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"Doubting is just this going-round in a circle, advancing and retreating, affirming and denying, banging in the nail and then pulling it out to bang it in again".

Descartes; *Objections and Replies*

## 1

The difference between Pyrrhonian<sup>1</sup> and Cartesian scepticism is clear— not only to us but to Descartes himself. In *The Search for Truth*<sup>2</sup> Polynder and Epistemon, on being presented with versions of the Dream Argument and the Demon Argument respond with typical awe for an apparently irrefutable scepticism;

*POLYANDER* : There, surely, we have arguments sufficient to overturn all the teachings of Epistemon, if he is reflective enough to give his attention to them....

*EPITEMON* : I agree that it is very dangerous to proceed too far in this line of thinking. Such general doubts would lead straight into the ignorance of Socrates or the uncertainty of Pyrrhonists. These are deep waters, where I think we may lose our footing<sup>3</sup>.

As against this, note the balanced response of Eudoxus who is the mouthpiece of Descartes;

*EUDOXUS*<sup>4</sup> : I confess that it would be dangerous for someone who does not know a ford to venture across it without a guide, and many have lost their lives in doing so. But you have nothing to fear if you follow me... (so) we must not let the matter rest here, especially since even if you did not wish to give further consideration to the arguments I have stated, the arguments have already done what I desired: their chief effect has been to touch your imagination so as to make you fear them. For this indicates that your knowledge is not so infallible as to prevent your fearing that these arguments will undermine its foundations by making you doubt everything. Consequently, it indicates that you already have these doubts, and so I have achieved my aim, which is

to overturn all your learning by showing you its uncertainty. But in case you should now lack the courage to proceed any further, I would advise you that these doubts, which alarmed you at the start, are like phantoms and empty images which appear at night in the uncertain glimmer of a weak light; if you flee from them, your fear will follow you, but if you approach as if to touch them, you will find nothing but air and shadow and you will be more confident the next time such an encounter may occur<sup>5</sup>.

It is clear then that according to Descartes, though the Pyrrhonian sceptics might have 'lost their lives' venturing across the dangerous ford of doubt, yet there was 'nothing to fear' if we followed him instead.

Both Descartes of *Meditation I* and the Ancient Greeks aimed at generating 'universal doubt'. Yet there are two crucial differences in their positions, which (from the Cartesian point of view) exemplify the power of the method of doubt 'properly' used (by Descartes) and the dangers of its misuse (by the Greeks). For the the Pyrrhonists, doubt is the *summon bonum* of our intellectual and ethical lives. The true sceptical method is one of generating counter-arguments of equal strength to any and all claims which in turn, results in a suspension of judgement (*epoche*). This, it is claimed, is a state of ultimate peace (*ataraxia*). When faced with the self-contradiction of *asserting* arguments that lead to universal doubt, the Greek sceptics are ready to go all the way and embrace self-refutation by subjecting their own sceptical strategies to doubt ...just as purgative medicines not only remove the humours from the body but expel themselves together with the humours<sup>67</sup> or like "a polypus which eats its tentacles after they have grown"<sup>7</sup>. The sceptical stance thus involves no theoretical *claims* but ends up as a way of being that abhors commitment even in the realm of epistemology and methodology.

Descartes' doubt is very different on both these counts. The eternal avoidance of commitment by the Pyrrhonist is tantamount to the loss of our intellectual lives. For Descartes, doubt is a stepping stone to certainty and the 'method of doubt' establishes the foundations of 'science'. Furthermore, the moment of self-contradiction in asserting universal doubt which led Sextus to turn self-reflexive, is the moment that yields the certainty of the *cogito* for Descartes. The Demon Argument shows not just that all our empirical and mathematical beliefs can be called into question but also that we do unquestionably *doubt* them. In the words of Polyander:

"... I can state that as soon as I began to doubt, I began to have knowledge which was certain. But my doubt and my certainty did not relate to the same objects; my doubt applied to only things which existed outside me, whereas my certainty related to myself and my doubting<sup>8</sup>."

Second-order doubt or doubt that I doubt is anathema in the Cartesian system. The *Meditations* shows how this assertion of doubt can be developed to serve as the foundation of all knowledge. According to Sextus, on the other hand, the sceptical formulae indicating doubt ('I suspend judgement', 'I can determine nothing', 'Perhaps') are not asserted and hence do not form the theoretical basis of certitude. One way of putting this difference would be to say that whereas Descartes does not doubt doubt, the Pyrrhonian never steps out of the sceptical mode not even while claiming that he doubts.

