

THE ROLE OF SKEPTICAL EVIDENCE IN THE FIRST AND SECOND MEDITATIONS

ARTICLE 1: THE DOUBT ACCORDING TO DESCARTES AND SEXTUS EMPIRICUS

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Abstract: The first article of the cycle “The role of skeptical evidence in the First and Second ‘Meditations’” compares the Cartesian and Sextus Empiricus’ concepts of doubt in, respectively, *Metaphysical meditations* and *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. The article starts with the current state of the “Descartes and skepticism” problem and admits the existence of consensus about the Cartesian perception of skeptical tradition: Descartes (1) was influenced by all skeptical movements, known in his time, and (2) created a generalized notion that contains elements of both Academic and Pyrrhonian origin. This consensus is the source of many contemporary studies on how different skeptical doctrines influenced certain parts of Cartesian philosophy. This article attempts to analyze possible Descartes’ use of Sextus Empiricus’ notion of phenomenon. Sextus clearly states in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* that one cannot doubt a phenomenon as something perceived directly. The article proves that (a) Sextus’ thesis about the “sensory” nature of phenomenon is metaphorical, so far as it includes (without distinction) both sensuality and the experience of thinking; (b) the phenomenon is realized through a wide range of passive states of mind that all have irresistible force of influence; (c) the impact of phenomena is always mediated by our self, because all skeptical phrases are strictly correlated with the first person singular. Some scholars distinguish Sextus’ isosthenia, as one of such insurmountable states, from Cartesian doubt at the First Meditation, which is allegedly based on a purely volitional decision. The article proves that this argument is artificial, since Descartes’ volitional decision is caused by the initial inability to take the doubtful as if it were certain. Thus, the Cartesian approach can be considered a specific kind of isosthenia. Such parallelism is a reason to assume a key role of Sextus’ understanding of the insurmountable power of phenomena in Cartesian anti-skeptical argumentation. This assumption will be tested in the following articles of the cycle.

1 Introduction

The topic of Descartes and skepticism is one of the most debated in historical-philosophical research in recent decades. Although the days when Descartes was considered an overt or hidden skeptic are long gone, there are still quite heated discussions about the differences and similarities between Cartesian “methodical” doubt and the “unrestrained” doubt of the skeptics (Giocanti 2002), between the voluntary Cartesian *ἐποχή* and Sextus Empiricus’ *ἐποχή* determined by an irresistible isosthenia (Kambouchner 2005: 217-226); on the “remnants of skepticism” in the Cartesian doctrine (Giocanti 2006); on the role of “common

sense” in the doctrines of the ancient skeptics and in Cartesianism (Broughton 2002: 78-82), and so on.

However, these discussions are dominated in one way or another by the theme of the *skeptical doubt* as a generator of epistemological and moral unease, as a motivation to debunk false appearances, established empty stereotypes, and ultimately as an essential step toward the Cartesian goal of gaining unshakable certainty, the solid ground, the “rock” on which the building of human knowledge must rest. Instead, in this series of articles I intend to highlight the key, and not yet properly described the role of *skeptical evidence* in the Cartesian refutation of skepticism, to emphasize the reconstruction of those purely skeptical grounds that make possible the prospect of “hyperbolizing” doubt in the Cartesian way. This treatment is essentially related to the peculiarities of Sextus’ version of skepticism, as well as to the lexical resources of Henri Etienne’s Latin translation of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (1562; 2nd ed. 1569). In this article, I will do the following: (1) delineate the scholarly consensus reached by historians of philosophy on the topic of Descartes and skepticism, emphasizing the current recognition of Cartesius’ “synthetic” reception of skepticism; (2) highlight the limits of doubt outlined by Sextus Empiricus in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*; and (3) critically examine the position of those authors who consider the free-will motives of Cartesian doubt to be the main difference between it and Sextus Empiricus’ doubt. The articles that follow will substantiate the claim that Sextus’ concept of “phenomenon” influenced Descartes’ creation of the “philosophical meditation” genre.

2 Descartes and skepticism: areas of contemporary scholarly consensus

In the vast field of research on Cartesian-Skeptic interaction, a fairly stable agreement has long been reached *on some issues*, for example, on the question of the sources of Descartes’ arguments in the First Meditation and other texts that have to do with “doubt.” This consensus is based on the recognition of the *synthetic* nature of the Cartesian reception of skepticism. Richard Popkin, one of the most authoritative experts on modern skepticism, notes: “When and how Descartes came into contact with skeptical views is hard to tell. But he seems to have been well aware not only of the Pyrrhonian classics but also of the skeptical current of his time, and its ever-increasing danger to the cause of both science and religion” (Popkin 2003: 144); however, referring to an old study by Joseph-Emmanuel Sirven (Sirven 1928), Popkin suggests that Descartes’ acquaintance with the skeptical philosophy began in college. Gianni Paganini develops this idea: despite being well acquainted with the works of skeptics, “Descartes had no interest in working with specific texts of certain skeptics ... rather, he was interested in how his contemporaries generally perceived skepticism and how they used it” (Paganini 2008, 236). Descartes paid attention exclusively to his own challenges, without showing any historical interest in skeptical doctrines. For instance, he did not pay any practical attention to the important distinction Sextus made between Pyrrhonic philosophers and academics, which assigned the name of “skeptics” only to the former (*PH* 1.3):¹ the terms “skeptic,” “Pyrrhonist,” and “Academic”

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¹ In the following, the title *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* will be replaced in references by the abbreviation *PH* (from Πυρρῶναιοι ὑποτυπώσεις = Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposeon. – On the

are in practice synonymous for Descartes (he believes that he is first to refute *Scepticorum dubitationem omnium* / *the doubt of all skeptics* (AT VII, 550: 19–20 / II, 376)². In characterizing skepticism, he does not mention a single personality.³ Obviously, the “essence of the matter” dominates here over the nuances of the historical context.

