

Descartes's Faith and Beyond

Felipe G. A. Moreira

<https://www.felipegamoreira.com/>

Abstract: It has been argued that when disputes on whether a proposition is true are concerned, one is to ignore persons of faith; dissuade them from being believers or address them as objects of study. Descartes indicates a widely shared reason for this stance, namely, such persons are not legitimate philosophical opponents — assuming a strong condition according to which such opponents: do not appeal to emotions or scriptures; suspend judgment or seek to convince others without using propositions of faith and respect Pyrrhonist epistemic standards, e.g., to avoid circularity. This essay problematizes this view. It argues that *pace* Descartes' endorsement of it, some of his works illustrate the procedure of a person of faith who is not aware of one's faith. Moreover, it is supported that the strong condition is less pertinent than a weak one according to which in the impossibility of satisfying the strong condition, a legitimate philosophical opponent can: recognize one's difficulty of distinguishing one's emotions from one's reasons for taking a proposition to be true; be self-aware of some of one's propositions of faith and acknowledge one's argumentative limits vis-à-vis opponents. The essay also defends that at least one person of faith satisfies the weak condition. *Keywords:* Faith; Pyrrhonism; Religion; Legitimate Philosophical Opponents; God.

Introduction

Consider an imaginative exercise. Step 1: A person of faith, P_F , and a *prima facie* faithless person, $P_{\sim F}$, have an attribution dispute on whether the property t of being true is attributable to a proposition p . Step 2: In appealing to emotions (e.g., in nervously raising one's voice), P_F states that this is the case due to a criterion: accordance with Christian scriptures. Step 3: "But why", $P_{\sim F}$ asks P_F , "do you embrace this criterion?". Step 4: P_F starts to reply by resorting to propositions of faith — supposing that faith is the attitude of unjustifiably attributing t to p and that a proposition of faith is a considerably problematic one that is likely to create disputes in being the object of faith.¹ Eventually, P_F states: "I embrace the stated criterion because of a faithful starting point", that is, a proposition of faith that allegedly justifies all other propositions endorsed by P_F :

(D): God exists.

¹ As John Bishop (2016) indicates, there have been other concepts of faith. This essay does not aim to discuss them. For our purposes, it suffices to assume that the stated concept of faith is a plausible one. This essay also does not aim to spell out necessary and sufficient conditions for a proposition to be considerably problematic. It suffices to assume that "God exists" is an example of such proposition. The same is not the case with "2+3=5".

Step 5: P_{~F} gives to P_F an incredulous stare² after: asking, “why do you adopt (D) as a faithful starting point?”; and stating that if not compelled to suspend judgment on whether *t* is attributable to *p*, P_F has five options of reply indicated by Pyrrhonist modes.³ *Hypothesis*: “Just because, that is, I presuppose so”. *Dispute*: “Regardless of whether others disagree with me, I am compelled to do so”. *Regress*: “Because of another reason that leads to another reason and so on”. *Relativity*: “Because it seems culturally appealing to do so”. *Circle*: “Because *t* is attributable to *p*”.

Like P_F, billions of others adopt similar attitudes, e.g., Christians from varied denominations. How is one to react to this fact? The eliminativist response is to suggest that insofar as attribution disputes are at stake, one is to: ignore the likes of P_F; dissuade them from being persons of faith or address them as objects of study in developing empirical theories that aim to explain their religious behaviors.⁴ A reason that could be given on behalf of this response is:

(R): Persons of faith are not legitimate philosophical opponents —assuming a strong condition according to which such opponents satisfy three individually necessary and conjunctly sufficient requirements: (a) when confronted with an attribution dispute (e.g., that of Step 1), they (unlike P_F in Step 2) appeal neither to emotions nor to scriptures; (b) distinct from P_F who reacts to Step 3 by taking Step 4, they suspend judgment or seek to convince others without using propositions of faith and (c) they respect the Pyrrhonist epistemic constraint of not adopting the replies of Step 5.⁵

This view is so widely shared that it may as well be called a contemporary secular dogma.⁶ As it will be spelled out in what follows, one of the firsts to point to this direction was René Descartes, hereafter, Descartes_{Author}, the flesh and blood author of the 1637 *Discourse on Method*, the 1641 *Meditations* and the posthumously published in 1684, *The Search for Truth by means of*

² For a take on this stare, see David Lewis (1986: 133).

³ See Diogenes Laertius (2018: 505 / Book IX, Chapter 11, §88) and Sextus Empiricus (2000: 40 / Book I, § 164).

⁴ See Baruch Spinoza (2016); David Hume (2007); Karl Marx (1970); Friedrich Nietzsche (1967-77); Sigmund Freud (2017); Rudolf Carnap (2004), and, more recently, Richard Dawkins (1993) and Daniel Dennett (2006).

⁵ Other reasons for the eliminativist response (e.g., that persons of faith are mentally ill) cannot be addressed here.

⁶ This is not to state that others (e.g., Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) and Alvin Plantinga (2000)) have not suggested otherwise.

the Natural Light. However, (R), this essay argues, does not seem to be a strong reason for the eliminativist response. While focusing on works by Descartes_{Author}, three theses are defended to show that. First, that these works illustrate the procedure of a person of faith who is not aware of one's faith. Second, that the strong condition is less appealing than a weak one. Third, that at least one person of faith satisfies the latter according to which in the impossibility of satisfying (a), (b) and (c), a legitimate philosophical opponent satisfies three individually necessary and conjunctly sufficient requirements for being so — this opponent can: (a) recognize one's difficulty of distinguishing one's emotions from one's reasons for attributing *t* to *p*; (b) be self-aware of some of one's propositions of faith and (c) acknowledge one's argumentative limits vis-à-vis opponents.

