

Scepticism, Stoicism and Subjectivity: Reappraising Montaigne's Influence on Descartes

*Escepticismo, estoicismo y subjetividad: Reevaluación de la influencia de Montaigne en Descartes*¹

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ABSTRACT

According to the standard view, Montaigne's Pyrrhonian doubts would be in the origin of Descartes' radical Sceptical challenges and his *cogito* argument. Although this paper does not deny this influence, its aim is to reconsider it from a different perspective, by acknowledging that it was not Montaigne's Scepticism, but his Stoicism, which played the decisive role in the birth of the modern internalist conception of subjectivity. Cartesian need for certitude is to be better understood as an effect of the Stoic model of wisdom, which urges the sage to build an inner space for self-sufficiency and absolute freedom.

KEYWORDS

SCEPTICISM, STOICISM, SUBJECTIVITY, MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, RENÉ DESCARTES

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RESUMEN

Según el punto de vista general, las dudas pirronianas de Montaigne se situarían en el origen de los desafíos escépticos radicales del argumento *cogito* de Descartes. Si bien este artículo no niega tal influencia, nuestro objetivo es reconsiderarla desde una perspectiva diferente mediante el reconocimiento de que no fue el escepticismo de Montaigne sino su estoicismo el que jugó un papel decisivo en el nacimiento del concepto moderno internalista de la subjetividad. La necesidad cartesiana de certeza se entiende mejor como un efecto del modelo estoico de sabiduría, el cual impulsa al sabio a construir un espacio interior para la autosuficiencia y la libertad absoluta.

PALABRAS CLAVE

ESCEPTICISMO, ESTOICISMO, SUBJETIVIDAD, MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, RENÉ DESCARTES.

I. CARTESIAN QUESTIONS

THE DESIRE TO BE POST-CARTESIAN might be the only aim that is commonly shared by almost each and every current scholar in philosophy of mind. But escaping from the long shade of Cartesianism is not easy, since our obsession to find alternative solutions to the problems that Descartes put forward might be hiding a deeper perseverance in his tradition. Briefly: by denying his answers, we might be inconspicuously accepting his questions. The moment might have come, when instead of finding new answers to old Cartesian questions, we should perhaps enquire about the questions themselves, about their pertinence and coherence, and about the reasons that brought us to accept them.

It is well known that Descartes tried to avoid any kind of presupposition when he chose the set of theoretical questions he would face in his *Meditations*, struggling to formulate them in a way that would not take anything for granted; but it is questionable whether he did succeed. Some of the most influential questions Descartes addressed to upcoming philosophers are:

- (1) What am I?
- (2) How do I know there is an outer world?
- (3) Are there other minds besides mine?

Although those questions appear to be as old as philosophy itself, they could hardly have been posed before Descartes. Up to that time, it was more common to ask:

- (1') Who am I?
- (2') What do I know about the world?
- (3') How can I judge the lives of others?

The former questions make assumptions that were not present in the latter ones –although those also certainly do make their own assumptions. For instance, by asking (1), I assume that I am *something*, whereas by asking (1') I just assume that I am *someone*, which is quite a different point. Cartesian question

(1) raised the modern problem of personal identity, from Locke and Hume to Parfit, by taking for granted that that *someone* that I am must be *something* in the world.²

By the same token, question (2) presumes that I am not really part of the world as an *outer* world, whereas in (2') I am included in the world I am asking about; in this sense, there was no room for idealism in pre-Cartesian philosophy, or for the problem of the very existence of the outer world; a point that was convincingly shown by Burnyeat.³ While classic Sceptical arguments were directed against particular beliefs –since each one of them could be proved to be uncertain one by one–, the novelty of Descartes approach was that he intended to challenge all of them at the same time.⁴

Finally, question (3), even if it was never posed by Descartes himself, was an unavoidable consequence of (1) and (2); it assumes that the concept that I use when I refer to the *thing* I am *inside* can also be applied to other things, which might exist in the outer world. That point gives rise to what is called *the conceptual problem of other minds*,⁵ which does not come to light with moral question (3'). The concept of *life* involved in (3'), unlike the concept of *mind* we find in (3), may be applied to oneself or another person indistinctly, with no particular asymmetry, since our lives take place in one and the same world.⁶

All those Cartesian questions have two aspects in common:

(a) They are posed from a methodological position of radical Scepticism.

2 The origin of this maze might be in the arguable use of «I» as a kind of referential proper name; for an alternative and critical view of this idea, see G. E. M. Anscombe's classic essay «The First Person», in S. Guttenplan (ed.), *Mind and Language*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, 45-65.

3 «Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed», *The Philosophical Review*, 91:1 (1982), 3-40.

4 The difference in scope of Sceptical doubts before and after Descartes is explained by J. L. Bermúdez as a transit from the idea that (a) *for all my perceptual beliefs, it is possible that any of those beliefs might be mistaken*, to the one that (b) *it is possible for all my perceptual beliefs to be mistaken*. The change in scope of the possibility operator makes admissible the idea that the whole world might just be an illusion. «The Originality of Cartesian Scepticism: Did It Have Ancient or Mediaeval Antecedents?», *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 17 (2000), 333-360. For an alternative view, see Gail Fine, «Descartes and Ancient Skepticism: Reheated Cabbage?», *The Philosophical Review*, 109:2 (2000), 195-234.