The purpose of this paper is to explore further the nature of doubt involved in the Cartesian method. Some of the questions I address here are whether the difference in positioning doubt as an absolute vs. instrumental value on the one hand and as self-reflexive vs. indubitable on the other, makes a difference to doubt *as doubt*. Is it just that the Pyrrhonists used/misused/misunderstood a generic doubt (did 'not know a ford' but 'ventured across it without a guide') and hence reached a scepticism very different from that of Descartes' or is Cartesian doubt a very different kind of epistemological creature to begin with? To complicate matters, Descartes himself is full of disclaimers of his own doubt calling it 'exaggerated', 'hyperbolic', 'laughable', 'philosophical', 'metaphysical' and the like. How then does Descartes' doubt deviate from the genuine entity to earn these characterisations? Or is it that Descartes does not doubt after all? How is 'real' doubt any different (if at all) from what is found in *Meditation I* and Sextus?

## II

Before proceeding further I would like to consider the possibility of interpreting Descartes as a closet Pyrrhonist by casting Cartesian disclaimers of his doubt into Sextus' framework. This move should be avoided in order to understand the differences in the 'method of doubt' of the two philosophers.

Sextus works by constructing equipollences i.e., by constructing counter-arguments of equal strength for any given claim. The general

strategy of the 'Modes' is to set up a structure like the following<sup>9</sup>.

x appears F in situation S

x appears F\* in situation S\*

We cannot prefer S to S\*

So we cannot either affirm or deny whether x is really F or F\*. We suspend our judgement about the nature of x.

Now the *Meditations* as a whole may be made to fit the above pattern. Ordinary empirical propositions about the world appear doubtful in some situations. For example, on considering the Evil Demon Argument at the end of *Meditation I*.

'...this (doubt) is not a flippant or ill-conceived conclusion, but is based on powerful and well-thought-out reasons.<sup>10</sup>

Thus S is constituted by sceptical arguments and F is the feature of 'being doubtful'.

Cartesian disclaimers specify context S\* where those same propositions are claimed to be not doubtful or F\*. Thus all that we need to suspend judgement or doubt the dubitability of the propositions is to assert that the two contexts are equally convincing. Descartes, of course, does not do this and it is interesting to see why.

There are two very different kinds of contexts S\* that result in disclaimers of that doubt or F\*. An example of the first is what Descartes says in *Meditation I* itself:

'...opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has been just shown, it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny.<sup>11</sup>

Or, on realising that these opinions are habitual:

'...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 false and imaginary. I shall do this until the weight of preconceived opinion is counterbalanced...<sup>12</sup>

So while S the context of a particular philosophical theory of scepticism, S\* here might be said to be the 'context of common sense and habit'. But this does not lead Descartes to suspend judgement. S and S\*

in this sense, are two different aspects of life that can co-exist. Hence relativising dubitability and indubitability in this manner has no tendency to make us doubt either in their appropriate contexts.

The second type of S\* is constituted by disclaimers found in *Meditation VI* where, after a long and circuitous route, Descartes is able to re-establish all that had been called in question under S. Finally he is able to say:

'Accordingly, I should not have any further fears about the falsity of what my senses tell me every day; on the contrary, the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable.<sup>13</sup>'

This is more serious because both S and S\* are philosophical points of view. So unlike the relativisation of dubitability and indubitability to theory and practice respectively, a relativisation to different theoretical frameworks does call for a determination of the preferred point of view within philosophical theory.

But unlike Sextus, Descartes avoids *epoche* even here. For him S and S\*, so interpreted, are not equipollent. The philosophical position articulated in the *Sixth Meditation* is meant to have refuted the scepticism of the *First*. Hence the indubitability of the world rather than a suspension of judgement is the conclusion. This rejection of the earlier doubt does not amount to *doubting* doubt. In Descartes S and S\* are successive rather than simultaneous. Doubt as it were is sublated by certainty rather than counter-balanced.

