Descartes and the beginning of a new world[1]

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In the 17th century, there is a time when knowledge, with much more impetus than before, expands its own possibilities of contemplating and acting in the world, splitting itself into three areas or forming three now distinct spheres, although, eventually, complementary: theology, philosophy and science. At that time, it was both desirable and possible to reconstruct the forms and objects of Reason. A new epoch in the history of philosophy began, then characterized "in a certain sense - according to Adorno - by a critique of the procedure of definitions, that is, when it was judged that the pure definition of concepts and the development of consciousness, from them, lead to nothing if one has not previously ensured that something corresponds to the concept and if the concept truly represents, with accuracy and fidelity, the thing to which it refers" (*Philosophical Terminology*).

This evidence stems, among several other factors of a socioeconomic and cultural nature, from thinkers like Bacon or Galileo, whose trajectories follow new and independent paths, as well as from recent institutions, such as the Royal Society of London, created in 1645, where one then seeks an *effective philosophy*. Descartes, in the Discourse of the Method, also compares his philosophy to a vast building under construction, the more beautiful and better finished the more it is the work of a single architect: “it is

[1] Originally published as a preface to the edition of Descartes, Selected Works, Ed. Perspectiva

seen that buildings undertaken and completed by a single architect usually to be more beautiful and better ordered than those that many tried to renovate, using old walls built for other purposes".

Such a building, unlike austere and very old scholastic certainty, built its bases on the shifting terrain of doubt. And this should be done because opinions are fragile and variable, because the senses are deceiving and wakefulness is often like dreams. Indeed, distrust goes back to Plato (for example, in his Teeteto), for whom certainty, when it comes from immediate sensitivity, was already seen as misleading. They are suspicions that contaminate a thought dedicated to the discovery of the truth, located, therefore, beyond or behind appearances. But, let it be said in passing, that the uncertainties or hesitations in Descartes refer, above all, to the "first principles of knowledge" (to metaphysics), because "although the senses sometimes deceive us, in what concerns little things sensitive and very distant, we may find many others that we cannot reasonably doubt, even though we knew them through them: for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a robe, having this paper in my hands and others things of this nature. And how could I deny that these hands and this body are mine? Unless perhaps I compare myself to those fools whose brains are so disturbed and overshadowed by the black vapors of bile that they constantly assure themselves that they are kings when they are very poor; that they are dressed in gold and purple when they are entirely naked; or imagine being pitchers or having a body of glass. But what? They are mad and I would be no less extravagant if I guided myself by their examples". Or again: "And finally, I give all the reasons why it is possible to conclude the existence of material things: not that I think them very useful to prove what they prove, that there is a world, that men have

bodies and other such things, which have never been put in doubt by any man of common sense; but because, considering them closely, one comes to know that they are not as firm or as evident as those which lead us to the knowledge of God and of our soul; so that the latter are the most certain and the most evident which may fall into the knowledge of the human spirit".

In the philosophical field, therefore, doubt is the very remedy for reflection. If treated systematically, it takes us back to a point which is absolutely insurmountable and certain, that is, to the stage where no false or illusory judgment is possible anymore, to the *aliquid inconcussum*: if I doubt, I think; if I think, I am. Therefore, the ideal truth is necessarily related to the reflexive act of reason. And, in this case, by a "direct inspection of the spirit," by a perceptive intuition, without the need for a syllogism whose major premise would be: "all that thinks is or exists".[2]

Hence the faculty to know, and by it to act in the world, coincides and better defines human existence itself. In a reply to his critics, one observes the insistence on the value of spiritual activity: "All the things we can understand and conceive are for them (the critics) nothing but the imaginations and fictions of our spirit, and which cannot have any subsistence: from which it follows that there is nothing except what cannot in any way be understood, conceived or imagined, which must be admitted as true: that is to say, that one must close the door entirely to reason and be content to be a monkey or a parrot and no

[2] Vico, in his book *De Antiquissima italorum sapientia*, thinks he has found the origin of the cogito in a verse of Plauto (from the play Amphytrio), said by the character Sósia: "but when I think, there is no doubt that I am what I have always been" (sed quum cogito, equidem certa idem sum qui semper fui). In the *City of God*, Augustine had already argued: "We really exist and we know him, and we love this existence and this knowledge. Against this truth, I do not fear any argument from academics, when they say: - But if you're wrong? If, in fact, I am wrong, I exist".

longer a man, to deserve to be placed at the level of these exalted spirits".