5 A. Avramides, *Other Minds*. London: Routledge, 2001.

6 Question (3) is built on the alleged *invisibility* of other minds, which are supposed not to be accessible to the Self with the same certitude he is present to himself. There is also a particular kind of invisibility involved in (3'), but it is of a very different kind. The difficulty to make sensible judgements about the intentions and desires of others is a common place in Renaissance moral literature; but the reason generally adduced for that difficulty is that we are not so acquainted with their lives as we are with our own.

(b) They request absolute and immovable certitude as an answer.

Those are two sides of the same coin, since neither can be conceived without the other: radical doubt can only be solved by radical assurance, and an absolute need for certitude can only be satisfied if we are able to confront even the most excessive of doubts. For that reason, Scepticism has traditionally been assumed as the starting point of Cartesianism, and Michel de Montaigne, the most influential Sceptic of the previous century, as one of the main precedents of modern subjectivism. However, my aim in this paper is to show that, even if Montaigne's Scepticism was implicitly assumed by Descartes as a challenge –and, by the same token, radicalized far beyond its original model–, the very reason why Descartes adopted his new perspective is to be found in (b), rather than in (a). I.e., what led Descartes to the reformulation of previous questions was the moral need for certitude; a need he probably did inherit from Montaigne, although not from his Sceptical facet, but most likely from the Stoic one. In few words: *the route to solipsism might not have been the Sceptical doubt about knowledge, but the Stoic search for moral certitude through the rational narrowing down of the self*. Noticing this difference will not only help us understand the reasons that led Descartes to reformulate old questions in a brand-new manner; it might also explain why many people persist even today in the kind of puzzles and dead ends that show up from that particular perspective.

II. THE STANDARD VIEW

In contrast to Descartes, Montaigne was not a professional philosopher, not to mention a scientist, but what we would now call a *dilettante*. He was in fact a man of law, who resigned his position as magistrate at the relatively early age of 37 in order to retire to his own castle and devote the rest of his life *to the muses*. It was 1570 and he had dedicated too much time to the world: the moment had come to follow the old advice of wisdom –*gnosce te ipsum*– and undertake the task of knowing himself. The problem then was that this *inner space* he expected to know and cultivate in solitude proved to be terribly unpredictable, as he reflected in his early essay «De l'oisiveté».⁷ In Dupré's words, «Rather than providing a ground for certitude as it later did for Descartes, the nature of the self is for Montaigne the source of all uncertainty».⁸ Contrary to Descartes' related experience, when he was in the privacy of his chamber warming himself by the famous stove, Montaigne found no assurance in the lonely familiarity with himself, but just a mess that he would try to order through the act of writing, not knowing exactly the aim of his task, or the way to achieve it.

7 M. de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, tr. M. A. Screech. London: Penguin Books, 1991 (I.8, 31). Letters A, B, C stand for the three main editions (1580/82, 1588 and 1595).

8 *Passage to modernity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, 115.

In the book he published ten years later, the first edition of his *Essays*, he offered to the public the results of this writing task, introducing himself as a follower of ancient Sceptics. Acknowledging his own ignorance, he was not intending to produce well founded opinions or definitively stated truths in his work, but simply *essaying* himself through his writing: testing his own abilities, developing his judgement facing such different commonplaces as the splendour of the ancient Romans, the decrepitude of his coevals, exotic customs of faraway places, our inability to have a real faith, or the different attitudes that can be found towards war, sexuality or family. While writing the book he noticed that all these issues were just excuses that allowed the appearance of its real subject: Montaigne was writing about these topics to make us see the glass through which they were being looked at. The very subject of his book was the writer himself. What he was showing us were his own faculties in action, being applied to that formless set of matters. Contrary to the appearances, he was the matter of his own book: «*je suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre*».⁹

At this point we might be tempted to say, as many others have done, that the object Montaigne was pointing at was his own *Self*, but the use of that expression is problematic, since the very noun was lacking at the time. In fact, one of the most appealing traits of Montaigne's introspective writing is that he was unable to talk about his *Self*, but only about himself, since the French pronoun *moi* only began to have a non deictic use at the end of the sixteenth century.¹⁰ Montaigne was able to talk about his *raison*, his *jugement*, his *discourse*, his *intelligence*, his *conscience* or his *esprit*, but could not talk about that *Self* who allegedly owns all those faculties. However, disregarding this linguistic limitation (and the significant cognitive difference that it involves), the work of Montaigne has been considered helpless for its unsolved Scepticism to find an answer to the question 'What am I?' In turn, Descartes is supposed to have pointed out half a

9 *The Complete Essays*, «To the reader».

