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## DESCARTES' *MEDITATIONS* IN THE HISTORY OF SCEPTICISM

### 1. Sceptical tradition before Descartes

Ancient scepticism was shaped as a special philosophical movement due to Pyrrho of Elis (IV–III B.C.), even if he had many antecedents (Heraclitus, Democritus, Socrates, Protagoras). Pyrrho's ethical scepticism inspired the heads of Plato's Academy Arcesilaus and Carneades. Plato's Academy was the centre of creative sceptical thought during several centuries (probabilistic scepticism IV–II B.C.). It was the second stage of ancient scepticism. Only when the Academy moved to Rome and Antiochus rejected scepticism, Plato's followers returned to their own tradition. Aenesidemus was discontented by this change and founded his own sceptical school in Alexandria, launching the third stage of ancient scepticism, later Pyrrhonism (I B.C.–II A.D.). His most important followers were Agrippa and Sextus Empiricus. Sextus' works are our basic source for ancient scepticism.<sup>1</sup>

Important even final stage of ancient scepticism was *Contra Academicus* and other works by St. Augustine (354–430), who rejected sceptical arguments (knowledge does exist, for instance about my own existence, my feelings or other conscious contents and mathematical truths). After this reply radical scepticism was not heard many centuries in Europe. Medieval sceptics (nominalists of XIV century, like Wilhelm Ockham) did not deny human access to truth but only were proponents of fideism in the case of religious claims.

Scepticism revived in Renaissance when ancient texts were discovered, translated and became popular. *Outlines of Scepticism* by Sextus Empiricus

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<sup>1</sup> See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism* (transl. J. Annas and J. Barnes). Cambridge 1994; Richard Bett, *Pyrrho. His Antecedents and His Legacy*, Oxford 2000.

“were read in France in the Middle Ages. One of Latin medieval translations of this treatise was found in the library of St. Victor monastery near Paris, the centre of mystical school famous in XII and XIII century, an important link in French scepticism development”.<sup>2</sup> But only “in Renaissance together with other ancient writers, Sextus became lovely reading for intellectual elite”.<sup>3</sup> Scepticism revived in XV and XVI century was settled in new Christian context. It was also different from medieval scepticism by knowledge of Pyrrhonian arguments reconstructed by Sextus. Both medieval and renaissance scepticism looked for help in fideism.

The renaissance sceptics are first of all Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) but also Pierre Charon (1541–1603), Francisco Sanchez (1552–1623) and others. There were even in XVII century sceptics inspired by Montaigne (Francis de La Mothe Le Mayer 1588–1672, Samuel Sorbriere 1615–1670, Pierre Daniel Huet 1630–1721 and Pierre Bayle 1647–1706). Essays by Montaigne alluded to *Sceptical Outlines* by Sextus and to *Soliloquies* by St. Augustine. It was “one of the most popular book in France and all intellectual modern Europe”.<sup>4</sup> Also Descartes had to be imbued with Montaigne’s scepticism. Montaigne represents modern scepticism, where ancient arguments against senses and reason are melted with Christian understanding the world (the misery of human mind) and enriched by renaissance experience (cosmological and geographical discoveries, the Reformation).<sup>5</sup>

I. Dąbska studied the French scepticism influence on Descartes’ *Meditations*. She stated that the influence was as great as the influence of medieval philosophy. But in both cases Descartes does not mention about his guiding spirits. “We can ask why Descartes does not mention and overtly discuss in *Meditations* any French sceptic of XVI and XVII century. He seems to conduct according to his permanent custom – often being remarked – the custom does not mention his antecedents and discuss only his direct critics. Actually, in this case the sceptical argumentation, repeating and developing ancient writers thought, belonged to common property of science, as *elementary* theorems of Euclidean geometry”.<sup>6</sup> It is very probable that

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<sup>2</sup> I. Dąbska, “*Meditationes*” *Descartesa na tle sceptycyzmu francuskiego XVII wieku*, “Kwartalnik Filozoficzny”, vol. XIX (1950), z. 1/2, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> I. Dąbska, *Sceptycyzm francuski XVI i XVII wieku*, Towarzystwo Naukowe w Toruniu, Toruń 1958, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> See my paper *Michel de Montaigne jako sceptyk renesansowy*, in: P. Gutowski, P. Gut, *Z dziejów filozoficznej refleksji nad człowiekiem. Księga Pamiątkowa ku czci Profesora Jana Czerkawskiego (1939–2007)*, Lublin, Wydawnictwo KUL, 2007, pp. 195–211.

