if it is necessary to doubt. How great a chaos, and how great a torment for the human mind! It seems therefore that this unfortunate state is the most proper one of all for convincing us that our reason is a path that leads us astray since, when it displays itself with the greatest subtlety, it plunges us into such an abyss. The natural conclusion of this ought to be to renounce this guide and to implore the cause of all things to give us a better one (1991, pp. 205-206).

Bayle refers here (1) to the problem of whether it is certain that it is necessary to doubt everything, which generates a contradiction; and (2) whether we can say that the reasons for doubting are doubtful! Thus, he concludes that reason alone is a “misguided path”, and the solution to this is to seek another guide. That guide is faith, as he explains further: “A man is therefore happily disposed toward faith when he knows how defective reason is. This is why Pascal and others have said that in order to convert the libertines they should make them realize the weakness of reason and teach them to distrust it” (1991, p. 206). Bayle’s formula here is similar to that proposed by Pascal and other modern skeptics (possibly La Mothe Le Vayer, who he quotes in the same part), which is: to know the weaknesses of reason and open the way to faith.

In Pascal, the paradox generated by someone's attempt to doubt that she doubts appears in aphorism 164 of his "Pensées" in the Anthony Levi edition. There, he portrays man in the same chaotic and unhappy state denounced by Bayle, but he seems to be more incisive in showing that both skeptical and dogmatic philosophies are incapable of freeing him from his condition, presenting both the one who doubts reason and the one who trusts it – the so-called dogmatic – as paradoxical: "Be aware then, proud men, what a paradox you are to yourselves!" (1995, p. 42). The skeptic and the dogmatist, each in their own sect,⁷ experience the contradiction of belonging to any of them and, faced with their inability to remain faithful to reason or not, they can only admit the confusion and regrettable human condition, recognizing themselves, thus, incapable of both accepting and renouncing their own situation of being a thinker. There is no way out, because "[...] those who think they can remain neutral are Pyrrhonists *par excellence*" - author's emphasis (1995, p. 41). "Listen to God" is the only hope for Pascal (in the same fragment).

What will we do in this state of mind? Shall we cast doubt on everything? Shall we doubt if we are awake if we are pinched, if we are burnt? Will we doubt whether we doubt? Will we doubt that we exist at all? We cannot get to that stage, and I am quite certain that no truly genuine Pyrrhonist has ever existed. Nature upholds powerlessness of reason and prevents it ever reaching that stage of lunacy. [...] What a figment of the imagination human beings are! What a novelty, what monsters! Chaotic, contradictory, prodigious, judging everything, mindless worm of the earth, storehouse of truth, cesspool of uncertainty and error, glory and reject of the universe. Who will unravel this tangle? [...] Nature confounds Pyrrhonists and reason confounds dogmatists. What will then become of you, men who are looking for your true condition through your natural reason? You cannot avoid one of these sects nor survive in either. Be aware then, proud men, what a paradox you are to yourselves! Humble yourself, powerless reason! Be silent, foolish nature! Learn that humanity infinitely transcends humanity and hear from your Master your true condition of which you are unaware. Listen to God. (1995, pp. 41-42).

Montaigne, who also portrays the Pyrrhonian as the most prepared to receive from heaven what she needs (1976, p. 520), refers to reason's inability to validate itself in the following way:

To judge the appearances that we receive of objects, we would need a judicatory instrument; to verify this instrument, we need a demonstration; to verify the demonstration, an instrument: there we are in a circle. Since the senses cannot decide our dispute, being themselves full of uncertainty, it must be reason that does so. No reason can be established without another reason: there we go retreating back to infinity. (1976, p. 616).

What instrument or criteria should be used to assess the validity of the reason? And, if we have such an instrument available, how will we know if the second one is reliable? We are thus, “faced with an impasse”. We would necessarily have to admit an arbitrary stop in the chain of reasoning or admit *ad infinitum*, which does not satisfy the problem either, since the validation of the senses would require a determination of reason, and that, another, and so on to infinity.

The other way out would be to try to find a principle to legitimize reason and, to legitimize that principle, use reason itself, but in this case, we will fall into a vicious circle. This criticism was made by Hume, among others, to Descartes:

There is a species of scepticism, *antecedent* to all study and philosophy, which is much inculcated by Descartes and others, as a sovereign preservative against error and precipitate judgment. It recommends an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they, we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning, deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful. But neither is there any such original principle, which has a prerogative above others, that are self-evident and convincing: Or if there were, could we advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are supposed to be already diffident (1975, pp. 149-50. Author’s emphasis).

