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THE RATIONALITY OF AFFIRMATION AND NEGATION IN MODERN FRENCH PHILOSOPHY

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This article refers to the rationality of affirmations and negations appearing in the philosophies of Descartes and Voltaire who can be treated as followers of previous traditions that separated these two modes of articulating rationality, including the traditions of antiquity. These modes became somewhat of a rule first for Socrates, and later for his disciple, Plato. However, Descartes and Voltaire slightly modified those traditions in order to adjust the rationalities they wrote about to the needs and expectations of their contemporaries. Voltaire negated, among other things, the rationality of Descartes' philosophy, but there were also a significant number of critics before him who expressed similar opinions, such as Leibniz or Kant.

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Although the article refers to the rationality of affirmations and negations appearing in the philosophies of Descartes and Voltaire, both philosophers are treated as continuers of previous traditions of separating these two modes of articulating rationality, including the traditions of antiquity. These modes became some-what of a rule first in Socrates, and later in his disciple, Plato. The French philosophers mentioned above did, however, make some corrections to those traditions so that the rationalities they wrote about would adjust to the needs and expectations of their contemporary man. Voltaire negates, among other things, the rationality of Descartes' philosophy, but also before him there was a significant number of similar critics, such as Leibniz or Kant, to name but a few.[1]

[1] For more on the subject of corrections to the philosophy of Descartes, see *On rationality in Modern philosophy. Lectures*, Poznań 2008.

ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL TRADITIONS

If one follows the lead laid out by Hegel in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy,* then Socrates was the master and teacher of rationality for many future generations of philosophers. In the light of this approach, nothing expressed his rationality better than the phrase: "I know that I know nothing." In a way, this phrase rationally connects an affirmation (expressed by "I know") with a negation (expressed by "I know nothing"). Hegel finds here not only rationalities which complement or exclude one another, but also rational "reflection upon [one's] duty", "[thinking] of the universal", "of truths and beauties which had universal value", "of that which is the definite right", etc. The phrase, according to Hegel, contains also a *Socratic irony.* According to the philosopher, in Socrates there "is a particular mode of carrying on intercourse between one person and another, and [it] is thus only a subjective form of dialectic [...]. What he wished to effect was, that when other people brought forward their principles, he, from each definite proposition, should deduce as its consequence the direct opposite of what the proposition stated, or else allow the opposite to be deduced from their own inner consciousness without maintaining it directly against their statements". However, Socrates "did not reach the systematic construction of a philosophy. He was conscious of this, and it was also not at all his aim to establish a science".[2] That was of course the aim of Hegel's philosophy, and he was deeply convinced that he had reached such a philosophy and such a science, that constituted a dialectical and rational unity.

Various means of expressing the ancient rationality of affirmations and negations can also be traced in the evolution of Plato's Academy – from a specific dogmatism in Plato himself, to various kinds of scepticism in the followers of later Academies; these, according to Sextus Empiricus, amounted to four.[3] The starting points to all of them were the modes of expression and practical application of rationality developed by Plato. They

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[2] Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy,* London 1892, p. 397 ff.

[3] Sextus Empiricus, in *Pyrrhonic Sketches,* writes that "There have been, as the most say, three Academies—the most ancient one, that of Plato and his followers; the second and middle one, that of Arcesilaus and his followers, Arcesilaus being the pupil of Polemo; the third and new Academy, that of Carneades and Clitomachus and their followers; some add also a fourth, that of Philo and Charmides, and their followers; and some count even a fifth, that of Antiochus and his followers." On Plato, he wrote that he "dogmatised" (for example, "when he expresses himself regarding ideas, and regarding the existence of Providence, and when he states that the virtuous life is more to be chosen than the one of vice") as well as was "doubtful" (when, for instance, "he gives a preference to one thing above another in trustworthiness or untrustworthiness"). Cf. Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrhonic Sketches, in: *Sextus Empiricus and Greek Scepticism*, Marry Mills Patrick, Cambridge 1899, p. 89 ff.