1. Descartes_{Persona}'s Faith

In the dedicatory letter to “the Dean and Doctors of the sacred Faculty of Theology of Paris” that prefaces the *Meditations*, Descartes_{Author} suggests (R). He points to (a) while indicating that one is not to rely on scriptures or emotions, but exclusively on “natural reason” when disputing whether *t* is attributable to the propositions that “God exists” and that “the human soul does not die with the body” (AT VII 1-2 / CSM II 3).⁷ In underlining that “unbelievers” cannot be persuaded by faith but only by “demonstrative proofs”, Descartes_{Author} also points to (b) (AT VII 1-2 / CSM II 3). Moreover, he problematizes the “circular” arguments of persons of faith (AT VII 2 / CSM II 3). So, (c) is attributable to him, even if he does not openly consider all replies of Step 5.

Accordingly, though Descartes_{Author} describes himself as a “believer”⁸, he adopts the rhetorical device of disguising oneself into a conceptual persona, say, Descartes_{Persona}, who in a

⁷ “AT”, “CSM” and “CSMK” stand for Descartes (1964-76), Descartes (1985) and Descartes (1991), respectively. The Roman numbers stand for volumes and the Arabic numbers for page numbers.

⁸ To which extent Descartes_{Author} himself was a person of faith is not a relevant issue here. For a biographical inquiry into his life, consider Stephen Gaukroger (1995).

faithless way aims to satisfy (a) to (c) (AT VII 1 / CSM II 3). As Stephen Menn (2003) puts it, “the Meditator of the *Meditations* is not specifically René Descartes”, that is, Descartes_{Author} (Menn 2003: 141). It is rather Descartes_{Persona} who meditates throughout the six *Meditations*, spells out his views in the *Discourse on Method* and dialogues with others in *The Search for Truth* under the name “*Eudoxus*” (AT X 499 / CSM II 401). It is also Descartes_{Persona} who speaks in the first person in these works while yet providing autobiographical information that also seem to apply to Descartes_{Author}, e.g., “I have recognized through my travels that *those with views quite contrary to ours* [that is, those who will be hereafter called the others] *are not on that account barbarians or savages, but that many of them make use of reason as much or more than we do*” (AT VI 16 / CSM I 119, our emphasis). The italicized proposition may be called the anti-colonial one because its denial has played a core role in the colonization of the Americas.⁹ Furthermore, the relation between Descartes_{Author} and Descartes_{Persona} resembles that of an autobiographical poem’s author (e.g., Sylvia Plath) and a poetic persona (e.g., that of Plath’s poem, “Daddy”). The difference is that whereas poetic personae usually pursue more emotional activities (e.g., to spell out one’s feelings vis-à-vis one’s father), Descartes_{Persona} is engaged in the justificatory activity of backing up stances on attribution disputes. Consider then a second imaginative exercise which begins with:

Step 1’ Like P_F and P_{-F}, Descartes_{Persona} and another conceptual persona, the Other_{ofDescartes}, have an attribution dispute: the dispute on whether *t* is attributable to the Cartesian foundationalism.

This foundationalism is the thesis that at least one of three propositions is a faithless starting point, that is, a proposition to which the attribution of *t* is immediately justified:

Cogito-i “*I am thinking, therefore I exist [cogito, ergo sum]*” (AT VI 32 / CMS I 127).

Cogito-ii “*I am, I exist [ego sum, ego existo]*” (AT VII 26 / CMS II 17).

⁹ See, in this sense, Anibal Quijano (2000).

Cogito-iii “*I am doubting, therefore I exist [dubito, ergo sum]*” (AT X 523 / CSM II 417).

That Descartes_{Persona} attributes *t* to the Cartesian foundationalism is a traditional reading.¹⁰ The same is the case with the claim that he takes that there is a Cartesian intuition —assuming that:

- I-i A Cartesian intuition is a cognitive “means” to apprehend the apparently “given” (to put it in Wilfrid Sellars’ terms (1997)) that is distinct and more trustworthy than the senses, the imagination and the understanding which, as the *Ist Meditation* indicates, sometimes deceive us or can deceive us in case a “malicious demon” exists (AT VII 23 / CSM II 15).
- I-ii A Cartesian intuition that *p* is an immediate justification for attributing to *p*, not only *t*, but also the property *c&u* of being “certain and unshakeable” for this intuition is a psychological experience that irresistibly compels one to do so (AT VII 24 / CMS II 16).
- I-iii Examples of objects of a Cartesian intuition are Cogito-i, Cogito-ii and Cogito-iii.¹¹

That Descartes_{Persona} takes that a Cartesian intuition immediately justifies the attribution of *t* and *c&d* to Cogito-i, Cogito-ii or Cogito-iii is not a particularly original reading.¹² Let us imagine then:

Step 2’ In apparently proceeding differently from P_F in Step 2, Descartes_{Persona} does not appeal to scriptures. He also does not seem to resort to emotions in calmly stating that *t* is attributable to the cartesian foundationalism due to a criterion: accordance with Cartesian intuition.

It is imaginable that like P_{-F} reacts to P_F by taking Step 3, the Other_{ofDescartes} would react by taking:

Step 3’ “But why”, this other asks Descartes_{Persona}, “do you embrace this criterion?”

¹⁰ See Martial Gueroult (1953: 54), Jaakko Hintikka (1962: 21), Charles Larmore (2006: 23), Lex Newman (2019: 5) etc. Yet, others, such as John Carriero (2009: 354), have pointed to distinct readings.