Cartesian skepticism, labeled “antecedent” by Hume, would be nothing more than a “sovereign preservative” of all unreflective judgment in philosophy, and would encompass not only our preconceived opinions, but also our cognitive faculties. The only solution to this kind of skepticism, Hume explains, would be the foundation of a principle that was prior to the others, that could resist widespread doubt and that was not “fallacious or deceitful”. The Humean critique indicates that the “original principle” or, in this case, the Cartesian *cogito* would have to be extracted from some external (prior) foundation, or at least from the same level as it. And even if the *cogito* could be read as a first principle, it would not allow us to advance a step beyond its self-evidence unless we could make use of some other principles of the very faculties that had previously been doubted. As can be seen, such use would immediately send us into the so-called vicious circle.

3. The Criterion of Truth

The epistemological problem posed here is the following: what criterion of truth, if any, must be admitted so that we can base human knowledge? According to Descartes, there is a truth that is given *a priori*, before any questioning. This is confirmed when he tries to raise universal doubt about all things, that is, about their senses,

the existence of the external world, mathematical truths and his own existence. By casting doubt on everything that is external to doubt itself, he realizes that doubt is a rational presupposition. Thus, reason legitimizes itself; it is necessary for the entire method of doubt. But, on the other hand, I only know that my reason is reliable because of a justification external to it: that of God, whose existence is also demonstrated by rational proofs, as he announces in the “Summary of the Six Meditations” (1897, vol. IX, p. 11).⁸

Denis Diderot, in the same way, understood well the consequences of the position of the skeptic who doubts everything, but hopes that the good use of reason or the senses will resolve his own doubts: “What is a skeptic? He is a philosopher who has doubted everything she believes, and who believes what a legitimate use of her reason and her senses has demonstrated to her to be true: do you want something more precise?” (my translation) (1777, p. 55, aphorism 30). From another perspective, many contemporary authors see global skepticism as self-refuting. Richard Fumerton, for example, argues that, if “reasoning is defective we can’t use it to conclude that it is defective”, e “if it is true that we don’t know anything, it follows that we don’t know that we don’t know anything” (2006, pp. 118-19). These and other criticisms, both by modern and contemporary authors, involving the contrariety of doubting everything and presupposing some commitment to reason are well known and have the purpose of rendering skepticism about reason innocuous.

But, by asking the dogmatist for rational explanations, would the skeptic be committing herself to the validity of reason in philosophical debates? According to Sextus’ explanation, the skeptic always follows what is apparent without dogmatizing, whether when it agrees with the senses or when it conforms to reason, as will be seen below. If she therefore asks for a rational explanation for the theses raised by the dogmatist, she is simply using one of the *ad hominem* modalities, that is, she is trying to verify whether the dogmatist contradicts himself based on the assumptions he himself admits. Furthermore, the skeptic’s task is to investigate (in an *a posteriori* way) and, therefore, the skeptic could only abandon reason after following it to the end.⁹ Such distrust towards reason, however, does not mean that the skeptic is an anti-rationalist or misologist, as Verdan says, although it seems that the skeptic has a “frustrated love” for reason (1998, pp. 45-6).

It was the dogmatists, says Montaigne, who took us out of our “natural state” of accepting the entire world in an apparent way and imposed on us a pretentious reason that has the function of explaining, justifying and controlling everything that surrounds us. Therefore, it is not fair to object to the skeptic with criticisms such as “the man who doubted heat was told to throw himself into the fire” and the like (1976, p. 556).

Against Descartes, the skeptic could claim that she does not assert that she doubts, but that it only *seems* to her that doubt occurs, that is, the skeptic suspends judgment

even over her own doubt (she practices *epoché* over *epoché*, as Bayle says). In other words, she uses doubt and reason in an instrumental and pragmatic way, without determining her doubt categorically. The assertion would therefore nullify itself, indicating only her mental state. Montaigne (1976, p. 542), following Sextus (OS I, XXVIII), explains that, just as rhubarb expels itself when it expels its humours, the propositions “I ignore” and “I doubt” when pronounced disappear, in a similar way, with the rest of the sentence.

Montaigne further states that, if someone clearly establishes her doubt, the skeptic’s task is to prove that doubt does not exist in her, or that it cannot be demonstrated that such doubt has any basis (1976, p. 517). The whole problem, he continues, would be in our language, which is incomplete and insufficient. To avoid such inconveniences and, in the absence of a more precise language, Montaigne’s solution is to state the question in the interrogative: instead of using “I doubt” or “I know nothing”, he finds more success stating “What do I know?” (in original, *Que sais je?*) (1976, p. 542).