There is another crucial complication here. It is simplistic to counterpoise the *First* and the *Sixth Meditation* as S and S\* in a straight-forwardly oppositional argument as above. S\* is not just found to be philosophically more sound than S; but the reason for this is that S\* is *derived* from S<sup>14</sup>. The sceptic-generated doubt about the external world leads Descartes to deduce the certainty of the *fact that I doubt*. Such impossibility of doubting that I doubt leads to the certainty of the *cogito* and then to the existence of God. This in turn, leads to the indubitability of the world. It is in this sense that an indubitable doubt is literally the 'method' or the 'way' to certainty about the world<sup>15</sup>.

But now we have a problem. Descartes' disclaimers of doubt here are taken not as resulting in a Pyrrhonic *epoche* (of doubt itself) but as a rejection of sceptical doubt. However, this rejection

of doubt is possible only thanks to an initial assertion of the doubt i.e., the rejection of  $S^*$  follows from  $S$ . We are beset with what I would like to call the Bhattacharya-paradox. Prof. Sibajiban Bhattacharya points to the basic flaw in the Cartesian method in the following words:

"If the doubt is true, then the cogito is true, and therefore, the doubt is false; if the doubt is false, the cogito is false, and therefore, the doubt is true.<sup>16</sup>"

Here the phrases 'doubt is true' and 'doubt is false' are odd. But setting aside the infelicity of this usage for the time being, our remarks on the Cartesian method make the difficulty which the paradox tries to capture clear. The philosophical theory  $S^*$  which asserts the certainty of our beliefs about the external world- is derived from the philosophical thesis of scepticism,  $S$ . And one of the crucial steps in this line of reflection is that the doubt generated by scepticism be genuine (indubitable). However, since  $S^*$  in claiming the certainty of our beliefs rejects the doubt generated by  $S$  (and rejection is even stronger than *doubting* those doubts) it seems to commit theoretical suicide by annihilating its own crucial premise.

The clue out of this muddle is hidden in those very odd phrases 'doubt is true' and 'doubt is false'. 'False' can mean different things in uses like 'false tooth', 'false certificate' and 'false statement'. Does 'false' in 'false doubt' mean 'unreal' or 'illegitimate' or even 'discordant with facts'? I shall explain the phrase differently than the way Prof. Bhattacharya seems to do and in spite of Cartesian disclaimers try to 'give' Descartes the *benefit* of his doubt.

In the next section I consider and reject the view that through his disclaimers Descartes demarcates 'true' from 'false' doubt. In section IV, I consider and reject the view that they set apart 'faked' from a 'genuine' doubt. And in the final section I propose the alternative that these disclaimers help in distinguishing two *kinds* of doubt which are both real/genuine. Through all this what emerges is not just a solution of a feared internal incoherence in Descartes but an understanding of the complexity of doubt itself.

### III

First and foremost, it is important to note an inherent ambiguity

in the adjective 'doubtful' which can either mean a doubting thinker or a dubitable thought. Noting this Prof. Bhattacharya first identifies a (i) *psychological* sense, where the subjects of doubt are, literally, subjects. *People* are doubtful and doubt signifies a specific state of mind. This is generally speaking, a state of indecision or paralysis where the subject fails to form a belief concerning a particular matter because of a felt incompatibility of two predicates/sentences claiming to characterise the same thing. Obviously, this is to be distinguished from simple disbelief. Secondly, in the (ii) *logical* sense, a *proposition* *p* is doubtful. What this signifies according to Bhattacharya, is that either (a) the negation of *p* is possible or that (b) both *p* and its negation are logically possible. Obviously, this can be the case even when no-one *thinks* of or even *can think* of these alternatives. It is in this sense, he says, that doubt can be 'false' i.e., when 'one of the incompatible alternatives does not exist, or that the alternatives are not really incompatible.'

Bhattacharya calls Descartes' doubt primarily logical in the above sense and hence a doubt that can be 'false'. It is worth our while to explore this further and may be to draw the lines in a slightly different way. First, note that when *p* is a self-contradiction, its negation is necessary and hence also *possible*. But a self-contradictory proposition is not doubtful but certain (because the certainly false is also certain). So it is better to drop (a) and stick to sense (b) alone as logical doubt. More substantially, both (i) and (ii) — i.e., both psychological and logical doubt involve a curious mix of psychological and logical elements. Psychological doubt is a mental state arising from the grasp of a logical structure of incompatible predicates for a subject<sup>17</sup>. Logical doubt also involves psychological elements when it is 'false'. Hence "If I think two sentences are incompatible when they are not really so, then even though I have a doubt, the doubt is not logically true."<sup>18</sup> This sentence is intriguing. Here I '*think*' of an incompatibility which does not really exist (a real psychological state) and '*I have a doubt*' yet '*the doubt is not logically true*' (i.e. false, which is a feature of logical doubt). Obviously, I may or may not (psychologically) doubt a logically dubitable proposition. But for a 'false doubt' which is a species of logical doubt this complete disassociation from psychological conditions is not possible. And note that Descartes' doubt according to Bhattacharya is deemed to be 'false' and hence logical.