10 Many scholars have already pointed to this linguistic deficit in the *Essays*: see for instance C. B. Brush, *From the Perspective of the Self: Montaigne's Self-Portrait*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1994, 215; I. Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe*. Paris: PUF, 1996, 70; T. Cave, «Fragments d'un moi futur: de Pascal a Montaigne», in *Pré-histoires*. Geneva: Droz, 1999, 111-28. I focus on its philosophical implications in *La Extrañeza de Sí Mismo. Identidad y Alteridad en Michel de Montaigne*. Sevilla: Fénix Editora, 2005, 131-6. Most English translations of the *Essais* miss this interesting point, even John Florio's first one; e.g. he translates «Il n'est description pareille en difficulté à la description de *soy-mesmes*, ny certes en utilité» (*Les Essais*, ed. Pierre Villey. Paris: PUF, 1965, 378) for «There is no description so hard, nor so profitable, as is the description of *a mans own self*» (*Essayes*. London, 1603, 219). And nowadays Screech translates «Me peignant pour autrui, je me suis *peint en moy* de couleurs plus nettes que n'estoyent les miennes premieres» (PUF, p. 665) for «By portraying myself for others I have *portrayed my own self* within me in clearer colours than I possessed at first», (*The Complete Essays*, 2.18, 755). My emphasis in both cases.

century later, with clearness and distinction, what Montaigne had only intuited: that that «Self», the only lifeboat available in the shipwreck of Scepticism, is in fact a *res cogitans*: a *thinking thing* whose essence is crystalline and transparent to itself. In the deepest doubt, the clearest certitude. As Alexander Koyré brilliantly remarked, «The *Discourse on Method* [...] is a reply to the *Essais*. To the sad story told by Montaigne, the story of a defeat, Descartes opposes his own, the story of a decisive victory».¹¹

This account of the story is what I call *the standard view*. I do not agree with it –as can be expected from the label I chose for it–, and in what follows I will try to reappraise it. The transit from Montaigne’s doubts to Descartes certitude, from the discursive exploration of himself to the substantive determination of the Self, might be better described otherwise.¹²

III. STOICISM AND THE NEED FOR CERTITUDE.

Montaigne was not significantly influenced by ancient Scepticism when he retired to his castle and began to write his *Essays*, since he did not even know yet the works of Sextus Empiricus that were to change his mind in such a deep way.¹³ On the contrary, he was following the advice of Roman Stoics, whose work he had been reading for years. He was not particularly interested in their metaphysical conception of the world, or in their epistemology, but mostly in their way of life: an ideal of wisdom gathered in a large list of precepts about how one should think and behave in order to attain rational autonomy, and

11 Quote from his «Introduction» to R. Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*. London: Nelson, 1969, xiv. Etienne Gilson had already turned this interpretation into the standard account by pointing out that «the philosophy of Descartes was a desperate struggle to emerge from Montaigne’s scepticism», *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*. New York: C. Scribner’s sons, 1937, 127. With a striking expression, he puts in Descartes’ mouth the famous lines «I was in the world to rid the world of Montaigne; don’t you grant me the benefit of his indulgent scepticism» (*ibid*, 151).

12 In contrast to the genetic interpretation that can be found in Gilson or Koyré, our reading will be in the line of Léon Brunschvicg’s also canonical view, when he considers the works of Montaigne, Descartes and Pascal as different speakers that take part in a debate: one could prevail over the others in a particular moment, but that doesn’t mean that the rest have been left behind. They are not successive phases or stages in the development of one same argument, but different voices whose counterpoint is constitutive of philosophy itself. See *Descartes et Pascal lecteurs de Montaigne*. Paris: Pocket, 1942/1995, 190.

13 Ancient Scepticism had attracted little attention in France before 1562, when Henri Estienne published a Latin translation of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. According to Pierre Villey, Montaigne did not read Sextus Empiricus until 1575 (see his edition of *Les Essais*, *op. cit.*, LIX).

become powerful enough to confront the strokes of fortune with the firmness of reason.¹⁴

According to their master Epictetus and his famous *Enchiridion*, the first step in that course was learning to distinguish what belongs to you from what belongs to others:

Some things are under our control, while others are not under our control. Under our control are conception, choice, desire, aversion, and, in a word, everything that is our own doing; not under our control are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, everything that is not our own doing.¹⁵

It is not difficult to see here, from a moral point of view, the germ of modern distinction between the mental (judgement, intention, desire...) and the physical (body, wealth, political power...). The division between what is inner and what is outer stems from the opposition between what belongs to *oneself* and what is foreign. It is the very constitution and consistency of the Self, as a project of absolute free will, which is at play.¹⁶

Furthermore, the things under our control are by nature free, unhindered, and unimpeded; while the things not under our control are weak, servile, subject to hindrance, and not our own.¹⁷

14 This aspect of stoicism is receiving special attention since Foucault (see «Technologies of the Self», in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: The New York Press, 2002, 223-251) and P. Hadot (*Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1981). For an interpretation of Montaigne from a foucaultian perspective, see M. Rieger, 'Ästhetik der Existenz'? Eine Interpretation von Michel Foucaults Konzept der 'Technologien des Selbst' anhand der *Essais von Michel de Montaigne*. Berlin: Waxmann, 1997; J. Navarro-Reyes, «Le divin interlocuteur: le souci de soi, la confession et l'essai», in P. Desan (ed.), *Dieu à notre commerce et société: Montaigne et la théologie*. Genève: Librairie Droz, 2008, 221-240; or Z. Zalloua, «Montaigne, Seneca, and 'le Soing de la Culture de l'Amé'». *Montaigne Studies*, XXI (2009), 155-168.

15 Epictetus, «The Manual», in *The Discourses as Reported by Arrian, The Manual, and Fragments*, tr. W.A. Oldfather. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1925, II, 483.

16 José Medina has recently criticized the modern notion of subjectivity by denouncing that «when we construe the relationship between the subject and her experiential contents in terms of ownership and mastery, we structure subjectivity according to the model of total subordination and submission to a sovereign power with full control over oneself.» *Speaking from Elsewhere: A New Contextualist Perspective on Meaning, Identity, and Discursive Agency*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006, 125. What I am exploring here is the historical origin of this conception of subjectivity as «ownership and mastery».