However, we could counterattack by saying that, if a statement can disappear along with doubt, doubt loses its essence, and ceases to be constituted as doubt. Now, once there is no doubt, there is no skepticism, and the problem would solve itself. In the dialogue “The Search for Truth”, Descartes, in the voice of Eudoxus, asks whether someone can doubt their own doubt, remaining uncertain whether she is doubting or not (1826, p. 353). For Descartes, whatever takes place within us must be the object of our consciousness, and doubting is nothing more than a kind of thought. So, if I doubt, I must know that I doubt.

The question underlying this controversy between the skeptic and Descartes’ *cogito* seems to be the legitimization of truth. Does the awareness of being thinking serve as a guarantee of the truth, or do I need external validation of it? In two of Descartes’ famous answers to this question, the author indicates that the *cogito* validates itself,¹⁰ but elsewhere, he tries to justify his assertion by divine guarantee, which may lead him to the famous Cartesian circle mentioned above.

Spinoza, in turn, in the “Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect”, argues, with Descartes, that “for proving the truth, and for valid reasoning, we need no other means than the truth and valid reasoning themselves: for by valid reasoning I have established valid reasoning [...]” (2000, p. 19).

If there yet remains some sceptic, who doubts of our primary truth, and of all deductions we make, taking such truth as our standard, he must either be arguing in bad faith, or we must confess that there are men in complete mental blindness either innate or due to misconceptions—that is, to some external influence. Such persons are not conscious of themselves. If they affirm or doubt anything, they know not that they affirm or doubt: they say that they know nothing, and they say that they are ignorant of the very fact

of their knowing nothing. Even this they do not affirm absolutely, they are afraid of confessing that they exist, so long as they know nothing; in fact, they ought to remain dumb, for fear of haply supposing which should smack of truth. [...] If they deny, grant, or gainsay, they know not that they deny, grant, or gainsay, so that they ought to be regarded as automata, utterly devoid of intelligence (Spinoza 2000, pp. 19-20).

Here is the answer to Montaigne's "Que sais je?": either it is admitted that doubt occurs in the thinking subject, or we are dealing with an automaton or a being without a spirit. In fact, Montaigne makes use of similar assertions to show, unlike Spinoza, that it is the skeptic who is always at an advantage when it comes to admitting the contradictions of her own understanding.

The Pyrrhonians have kept themselves a wonderful advantage in combat, having rid themselves of the need to cover up. It does not matter to them that they are struck, provided they strike; and they do their work with everything. If they win, your proposition is lame; if you win, theirs is. If they lose, they confirm ignorance; if you lose, you confirm it. If they prove that nothing is known, well and good; if they do not know how to prove it, just as good. (Montaigne 1976, p. 518).

While Spinoza says that the skeptic does not seem aware of herself when raising problems related to her own understanding, Montaigne believes that such complications lead the skeptic precisely to doubt the capabilities of our reasoning. And, while Spinoza suggests that a skeptic of this type has some problem of birth or spirit, or that she should remain silent as if she were an automaton, Aristotle compares this person who thinks and does not think indifferently and does not form any judgment about the things that surround it with a "vegetable" (*Metaphysics*, book IV, 1008b).

But, saying that this skeptic does not even know whether to doubt, deny, feel or be proven something to her, is not a criticism that skeptics would accept, because, as we have seen, they accept arguments and reasonings as they use them; they only question their universal validity, as they recognize that their effectiveness has value only as long as they are used. Many skeptics would certainly agree with the notion of sensation that Spinoza presents, a little later in the same writing:

Real doubt is never produced in the mind by the thing doubted of. In other words, if there were only one idea in the mind, whether that idea were true or false, there would be no doubt or certainty present, only a certain sensation. For an idea is in itself nothing else than a certain sensation. But doubt will arise through another idea, not clear and distinct enough for us to be able to draw any certain conclusions with regard to the matter under consideration; that is, the idea which causes us to doubt is not clear and distinct (Spinoza 2000, p. 33).

An idea that is found in the mind is, then, a sensation, and just as the skeptic accepts external sensations without questioning them (as Sextus says, for example, in OS I, X), she would also accept the internal idea in an apparent way in this case. Hume (1978, p. 190) and Descartes (1897, vol. IX, p. 29) also do not raise controversies regarding this aspect. In fact, the criticism that the skeptic would deny the presence of an idea in the mind seems to resemble the “argument from apraxia”, which refers to the denial of the senses.

