CHAPTER I

The Thomist Critique of the Cartesian *Cogito*

In this article, we would like to recall the meaning of the *Cogito* according to Descartes's own thought, as well as the criticism which the Thomists have generally registered against it.

I. THE SENSE AND SCOPE OF THE "COGITO" ACCORDING TO DESCARTES

In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes says:

> Having learned, even from the time of my college studies, that nothing can be imagined that would be so strange or so unbelievable that it would not, however, have been said by some philosopher, and then, while travelling, having recognized that all those who have sentiments than are quite contrary to our own are not, for all this, barbarians or savages but, rather, that many such people use reason as well as we do if not better.... I could not choose anyone from among these people whose opinions seemed should be preferred to the opinions held by others, and I found myself, as it were, constrained to strive to lead my own self-conduct by myself.[1]

Later on, he writes:

> Thus, given that I desired to turn my attention only to the search for the truth, I thought that I needed to reject, as representing something absolutely false, everything which I thought contained the slightest doubt, so that I might see if, after this, there may not be left remaining in what I believe something which was utterly indubitable... However, I heeded the fact that, while I thus wished to think that everything was false, it was utterly necessary that I, who thought this fact, would be something. And noting that this truth — namely, *I think, therefore I am* — was so firm and so certain that all the most extravagant skeptical suppositions would not be able to shake it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as being the first principle of philosophy which I was seeking.[2]

Now, is the "*Cogito ergo sum*" the result of discursive reasoning or, on the contrary, an immediate apperception, an intuition of the soul by itself? By looking at Descartes's Responses to the Second Objections and at the *Responses to the Objections Raised by Gassendi*, we can see that according to Descartes himself, the "*cogito ergo sum*" is an intuition. In response to Gassendi, he writes: "When you teach a child the elements of geometry, you will not make him understand in general... that *the whole is greater than its parts* if you do not show him particular examples."

As Étienne Gilson remarks on this:

> Therefore, Descartes' intention cannot be doubted; it is not generally discussed. However, his critics or historians have often held that, whatever

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[1] Descartes, *Discourse de la méthode*, ed. Étienne Gilson (1930), pr. 2 (p. 16).

[2] Ibid., pt. 4 (p. 32); Descartes, *Principes*, bk. 1, ch. 7.

might have been Descartes own intention, the *Cogito* was nonetheless the outcome of reasoning and could not fail to be such. Cf. Huet, *Censura philos*. Cart., vol. 1, p. 11: "It is false to say that *I think therefore I am* is known by us through simple vision and not through discursive reasoning."[3]

Chronologically, in the order of discovery, it is possible that one could say, "I think; therefore, I am," after having said, "Everything that thinks exists." However, it is nonetheless true that, *de iure*, general truths found particular truths, and that the former is what is seen in a given particular example.[4]

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This question becomes even more pressing if we consider the fact that, for Descartes (*Response to the fifth set of objections*), "God did not create only existences but even created essences." He freely created the eternal truths, logical, metaphysical, and geometric truths. "Without falling into blasphemy, one cannot say that the truth of something precedes the knowledge that God has of it, for in God, willing and knowing are one and the same thing, meaning that, *from the very fact that He wills something He therefore knows it, and therefore, only such a thing is true.*"

On April 15, 1630, we find Descartes saying to Mersenne that God would be subject to something, like Jupiter to the Styx, if outside and above Himself there were an order of truths that He would not have created.[5] Therefore, he did not hesitate to say: If the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, and if mountains do not exist without valleys, this is because God has willed things to be such. Henceforth, what remains of the necessity of the principle of contradiction, founded on the opposition of being and non-being and, first of all, on the very nature of God, the First Being?

Often, people have attempted to attenuate this Cartesian doctrine holding that God freely created eternal truths. However, as Gilson has shown, Descartes's texts on this point are formal in character.[6] Descartes held that the eternal truths were finite in character and, from this perspective something dependent upon the divine freedom. Thus, something that is contradictory for us, like a square circle or a mountain without a valley, is not, for all this, impossible or unrealizable for God. Descartes only makes an exception for the Divine Attributes (for example, God cannot lie) and for a purely formal contradiction, which does not involve the content of a definite essence (for example, "*ut quod factum est sit infactum*," that which has been made cannot have not existed, and creatures that were made by God cannot not depend on Him).[7]

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[3] Descartes, *Discourse de la méthode*, pt. 2 (p. 294).