But then, Descartes might as well have been admonishing Prof. Bhattacharya rather than Bourdin in saying "...throughout he treats doubt and certainty not as relations of our thought to objects, but as properties of the objects which inhere in them all the time<sup>19</sup>," and more succinctly, "my critic regards doubt and certainty as being in the objects rather than our thought."<sup>20</sup>

To make things clearer, I suggest a threefold distinction in the kinds of doubt. The taxonomy here is the following: (a) *Logical* dubitability pertains to propositions that are possible along with their negations. In other words, it is the idea of contingency. (b) *Psychological* doubt is the mental state of indecision or oscillation between alternative possibilities. Depending on the logico-epistemic status of these alternatives we get a third variety. (c) *Rational/Epistemological* doubt is a sub-species of the psychological and hence is primarily mental oscillation. But the alternatives here are not just logically possible but epistemically possible as well. In other words, they are regarded as *evidentially* at par because of which we cannot make up our minds.

Each of these can be 'false' in the sense that a statement claiming a particular instance to be logical/ psychological/ rational doubt may be false. It is as easy to misrepresent a proposition as contingent as it is to misidentify the nature of a mental state. The relations between these three kinds of doubt are also interesting. It is possible for a proposition to be logically dubitable without it being *psychologically* doubted. Countless contingent propositions are believed with unshakable trust by most of us. I do not doubt, for example, that my name is Vrinda although it could very well have been Jayalalitha or something else. Conversely, it is quite possible to doubt i.e. be psychologically uncertain of many necessary truths. A mathematical dullard may doubt whether the cube-root of 1728 is really 12. The distinction between (b) and (c) i.e. the merely psychological and the rational  $\rightarrow$  is slippery. Consider the pathological case of someone with such an abysmal level of self-confidence that he just cannot make up his mind about anything. For him, every case of logical contingency would be a case of psychological doubt. But rational doubt, on the other hand, occurs only when the counterpoised alternatives are *regarded as epistemically viable* and one can justify the doubt. Sceptical doubts are typically rational/epistemological in this sense since "...for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least *some reason* for doubt."<sup>21</sup>



To justify the positioning of Descartes' doubt as rational/ epistemological rather than logical let us take a close look at a Cartesian text. Consider for example, a part of the extract already quoted from *Search For Truth* :

...the (sceptical) arguments have already done what I desired: their chief effect has been to touch your imagination so as to make fear them. *For this indicates that your knowledge is not so infallible as to prevent your fearing them that these arguments will undermine its foundations by making you doubt everything. Consequently, it indicates that you already have these doubts* (emphasis mine).

The first thing to note is that doubt here is clearly not used in the logical sense— you are the bearer of doubts not the subject matter or the proposition. Is it, however, *merely* psychological or is it rational and epistemological? Sceptical arguments says Descartes, 'touch our imagination' i.e., they generate the envisaged possibility of a Demon world of massive deception — and we are incapable of rejecting this possibility. What is interesting is that just this possibility enables Descartes to conclude that we '*have doubt*'. I take this to mean that the irrefutability of the sceptical alternative establishes its evidential viability. With reference to empirical propositions (which might *be* otherwise in any case), the sceptic elevates the prior logical possibility to an *epistemological* status. With reference to mathematical and other necessary propositions, this is just an epistemological possibility (they might *turn out* to be otherwise). On either count we are stuck with an ineliminable and hence (for the time being) an evidentially plausible alternative and our doubt is squarely 'rational'<sup>22</sup>.