Considering as true a first substance ("every thing in which it immediately resides as in its subject or by which there is something that we conceive"), creative, perfect and therefore absolute, that is, God, such a substance is also unique or incomparable. At the same time, there are things or material phenomena, that is, finite bodies which are characterized by a form, a limit and by their divisibility, constituting the *extensive res*. Finally, there is a substance differentiated from the foregoing, the spirit, whose principal attribute is not merely materiality and the common extension to bodies. It is a universe apart, in which thought, self-awareness, understanding, and the will to act are manifested. "But what am I, then? Something that thinks. What is a thing that thinks? It is something that doubts, that conceives, that affirms, that denies, that wants, that does not want, that imagines too and that feels". This very human substance is the *res cogitans* (quickly, let us remember that these different substances will be unified by Spinoza in the divine substance, which in turn will possess infinite attributes and forms of manifestation). It is in the realm of this spiritual or soul universe that ideas are given and formulated, and in which also the will and imagination are manifested, which still means that *res cogitans* assumes the role of ballast or guarantee of objectivity, of immediate or concrete. In certain aspects, moreover, Tommaso Campanella has already anticipated this judgment, which some call performative: "Three are the most certain things for us: what we are, what we know and what we want. We know that we are, that we love our being and our knowledge; and in these three certainties there is no falsehood that can disturb us, while we make mistakes about those objects of which we have knowledge

through the images and impulses that come from them" (Universal Philosophy, book 1).

Currently, Descartes is known to have clearly separated the spiritual-rational world from the physical-material world, or the soul being from the somatic being. But it is possible that things are not as radical as tradition asserts, and such a separation, even if true, has perhaps been overemphasized by the method. Let us not see: in the initial summary of the *Meditations*, he says in relation to the sixth reflection: "I show that the soul of man is really distinct from the body and yet it is so closely conjugated and united to him that it composes as if it were one and the same thing with him. All errors that come from the senses are exposed there with the means to avoid them". Already within the text it can be seen that at least the imagination (part of the res cogitans) has much to do with bodily reality: "The faculty of imagining that exists in me, and of which I see from experience that I use myself when I apply myself to the consideration of material things, is capable of persuading me of their existence: for when I consider attentively what the imagination is, I see that it is nothing more than an application of the faculty which it knows to the body which is intimately present to it and therefore exists. Later on, he reaffirms: "It was not without some reason that I believed that this body (which, by a certain particular right, I called mine) belonged to me more properly and more closely than any other. For I could never be separated from it as from other bodies; I felt in it and for it all my appetites and all my affections; and finally I was touched by feelings of pleasure and pain in its parts and not in those of other bodies which are separated from it".

The problem of physical, bodily sensations lies in the fact that they are also captious or illusory. This is why "many experiences gradually

ruined all the credit I had given to the senses. For I have often observed that towers, which from afar seemed to me round, at close quarters, and that colossus, erected on the highest peaks of these towers, seemed to me small statues when I looked down upon them; and so, on an infinity of other occasions, I found error in judgments based on the external senses. And not only in the outer senses, but even in the inner: for is there anything more intimate or more inner than pain? And yet I learned once from some people who had their arms and legs cut off, that they still seemed at times to feel pain in the parts which had been amputated; this gave me reason to think that I could not be sure that I too had sore some of my limbs, even though I felt pain in them"; so "now that I am beginning to know myself better and to discover more clearly the author of my origin, I do not really think that I should fearfully admit all the things that the senses seem to teach us, but I do not think that I should question them all in general". Among other facts because "Nature also teaches me through these feelings of pain, hunger, thirst etc. that not only am I lodged in my body, like a pilot in his ship, but that, moreover, I am very closely conjugated with him and so confused and mixed that I compose with him a single whole". Therefore, it is perfectly possible to conceive that the argument comes from an evidence: if a body were enough for the animated[3] or spiritual activity, all living beings could perform it. The body is necessary and exerts a great influence on thinking, but it would not be its whole and sufficient cause.