So, despite his acquaintance with the topic, Descartes, to put it mildly, did not imitate Montaigne’s style: a quotation is a very rare guest in his texts. However, this acquaintance is not in doubt, and the range of skeptical works whose influence on Descartes is considered indisputable has long been recorded. Interpreting Descartes’ words about his familiarity with the “books of the skeptics”,⁴ Henri Gouhier noted: “What are these books? That is not so important here. It is not difficult to find the arguments of the skeptical school. Cicero gave them an elegant form in the first part of the *Academica*; Sextus Empiricus categorized them, creating a kind of *codex*; St. Augustine refuted them from a Christian point of view in *Contra Academicos*; they were considered in the course of rhetoric, and also studied in the course of logic at the (La Fleche) College. Finally, at the time when Descartes was developing his philosophy, the skeptical tradition flourished. Sanchez’s *Quod nil scitur* was widely read, and Montaigne’s ‘Pyrrhonism, provided it was interpreted in a subtle way,’ in the words of Mr. E.

regular basis, the reference is made to the Latin translation of Henri Etienne (Sextus 1569), since the Greek original was not available to Descartes, who did not know Greek enough to read philosophical texts fluently (although he studied this language in college and used Greek words in his letters, albeit very rarely). Since the focus of this article is Descartes’ perception of skepticism, and not the skeptics’ doctrine itself, this choice seems quite natural. Of course, if he wanted to, Descartes could have familiarized himself with the Greek original, since bilingual editions existed in his time (Sextus 1621).

But in practice, Descartes viewed both skeptical and anti-skeptical arguments only through the prism of Latin terminology. Although the Latin anti-skeptical argumentation was largely developed by Cicero (see, for example, *Academica* II, 6: 16), one should not assume that Descartes, when using it, necessarily had Cicero’s works in mind. The texts dealing with skeptical subjects (St. Augustine, translations of Sextus Empiricus, etc.) were, in Descartes’ time, either written in Latin (i.e., using Cicero’s lexicon) or influenced primarily by the Latin tradition (Montaigne, Pierre Charon, Francis Bacon, etc.). – I will compare the text of Etienne’s Latin translation with the Greek original according to (Sextus Empiricus 1933). Where necessary, I will provide my own translation of the texts from the Greek.

² Hereafter, I cite Descartes’ texts according CSM (Descartes 1984–1985). All quotations are compared to the original according to the classical edition of Adam and Tannery (Descartes 1996). After each quotation from Descartes, pagination according to AT is given first; after the / symbol, the number of the volume and page according to the CSM is given. Sometimes I make changes to the text of CSM, if I think that the original needs a more exacte translation.

³ The only possible exception might be the passing analogy between the uncertainty of the Pyrrhonists and the ignorance of Socrates in the dialogue *The Search for Truth* (AT X, 512: 15–16).

⁴ In his Response to the Second Objection to the *Meditations* Descartes writes: “Now the best way of achieving a firm knowledge of reality is first to accustom ourselves to doubting all things, especially corporeal things. Although I had seen many ancient writings by the Academics and Skeptics on this subject, and was reluctant to reheat and serve this precooked material, I could not avoid devoting one whole Meditation to it” (AT VII, 130: 17–23 / II, 94). Also important is Descartes’ clear statement in the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet...* regarding the arguments of the First Meditation in favor of hyperbolic doubt: “I was not the first to discover such doubts: the skeptics have long been harping on this theme (*a Sceptivis dudum decantata*)” (AT VIII, 367: 7–10 / I, 309).

Gilson, ‘put a “soft pillow of doubt” under the heads of some sages’ (Gouhier 1999: 34).⁵

Another common thread among modern Cartesian scholars is the thesis that Descartes’ attitude to skepticism was ambivalent. For example, according to Emanuela Scribano, skepticism in Cartesius’ eyes appears “on the one hand, as an enemy to be defeated, and on the other, as an ally whose requirements one should use to measure the firmness of beliefs uncritically acquired throughout her life. In the “Synopsis of the Following Six Meditations”, “Descartes emphasizes the double function of doubt, which, on the one hand, is to free the mind from prejudice, and on the other hand, to eliminate the possibility of later doubts about what has turned out to be true” (Scribano 2008: 20). Thus, Cartesian scholars are convinced of Descartes’ rather “constructive” attitude to skepticism.

Indeed, the few texts in which Descartes mentions skeptics, Academics, or Pyrrhonists can hardly be called a model of aggressive rhetoric. Of course, in the passage quoted in note 3, Descartes speaks of “reluctance” (*fastidium* would be more accurately translated as “aversion”),⁶ but this is the only case when the author of the *Meditations* speaks of skeptics in an “aversive” way.⁷ In the end, Descartes has *only one* serious complaint against these philosophers (AT VII, 549:

⁵ I am quoting from the fourth edition of the book, which was first published in 1962.

⁶ By the way, it is not very clear from the text what exactly causes this aversion: the skeptical argumentation itself, the very need to return to it once again, or, perhaps, the need to explain in a popular manner to others what one has long understood and now considers rather elementary. One should not regard the latter option impossible, given the “delicacy” in Descartes’ time of such a matter as public analysis of skeptical generalists. After all, the author of the Seven Objections to the *Meditations* did accuse Descartes of skepticism (AT VII, 550: 20-25). Thus, the “aversion” that the reheating of “this precooked material” raises may well have been the result of Descartes’ understanding of what the likely reaction of “unpleasant” opponents of various kinds to his words was supposed to be.