were more complex, and therefore more difficult to recognize, than those of Socrates. This problem was already indicated by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. There he states "there is also a great division of opinion respecting [Plato's dialogues], from some people asserting that in them Plato dogmatizes in a positive manner". Several lines later he adds that the philosopher "explains the opinions which he entertains himself, and refutes false ones; and about doubtful matters he suspends his judgement".[4] It is not easy to identify what is here a rationalization of affirmations, and what is a rationalization of negations. A clue is given by Diogenes Laertius in his stating that Plato considered "wisdom as the knowledge of things which can be understood by the intellect, and which have a real existence: which has the Gods for its object, and the soul as unconnected with the body. He also, with a peculiarity of expression, calls wisdom also philosophy, which he explains as a desire for divine wisdom. But wisdom and experience are also used by him in their common acceptation; as, for instance, when he calls an artisan wise".

Therefore it turns out that in Plato, there is not one, but at least two types of wisdom (rationality) – one is oriented on that which is absolute and solely mental (spiritual), the other is oriented on that which is relative – partly mental and partly sensual (carnal). The accuracy of Laertius' analysis is confirmed by historians of philosophy. For example, Giovanni Reale interprets these two types of wisdom (rationality) as an opposition of *myth* and *logos*. Hegel presents myth as "contaminated by sensible forms" ("thus myth in Plato has a negative (philosophical) value"), whereas for Heidegger it is "the most authentic expression of Platonic metaphysics", because the "logos, that is deployed in the theory of Ideas, is revealed as capable of stating being, but incapable of explaining life. Myth comes to its assistance in explaining life and, in a certain sense, overcomes logos and makes it mythology".[5]

Nevertheless, in Plato these two types of rationality are in a dialectical relationship and are hierarchized, with a generally bigger regard given to that rationality which is oriented on the absolute and strictly mental, which – depending on the context – could be called the rationality of the *Logos* (for Greek philosophers the term meant: argument, assessment, measure, proposal, principle, reason, etc.), or *Nous* (which for them meant, among other things, intelligence). This distinction is where the Platonic separation of the rationality of affirmation and that of negation, as well as the reasons for

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[4] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers,* London 1853, p. 133 ff.

[5] Cf. G. Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy Volume II*, State University of New York 1990, p. 29 ff.

giving more consideration to the former than to the latter, should be searched for.

In the Middle Ages, both modes of seeking and articulating rationality can found in great theological disputes – such as those between the continuer of Platonic traditions, Augustine of Hippo, and the follower of apostolic traditions (in particular, *Pauline epistles*), Pelagius. In *On the Proceedings of Pelagius*, written by Augustine, the prevailing rationality is that of negation – he negates the validity of his opponent's views on God's grace, which was supposedly free for everyone, including pagans. However, in his other works, such as the treatise *On true religion*, the rationality of affirmation takes the upper hand – the affirmation of a faith in which divine grace plays a key role, as well as the affirmation of human reason.

In the ages that followed, there were at least several prominent philosophers, such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite or Nicholas of Cusa, who formulated their theologies on the basis of various negations, and therefore proposed a path towards God in a negative theology. These varieties of rationality of affirmations and negations are only indicated here and will not be discussed, since their relationship with the affirmations and negations appearing in Descartes and Voltaire is quite remote.

DESCARTES' RATIONALITY OF AFFIRMATIONS AND NEGATIONS

One of the most prominent and best manifested negations in Descartes' philosophy is the negation of the usefulness of the philosophical traditions passed on in books and taught in the schools of his time. This negation appears, among his other works, in *Discourse on the Method*. There, he admits that he was raised in this tradition "from [his] childhood", but upon completion of his course of study he "found [himself] involved in so many doubts and errors, that [he] was convinced [he] had advanced no farther in all [his] attempts at learning, than the discovery at every turn of [his] own ignorance".[6]

This negative assessment of the Jesuit education at the Collège at La Flache is supplemented with remarks on: philosophy ("there is not a single matter within its sphere which is not still in dispute, and nothing, therefore, which is above doubt"), the writings of the ancients ("the grace of fable stirs the mind"), theology (it "points out the path to heaven"), jurisprudence, medicine, and other sciences which "secure for their cultivators honours

[6] "And yet I was studying in one of the most celebrated schools in Europe, in which I thought there must be learned men, if such were anywhere to be found." Cf. R. Descartes, Discourse on Method, New York 1924, p. 12 ff.

and riches", as well as rhetoric and poetry – which he was "in raptures with." None of these gave him that which he searched for, that is, the "certitude and evidence of their reasonings". Although he eventually found this in mathematics, at the time of his studies he "had not as yet a precise knowledge of their true use; and [thought] that they but contributed to the advancement of the mechanical arts".