17 Epictetus, *op. cit.*, 483.

Most human beings mistake themselves for something else, not recognizing the real limits of their own existences. However, if your main concern is taking care of yourself in order to become a better being, you should first of all restrict the acceptance of what you actually *are* to its minimum expression. The first task of the Stoic is therefore *shaping the Self* or, in Richard Sorabji's words,¹⁸ *narrowing it down* in order to define its inner, independent, and –as they would later be called– purely *mental* features. Those are the only ones that really do matter: not our physical capacities, our belongings, or our wealth; not even our children, or our partners. It is only in the inner world, the seat of the soul, where quietude and self-assurance can be attained. And within this inner space, there is a particular level where all the project of rational autonomy relies on: the *proairesis*, i.e., our capacity to *decide* where to place our interests, and how to integrate events in our moral set of priorities. According to Sorabji, Epictetus inherits this concept from Aristotle, but he introduced crucial changes in it: *proairesis*, for Epictetus, is completely under our command, and nobody, not even God himself, could constrain it if we did not allow him to do it. Only your *proairesis* can control your *proairesis*. Everything that happens in the world around you, or even in your own body, is heteronomous and unpredictable –at least from your limited perspective–; but it is up to you to decide –in an act which is conceived more as a cognitive judgement than as an act of will or power– whether those events are worth worrying about or not. For instance: any event that ordinary people would conceive as pernicious –such as illness, poverty, imprisonment, slavery, or even the death of a beloved being– can only affect our inner space if we *decide* to assume it as evil, and this decision is, according to Epictetus, completely up to us.¹⁹ If we constrained our affects to that inner space, we would reinforce our *hegemonikon*, i.e., the governing part of our soul, and our mind would thus be in the way to rationality, not impelled by the kind of passions that usually perturb ordinary people. Needless to say, Stoics also promoted a strong commitment to public life and political action; but, in order properly to fulfil those tasks, the subject should keep imperturbable the site of his reason, and therefore should always keep in mind that caring too much about what does not belong to that inner space –and depending thus too

18 *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life and Death*. Oxford: OUP, 2006, 181-97.

19 In order to achieve this project, it is crucial to assume Chrysippus' conception of emotions as cognitive judgements, and not as some kind of passive sufferance. Although the existence of what would latter be analysed by Seneca as «first movements» must be acknowledged –bodily reactions out of our command–, real emotions are not that, since a positive and active acceptance by the soul is required in order to transform that bodily reaction into a mental event. And that judgment would be what Epictetus considers our own doing. See Sorabji's *Emotion and Peace of Mind. From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation*. Oxford: OUP, 2000.

much on others—is the first mistake that moves him away from self-sufficiency, freedom, and pure rationality.²⁰

By the time he retired from active life Montaigne was deeply impressed by this model of wisdom. Although Epictetus might be the most radical example of the selfish tendency in classic Stoicism, and his work was quite widespread in the 16th century France,²¹ it is not clear if Montaigne read his work directly.²² He certainly read some neo-Stoic authors such as Juste Lipse, but it was mainly from Seneca that he received that influence, as well as from quotes and references to old Stoicism that he probably found in Cicero, Plutarch or Diogenes Laërtius. Outside the world of books, his prematurely deceased friend Étienne de La Boétie had represented for him the living proof that the Stoic way of life was still attainable, in spite of the decadence of present times: an existence strictly ruled by the strengths of reason, where pure self-sufficiency and self-control would have been fully achieved. This admiration for Stoic models is evident in the oldest layers of his earlier essays, such as «Que philosophe c'est apprendre à mourir» or «De la solitude», where he states:

[A] We should have wives, children, property and, above all, good health... if we can: but we should not become so attached to them that our happiness depends on them. We should set aside a room, just for ourselves, at the back of the shop, keeping it entirely free and establishing there our true liberty, our principal solitude and asylum. Within it our normal conversation should be of ourselves, with ourselves, so privy that no commerce or communication with the outside world should find a place there [...]. We have a soul able to turn in on herself; she can keep herself company; she has the wherewithal to attack, to defend, to receive and to give.²³

A conception of interiority as a self-standing bulwark is rising from this moral need for certitude: not something that could be *found* into oneself, just

20 See G. Baldwin, «Individual and Self in the Late Renaissance», *The Historical Journal*, 44:2 (2001), 353.

21 The *Enchiridion* had already been translated from Greek by Antoine Moulin in 1544—as *Le Manuel d'Epictète*—and by André Rivandeau in 1567—as *La doctrine d'Epictete*.

22 According to Pierre Villey, both Montaigne's implicit reference to Epictetus in I.14—which was also inscribed in one of the wooden joists in his library—and the explicit one in II.12 (pages 50 and 489 of his edition of *Les Essais*) stem from Stobée's collection of Greek sentences. One copy of its 1559 edition is known to have belonged to his library. He also owned a Latin translation of the *Enchiridion* within the works of Politien, but there is no decisive proof that he read it—see R. Crescenzo, «Epictetus», in P. Desan (ed.), *Dictionnaire de Michel de Montaigne*, Paris: Champion, 2004, 331-332. Despite the lack of direct references from Montaigne to Epictetus, both were famously rejoined in Pascal's «Entretien avec M. de Saci», *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. de Louis Lafuma. Paris: Seuil, 1963.