⁷ When Descartes speaks in the *Discourse* (AT VI, 32: 20-21 / I, 127) of the truth of the proposition “I think, therefore I am” being irresistible to “all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics”, he is not calling all skeptical theses “extravagant”. Rather, he draws a distinction between the too “extreme” skeptical positions and those that are very useful for the knowledge of truth (see note 9 below). The same is true of “those skeptics” (*illi Sceptici* - not all of them!) who, without any concern for the realities of human life, were ready to throw themselves into the abyss: they deserve to be put to ridicule (AT VII, 351: 2-5). However, the skeptics were usually far from extravagance in life. For example, Sextus Empiricus recommends that one should follow almost the same maxims in life behavior (*PH* 1.21-24: Through the establishment of laws and customs, “in public life we regard pious behavior as good and impious behavior as evil”, *pie agere in vita communi, bonum censeamus; impie agere, malum*), as did Descartes (*Discourse on Method*, AT VI, 22: 30 - 23: 1-7 / I, 122: The first rule of “temporal” morality requires “to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God’s grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions – the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live”. In addition to this, Descartes demonstrates “moral adogmatism” that is very close to that of skeptic tradition, that is, preliminary willingness to refuse to consider good what is no longer good in one’s eyes: cf. *ibid.*, 24: 10-17). Thus, Cartesian criticism of skepticism is substantially balanced by the presence of a number of theses that both skeptics and their “hyperbolic” debunker recognized. At least the fourth paragraph of the third, “moral” part of the *Discourse* clearly shows that Descartes was close to the spirit of practical philosophy of the Hellenistic period (*ibid.*, 25: 20-30 - 27: 1-2).

24-25 / II, 375): “that one error⁸ which is the hallmark of the skeptics’ sect” (*unum illum errorem, in quo Scepticorum secta consistit*), he identifies as “excessive doubt” (*nimiam dubitationem*);⁹ which, however, does not apply “in practice” of life (*ibid.*, 10-11 / *ibid.*).

So, if it were not for this “one error,” if the skeptics had not “go[ne] beyond all the boundaries of doubt” (*ibid.*, 548: 25 / II, 374), would Descartes have seen their doctrine as having solid advantages? There is no reason to believe otherwise. After all, even in the polemic he finds an opportunity to note that the sect of skeptics is in full swing (*viget... quam maxime; ibid.*, 29-30 / *ibid.*), that its ideas are much more attractive than the common philosophy (*vulgari Philosophia*), i.e. scholasticism, almost all those who regard themselves as smarter than others (*qui se aliquid ingenii prae caeteris habere putant*) runs to the camp of skeptics, together with those who seek to believe with certainty (*certo credere*), who seek certain proofs (*certis rationibus*), without abandoning this desire even in such matters as the existence of God and the immortality of human mind (*ibid.*, 548: 30 - 549: 1-5 / II, 374-75).

Thus, Descartes is at least sympathetic to the skeptical demand for “more certain reasons” (*rationibus magis certis*) than those on which people simply “accept all appearances” (*apparentia omnia amplectuntur; ibid.*, 549: 18-20). At least, this intellectual position does not arouse any “aversion” on Descartes’ part. Disagreeing with the skeptics as a *secta*, that is, with a kind of generalized complex of all their doctrines, the author of the *Meditations* fully recognizes the usefulness—even indispensability—of ordered doubt (= “modified” skepticism) as a means to undermine the prejudices one uncritically acquired throughout his life.¹⁰ Moreover, the autobiographical passage from the *Discourse*, which refers to the decision to begin “to search for the foundations of a philosophy more certain than the commonly accepted one” (AT VI, 30: 13-14 / I, 126), contains a very specific assessment by Descartes of the reasons why he is regarded as an authority by “some people.” He considers these reasons to be (*ibid.*, 22-28 / *ibid.*): 1) a more explicit acknowledgment of his own ignorance (*ce que j’ignoreis*) than is common in academic circles, and 2) giving reasons for doubt “about many things which others regard as certain, rather than because I boasted of some learning”. In other words, Descartes recognized his greatest intellectual virtues as a purely skeptical questioning of prejudices and an emphatic rejection of dogmas!¹¹

⁸ Oleksiy Panych was the first Ukrainian author to focus on this important point in his fundamental monograph on the skeptical component of British modern philosophy (Panych 2007: 39).

⁹ Cf. Secundant 2013: 53-54.

¹⁰ Descartes, characterizing the content and purpose of the First Meditation, explains to his readers: “...Although the usefulness of such extensive doubt is not apparent at first sight, its greatest benefit lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses. The eventual result of this doubt is to make it impossible for us to have any further doubts about what we subsequently discover for the true” (AT VII, 12: 4-9 / I, 9).

Silvia Giocanti argues that Descartes not only overcomes skepticism (in this case, the representatives of the New Academy), but also uses it “as an antidote to the habits of the mind that bind it to false certainties. Skepticism has an internal application, that is, the arguments extracted from it serve as our very defense, reactivating the doubt that vigilantly guards us on the paths of thought” (Giocanti 2013).

