

III. Secondary Literature on Kierkegaard's Relation to Bayle

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René Descartes: Kierkegaard's Understanding of Doubt and Certainty

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I. Descartes' Life and Work

For centuries and up to this very day René Descartes has been regarded as the founder of modern Enlightenment philosophy, introducing a radical turn in Western philosophical and scientific thought. With the way prepared by thinkers of the Renaissance, Descartes broke definitively with the scholastic tradition of the Middle Ages since he turned against the doctrines of Aristotle, especially the doctrine about the senses being the one and only source of knowledge. Drawing upon the skeptical tradition of ancient Greek philosophy, which was revitalized in the Renaissance, Descartes in his philosophical writings, most explicitly in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), developed a two-part strategy, rejecting at the same time Aristotelian sensualism and skepticism. The key concept in this context is the famous notion of “methodological doubt.” This method has a double structure: first the sensualist theory is undermined by means of skeptical arguments (the so-called “argument of illusion” the “dream argument” and “the argument of an evil demon”), and thereafter skepticism is turned against itself. The result of this operation is the foundation of a radically new metaphysics. The “methodological doubt” involves both a destructive and a constructive part since the whole process terminates in a new doctrine of metaphysical thinking: the famous “*cogito ergo sum*.” Doubt and skepticism cannot be universal since I cannot possibly doubt my existence: for if I do not exist, I cannot doubt anything whatsoever. This is the point where skepticism contradicts itself and a new paradigm of knowledge emerges. Raised above any kind of doubt, as absolute certainty, self-consciousness or the “*cogito*” becomes the new standard of knowledge. All knowledge that is to count as genuine must fulfill the conditions of self-consciousness' self-evidence and complete transparency. In order to secure the absolute validity and objectivity of thought and knowledge, Descartes reintroduces the “argument of the evil demon” or the “deceiving God,” by means of which he leads up to his epistemological version of the proof of God. So the source of knowledge lies within human reason, and God guarantees its ultimate validity. According to Descartes, this whole procedure is a purely rational enterprise that takes place within reason alone. The skeptical route leading to the absolute certainty of the “*cogito*” is the internal movement of reason and thought, independent of all

preconditions other than those posed by reason itself. By stressing the absence of any kind of precondition, Descartes formulates the very principle of what came to be known as modern Enlightenment rationalism.

II. Kierkegaard's Relation to Descartes

A. The Forerunner of Hegelian Philosophy

Generally, Kierkegaard's relations and interpretations of philosophers of the past are colored by his picture of Hegelian thinking and how the former stand in relation to this philosophy. This is especially true of his interpretation of Descartes. This, however, is not due to some Kierkegaardian idiosyncrasy, but rather it relies heavily on Hans Lassen Martensen's (1808–84) interpretation of Descartes' philosophy, which is documented partly in his lectures on the history of philosophy¹ and partly in his review of Johan Ludvig Heiberg's (1791–1860) introduction to the logic course in the *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur* (1836).² The review in particular plays an essential role in Kierkegaard's reception of Descartes. It concerns primarily Hegel's philosophy as presented in his logic and presents his systematic philosophy as the most "complete and comprehensive development of rational knowledge."³ As such, Hegelian thinking represents the result or what is called "the consequence"⁴ of the philosophy of modern times, breaking with medieval Christian philosophy by replacing the old notion of "faith" with the new principle of "doubt." In that connection Descartes is introduced as the inaugurator of this new kind of thinking, who only accepted as true those things that were the result of the inner necessity of thought. The means of arriving at the truth is the methodological procedure of doubt, through which truth becomes equivalent to certainty. Contrary to the old way of thinking, truth, according to the new doctrines of Descartes, is conceived of as something utterly internal to cognition. Making universal doubt the imperative of thinking—"de omnibus dubitandum est"—Descartes states the new principle of philosophy as "the absolute autonomy of thought."⁵

¹ See "Referat af Martensens Forelæsninger over den nyere Philosophies Historie," in *Pap. II C 25*, in *Pap. XII*, p. 282.