As for ideas capable of being formulated by res cogitans, they may be of three types: the *factitious*, formed by will and which combine disparate elements when, for example, we imagine a dragon or a

[3] From *anima*, soul.

centaur; the *adventitious*, which seem to come from objects outside the consciousness, but which are not confused with the very objects which provoke sensations, because if outside us there are objects and their movements, the sensation of pain does not mix with the cause, that is, all the qualities of sensation are in us, not in the objects or phenomena outside. As a convinced spiritualist, Descartes did not accept an explanation that was entirely materialistic or empirical, because we do not perceive the internal cerebral processes, but the attributes and results of perceptions. In other words, and in current language, we do not perceive the impulses and nervous contacts of synapses, but, for example, the colors, the consonant chords, or the ideas that result from the neurological process. Finally, there are the *natural or innate* ideas that the spirit produces independently of sensations and will. And in this respect Descartes says: "... I have never thought or written that the spirit needs natural ideas which are something different from the faculty it has to think about. But, recognizing that there are certain thoughts which proceed neither from external objects nor from the determination of my will, but only from the faculty which I have to think, to establish some difference between the ideas or notions which are the forms of these thoughts (or of these operations of conscience) and to distinguish them from others which we may call foreign (the adventitious) or done for pleasure (the facticious), I have called them natural; but I say it in the same sense in which we say that generosity or some sickness is natural to certain families... When I say that some idea was born with us, I understand only that we have in ourselves the *faculty* of producing it" (Answer to Regius).

Now, if it is man's own thinking, that is, if he is above all a more reasoning machine than just something extensive or material, even if

he lives, this evidence is equally shown by the fact that, in thinking, he possesses the ideas of truth and false, of right and wrong, of good and evil, of beautiful and ugly. Consequently, this spiritual faculty acquires dignity by the fact that it provides not only cognitive certainties (the true, the right), but the practical improvements of its existence (the good, the beautiful). This is why he wrotes to Cristina of Sweden in a letter: "For the goods of the body and of fortune, they do not depend absolutely on us; and those of the soul are both related to two drivers who are: one, to know, the other, to want what is good; but often knowledge is beyond our strength; this is why there is nothing left but our will, of which we can dispose entirely. And I do not see how it is possible to use it better when one always has a firm and constant resolution to do exactly all the things that one would think were best and to employ all the forces of the spirit to know them well". What is repeated in other terms in *The Passions of the Soul*: "...these things are useful to know in order to encourage each one of us to learn to observe his passions; for, since one can, with a little ingenious, change the movements of the brain in animals devoid of reason, it is evident that one can do it even better in men, and that even those who possess the weakest souls could acquire an absolute empire over all their passions, if they employed much ingenious in taming and leading them".

For the discovery of truth and the practice of good it is indispensable, however, that man himself impose rules: "...it is better not to seek the truth about something than to do it without method: for it is quite certain that these disordered studies and obscure meditations disturb the natural light and blind the spirit. And all those who are thus accustomed to walk in darkness diminish the acuity of their vision so much that they can no longer bear the full light. And the

first of his rules is that which he himself gives himself: "nothing to include in my judgments which would not present itself so clearly and so distinctly to my spirit that I had no occasion to doubt it. Therefore, it is possible to convince oneself that there are causes for phenomena, since nothing comes from nothing; that something cannot be and cannot not be, simultaneously; or that the reality of the idea already contains a search for the cause, which exists not only in an objective way, but also in a formal and still eminent way. In short, the Cartesian rules, based almost entirely on common sense, are: evidence, analysis (or division), deduction and enumeration (experimentation or supposition of similar examples, in accordance with the previous steps). So simple that Leibniz judged them practically unnecessary: "And I almost say they are the rules of the method similar to the foolish precept of that chemist: take what you must, proceed as you should and you will have what you want" (quoted by Ivan Lins in Descartes: Epoch, Life and Work).