¹¹ Emphasizing this plot has become a commonplace in Cartesian studies, although scholars do not miss the opportunity to give the well-known thesis an original twist. For example, Silvia Giocanti believes that Descartes managed to become a representative of both rationalism

The above-mentioned historical-philosophical consensus is not limited to general theses, but makes it possible, on their basis, to conduct fruitful research on specific skeptical influences on Descartes' philosophy. Specifically, scholars rely on both textual parallels and borrowings of argumentation systems, thought processes, principles, guidelines, etc. In this regard, I limit myself to only the most illustrative, in my opinion, studies of recent years. For example, I would like to note that the ambivalent influence of Montaigne¹² upon Descartes is analyzed in an original way by Silvia Giocanti (Giocanti 2006; 2011), Frederic Brahami (Brahami 2006), and Jesus Navarro (Navarro 2010); the summary on the influence of Cicero's "Academia" is given in another article by S. Giocanti (Giocanti 2013); the undoubted influence of Pierre Charon is analyzed in a thorough study by José Maia Neto (Maia Neto 2003; 2014); the influence of Sánchez is examined in an article by Gianni Paganini (Paganini 2009); and the best study of the influence of Augustine's anti-skepticism to date is the fundamental and multidimensional work of Emanuel Bermon (Bermon 2001). I am not aware of any thorough special studies of recent years devoted to the possible influence of Sextus Empiricus on Descartes, if any, and the most recent authoritative work on the comparison of these two thinkers is probably the already quite old article by Kenneth Westphal (Westphal 1987). However, in my opinion, Cartesian philosophy owes a lot to the Pyrrhonian version of skepticism set forth in the *PH*. I agree with the thesis about Descartes' synthetic approach to the analysis and criticism of skepticism, and understand the influence of Sextus Empiricus on him not as exclusive but as complementary. However, it is a rather significant addition that should not be ignored. In order to better understand the role of the *PH* in the formation of the Cartesian doctrine—especially the project of philosophical meditation—let us pay attention to some key theses of the work.

3 The Limits of Doubt in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*

The power of doubt in the First Meditation is quite clearly outlined against the background of doubt in Sextus Empiricus¹³ (to present the relevant concept of the

and a certain kind of skepticism. After all, the Cartesian project that aims at the rational construction of knowledge should be understood on the basis of engaging and correcting Montaigne's anti-intellectualist skepticism, and therefore remains dependent on the conclusions proposed by this skeptic. This dependence does not concern the status of rationality in Montaigne's doctrine, but rather the latter's description of the limits of human reason and how difficult it is for a person to access this rationality and to give it a rightful use (Giocanti 2006). In my opinion, the term "Descartes' skepticism" is quite justified, and for reasons more general than the influence of Montaigne's or anyone else's doctrine. Since Descartes really and intentionally questions uncritically accepted dogmas and refraining from making hasty judgments, he does the work of a skeptic. Also, since those who are traditionally counted among the representatives of skepticism have understood the purpose of skepticism quite differently, Descartes' "non-skeptical" purpose does not play an essential role. The notion of "Descartes' skepticism" does not necessarily have to meet the criteria of the indispensable achievement of ataraxia or, say, the desire to prove the incomprehensibility of truth. After all, if one can speak of Cartesian "temporary" morality, there is no reason to prohibit the use of a term like Cartesian "temporary" skepticism. But this term will make sense, of course, on condition that it is precisely defined.

¹² It is important to note that in the same time, discussions continue about the correlation between the Pyrrhonic and Academic components in Montaigne's skepticism (see, for example, Eva 2013).

¹³ Of course, we are talking here about doubts in scientific matters, since both authors fundamentally exclude practical matters from the sphere of rational proof, limiting themselves in this area to uncritical adherence to established views, traditions, laws, etc.

latter, I will use Etienne's Latin translation rather than the Greek original - see above, note 1): Descartes is going to obliterate "all my former beliefs" (*illud omne quod olim credidi*; AT VII, 18: 14 / II, 12), certainly without planning to uncritically accept any opinion in the future. Sextus seeks "in any way" (*quolibet modo*) to juxtapose the apparent (phenomenon) and the thinkable (noumenon)¹⁴ (*PH* 1.8-10). Thus, we are faced with radical forms of doubt, since any dogmatic statement cannot avoid being undermined by such demands. However, the key thesis for this part of our presentation is contained in *PH* 1.19-20, which is entitled "Does the skeptic deny the phenomenon?": "we do not reject (*non evertimus*) that which we passively undergo through the phantasia (*per phantasiam*¹⁵ *patientem*) and which involuntarily leads us to the assent (to it) (*quae invitos nos ad assensionem adducunt*)."

Hence, according to Sextus, the phenomenon is something we "undergo," so its perception through the ability to receive representations (phantasia) is *our passive state*, which we "do not reject." Moreover, in questioning whether the object that presents itself to us is really like it presents itself to be, we at least concede (*concedimus*) that it presents itself! This statement is very remarkable and can to some extent (and with serious reservations) serve as an analogue of Cartesian *cogito*: by experiencing a phenomenon, we recognize that the phenomenon is there! Sextus immediately illustrates this point with the well-known example of the sweetness of honey: honey appears (*apparet*) to be sweet to us and we assent to this "phenomenon" of sweetness perceived by our senses (*sensu percipimus*) (the perception of sweetness exists!). We doubt, however, whether honey really has the sweetness that reaches our reason and intelligence.¹⁶

Therefore, Sextus clearly regulates the limits of his doubt. After all, in *PH* 1.19-20, he merely clarifies a point already made in *PH* 1.13-15:

[a sceptic] assents to the things which, through the phantasia, enforce him to be affected by them (*iis*¹⁷ *quibus per phantasia cogitur affici, assentitur*): for example, when experiencing heat or cold, he would not say: "I consider I'm not hot or cold" (*Quum calefit, aut frige fit, nequaquam dixerit, Puto, me not cale fieri, aut frigo fieri; οἷον οὐκ ἂν εἴποι θερμαινόμενος ἢ ψυχόμενος ὅτι δοκῶ μὴθερμαίνεσθαι ἢ ψύχεσθαι*). [...]

Because the Pyrrhonist does not assent to any uncertain and controversial thing (*nulli enim rei incertae et controversae assentitur Pyrrhonius; οὐδενὶ γὰρ τῶν ἀδήλων συγκατατίθεται ὁ Πυρρώνειος*).