¹¹ In this sense, consider a passage from a letter from March or April of 1648 of Descartes_{Author} to Jean Silhon: “You will surely admit that you are less certain of the presence of the objects you can see [that is, in relying on the senses] than of the truth of the [non-sensitive, imaginative or provided by the understanding] proposition ‘I am thinking, therefore I exist’ [or of Cogito-ii and Cogito-iii]. Now this knowledge is not the work of your reasoning or information passed on to you by teachers [that is, the means that allows one to achieve this knowledge is not the understanding]; it is something that [through a psychological experience] your mind [metaphorically, speaking] sees, feels and handles; and although your imagination [which is a less reliable means than a Cartesian intuition] insistently mixes itself up with your thoughts and lessens the clarity of this knowledge by trying to clothe it with shapes, it is nevertheless a proof of the capacity of our soul for receiving intuitive knowledge from God” (AT V 137-138 / CSMK 331). For a comment on this passage that connects it with current disputes on intuition, see Elijah Chudnoff (2013:3).

¹² This reading is allied with what Edwin Curley calls a “popular interpretation of Descartes” according to which propositions are “properly basic when they are either *self-evident* or *incorrigible reports of the contents of our consciousness*” (Curley 2006: 31). For an alternative reading, consider Curley (2006) himself.

As the eliminativist Rudolf Carnap (2003) indicates, accordance with Cartesian intuition is a debatable criterion. In refereeing to another eliminativist, Friedrich Nietzsche, Carnap states: “the *sum* [in Cogito-i] does not follow from the *cogito*; it does not follow from ‘I experience’ that ‘I am’, but only that an experience is” (Carnap 2003: 261). Similarly, one could problematize that Cogito-iii is a faithless starting point in arguing that “*sum*” also does not follow from “*dubito*”. Thus, while suggesting that accordance with Cartesian intuition may not be an appropriate criterion to deal with the attribution dispute over the Cartesian foundationalism, the Other_{ofDescartes} could argue that: “even if there is a Cartesian intuition in the sense of I-i, contrary to I-iii, Cogito-i and Cogito-iii do not seem to be its objects; *pace* I-ii, one or at least myself do not have a psychological experience that irresistibly compels the attribution of *t* and *c&u* to these propositions”.

As Hintikka (1962) indicates, it is charitable to read that despite of what the term “*ergo*” may seem to suggest, one is not to read Cogito-i or Cogito-iii as inferences but as immediate self-verifiable insights which may be more accurately formulated in terms of Cogito-ii. As Hintikka (1962) indicates, the latter proposition may be interpreted as a “performance”: “an act of thinking” whose truth can be self-verified by the one who utters it (Hintikka 1962:17).¹³ Then, it may be replied on behalf of Descartes_{Persona} that a Cartesian intuition (in the sense of I-i) that Cogito-ii is, indeed, an immediate justification whose psychological experience compels one to attribute *t* and *c&u* to this proposition. So, Cogito-ii would be an object of a Cartesian intuition.

This reply can yet be resisted. Consider “*Epistemon*”, an interlocutor of Descartes_{Persona} (“*Eudoxus*”) in *The Search for the Truth*. In addressing Descartes_{Persona}, he argues that: “you say that you exist and you know you exist, and you know this because you are doubting and because you are thinking. But do you really know what doubting or what thinking is?” (AT X 522 / CSM

¹³ For a problematization of this reading, see Bernard Williams (2005:60-61).

II 416).¹⁴ This remark indicates that if there is a Cartesian intuition, its objects have to be propositions that only rely on minimally normative concepts that: have been applied in the same sense by practically all persons or at least throughout the sciences; and do not usually raise or are unlike to raise a practical dispute. As *Epistemon* indicates, the concepts employed in Cogito-ii do not satisfy these conditions. Suppose that the Other_{ofDescartes} was raised in a context in which a community does not use “I” as an indexical but, rather, takes it to mean one’s deep self whose full development is only achieved after one’s life. This community, imagine, also takes “am” or “exist” to mean a more authentic way of being that only this deep self can achieve.¹⁵ In reading the concepts used in Cogito-ii along these lines, uttering this proposition but being unable to self-verify its truth, the Other_{ofDescartes} may insist that: “one or at least myself do not have a psychological experience that irresistibly compels the attribution of *t* and *c&u* to Cogito-ii”. This move may give rise to a practical dispute on how one is to employ the concepts used in Cogito-ii.¹⁶ *Epistemon* points in this direction. He claims that “first of all”, Descartes_{Persona} should have spelled out “what doubt is, what thought is, what existence is” (AT X 522 / CSM II 416).

“I dare not hope that Epistemon will give in to my arguments”, Descartes_{Persona} replies. (AT X 522 / CSM II 416). “Someone who, like him, is stuffed full of propositions and taken up with any number of preconceptions”, he proceeds, “finds it difficult to submit himself exclusively to the natural light, for he has long been in the habit of yielding to authority rather than lending his ear to the dictates of his own reason” (AT X 522-523 / CSM II 416). Indeed, “I would never have believed”, Descartes_{Persona} emphasizes, “that there has ever existed anyone so dull [*stupidum*, in the original] that he had to be told what existence is before being able to conclude and assert that he

¹⁴ While pointing to an alternative concept of “thinking”, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994:24-31) develop a similar line of reasoning against Descartes_{Persona}.

¹⁵ For a defense of the claim that philosophers have applied “existence” in distinct senses, see Eli Hirsch (2011).

¹⁶ Carnap (1956) argues that all disputes in philosophy or at least in metaphysics lead to this practical issue.

exists” (AT X 524 / CSM II 417). Given the harshness of the term “*stupidum*”, Descartes_{Persona} seems to have an emotional reaction vis-à-vis *Epistemon*. In fact, it is easy to imagine that he, like P_F in Step 2, nervously raised his voice at this moment. Indeed, Descartes_{Persona} seems to express vis-à-vis *Epistemon* a “subtle” violence.¹⁷ In apparently contradicting the anti-colonial proposition and taking oneself to satisfy (a), (b) and (c), this is the violence of unjustifiably suggesting that one’s opponents fall short of *logos* in accidentally not properly using “good sense”, that is, the “power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false” (AT VI 2 / CSM I 111).