The so-called “argument from apraxia or inactivity” became well known through Hume, although it appears throughout the history of philosophy, since the time of Sextus Empiricus.¹¹ Montaigne, Bayle and Descartes also mentioned it.¹² The common objection to this argument is that if the skeptic doubts the senses, then she cannot conduct herself in ordinary life and must remain inactive. And, as the skeptic obviously does not act indifferently to the things that surround her, she is often accused of even behaving like an impostor or a liar.¹³ The skeptic’s frequent response, since Sextus Empiricus, is that she has never denied the appearances of things, and that she follows her instincts and natural impulses in the conduct of life, limiting herself to questioning only the external existence of things. In this way, Spinoza’s criticism, that we have no doubt or certainty about any idea of the soul, but only sensation, would not be properly a criticism, but rather how the skeptic herself understands the issue at the moment she questions her interlocutor. The whole problem lies, as already mentioned, in wanting to attribute any value judgment of truth or falsity to one’s own sensations.

But then would the skeptic take certain data for granted, namely, her sensations, involuntary impressions and her own ideas received through instinct, without questioning? George Moore notes that we know there is something when we say we perceive a hand, in his essay “A Defense of Common Sense” (2004). This is what Augustine also maintains, when he states that our reasoning could never destroy the senses, to the point that nothing appears. And, if something appears, it is certain that something exists because, even if we suppose that everything is nothing more than a dream, whatever appears to us, we call it the *world* (1993, p. 67).

In fact, as Sextus says, the skeptic does not reject the appearance, but only the explanation of the appearance or the judgment about the apparent¹⁴ (OS I, X and XI). Appearance, therefore, is a given, mere information without any necessary relationship with what exists. But does the information itself exist? Yes, regardless of whether it is real or comes from dreams or hallucinations. To deny it would be to make the skeptic “Spinoza’s automaton” or “Arnauld’s liar”. Therefore, the skeptic is guided by the senses and reason; she just cannot say whether they are real things, metaphysically speaking. What is the criteria for deciding whether they are real? The senses themselves and reason themselves could not be part of the analysis, as they only present information to us, without validating it. Just as we would need a

second-degree reason to validate the reliability of the current reason; in the case of the senses, we would have to have access to the experience of our own experiences! As Hume well realized,

It is a question of fact, whether the perceptions of the senses be produced by external objects, resembling them: how shall this question be determined? By experience surely; as all other questions of a like nature. But here experience is, and must be entirely silent. The mind has never any thing present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects. The supposition of such a connexion is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning (Hume 1975, p. 153).

4. The External Justification of Reason

The problem mentioned here, also called the “regress problem”, is the attempt to seek external validation of reason but, when trying to do so, we realize that either this cause must lead to another and so on, or this chain must stop arbitrarily, or the reason would have to be a cause of itself. The skeptic raises doubts about the validity of reason, although she does not doubt it while she uses it, using it as justification to make a merely pragmatic use of it. In a possible interpretation, Descartes validates reason by itself in the *cogito*, and only seeks divine guarantee when he needs to use it beyond his knowledge of himself.¹⁵ But what is the need to demand external validation of reason? If the skeptic raises any doubt regarding the validity of reason, would she not be committing herself to a Cartesian-like course of inquiry concerning the requirement for an external justification of reason?

In an unfinished and not much commented book by Kierkegaard, “Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus dubitandum est”, one of the discussions is the question of the existence of a consciousness beyond the present and how it would be possible to think about it. In Chapter I of *Pars Prima*, §3, he observes, as does Descartes in certain passages, that knowledge of oneself is reduced to the current moment (1897, vol. IX, p. 19). But, for him to have this knowledge at a given moment, this present consciousness (*relative knowledge*) would depend on another consciousness (*absolute knowledge*). Furthermore, for each particular moment to have its eternal status, the individual would need to be omniscient and the world immutable. Philosophy aims to penetrate the idea of eternity and necessity in the present moment, and this would mean wanting to see what happens as what has already happened and what happens at the same time, that is, “it would mean wanting to know the future as a present and yet simultaneously as a future” (1987, p. 143).

The presupposition here is that doubt should always remain the same in consciousness, Kierkegaard continues. This would have been the desire of the moderns, who accepted to pose the doubt in a systematic and disinterested way – unlike the

Greeks, who sought *apathy* (*sic*). From this perspective, talking about an uninteresting doubt or an objective doubt would just be “playing on words” (1987, p. 170).

The problem posed here refers to the temporal aspect and the distinction between the subjective and objective, particular and eternal aspects. If doubt comes from individual reason, how can one seek, through it, a fixed point (the “archimedeal point of knowledge”, as Descartes says in “Second Meditation”, §2), to serve as validation? Or, if nothing can be thought of as fixed and constant, how can any form of knowledge be founded? Concomitantly, if the doubt about the foundation of knowledge cannot be asserted in a fixed and constant way, neither could the skeptic raise a universal doubt in the same sense.