<sup>6</sup> I. Dąbska, *Meditationes*, p. 20.

Montaigne and strong sceptical movement raised by him inspired Descartes to start his philosophy expressed later in *Meditations*.

## 2. Making scepticism deeper – two hypotheses

Before giving answer to renaissance scepticism, Descartes contributes to making sceptical arguments deeper and becomes one of important creator of sceptical history. The important place is just the first meditation of his *Meditations*, where we find two famous hypotheses: of dream and of evil demon.

First let us see how Descartes refers to sceptical arguments. Sceptical tradition is noticeable at the very beginning of the *Meditations* in the resolution to "withhold my assent from what is not fully certain and indubitable" (M I, 18)<sup>7</sup> and in statement that senses are deceptive and "prudence dictates that we should never fully trust those who have deceived us even once" (M I, 18). Descartes does not think highly of classical sceptical arguments. In reply to the *Second Objections* he writes: "Even though I had long ago seen several books on this subject composed by Academics and Sceptics, and therefore it was with some distaste that I found myself rehashing all this stuff, I could not dispense myself from devoting a whole Meditation to it" (O II, 130). We can hear in these words the aversion to sceptical literature, to repeating the old arguments. Scepticism is not a goal or a value for him but an obstacle to copy with. But, in the sixth meditation he uses ancient examples: "many experiences gradually undermined all the faith I had placed in the senses. For sometimes towers that from a distance seemed round appeared from close up as square; and giant statues perched on the top of those towers did not look particularly large to one gazing up from below" (M VI, 76). He adds the pain illusion argument: "I had often heard from people whose arm or leg had been amputated, that they still occasionally seemed to feel pain in the part of the body they were missing" (M VI, 77).

Ancient arguments are inconclusive according to Descartes, because perceptual illusions happen only in special circumstances, for instance where objects are small or remote. It is also difficult to deny what is the evident:

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<sup>7</sup> Numbers in brackets refer to: René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, transl. by M. Moriarty, Oxford University Press 2008. Numbers in brackets refer to subsequent Meditations, Objections or Replies. Letter "M" refers to "Meditations", "O" refers to "Objections" and "R" refers to "Replies".

“that these hands themselves and this whole body are mine” (M I, 18; this argument will be repeated in XX century by G. E. Moore). The real danger for perceptual knowledge is the case of mad people (they see what does not exist). The mad people case leads Descartes to the dream hypothesis. He concedes: “in my dream I have all the same experiences as these madmen do when they are awake – or sometimes even stranger ones” (M I, 19). The dream representations are less clear but: “waking can never be distinguished from sleep by any conclusive indications” (M I, 19).

The dream hypothesis was presented previously in *Discourse on the Method* and it was known before Descartes, what Hobbes reproached him in the *Third Objections* (O III, 171). In fact, the problem to discern dream and reality worried Heraclitus, Plato in *Theaetetus*, Carneades, St. Augustine, ockhamist Petrus Aureolus, Montaigne and others. Descartes refers to this rather marginal part of sceptical tradition, but stresses its significance for the problem of our senses credibility. In fact, we can pass over particular cases of perception illusions, when we see the possibility that all of them can be not real but part of global dream. The dream hypothesis is Cartesian counterpart to traditional reasons against senses. And it is making them deeper, because we doubt not only the particular perception content but even the existence of empirical world. There was no philosopher before Descartes to give this hypothesis so important meaning and that is why we say that dream hypothesis is Cartesian hypothesis.

The next Descartes' contribution to scepticism development is the evil demon hypothesis. There is no trace of it in *Discourse on the Method* and this second hypothesis makes scepticism even deeper. Descartes remarks that dream hypothesis does not question the value of truths of reason like mathematical theorems. Arithmetic and geometry do not care whether their objects exist or are not real. What is only dreamt and possible has the same status as what is real. “Whether I am waking or sleeping, two plus three equals five, and a square has no more than four sides” (M I, 20).<sup>8</sup> But he observes a more serious possibility important both to the value of knowing by sense and reason. It is the evil God/demon hypothesis. If the God can do everything, if he is omnipotent, how we know that “he has not brought it about that there is no earth at all, no heavens, no extended things, no shape, no magnitude, no place – and yet that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now? ...I too should be similarly deceived whenever I add two and three, or count the sides of a square” (M I, 21).