23 *The Complete Essays*, 1.39, 270.

waiting for inspection, but a kind of shelter one should construct through exercise and practice; a place where we could refuge from any eventuality fate might have in store for us.

What I would like to suggest is that this sort of *moral* solipsism can be understood as a prefiguration of the modern epistemological one. A modern strong internalist position would claim that inner mediators, whether ideas or perceptions, play an unavoidable role in any knowledge we have about the outer world. Knowledge of those *cogitata* would be attained with a kind of certitude and authority that would be unachievable for any other knowledge whose object would be placed in the outer world. There is a strong resemblance between this epistemological idea and the one of *proairesis* control in Stoic moral. Quoting Epictetus in essay I.40, Montaigne asserts that men are tormented *by the opinions they have of things and not by things themselves*; in a similar sense, in essay III.9 he claims that everything we can possess or enjoy is in a way mediated by our *phantasie*, i.e. we do not possess or enjoy things themselves, but inner mediators within our souls. The project of Stoic rationality is attainable for us because we do not experience facts themselves, but a representation of them that is under our control, since it can be accepted or rejected by us at the level the *proairesis*. The modern internalist conception of consciousness –what has been called the *Cartesian Theatre*, in which we do not see things themselves, but only inner representations of them– is just the application of this same conceptual scheme, not on moral issues any more, but on epistemic ones. Just as Stoics assured that we do not suffer what happens, but only our opinions of what happens, modern internalism assumes that we do not know things themselves directly, but only through our representations of those things. Both ideas are supported by one same principle: *we only come into contact with outer events through inner mediators*.

Under this light, it might be sensible to assess that the internalist epistemological position, according to which any knowledge at all must somehow be anchored in an inner content, keeps important traces of the Stoic moral idea that we can take control of inner representations. Both seem in fact to be impelled by one same need: the need for inner certitude in our search for rationality. And both rely on one same assumption: that judgement is an act of will, which can be under our command as far as it's content remains in the inner space of the soul. Just as we can find absolute liberty in the control of inner representations, we can find absolute authority in their phenomenological description.

IV. SCEPTICISM AND THE BALANCE OF THE SELF

Although it has sometimes been questioned, nowadays it is commonplace that, around 1575, Montaigne suffered a kind of «Sceptical crisis»²⁴: after learning about the life and ideas of Pyrrho of Elis through the work of Sextus Empiricus, his initial trust in the Stoic model began to tremble. He wrote then his famous «Apology for Raymond Sebond», where the possibility of human knowledge was denied: since our poor intellectual forces are too weak to undertake the task of science, the intention of attaining metaphysical or theological knowledge is shown as an absurd delusion of human vanity.

If Montaigne's main contribution to the history of philosophy had just been this Scepticism about knowledge, it would arguably have been minor. Other Renaissance authors –such as Cornelius Agrippa in his *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum*, or Francisco Sánchez in his *Quod nihil scitur*– probably tackled this task with more clarity, systematicity, and rigor than the essayist. Nevertheless, there are many other ways of doubting, beyond the doubt of knowledge. In this sense, the relevance of Montaigne's Scepticism might not stem from its epistemological aspect, but from its moral and an ontological ones.²⁵ Sceptical arguments were put forward as a particular lesson of humility: an attack against the self-assurance of the human being, who believes that he is the main and principal being in creation, when in fact he is nothing but «the jester of the farce».²⁶ But that was just a limited step within a wider project of humiliation, which was already widely analyzed by Hugo Friedrich.²⁷ Our impossibility to attain knowledge is just an example of what we cannot reach: absolute moral virtue, rationality, autonomy, and, in general, the Stoic ideal of wisdom that, according to this chastened Montaigne, is far beyond our scope:

[B] I am well aware that there have been sages who have adopted a different course: [...]. Let us not attempt to follow such examples: we shall never manage it. Such men have made up their minds to watch resolutely and unmoved the destruction of their country, which once held and governed all their affection. For common souls like ours there is too much strain, too much savagery in that. [...]

If a man cannot attain to that noble Stoic impassibility, let him hide in the

24 See Pierre Villey, *Les sources et l'évolution des Essais de Montaigne*. Paris: Hachette, 1908. The idea had been put forward by F. Strowski in his *Montaigne*. Paris: F. Alcan, 1906.

25 As J.-Y. Pouilloux points out, «Ce n'est plus en termes de connaissance, mais d'existence que se trouve désormais posée la question de l'identité». *Montaigne: l'éveil de la pensée*. Paris: Champion, 1995.

26 *The Complete Essays*, 3.9, 1133.