We can draw a parallel here with Socrates’ attempt to refute the Heracliteans in the dialogue “Theaetetus”, by Plato (1921, pp. 141ss. §180 to 183). While trying to relate knowledge to perception, Theaetetus and Socrates set out to analyze whether all reality can be a continuous flow, as proposed by Heraclitus. However, if everything is constantly changing, that is, if everything is a universal flux, including the perceiver herself, how can we talk about knowledge or anything else? In other words, if nothing is fixed, not even the assertion that “nothing is fixed” could be seen as something fixed.¹⁶ Similarly, how could the skeptic maintain a constant doubt about everything without relying on any basis for his doubt, whether from reason or language?

Therefore, before being able to enunciate any idea that has a claim to knowledge or to raise any philosophical thought, it is necessary to admit something that has enough permanence to support any idea. Augustine, for example, argues, in “Against the Academicians” that, although we do not know if this world is real, we know that it is one or multiple; is finite or infinite; it was created by chance or by some Providence; is it eternal or not; and the like (1993, pp. 66-7). In other words, logical disjunctions, such as Aristotle’s first principles or the mathematical truths that the Cartesian *Malin Génie* tried to destroy, are presupposed before any reasoning.¹⁷

But, of course, the skeptic can assent to Aristotle’s first principles even in an apparent way, without granting them any truth status. However, let’s continue the question: is it possible for a skeptic to admit any ideas and principles without consenting to them?

For Burnyeat, in the famous article “Can the skeptic live his skepticism?”, the skeptic seems to state the following: “it is thought within me that p, but I do not believe it”. Although impression and assent are logically independent, in the philosophical case, it is not possible to have the impression of something without also having its assent, as that being true.¹⁸

For if, beneath its disguise as a mere passive affection, the philosophical impression includes assent, it ought to make no sense for the sceptic to insist that he does not assent to it as true. That would be to contemplate a further act of assent to the assent already given. If the sceptic does insist, if he

refuses to identify with his assent, he is as it were detaching himself from the person (namely, himself) who was convinced by the argument, and he is treating his own thought as if it were the thought of someone else, someone thinking thoughts within him. He is saying, in effect, 'It is thought within me that p, but I do not believe it' (2012, p. 234).

Burnyeat refers here to the dichotomy promoted especially by the Cartesian revolution: that it is possible to think and investigate something without believing or giving assent to it, according to the interpretation adopted here. Descartes, as Gaukroger says, sees a divergence between looking like 2 plus 3 is 5 and actually adding up to 5. The *cogito*, in the same way, would claim to be a judgment, but Descartes realized that there is a coincidence between appearing to be thinking and I'm really thinking (1995, p. 340). The problem is aggravated when, after finding the model of truth in the *cogito*, Descartes seeks to substantiate the other ideas using the same method. Spinoza, on the other hand, protests against any validation of our own understanding: "it is also evident that, for the certainty of truth, no further sign is necessary beyond the possession of a true idea: for, as I have shown, it is not necessary to know that we know that we know" (2000, p. 15).

By trying to validate his reason in an externalist, objective, immutable and absolute way, Descartes creates problems for modernity, and post-Cartesian philosophy starts to teach us that we cannot truly know how I and the world are, without previously admitting a certain worldview and trying to understand ourselves and the world the way God does. The skeptic, when proceeding in the same way, can claim that this is not a requirement of her, but of modern philosophy. All she would be doing, by asking for external validation of her reasoning, is playing the modern game, to see how much it sustains. Although some, such as Spinoza, propose that external legitimation of reason is not necessary in this case, a skeptic would be reluctant to accept any universal conception of reason that underlies her reasoning, always limiting herself to that portrayed as a pragmatic and instrumental tool.

5. The Skeptic and the Truth

It is pertinent to conclude these considerations with the following question: is it the skeptic's task to seek the truth for herself? Or does she just ask questions based on assumptions from other philosophies? The paradox of the validation of reason helps us understand that the skeptic, when she tries to doubt the legitimacy of her own reason, either needs to admit that she uses a reason of the same status as her interlocutor to continue the debate, or needs to abandon her purpose of find the truth.