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<sup>8</sup> See Plato, *Theaetetus* 190 B.

In the next step, Descartes observes that he must modify the hypothesis, because God as the source of the truth and the good should not be a deceiver. From now on Descartes says about evil demon instead of God deceiver. "Some evil spirit, supremely powerful and cunning, has devoted all his efforts to deceiving me" (M I, 22). In the third meditation he repeats: "whenever this preconceived opinion of God's supreme power occurs to me, I cannot help admitting, that, if indeed he wishes to, he can easily bring it about that I should be mistaken, even about matters that I think I intuit with the eye of mind as evidently as possible" (M III, 36). After constructing his hypothesis Descartes confesses: "To all these arguments, indeed, I have no answer, but at length I am forced to admit that there is nothing of all those things I once thought true, of which it is not legitimate to doubt – and not out of any thoughtlessness or irresponsibility, but for sound and well-weighed reasons" (M I, 21). After discovering *cogito* he assesses his hypothesis as weak, but even then he writes: "I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver; since, as long as I remain ignorant of this matter, I seem unable ever to be certain of any other at all" (M III, 36). We should remark that this hypothesis assumes what later Descartes will see as the evident: the existence of doubting ego and the existence of God.

The evil demon hypothesis has its source at Ockham and ockhamists. Ockham was deeply convinced about God's omnipotence and that is why he believed that "God can create the intuition of something that does not exist".<sup>9</sup> "If Aureolus supposes that God – if wants – can trigger in us sensual contents and images without any transcendental object as their counterpart, he moves in the circle of thought, that will be repeated in Descartes' first *Meditation*".<sup>10</sup> But the basic source of Cartesian hypothesis is the Christian concept of omnipotent God and the medieval current of voluntarism stressing the God's omnipotence even to negation of the law of contradiction.

With these two hypotheses Descartes creates the specific form of modern scepticism, other than ancient scepticism and contributes to making the sceptical problem deeper. First, Descartes added to ancient pure question "How do you know?" two serious reasons, why we may be deceived. The two hypotheses make the sceptical doubts serious. Doubts are not baseless, but now have clear reasons. Second, ancient sceptics questioned the properties of things; Descartes started to question their existence. Ancient

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<sup>9</sup> E. Gilson, *Historia filozofii chrześcijańskiej w wiekach średnich*, PAX, Warszawa 1987, p. 436.

<sup>10</sup> I. Dąmbska, *Meditationes*, op. cit., p. 9.

people assumed the existence of the world as something evident; Descartes compares the world to dream and asks himself, what existence I can be certain. “If I dream that I, for instance, walk in the forest, my mistake is not the belief that the forest is green but the belief that the forest exists when it does not”.<sup>11</sup> Jerzy Szymura aptly writes that ancient scepticism was scepticism about properties, universals (what something is?), and modern scepticism is about existence (does something exist?).<sup>12</sup> Thanks to Descartes the arguments for scepticism increased in their strength. But there are some reasons to ask whether Descartes was any serious sceptic. We move to the question of methodical scepticism.

### 3. Methodical scepticism

Descartes clearly declares his sceptical doubts (“there is nothing of all those things I once thought true, of which it is not legitimate to doubt” M I, 21) but according to some critics he is not sincere. “It became common, in accordance with Descartes himself suggestion, that two first meditations are original methodological trick and the concept of the Cartesian that is methodological scepticism was created. The method was to accept, on principle, normative scepticism that is using the basic directive *epoché* towards all judgments about reality, even evidently forcing on us. The suspension should last until formulating axiom that can not be denied without contradiction. Only such a priori and necessary axiom could be the base to reconstruct infallible philosophical system”.<sup>13</sup> But according to Dąbbska, in XVII century scepticism was so serious trend that rejecting its arguments was necessary to avoid the name dogmatist. We can not say that Cartesian doubting was faked. W. Augustyn claims that Cartesian scepticism was not methodical but epistemological. It is not scepticism pretended but “taking negative stance towards particular cognitive results”.<sup>14</sup>

Descartes like ancient sceptics accepts scepticism as a rule of acting. Because we can doubt everything and evil demon can exist, Descartes decides to treat his beliefs as if they were “false and imaginary” (M I, 22).