² Hans Lassen Martensen, "Indlednings-Foredrag til det i November 1834 begyndte logiske Cursus paa den kongelige militaire Høiskole. Af J.L. Heiberg, Lærer i Logik og Æsthetik ved den kgl. militaire Høiskole," *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, vol. 16, 1836, pp. 515–28. (In English as "Review of the Introductory Lecture to the Logic Course" in Heiberg's *Introductory Lecture to the Logic Course and Other Texts*, ed. and trans. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2007 (*Texts from Golden Age Denmark*, vol. 3), pp. 75–86.)

³ Martensen, "Indlednings-Foredrag," *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, vol. 16, 1836, p. 516. ("Review of the Introductory Lecture to the Logic Course," p. 75.)

⁴ Martensen, "Indlednings-Foredrag," *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, vol. 16, 1836, p. 516. ("Review of the Introductory Lecture to the Logic Course," p. 76.)

⁵ Martensen, "Indlednings-Foredrag," *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, vol. 16, 1836, p. 519. ("Review of the Introductory Lecture to the Logic Course," p. 78.)

Together with his lectures on the history of philosophy, this review by Martensen plays an essential role in Kierkegaard's comprehension of Hegelian philosophy, and it is also a key document in understanding Kierkegaard's relation to Descartes. Implicitly or explicitly, it is present in all his texts that refer to and comment on Cartesian philosophy, that is, the Preface to *Fear and Trembling*, *Johannes Climacus* or *De Omnibus dubitandum est* and the *Journal DD* with *The Conflict between the Old and the New Soap-Cellar*. In the Preface to *Fear and Trembling*—just as in Martensen's review—the principle of "recent philosophy" is presented as the imperative of universal doubt. The preface, however, also contains a critical remark on making Descartes the inaugurator of modern philosophy. By giving two extended quotations from Descartes' *Principia philosophiae* and *Dissertatio de methodo*, Kierkegaard wants to point to the crucial difference between Descartes himself and the fashionable philosophy of his own time. Contrary to the philosophy of the present day, Descartes never disputed the authority of divine revelation since he neither forced upon anybody his paradigm or method of universal doubt: "He [Descartes] did not shout 'Fire! Fire!' and make it obligatory for everyone to doubt, for Descartes was a quiet and solitary thinker, not a shouting street watchman; he modestly let it be known that his method had significance only for him and was partly the result of his earlier warped knowledge."⁶

In *De Omnibus dubitandum est* the review by Martensen also plays an important role, since Johannes Climacus' reflections on doubt could be seen as one long comment on the thesis proposed in the review. The fundamental problem in Johannes' reflections concerns the apparent contradiction between two types of statements concerning doubt—one of a systematic character, which states that doubt is the beginning of philosophy, and the other of a historical character, which states that "recent philosophy" begins with doubt—a problem that can easily be detected in Martensen's review, although it is not discussed explicitly by Martensen himself. Furthermore, Johannes' occupation with this unsolvable problem results in an alternative conception of doubt, skepticism and certainty, a conception that is developed in more detail in some of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, especially *Either/Or* and *Philosophical Fragments*.

Finally, Kierkegaard's draft of a student-comedy *The Conflict between the Old and the New Soap-Cellar* in *Journal DD* explicitly alludes to Martensen's review and its description of Descartes. Towards the end of the text there are several explicit references to the thesis about Descartes being the inaugurator of modern philosophy; the slogans "*cogito ergo sum*" and "*omnibus dubitandum est*," which are used in Martensen's review to elucidate the philosophy of Descartes in the development of modern philosophy from Descartes to Hegel, are also imitated.⁷

⁶ SKS 4, 102 / FT, 6.

⁷ SKS 17, 288, DD:208 / KJN 1, 279. SKS 17, 290, DD:208 / KJN 1, 282.