After all, what status should we grant to reason in this discussion that is so present in modern philosophy? Philosophers of the period do not always seem to agree on this

parameter. Descartes, especially when dealing with the *cogito* in his writings, presents a self-sufficient reason, which does not need any external guarantee. Spinoza also presents this defense explicitly in his “Treatise”, as already mentioned, but both Bayle and Pascal in the excerpts presented here realize that reason needs external legitimation in the context of modern philosophy, and Descartes himself tries to provide a guarantee for the clear and distinct truths in his “Fourth Meditation”. The task of the modern skeptic here is to demand the foundation of the bases of this philosophy and, as long as she does not find it (or while her opponent does not provide it), she continues using a reason that is sufficient for her purposes, as Hume says (1975, p. 160), or that can serve as a “guide of life”, as stated in Sextus (2007, pp. 09 & 71)

When the skeptic proposes any question, therefore, does she elaborate a reasoning outside the philosophical thought in question or is she just extracting possible refutations internal to that system, which would inadvertently have escaped the observation of her proponent? If she reasons from her own thoughts, she expects an answer that satisfies her and, therefore, trusts reason as an instrument or criterion to discern what is true or, at least, credible. If, on the other hand, she explains that she makes use of a reason admitted by the dogmatist in question, but not agreed by the skeptic with regard to its objectivity and universality, she at least needs to make use of it in a pragmatic way for the debate to take place. And what pragmatic form would this be if not the one that so many philosophers consider necessary for science and philosophy? Even if philosophy uses a merely instrumental reason without divine validation in its investigations, we still have a commitment to it. As Hume says, we continue using the only instrument we have at our disposal, namely, “a false reason and none at all” (1978, p. 268).

Furthermore, we must admit that if we are dealing with fundamental questions of epistemology, that is, with the preconditions for any kind of thought, with questions related to the *cogito*, the grounding of human understanding and first principles; When we are attentive to such thoughts, therefore, we are dealing with what we call Reason. If the skeptic, when she raises questions pertinent to the very legitimacy of reason and, thus hopes to find a definitive answer to that question, she has to know what conditions are necessary for that answer to emerge. Otherwise, she will have no mechanisms to evaluate such a response.

If, however, the skeptic only demands a justification of reason on the basis of some particular philosophical theory, she must rationally consent to the theses of that supposed system at least as long as she goes through it. Even a *posteriori* investigation requires that one consent to its premises, *at least at the time it is undertaken*.¹⁹ There is at least a provisional commitment here regarding the validity of the reason,²⁰ since otherwise no one can ever achieve the supposed truth they are looking for.

But wouldn't it be possible to remain receptive to other possibilities of explanation about the real nature of our reason, in order to justify the *Malin Génie* hypothesis?

Believing that there may be reasons beyond those that have been or are being offered for the foundation of knowledge is a belief that would need reasons to be put into discussion,²¹ and this would lead us back to the paradox.

What if the skeptic considers her cognitive processes as passing ideas, without any determination, as Sextus, followed by Montaigne, presents when comparing rhubarb with our thoughts, or as a subjective thought, as Kierkegaard says? What if everything is a universal flow, as presented by Plato? In fact, we can understand our reason as something that will die with the human species and reasoning as things that are not fixed by anything, but this does not prevent us from being able to record our thoughts for a considerable period of human history, as in fact we have done so far.

Furthermore, if the skeptic considers the metaphysical hypothesis that everything is a flow (at least as she reflects on it), there is still some momentary commitment here regarding our own thoughts. If the skeptic thinks about the opposite thesis (that our thoughts are perhaps not in a constant flow), she continues to consider something while thinking about it. Any questioning that occurs in someone's mind is an action, a deliberative act or a reflection towards the truth.

In fact, the skeptical procedure, since Sextus Empiricus – see, for example, OS, book I, chap. IV – consists of examining all the data on a given question with an impartial eye. Let us remember that the term “skeptic” comes from *skepsis* (related to the action of examining, observing, considering, investigating and looking carefully). The skeptic, continues Sextus, willingly receives ideas and appearances in order to compare them with each other. And, after receiving the data, whether coming from the senses, habits and customs or ideas on a certain subject, she carries out a careful comparative examination until reaching the suspension of judgment (*epoché*). All this without calling into question, up to this point, the very reason that examines and investigates the truth.

The skeptic, however, makes it clear that she cannot confidently affirm that truth is either attainable or unattainable (to avoid the risk of dogmatizing), but she does not renounce the search for truth (according to Sextus, OS I, I) and, therefore, she still hopes to find her. What hopes could those be? If, on the other hand, she doesn't claim to find anything significant, what's the point of research?

Moderns philosophers, when dealing with the question, also consider the skeptic as someone who longs for some truth. Montaigne, in his “Apology” (1976, p. 577), Bayle (in the entry “Pyrrhon”, rem. A, from his “Dictionary”) and La Mothe Le Vayer (in his skeptical dialogues), for example, portray the skepticism as a search for truth. In the Letter to the Author in his “Cinq Dialogues”, says Le Vayer: “If our philosophical discourses need asylum and protection, let them find it in the force of truth, and in the authority of reason” (my translation) (1716, second page, not numbered). In the same way, Hume says about the academic skeptic: “every passion is mortified by it, except the love of truth [...]” (1975, p. 41). Now, what is this truth that skeptics

would be looking for if not one that seems evident from the point of view of reason?