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<sup>11</sup> F. Alquié, *Kartezjusz*, PAX, Warszawa 1989, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> J. Szymura, “*Adequatio intellectus et rei*” w świetle dyskusji ze sceptycyzmem semantycznym, “Roczniki Filozoficzne”, vol. 53, nr 2, p. 248.

<sup>13</sup> I. Dąbbska, *Meditationes*, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Compare W. Augustyn, *Podstawy wiedzy u Descartesa i Malebranche’a*, PWN, Warszawa 1973, p. 21.

"I will try...eliminating everything in which there is the smallest element of doubt, exactly as if I had found it to be false through and through; and I shall pursue my way until I discover something certain; or, failing that, discover that it is certain only that nothing is certain" (M II, 24). So, Descartes takes sceptic reasons seriously but he does not exclude discovering truth. He uses "hyperbolic doubting", writes Alquié,<sup>15</sup> to protect himself against false. He decides to treat the dubious as the false. He doubts with overcautiousness. This extreme doubting is apt to so ambitious goal as achieving certain knowledge. Answering to sceptical arguments Descartes uses the strategy of seeking certainty like St. Augustine. The Cartesian result decided that his scepticism turned out to be methodical only and passing. It seems that Descartes at the beginning of his philosophy was ready to accept every rational, even sceptical, conclusion.

Methodical scepticism is, as Dąbbska aptly writes, a kind of normative one. Just in modern times scepticism ceases to be a stance in practical philosophy. Descartes is a practical sceptic yet but in a specific form. He takes the scepticism as a method of theoretical thinking but not a method of life, wisdom for life. He writes "my concern at the moment is not with action but only with the attainment of knowledge" (M I, 22). In replies to second objections he reminds us the difference between the need of life and the truth contemplation (R II, 149). It is obvious to him that scepticism can not be the philosophy of life and acting, what D. Hume will stress (ancient sceptics were contended with the charge of impossibility of acting). Descartes rejects the ancient and Montaigne scepticism as the wisdom for life. Scepticism has for him theoretical use, as the method to clean the searching field and the method to test judgments.

Methodical scepticism comprises both dream and evil demon hypothesis. "I will think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, figures, sounds, and all external things are no different from illusions of our dreams, and that they are traps he has laid for my credulity; I will consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, and no senses, but yet as falsely believing that I have all these" (M I, 23). There is here both dream and evil demon activity.

The particular domain for doubting is the sense perception. It is psychologically hard to doubt in the value of whole own knowing, especially knowing by reason what is necessary to conduct thinking. Cartesian doubting is theoretical, based on rational grounds (hypotheses) and we can see

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<sup>15</sup> Compare F. Alquié, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

that he tries to break his natural psychological inclinations: “I shall now close my eyes, I shall block up my ears, I shall divert all my senses, and I shall even delete all bodily images from my thought” (M III, 34).

Descartes is a kind of philosopher who strongly believes that discovering truth is possible. But at the beginning of his philosophy he is a sincere sceptic (ready to accept sceptical conclusion) and a creative sceptic (he creates radical and original sceptical arguments).

#### 4. An attempt to answer scepticism

Cartesian sceptical doubting was stopped by discovering subject’s own existence. After all, doubting needs the existence of doubting subject. “Certainly I did exist, if I convinced myself of something” (M II, 25). “I also exist, if he is deceiving me ... he will never bring it about that I should be nothing as long as I think I am something” (M II, 25). After rejecting the evil demon hypothesis he boldly says: “this proposition, ‘I am, I exist’, whenever it is uttered by me, or conceived in my mind, is necessarily true” (M II, 25). Knowing one’s own existence turns out to be immune to the evil demon hypothesis. The dream hypothesis has here little significance and it can easily be rejected by the same move: “I exist – even if I am always asleep” (M II, 29).<sup>16</sup>