[4] This point will be acknowledged if one admits, with St. Thomas (see *ST* I, g. 85, a. 3) that for the senses as for the intellect, more general [*commune*] knowledge precedes that which is less general: "Knowledge of particular things," he says there, " *quoad nos* is prior to knowledge of universals, just as sense knowledge is prior to intellective knowledge. However, both in the case of the senses and that of the intellect, more general [*communis*] knowledge is prior to less general knowledge."

[5] "The mathematical truths which you call eternal were established by God and utterly depend on Him, just as much as do other creatures. Indeed, were we to say that these truths are independent from Him, we would thereby speak of God as though we were speaking of a god like Jupiter or Saturn, thus making Him subject to the Styx and to the faces, I pray you not to fear maintain and to proclaim everywhere that God is the one who established these laws in Nature, just as a King establishes laws in his Kingdom" (Letter to Mersenne, April 15, 1630).

[6] See Descartes, *Discourse de la méthode*, pt. 2 (pp. 335-72, 373). See the letters to Mersenne from May 6, 1630 and May 27, 1638; also, see the letter to Mesland on May 2, 1644; and the sixth response. Also, see Émile Boutroux, *De veritaribus aeternis apud Cartesium* (Paris: Germer Ballière, 1874).

[7] See [Letter to] A. Morus on February 5, 1649, cited by Gilson, in Descartes, *Discurse de la méthode*, pt. 2 (p. 335).

This Cartesian doctrine concerning the relationship of metaphysical truths to the divine freedom cannot be separated from the *Cogito*.

II. THE CRITIQUE REGISTERED BY THE THOMISTS

The first objection against the Cartesian *Cogito* which springs to the mind of a disciple of St. Thomas rests on the following words which were often formulated by the Holy Doctor and can be found in *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1 (*What is truth?*):

> I respond that we must say that, just as demonstrated things must ultimately be reduced to some principle that is *per se nota* for the intellect, this holds for the investigation of the nature (*quid est*) of any given thing, for otherwise there would be an infinite regress, leading to the destruction of all science and knowledge of things. *However, that which the intellect first conceives, as it were, as what is most evident* [*notissimum*], that notion *into which all of its conceptions are resolved, is being*, as Avicenna says at the beginning of his *Metaphysics* (bk. 1, ch. 9). Whence, all the other conceptions of the intellect are had as involving some kind of addition to being.

Thus, unity, truth, and goodness are indeed general modes of being, which belong to every being; and substance, quantity, quality, action, passion, relation, etc. are the categories of being.

The same can be read in the *Summa theologiae*:

> *That which first falls into apprehension is being*, the understanding of which is included in all things that someone can grasp. Therefore, the first indemonstrable principle is that *we cannot affirm and deny* [one and the same thing at the same time from the same perspective] (or: being is not non-being), which is founded on the formal character [*rationem*] of being and non-being. And this principle is the foundation for all the other principles, as the Philosopher says in *Metaphysics*, bk. 4, ch. 3.[8]

Being, the most universal notion, is presupposed by all other notions, and the utterly first principle is that which enunciates what first of all belongs to being, namely, its identity with itself and its opposition to non-being: "Being is being; non-being is non-being. That which is, is; that which is not, is not; yes is yes and no is no. One and the same thing, from the same perspective and at the same time,[9] cannot both be and not be."

This fundamental assertion comes up consistently in Aristotle and also in St. Thomas. The latter says, in *ST* I, q. 5, a. 2: "*Being is the first thing that falls into the intellects act of conceiving*, for any given thing is knowable on account of the fact that it is in act, as is said in *Metaphysics*, bk. 9, ch. 9. *Whence, being is the proper object of the intellect, and thus also is the first intelligible*, just as sound is the first thing heard." Also see *ST* I, q. 85, a. 5: "Both in the case of the senses and that of the intellect, more general [*communis*] knowledge is prior to less general knowledge."

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Thus, following along these same lines, we can easily grasp the Thomist critique of the Cartesian *Cogito*, a critique found in the works of all Thomists writing about this matter from the seventeenth century onward.

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[8] *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

[9] The word "simul" in the statement of the principle of non-contradiction is either temporal or supra-temporal; thus, making abstraction from time, one can say "Something cannot simultaneously and from one and the same perspective be finite and infinite."

