

Chapter VI

DESCARTES

Rene Descartes represents in many ways a pivotal point in the Western attitude towards the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. His philosophy contains the end of the past and the beginning of the future. His defense of the immortality of the soul was to become the basis for the denial of the immortality of the soul. Objective evidence was to be superseded by subjective conviction. Yet his purpose was to defend immortality.

The philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, as elaborated and clarified by St. Augustine and St. Thomas, had formed the framework of the greater part of the structure of rational, and simultaneously Christian, thought up until the sixteenth century. By the time of Descartes, three hundred years after the death of St. Thomas, during which three hundred years the system of Thomistic-Aristotelian philosophy had not maintained all the vigor it possessed when activated by St. Thomas himself and had on the other hand become somewhat ivy-covered, this philosophy had become, in the hands of many, more a series of propositions to be accepted on authority than a steadily developing system of thought. Likewise certain errors were maintained by their authors' ability to justify them by the system in question. The time was ripe for a

revolt. The religious revolt against authority had already taken place. In his endeavor to bolster that authority from purely rational grounds and by arguments completely untainted by any appeal to the past, Descartes undertook to prove the existence of God and the immortality of the soul in a new way which so captivated the new world that when later on this same mode of reasoning appeared to require the denial of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul these seemingly ineluctable conclusions were scrupulously affirmed as the basis of a new materialist philosophy.

What had impelled Descartes to attempt a restatement of the findings of man's knowledge? There was on the one hand his dissatisfaction with the somewhat antiquated and arbitrary presentation of scholastic philosophy as he knew it. There was on the other hand the encouragement afforded him by the success of his synthesis of mathematics. It could seem only natural to him to apply himself in the interests of humanity to establishing a new and henceforth indestructible certitude concerning the supremely important questions of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, and to show by this very fact the value of his new philosophy which was somewhat suspect to the representatives of traditional thought.

Thus, in the dedication of his Meditations on the First Philosophy to the Faculty of Theology of the Sorbonne, he states:

"I have always been of opinion that the two questions respecting God and the soul were the chief of those that ought to be determined by help of philosophy rather than of theology; for although to us, the faithful, it be sufficient to hold as matters of faith, that the human soul does not perish with the body, and that God exists, it yet assuredly seems impossible ever to persuade infidels of the reality of any religion, or almost even any moral virtue, unless, first of all, those two things be proved to them by natural reason." How is this to be accomplished in the present work?

"...There is, I apprehend, no more useful service to be performed in philosophy, than if some one were, once for all, carefully to seek out the best of these reasons (for the immortality of the soul and the existence of God), and expound them so accurately and clearly that, for the future, it might be manifest to all that they are real demonstrations. And finally, since many persons were greatly desirous of this, who knew that I had cultivated a certain method of resolving all kinds of difficulties in the sciences, which is not indeed new (there being nothing older than truth), but of which they were aware I had made successful use in other instances, I judged it be my duty to make trial of it also on the present matter." These demonstrations, Descartes believes, are "equal or even superior to the geometrical in certitude and evidence."

Their desired result is "that henceforward all errors which have been entertained on these questions will very soon be effaced from

the minds of men."

How does Descartes proceed in setting forth his demonstration of the immortality of the soul? The initial step is to make a clean sweep of all previous knowledge: "I will at length apply myself earnestly and freely to the general overthrow of all my former opinions. ... As the removal from below of the foundation necessarily involves the downfall of the whole edifice, I will at once approach the criticisms of the principles on which all my former beliefs rested (1st Meditation)." This separation from all previous knowledge also entails the separation from the external world since from it illusions may arise: "All that I have, up to this moment accepted as possessed of the highest truth and certainty, I received either from or through the senses. I observed, however, that these sometimes misled us; and it is the part of prudence not to place absolute confidence in that by which we have even once been deceived (ibid.)"

What then is to be the criterion of truth? The concept in the mind must have mathematical certitude such that it remains eternally and universally true, as for instance the truth that the sum of the angles of a triangle equals two right angles. The very nature of the concept itself must make it so. It must be clear and distinct so that it compels the assent of the mind in a way independent of any influence of the senses and so that the "natural

light" can have no other alternative but to accept it.

Thus the existence of the mind is established, since it is always present in all one's perceptions, whether true or false. The mind is necessarily seen as separable from the body since it is indivisible, whereas the body is divisible. "...Because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in as far as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other hand, I possess a distinct idea of body, in as far as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that I, that is, my mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely and truly distinct from my body and may exist without it (6th Meditation)." Consequently, also, since what is clearly and distinctly known is true (5th Meditation) and truth is identical with existence (the notion of triangle, for instance, even if independent of the senses, is something existing), to the idea of God, which is clear and distinct in the highest degree and true, there necessarily corresponds existence. (3rd Meditation)

Although Descartes was supposedly striving for the glory of the God in which he believed, and states that even in this life the necessarily imperfect contemplation of the Divine is the source of the highest satisfaction of which we are susceptible (3rd Meditation), nevertheless his system opened the way to the denial of God and all that is not material. He successfully

undermined the value of objective evidence but was unable to substitute another certitude in its place. Kant was to bring what he had begun to its terrifying conclusions. Henceforth truth was destined to be subject to man, rather than man to it. Descartes is somewhat like a man busily engaged in sawing off the branch he is sitting on.