It is then plausible to imagine:

Step 4’ “Accordance with Cartesian intuition”, Descartes_{Persona} replies to the Other_{ofDescartes} while nervously raising his voice, “is the only rational criterion that can be adopted vis-à-vis the attribution dispute on the Cartesian foundationalism. The one who disagrees or does not have a Cartesian intuition that Cogito-i, Cogito-ii or Cogito-iii is ‘*stupidum*’”.

This reaction does not seem very appealing; though disputable, the Other_{ofDescartes}’ points do not seem to justify one to attribute to this conceptual persona stupidity. Furthermore, other objections could be articulated against the Cartesian foundationalism, e.g., that even if Cogito-ii is an object of a Cartesian intuition, further points would have to be established to back up the thesis that this proposition is the simplest; that though “some things [may be] made more obscure by our attempts to define them”, Descartes_{Persona} had to precisely spell out conditions for taking a term as a primitive (AT X 523-24 / CSM II 417); etc. Indeed, it is not easy finding contemporary philosophers who embrace the Cartesian foundationalism. As indicated above, Nietzsche and Carnap also do not embrace this view. The same is the case regarding the other aforementioned eliminativists who yet point to (a), (b) and/or (c). Furthermore, the harshness of Step 4’ does not seem consistent with someone who, like Descartes_{Persona}, states that his aim “is not to teach the

¹⁷ This term was borrowed from Felipe G. A. Moreira (2021:16).

method which everyone must follow in order to direct his reason correctly, but only to reveal how I have tried to direct my own” (AT VI 4 / CMS I 112). These factors provide a motivation for supporting this essay’s first thesis, which can also be put as follows: in the *Discourse on the Method*, the *Meditations* and *The Search for Truth*, Descartes_{Persona} proceeds like a person of faith who is not aware of one’s faith. Textual evidence attests to that in backing up an alternative reading not yet explored; that before suggesting that *t* is attributable to the Cartesian foundationalism and to the proposition that a Cartesian intuition exists, Descartes_{Persona} unconsciously presupposes three considerably problematic propositions in acting as if *t* were attributable to them:

Modal Proposition: I can be more cognitively and practically perfect than at least some others.

Normative Proposition: I should be so.

(D)_{Alternative}: There is a highest degree and a criterion for perfect cognition and practice.

Suppose that *x* is more cognitively perfect than *y* if and only if *x* has a more pertinent than *y* take on attribution disputes, that is, on the “investigation of the truth” (AT VII 350 / CMS II 243). Moreover, *x* is more practically perfect than *y* when *x*’s “actions of life” — insofar as the investigation for the truth is at stake — are also more pertinent than *y*’s (AT VII 350 / CMS II 243). (D)_{Alternative} deserves this name, for it is the faithful starting point of Descartes_{Persona}. So, (D)_{Alternative} plays for him a role similar to that of (D) for P_F. The highest degree and criterion for perfect cognition and practice may as well stand, to put it in John Bishop’s (1998) terms, for an “alternative concept of God” (Bishop 1998:174). This concept is alternative vis-à-vis that of “a supreme God, eternal infinite, immutable, omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from him” whose existence Descartes_{Persona} aims to prove in the 3rd and 5th *Meditation*.

Part One of the *Discourse on Method* provides evidence of Descartes_{Persona}’s commitment to the modal proposition. “I follow”, he states, “the common proposition of the philosophers who say there are differences of degree only between the *accidents*, and not between the *forms* (or

natures) of *individuals* of the same *species* (AT VI 3 / CSM I 112). So, though all persons have “good sense”, some accidentally express it more perfectly than others, e.g., in better cognitively addressing attribution disputes while practically directing their “thoughts along different paths” (AT VI 2 / CSM I 111). Descartes_{Persona} suggests that he is one of those. In his words: “I can increase my knowledge gradually and raise it little by little to the highest point allowed by the mediocrity of my mind and the short duration of my life” (AT VI 2 / CSM I 112).

Further evidence of Descartes_{Persona}’s commitment to the modal proposition is provided by the *1st Meditation* where he makes a distinction between his past and current self. The past self is the cognitively and practically less perfect one from Descartes_{Persona}’s “childhood” who in accepting a “large number of falsehoods”, erected a “whole edifice” of a “highly doubtful nature” (AT VII 17 / CMS II 12). The current self is a more cognitively and practically perfect self who reached a “mature enough age” and in being “quite alone” can devote oneself “sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of [his] propositions” (AT VII 17-18 / CMS II 12). Further down, Descartes_{Persona} draws another distinction between himself and “madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain that they are kings when they are paupers” (AT VII 19 / CMS II 13).¹⁸ This is to suggest that his current self can be more cognitively and practically perfect than madmen. In the beginning of *The Search for Truth*, Descartes_{Persona} points to a similar direction while replying to Epistemon’s remark that the “desire for knowledge [...] is an illness which cannot be cured” (AT X 499 / CSM II 402). Descartes_{Persona} suggests that there is a “remedy” to this illness that he found for himself and, arguably, for others (AT X 500 / CSM II 402). “I venture to hope”, he states, “not only that you

¹⁸ For a more detail take on Descartes_{Persona}’s view on madness, see Ethel Menezes da Rocha (2012).

will admit that I have some reason for being content with my knowledge, but, in addition, that you for your part will be fully satisfied with the things you have learned” (AT X 502 / CSM II 403).