B. Kierkegaard's Alternative Interpretation of the Notions of
Doubt, Skepticism, and Certainty

Apart from the remarks in the Preface to *Fear and Trembling*, all other comments on the philosophy of Descartes made by Kierkegaard are of a negative or polemical nature. In the Kierkegaardian *corpus* there are in fact very few evaluative remarks that comment directly on Descartes. However, there are some very important passages that make up an essential part of what could be called Kierkegaard's epistemology, where he takes up the problems concerning doubt, skepticism and certainty, characteristically enough not mentioning the name of Descartes but rather alluding to Hegel. This holds true of Kierkegaard's extensive discussion of doubt and despair in *Either/Or*. In the relevant passages of the text,⁸ Kierkegaard mainly deals with two aspects concerning the concept of doubt. He explicitly takes up Hegel's distinction from the Introduction to *The Phenomenology of Spirit* between doubt (*Zweifel*) and despair (*Verzweiflung*) concerning the difference between small-scale everyday doubt, which ultimately leaves everything as it was before, and a universal and profound doubt leading to science and truth.⁹ Taking up this distinction, Kierkegaard simultaneously transforms the two concepts involved—a transformation paradigmatic of his approach to epistemology of the Cartesian/Hegelian type. In a way Kierkegaard assumes the Hegelian distinction that gives priority to despair over and against doubt, but at the same time he totally transforms the content of the concepts of doubt and despair concerning two different spheres, that is, the sphere of thought and reason and the sphere of life, will and personhood. So, Kierkegaard claims:

Doubt and despair, therefore, belong to completely different spheres; different sides of the soul are set in motion. But I am not at all satisfied with this, because then doubt and despair would become coordinate, and that is not the case. Despair is precisely a much deeper and more complete expression; its movement is much more encompassing than that of doubt. Despair is an expression of the total personality, doubt only of thought.¹⁰

According to Kierkegaard, despair is the higher and most comprehensive form since it leads to the absolute. This is, contrary to the Cartesian/Hegelian line of thought, due to the practical and volitional character of despair: "Generally speaking, a person cannot despair at all without willing it, but in order truly to despair, a person must truly will it; but when he truly wills it, he is truly beyond despair."¹¹

This quotation also reveals a genuine Cartesian thread of thought in so far as despair is described as a method leading to the absolute, which in the terminology of Judge William is called an "Archimedean point." By means of the negative method of despair, security and certainty can be reached, as is explicitly stated in the Judge's

⁸ SKS, 3, 203–5 / EO2, 210–14.

⁹ Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977, p. 49. (*Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe in 20 Bänden*, ed. by Hermann Glockner, Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag 1928–41, vol. 2, p. 71.)

¹⁰ SKS, 3, 204 / EO2, 212.

¹¹ SKS, 3, 204 / EO2, 213.

invitation to Johannes: "What, then, is there to do? I have only one answer: Despair, then!"¹² His new definitions of doubt and despair follow: doubt is a purely theoretical operation following the inner laws of thought and, as such, an expression of necessity, while despair is a passionate act or choice and as such an expression of will and freedom. Kierkegaard also transforms the concepts of certainty or the "absolute." As in the case of Descartes, Kierkegaard also locates the "absolute" in human self-consciousness. In that sense there is a strict correspondence between the Cartesian notion of the "*cogito*" and Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity as "myself in my eternal validity."¹³ This being the case, Kierkegaard's conception of subjectivity, however, is radically opposed to that of Descartes. The reason why Descartes places the "absolute" in human self-consciousness is that self-consciousness possesses a special kind of transparency, an immediate and infallible knowledge of one's own mind. Contrary to this cognitive model of subjectivity, Kierkegaard develops an alternative conception of subjectivity and the self since he conceives of subjectivity in normative terms. The "absolute" then no longer refers to infallible knowledge but to responsibility, competence and agency in so far as being a person means being the author and originator of an act.