¹⁴ It is significant that Etienne translates νοουμένων as *quae mente et intellectu percipiuntur* ("what we perceive with our minds and intellects").

¹⁵ I use Latin term *phantasia* (= Greek φαντασία) without translation. It is important to note that I usually translate the Latin *imaginatio* through the equivalent of "imagination".

¹⁶ Here the Latin translation significantly modifies the original, which refers to the sweetness "of which we speak" (εἰ δὲ καὶ γλυκὺ ἔστιν ὅσον ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ). Instead, Etienne's translation appears here as a rather loose handling of the original (*quid ad rationem & intelligentiam attinet*). In the end, one should not speak of a fundamental distortion, because Sextus understands the action of the skeptical ability as any opposition between a phenomenon (*φαινομένων*) and an thinkable (*νοουμένων*). So, although "reason" and "intellect" are close to "thinking," the translator has created the impression that Sextus is making here a subtle distinction between intellectual abilities, which is not the case. The phrase "reaches/refers to reason and intelligence" is much more detailed than initial "speak".

¹⁷ The Greek original refers literally to "passions of coercive force" (*κατηναγκασμένοις πάθεσι*), with which the skeptic agrees (*συγκατατίθεται ὁ σκεπτικός*).

[...] he says what seems to him, and he explains the passion he senses, without any opinion on it, affirming nothing about external subjects (*quid sibi videantur, dicit, & passionem quam sentit, exponit, citra ullam opinionem, nihil de externis subiectis affirmans*; τούτων το εαυτώ φαινόμενον λέγει καί το πάθος απαγγέλλει τό έαυτού άδοξάστως, μηδέν περί τών έξωθεν ύποκειμένων διαβεβα ιούμενος).

Thus, the skeptic's doubt, according to Sextus, is limited to phenomena as passions (passive states) of coercive force that the skeptic experiences through phantasia. The skeptic does not try to interpret these states in any way, but correctly identifies them, describes them, and assents that they exist. He cannot deny them, but he considers their epistemic status to be rather weak: it is what appears, an appearance, beyond which it is unacceptable to go. The ending of *PH* 1.193 is indicative: "...In what we say, we neither affirm nor deny that which in a dogmatic manner is certainly asserted about dubious things (*de dubiis*; κατά το άδηλον). But to that which we passively undergo and that through this coercion bring us to assent, we cede and acquiesce."¹⁸

So, the phenomenon (φαινόμενον) is initially assumed to be an immediate given that people cannot but recognize (*PH* 1.19-20). This "sensible" phenomenon is contrasted with the doubtful that is thinkable (νοητά; 1.8-10). The skeptic cannot doubt the phenomenon, for it is "his" immediate state, his own state of mind (*status mentis, πάθος διανοίας*; 1.10). The phenomenon is the criterion of skepticism, which does not yield to searching and doubting (*ambigi de ea non potest*; 1.21-24). On the contrary, it appears to the skeptic as a life guide, since it manifests itself as "conviction and a coerced passion" (*persuasionem et coactam passionem*), in which it is impossible to doubt what the object of appearance is (*tale ut tale apparere ipsum subiectum*).

Hence, this state compels us to assent to it, it provides us with various impressions, the facts of which cannot be denied. It is simply impossible *for ourselves*: for example, Sextus *always* interprets all "skeptical expressions" through the prism of the first person singular, through the modus "it appears to me that..."

There are many illustrative examples of this approach, but for us, it is enough to consider *PH* 1.200. When interpreting the skeptical phrase "everything is incomprehensible" (*omnia sunt incomprehensibilia*; πάντα έστιν άκατάληπτα), Sextus warns against its dogmatic interpretation. By expressing themselves in this way, skeptics do not seek to give any "essential" characteristics of things, so they should not be considered dogmatists here. In fact, this phrase is a short formula for a thesis that can be formulated in full as follows: "All that I have skimmed among those uncertainties which are affirmed in the quest of the Dogmatics, seem to me incomprehensible (... *mihi videntur incomprehensibilia*; ...φαίνεται μοι άκατάληπτα)."¹⁹

¹⁸ The Latin translation and the Greek original of this passage provide rich material on the Latin equivalents of Greek skeptical terminology:

...nihil poni aut tolli a nobis, eorum quidem certe quae dogmatice de dubiis asseruntur. Iis enim a quibus patimur, et a quibus ita coacti ad assensum addicatur, cedimus et acquiescimus.

ότι μηδέν τιθέναι μηδέν άναίρειν φαμεν τών κατά τό άδηλον δογματικώς λεγομένων - τοίς γάρ κινούσιν ήμᾶς παθητικώς και άναγκαστικώς άγουσιν εις συγκατάθεσιν έίκομεν.

¹⁹ Let me offer another formulation. In his statements, the skeptic does not claim, as dogmatists do, the truth of what he says, but merely denotes "the human passion (*passionis*

This “egological” aspect of Sextus’ teaching will be of particular importance for my argumentation. For now, it should be affirmed that Sextus’ skeptic, realizing that something “seems” to him (*ut mihi videtur*; ὡς ἐμοὶ φαίνεται) and submitting to the irresistible force that makes him recognize the existence of a state in which something seems to him, knows other states as well.

For example, the famous “epoche” (*assensus retentio*) is also defined as “a state of mind in which we neither affirm nor deny” (1.10; *status mentis per quem neque ponimus, neque tollimus*; στάσις διανοίας δι’ ἣν οὐ τε αἴρομέν τι οὔτε τιθεμεν). Another state is isosthenia (*aequam potentiam*), which indicates the impossibility to recognize something as more credible (*fide dignior*) than another (1.10). Finally, the ataraxia (*vacuitas perturbationis in animo*), the equanimity that the skeptic seeks as an unconditional goal, is also regarded, at least in the Latin translation of PH, as a state of mind (I, 26: *imperturbatus mentis status circa opiniabilia*; ἡ ἐν τοῖς δοξαστοῖς ἀταραξία).

