

ON DESCARTES'S CONCEPT OF GOD*

(Whom is the mask worn by?)

Peter LOSONCZI.....

Introduction: The problem of legitimacy

In the Third Meditation we can read the following:

„By the name ‚God’ I understand a substance that is infinite (eternal, immutable,) independent, all-knowing, all-powerful, and by which I myself and everything else, if anything else exist, have been created”¹

As we know it on the ground of this idea Descartes comes to the conclusion that God necessarily exists.

This is one of the most problematic and criticised point of the Cartesian philosophy. Pascal was not the only one who couldn't forgive Descartes²

The legitimacy of God's presence in the thought of Descartes has been called in question during the last four hundred years by many authors.

We can distinguish two main groups of the critics.

The representations of the one group state that Descartes tried to prove God's existence just because he needed an „epistemological Jolly Joker”(Ferenc Altrichter) or because he wanted deserve the support of the Church(Tom Sorell).

According to the other, perhaps more moderate standpoint, Descartes's God is a „stillborn God”³ or he had been a quasi-atheist.

In short we can say that for some of them it is *too much* what Descartes says about God, while for others it is *not enough*.

Naturally, there are several problematic moments in his works. We can point out logical and metaphysical tensions, incoherence, theological deficiency. But does it mean that we should totally reject his statements concerning God? My aim is not to defend Cartesian metaphysics as such. But I would like to defend him against the charge of untrustworthiness.

In my opinion, despite of the tensions of his philosophy, we can show out a fundamental legitimacy of God's presence in Descartes's work. I think that by a phenomenological investigation, we can point out the presence of the *religious experience* in it. I don't think that this attempt will solve all the problems that may arise in Descartes's metaphysics. But I hope it helps to establish the legitimacy mentioned above.

How could we reach this purpose?

By following Descartes in the process of his *meditatio* we can arrive at a *non-cognitive element* where this peculiar internal experience can be pointed out. I call this element *religious level* and I distinguish it from the philosophical-theological level of Descartes's thought. My investigation will focus on the definition quoted above, more exactly on the concept of infinity. In my opinion, this concept has an essential role in Descartes's thinking about divinity. What should be pointed out that it is not so by accident but just because it contains that special surplus value that the religious experience and meaning possesses.⁴

The problem of religious experience

What do I mean by the special surplus value just mentioned? What is that characteristic feature of the religious experience, which distinguishes it from other experiences?

Naturally, we cannot give a detailed analysis of this problem here, but an outline about it. Joachim Wach gives four formal features of the religious experience⁵

- 1) „Religious experience is a total response to what we experience as ultimate reality (...)to what we realize as... conditioning all that constitutes our world of experiences...”
- 2) „Religious experience is a total response of the total being to what is apprehended as ultimate reality.”
- 3) „The genuine religious is the most intense experience man is capable of...”
- 4) „The religious experience is practical, that is to say it involves an imperative, a commitment which impels man to act...”

It is important to emphasize that this ultimate response or motif is not an outcome of intellectual considerations⁶. Although it contains certain intellectual elements, the original inner experience should be concerned prior to other elements. The latter are based on the former ones.

As Emmanuel Levinas⁷ writes, there is a peculiar state in which our mind gives up its exertion for intentionality. This is the modification called *insomnia* by Levinas. „Insomnia is a wakefulness, but wakefulness without intentionality, dis-interested⁸“This dis-interestedness leads to the breaking up of consciousness. And this breaking up appears what is beyond all content – what is uncontained, *infinity*.⁹

I think this *petrifying* of consciousness to be the core of the surplus value mentioned above. This is the moment which *forces* the human being to respond the Absolute.

But where are the traces of this surplus value to be found in the Cartesian thought?

The concept of infinity in Descartes's philosophy

My task is twofold. On one hand, I have to show the priority of the concept of infinity in the Cartesian theology. On the other hand, I shall try to point out, that it is so because this concept has a reference to the religious experience.

Descartes himself emphasizes this priority in many cases. In the Second Set of the Replies he writes concerning God that the „very immensity of His being lies the cause or reason why He needs no cause in order to exist”¹⁰. This immensity is equal to the positive infinity we read about in the Principles. In this work he clearly distinguishes the concept of infinite from the concept of indefinite, and „reserves to God alone the name of infinite”. The reasons given by Descartes for this separation are that „in Him alone we observe no limitation (...) and we are quite certain that He can have none”, while in the case of other things „we do not positively understand (...)but merely negatively admit that their limits, if they exist, cannot be discovered by us”¹¹

By returning to the *Meditationes*, we can also see infinity playing a favoured role. In the Third Meditation, where Descartes makes a distinction between the ideas of the substances, he also uses infinity as a main category: „that idea by which I understand a supreme God, eternal, *infinite* omniscient, omnipotent and creator of all things which are outside of Himself, has certainly more objective reality in itself than those ideas by which *finite* substances are represented”¹². Besides we should quote a letter in which Descartes defines infinite substance as „a substance which has actually infinite and immense true and real perfections”¹³ Or we could refer to another letter in which he writes that „God is greater than the world, non in *extension* but in *perfection*”¹⁴

Here we should take note on a very important momentum: divine perfections are common in one aspect, namely that *they are actually infinite*. As Jean Luc Marion puts it „substance, when applied to God, becomes a simple qualification added to infinity, which alone is substantive and subject; thus it would be necessary to speak less of an infinite substance than of a substantial infinity.¹⁵

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But why is infinity the „first of divine names” (Marion)? Why can – at least for Descartes – the objective reality of this idea prove the formal reality of it? And why does Descartes underline the *positivity* of the infinity in the case of God?