These critical remarks on the various fields of science and those who cultivated them are filled with Descartes' hints on what to search for in these sciences, how to search for it, and what should be used in this search. In the last matter, he points to human reason. Sometimes it is identified with common sense, yet on other occasions the evidence of this cognitive power is filled with question marks. However, in these preliminary deliberations the negation of the cognitive abilities of common sense is not of the essence. What is important is to, first, find such a method which would be an appropriate "means [...] of gradually augmenting [ones] knowledge, and of raising it little and little to the highest point", and, second, to apply it so as to achieve this point. According to this philosopher, knowledge at this point is unconditionally certain and unconditionally true. Common sense, among other things, can facilitate reaching this point – but only to a certain degree. However, to determine the time when one should part ways with common sense is the task of the intellect, that is, the power which is possessed by all men, but not everyone is capable of using it. And this is the crux of the problem. The art of rational thinking and acting is not "having" something, but rather making appropriate use of that which one has.

This brief presentation will not indulge into the intricacies of the rather complicated structures of Descartes' negations and affirmations. Also, Descartes himself radically simplified the matter by comparing the former to tearing down old walls, and the latter to building a solid house on the foundations of that which survived the intellect's critical assessment. This metaphor is developed and specified in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Generally, the dominating theme throughout the work is that of the rationality of affirmations – the affirmation of the power of intellectual thought, that is, thought basing on everyone's natural intellect and inherent ideas. In *Meditation I*, however, the philosopher begins with a rationality of negations – he negates the credibility of sensory evidence and creations of the imagination. Also, he attempts at negating the credibility of the intellect. This attempt leads him to the discovery of *res cognitans* (mental substance) which self-determines its being, precisely through that ability (finding that the two can in no way be separated). This is Descartes' affirmation of humanity in general. Later there is, however, a Cartesian negation of that which appears in such thought, yet is not explicit, not clear, and not obvious. He therefore

attempts to make it explicit, clear, and obvious, as only such thinking deserves to be called true knowledge. That, however, is the subject of his subsequent *Meditations.* Each of them contains rational affirmations and rational negations, but also each ends with some specific, rational affirmation.

In an extreme summary of this fundamental work, these affirmations can be reduced to three principal affirmations, that is, to the affirmation of oneself as a being willing and able to use its own cognitive powers, the affirmation of God as a being willing and able to support man in these attempts, and the affirmation of man's surrounding world of corporeal substance, but not of mental substance – yet still in various ways useful to the thinking man. And this is, presumably, the general meaning of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

VOLTAIRE'S RATIONALITY OF AFFIRMATIONS AND NEGATIONS

Although Voltaire's attitude towards Descartes and his philosophy was critical, and in the *Letters on England* hyper-critical, he did hold in respect the achievements of the philosopher. He expressed his regard in *Letter XIV*. Voltaire presents Descartes as a person whom "Nature had indulged [...] with a shining and strong imagination, whence he became a very singular person both in private life and in his manner of reasoning. This imagination could not conceal itself even in his philosophical works, which are everywhere adorned with very shining metaphors and figures. Nature had almost made him a poet..." Yet this is more of a drawback than an advantage, since this imagination caused that "there are innumerable errors in the rest of Descartes' works", and that "he pushed his metaphysical errors so far, as to declare that two and two make four for no other reason but because God would have it so. However, it will not be making him too great a compliment if we affirm that he was valuable even in his mistakes. He deceived himself; but then it was at least in a methodical way. He destroyed all the absurd chimeras with which youth had been infatuated for two thousand years. He taught his contemporaries how to reason, and enabled them to employ his own weapons against himself. If Descartes did not pay in good money, he however did great service in crying down that of a base alloy. [...] Descartes gave sight to the blind. These saw the errors of antiquity and of the sciences. The path he struck out is since become boundless".[7]