How was this accomplished? First of all, by calling into question the testimony of the senses Descartes paved the way to a denial of the axiom that truth is measured by objective reality, since that objective reality is primarily known by the senses. The criterion of truth becomes the knower himself. To put it brutally, nothing can be true unless the knower accepts it as true. "... (I) am constrained at last to avow that there is nothing at all that I formerly believed to be true of which it is impossible to doubt, and that not through thoughtlessness or levity, but from cogent and maturely considered reasons... (1st Meditation)" One does not clearly and distinctly perceive the earth, the sky, the stars, but only the ideas one has of them. Even God could cause us to err in matters in which we think we have the highest evidence. Truth thus does not consist in the equation of the knower and the known, but rather in the clearness and distinctness of the idea itself which renders any denial of it impossible. "But the chief and most ordinary error that arises in them (our judgments) consist in judging that the ideas which are in us are like or

conformed to the things that are external to us; for assuredly, if we but considered the ideas themselves as certain modes of our thought (consciousness), without referring them to anything beyond, they would hardly afford any occasion of error." (3rd Meditation)

When a clear and distinct concept is attained, then that concept is necessarily true. "...As often as I so restrain my will within the limits of my knowledge, that it forms no judgment regarding objects which are clearly and distinctly represented to it by the understanding, I can never be deceived; because every clear and distinct conception is doubtless something, and as such cannot owe its origin to nothing, but must of necessity have God for its author- - God, I say, who, as supremely perfect, cannot without a contradiction be the cause of any error; and consequently it is necessary to conclude that every such conception or judgment is true (4th Meditation)." How does one know that one has attained a clear and distinct, and therefore, true, concept? It is the natural light which sees the concept as clear and distinct. Once it is clear and distinct, the will accepts it as true; "for it is a dictate of the natural light, that the knowledge of the understanding ought always to precede the determination of the will (4th Meditation)." Error consists in the will affirming as true what the understanding does not see clearly and distinctly.

In the understanding itself, there is neither truth nor

falsity. It is only the intervention of the will which, adhering to what is clear and distinct, constitutes truth. Thus Descartes inadvertently laid another basis for materialism and in particular dialectical materialism. In effect, by introducing the will as a component of truth, he paved the way to a conception of truth as that which contributes to the good desired by the will, as illustrated by the following excerpt from Lenin: "Marx did not stop at the materialism of the eighteenth century, but moved philosophy forward. He enriched it by the achievements of German classical philosophy, especially by Hegel's system, which in turn led to the materialism of Feuerbach. Of these the main achievement is dialectics, i.e. the doctrine of development in its fuller, deeper form, free from one-sidedness, - - the doctrine also, of the relativity of human knowledge that provides us with a reflection of eternally developing matter...(V.I.Lenin, Marx, Engels, Marxism, New York, 1935, p.51)." This is but a restatement of Engels: "In the course of progress all earlier reality becomes unreality, loses its necessity, its right of existence, its rationality; in place of the dying reality comes a new vital reality, peaceable when the old is sufficiently sensible to go to its death without a struggle, forcible when it strives against this necessity." (Engels Essay on Feuerbach, English translation, Chicago, 1903, p.40) - (Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie)

Thus, by undermining the criterion of truth whereby it

consists in the recognition of a judgment's correspondence to objective reality by bringing into doubt the validity of sense knowledge, and setting up the will as the final determinant of truth, since it is the will which ultimately decides whether a concept is clear and distinct and therefore true. Descartes may be said to be the founder of modern materialism. It is true that he relied upon God to assure that a clear and distinct concept could not be erroneous, as he relied upon God to vindicate one's judgments of external reality, but once God as the supreme criterion of truth is removed, man alone remains as sole judge and measure of truth. Kant, applying the logic of Descartes' system, found himself obliged to eliminate that certainty Descartes felt about the intervention of God. Feuerbach and the Marxists were to unequivocally proclaim the human will as the ultimate determinant of the true and the good.