Finally, possibly the only way to avoid the skeptic's challenges, as Hume (1975, p. 170) says, is to refuse to debate her. But to what extent is this possible? Porchat thinks that the only way to do this would be to practice silence, as a refusal to practice philosophy. Only this denial of philosophy would make it possible to abandon investigative skepticism and completely return to common life (1981, chapter VII).

However, thinking of reason and the senses as mere instruments for our conduct in the world without ever pronouncing on their legitimacy, leads us to the vision of someone who abandoned philosophy and fully adhered to common sense, as Porchat perceives, to simply satisfy your psychological needs in a therapeutic way. Because, if she still hopes to find the truth, she needs to agree with some mechanism to make this possible. Otherwise, the skeptic could be exposed to the criticism of not knowing what she is looking for, and this would legitimize Hume's criticism about the uselessness of skepticism for the progress of knowledge (1975, pp. 159-160).

Thus, the modern skeptic would find herself unable to raise questions regarding the paradox or validity of reason, under penalty of self-contradiction or being unable to clarify what kind of doubt she refers to. For, whether accepting the search for the external validation of reason or assuming that everything is a continuous flow, including the ideas of reason itself, the skeptic must find herself engaged in one of these assumptions before embarking on any investigation into truth. If she intends to suspend judgment even about which investigative tool she should adopt before any undertaking, she can never be recognized as truly skeptical.

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Notes

¹The term “reason” here refers to cognitive states in general, and may involve both “consciousness” and “cognitive faculties”. The term is being used loosely to follow the passages of the philosophers cited below, who use it to refer to both processes of self-awareness and the reliability of human understanding in general.

²In Latin, *ego sum, ego existo* (1897, vol. VII, p. 25) and, in the French edition: *je suis, j'existe* (1897, vol. IX, p. 19). The term, however, became popularized from the *ego cogito ergo sum* version, which appears in the "Principles of Philosophy" (1897, vol. VIII, p. 07). Another question concerns the scope of Cartesian doubt. Here, I follow the interpretation that Descartes would have tried to question not only his senses and the existence of the external world, but also mathematical truths and his own existence, but ends up recognizing that it is not possible to doubt self-evident truths, as will become clear below. For authors who adopt this reading, see Popkin (2003, p. 149), Dicker (1993, p. 22) and Kenny (1995, p. 17ff). For an alternative interpretation, that is, that Descartes never doubts self-evident truths, see Margaret Wilson (1991, pp. 58; 131-5).

³The problem was pointed out by several contemporary authors, such as Anthony Kenny (1995, p. 62) and Georges Dicker (1993, p. 49). Descartes also receives from Hyperaspistes the observation that there is no way of knowing whether it is I who thinks or whether it is the world-soul who thinks about me, as the Platonists argue. On this, see Descartes' correspondence, edition by Adam and Tannery (1897, vol. III, p. 404).

⁴Note that the accountability to the skeptic that I make here only "reminds us" of the imputation that the skeptic Agrippa made to the dogmatist, for the former occurs in another context. The popularly known trilemma is attributed to the philosopher Agrippa (end of the 1st century), who presented five ways of suspending judgment to refute the "rashness" of dogmatists, according to Sextus Empiricus (in "Outlines of skepticism" – from now on, OS – I, XV), although he does not name Agrippa, and attributes such modes to the "more recent skeptics" (2007, pp. 40-3). It is Diogenes Laertius who informs us that it is Agrippa in "Lives of Eminent Philosophers", in the entry "Pyrrho", IX, 88. It is also worth mentioning that Sextus deals with the problem of criteria in OS II, IV (2007, p. 72). The term "Münchhausen Trilemma" comes from Hans Albert (1921-2023), and was taken from the anecdote of Baron Münchhausen, who allegedly sank into a swamp with his horse and managed to get out of there by pulling his own wig, in "Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvelous Travels and Campaigns in Russia" from 1785.

⁵The purpose of the article is not to exhaust the discussion about the skepticisms of such philosophers, nor to attribute labels to any of them, but to present a possible relationship between modes of skeptical doubts and dogmatic forms of thought present in modernity from selected passages from authors of the period.

⁶Historically, Montaigne first presents the problem in his "Essays" in 1580. After the Cartesian Revolution, variations of the argument appear in Pascal's "Pensées" (1670), Bayle's "Dictionary" (1696) and Hume's "Enquiry" (1748). However, the presentation of the problem in this article begins with Bayle and Pascal, because they formulated the question in a more explicit and detailed way than Montaigne, who refers to it in passing way. The discussion is then presented in Hume, with a skeptical formulation slightly different from that of the philosophers of the previous century, who link their doubts, in one way or another, with faith.