Accordingly, throughout the *Discourse on Method*, the *Meditation* and *The Search for Truth*, Descartes_{Persona} practically proceeds by showing how he is more cognitively and practically perfect than some others, e.g., in not being “vain” or “lacking in curiosity” (AT X 502 / CSM II 403). Given so, it is plausible to attribute to him an unconscious commitment to the normative proposition. Given so, he also seems to be unconsciously committed to (D)_{Alternative}. This is so in that this proposition seems to be a ground for the normative and the modal proposition.¹⁹ It is imaginable then that instead of taking Step 4′, Descartes_{Persona} could have taken a distinct route:

Step 4′′ He starts to reply to the Other_{ofDescartes} by becoming self-aware and stating his propositions of faith: the modal and the normative one. He then argues that he endorses accordance with the Cartesian intuition as a criterion because of (D)_{Alternative}, his faithful starting point.

This step avoids “subtle” violence; this is a reason for preferring it over Step 4′. Step 4′′ would yet not likely end the attribution dispute at stake. What is more easily imaginable is:

Step 5′ Similar to P_{-F} in Step 5, the Other_{ofDescartes} gives to Descartes_{Persona} an incredulous stare after: asking, “why do you adopt (D)_{Alternative} as a faithful starting point?”; and stating that if not compelled to suspend judgment on whether *t* is attributable to the Cartesian foundationalism, Descartes_{Persona} seems to have the same options of reply stated in Step 5.

2. The Strong and the Weak Condition

The dispute between Descartes_{Persona} and the Other_{ofDescartes} points to this essay’s second thesis: the strong condition for being a legitimate philosophical opponent is less appealing than the weak one. The reason is that the former leads whereas the weak condition avoids some absurdities:

(Absurdity)-i Descartes_{Persona} is not a legitimate philosophical opponent.

¹⁹ It is beyond this essay’s scope to spell out in detail what kind of ground that is, e.g., in addressing the current literature on grounding discussed by the likes of Jessica Wilson (2014).

- (Absurdity)-ii The same is the case with (if not all) at least several philosophers, e.g., Karl Leonhard Reinhold (2013), Nietzsche (1967-1977), Carnap (2004), Peter Klein (2005), Richard Rorty (1999), and Willard van Orman Quine and J.S. Ullian (1978) who suggest that it is acceptable to violate the Pyrrhonist constraint.
- (Absurdity)-iii Arguably, the only legitimate philosophical opponent would be a radical skeptic who respects this constraint while taking “actions of life”, but yet being neutral on the “investigation of the truth” (AT VII 350 / CMS II 243).

To spell out that the strong condition leads to (Absurdity)-i, suppose this condition and the more manifest reading according to which Descartes_{Persona} would take Step 4' when confronted with the Other_{ofDescartes}. Granted these moves, Descartes_{Persona} violates the strong condition. To begin with, though he does not appeal to scriptures, he seems to rely on emotions in expressing “subtle” violence. This is to violate (a). Even if this were not the case, Descartes_{Persona} apparently violates (b). This occurs in that he does not suspend judgment on the attribution dispute over the Cartesian foundationalism. Moreover, when confronted with the Other_{ofDescartes}, he appears pressured to endorse as a proposition of faith the thesis that the Cartesian intuition is the criterion to deal with the attribution dispute over the Cartesian foundationalism. Suppose yet that he can avoid that while also not adopting the stated *Hypothesis* option of reply.

Even if Descartes_{Persona} had the means to do so, it does not seem possible for him to avoid the other stated four options of response in satisfying (c). To begin with, there have been the likes of the Other_{ofDescartes}; they are unconvinced by the proposition that accordance with Cartesian intuition is the criterion to deal with the attribution dispute on the Cartesian foundationalism. Thus, if unwilling to suspend judgment, Descartes_{Persona} seems to be rationally compelled to endorse this criterion, regardless of whether others disagree with him. Suppose yet that Descartes_{Persona} refuses to proceed in such a way. He can then start a regress, e.g., in giving a reason for adopting accordance with Cartesian intuition as a criterion which would require another reason for being justified and so on. If unwilling to regress, Descartes_{Persona} could endorse a relativist response. This

is to claim that accordance with the Cartesian foundationalism is an appealing criterion from his culture's perspective. If unwilling to make this move, Descartes_{Persona} could run into a circle similar to the one he attributes to persons of faith while claiming that: *t* is attributable to the proposition that one is to adopt the Cartesian intuition as a criterion to deal with the attribution dispute over the Cartesian foundationalism because *t* is attributable to the Cartesian foundationalism.

Descartes_{Persona} appears then to violate (a), (b) and/or (c) in not being a legitimate philosophical opponent. This conclusion also follows if a less manifest reading is proposed: that Descartes_{Persona} would adopt Step 4'' when confronted with the Other_{OfDescartes}. In this case, like P_F, Descartes_{Persona} would even more overtly contradict (a), (b) and (c) while relying on emotions, adopting propositions of faith and embracing the *Hypothesis* option of response. Of course, there can be other readings that attribute steps distinct from Step 4' and Step 4'' to Descartes_{Persona}. Yet, it is hard to see how such readings would make Descartes_{Persona} satisfy the strong condition.²⁰

On the other hand, Descartes_{Persona} can satisfy the weak condition. This occurs insofar as nothing in the works of Descartes_{Author} suggests that this conceptual persona cannot do (a)', (b)' and (c)'. It is not this essay's aim to develop a detailed account on the modal term "can".²¹ For the current purposes, it suffices to underline that to claim that one *can* do something is distinct from arguing that one *wants* or *enjoys* doing so. Indeed, it seems that Descartes_{Persona} does not want and would even suffer if required to satisfy the weak condition. This suffering is unnecessary; he could avoid it by adopting Step 4''. This is a second reason for preferring this step over Step 4'.