It would be a mistake to expect that on the basis of these fragments of Letter XIV it is possible to clearly outline Voltaire's take on the "advan-

[7] Cf. Voltaire, *Letters on England*, Pennsylvania State University 2002, pp. 49 ff.

tages" and "disadvantages" of Descartes. To more or less clarify them it is necessary to refer to Voltaire's other works, and have at least a partial understanding of their essence, as well his specific mode of expression. Both things are difficult – not only because of the magnitude of Voltaire's corpus (his collected works amount to 52 volumes), but also because of the variety of literary genres he wrote in (ranging from philosophical treatises to poetry), all of which contain some of his "fors" and "againsts". Rene Pomeau, an eminent authority on Voltaire, claimed that "even those of his works which have been most rightly forgotten still contain numerous surprises for the readers".[8]

This of course does not mean that those readers remain completely helpless to that which Voltaire has to offer, both to them and all those who have some confidence or, at least, interest in his works. After all, at least several of Voltaire's general negations are relatively well-known, and have been long since recognised by various experts on the achievements of this philosopher, and by experts on the Enlightenment, an epoch of which Voltaire was and is a specific icon. Therefore it is known that his leading negation is not that of Descartes' philosophical and scientific achievements, but rather the negation of Christianity, with the totality of its contribution to European culture. It appears in almost every piece of Voltaire's writing – according to Pomeau, "Voltaires philosophy defines itself from the very beginning as a rejection of Christianity and a search for new faith".[9] It is difficult to disagree with this statement, especially when taking into consideration his *Letters on England* (where he mocks not only the English and their religion, but also the Scots and the French), quoted above, and his *Treatise on Tolerance* (which is basically a treatise on intolerance – not only that of Christians, but also of the followers of other traditional religions). Moreover, his modes of debating on and dealing with Christianity are also recognized and popular. Pomeau's claim that Voltaire "was not exactly respectful of anything", especially of Christianity, does not give merit to his peculiar specific inclination for finding various abuses on the part of this religion and presenting them in the darkest of colours.

Voltaire's "search for new faith", and determining what he eventually found is surrounded by many more question marks. Much indicates that, like many other philosophers of the time, he held in great esteem all that which belongs to Nature (called by some of his contemporary philosophers, "Mother Nature") or depends on it. However, contrary to many of his contemporaneous philosophers, he did not trust nature uncritically – rather, he

[8] Cf. R. Pomeau, Voltaire, in: Literatura francuska (group editing), volume 1, Warsaw 1974, p. 612 ff.

[9] Cf. ibid. p. 604.

had a series of specific reservations, which he expressed in several of his works.

A good example is his entry under the term *Nature*, in his *Philosophical Dictionary*. He presented a dialogue between The Philosopher, curious of nature's secrets, and Nature, reluctant to reveal its mysteries. The conversation ends with The Philosopher actually realizing that... he knows little of nature's secrets, and – what is worse – has no perspectives of knowing them in the foreseeable future. In his philosophical novellas, Voltaire signals his reservations not only to human nature, and the nature of the natural world surrounding man, but also to human faith in its causal power – such as its contribution to human good or happiness. In *Candide* – a novella considered to be Voltaire's greatest literary achievement – the life of the protagonist is a long series of misfortunes. Nevertheless, Candide "believed innocently" that everything is at its best "in this best of all possible worlds".[10] Of course, this is a Voltairean mockery of a centuries old thesis, endorsed and adopted by Christians, among others. Also, it is a mockery of philosophy and philosophers. They are represented in the novella by Candide's teacher, Pangloss. In the end, Candide states that "we must cultivate our garden", instead of dealing with everyone and everything which is or might be of this (Earthly) or the other (heavenly) world. There are justifiable assumptions that Voltaire meant here those philosophers who dealt with other worlds, such as Leibniz. This, however, remains only an assumption since Voltaire – a master of ambiguity – paid careful attention not to be totally clear on this.