In this way Descartes indeed represents a pivotal point in the history of Western thought, since he was at once the last recognized thinker to elaborate a professedly rational proof of the immortality of the soul and the existence of God, while laying the foundation of a manner of thinking which was ultimately to lead to the denial of both and the proclamation of man, his intelligence and will, as the supreme factors in the universe, and the irresponsible measures of all that is true or good. By a strange paradox Descartes in endeavoring to set the soul completely out of the realm of material things in order to preserve its identity contributed to

a purely mechanistic idea of the body which would eventually lead to the denial of the soul as superfluous. In proposing a mathematical clarity for all intellectual knowledge, he contributed unwillingly to the reduction of all intellectual knowledge to the level of mathematics.

The words of Pascal: "L'homme n'est ni ange, ni bête; mais le malheur veut que celui qui fait l'ange fait la bête," have been applied to Descartes. The modern effort at the complete possession of self, at Selbstbewusstsein, is justified by man's supposed prerogative of possessing himself in a purely intellectual mode, as was the aim of Descartes. Whereas man is a rational creature, and is destined by nature to gain his knowledge from the senses, the urge for self-possession impels him to refuse this humble attitude and start with the best, with what is most known in itself, like God and the angels. This is somewhat similar to stealing instead of working for a living. What is the result of this attempt? This inordinate desire to possess the self in a mode better than human leads inevitably to the destruction of the best and exaltation of the worst in man. "Qui fait l'ange, fait la bête." Descartes was merely another step in this destructive process which found expression in Pelagianism, Averroism, and the Renaissance, and was carried out to its inevitable conclusions in modern philosophy by the successors of Descartes.

Rationally speaking, in philosophy one goes from what is most known in itself to what is most known to us. Modern philosophy has emphasized the identification of these two orders. God has become mathematics. Prometheus has stolen the divine fire, and will not yield, and Karl Marx is right behind him. But in man, that which is most knowable in itself is least known as to what it is. Consequently, the best things simpliciter and the best things in man can be known only in an imperfect mode. On the other hand, the natural process of rationalization consists in an effort to seize, to express all things in terms of what is least conditioned in our knowledge. This means that if man is to endeavor to possess all things in a purely intellectual mode, he will necessarily be reduced, by a sort of natural retribution, to identifying that which is best in him with that which is most known to him. This process will consist in trying to reduce the objectively intelligible, i.e. the form and nature of things, to the irrationality of pure multiplicity with formal identity, thus freeing it from any objectivity. The stuff of the universe will be rendered completely homogeneous. That which cannot be assimilated will be termed irrational, and irrationality will therefore become the base of objectivity. Thus, in man's striving for self-possession, the imperfection of the intellect which obliges it to rely upon the lowest form of knowledge, i.e. sense knowledge, as a principle, and which is considered an affront to its pure intellectuality, is obviated by a voluntary uniformizing of reality.

But this tour de force is rewarded with a poetic justice, which, if it did not entail such tragic consequences, would be humorous in its results. That which is first known, and most known to us, has its certitude precisely because of its confusion. This is just the opposite of the "clear and distinct idea" of Descartes. Quite naturally, the intellect wants to be most certain of that which is in itself most certain, but such a certitude is reserved for the beatific vision. If man tries to have about what is best in him the kind of knowledge he has of what is least in him he is usurping the angelic mode. The tragic aspect of this usurpation is that, in trying to know oneself and the knowledge of oneself as the ratio sub qua all is known actually, by a kind of inevitable revenge the only thing that can be achieved is a reduction of what is best and most knowable in us to what is least and most knowable to us, in other words, to the identification of the spiritual and the sensual. The sensual is sublimated by a logical mode which itself will be nothing but pure repetition, i.e. fundamentally purely rational homogeneity. The result is an irrational rationality, i.e., a rationality based on homogeneity, which by its lack of form, and consequently, intelligibility, is fundamentally irrational. Thus, whereas the objective becomes "irrational," the truly irrational becomes "rational". This rationalisation, when carried to the limit, leads inevitably to the destruction of natural form, and, as a corollary, to the destruction of the soul. Thus the dissolution of the Ego is the punishment for the seeking of the Ego, as in the

case of the farmer who, intent upon rendering his ass self-sufficient by feeding him less and less, eventually starved the poor beast to death.

Because of his starting point, Descartes' world had necessarily to end in matter in its most undetermined sense, because the stuff of his universe could be nothing but homogeneous and all was to be reduced to this homogeneity. But irrational matter is precisely the enemy of the intellectuality man is seeking. This is the cause of the note of despair in modern philosophy. The Ego has sought to exalt itself and finds itself reduced to nothingness. To speak with Engels of the "strength of misery" is only to make a virtue of necessity, to freely submit to the unfeeling extermination of all by the matter to which all has been reduced. "Brief and powerless is man's life; on him and all his race the slow sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow to pass himself through the gates of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day." (Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," from Mysticism and Logic. It is significant that it should be a mathematician who utters these words. Yet why is the universe cruel and irrational? The irony of it all is that man has made it so, and would sooner accept doom at its hand, since he has made it, than retract his freedom and live as a subject

in a rational universe made by God. What man has made, man can destroy, and this man-made, antagonistic, irrational universe only holds together by the slender strength of a stubborn human will. Such is the spell which Descartes had his share in weaving, and whose imaginary bonds Kant will draw ever tighter. Such is the literally suicidal bent in the effort at self-possession.