That the strong condition also leads to (Absurdity)-ii can be spelled out by considering that it may be impossible for persons to satisfy it. Indeed, those, such as Descartes_{Persona}, who suggest

²⁰ See, e.g., Curley (2006) who yet emphasizes: "I am not, in fact, prepared to say that Descartes' defense of knowledge achieves a victory [...] over the Pyrrhonian skeptic" (Curley 2006: 47).

²¹ As Almog (2002) indicates, "today many readings offer very sophisticated senses of [...] 'can'" (Almog 2002:4).

that they can do so have not been able to convince the philosophical field of that. There is then a third reason for preferring Step 4'' over Step 4'. The former is held by someone whose self-image is more in alliance with the philosophical field's views about oneself. Arguably, the adoption of Step 4' may even be a sign of a less severe but comparable to that of "madmen" self-delusion.

For the sake of argument, let us yet assume that one can satisfy (a), (b) and (c) and that (a) and (b) are met by Reinhold (1801), Nietzsche (1967-1977), Carnap (2004), Klein (2014), Rorty (1999) and Quine and Ullian (1978). Even if this move granted, such authors violate (c). As Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (2010) and, more recently, Manfred Frank (2004) indicates, Reinhold (2013) points to *Hypothesis*. "Philosophy", Hegel takes to be Reinhold's view, "can begin only with something which is *hypothetically* and *problematically* true" (Hegel 2010: 48). At least in Felipe G. A. Moreira's (2020) reading, Nietzsche and Carnap point to a similar direction. Respectively, their hypotheses would be: there is a "will to power" that compels one to act in accordance with one's libertarian tendencies of expressing one's uniqueness while criticizing communitarian restraints; and there is a "will to order" that compels one to act in accordance with one's egalitarian tendencies of contributing to the creation of a universal community whose restraints would serve common interests (Moreira 2020:163). Nietzsche also suggests *Dispute*. He claims that it would be valuable for a "philosopher of the future" to state that: "'my judgment is my judgment: other people don't have an obvious right to it too'" (*Beyond Good and Evil* §43).

Moreover, *Regress* is an acceptable option for Klein (2014) in that he points to infinitism. This is the thesis that given an attribution dispute, one is to provide a chain of reasons that may ultimately be infinite. Rorty (1999) problematizes the "distinction between the way things are in themselves and the relation which they have to other things, and in particular to human needs and interests" (Rorty 1999: xvi). So, he indicates *Relativism*. As Klein (2014) indicates, no

“epistemologist explicitly advocated” *Circle* (Klein 2014: 276). However, whether the likes of Quine and Ullian (1978) can avoid this reply while supporting coherentism is debatable. Given that coherentism is the thesis that when confronted with an attribution dispute, one is to provide a web of propositions that mutually support one another, it is quite hard to distinguish mutually supportability from circularity.²² Thus, if the strong condition is embraced, Reinhold, Nietzsche, Carnap, Klein, Rorty, Quine and Ullian do not seem legitimate philosophical opponents. This does not follow in case the weak condition is embraced; like *Descartes_{Persona}*, all these philosophers can do (a)’, (b)’ and (c)’, regardless of whether they would want or enjoy doing so.

The weak condition is also satisfiable by the radical skeptic mentioned in (Absurdity)-iii. That the strong condition also leads to this absurdity follows from the fact that only this skeptic appears to respect the Pyrrhonist constraint. In doing so, this skeptic would suspend judgment on whether *t* is attributable to the proposition being disputed by P_F and $P_{\neg F}$, say, the proposition suggested in *John 8:1-11* that one is not to stone an adulterous woman.²³ A context in which P_F and $P_{\neg F}$ may have an attribution over this proposition is one in which a woman is actually about to be stoned. Regardless of whether one can suspend judgment, the radical skeptic cannot suspend one’s actions of life. So, if inserted in such a context, the skeptic would have to take a course of action, e.g., to help to stone the woman, to dissuade others from doing so etc. Another practical decision is imposed upon a radical skeptic who suspends judgment on the attribution dispute over the Cartesian foundationalism but is inserted in a context in which one physically constrains the skeptic to engage oneself into a meditation similar to that of *Descartes_{Persona}*. In other words, this skeptic would have to take a course of action in meditating, refusing to do so etc. Regardless of

²² For a more detailed take on such issues, see Laurence Bonjour (1985).

²³ Ernesto Cardenal (2010: 321) articulates a detailed reading of this passage.

the merits or demerits of this skeptic stance (discussed in detail by Robert Fogelin (1994)), what matters is that distinct from the strong condition, the weak one does not lead to (Absurdity)-iii.

It does not follow that all persons satisfy the weak condition. Imagine that P_F gets very mad with $P_{\sim F}$'s Step 5. In being dominated by hatred, P_F (at least momentarily) cannot satisfy (a)', (b)' and (c)'. As eliminativists claim, there have been persons of faith who have taken such attitudes.²⁴ It is a sociological matter to determine the recurrence of such actions. This is not at stake here.

3. A New Faith

What is crucial is to back this essay's third thesis: at least one person of faith satisfies the weak condition. This may be illustrated by imagining another conceptual persona, say, ABCD.²⁵ Suppose that this persona is informed in having paid attention to the disputes between P_F and $P_{\sim F}$ and that between $\text{Descartes}_{\text{Persona}}$ and the $\text{Other}_{\text{ofDescartes}}$. ABCD takes then two steps:

Step 6 "Arguably, there may be those who can satisfy (a), (b) and (c)", ABCD speculates. "However, I do not take myself to be one of them".