Another necessary procedure for wisdom is the separation of philosophy and science, on the one hand, and theology, still culturally predominant on the other, given the differences in its forms and objectives. In the first place, because philosophy and science are born of doubt and are built in the imperfect realm of human beings, while theology comes from a divine substance, sovereignly perfect; in the second place, because faith is not based on intelligence and will, but only on the latter faculty. Cautiously, in order to avoid friction with the judgment of the Parliament of Paris (1624), which condemned to death anyone who taught principles contrary to the ancient authors already approved, or consequences such as those then recently

suffered by Galileo,[4] says Descartes in the Rules for the Direction of the Spirit: "Here are the two most correct ways to lead to science (he refers to intuition and deduction). As far as intelligence is concerned, no more should be admitted than this, and all others should be rejected as suspicious and exposed to error. However, this does not prevent that, in relation to that revealed by God, one believes as knowledge even more certain, since faith, which always deals with obscure things, is not an act of intelligence, but of will, and that, if it has bases in understanding, those there can and must be found, first of all, by one or other of the ways already mentioned, as we may one day show it more widely". It is not rare that Descartes assumes this behavior of *larvatus prodeo* (to show himself in a delusional way, or disguised).

At the same time, science competes to supply practical needs and make life more comfortable: "instead of this speculative Philosophy which is taught in schools, another practice can be found whereby, knowing the power and actions of fire, water, air, stars, heavens and all the other bodies which surround us, as distinctly as we know the various occupations of our craftsmen, we could employ them in the same way in all the uses for which they are proper, and thus become as it were masters and possessors of nature. What is to be desired, not only for the invention of an infinity of artifices, which would allow us to enjoy, at no cost, the fruits of the earth and all the comforts that are found in it, but above all also for the conservation of health, which is undoubtedly the first good and the foundation of all the other goods of this life".

[4] On the condemnation of Galileo, Descartes wrote to Father Mersenne (letter of 22 July 1633): "It shook me so much that I felt prone to burn all my papers or at least not to let anyone see them... I confess that if it is false (the earthly rotation movement), all the foundations of my philosophy are so too".

The distinction between philosophy and theology is still made in a third area, that which unites a certain conception of man and morality. Emmanuel Faye comments: "It is there that we see the true separation between philosophy and theology, that is, between two conceptions, the natural and the supernatural, of man's happiness and perfection... A philosopher like Descartes relies on such a distinction to precisely delimit the horizon of natural philosophy, which only considers nature, and does not authorize himself to talk about grace. Philosophy does not conceive of man except in the present state and not, like the theologian, 'before the fall'. Descartes' statements to Burman are capital in this respect. Burman asks him: - Why should I not have the same power to suspend my judgment and to make good use of my free will in supernatural things as in natural ones? The philosopher answers: - That should be left to the theologians to explain. To the philosopher it is enough to consider man as he is in his natural condition; and so I have written my philosophy, so that it may be received everywhere, even among the Turks, without me being a stone on the road to anyone" (Philosophy and Perfection of Man). Further on in the same text, Faye states: "Nothing is further from the moral philosophy of Descartes than this contemplation of the body and the flesh, and it can be said that Malebranche has radically compromised by his method the distinction between philosophy and theology, so hardly conquered in France by the philosophers of the Renaissance and by Descartes".

And here we allow ourselves a parenthesis to remember that Descartes' idealism, which is also an early Enlightenment, was a reason for Heidegger to criticize the way in which the *cogito* was formulated and all rational, scientific knowledge. In the book in which he analyzes the German philosopher, George Steiner writes about it:

"For Descartes, certainty determines and confirms the truth. Certainty, in turn, is situated in the ego. The self becomes the axis of reality and relates to the outside world in an exploratory, necessarily exploratory way. The ego, as connoisseur and user, is a predator. For Heidegger, on the contrary, man and consciousness of self are not the center, the regulators of existence. Man is only a listener or privileged interlocutor of existence... What we do is seek 'the voice of being' (*Martin Heidegger*)". For the sake of truth, however, the German philosopher's criticism is far more comprehensive about the historical timeline. In *What is this, philosophy*?, he says that Western thought, after physicists like Heraclitus or Parmenides, gives rise to philosophy, that is, to a meditation that, above all, reflects or expresses the behavior proper to subjectivism and technicalism, substituting the original question for Being (*die Frage nach dem Sein*) by the one that inquires the being of beings (*die Seinsfrage*). Descartes, in this trajectory, would do nothing but reaffirm, albeit in an unprecedented way, this old purpose that would not go back to the foundations and, for this very reason, would keep Being in oblivion.

Back to the French thinker, and analyzing him now from a theological point of view, if one cannot accuse him of being a materialist, as secular and religious authorities have sometimes done, one can see that the idea of God, although it is that which guarantees the certainty of thinking, is found in a way that was until then unconventional. It derives from the idea of perfection, for "what is more perfect, that is, what contains in itself more reality, cannot be a consequence and a dependence on the less perfect. But this same idea, present in the spirit, makes one think and wish for an indefinite perfection, or a finished perfection. Hence the author concludes: "because I think, and think of God, God exists". If the idea of

perfection and the idea of the existence of God are inseparable in thought, it is because they are also in reality. If "I cannot conceive of God as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from him; not that my thought can make it so, or that it imposes some need on things; on the contrary, the need that is in the thing itself, that is, the need for the existence of God, determines me to have this thought. For it is not in my freedom to conceive of a God without existence, that is to say, a sovereignly perfect being without sovereign perfection.

It happens, however, that the very idea of God, based on perfection, is only known to us through thought. In synthesis, all knowledge is produced, reflected or contained in the subject who thinks, and the moment of reflection cannot be conceived otherwise than by admitting a moment of subjectivity which returns to the structure of the thought object. In synthesis, if the conformity between reason and object is guaranteed by divine transcendence, or by a dialogue with another being, whether deceiving or not, it necessarily returns to the observing subject in the form of a "reascendancy," that is, of a new escalation, this time intrinsic to the spirit. Still on this subject, it is with great acuity that Charles Adam explains to us why Descartes turns to God, even recognizing that natural reason is capable of capturing or formulating indisputable mathematical truths: "Descartes responds (to atheistic mathematicians) that, pushed to the limits of their last defenses, they cannot escape an ever possible doubt as to the origin of his principles, unless they have God's guarantee for them here. Only with God can they have the absolute guarantee. But why this word 'absolute'? No doubt theology had given the spirits this need for absolute certainty... and the philosophers had transposed it to science, wanting it to give them equal satisfaction. And the only means was to appeal to God to

guarantee, with his infallibility, the principles which will serve science. Hence, for this one, the need for a previous metaphysics, in the absence of which it remains exposed to doubt, or has only more or less relative affirmations, always subject to a guarantee... in the 17th century, the spirit still had demands which, no doubt, it owed to a long exercise in scholastics" (*Descartes: his three fundamental notions,* Philosophical Journal of France and Abroad, 1937).

Bréhier also observes, in his own way, this natural and elusive theology: "It is difficult to imagine how paradoxical this thesis must have seemed to the contemporaries of Descartes: in Scholastics, the affirmation of the existence of God lends its certainty to sensitive things, from where it goes back to him as from an effect to a cause. On the other hand, neoplatonism starts from the intuition of a divine principle to go from God, as cause, to things as effects of that cause. There seems to be an alternative there to which Descartes' thought escapes him. And the first two phases of his metaphysics demonstrate the impossibility of any of the ways: methodical doubt, by showing that there is no certainty in sensitive things, not even in mathematical things, prevents one from going from things to God. The theory of eternal truths prohibits deriving from God, as a model, the essence of things" (*History of Philosophy*).