27 *Op. cit.*, 104-155.

lap of this peasant insensitivity of mine.²⁸

The relevance of Scepticism in Montaigne's work resides in the fact that it shows the impossibility of attaining the highest peaks of rationality and self-sufficiency, being therefore a terrible blow against the aim Stoics had tried to fulfil. Beyond the project of autonomy, independence, and pure rationality, we attend in the *Essais* to what has been called «the collapse of the autonomous self».²⁹ The essayist is forced to recognise that he cannot keep control of his own identity, since both his bodily and his mental features respond unavoidably to accidental processes where the Self is not even present.³⁰

However, after this «process of de-stoicization»,³¹ this incapability to retain an absolut control of oneself will not be considered as a failure any more: the project of building an inner, inaccessible Self is abandoned, and dependence on otherness is progressively assumed by Montaigne as some kind of beneficial tendency.³² In this light, the knowledge of one's own identity becomes a task where the Self cannot just rely on its own capacities, but must assume unpredictable exchanges in regard to what had been previously considered as «other»: firstly the world,³³ and secondly other minds.³⁴ Montaigne scholars have thus shown during the last decades that the identity of the Self is acquired through the construction of a linguistic self-portrait, only attainable because it is offered to his readers.³⁵

28 *The Complete Essays*, 3.10, 1150-3.

29 Patrick Henry, «Recognition of the Other and Avoidance of the Double. The Self and the Other in the *Essais* of Montaigne», *Stanford French Review*, 6:2-3 (1982), 187.

30 *The Complete Essays*, 3.8, p. 1058. On the limited presence and control of consciousness over the mind in the *Essays* see chapter II of my *La extrañeza de sí mismo*, *op. cit.*, 69-137.

31 See Z. Zalloua, *Montaigne and the Ethics of Skepticism*. Charlottesville, Va.: Rookwood Press, 2005, 11.

32 I have analyzed the effects of this dialectic between self and other from different perspectives in *Pensar sin certezas: Montaigne y el arte de conversar*. Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007.

33 See for instance *The Complete Essays*, 1.26, p. 177.

34 See *The Complete Essays*, 3.13, p. 1221.

35 The performative character of Montaigne's text constantly requires uptake and response from his public, as André Tournon points out: «The auto-exegesis of the *Essais* does not thus close upon itself, and neither Montaigne's reflections, nor the text with incorporated commentary which it produces are reduced to a soliloquy. For everything in this book is arranged [...] to solicit the reader's replies and his choices». «Self-Interpretation in Montaigne's *Essais*», *Yale French Studies*, 64 (1983), 72. See also his *Montaigne: la glose et l'essai*. Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1983, 294. In the same way, Anthony Wilden proved from the perspective of philosophy of communication that «the introspection and withdrawal from society [that Montaigne] promoted led to the discovery that self-knowledge can only come through examination of one's relationship to others, rather than from the isolated examination of oneself». «Par divers moyens

In contrast to the standard reading of Montaigne that philosophers like Gilson or Koyré have usually done, the main insight in his work might not have been the critical moment of Scepticism, not to say its limited epistemological facet, but the effects that a wider sense of Scepticism had in his notion of wisdom in general, and his conception of Self in particular. The Stoic inclination to egotism found a counterbalance in this Sceptical antithesis, and Montaigne had to develop his essays seeking to balance Stoicism and Scepticism, arrogance of loneliness and humility of interaction.³⁶ All of that which had been neglected or denied by Stoic ideals had to be reassumed by a new model of wisdom, usually identified as a kind of neo-hedonism, much more attached to the body and its pleasures, and not obsessed any more by pure rationality, self-sufficiency and absolute autonomy.

Villey's triadic conception of Montaigne's evolution (from Stoicism to Scepticism, and from Scepticism to hedonism) has often been criticized. However, it must be underlined that it should not be understood as a matter of radical, distinguished stages in Montaigne's thought –as Villey himself occasionally seemed to claim–, since both the admiration for Stoic ideals and the echoes of Scepticism still remain even in the latest layers of his text. Instead of that, what we find in the *Essays* is, according to Starobinski's formulation, a living *mouvement* where the Stoic proneness to build a purely autonomous Self is balanced by his acknowledgement that rational isolation is not the way to attain wisdom.³⁷

It is this movement, attained through the balance between Self and others, what kept Montaigne's narrative alive. In this sense, although the tradition has given much more relevance to Montaigne's individualist tendency, the *Essays*

on arrive à pareille fin: a reading of Montaigne», *Modern Language Notes*, 83 (1968), 577-97.

36 I thus fully agree with Zalloua when he claims that «Contrary to being an impediment to ethical thought, Montaigne's skepticism, epitomized by his interrogative 'Que sçay-je?' ('What do I know?'), I would argue, generates a concern for and openness toward the other, precisely the opposite of the kind of relation to alterity found in René Descartes, whose hyperbolic doubt and skepticism can lead to solipsism (the advent of a 'solitary' cogito), or to the epistemological impasse known today as the Problem of Other Minds», *Montaigne and the Ethics of Skepticism*, *op. cit.*, 4. See also C. Collier, «The self in Montaigne and Descartes. *From portraiture to indigence.*» *De Philosophia*, XIII:2 (1997), 256.