Step 7 "Like $\text{Descartes}_{\text{Persona}}$ (as section 1 indicates)", ABCD continues, "I adopt the modal proposition, the normative proposition and (D)_{Alternative}, my faithful starting point. Unlike him, it is not painful for me to recognize my difficulty of distinguishing my emotions from my reasons for attributing t to these propositions. In other words, unlike P_F , I can do so."

An example of a *prima facie* reason that ABCD can adopt for the modal proposition runs as follows. As $\text{Descartes}_{\text{Author}}$ acknowledges in his fifth set of replies to Pierre Gassendi, insofar as actions of life are concerned, it seems "foolish not to trust the senses" even if they sometimes fool us (AT VII 350 / CMS II 243). Actually, this is what one usually does when taking the senses to justify the attribution of t to a sensible proposition: "I sensibly perceive myself as being cognitively

²⁴ Consider, for instance, Spinoza (2007:7) and, more recently, Dawkins (1993:20).

²⁵ **For referees:** In the final version, I plan to change "ABCD" for my initials while highlighting that my relation vis-à-vis ABCD is similar to that of $\text{Descartes}_{\text{Author}}$ vis-à-vis $\text{Descartes}_{\text{Persona}}$.

and practically more perfect than some others, say, those who struggle with mental disorder, e.g., depression or schizophrenia”. As Descartes_{Persona} also indicates (AT VII 19 / CMS II 13), the imagination can deceive us. It also seems yet foolish to avoid using such faculty when actions of life are concerned. This is also what one usually does when taking the imagination as a justification for attributing *t* to an imaginative proposition: “I imagine myself as being cognitively and practically less perfect in the past than as of now”. Given this proposition and the sensible proposition stated in this paragraph, it seems justifiable to endorse the modal proposition. The conjunction of these three propositions provides a *prima facie* reason that ABCD can also endorse for the normative proposition. As stated above, a ground for the normative and modal proposition is (D)_{Alternative}. So, ABCD also has a *prima facie* reason for adopting it. An example of an emotion for adopting the modal proposition, the normative proposition and (D)_{Alternative} is the feeling of desperation that one, such as ABCD, may experience in case such propositions are false or if one doubts that *t* is attributable to them. Another step that ABCD takes is:

Step 8 “Unlike Descartes_{Persona} who seems to be unaware of one’s faith in the modal proposition, the normative proposition and (D)_{Alternative}”, ABCD underlines, “I am self-aware that these are my propositions of faith. Another proposition of faith of mine is that to act in life in accordance with such propositions is to adopt a procedure distinct from Descartes_{Persona}’s”.

Descartes_{Persona}’s procedure is that of suggesting that to be maximally cognitively and practically perfect, he endorses a particular balance between libertarian and egalitarian tendencies. In a Nietzschean vein, he seeks to maximize libertarian tendencies, e.g., in problematizing the constraints of educational institutions while: “resolving to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in [him]self or else in the great book of the world” (AT VI 9 / CMS I 115); isolating oneself from the rest of the community in meditating “quite alone” (AT VII 18 / CMS II 12); disputing the likes of Epistemon who has a “detailed knowledge of everything that can be learned

in the Schools” (AT X 499 / CMS II 401); etc. In a more Carnapian vein, Descartes_{Persona} also aims to maximize egalitarian tendencies by proposing a “method” that others may use (AT VI 4 / CMS I 112) in seeking to establish purported “truths equally useful to everybody” (AT X 498 / CMS II 401), e.g., the Cartesian foundationalism and that there is a Cartesian intuition.

ABDC, suppose, adopts a distinct procedure; one that is spelled out in this essay and proposes a distinct balance between libertarian and egalitarian tendencies. The maximization of libertarian tendencies pursued in this case is one that: proposes a new reading of Descartes_{Author}’s works; sketches a new faith based on propositions of faith not yet explicitly adopted; refers to continental, analytic, non-European and non-North American philosophers in problematizing the implicit restraints of certain educational institutions and academic journals that rarely publish those who do so etc. ABCD’s distinct procedure also aims to maximize egalitarian tendencies by: proposing a new faith that may be useful to others and opposing the loneliness of Descartes_{Persona}’s meditation to an awareness of a conflictual communal coexistence. This awareness is shown by problematizing Descartes_{Persona} “subtle” violence while endorsing a simple argument whose first premise is: if t were attributable to the Cartesian foundationalism and to the proposition that accordance with Cartesian intuition is the only rational criterion to address the dispute between Descartes_{Persona} and the Other_{OfDescartes}, there would have been by now consensus on such propositions. Given that this is not the case, t is not attributable to them. Thus, the differences between ABCD and Descartes_{Persona} are comparable to those between two Christians who endorse the same propositions of faith but read them differently. Suppose that ABCD also takes:

Step 9 “In seeking to avoid expressing ‘subtle’ violence”, this conceptual persona argues, “I acknowledge my argumentative limits vis-à-vis my opponents”.

This acknowledgement can be done by considering that when confronted with opponents (especially, the others) ABCD may disrespect the Pyrrhonist constraint. Indeed, to endorse Step 7 is to adopt a variation of *Hypothesis*. Thus, to justify this attitude ABCD may be pressured to endorse a variation of *Dispute* in stating that: “regardless of whether others disagree with me, I am compelled to adopt my propositions of faith”. If unwilling to endorse this stance, ABCD may have to endorse a variation of *Regress*. This would occur in case this persona were to provide an apparently infinite chain of reasons to back up one’s propositions of faith when confronted with objections, e.g., that the aforementioned ground that (D)_{Alternative} is supposed to be vis-à-vis the modal and the normative proposition needs to be further spelled out; that it is not clear whether the highest degree and a criterion for perfect cognition and practice is not ultimately the traditional concept of God; that the connection between (D)_{Alternative} and Christian scriptures must be explained; etc. ABCD may also be forced into adopting a variation of *Relativity* or *Circle*. Respectively, this would occur in case one were to argue that: “it seems culturally appealing to endorse my propositions of faith” or “one is to adopt the modal and the normative proposition because of (D)_{Alternative}, and one is to adopt the latter because of the former two propositions”.