But if we can know, and accurately, since science proves to be equally exact when converted into technology, not for that matter the "natural light," which is proper to the spirit, is free of errors: "nothing seems to me more absurd than to discuss adventurously the mysteries of nature, the influence of the heavens on the earth, the prediction of the future and similar things, as many people do, and to have never investigated whether human reason is capable of discovering such things. And it should not seem uncomfortable or

difficult to determine the limits of the spirit of which we are aware, for we do not often hesitate to uphold even judgments about what is external and entirely foreign to us" (*Rules for the Direction of the Mind*). Errors derive either from human imperfection, which the method (or even a scientific method) can heal, or from free will. In other words, error cannot be in things, which are what they are, and therefore "my thinking imposes no need on things": "looking more closely at me, and considering what my errors are, which only testify to imperfection in me, I discover that they depend on the contest of two causes, namely, the power to know that exists in me and the power to choose, that is, my free will". In short, knowledge is desirable and possible, paradoxical and precisely from a skeptical attitude. Or, in other words, "it is the darkness itself that serves me as matter to form a clear and distinct judgment". If everything were immediately clear and secure, there would be no discussion or question, and probably the thought, that which groups the understanding, the will and the senses, would be of another nature.

But what makes the error possible? It consists of the difference or imperfect relationship between the two essential faculties of the soul: intelligence and will. The first is passive and finite; the second, active and infinite. In his words, "the will being much broader and more extensive than the understanding, I do not contain it within the same limits, but I extend it also to the things I do not understand; of which, the will being indifferent in itself, it is easily lost and chooses evil for good or false for the true". So is it true that false judgment is an act of will? Not necessarily, because it may be difficult to find someone whose will is to make a mistake or to remain in the error. "But as the will is absolutely necessary, in order that we give our consent to what we perceive, and as it is not necessary, to make a judgment as it

should be, that we have a complete and perfect knowledge, then it happens that, quite often , we gave our consent to things of which we never had anything but very confused knowledge".

Of course, mistakes come from the difficulty of perceptions, external circumstances and cultures, but the will has a decisive place on whether to accept or refuse what can be true knowledge. This means that we must say what we see and what we do not see clearly; that we must translate faithfully what we feel; that we must assume the doubt when we are not sure of knowing. Therefore, truthfulness is a statement or adequacy that begins with intimate or subjective sincerity. At the same time, it is perceived that external authority, like scholastic theology, has been abandoned in favor of individual conscience, "the Lutheran way".

Our power to act well or badly has its origin not in freedom, but in its imperfection, when mixed with indifference. And indifference, in turn, derives from the imperfection of understanding: "this indifference which I feel, when I am not absolutely driven to one side more than to another by the weight of some reason, is the lowest degree of freedom, and makes it seem more a lack of knowledge than a perfection of will; for if I always knew clearly what was true and what was good, I would never be in difficulty in deciding what judgment or what choice I should make; and so I would be entirely free without ever being indifferent". Therefore, indifference and ignorance are not conditions of freedom, for they are faults or denials, while true freedom means a real and positive power to determine. In short, freedom finds here its perfect synonym, *the autonomy of the upright man* who, at the same time expressing it, derives from correct understanding and moral action. It should also be noted that while much of ancient philosophy had attributed to necessity a

characteristic of the absolute, and to the adaptation of man to his demands a manifestation of wisdom, for our philosopher the basis of human existence would rest rather on will and freedom.

As for Cartesian physics, it begins with the statement that "every thing remains in the state it is in as long as nothing changes it. Two others derive from this law: "the same amount of movement is always preserved in the world," since, if a movement appeared and was entirely new, such a phenomenon would be a new creation and, therefore, we would be facing a miraculous act; moreover, "every body that moves tends to continue its movement in a straight line. Matter, once set in motion, has produced the world as it is, and would not happen otherwise. This same matter, which is extension, occupies the space indefinitely. And being the divisible extension to infinity, it is also matter indefinitely divisible. Therefore, void would not exist. The importance given to movement caused Descartes to conceive of gravity, light and heat as displacements, undulations or whirlwinds: "it is only movement which, according to the different effects it produces, is sometimes called heat and sometimes light".

The geometry was innovatively perfected by him when he linked the domain of space and its continuous quantities to numbers and its discrete quantities. With it and its applications in Dioptrics, the philosopher sought an operative, practical science, complementary to another older one and satisfied only with contemplation.