37 *Montaigne en Mouvement*, Paris: Gallimard, 1983. As Tarrête points out in a painstaking article, from Jean-Yves Pouilloux and André Tournon important works «Le débat, désormais, se déplace donc: il est moins question de savoir si M. est stoïcien ou autre chose que de mettre en évidence quel usage il fait de la philosophie stoïcienne». «Stoïcisme», in Philippe Desan (ed.), *Dictionnaire de Michel de Montaigne*, *op. cit.*, 937. What Pouilloux says about Montaigne's Scepticism could also be claimed about his alleged Stoicism and Epicureanism, i.e. that they are not to be understood as doctrines, but as attitudes. See his «Socrate», *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Montaigne*, 41-42 (2006), 185.

do not tend more to the isolation of the Self than to the acknowledgement of its dependence on others.³⁸

V. HOW THE *COGITO* UPSET THE BALANCE

The moment has come to reconsider the transit from Montaigne's *Essays* to Descartes' *Discourse on Method*. As I previously pointed out, it is widely accepted that Descartes' method of doubt has its roots in sixteenth century Scepticism, particularly in Montaigne's approach, whose cultural influence was quite widespread in the France of the seventeenth century.³⁹ However, it could be alleged that that influence was in fact minor, since Descartes' discussion of Scepticism was not central in his work at all. His references to it are quite rare and occasional, and he was certainly not a Sceptic himself, but an adversary of Scepticism who only confronted it explicitly as a show of strength, once he found himself confident enough to defeat that *locus communis* with the argument of the *cogito*.⁴⁰ In any case, although Sceptic doubts could be the most evident trace of Montaigne's work in Descartes' one, it probably was not the deepest one. It could be argued that, under the surface, and probably unwittingly, he was more deeply influenced by a sort of Stoicism that he probably found in the *Essays* –but that he could have also received from other philosophers who also show an important proneness to Stoicism between the 16th and 17th centuries, such as Juste Lipse, Pierre Charron or Guillaume Du Vair.⁴¹ It is not difficult to see

38 I would endorse Jules Brody's words when he says that «Il me paraît pourtant aberrant de célébrer exclusivement, ou même principalement, en Montaigne, l'inventeur de la conscience de soi et le père de la subjectivité dite 'moderne'». «Montaigne et le sujet mixte», in E. Kushner (ed.), *La problématique du sujet chez Montaigne*. Paris: Champion, 1995, 52.

39 See R. H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979; and L. Brunschvicg, *op. cit.* Étienne Gilson finds almost thirty textual reminiscences of *The Essays* in his commented edition of Descartes' *Discours de la Méthode*. Paris: Vrin, 1976; some of them are studied in more depth by Geneviève Rodis-Lewis in «Dout pratique et doute spéculatif chez Montaigne et Descartes», *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, 182:4 (1992), 439-449. P. Chamizo-Domínguez has pointed out similarities and differences between Montaigne and Descartes, both in «La présence de Montaigne dans la philosophie du XVII^e siècle.» *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Montaigne*, 11-12 (1988), 72-86 and «El Discurso del Método de Descartes como ensayo», *Aporía*, IV:15-16 (1982), 69-83.

40 See J. Broughton, *Descartes' Method of Doubt*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. Descartes was thus accepting a challenge that had been previously faced by others, like Marin Mersenne in his 1625 book *La vérité des sciences contre les sceptiques ou pyrrhoniens*, ed. D. Descotes. Paris: Champion, 2003. Mersenne seemed to share with Descartes the same attitude towards sceptical doubts, as Descotes points out in his introduction to the aforementioned edition (p. 22). I am thankful to J. L. Sánchez Tierra for bringing this point to my attention.

41 General accounts of the Neo-Stoic movement in early modern thought can be found

that Descartes' intellectual quest, from the *Regulae* to *Les passions de l'âme*, was guided by a strong need for certitude, whose origins are to be found in the social and political situation of his time;⁴² a need that was to be satisfied, as in the Stoic tradition, by the narrowing down of the Self, in search for refuge in the inner control of mental representations. As an echo of the Sceptic topic, we find in Descartes' provisory code of moral (third maxim) the idea that power to confront fate remains within oneself:

[A]lways to try to conquer myself rather than fortune, and to change my desires rather than the order of the world, and generally to accustom myself to believing that there is nothing that is completely within our power except our thoughts, so that, after we have done our best regarding things external to us, everything that is lacking for us to succeed is, from our point of view, absolutely impossible. [...] But I admit that long exercise is needed as well as frequently repeated meditation in order to become accustomed to looking at everything from this point of view [...].⁴³

It is well known that Descartes' explicit attitude towards Stoic moral was not very favourable, since he considered its maxims as inhuman efforts to escape from our finite nature, and thus developed a more permissive and benevolent position with respect to passions. But, beyond this superficial distance, the Cartesian distinction between the inner and the outer world –the conscious, free mind on the one hand and the extended, mechanical world on the other– could hardly not have its roots in the Stoic classification of events between those that depend on us and those that are out of our control.⁴⁴ It is not my aim here to prove any direct borrowing on the part of Descartes, but I think that this and other significant passages make this reading quite compelling.⁴⁵ The incontro-

in L. Zanta, *La Renaissance du stoïcisme au XVIe siècle*. Paris: H. Champion, 1914; G. Abel, *Stoizismus und frühe Neuzeit*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978; and D. Carabin, *Les idées stoïciennes dans la littérature morale des XVIe et XVIIe siècles (1575-1642)*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004.

42 The roots of this need, according to S. Toulmin (*Cosmopolis: the Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992, 45-88), can be found in the social and political crisis that followed the regicide of Henry IV, and the fall of his model of tolerant coexistence between different religious beliefs.

43 *Discourse on method*, tr. D. A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998, III, 15. As Brunschvicg pointed out, «le comportement provisoire [de Descartes] reflète l'attitude que Montaigne recommandait à titre définitif.» *Op. cit.*, 109. On possible influences of Montaigne on Descartes' moral ideas see M. G. Paulson, *The possible influence of Montaigne's Essais on Descartes' Treatise on the passions*. Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1988.