For example, we can read in Antoine Goudin's *Philosophia iuxta inconcussa tutissima Divi Thomae dogmata*, vol. 4, 11th ed. (Coloniae, 1724), p. 240:

> The first complex principle[10] is, "One and the same thing cannot at once be and not be," as we can find in Aristotle, Metaphysics, bk. 4, ch. 4, and St. Thomas, *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2...
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> However, Descartes is not to be tolerated here when he commands that the mind, for the time being holding every other exposited principle in doubt, begin its knowledge of things with, "I think," from which it would immediately infer: "Therefore, I am." For, so without arguing about other points (*ut coetera non urgeam*], if the mind were to set aside even our own principle, along with all the others, as something that must remain doubtful, another doubt will remain: whether he who thinks exists or does not. For he could think and, nonetheless, not exist, if it were possible that one and the *same thing could be and not be.* And so, that very principle (or, rather, that very enthymeme) of Descartes rests upon our principle.

Likewise, Salvator M. Roselli, O.P., in his *Summa philosophica*, vol. 5 (Madrid, 1788), p. 9, asks himself whether there is an absolutely first principle which is needed for certain knowledge of reality. He first of all recalls the doctrine admitted by St. Thomas in *ST* I, g. 5, a. 2, concerning being, the intellect's first given, as well as the first principle which must enunciate what first of all belongs to being, namely, its self-identity and opposition to non-being. Then, he provides the following critique of the *Cogito*:

> The very first principle of demonstration not only must be *maximally certain and evident* (for all universal, self-evident principles have this in common), nor must it only arise *naturally*, as St. Thomas says — that is, it does not need to be acquired through demonstration but, rather, through a simple perception of the terms, as has been said already-which is something also common to all self-evident principles. Beyond these characteristics, it *must also not presuppose any other truth*, for if it did suppose something else, it would not be the very first principle. Now, the Cartesian utterance, "I think; therefore I am," presupposes other principles, namely: *whatever thinks, is; whatever acts, exists; action follows on being, it is impossible that one and the same thing simultaneously be and not be.*
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> Indeed, unless these principles were true, I could not infer that I exist from the fact that I think. Hence, that utterance is a demonstration rather than a principle, for it includes the major premise, "Whatever thinks, is," which would not be true if the principles enumerated above were not true. Therefore, the conditions are lacking for the Cartesian utterance to have the character of being an entirely first principle of demonstration. Nor does it deserve to be called a self-evident principle, given that it comes to be known through demonstration and not merely through the perception of its terms.

Later Thomists would speak similarly. For example, among the most recent ones, we find Cardinal Tommaso Zigliara, O.P., saying in his *Summa philosophica*, vol. 1, 8th ed. (1891), 200:

> By means of the hypothetical fiction of an evil genius which could possibly deceive him, Descartes placed the principle of contradiction in doubt, along with all other principles. Nay, once the principle of contradiction has been

[10] **Translator's Note**: That is, the first principle formed by the second operation of the intellect by which complex enunciations and judgments are formed.

> placed in doubt, even if only hypothetically, the "*cogito, ergo sum*" itself can be asserted as a certain principle only illogically for, by the very hypothesis in place, I must be in doubt whether I can *simultaneously think and not think, as well as simultaneously whether I exist and do not exist*. Therefore, wherever Descartes may turn himself, he will find himself in open self-contradiction.

Likewise, Édouard Hugon, O.P. wrote in his *Cursus philosophiae thomisticae*, pt. 1, *Logica* (1902), p. 336: "Obviously, the first fact, *'Cogito*, from which is inferred, 'Therefore, I am,' holds only if it is contradictory to think and not think at the same time, which holds lest) from the principle of contradiction." Likewise, see Joseph Gredt, O.S.B., *Elementa philosophiae aristotelico-thomisticae*, vol. 2, 3rd ed. (1922), pp. 53-54.