The next stage is the gradual regaining the knowledge previously under sceptical doubting. At the beginning of third *Meditation*, before the argument for God’s existence, Descartes states the criterion of truth and rejects the power of evil demon against the clear and distinct perception. “I am certain that I am a thinking thing. But do I not therefore also know what is required in order for me to be certain of something? For in this first act of knowledge [cognition] there is nothing other than a clear and distinct perception... I seem already to be able to lay down, as a general rule, that everything I very clearly and distinctly perceive is true” (M III, 35). Clear and distinct judgments receive the guarantee of truth before the proof of existence of truthful God is constructed. Descartes admits his mistake: “In fact, when I later judged that such things should be doubted, this was only because the thought had come to me, that perhaps some God might endowed me with such a nature that I could be deceived even about those

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<sup>16</sup> Again, Descartes does not refer to his antecedents. The discovery of own existence was made by St. Augustine (Sol. 2, 1–1; DC 11, 26). Arnauld already noticed this resemblance (O IV, 198).

things that appeared supremely obvious" (M III, 36). Now he writes: "Let whoever can, deceive me as much as he likes: still he can never bring it about that I am nothing, as long as I think I am something ... or that perhaps two plus three added together are more or less than five; or that other such things should be true in which I recognize an obvious contradiction" (M III, 36).

We observe that Descartes in his third Meditation withdraws the evil demon hypothesis as applicable to clear and distinct (evident) perception. If his own existence was discovered without God's guarantee, the same is right towards all evident judgments. So, the criterion of truth (what is clear and distinct) is not dependent on God's truthfulness.<sup>17</sup> In the first Meditation even evident perception was in danger of evil demon, in the third Meditation Descartes changes his mind and withdraws this danger. In reply to objections we find confirmation: God's guarantee is needed when we use memory (for instance during complicated reasoning) and when we use senses (always without clarity and distinctness). After discovering his criterion of truth, the evil demon hypothesis is called weak base for doubting (III, 36). "Whatever is shown to me by the natural light (for instance, that, from the fact that I am doubting, it follows that I exist, and suchlike) can in no way be doubtful, because there can be no other faculty that I could trust as much as this light" (M III, 38).

In this way Descartes finds some means to know God. It is intuitive knowledge like knowledge about first principles. "From the bare fact that I exist, and that in me there is an idea of a supremely perfect being, that is God, it is proved beyond question that God also exists" (M III, 51). One cannot think about "God without existence (that is, to think of the supremely perfect being without the supreme perfection)" (M V, 67). These and other arguments look like proofs but they are in fact several ways to put us on the right track to intuition of God existence.

Next problem is the existence and knowability of the external world. After presenting argumentation for the existence of God, Descartes finally removes the evil demon hypothesis, early limited to non-evident knowing. "It cannot happen that he should ever deceive me; for in all deceit and trickery some element of imperfection is to be found" (M IV, 53). Truthfulness of God guarantees the world existence and principal knowability. We can be sure the existence of material things and what we can know clearly about them (see M VI, 80). The rest of our beliefs are not certain but owing

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<sup>17</sup> See J. Czerkawski, *Istnienie świata materialnego w filozofii N. Malebranche'a*, "Roczniki Filozoficzne", vol. 50 (2002), p. 76.

God's truthfulness they are credible. "Although I do not think that all that senses seem to teach me is to be rashly accepted, I do not think that it should all be called in doubt" (M VI, 78).

#### 4. Some critics

The basic objection to Descartes, formulated already by the authors of the *Objections*, is unclear relation between clear and distinct knowledge and God's guarantee (the suspicion of vicious circle). We can be certain that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true, only if God exists, and we can be certain that God exists, only because we clearly perceive it (see O II, 125; O IV, 245). Descartes in *Replies* denies that all knowledge depends on knowing God. "For the knowledge [*notitia*] of principles is not usually called 'scientific knowledge' by logicians. But when we realize we are thinking things, this is a first notion not derived from any syllogism. And, when someone says, *I am thinking, therefore I am, or exist*, he is not deducing existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as known directly [*per se notam*] by a simple intuition of the mind" (R II, 140). And he adds that there are things so evident and simple that "we can never think of them without believing them to be true: for instance, that while I am thinking, I exist; that what has once happened, cannot not have happened, and suchlike" (R II, 145). A. Arnauld (O IV, 214) repeats the vicious circle accusation. "The sentence 'all known clearly and distinctively is true' is based on God truthfulness but the sentence stating God existence has its ground in the previous sentence; so we have here *circulus vitiosus*".<sup>18</sup> Descartes gives short answer that we need discern "between what we clearly perceive in actual fact and what we remember we once clearly perceived" (R IV, 246). God is to be needed only in the second case. The knowledge of own existence and knowledge about God is to be like knowledge about first principles. These three kinds of knowledge are prerequisite to know other things. They are rather intuition or a sequence of intuitions than some discourse employing memory.