As far as biology is concerned, it should be borne in mind that Descartes sensed, in his own way, the Darwinian theory of natural selection. In passage from *The World* he says: "It is not surprising that almost all animals engender, for those who cannot engender are no longer engendered and thus find no place in the world. In short, only

the fertile species survive. Adding the ideas of adaptation and transmission of genetic characteristics, we arrive at modern biology.

And if the universe can be known for its causes and effects, this rationality does not carry with it another consequence very much in vogue in its time, the so-called *final cause*: "we should not presume so much and believe that God wanted us to be part of His councils"; "it is not true that God had no other purpose than ours in creating the world. Indeed, how many things are now in the world, where they were before and are no longer, without any man having seen or known them, and without any use for mankind"; "it is something puerile and absurd to assure in metaphysics that God, in the manner of a proud man, had only the purpose, in building the world, of being praised by men; and that he created the sun, many times greater than the Earth, with no other purpose than to enlighten man, who occupies only a small part of it".

Finally, four remarks.

1st) Let us not forget that the philosopher's dream of offering safe or exact foundations to philosophy, such as the normative principle of evidence, led Husserl to write *Philosophy as a Science of Rigour* and, passing through *Cartesian Meditations*, to the transcendental phenomenology and the unfoldings that this current has brought about.

2nd) Even the contemporaries and the posthumous who criticized him were able to give him the value he deserves for his innovation and prudent boldness. Thus, for example, D'Alembert manifests himself in the *Preliminary Discourse of the Encyclopedia*: "Descartes dared at least to show the good spirits how to shake the yoke of scholastics, of opinion, of authority, in a word: of prejudice and barbarity. And for this revolt, whose fruits we recognize today, he

rendered to philosophy a more essential service perhaps than all that it owes to its illustrious successors. We can consider him as a chief conspirator who, in the first place, had the courage to rise up against a despotic and arbitrary power, and who, preparing a thunderous revolution, laid the foundations for a fairer and happier government, which he could not see established. If he ended up believing it all to be explained, at least he began by doubting it all; and the weapons we used to fight him no less belong to him because we turned them against him". For his part, Karl Jaspers (*The Thought of Descartes and Philosophy*, Philosophical Magazine of France and Abroad, 1937), although he considers that the cogito seizes only himself, because all determination escapes him, preventing him from having objective relations (opinion, by the way, unconvincing) opens his essay with the following words: "The glory of Descartes is so extraordinary, his historical influence so undeniable, the study of his principal writings is still in our days so indispensable for the philosophical education of man that it becomes superfluous to insist on its historical scope. It was notably the German philosophers, after Hegel and Schelling, who saw in him the beginning and the origin of modern philosophy... Thought is concise, each sentence has its own determined place; it is never about superficial things; there nothing is accessory; the development of ideas is clear, it goes straight to the end, and the reader feels that a discipline is imposed upon him... (His) glory consists in having wanted to elevate philosophy, by method, to the condition of science, extending, from another point of view, to the totality of the scientific domain. From his fundamental reasoning, no less famous, certainty must be born".

3) More modernly, Alexander Koyré was not afraid to say: "For three centuries we have all been fed, directly or indirectly, by

Cartesian thought, because for three centuries, precisely, all European thought and all philosophical thought has been oriented and determined with reference to Descartes. ... one of the deepest intellectual and even spiritual revolutions that humanity has ever known, decisive conquest of the spirit by itself, decisive victory on the arduous path that leads man to spiritual liberation, to freedom from reason and truth" (*Conversations on Descartes*).

4) And if he was one of the first thinkers of modern times, perhaps he was, at the same time, one of the last sages in the sense that Antiquity lent him. What it means to possess the following attributes: to maintain serenity in the face of the inevitable tribulations of life; to practice the isolation of other men in order to reflect beyond the immediate things, *sub specie aeternis*; to have the material autarchy indispensable to administer one's own life; and to acquire the widest consciousness of oneself in order to be able to extract from one's inner self the most mature teaching possible.