#### IV

However, there is more that needs to be said. Our problem is the following: Having established the doubt of *Meditation I* to be rational doubt i.e. a specific mental state induced by epistemological considerations, the further explications of that doubt really amount to *disclaimers* of that very doubt. In the *Letter to Regius* Descartes claims :

"What could be more foolish than to suppose that... the man who states the arguments of the Atheists is *temporarily an atheist*? What more puerile than to say that, if he were to die meantime, before writing or discovering the *hoped for demonstration*, he would die an atheist?"

And also in the *Replies to the Fifth Set of Objections* :

"The philosopher knows that it is often useful to assume falsehoods instead of truths in this way in order to shed light on the truth, eg. when astronomers imagine the equator, the zodiac, or other circles in the sky, or when geometers add new lines to given figures.<sup>237</sup>"

This seems to indicate that what we are supposed to have attained as a result of the sceptical arguments is a *pretended* doubt. It should be clear now that Prof. Bhattacharya construes these as assertions of *falsity* of the propositional content generating the mental condition of oscillation. But since the doubt in question has been established as the rational form of psychological doubt and not logical, we now interpret the disclaimers as denying, in a sense, the genuineness of that mental state itself- by qualifying it to be *pretense*. The question now arises as to the difference between a *genuine* doubt and an '*assumed*' or '*pretend-doubt*'. What does Descartes' doubt *lack* because of which it is deemed to have this status? The answer would depend on our theory of full-fledged doubt. Let us consider two of the most obvious ways of distinguishing the '*genuine*' from '*pretense*' in the realm of doubt.

According to what may be called an *Internalistic* theory, doubt is a mental state (of '*oscillation*', '*paralysis*', '*indecision*') and whether we genuinely are in such a state or not is something that is available in a first-person introspective act. A genuine state of doubt is thus one which appears as '*I doubt*' when we look within. By contrast a pretended doubt is where one may say or act as if one doubts but the typical features of indecision or vacillation are not introspectively detected. All I need to do is to attend to my mental states to determine whether I am only pretending to or actually doubting.

Now what Descartes says about the perspicuousness of thought in general suggests that he would not be averse to such an Internalistic account. Thus when I doubt it is clear to me on reflection that I doubt. Most of the Cartesian disclaimers can also be read as an account of pretense in the sense that introspection does not yield '*I doubt*' even at the end of *Meditation I*. The agonising fact for Descartes is that even after considering the sceptical arguments it is evident to him that he does *not* really doubt or that he is apt to slip into not doubting because of the grip of his former opinions.

There are some problems, however, of drawing the sincere/sham distinction in this manner and of placing Cartesian doubt in the latter category. The first is whether Descartes himself is *entitled* to the internalist criterion of doubt once he has evoked the sceptical arguments. Thus Bourdin remarks that "it is not certain that what appears certain to a person who is in doubt whether he is awake or asleep, is in fact certain."<sup>24</sup> In the present context, this would mean that the appearance to reflective consciousness of the certainty that I doubt cannot guarantee that I do doubt. Descartes' response of distinguishing 'what is clearly and distinctly perceived' and what 'merely seems or appears to be' is rather lame particularly when we raise the problem in a general manner. The problem with making the distinction between genuine and pretended doubt solely in terms of phenomenological content is that the notion of pretense becomes uncapturable. The point here is the familiar Wittgensteinian one that if something is identified solely in terms of a private criterion accessible only from a first-person perspective, then the notion of a mistake loses sense. (Is pretense a deliberately committed mistake?)

Difficulties such as these lead us to what may be called the *Externalist* theory of doubt. According to this view, to have a genuine doubt is not to have a certain 'feeling' but to behave in a certain manner. Our actions make the distinction between genuine and pretended doubt. Someone who *really* doubts thus behaves in a way very different from someone who merely plays at doubting. Plausible as this might seem, there are problems in adopting the 'action criterion' for doubt. First, the connection between mental states and behaviour assumed here is problematic. Philosophical theories can be such that typically from them *no* action follows. This delinking of philosophical *beliefs* from actions paves the way for disassociating philosophical *doubts* from actions too. Furthermore, a sceptic who denies the certainty of the external world is also sceptical about actions which, as events in the external world are, from the externalist perspective, public, physical events. Thus, such a person cannot use the action-criterion of genuineness without falling into a self-contradiction<sup>25</sup>. However, a version of externalism is coherent and seems to be endorsed by Descartes. This is to say that real doubts imply *no action* whatsoever or at best *heedless and random* ones. Note the popular caricature of a sceptic as someone who does not jump out of the way of incoming trucks or someone

who can walk out through the window as much as through a door! Emphasising that his doubts do not have such 'peril' and hence are not *really* doubts, Descartes asserts in the *Meditations* that "the task now in hand does not involve action but merely the acquisition of knowledge."<sup>26</sup>