In *Meditations* we have some problems with the status of clear and distinct intuitions and this is the source of so called Cartesian circle problem.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> S. Swieżawski, *Słowo wstępne*, in: Rene Descartes, *Medytacje o pierwszej filozofii. Zarzuty uczonych mężów i odpowiedzi Autora. Rozmowa z Burmanem*, Kęty: Wydawnictwo Antyk, 2001, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Compare J. Czerkowski, *Zagadnienie punktu wyjścia w filozofii N. Malebranche'a*, "Roczniki Filozoficzne", t. 42 (1994), p. 104.

In the first Meditation Descartes doubts in the value of evident intuitions (clear and distinct) on the ground the demon. The example is mathematical theorem "two and three equals five". In the second meditation Descartes discovers the certainty of his own existence and at the beginning of the third Meditation, before discovering God's existence, he states the criterion of truth as clear and distinct perception. Thus he restores the power of mathematical knowledge. The turning point was the discovery of *cogito*. This discovery limited the scope of the evil demon hypothesis. This is rather development of Descartes thought than any contradiction.

The problem is that later in fifth Meditation Descartes writes that evident knowledge is dependent on God: "Once I have perceived that God exists, then because I grasped at the same time that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver, and from this I deduced that everything I clearly and distinctly perceive is necessarily true" (M V, 70). "I plainly see that certitude and truth of all knowledge [*scientiae*] depends on the knowledge [*cognitione*] of the true God alone: so much so, that before I had discovered his knowledge, I could have no perfect knowledge [*scire*] of anything else at all" (M V, 71).

We should not rather say that only knowledge about external world is dependent on God (that would be consistent). Descartes says clearly that all knowledge is dependent. But early he said that clear knowledge even in a dream is true: "even if I were sleeping, if something is evident to my understanding, then it is altogether true" (M V, 71).

One way to avoid inconsistency is to distinguish the order of being (creatures depend on their Creator) and the order of knowing (evident knowledge must be confirm by truthful God). Descartes in the fifth Meditation could write about the ontological dependency but not necessarily about the epistemological one. Next way to avoid vicious circle is to assume that *cogito* and knowing God is intuitive (in fact Descartes was not clear to distinguish intuition and inference both in the case of *cogito* and in the case of the existence of God). "Ego and God reveal as beings directly (even if incompletely), however they are not proved by discourse and conceptualised. They are only truths that can go without God's truthfulness guarantee. Descartes often say that mathematical and logical truths need God's guarantee but he never say about the guarantee stating *cogito* or God himself. On the contrary, *cogito* is stated when God is assumed as deceiver and despite evil demon".<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> F. Alquie, op. cit., p. 111.

Actually, all intuitive knowing by reason gain its status by resemblance to *cogito*. *Cogito* resisted the evil demon hypothesis when mathematical knowledge was defeated by it. But, against Alquié, later Descartes treats both mathematical knowledge and *cogito* as the same type of evidence (see M III, 36). W. Augustyn analysing Cartesian grounds for knowledge concludes that Cartesian evidence was based on “the impossibility to deny the statement without nonsense”.<sup>21</sup> According to him this is the real criterion of evidence and certainty. Descartes uses this criterion to defend his own existence and it is suitable to mathematical knowledge. We must agree that such criterion was able to guarantee the absolute certainty and impossibility to turn out the statement false. “Clarity and distinctness are so necessary conditions for stating certainty of some knowledge, but they are not sufficient conditions.”<sup>22</sup> W. Augustyn also rightly remarks that the author of *Meditations* already before the discovery *cogito* in practice takes self-consciousness data as infallible. He uses them unknowingly to negative valuation of sense perception and to formulate sceptical hypotheses.<sup>23</sup>

Next objection directed to Descartes was weak analogy between *cogito* and other statement recognized as clear and distinct. According to Gassendi “the principle ‘the true is what we know clear and distinct’ is subjective”.<sup>24</sup> We must concede that knowing own existence is self-verifying (if I ask whether exist, I must exist). Similarly, to deny the simple *a priori* statement like “triangle has three sides” would lead to contradiction. But we can not say this about statement “I am thinking substance” when we mean metaphysical substance.