We also wrote, in 1908, in our work, *Le sens commun et la philosophie de l'être* (cf. p. 135 of the 4th edition):

> Descartes and the modern idealists do not wish to admit anything but a subjective form of evidence because, for them, the intellect knows itself before knowing being. It builds its foundation upon the *cogito*, but it could never conclude, "*ergo sum*," without surreptitiously presupposing the ancient axiom: "The object of the intellect is being." Kant and the phenomenalists saw this quite well. Therefore, one would need to be content with saying, "I think therefore I am thinking," And, in fact, this is not certain, for according to his own principles, the idealist does not know *the reality of his action*, but rather, only the representation that he fashions of it for himself, and he would know this reality through his consciousness, without being able to be absolutely certain whether it is indeed real, for if he doubts the objectivity of the principle of identity and of contradiction, as well as its value as a law of being, and if reality can, at bottom, be contradictory (like an utterly causeless becoming which would be its own self-sufficient reason), nothing can assure one that the action that he holds as being real truly is so. If being is not the first and formal object of the intellect, the intellect obviously will never attain it. Here, the phenomenalists are right a thousand times over. The case is closed. Finally, one will no longer even be able to say, "I think," for the "I" is, at bottom, inevitably ontological. One will need to be content with affirming with a German philosopher whose name I cannot recall, "*There is thought*," just as one says, "There is rain falling in my attic." And yet, even this is not certain, for it could well be the case that such impersonal thought would in itself be identical with non-thought.

Even less will one be able to say, "Therefore, I am."

This represents the time-honored refutation of Cartesianism offered by the Thomists of the seventeenth century. The point of departure for knowledge is not the *cogito*. It is *being*, as well as the first principle which it implies: the principle of identity / non-contradiction [*sic*]. Every ancient philosophy proceeded from this primary certitude: *Obiectum intellectus est ens*; nothing is intelligible except in function of being; above all, the intellect is intelligible to itself only in function of being, which it knows as the first intelligible object before knowing itself through reflection. The first object known by our intellect is the intelligible being of sensible things and its primordial opposition to non-being. The first principles are *laws of thought* only because they are first *laws of being* and of reality. From the outset, it is utterly clear that reality cannot at once be reality and non-reality. The ontological formulation of the principle of identity / contradiction [sic] (being is being, non-

being is non-being-being is not non-being) thus precedes its logical formulation (one cannot at one and the same time, from the same perspective, affirm and deny one and the same attribute of one and the same subject).

If the whole of ancient philosophy proceeded from this first certitude, "The object of the intellect is being," the whole of modern subjectivism is found in this other expression which does not, in fact, reach its conclusion: "*Cogito, ergo sum*"[11].

Emile Boutroux said quite correctly in 1894:

> The central problem in Cartesian metaphysics is the passage from thought to existence. By itself, thought is inextricably innate within itself. How, therefore, by what rights and in what sense, can we affirm things that exist? ... Existence, which for the ancients was a thing that is given and perceived, something merely there to be analyzed, here is a distant object that must be itself attained, so long as it can indeed be attained.[12]

Furthermore, let us note that, according to Aristotelian and Thomist realism, while the principle of contradiction (or, better, of non-contradiction) is indeed the fundamental law of reality, it is not, however, a judgment of existence. It precedes the first judgment of existence. With a primordial form of evidence, whose value then increasingly imposes itself through the intellect's reflection upon itself, it affirms *that it is not only* INCONCEIVABLE FOR US, *but is indeed* REALLY IMPOSSIBLE IN ITSELF *that any given reality would simultaneously exist and not exist*. Here, we have *a necessary law of reality in itself* and not a merely logical law of the mind (i.e., of reality inasmuch as it is conceived). This REAL IMPOSSIBILITY of absurdity is necessarily conceived as being distinct from SUBJECTIVE INCONCEIVABILITY, and by affirming it, the mind affirms, not yet the existence of an extra-mental being, but rather, the first law of extra-mental reality. It affirms it at least in this negative form: that which is manifestly absurd (like a square circle) is obviously UNREALIZABLE outside of the mind, whatever God's power may be (if He exists) or even that of an evil genius. Behold the *objective* evidence which Descartes recklessly placed in doubt by saying that God can perhaps make a square circle or a mountain without a valley. Once this doubt has been admitted, the *cogito* could no longer reach the conclusion it proposes.

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From this perspective, we can easily respond to a number of questions which arise today on [*se reposent à*] the occasion of the three-hundredth anniversary of the 1637 publication of Descartes's *Discourse on Method*.

