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TRUTH AND SKEPTICISM:
ON THE LIMITS OF A PHILOSOPHICAL
REFUTATION OF SKEPTICISM

What is truth? This famous question does not express merely the anguish—or the detachment—of the person who, at the moment of choosing, hesitates between deciding for one or the other of the contradictory theses being presented. At a second level, the question no longer concerns merely the content but the very conditions for the decision: in what name, by virtue of what criterion do we say that a given assertion is true while its contrary is false? We could limit ourselves to recognizing in this second phase a particular species of philosophical questioning, which proceeds reflexively from the constituted to the constituent, from the given of the experience to the conditions for the possibility of the experience in general. But in the question about truth, a prejudicial difficulty inevitably arises which is proper to this question and makes it incomparable to any other. How can I be assured of the truth of my assertions about truth without presupposing at the same time

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a theory for that truth which I am in fact in the process of seeking? In other words, any question about truth moves in a circle since, by demanding a *true* answer, just like every question it implies that the questioner already knows what is truth at the very moment when he is asking what it is.

Skepticism seized on this situation to question the possibility for something other than an arbitrary response to the question, what is truth. But by raising the doubt, does the skeptic himself escape from the circle which he reproaches in his dogmatic adversary? He would not escape it if skepticism were a body of doctrine claiming, like every doctrine, its own truth. It is clear that skepticism, for example, cannot at the same time affirm, “no proposition is true” and, by way of exception, hold this single proposition as true. Dogmatic adversaries of skepticism since Aristotle have correctly understood that a proposition of the type, “Every one (proposition) is false” is self-refuting since if everything is false, it is also false that everything is false.¹ And the skeptic is no better sheltered from refutation if, given the impossibility in which he finds himself of discerning the false from the true and thus of refuting any proposition whatsoever, he reaches the conclusion that everything is as it seems and as it is said to be, in other words that every proposition is true. For then the contrary proposition would also be true, namely that no proposition is true, including, obviously, the proposition which holds that every proposition is true.²

Here and there skeptics have fallen into non-sequiturs of this type, opening themselves up to criticism from their adversaries. But this is obviously not the most interesting, nor even the most general, case. In Antiquity, skeptics, or rather those who were later to be designated by this name, called themselves *ephektikoi* which

¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book Gamma, 8, 1012 b 8-11. The reader is asked not to see an anachronism in the fact that Aristotle is made to respond to the argument of a skeptic. Although historically skepticism did not appear until Pyrrhon (Third century B.C.), it is clear that this trend had been widely prepared for by the many arguments attributed to the Sophists of the Fifth century B.C., arguments which, in what follows, we shall consequently and recurrently refer to as “skeptical”.

² *Ibid.*, 1012 b 15 sg. M.F. Burnyeat (“Protagoras and Selfrefutation in Later Greek Philosophy”, *The Philosophical Review*, LXXXV, 1976, pp. 44-69) shows that the case of the two propositions is not exactly parallel. Unlike the proposition, “Everything is false”, the proposition “Everything is true” is not immediately, but only “dialectically”, self-refutable, because it requires the presence of a contradictor.

means specialists in suspense, in the suspension (*epoche*) of judgment. The later denomination “skeptic”—from *skepsis*, which means “research”—is more positive, and thus more imprudent, for research implies an idea of truth (one would not search if there was no hope of discovering the truth) and thereby presupposes once again the very matter in question. Certainly we should be grateful that the skeptics of history, in particular those in the late Antique period, the leading one of which is Sextus Empiricus, were in fact “researchers”, that they practised the experimental method before the fact, which allowed them to contribute to scientific progress, and to that of medical science in particular.³ But what is of interest to us here is the radicality of skeptical “suspense” and the provocation it represented for the proponents of dogmatism, who, without skeptical provocation, would have remained blind to the circle—which must truly be called vicious—on which their own thinking rests. Quite fortunately, then, there was a sufficient number of consistent skeptics—from Protagoras to Pyrrhon, if we limit ourselves just to Antiquity—to avoid making of skepticism a dogma among others, which would then succumb under its own blows. The pure skeptic is someone who does not affirm, for to affirm *also* means affirming that what one affirms is true.⁴ Nor does he deny, for to deny is *also* to affirm that the contrary of what is said is false. The skeptic, for example, does not affirm that *there is no* criterion for truth. He simply notes that until an eventual proof to the contrary is produced, there is no criterion which imposes itself on him in an evident manner, thus leaving to the adversary and to him alone the burden of this proof. The suspension of judgment which derives therefrom does not signify that the skeptic is disinterested in the truth, but that he is *waiting*, even if for but a single assertion from the other to force him, for his own benefit as well as for that of humanity in general, to question himself about the conditions for the validity of this assertion.