In my opinion, just because the idea of God – strictly speaking the idea of infinity – carries for him that surplus value, which has its origin in the genuine religious experience. (Descartes underlines the *immediate givennes* of this idea. He emphasizes that this idea proceeds neither from books or conversations¹⁶, nor from the statement „God exists”¹⁷)

In his *meditatio* he arrives at a point where he „meets” the idea of God. In the internal and immediate experience he perceives the most immense power, that he has ever perceived. As Levinas writes on „the idea of God, the *cogitatum* of a *cogitatio* which to *begin with* contains that *cogitatio*, signifies the *non-contained par excellence* (...) the ‘objective reality’ of the *cogitatum* of the *cogitatum* breaks up the formal reality of the *cogitatio*”¹⁸

In my opinion this breaking up of the thought „forces” Descartes to „respond”, that is to say that *he must conclude that God necessarily exists* That’s why he may write that „in some way I have in me the notion of the infinite earlier than the finite”¹⁹

This moment is what I call the religious level of Descartes’s thought. In my opinion the „way” just mentioned is a reference to the peculiar moment discussed.

I’m aware of course that Descartes spoke a metaphysical – by the term of Levinas²⁰ – substantialist language. But in spite of this he was who”with an unequalled rigor, has sketched out the extraordinary course of thought that proceeds on the breakup of the *I think*”²¹

Besides, I think so, that he tried to maintain the fact of the surplus value. In the Conversation with Burman we read the following: *we understand* the perfections and attributes of God, *but we do not conceive* of them – or, rather, in order to conceive them, conceive of them as indefinite”²². Descartes perceives very clear that the real infinity of God is beyond the philosophical discourse – but he also perceives that this does not mean that it is beyond our mental capacity, our *understanding*.

I think this effort to put into words the surplus value to be the background the distinction between the concept of infinite and that of indefinite. And I think my reading to be a possible interpretation of the priority of infinity discussed above.

I have no doubt that this interpretation has not solved the incoherences and tensions that can be discerned in the Cartesian metaphysics and natural theology. The tensions stay to be tensions, the incoherences stay to be incoherences. But perhaps it can make clear the core of some of these problems. And last but not least I hope it has been able to defend Descartes against the charges mentioned: *the mask is worn by a homo religiosus*.

Notes

This paper is an enlarged version of my presentation based on an essay I wrote.

¹ Meditations on First Philosophy – In: The Philosophical Works of Descartes I-II. (P.W.D.) C.U.P.,1981 , I.165

² See: I cannot forgive Descartes. In all his philosophy he would have been quite willing to dispense with God. But he had to make Him a fillip to set the world in motion; beyond this, he has no further need of God." B. Pascal: Thoughts 77§ (Greenwood, Westport,1978) p.33

³ E. Gilson: God and Philosophy (Yale U.P.,1992) p.89

⁴ See: Jacques Waardenburg: „From the point of view of the study of religion, and probably that of philosophical anthropology, there is in a religious meaning a `surplus value which has some absolute connotation for the people concerned."in: Reflections on Study of Religion(Mouton, The Hague, Paris, N.Y.;1978) p.88

⁵ Types of Religious Experience (quoted by Waardenburg,ed.: Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion (Mouton 1973) p.396

⁶ Wach,ibid.

⁷ God and Philosophy (in: Collected Philosophical Papers; tr: A. Lingis; Martinus Nijhoff,1987) p.153

⁸ ibid p.156

⁹ ibid p.156

¹⁰ P.W.D.II.p.55

¹¹ P.W.D. I. p.230 (XXVII.)

¹² P.W.D. I.p.162 (my italics)

¹³ Letter to Clersevier, 23 April 1649; in:Descartes: Philosophical Letters (tr.: A. Kenny. Basil Blackwell, Oxford,1970) p.254

¹⁴ Letter to More,15 April 1649; ibid p.251 (my italics)

¹⁵ Marion: The Essential Incoherence of Descartes's Definition of Divinity (in: A.O. Rorty, ed: Essays on Descartes's Meditations, University of California Press, Berkeley, L.A." London,1986) p.307

¹⁶ Replies II. P.W.D. II. p.35.

¹⁷ Letter to Mersenne July 1641, ibid p.107

¹⁸ ibid; p.159-60

¹⁹ Third Meditation, P.W.D.I.p.166

²⁰ ibid; p.159

²¹ Levinas, ibid. p.159

²² in Correspondance of Descartes (tr.: J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D; Murdoch, A; Kenny; C.U.P.1991) p.339 (my italics)