We would like to say that what is certain is only the existence of transcendental *ego* as a necessary condition for all knowledge but Descartes claims that certain is the existence of thinking substance, meaning soul containing reason, the faculty of imagination, will and consciousness.<sup>25</sup> Descartes can defend his criterion of truth when we assume his theory of “simple natures” and distinguishing the function of reason and will. The price is the limited application for such criterion. “Whenever in passing judgement I so keep my will under control that it confines itself to items clearly and

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<sup>21</sup> W. Augustyn, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> S. Swieżawski, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Compare F. Alquié, op. cit., p. 88–89.

distinctly represented to it by the intellect, it certainly cannot come about that I should make a mistake" (M IV, 62). He concedes that "the necessities of action do not always allow us the opportunity for such a thorough examination" (M VI, 90).

Let us pass over objections by Caterus, Gassendi and others concerning the conclusiveness the proof for the existence of God. As we have already said, Descartes takes knowing God as a kind of intuition, equal to knowing first principles. "One can not think about anything without thinking at the same time about thinking mind and one can not think about our limited mind without thinking about God".<sup>26</sup>

The more important problem is that even truthful God could have "his own reason for deceiving us"<sup>27</sup> for our good, like a doctor with his patients or a father with his children (O II, 126). Descartes thinks that great metaphysical illusion would deny God's truthfulness but not some local illusions. We should agree with critics that when we seek absolute certainty and when such rigorous criteria for knowledge were established, we should keep their obeying. However Descartes weakens criteria for evidence (he can not know clearly the reasons of unlimited being) and this is his way to avoid sceptical conclusion.

Next matter is the status of *cogito*. Bourdin writes that *cogito* can be a part of dream. Descartes answers that there is no possibility of mistake in the knowledge of one's own thoughts because a thought and our thinking about it is the same thing. "The first thought, by which we become aware of something, differs no more from the second thought by which we become aware that we have become aware of it" (R VII, 559). The same strategy to defend the certainty in self-consciousness developed in XIX century F. Brentano in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. According to him the ground of certainty is strict unity between conscious act and its knowing. The unity excludes the interruption of evil demon and the threat of regresses in knowing. Similar Cartesian way to break scepticism and justify the existence of world took also E. Husserl in *Cartesian Meditations*. The certainty of one's own existence was limited to transcendental *ego*, being no part of the world but the condition of its existence for subject. Later discussion about the value of self-consciousness data showed that distance in time and structure and the medium of social language do not allow for certainty. There is no sentence reporting any current conscious state and

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<sup>26</sup> Compare F. Alquie, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>27</sup> R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981, p. 202.

being absolutely certain.<sup>28</sup> That is why *cogito* can not be considered to be an example of absolute certain truth and knowledge (denying scepticism). But we can use *cogito*, as Descartes in the *Meditations*, to rebut sceptical doubt (if I doubt, I exist).

Descartes sought some help for *cogito* in God's truthfulness, like St. Augustine and Malebranche in God's illumination. Contemporary theories of consciousness are reluctant to look for such help and that is why they had to resign to the lack of certainty. Recently the Cartesian way to answer scepticism was questioned but the Cartesian hypotheses are still pattern for radical scepticism.

## 5. Contemporary versions of Cartesian hypotheses

Descartes as the author of evil demon hypothesis is the hero in contemporary philosophical literature on scepticism. Declared sceptic P. Unger writes that he wants to play the role of contemporary Descartes. He considers evil demon hypothesis as classical and constructs its modern version based on recent knowledge and *science-fiction* literature. Evil demon was replaced here by evil scientist.<sup>29</sup> Let us take any belief about world, for instance the believing there to be rocks. Let us imagine that it is false belief triggered in a subject by an evil scientist.