The passive states that the skeptic undergoes are, in Sextus’ view, essential. Having no dogmas, the skeptic must nevertheless be guided by something in life. In PH 1.21-24, the phenomenon-criterion is proclaimed to be the instance that makes such guidance possible in the form of “life observation” (*observatio eorum quae ad vitam communem spectat*; βιωτική τήρησις): the skeptic lives according to life observation and without prejudice.

The spheres of such guiding observation are: (1) the instructions of nature (*instruction naturalis*; ὑφήγησις φύσεως); (2) the urge and coercion of passions (*impulsus et coactus passionum*; ἀνάγκη παθῶν); (3) the dictates of laws and customs; and (4) the (requirements) of mastering a craft.

In my opinion, point (1) is of primary importance, because it is through the guidance of nature that we are gifted with both sensory and intellectual faculties (*per quam a natura et sensuum et intellectual facultate praediti sumus*; καθ’ ἣν φυσικῶς αἰσθητικοὶ καὶ νοητικοὶ ἐσμεν). The instructions of nature *qua phenomena*, i.e., as coercive states that overwhelm us, in fact, appear to our feelings and thoughts. Therefore, the skeptic should observe these states and act in accordance with how they unfold naturally, instead of constructing his own dogmas, which, as experience shows, only lead to disputes and disappointment.

Here it is appropriate to clarify Sextus’ very distinctive understanding of the phenomenon as something that is sensed (*quae sub sensus cadunt*; αἰσθητὰ). It would be a mistake to take this notion of “sensory” literally, because it is not just the data of the external senses, but a very diverse experience that encompasses our internal perception of our thinking, that is, a kind of state of direct self-awareness that is equated with the senses.²⁰ The phenomena include not only the sensations

humanae; ἀνθρωπείου πάθους), as it appears to the one who passively undergoes it (*quae est id, quod apparet patienti*; ὃ ἐστὶ φαινόμενον τῷ πάσχοντι) (PH I, 27).

²⁰ After all, even today in Ukrainian we use expressions such as “I feel like this solution is false” or “I sense that this is a fraud” in everyday speech. The same type of expressions is not uncommon in English, too: for example, “I feel like going for a walk” or “I don’t feel comfortable about this.” Of course, the word “feel”/“sense” is used here metaphorically, because such things as “fraud,” “problem/solution,” or “going for a walk” are themselves the phenomena of the intellectual order, so there is hardly any “body organ” that would “sense” them. However, an “extended” understanding of the sphere of the sensual is not uncommon in the history of philosophy. For example, Nicolas Malebranche, who borrowed many of Cartesian ideas, declared “consciousness” to be the sphere of “inner sense” (RV II: VI, 4), lowering its cognitive status introduced by Descartes. Sextus’ phenomenon-as-sense /

of heat and cold, the sweetness of honey, and the like, but also, for example, the acquisition of a just-mentioned life-guiding experience that enables adogmatic control of one's behavior. The "saturated" and complex nature of phenomena is an important component of Sextus' teaching.

At the same time, the "thinkable," according to Sextus, only gives rise to disputes and disagreements, for there are many incompatible approaches to it. This is why it is denoted by the term ἀδῆλον, "unclear." Pyrrhonists cannot use the term πρόδηλον (clear, manifest) to describe the thinkable, because they have not yet found a single example of truly convincing statements about the thinkable that would not cause objections from anyone. Assertions about the "thinkable" do not produce such powerful states of coercive force to which one cannot but assent, and this is what skeptics use when applying their irresistible tropes.

When translating the skeptics, Cicero equated ἀδῆλον with the Latin *incertus* (*Academica* II: XVII, 54), and accordingly, πρόδηλον was translated as *certus*. This usage was established in the Western tradition; thus, Etienne and Hervé in the sixteenth century simply used generally accepted terminological equivalents. Therefore, Descartes (as a person of his time and a possible reader of Cicero, Sextus Empiricus, St. Augustine, e.a.) could not but perceive the search for "certitude" (*certitudo*) of knowledge in the context of skeptical discussions about "phenomenon," "life observation," "thinkable," etc.

4 Freedom and unfreedom of Cartesian doubt

In the context of what has just been said, it is worth quoting Silvia Giocanti's statement:

in order to make sure that we are relying on an indubitable certainty, it would be prudent, according to the skeptics, to refuse the assent that the mind is spontaneously inclined to give to its impressions. Contrary to what the Stoics believe—that "it is impossible for the mind not to approve a perspicuous thing it is presented with" (*Academica* II: XII, 38)—it is always possible to refuse assent, to the extent that passive perception of a thing is not identical to its acceptance and a fortiori to its affirmation as true. These last two operations refer to the active quality of the mind, the will. Like the neo-Academics, and especially Carneades, who recognized the autonomy of the will, Descartes emphasizes the negative capacity of the will to reject the evidence, to go against nature, and thus to protect its freedom, its independence, from any guardianship. (Giocanti 2013)

According to this author, in the First Meditation Descartes not only uses the neo-Academics' arguments (from the deceptive senses, sleep, madness), but also their method of unrestrained refusal of assent. Moreover, it is this methodology that allegedly underlies Descartes' rule of truth recognition, according to which one should "to withhold judgement [*a iudicio ferendo esse abstinendum*] on any occasion when the truth of the matter is not clear [*non liquet*]" (AT VII, 62: 1-2 / II, 43).

sense-phenomenon, with its synthetic, complex character, is very similar to Malebranche's "consciousness."

