CHARRON’S *EPOCHÉ* AND DESCARTES’ *COGITÓ*:  
THE SCEPTICAL BASE OF  
DESCARTES’ REFUTATION OF SCEPTICISM

JOSÉ R. MAIA NETO  
*Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte*

The influence of Charron’s *De la Sagesse* on Descartes’ thought has been noted by many scholars at least since Gilson’s classical commentary on the *Discours de la Méthode*.

Few, however, have examined the issue in which this influence is most interesting and important: scepticism and doubt. The exception is Richard Popkin one of whose first publications on early modern

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scepticism deals precisely with the issue. Popkin shows that the idea of a
methodic doubt in the sense of a doubt conceived as means to something else
is quite central in Charron. He points out two basic differences between
Charron and Descartes on methodic doubt: the radical nature of the Cartesian
doubt and the fact that in Descartes, in contradistinction to Charron, the
result of the sceptical elimination of belief is not a tabula rasa. This second
difference is generalized in Popkin’s History of Scepticism to the whole
tradition of sceptical fideism in the period. In Descartes, he says, “the
process of doubting compels one to recognize the awareness of oneself,
compels one to see that one is doubting or thinking, and that one is here, is
in existence. The discovery of true knowledge is not miraculous, not a special
act of Divine Grace. Instead the method of doubt is the cause rather than the
occasion of the acquisition of knowledge. Its truth ... is the result of Divine
intervention, but not of sudden, new intervention, but rather a continuous
and permanent act of Grace which sustains our mind with its innate ideas,
and with its natural light that compels us to accept as true that which we are
unable to doubt. Thus, the method of doubt leads naturally to the cogito, and
not supernaturally to truth as the ‘nouveaux Pyrrhoniens’ claimed”.

I agree with Popkin’s first difference (the radical nature of Cartesian
doctrine) but disagree that the result of Charron’s doubt is a tabula rasa
waiting for the miraculous reception of grace. Both in Charron and in
Charron’s disciples La Mothe Le Vayer and the Gassendi of the
Exercitationes, sceptical epoché is not properly a tabula rasa and it is not a
means to something different from scepticism itself. If we keep strictly to

2 Popkin, Richard H., “Charron and Descartes: the fruits of systematic doubt”, The Journal of
Philosophy, vol. 51, 1954, pp. 831-837. It is rather odd that such an important connection
has not been explored in the recent boom of Charronian scholarship. One remarkable
exception is Gianni Paganini’s Scepsi Moderna. Interpretazioni dello scetticismo da
Charron a Hume (Cosenza: Busento. 1991), pp. 28-29, who indicates some innovations
that Charron introduces in the sceptical tradition that become crucial in Descartes’
methodic doubt, notably, the active role of the will.

3 Popkin, R.H., The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza. Berkeley: University of

163-182, and “Il libro scandaloso” di Pierre Charron” in Id., Etica e religione nella critica
libertina. Napoli: Guida, 1986, pp. 73-107. Both essays were translated to French and
published in Gregory, T., La Genèse de la Raison Classique de Charron à Descartes.
the issue of the relation between doubt and faith – similar to Popkin’s. He says that
whereas Descartes unifies wisdom and science (in contrast to Charron, as was first pointed
out by Gilson), “le discours sapientiel pour Charron reste un auxiliaire précieux du discours
religieux, auquel il prépare” (op. cit., p. 238). I disagree with both. Against Gregory,
despite Charron’s criticism of superstition, I argue in section 3 below that his scepticism
cannot be viewed straightforwardly as anti-religious. Against Belin, I hold that in Charron
Popkin's description of the *cogito*, that is, if we set aside the fact that the *cogito* involves the metaphysical doctrine of the non-material essence of the soul, it could apply as well to Charron's *epoché*. So given my agreement with Popkin's first difference (the radical nature of Cartesian doubt), what I argue here is that Descartes is closer to the scepticism of his time not in the sceptical arguments he uses but in the way he refutes scepticism. I propose that the *cogito* can be seen as a metaphysical interpretation of Charron's *epoché* resulting from Cartesian hyperbolic doubt. It is hyperbolic doubt (absent from all sceptics from ancient times to his own) that allows Descartes to transform the most precious acquisition of the sceptics (*epoché*) into the single doctrine capable of refuting them.\(^5\)

Charron's influence on Descartes concerns more the preambles of Cartesian philosophy than doctrinal Cartesianism proper (the exception being the *cogito*), that is, methodic doubt and everything relevant to it (provisional morals, political conservatism, rejection of established peripatetic philosophy, personal doubt, etc).\(^6\) The relevant Cartesian text is therefore the first three parts of the *Discours de la Méthode*. Sections 2 to 7 cover six topics that are relevant to Cartesian doubt. Another work in which Charron's presence is also noticeable is Descartes' unfinished dialogue *De la Recherche de la Vérité* in which he covers precisely the issues of doubt and the *cogito*. Section 8 below, in which I examine the relations of the *cogito* with Charron's scepticism is based above all on this work. Finally, it should be noted that some of the Cartesian passages and positions in which I detect Charron's presence are also exhibited in Montaigne's *Essais*. In these cases, Descartes could have got the position directly from Montaigne or indirectly through Charron.\(^7\) At least as far as doubt and the *cogito* are concerned, Charron is much more relevant to Descartes than Montaigne. First, it is Charron who in an explicit way proposes scepticism as a means to expurgate all acquired beliefs; second, it is Charron's Academic version of scepticism

human beings find the perfection of their nature in sceptical *epoché*, and this is achieved independently and autonomously vis-à-vis Christian faith and grace (see section 2 below).

\(^5\) My view of Descartes' relation to the sceptics of his time differs from Curley's who sees in Montaigne's scepticism a possible historical source for Descartes' dream and deceiver arguments and the *cogito* as Descartes' anti-sceptical reply. (See Curley, Edwin M., *Descartes Against the Sceptics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1978, in particular chapter 2). Note that I agree that Descartes' *cogito* is original and anti-sceptical. What I argue is that, unlike his sceptical arguments, the *cogito* can be viewed as a philosophical (metaphysical) interpretation of the *epoché* held by French early modern sceptics. This makes Descartes' refutation of scepticism even more suited to meet the sceptical challenge of his time.

\(^6\) I am not saying that Charron is not relevant for other parts of Descartes' doctrinal philosophy. Faye finds Charron crucial in Descartes' philosophical morals.

\(^7\) I do not give the exegetical analysis that would indicate Descartes' source for such analysis is not relevant for the purpose of this article.
The Return of Scepticism
From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle
Paganini, G. (Ed.)
2003, XXVIII, 495 p. 2 illus., Hardcover