"This scientist uses electrodes to induce experiences and thus carries out his deceptions, concerning the existence of rocks or anything else. He first drills holes painlessly in the variously coloured skulls, or shells, of his subjects and then implants his electrodes into the appropriate parts of their brains, or protoplasm, or systems. He sends patterns of electrical impulses into them through the electrodes, which are themselves connected by wires to a laboratory console on which he plays, punching various keys and buttons in accordance with his ideas of how the whole thing works and with his deceptive designs".<sup>30</sup>

The hypothesis takes part in a following argument: (1) if you know that there are rocks, and then you can know that there is no such scientist doing this to you (triggering you to believe that there are rocks). (2) No

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<sup>28</sup> See my paper *Intuicja przeżywania*, "Przegląd Filozoficzny" Nowa Seria 1993, no. 2, p. 71–8 and *Samoświadomość i samowiedza z punktu widzenia epistemologii*, "Analiza i Egzystencja", no. 7 (2008).

<sup>29</sup> P. Unger, *Ignorance. A Case for Scepticism*, Clarendon Press. Oxford 1975, p. 7–8.

<sup>30</sup> P. Unger, op. cit., p. 7.

one can ever know this. So, (3) you never know that there are rocks. After generalisation we get sceptical thesis: nobody ever know anything about the external world.<sup>31</sup> Similar consequence for knowledge about past has B. Russell's hypothesis that our world was created five minutes ago.

The most famous versions of Cartesian hypothesis are created by R. Nozick and H. Putnam. In 1981 both (colleges at Harvard) published books demonstrating scepticism by new hypothesis. Nozick writes that he was inspired by *science fiction* literature and Putnam writes that he was inspired by Nozick. Nozick referring to Descartes constructs the evil scientist or brain-in-a-vat hypothesis. "You think you are seeing these words, but could you not be hallucinating or dreaming or having your brain stimulated to give you the experience of seeing these marks on paper although no such thing is before you? More extremely, could you not be floating in a tank while super-psychologists stimulate your brain electrochemically to produce exactly the same experience as you are now having, or even to produce the whole sequence of experiences you have had in your lifetime thus far? If one of these other things was happening, your experience would be exactly the same as it now is. So how can you know none of them is happening?"<sup>32</sup>

Putnam's version turned to be most popular and most frequently quoted. "Imagine that a human being (you can imagine this to be yourself) has been subjected to an operation by an evil scientist. The person's brain (your brain) has been removed from the body and placed in a vat of nutrients which keeps the brain alive. The nerves endings have been connected to a super-scientific computer which causes the person whose brain it is to have the illusion that everything is perfectly normal. There seem to be people, objects, the sky, etc; but really all the person (you) is experiencing is the result of electronic impulses traveling from the computer to the nerve endings".<sup>33</sup> Contemporary discussions on scepticism are totally dominated by this hypothesis which is modern version of evil demon hypothesis created by Descartes.

Descartes has important place in the history of scepticism. He is the model of modern sceptic, who established conditions for knowledge impossible to fulfil. His hypotheses turned to be more convicting than his original answer to scepticism (highly inspiring for all modern philosophical systems). Let us stress the meaning of this answer, following Alquié: Descartes help

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<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> R. Nozick, op. cit., p. 167.

<sup>33</sup> H. Putnam, *Brains in a Vat*, in: H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge Univ. Press, New York 1981, p. 5-6.

us to understand that our existence is the most certain truth and that our consciousness should not be the victim of its own hypotheses.<sup>34</sup>

## **Abstract**

Descartes started his philosophy when scepticism was very popular in France (M. de Montaigne's followers). Meditations are under influence of sceptical tradition even if Descartes does not mention it. His methodical scepticism was very serious in fact (the threat of sceptical conclusion was real). Descartes made the traditional sceptical reasons deeper by constructing two hypotheses: of dream and evil demon. He stopped sceptical doubting by discovering his own existence and tried to rescue the rest of human knowledge. There are many critical remarks about his answer to his own sceptical hypotheses. Descartes' role in the history of scepticism is the role of the author of evil demon hypothesis (recently modified as the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis).

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<sup>34</sup> Por. Alquié, op. cit., p.106. In contemporary Polish literature S. Judycki continues the Cartesian way to seek certainty in ontological proof as the only way to answer scepticism. See S. Judycki, *Sceptycyzm i dowód ontologiczny*, "Analiza i Egzystencja", no. 1 (2005), pp. 9–29. Similarly L. Kołakowski claims that if there is no God, the concept of truth is out of sense. There is no epistemological absolute without ontological absolute. But he denies the possibility to achieve certainty by humans. See L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, New Haven, Yale University Press 1975.