Is Descartes truly the father of modern philosophy? Yes, if the *Cogito* is proposed independently from the ontological value of the principle of contradiction.[13]

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[11] We have developed these points in *Le réalisme du principe de finalité*, pp. 31 and 160-66. There, we showed that if the principle of identity (or, of non-contradiction) is the fundamental law of reality, there is more in that which is than in that which becomes and does not yet exist. Therefore, becoming cannot be the first and fundamental reality, for it is not related to being as A is related to A. If the principle of identity is the fundamental law of reality, then the first reality, the principle of all the others, must be Being Itself, "I am who am," in whom alone essence and existence are identical. See ibid., 14-35 on the primacy of being over becoming.

[12] Émile Boutroux, "De l'opportunité d'une édition nouvelle des œuvres de Descartes," Revue de métaphysique et morale (May 1894): pp. 248-49.

[13] Clearly, we are not here attributing to Descartes the doctrine of Berkeley, nor that of Kant. However, whatever might have been his intentions to remain a realist, he introduced the principle of modern idealism by saying that the only object *directly and immediately* attained by the act of knowing is thought and not the intelligible being of things.

Does modern philosophy essentially differ from ancient philosophy? Yes, in the same sense as the first response, and this difference rests on idealism's opposition to the realism of the ancients.

Is the idealism coming from Descartes an aberration of thought? A form of progress? Or simply a new kind of thought? If it is conceived in the sense indicated in the first response, it is an aberration of thought, for if the ontological value of the principle of contradiction is set in doubt, *perhaps I simultaneously think and do not think, simultaneously am the self and am not the self, simultaneously exist and do not exist*.

Does the modern philosophy begotten by Descartes call for a rectification? If so, what kind? Yes, a rectification which reestablishes the value of the real scope of the principle of contradiction and of the notion of being presupposed by all other notions, as Aristotle shows in bk. 4 of his *Metaphysics*.

What is the most topically relevant subject still calling for further development[14] in Descartes's philosophy? At least one of the most topically relevant subjects would again be to show what Descartes held was the relationship of the *Cogito* with the real value of the first rational principles, as well as the nature of the relationship of this real value of the first principles with sense experience.

According to the Aristotelian and Thomist doctrine, the real value of the first principles *is founded* (or, *materially resolved*) in sense evidence which is presupposed for such knowledge and *is formally resolved* in the objective intellectual evidence of the real, necessary, and universal value of these principles, a necessity and universality which the senses could never perceive. This objective evidence is intelligible being in its evidential character, indeed, first of all: *the real extra-mental impossibility* of something which would exist and not exist at one and the same time from one and the same perspective. Thus, the real value of the *material resolution* of our intellectual evidence into sensible evidence is *formally judged* under the superior light of the intellectual evidence into which this same certitude is resolved (or, *formally founded*).[15] Here, we have the mutual relation between the senses and the intellect: The senses furnish *the matter* for intellectual knowledge, and the value of the senses is *formally judged* in the intellectual light of the first principles. A sensation without a real object sensed, without an efficient cause, and without an end, would violate the principles of contradiction, efficient causality, and finality. Doubtlessly, this doctrine claiming that our ideas come from the senses through abstraction is known only after we know the real value of the principles of contradiction and of causality. However, we do not come to know these principles without the senses furnishing us with the matter of knowledge.

Such is the perspective held by traditional philosophy, above all in the form that it takes in Thomism. The primordial certitude of this philosophy is that *the object of the intellect* is being and reality, indeed, a reality that obeys from the start the absolute necessity and value of the principle of contradiction as the law of non-contradiction. Thus obeying the principle of contradiction, being consequently cannot be a mere process of becoming which lacks an efficient cause superior to itself as well as an end, a becoming which would be self-explanatory, a fieri which would therefore be more perfect than *esse*. To hold that the first principle of the mind is the principle of identity (or, of non-contradiction) is to admit that *there is more in*

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[14] **Translator's Note**: Reading "mettre encore au point" for "mettre encore ou point."

[15] See *ST* 1, q. 84, a. 6 and 5.

Translator's Note: For a clear exposition of the point in the background concerning material and formal resolution, see Garrigou-Lagrange, *Sense of Mystery*, pp. 15-19.

being than in becoming, that *becoming cannot be self-explanatory*, and that it requires an efficient cause superior to itself, as well as a final cause. In the final analysis, these superior causes can only be found in *He who is*. All of this represents the affirmation of the primacy of being over becoming.

This traditional doctrine was profoundly underrated by Descartes because of the very way that he conceived of the importance of the *Cogito* by disregarding the absolute necessity and value of the principle of contradiction as the absolutely necessary and fundamental law of reality.