However, the theoretical-practical distinction with reference to doubt is a double-edged sword. In general terms, the charge of a practical self-stultification is always brought against the sceptic faulted with not being able to live his or her own scepticism. But just as Sextus claimed to be able to happily lead a 'life of appearance', Descartes' sceptic also is comfortable being guided by 'ordinary opinion' in practical matters. In either case, the unaffected continuation of action cannot be made the reason for characterising the doubt as less than genuine.

## V

I want to suggest here that the Cartesian disclaimers of doubt do not amount to a *denial* of doubt but delineate a new *species* of doubt different in kind from the received Pyrrhonic variety.

Descartes does not really deny the doubt of *Meditation I* in the sense of straight-forwardly *rejecting doubt*. Of course, to argue for this one would have to show what it is for someone *not* to doubt or conversely, what it is, minimally, for someone *to* doubt. Given that doubt is a state of indecision or vacillation, what it entails minimally is an *absence of commitment* (to either of the possible alternatives generating the indecision). It is surely contradictory to say that "I am *doubtful* about the involvement of Sushil Sharma in the murder of Naina Sahni but I am *sure that he did it*". For the project of the *First Meditation* to work, Descartes suggests "pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary". Now the recognition of *p* as false entails assenting to not-*p* as true. But before that, it involves *withdrawing of assent from p itself*. As Descartes makes clear in his reply to Bourdin, doubt differs from the recognition of falsity in not entailing the assent to the opposite. But they are comparable in that both involved a 'careful holding back' of assent. In fact, the predominant metaphors of the *First Meditation*—that of 'freeing' or 'emptying' the mind of previously held opinions makes sense only as a 'withdrawal of assent' from them.

Now if this is doubt, then do statements like 'no same person has ever seriously doubted these things' indicate that according to Descartes, we never *really* withdraw our assent from ordinary beliefs? It is tempting to think so. More so because Descartes does say that his philosophy, in spite of a detour, ends up establishing common sense views, which makes it quite plausible to maintain that there was no genuine withdrawal of assent from those beliefs in the first place.

The clue to a rather different interpretation is provided by Margaret Wilson who stresses that the *Meditations* should be read in the context of the general philosophical orientation of Descartes. Though in a sense, the *Sixth Meditation* reinstates almost all our 'common opinions', their inter-relations and what they mean are radically changed. The whole point of the Cartesian enterprise is to dislodge Empiricism and Aristotelian science and make room for Rationalism. In very general terms this amounts to the substitution of a 'sense-based' view of the world by a 'reason-based' one. Thus, even though ultimately Descartes' philosophy has room for Mind, Matter and God, it turns out that contrary to common sense, mind and God are known with greater certainty than matter and, as the wax example indicates, what our senses tell us about the nature of matter is less reliable than what our reason tells us. What I would like to argue is that since a genuine *replacement* of philosophical views has taken place, it must have been preceded by an equally genuine *suspension* or *withdrawal* of assent from the replaced view. Thus, it is wrong-headed to claim that Descartes does not *really doubt* that his doubt is 'fake' or hoax in any way.

Though it is not *doubt* that Descartes is shying away from, the *nature* of this doubt is peculiar. We have already specified this to be 'rational doubt' but now we need to capture the idea that it is 'methodic' in the sense of being an essential element in a dialectical process of reasoning<sup>27</sup>. Let us schematise a situation of rational doubt as follows :

- p, given arguments A (common sense)
- Might turn out to be not-p, given arguments A' (scepticism)
- Equipollence or evidential counterbalancing of A and A'
- Withdrawal of assent from p
- Withdrawal of assent from not-p
- Suspension of judgement/mental oscillation/indecision

Now a number of responses are possible to this. (i) A Pyrrhonist would stay with an eternal suspension of belief. (ii) A robust common sense would disturb the equipollence by rejecting not-p and hence, asserting p. (iii) A relativist, by separating the contexts of A and A' would be comfortable asserting both.