Of course, a more detailed defense of the new kind of faith sketched here would have to address the last paragraph’s points in detail in providing more than merely *prima facie* reasons for following the likes of ABCD. For the sake of this essay, though, it suffices to conclude that Steps 6 to 9 are evidence that at least one person of faith, ABCD, satisfies the weak condition. This is the third thesis this essay proposed to defend — the other two were that: the weak condition is more pertinent than the strong one; and Descartes_{Persona} proceeds like a person of faith who is not aware of one’s faith. Given that these theses were also with any luck persuasively defended, let us

finish by emphasizing that it does not seem that the claim that persons of faith are not legitimate philosophical opponents is a strong reason for the eliminativist response.

References

- Almog, Joseph (2002). *What am I? Descartes and the Mind-Body Problem*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony (1992). *In My Father's House*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bishop, John (1998). "Can there be alternative concepts of God?". *Noûs*, Jun., 1998, Vol. 32, No. 2: p. 174-188.
- . (2016). "Faith", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/faith/>.
- BonJour, Laurence (1985). *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Cardenal, Ernesto (2010). *The Gospel in Solentiname*. Eugene, OR: Orbis.
- Carnap, Rudolf. (2003). *The Logical Structure of the World and Pseudoproblems in Philosophy*. Illinois: Open Court.
- . (2004). *Scheinprobleme in der Philosophie und andere metaphysikkritische Schriften*, edited by Thomas Mormann. Hamburg: Meiner Felix Verlag GmbH.
- Chudnoff, Elijah. (2013). *Intuition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Curley, Edwin (2006). "The *Cogito* and the Foundations of Knowledge". In *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, edited by Stephen Gaukroger. MA: Blackwell.
- Deleuze, Gilles; e Guattari, Félix (1994). *What is Philosophy?* NY: Columbia University Press.
- Dawkins, Richard (1993). "Viruses of the Mind." In Dahlbom, B. (ed.) *Dennett and his Critics*. MA: Blackwell Press.
- Dennett, Daniel (2006). *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. NY: Penguin Books.
- Descartes, René (1964-76). *CEuvres de Descartes Vol 1-12*, edited by Charles Adam e Paul Tannery. Paris: Vrin/CNRS.
- . (1985). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Vol. 1 and 2*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . (1991) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Vol. 1 and 2*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch and Anthony Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Empiricus, Sextus. (2000). *Outlines of Skepticism*, edited by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fogelin, Robert J. F (1994). *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Freud, Sigmund (2017). *Civilization and Its Discontents*. NY: Indiebooks.
- Frank, Manfred. (2004), *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*. Albany NY: SUNY.
- Gaukroger, Stephen (1995). *Descartes: an intellectual biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gueroult, Martial (1953). *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons, T. 1: L'Âme et Dieu et T. 2: L'Âme et le corps*. Paris: Aubier-Montaigne.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (2010). *The Science of Logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hintikka, Jaakko (1962). "Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?". *The Philosophical Review* Vol. 71, No. 1, Jan., 1962: pp. 3-32.
- Hume, David (2007). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Klein, Peter (2014). "Is Infitism the Solution to the Epistemic Regress Problem?". In *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (second edition), edited by Matthias Steup, John Turri and Ernest Sosa. Malden MA: Willey-Blackwell.
- Laertius, Diogenes (2018). *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, edited by James Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Larmore, Charles (2006). "Descartes and Skepticism". In *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, edited by Stephen Gaukroger. MA: Blackwell.
- Lewis, David (1986). *On the Plurality of Worlds*. MA: Blackwell.
- Marx, Karl (2009). *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Menn, Stephen (2003). "The *Discourse on Method* and the Tradition of Intellectual Autobiography". In *Hellenistic and Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Jon Miller and Brad Inwood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
- Moreira, Felipe G. A. (2020) "The Will to Synthesis: Nietzsche, Carnap and the Continental-Analytic Gap". In *Nietzsche-Studien*, Volume 49, Issue 1, p. 150–170.
- . (2021) "Anselm, Intuition and God's Existence". In *Philosophia* (2021). URL: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-021-00403-w>.
- Newman, Lex (2019). "Descartes' Epistemology". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/descartes-epistemology>

- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1967- 1977). *Nachlass* in Colli, Giorgio (ed.) and Montinari,azzino (ed.), *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, Berlin, de Gruyter.
- Hirsch, Eli (2011). *Quantifier Variance and Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plantinga, Alvin (2000). *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Quijano, Anibal (2000). “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America”, *Nepantla: Views from South*, Volume 1, Issue 3, 2000, p. 533-580.
- Quine, Willard Van Orman, and Ullian, J.S. (1978). *The Web of Belief*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Reinhold, Karl Leonhard (2013). *Essay on a new Theory of the Human Capacity for Representation*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Rocha, Ethel Menezes da (2012). “Notas sobre o argumento da loucura na primeira meditação”. *Educação e Filosofia Uberlândia*, v. 25, N. Especial: p.103-116.
- Rorty, Richard (1999). *Philosophy and Social Hope*. NY: Penguin Books.
- Sellars, Wilfrid (1997). *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Spinoza, Baruch (2007). *Theological-Political Treatise*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Williams, Bernard (2005). *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*. London: Routledge.
- Wilson, Jessica (2014). “No Work for a Theory of Grounding”. *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 57:5-6: p. 535-579.