These statements should be supplemented by a peculiarly pertinent (and quite common) scholarly position, which was clearly formulated by Denis Kambouchner in the first part of his fundamental commentary on Descartes' *Meditations*: Cartesian doubt is “thoroughly arbitrary” (Kambouchner 2005: 217), the matter of destroying the foundations of old opinions is a matter of free decision, while the entire First Meditation is “laced with nerve fibers of will” (*ibid.*, 218).

Indeed, there are substantial grounds for such statements in Descartes' texts²¹. Thus, “suspending assent²² to anything that might give the slightest reason to doubt” (*ibid.*) is for Descartes a decision that rests solely on his will. According to Kambouchner, the strong-willed determination to abstain from accepting the doubtful, as well as the “direct relation of the mind to its own acts” are the two features that distinguish Cartesian doubt from skeptical doubt, the quintessence of which is the doubt of Sextus Empiricus. To support his thesis, the French historian of philosophy quotes *PH* 1.8-10 (I will quote this citation in translation from the Greek text, indicating the Latin equivalents according to Etienne's version):

The skeptical faculty (δύναμις; *vis et facultas*) is that which in any way opposes the phenomenon (φαινομένων; *sub sensum cadunt*) to the thinkable (νοουμένων; *quae mente et intellectu percipiuntur*); hence, through equivalence (ισοσθένεια; *paria momenta*) in opposite things and statements, we first come to the suspension of assent (ἐποχήν; *assensus retentionem*) and then to equanimity (ἀταραξία; *vacuitatem a perturbatione*).

Kambouchner interprets this quote in the sense of the fundamental limitation of Sextus' doubt to (a) the sphere of dogmatic (i.e., purely doctrinal) statements; (b) the influence of irresistible isosthenia (in other words, it is not a free act of the mind, but a kind of automatic result of the work of opposing things or statements). Since Descartes considered isosthenia to be a fiction (the mind cannot be in such equilibrium, it is bound to lean more in one direction or another), Descartes' suspension of assent is based only on Descartes' own strong-willed conviction that under certain conditions “the assent should ... be postponed” (Kambouchner 2005: 222).

In my view, argument (a) is based on a rather one-sided interpretation of Sextus' Pyrrhonism; as for argument (b), the mere fact that the reality of isosthenia is fictional does not provide a substantial basis for distinguishing Cartesian doubt from Sextus' doubt. I will consider these objections in detail.

²¹ Kambouchner quotes passages that powerfully support his position. “So today I have expressly rid my mind of all the worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions” (AT VII, 17: 13-18 / II, 12). “...I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree” (AT VII, 23: 4-9 / II, 15).

²² It is worth noting that since the time of Cicero “the suspension of assent” (in Latin texts of Descartes – *assensus retentio*) used to be the equivalent of the Greek ἐποχή in the Western tradition.

Kambouchner grounds his conclusions about the narrow application of skeptical doubt mainly on *PH* 1.202-205.²³ But it is hardly a question of narrowing the applicability of doubt. Any dogmatic reasoning, i.e., the one that does not concern impressions (phenomena) in themselves but claims to be certain in judgments about what the objects of these impressions are, are subject to doubt. Thus, it is difficult to understand why Sextus Empiricus would not question, as Kambouchner argues, “such a radical condition as the existence of the sensible world at all” (Kambouchner 2005: 219). Since Pyrrhonian doubt, according to *PH* 1.202-205, reacts to the *form* of statements, it would certainly extend to statements about the existence of the external world, as long as these statements contain elements of dogmatic justification.

As for Sextus’ externally determined *epoché* and Descartes’ free decision to refrain from assenting to the uncertain, Kambouchner, in my opinion, artificially exaggerates these differences. Of course, Sextus recognizes isosthenia as a state of the human mind, while Descartes is, so to speak, skeptical of this. But this does not mean that Descartes *makes arbitrary decisions* to judge or not to judge, to admit or not to admit the obvious. Even the initial decision to “freely” embark on the meditative search for certainty is not arbitrary at all: it is (1) strictly determined by the desire to find a completely certain foundation for the sciences; (2) based on the willingness to accept the certain (*certus*), if one is to be found. In *this* respect, Descartes’ famous decision to accept the dubious in the process of meditation in order to make the search for certainty more effective *is not fundamental*. Descartes himself regarded it as an artificial technique, similar to the use of pictorial lines by astronomers and geometers, designed to visualize the truth (AT VII, 349: 19-27; 350: 1-4). This technique should not be overestimated; it simply saves one’s research time, like a convenient substitution in the conversion of a mathematical expression. Descartes himself describes it quite clearly in the First Meditation: this decision stems from reasonable doubts of the Pyrrhonian type, which have revealed that: “there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised” (21: 27-29 / II, 14-15).

It is noteworthy that this result was achieved in full accordance with Sextus Empiricus’s instructions, up to and including the formally attested *epoché* (22: 1 / II, 15): Descartes comes to the necessity to “suspend my assent... carefully” (*assensionem... cohibendam*) to both the things that are clearly false and those that appear to be only probable. Such suspension is naturally justified, for example, by the skeptical use of the expression “no more” (*PH* 1.188-191):²⁴ after all, skeptical isosthenia does not require a thorough weighing of opposing arguments; for it, the very opposition of arguments, the very situation of controversy, is enough.

It should always be remembered that the main thing for a skeptic is not the strength/weakness of an argument, but the degree of stubbornness of the one who defends the argument. This is convincingly demonstrated in the last paragraph of the *PH* 3.280:

²³ In the phrase “to any expression an equal expression is opposed (*omni orationi oratio aequalis opponitur*)” Sceptics understand “expression” (*oratio*; λόγος) to mean not simply any expression but, in particular, that expression which establishes something in a dogmatic way (*dogmaticem*; τι δογματικώς), that is, in relation to the uncertain (*de incerto*; περί ἀδελον) and by any method (*quae quovis modo astruit quidpiam*; τὸν ὅπως οὖν κατασκευάζοντα).