Descartes clearly distinguishes himself from Pyrrhonism or (i) and so it is natural to interpret him along the lines of either (ii) or (iii) i.e., either as rejecting not-p and asserting p or as relativising p and not-p to the different contexts of practice and theory. However, what actually takes place in the *Meditations* is a *fourth* alternative. What we find is (iv) the rejection of *both* A and A' and the assertion of neither p nor not-p but of q. The ultimate Cartesian conclusion therefore, is not common sense which is unabashedly 'sense-based'; nor is it sceptical; but *Rationalism* which is different from both. As it comes out of its ritualistic bath of routine doubt, a sense-certainty is reborn as a reasonable belief. Doubt used in this manner may be called 'dialectic' or 'methodic'.

The advantage of reading Cartesian intentions in terms of dialectic doubt spelled out in this way is that it helps dissipate the Bhattacharyya-paradox. The latter, to remind ourselves, is the following :

If the doubt is true, then the cogito is true, and therefore, the doubt is false; if the doubt is false, the cogito is false, and therefore, the doubt is true.

We can understand this in the following manner now: Let us look at the first arm of the paradox — if the doubt is true, then the *cogito* is true, and therefore, the doubt is false. If we doubt or truly suspend judgement between p and not-p, then we are led to the *cogito*. However, the *cogito* is the lynch-pin of Cartesian Rationalism. It is not just the 'self I feel myself to be' but the reason-based notion of the self as a 'thinking thing'. Starting from this *cogito*, Descartes is able to argue back the world and all that he had initially doubted. However, this re-established world is not *quite* the world of common sense after all — it is that world epistemically and metaphysically arranged according to rationalistic principles. So in a sense, what we have as the final conclusion is a certainty and consequently a denial of doubt about this *re-arranged* world. But since the *original* doubt about the world was not about the world seen on rationalistic lines

this is not a contradiction of the original doubt.

The matter can be more simply put by introducing a complexity in the intentional content of doubt. The *First Meditation* doubts ordinary everyday experiences—like my holding a pen in my hand right now. But this pen which is the subject/topic of doubt may either be a pen as understood by Empiricism and Aristotelian science (call this 'EMpen') or it can be pen conceived as a material substance according to Rationalist principles (call this 'RATpen'). Now in *Meditation I* we find doubt about EMpen. This leads to the certainty of the *cogito* and the whole line of epistemic retrieval which culminates in establishing RATpen. However, what this shows is only that doubt about RATpen is impossible. Certainty about RATpen is not only consistent with but is also consequent upon the continued withdrawal of belief from EMpen. The air of paradoxicality is produced by not giving a fine-enough analysis of the topic of doubt. Both EMpen and RATpen remain, after all, beliefs about *pens*. And so it is easy to see how a *certainty* about RATpen can be stated as a contradiction or denial of doubt about EMpen.

The second arm of the paradox— if doubt is false, the *cogito* is false, and therefore, the doubt is true— is even easier to dispel.

If there is no withdrawal of assent from the common-sense world or there is no doubt generated by sceptical arguments about EMpen, then, obviously the certainty of the *cogito* has not been established. However, from the non-establishment of the *cogito* what follows at best, is doubt about RATpen. But doubt about RATpen is quite consistent with the *absence* of doubt about EMpen. Withholding assent from a rationalist world-view does not rule out our being committed to a commonsensical or empiricist one. Indeed most often we hesitate to embrace a rationally reborn version of our beliefs *because* we are still clinging on to their raw unexamined ancestors.

To conclude, this paper has tried to show the complexity of Descartes' doubt: It is a 'rational' doubt to be distinguished from a logical or merely psychological one; and it is different from Pyrrhonian doubt in being 'dialectical'. Introducing such complexity of course has the advantage of making coherent certain apparently conflicting Cartesian texts. But besides this, it serves a broader epistemological purpose. According to the familiar Cartesian picture of an epistemologist-apple-

sorter, the enterprise of epistemology is primarily the business of classifying and sorting our beliefs into the categories of 'good' and 'bad' or 'knowledge' and 'non-knowledge'. Though contemporary Western epistemologists have concentrated on distinguishing and classifying the different kinds of 'knowledge', the epistemically 'bad' beliefs are generally lumped together into an undifferentiated category of non-knowledge. A finer-grained look at this category is necessary not only for a complete chart of our doxastic system but also for a deeper understanding of knowledge itself\* because knowledge is related in many different ways to our non-knowings. They are not just opposites. Some sophisticated non-knowings, for example, may logically lead to surer knowings\* though what is eventually known is not quite the same thing as what was known to be non-known to start with. It is only by analysing Descartes' doubt that we can bail him out of seeming paradoxes and give him the benefit of doubt to reach certainty.