⁷By the way, Hume asks us to be careful when attributing the term "sect" to the skeptic in the "Dialogues concerning natural religion" (1970, p. 87), attentive, therefore, to the protests of skeptics who say they are not part of any sect or support any doctrine, according to Sextus Empiricus (OS I, VIII).

⁸This could generate the problem known as the "Cartesian Circle" or "Arnauld Circle",

but we will not deal with it here. In general terms, the problem consists of Descartes' supposed inconsistency in establishing that everything we perceive clearly and distinctly is true because God exists and has no intention of deceiving us, and, on the other hand, ensuring that God exists and is not deceiving because we can conceive such truth clearly and distinctly. Descartes faces the possible problem mainly in Replies to Arnauld's Objections (1897, vol. IX, pp. 160ss).

⁹As Sextus says, one of the denominations of skeptical thought is that of being investigative (*zetetic*) (OS I, III).

¹⁰That is, our own thinking is enough to find the truth. In the "Replies to the Second Objections", Descartes responds that we should not care about those who believe that everything we think is false in the eyes of God or the angels, since we have no reason to believe this and, in the "Replies to the Fifth Objections", says that trying to imagine our ideas as "fictions of the spirit" is "to close the door to reason, and be content to be a Monkey or a Parrot, and no longer a Man [...]" (my translation) (1897, vol. IX, pp. 109 e 212).

¹¹For example, in Aristotle, "Metaphysics" IV, 1008b; Diogenes Laertius, "Lives of Eminent Philosophers", IX, 62; Lucian, "Hermotimus, or the Rival Philosophies" (*apud* Verdan 1998, pp. 59-62).

¹²Montaigne, in the essay "Apology of Raimond Sebond" (1976, p. 556); Descartes, in the letter to the translator and in art. 3 of the "Principles of Philosophy" for example, and in the Summary of his "Meditations"; Bayle, in the articles "Pyrrhon", rem. D, and "Zenon", rem. K, from "Historical and critical dictionary". Hume presents it in a more sophisticated way, mainly in his writings on skepticism ("Enquiry" sect. XII; "Treatise" I, IV, VII).

¹³The authors Arnauld and Nicole, in "Logic or the Art of Thinking", for example, state that "Pyrrhonism is not a sect of people who are convinced of what they say, but it is a sect of liars" (my translation) (1992, p. 12). In the "Dialogues", Hume repeats this accusation through the character Cleanthes but, shortly afterwards, disagrees with the term *liar* and replaces it with *jesters or railers* (1970, p. 12).

¹⁴It is important to note that the skeptical doubt of Sextus' ancient philosophy concerned the phenomena themselves (whether or not appearance conforms to reality) and not the external world in its entirety, as later became popular with Descartes.

¹⁵See, for example, John Cottingham (1986, pp. 70-1).

¹⁶Remembering that Sextus, in OS I, VII, shows that the skeptic does not dogmatize when he makes assertions such as "in no way more"; "I determine nothing", etc.

¹⁷Descartes, in the doubt of the "First Meditation", seems to have relied on certain assumptions known "intuitively", such as the notion of truth, existence, certainty, principles of self-contradiction and "natural light". See, for example, "Rules for the Direction of the Mind", Rule Twelfth, "The Search for Truth" (1826, p. 369), and "Principles of Philosophy", first part, art. 10. Besides, I could not say (or think), for example, "I think and I do not think" or, as Hintikka notes, even the sentences "I do not think" and "I do not exist" are self-refuting since they are performative (1996).

¹⁸Burnyeat closes his text by stating that, in this case, Hume and the ancient skeptics are right in their interpretations of the problem, since they did not detach themselves from themselves, and did not try to live a life without beliefs.

¹⁹Descartes also realizes, in "Meditations" II, 7, that the *cogito* is valid only at the moment he is aware of it.

²⁰It is possible to infer that the philosophy of the academic skeptic (which is generally portrayed as following “the most credible” or “the most probable” in ancient and modern literature), would find it easier to admit a provisional reason for use in their investigations. On the criterion of conduct of the academic skeptic, see, for example, Montaigne (1976, pp. 577), La Mothe Le Vayer (1716, vol. II, pp. 13-4, 24, 46, 62-3, 233-4), Sextus Empiricus (2007, p. 61), Cicero (“Academica Priora” I, XI).

²¹In the “First Meditation”, Descartes states that he needs “reasons for doubt”, although the reason for supposing the existence of an Evil Genius in itself is not seen as reasonable from the point of view of philosophy and science today.