²⁴ “By equipotency (*paria momenta*; ἰσοσθένεια) we mean equality in what appear to us probable” (*quae sunt in eo quod nobis apparet probabile*; ἰσοσθένειαν μὲν λεγόντων ἡμῶν τὴν ἰσότητά τὴν κατὰ τὸ φαινόμενον ἡμῶν πιθανόν).

The skeptic, because he is humane (*eo quod sit humanus*; in Greek original: διὰ τὸ φιλόνηθρος εἶναι – because he is philanthropic), wants, as best he can, to heal the dogmatists' arrogance (*arrogantia*; οὔρησιν) and reckless insolence (*temeraria insolentia*; προπέτειαν) by reasoning (*ratiocinando*; λόγῳ). So, just as the physicians who cure bodily ailments (*corporalium morborum*; σωματικῶν παθῶν) have remedies which differ in strength, and apply the severe ones to those whose ailment are severe and the milder to those mildly affected, so too the Skeptic propounds your reasonings (*rationationes*; λόγους) which differ in strengths.

By demolishing powerful dogmas with powerful reasoning and weak dogmas with light reasoning based only on probability, the skeptic focuses more on the degree of the dogmatist's pride than on his arguments themselves. Thus, isosthenia implies equal strength of arguments, adjusted for a specific degree of dogmatic "pride." Ultimately, the skeptic's goal is his or her own state of equanimity, which is achieved through a constant "search for truth," which is identical, in the skeptical interpretation, to the search for counterarguments to established dogmas. Therefore, convincing a dogmatist is a secondary goal, pursued for purely "philanthropic" reasons, whereas the main goal is to convince oneself, because, for the Pyrrhonian skeptic, the degree of arguments' probability is not very important. After all, skeptical tropes are aimed precisely at proving the impossibility of one impression (φαντασία) being superior to another.

When Descartes speaks of the "apparent" equation of the doubtful with the false, he is responding to the just-described train of thought found in Sextus' works: if the skeptic is satisfied with the mere dispute, disagreement (διαφωνία), then Descartes does not need to consider doubtful cases which will not lead him to his goal. Doubtfulness indicates disagreement, and therefore, in the eyes of the skeptic, makes it impossible to conclude that something is true. *In this sense*, doubtfulness is absolutely equivalent to falsity. Let us carefully follow Descartes' motivation when he moves from *epoché* to the "apparent" recognition of the doubtful as false. In his view, simply pointing out the need to suspend one's assent is not enough:

...I must make an effort to remember it. My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom. I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions, so long as I suppose them to be what in fact they are, namely highly probable opinions – opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has just been shown, it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny. In view of this, I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary. I shall do it until the weight of preconceived opinion is counter-balanced and the distorting influence of habit no longer prevents my judgment from perceiving things correctly. In the meantime, I know that no danger or error will result from my plan, and that I cannot possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude. This is because the task now in hand does not involve action but merely the acquisition of knowledge. (AT VII, 22: 3-22 / II, 15)

Directing one's will "in the opposite direction" serves to "balance" the various prejudices, both "natural" and artificially created! Descartes, so to speak, proposes a corrected notion of isosthenia, that is more adjusted to reality than Sextus'. In seeking to eliminate the "metaphysical" grounds for doubt (36: 24), Descartes must work properly with doubt, responding to even the slightest occasion for it. The use of the will is not primary here; it is, in turn, based on the primary impossibility to accept even minimally doubtful things as certain (in the light of the strict criteria of metaphysical certainty).²⁵ In this case, I see no reason to consider the response of the will to be something fundamentally different from the usual skeptical ingenuity in search of anti-dogmatic arguments. We can admit that Descartes was the most ingenious of skeptics, but this does not prove that his doubt was of a fundamentally different nature. The fact that Descartes' text is imbued with the concept of will is undeniable, but the conclusion that he "emphasizes the negative capacity of the will to reject the evident, to go against nature, and thus to protect its freedom, its independence, from any guardianship" (Giocanti 2013) seems too radical, because the decision to consider the doubtful to be conditionally false can be explained by simpler reasons. Descartes does not intend to "abandon the obvious"; on the contrary, it is the lack of obviousness that forces him to take non-standard steps to find it.

5 Conclusion

As a result of this study, two main conclusions can be drawn, on which the concept of the following articles in the series will be based.

First, Descartes' perception of skepticism was "synthetic" in nature; he was well aware of the ideas that different strands of skepticism proposed, and tried to compose arguments against them all. In this regard, it would be wrong to gloss over one element of Descartes' skeptical legacy in favor of another. But it is also important to work on reconstructing the specific systems of skeptical argumentation that are embedded in Descartes' philosophy in one way or another.

Secondly, the volitional element of Cartesian doubt—in particular, the decision to conditionally consider the doubtful to be false—is not a sufficient basis to distinguish this doubt from isosthenia as Sextus understood it. Both philosophers focus on the obviousness of statements, looking for those that would appear in their perception as absolutely convincing. All other statements receive the same status – that of being doubtful. Moreover, both Descartes and Sextus do not bother to distinguish between the degrees of unconvincingness of what is doubtful. This parallelism gives rise to the assumption that Sextus' understanding of the irresistible power of the obvious plays a key role in Cartesian anti-skeptical argumentation. But such an assumption can only be proved or disproved on the basis of an analysis of Descartes' texts, which I will propose in the next article of the series.

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²⁵ "I have no answer to these arguments, but am finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised; and this is not a flippant or ill-considered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well thought-out reasons" (AT VII 21: 26-30 / II, 14-15).

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