#### NOTES

1. I take Sextus Empiricus to be a representative of Pyrrhonism. See Sextus Empiricus, *Selections from the Major Writings on Scepticism, Man and God* ed. by P.P. Hallie and S.G. Etheridge, (Indiana:Hackett, 1985).
2. All references to the works of Descartes are (unless mentioned otherwise) from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
3. *Search, For Truth*, p.408.
4. The names of the three characters in the dialogue are etymologically interesting. 'Polyander' means 'the common person'. 'Epistimon' signifies 'the scientist' and 'Eudoxus' means 'the good believer'.
5. *The Search For Truth*. p.408.
6. Sextus Empiricus, *Selections From the Major Writings*. p.86.
7. Stobaeus *Florilegium* 82, 13; Plutarch *De Communibus Notitiis* 1059e,



- Quoted in Mark L. Mcpherran, 'Skeptical Homeopathy and Self-Refutation' in *Phronesis* 1987. Vol. XXXII/3; p.291, fn5
8. *Serach For Truth*, p.418.
  9. See J. Annas and J. Barnes, *The Modes of Scepticism* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1985).
  10. *Meditations*, p.15
  11. *Ibid*, p.15.
  12. *Ibid*, p.15.
  13. *Sixth Meditation* p.61
  14. The apparent oddity of the observation, if detected at this point, is actually the root of the Bhattacharya-paradox which I grapple with later on in this paper: How can S\* be *derived* from S and be evidentially stronger than S such that it can outbalance S? Is'nt a *derived* end less than or equal to the set of premises in evidential strength?
  15. For Sextus, the 'method' of doubt is the ability to generate equipollent arguments having the structure indicated above. But it is not necessary for him to *assert* any of the premises. All he does in stating the conflicting perspectives S and S\* is to report the beliefs of others and in doing so also records that they *seem* to be of equal strength. This naturally and automatically *results* in a suspension of belief about the matter in question. The difference between the two philosophers then is something like this: Sextus' arguments end in doubt and not only does he make no theoretical commitments in generating the doubt but *does not make any theoretical statements about the doubt*. Descartes, on the other hand, moves to the reflective stage by *asserting* his doubt-which assertion forms the theoretical starting point of another line of reflection that result in certainty.
  16. Sibajiban Bhattacharya, 'Descartes Doubt' in his *Doubt, Belief and Knowledge* (New Delhi: ICPR in association with Allied Publishers, 1987) p.9.
  17. Refer to *Nyayasutra* 1.1.23.
  18. Sibajiban Bhattacharya, "'Descartes' Doubt'", p.7.
  19. *Seventh Set of Objections with Replies*, p.319.
  20. *Ibid*. p.3149.
  21. *Meditation I*, p.12.
  22. Descartes' response in explaining what is 'minimal element of doubt'

in response to Bourdin's query in consonance with this. In the *Seventh Set of Objections and Replies* we find him saying: 'Firstly, if there is anything whose existence or whose nature I can doubt, not rashly but for powerful reasons, then it contains some element of doubt. But secondly, there is also, an element of doubt in things concerning which, though they may seem clear to me, some evil demon may deceive me.... Now items in the first category contain a considerable element of doubt, whereas those in the second contain a small element of doubt which although 'minimal' is sufficient to justify the label 'doubtful' and to make the doubt a real one.' p.305.

23. *Fifth Set of Replies.* p.242.
24. *Seventh Set of Objection with Replies,* p.307.
25. See Margaret Dauler Wilson, *Descartes.* The Argument of the Philosophers (London: Routledge, 1978).
26. *Meditaion I,* p.15.
27. The phrase 'method of doubt' has an interesting ambiguity. In Sextus it seems to stand for the way or the arguments generating doubt. In Descartes, in signifies a way *through* doubt or a method in which the presence of doubt is an essential element. Doubt is the end and the method is the means in Sextus; whereas, doubt is the means in Descartes.