

THE FATHER OF MODERN DOUBT

A Study of Descartes

THE following words will be an attempt to analyse the cause of the Cartesian Doubt, which, in our opinion, still lives as an intellectual disease in some of the noblest minds of our age.

1. It is our conviction that the universe and man are wholes or unities. Indeed each in its own way and both when united are such wholes or unities that any separation of a part is fatal to the whole. To exemplify : the laws of ethics will be found to be, in the end, sound economic laws. Theft, if not repressed by a commonwealth, will in the end destroy the commonwealth. Or again, the laws of mathematics, if denied, will mean the denial of the laws of psychology. Or the denial of ' Thou shalt not commit adultery ' will spread contagious disease. Or again, voluntary individual poverty will increase communal wealth.

2. Moreover, as man is a moral unity as well as an intellectual unity, man's intellectual acts may be moral acts. Hence what is intellectually possible may be morally wrong; even as some acts, such as deliberate drunkenness, which are physically possible, may be intellectually harmful.

3. Man, like every other created being, is an imperfect being. Not only is he imperfect in being but in acting.

Moreover, since man can act deliberately some of his defective acts may be deliberate. But as man is master of his deliberate acts by his will, man's deliberate defective acts, of body or soul, are moral faults. Acts attributable to the will are chargeable to the will.

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4. Hence the need of an accurate use of such words as *power* or *possibility*, with their equivalent verb *can*.

When it is said 'Man's free-will has the *power* to sin' we are not expressing a power but a weakness; not a perfection but a defect. In other words, just as we cannot express non-being except in terms of being, so neither can we express defect except in terms of perfection, or weakness except in terms of power.

5. When, therefore, Descartes says, or implies, that 'man *can* doubt of everything,' the word *can* expresses not a moral permission but only an intellectual possibility. Man has, perhaps, such an intellectual weakness that he may doubt of everything, just as man's brain has such a physical weakness that it may cease to function if it is tampered with.

But man is morally responsible for so tampering with his brain that it does not function. And man is morally responsible for doubting, or at least saying that he doubts, of everything. In other words man can, intellectually but not morally, doubt of everything.

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6. Descartes is the Father not merely of Modern Doubt, but, in large measure, of modern Algebra. He is a mathematician, therefore he belonged to the group whom Plato would disqualify for the profession of philosophy. But if mathematics in Plato's day unfitted a man to be a philosopher, the further evolution of mathematics into Algebra had doubly justified Plato's wisdom.

7. The new science of Algebra had made it possible to forget that the non-being was not being and that the impossible was not possible. When X.Y.Z. could be taken to mean, not any thing but anything, even a no-thing, mathematical problems when sufficiently prolonged or subtle might arrive at specious sophism.

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Thus X might be made to represent such an absurdity as $2 + 2 = \sqrt{3}$. Or we might be fascinated by the cloaked absurdity of $\sqrt{-1}$.

It was dangerous enough to have our minds dust-blinded by the fallacy of π , as if a curve could ever be fitly or scientifically expressed as a straight line. But whereas these attempt to express one thing in terms of a disparate thing (substance in terms of accident, quality in terms of quantity, will in terms of intellect, understanding in terms of cerebration) Descartes' algebraic inroad into philosophy meant that we could apply to reality a method that could assume the unreal to be real, the untrue to be true.

8. In matters of Algebra the assumption that X was the impossible, and therefore the untrue, could lead to developments as intricate and interesting as skilled chess-play. A science of *imaginaries*, though dealing primarily with the impossible might in the end work itself out to a kind of self-consistency which seemed to betoken self-existence.

9. Moreover false assumptions, worked out logically may sometimes issue in the truth. Thus in the syllogism :

All Turks are named René
Descartes is a Turk
Therefore Descartes is named René

truth comes from assumed untruth.

Yet, it must be remembered that untruth may also issue in untruth even when worked out logically ; thus :

All Turks are named Edmund
Descartes is a Turk
Therefore Descartes is named Edmund.

But *truth* logically worked out can never issue in untruth. In other words untruth can yield truth only ' by accident '—whereas truth yields truth ' per se.'

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From this we can see the importance of gathering truth only from assumptions that are true. If indeed having started from untruth the mind can come to the truth this is hardly more than a lucky accident without claim on the thought of a scientific philosopher.

10. Descartes was right, as Augustine was right, in telling the sceptic who doubted that at least he did not doubt of his doubt. Strangely enough it was this truth with its *reductio ad absurdum* which alone could move minds ill or wilful enough to doubt of everything. And this mode of convincing, or at least convicting universal doubters was no less needed in the days of Descartes than in the days of Augustine, because ailments of the mind, like ailments of the body, have to be first-aided, not with food, but with medicine and even drugs.

11. Yet it was not this Augustinian *reductio ad absurdum* which Descartes passed on as the bacillus of modern doubt; it was the self-refuted doubt. Descartes had parted company with the larger mind of Augustine by looking upon this universal doubt as not merely possible but almost praiseworthy. Every mind could—and the scientific mind should—begin with doubting if anything was true, in the chivalrous quest of finding if anything was true. In other words the mind was to be certain of what was wrong, in order to become certain of what was right.

12. No need to point out the many assumptions—and indeed contradictory assumptions—of this primal error of Descartes. Our chief concern is to show its parenthood of modern doubt which now sickens not only epistemology, but psychology, metaphysics, ethics, and even mathematics itself.

Before Algebra came to the group of mathematical sciences there seemed no possibility or likelihood of the mathematicians assuming the untrue, except as a

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reductio ad absurdum. Geometry could not be based on such assumptions as 'a circle may be a square'—'a pentagon may have nine angles'—'or the interior angles of a triangle are equal to three right angles.' Nor could Arithmetic begin by assuming that 'two and two make five.' The older mathematical sciences began by a group of Postulates and Axioms of such rigid truth and such infallible issue in truth that it was their rigidity which unfitted the mathematician for philosophy.

But the new science of Algebra, which could postulate anything, unfitted the mind almost to understand the word philosophy.

13. If in the sphere of mere intellectual or imaginary activity there was no moral fault in assuming what was not possible or not true, *e. g.*, $X = \sqrt{-1}$ or $X = [4 + 5 = 10]$ there was moral fault in beginning the search for philosophical truth with a deliberate acceptance of untruth.

Even if it was intellectually possible—and the present writer cannot see that it was intellectually or psychologically possible—to begin with doubting of everything; nevertheless such a doubt is morally wrong. In other words Descartes, as a man if not as a philosopher, fails to give the true meaning to *can* in the proposition 'Man *can* doubt of everything.' Descartes assumed that man can, *i. e.*, intellectually, doubt of everything. But he had no right to assume that 'Man can, *i. e.*, morally, doubt of everything.'

14. To see the moral wrongness of this principle we have but to apply it to morals itself. Thus we might assume in ethics that 'All persons over eighty years of age should be strangled'—or 'All blind persons should be reduced to slavery.'

No doubt that on the practical assumption of these moral principles some social good might result. Never-

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theless, these assumptions, being ethically wrong, cannot be valid or valuable for human life.

And Descartes' morally wrong principle that the human mind can—and therefore should—doubt of anything is proving itself so dangerous to human activity that in almost every sphere of speculative and practical thought it is questioning and jettisoning the conditions of life.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.