This normative or practical transformation of Cartesian epistemological vocabulary is repeated in another passage vital for the understanding of Kierkegaard's relation to Descartes: the "Interlude" in *Philosophical Fragments*. In the "Interlude" metaphysical and epistemological concepts are brought together as one of the main problems concerning the question of how becoming is to be conceived. This topic is addressed in § 4 of the "Interlude," which concerns what is called "The Apprehension of the Past," where Kierkegaard runs through different modes of apprehension searching for the adequate mode of apprehending the historical or the past: that is, that which has come into being. Ruling out "immediate sensation and immediate cognition," Kierkegaard finally arrives at "doubt" and "faith" as the true and adequate "organs" of the historical, and the rest of the section concerns what could be called Kierkegaard's alternative conception of the Cartesian/Hegelian notions of doubt and certainty/truth. In this connection Kierkegaard refers to "Greek skepticism" as a paradigmatic conception of doubt not associated with any kind of cognition but as an expression of the will: Greek skepticism was a withdrawing skepticism...they doubted not by virtue of knowledge but by virtue of will....¹⁴ Greek skepticism in the tradition from Pyrrho of Elis to Sextus Empiricus is an expression or an act of the will in so far as doubt is apprehended as a protest or denial of any kind of inferring or judging. Here Kierkegaard explicitly refers to Descartes as a representative of Greek skepticism when the latter claims that error emerges from the will, that is, from being too hasty in judging and inferring. Now there seems to be two kinds of will: on the one hand, refraining from making judgments and, on the other hand, actively making judgments and inferences. Kierkegaard claims the existence of two different operations, which are identifiable as expressions of the will, but the distinction is not between refraining from making inferences and actively making them. Although

¹² SKS 3, 200 / EO2, 208.

¹³ SKS 3, 205 / EO2, 214.

¹⁴ SKS 4, 281 / PF, 82.

being of the same risky nature as making inferences, faith, is something different from making inferences: "The conclusion of belief is no conclusion [*Slutning*] but a resolution [*Beslutning*], and thus doubt is excluded."¹⁵ According to Kierkegaard "faith" is an act of freedom or an act of the will:

It believes the coming into existence and has annulled in itself the incertitude that corresponds to the nothingness of that which is not. It believes the "thus and so" of that which has come into existence and has annulled in itself the possible "how" of that which has come into existence, and without denying the possibility of another "thus and so," the "thus and so" of that which has come into existence is nevertheless most certain for belief.¹⁶

This is the quintessence of Kierkegaard's notion of "faith"; it reveals a distinct transformation of the Cartesian/Hegelian concepts of certainty and truth. As in the case of Kierkegaard's notion about the absoluteness of subjectivity, the certainty of faith is an expression of an act. In both cases Kierkegaard claims that something can have the status of being certain or absolute without being the result of a thought operation. According to Kierkegaard, neither is doubt a method nor is certainty a result of that method: "Belief is the opposite of doubt. Belief and doubt are not two kinds of knowledge that can be defined in continuity with each other, for neither of them is a cognitive act, and they are opposite passions."¹⁷ Faith is the resolute suspension of the equilibrium and indifference, the two terms being the synonymous expressions for refraining from judgment.

Interestingly, this practical or existential critique and transformation of the Cartesian/Hegelian notions of doubt and certainty has its counterpart in the philosophy of the later Schelling (1775–1854). As can easily be demonstrated, Kierkegaard shares with Schelling numerous thoughts concerning the prospect of a new kind of philosophy capable of reflecting human reality in an adequate way. The parallel between Kierkegaard and Schelling concerning the concepts of certainty and doubt is just another expression of that common enterprise. Without there being any kind of direct or genetic dependence, one is struck by the parallels between Schelling's critique of Descartes, which are stated most explicitly in his "On the History of Recent Philosophy" (lectures given in Munich in the period from 1827 to 1837),¹⁸ and Kierkegaard's objections against a purely cognitive conception of doubt and certainty stated in different ways and in different contexts in *Either/Or* and *Philosophical Fragments*. As in the case of Kierkegaard, Schelling's relation to Descartes is twofold, having both positive and negative aspects. As noted above, Kierkegaard appreciates the personal and existential dimension of Descartes' philosophical enterprise, which thereby almost makes him a philosopher of existence. This also applies to Schelling, who frequently praises Descartes for introducing a personal note into philosophical thinking. Nevertheless Schelling repeatedly blames Descartes for having reduced

¹⁵ SKS 4, 283 / PF, 84.