The case is similar with his take on faith. Paul Hazard, in his review of Enlightenment thinkers, placed Voltaire amongst the deists. Moreover, he claimed that Voltaire "bestowed on deism his ineffaceable imprint"; that is, "from deism he had taken away the aristocratic and quasi-sceptical air it owed to Bolingbroke, and the poetical air it owed to Pope, so as to make it a thing intimately connected with life and its activities".[11] Hazard is surely on to something here; however, this remains only a "something", as Voltaire's deism was surrounded, and still is, by numerous question marks. This is not only because Voltaire, in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, defined the deist under the entry *Theist*, since a mistake like that could happen to anyone; rather, it is because Voltaire leaves a series of unanswered questions around his concept of the Supreme Being, without which there is no and can be no discussion of deism. In the aforementioned *Dictionary*, he wrote: "The theist is a man firmly persuaded of the existence of a Supreme Being

[10] Cf. Voltaire, *Candide*, New York 1918, p. 1 ff.

[11] Cf. P. Hazard, *European thought in the eighteenth century: from Montesquieu to Lessing*, London 1954, p. 402 ff.

as good as He is powerful, who has formed all beings with extension, vegetating, sentient and reflecting; who perpetuates their species, who punishes crimes without cruelty, and rewards virtuous actions with kindness. The theist does not know how God punishes, how he protects, how he pardons, for he is not reckless enough to flatter himself that he knows how God acts, but he knows that God acts and that He is just".[12] Here it is generally clear what the deist (aka theist) knows or does not know, or what for him is a "yes" and a "no". What remains unclear, however, is whether Voltaire wrote about his contemporary deists (aka theists) or himself; if he in fact wrote about himself, did he mean his philosophical past, or rather the period when he stated that if there was no God, he should be invented.[13] In short, even on such a significant subject, this philosopher remains a master of ambiguity – which, accidentally, is rather well deserved owing to his problems with the prosecution and censors; still, it does not help his readers to understand what was basically on the author's mind, or to identify where his negations ended and his affirmations began, and vice versa.

This was and could still be one of the most distinctive ways of articulating rationality in philosophy. Philosophers, however, have been aware of this in varying degrees, although it is difficult to imagine a prominent philosopher who would remain unaware. Even the protagonist of Voltaire's *L'Ingénu* seems to understand it; and he is surely not an eminent philosopher. However, it would be an unacceptable simplification to consider this mode of articulating and distinguishing rationality as the only one in philosophy, or even one more important than others. Here, much depends not only on those philosophers who successfully practised it and used it to inscribe their names in philosophical tradition; a lot depends on the range of problems they undertook (or not). No great effort is needed to indicate those problematic areas in which such a separation and diversification of rationality did not and does not play any key role. Max Weber convincingly showed that the sphere of religious life poses such a problem. This is one of the reasons why he proposed – as the categories separating and diversifying

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[12] Cf. Voltaire, Philosophical Dictionary, Volume 6, London 1824, p. 258 ff.

[13] According to Voltaire, God exists and must exist – as something eternal (since "only nothing can come from nothing"), and as "the force and the mean" (because "the universe is composed of forces and means, which all have their end indicating of an omnipotent and omniscient creator"), and, lastly, whose existence was confirmed by the laws of physics discovered by Newton. Apart from this, not much more can be said about him. To the question: "is this Supreme Creator infinite, is he omnipresent and not connected with any space?" Voltaire answered with his own question: "how can we answer these questions with our limited intellect and perception?" Quoted after: W. Weischeld, Die philosophische Hintertreppe. Die grossen Philosophen in Alltag und Denken, Munchen 1973, p. 155 ff.

the processes of rationalization and irrationalization occurring in this sphere – the "enchantment" of the world by some, and its "disenchantment" by others. There are of course many more examples like this, which would extend the list of the modes of articulating rationality in various areas of European culture (and not only in that culture).