Chapter VII

KANT

The devastation that Descartes had begun "seated by the fire, clothed in a winter dressing gown," were to be continued in the next century by Immanuel Kant, the solitary and punctual stroller of quiet Koenigsberg. Descartes still maintained that the immortality of the soul could be demonstrated by reason, as well as held by faith. Kant was to state unequivocally that such a demonstration was beyond the reach of reason and was a matter of belief alone. After Kant it remained only to do away with faith to attain the complete denial of the immortality of the soul. Henceforth men were to be content with at most a collective, impersonal, and material immortality. The question of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul having been dispensed with, the struggle was to be engaged between the autonomous intellect and the autonomous will, but notwithstanding, the question of immortality will continue to rear its ugly head.

Just as Descartes stated in the dedication of his Meditations that the two questions of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul were the chief of those to be determined by philosophy, so also Immanuel Kant, in his introduction to the Critique of Pure Reason, states the same questions: "So high a value do we set upon these investigations, that even at the risk

of error, we persist in following them out, and permit neither doubt nor disregard nor indifference to restrain us from the pursuit. These unavoidable problems of mere pure reason are GOD, FREEDOM (of will), and IMMORTALITY." (Mod. Library Edit. p. 28)

Just as Descartes had set out to defend these questions, so also did Kant. But whereas Descartes had endeavored to do so by showing the power of reason to attain to a knowledge of these truths, Kant set out to do so by showing the powerlessness of reason to attain them. However, Kant is merely a logical step forward. In making, the command of the will follows the judgment of the intellect. In remaking the world around man, the irrationality introduced into the intellect is naturally followed by a decree of the will not based on evidence, but on the authority of the self. Thus supernatural faith is superseded by natural belief, which like supernatural faith is also to be beyond the reach of reason. This authoritarian belief is to guarantee and, where desired, transform the very natural essences of things. As with the Averroists, this was done by Kant to protect these natures from what he considered pure wishful thinking, i.e. a reason not subject to Kant. In place of a rational demonstration, he substitutes a demonstration of his own which he describes in glowing terms. It is none other than his own authority.

As has been seen, Descartes was to exclude any appeal

to the external world, which he considered possibly deceptive, and endeavor to rear his proof of immortality by the mode of reason alone. Kant, awakened from his dogmatic slumbers by Hume, who, by denying causality made communication with the world beyond experience impossible, and by denying that any miracle could be a mode of faith eliminated the possibility of a supernatural order, was to be suddenly struck with the appalling discovery that apparently up to his time no one had troubled to examine the capacity of reason itself and had been allowing it to plunge far beyond its depth. Metaphysics, which he defines in Cartesian fashion as that knowledge one strives to attain by reason alone without the aid of experience, and which embraces the question of the immortality of the soul, had consequently fallen into scorn and disrepute. He saw the weakness of Descartes effort to establish truth by the pure mode of reason, but rather than recur to experience, he naturally preferred to recur to an authority as equally unfettered as the Cartesian reason.

It is his purpose to rescue metaphysics from the sorry state to which the dogmatists, by their pretentious despotism, and the sceptics, by their weariness and indifference engendered by the fruitlessness of their past efforts, have reduced it. Since the natural can lead to the supernatural and loss of self-possession, it must be eliminated as dogma. Mr. Dewey does the same thing. The inability of man to attain that self-possession by reason can also

be conveniently called scepticism. This is to be done by removing the errors which have hitherto set reason at variance with itself in the sphere of non-empirical thought, a task which Kant considers he has accomplished to complete satisfaction. (op. cit. p. 3) In effect, it is today metaphysics in the Kantian sense which is used as the straw man upon which the denial of all metaphysics is based. Just as he was to carry the subjectivism of Descartes into the plane of tyrannical action by the categorical imperative, so also he elaborated a pseudo-spirituality which leads necessarily to materialism.

This purification will entail, of course, the regrettable but necessary conclusion that reason is unable to attain to the knowledge of the existence of God and of the immortality of the soul. But this is of no great moment, since these doctrines have never had any influence upon mankind in general. (What of the Greeks?) "I appeal to the most obstinate dogmatist, whether the proof of the continued existence of the soul after death, derived from the simplicity of its substance, ... has ever been able to pass beyond the limits of the schools, to penetrate the public mind, or to exercise the slightest influence on its convictions." (op. cit. p. 18) However, Kant overlooks that this discrepancy between scientific and popular belief is in no wise a proof of a denial on the part of the people.