¹⁶ SKS 4, 282 / PF, 83.

¹⁷ SKS 4, 283 / PF, 84.

¹⁸ Published in volume 10, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vols. 1–14, ed. by K.F.A. Schelling, Stuttgart: Cotta 1856–61. (English translation: *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. by Andrew Bowie, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994, see pp. 42–63.)

subjectivity to something utterly anonymous since Descartes exclusively conceives of certainty in terms of the necessity of thought. According to Schelling, Descartes never managed to overcome doubt but instead ignored it by taking refuge in the idea of necessity. Against this conception of certainty, Schelling, like Kierkegaard in *Philosophical Fragments*, claims that genuine certainty emerges out of doubt being defeated. Certainty does not mean that doubt is totally mastered but rather that doubt is defeated or overcome.¹⁹

As stated above, the quintessence of Kierkegaard's relation to Descartes consists in what could be called a practical or existential transformation of the core concepts of Cartesian epistemology. This also applies to the text titled *Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus dubitandum est*, which explicitly deals with the Cartesian notion of doubt. In fact, the text is much more a polemical comment on Martensen's review of Heiberg's introduction to Hegel's logic than it is a discussion of Cartesian philosophy. The text tells a story about a young man growing increasingly disturbed by reflecting on the coherence of three claims concerning the status of doubt in philosophy. The three claims are (1) Philosophy begins with doubt, (2) Coming to philosophize one must have doubted, and (3) Modern philosophy begins with doubt.²⁰ All three claims are present in one way or another in Martensen's review. The main problem with the coherence of these claims stems from the very special status of the third claim, which concerns something historical in contrast to the two other claims, which are of a systematic nature. Finding no solution to this seemingly irresolvable problem, the young man starts by making an entirely new kind of investigation by asking the question: how is doubt possible or what must the nature of existence be if doubt is to be possible?²¹ In the course of answering this question, Johannes Climacus develops a concept of doubt that could be said to function as an alternative to that of Descartes. On close consideration of the text, it is possible to distinguish between two different kinds of doubt or reflection, a disinterested one and a passionate and interested one. Focusing on the notion of consciousness, Climacus develops the central idea of the text: that is, the relation between "reality" and "ideality." According to Climacus, the notion of consciousness reveals the latent contradiction between "reality" and "ideality" since consciousness not only makes the relation between "reality" and "ideality" possible, but is the relation itself, in the mode of a contradiction. The nature and the emerging of consciousness can only be explained by contradiction, and this points to a passionate mode of reflection and skepticism: "as long as there is no consciousness, no interest, no consciousness that has an interest in this struggle, there is no doubt...."²² By connecting doubt with interest and passion, Climacus' reflections on consciousness are just another expression of Kierkegaard's overall existential transformation of Cartesian epistemology.

¹⁹ Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 10, pp. 8ff. (*On the History of Modern Philosophy*, pp. 43ff.) See also Axel Hutter, *Geschichtliche Vernunft Die Weiterführung der Kantischen Vernunftskritik in der Spätphilosophie Schellings*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1996.

²⁰ Pap. IV B 1, p. 115 / JC, 132.

²¹ Pap. IV B 1, p. 145 / JC, 167.

²² Pap. IV B 1, p. 149 / JC, 170–1.

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²⁰ Pap. IV B 1, p. 115 / JC, 132.

²¹ Pap. IV B 1, p. 145 / JC, 167.

²² Pap. IV B 1, p. 149 / JC, 170–1.

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