44 We follow here L. Zanta's interpretation of Descartes' work, that finds behind his apparent refusal of Stoicism a deeper assumption of its central claims. *Op. cit.*, 337-339.

45 A similar Stoic inclination can be found in other places, but a more detailed study of this influence should be carried out. For instance, Descartes writes in a letter to Elisabeth: «Or

vertible and immovable evidence of the *cogito* –starting point to reconstruct the building of science– seems to be achieved exactly in the same way the Stoics proposed to regain control of the *proairesis*: by remaining in the inside, i.e. in the space of representations, and thus be assured that nothing external will be out of our control. The same step that had been taken by the Stoics as a strategy in the search for moral independence was epistemically taken by Descartes in the search for gnoseological certitude.

Sceptic doubts were thus defeated, thanks to a double movement: firstly, epistemic Scepticism –*what do I know?*– came to the foreground, gaining special prominence; and secondly, moral Scepticism –*how shall I overcome my human limitations?*– was defeated by the idea of *method*, since the task of developing the first apodictic truth of the *cogito* would not demand inhuman strengths that would be beyond our scope.⁴⁶ And once Scepticism was allegedly defeated, the Stoic tendency became unbalanced, taking control of modern philosophy, and allowing the appearance of the concept of mind as an inner space, whose particular features –autonomy, subjectivity and rationality– forced philosophers to attribute to it a different kind of reality, namely, a *res cogitans*.

In this light, the issues of the substantive character of the Self, the existence of an outer world and the very possibility of other minds are not to be considered as the effect of radical Scepticism; on the contrary, they can be seen as the result of the defeat of moderate Scepticism by radical needs of Stoicism. It was the will of certitude and control what lead to the reification of the Self, its distancing from the world, and the impossibility to attain the minds of others; a need that simply did not stem from Scepticism. The outer world and other minds were distanced from Cartesian Self because they prevented its achievement of radical certitude, autonomy and self-sufficiency. Their very reality became problematic

ce qui m'a fait dire, en ce dernier sens, qu'il y a toujours plus de biens que de maux en cette vie, c'est le peu d'état que je crois que nous devons faire de toutes les choses qui sont hors de nous, et qui ne dépendent point de notre libre arbitre, à comparaison de celles qui en dépendent, lesquelles nous pouvons toujours rendre bonnes, lorsque nous en savons bien user; et nous pouvons empêcher, par leur moyen, que tous les maux qui viennent d'ailleurs, tant grands qu'ils puissent être, n'entrent plus avant en notre âme que la tristesse que y excitent les comédiens, quand ils représentent devant nous quelques actions fort funestes; mais j'avoue qu'il faut être fort philosophe, pour arriver jusqu'à ce point.» *Oeuvres complètes de René Descartes*. Charlottesville, Va.: InteLex Corporation, 2001, IV, 355 (the final expression reminds a famous quote of Montaigne: «[C] Je ne suis pas philosophe: les maux me fouillent selon qu'ils poisent», *Les Essais*, III.9, 950). See also *Les passions de l'âme*, in *Oeuvres complètes, op. cit.*, III, 152.

⁴⁶ See Dupré, *idem*. On Montaigne's influence on the birth of the modern concept of *method* see P. Desan, *Naissance de la méthode: Machiavel, La Ramée, Bodin, Montaigne, Descartes*. Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1987.

and, since the *cogito* was supposed not to depend on anything else to subsist, doors were open to different kinds of idealism and solipsism.

Strangely enough, the standard view blames Scepticism for having led modern philosophy towards this impasse. But Scepticism by itself neither leads to solipsism nor to the other minds problem; in fact, the classic Sceptic doubts *with others*, not as an isolated thing but as a person –not as a *what* but as a *who*–, i.e. as someone who shares with his interlocutors the common space of language and action.⁴⁷ The consideration of the art of conversation thus plays in Montaigne's work a role which is equivalent to the one played by the *Discourse on Method* in Descartes, as a reflection on the normative constraints that govern our relationship with truth and knowledge. Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference: Montaigne offered a set of guidelines that would help us find our own way in the endless universal *commerce* with others –that is, a way of chasing truth in common–, whereas Descartes tried to find a method for the isolated subject, in order to help him tackle the task of science in solitude.

Contrarywise to Montaigne's quest for himself, what Descartes found in his *cogito* argument –the outset of the modern philosophical discourse on subjectivity– is not *himself*, a person that lives in the world and speaks with others, but his *Self*: a substantive entity, devoid of any deictical reference, that became the beginning and the end of the intellectual quest; something that does not belong to the *outer* world, and can confront the task of knowledge from the certitude of the inside, preserved from the possibility of failure –just like Stoics preserved their quietude of mind from the ups and downs of fortune. A Self far away and isolated from other Selves, no longer considered as interlocutors but as other *things*, whose thinking character cannot be proved but through uncertain, unreliable and fallible arguments.

What a careful study of Montaigne's influence could show us is that those problematic answers only make sense if we pose those specific questions; and that, from a different perspective, we might find much better reasons to ask otherwise.⁴⁸

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47 That is actually not far away from Avramides' attempt to dissolve the problem of other minds with what she calls «the lived position» (*op. cit.*, part III).

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