Historically, however, skepticism was not able to present itself

³ Cf. J.P. Dumont, *Le scepticisme et le phénomène*, Paris, 1972.

⁴ The fact that every proposition stated implies its own truth has been recognized from Aristotle to Wittgenstein. Cf. Aristotle: “*Socrates is a musician* means that this is true” (*Metaph.*, book Delta, 7, 1017 a 33), and Wittgenstein: “What does a proposition’s ‘being true’ mean? ‘p’ is true = p. (That is the answer)” (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Appendix I, section 5).

as a simple expectation, waiting on the uncertain arrival of truth, but rather it appeared as a reaction against the surrounding dogmatism. Thus it is that there was skepticism in the Hellenistic period, which reacted against Stoic dogmatism, and to a lesser extent Epicureanism. But skepticism is not simply a philosophical theory among others, which therefore must wait before announcing that a theory, or even simply a discourse, has been articulated.⁵ Skepticism is thus not a discourse which can claim truth for itself, but a meta-discourse which questions the pretence to truth of already existing discourses. The discourse thus placed in question is not necessarily a philosophical discourse; it can be an ordinary discourse or such and such other form of discourse, even a discourse held to be in a pathological state. This explains the fact that certain manifestations of skepticism before the fact could appear quite early in the history of philosophy. Thus Aristotle attributed a fully skeptical attitude, namely the impossibility of determining the truth or falsity of contradictory appearances, to such archaic authors as Parmenides, Heraclitus, Empedocles or even Homer, who, according to Aristotle, raised the question of truth in the context of Hector's delirium.⁶ It is also clear, for example, that the position of the sophist Protagoras, who wondered about the status of two opposing statements (*dissoi logoi*) of which any given object may be the subject, can be analyzed as a second level of reflection on discourse, and it is probably the same, at least in an indirect manner, for the theses of Gorgias on non-being, in which certain persons quite rightly see a "parody" of the discourse of the Eleatic philosophers on truth and being.

These historical remarks make it possible to situate the locus of the debate between skepticism and dogmatism. Skepticism summons dogmatism to prove its truth, if necessary simply by requiring that it effectively meet its own requirements. Skepticism takes cover behind the fact that the person who affirms also bears the obligation of proving the truth of what he affirms. By affirming nothing, the skeptic then believes that he can avoid this obligation of proof. But the dogmatic person does not let him off so easily.

⁵ Skepticism, since it is not a theory, should not be confused with agnosticism, which affirms from the outset that being is unknowable or that truth is inaccessible.

⁶ *Metaph.*, Gamma, 5, 1009 b 29.

The strategy of dogmatism in its attempt to refute skepticism was to consist in showing that the skeptical meta-discourse, even though it be an antidiscourse, remains necessarily a discourse and therefore is subject to the law affecting all discourse which is to affirm (or to deny, which is in effect the same thing) and at the same time to presuppose the truth of what he affirms (or the falsity of what he denies). Skepticism, therefore, cannot escape its own criticism.

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I would like to discuss the validity of this dogmatic refutation of skepticism by examining a famous, although often poorly understood, example of this refutation. This is the argument in which Aristotle, in the fourth chapter of the book Gamma of the *Metaphysics*, refutes the adversaries of the principle of contradiction. Characterizing the argument in this manner itself calls for a preliminary remark. Adversaries of the principle of contradiction are not, and cannot be, properly speaking, deniers; for to deny the principle of contradiction would mean affirming the truth of the contrary of the principle by applying the principle of contradiction implicitly (or at least its corollary, the principle of the excluded middle) at the very moment in which it is being denied. The argument is often presented this way in fact: the negation of the principle of contradiction is self-contradictory. But this is a poor response (poor because the adversary could reply that the accusation of contradiction does not apply since he does not recognize the validity of the principle of contradiction) to a bad argument (for the skeptic, by positing a thesis, even a negative one, would objectively be joining the camp of the dogmatics and would thereby fall under the sway of his own criticism).

In fact Aristotle did not fall into this facile argument. He imagined an adversary—historic or fictional, it makes no difference—who neither affirms nor denies, but *requests* (1006 a 5). He requests that the principle of contradiction be demonstrated for him. Answering this request by saying that the principle of contradiction is evident or indemonstrable is a flimsy response, and Aristotle is very conscious of this; for such a response would consist in admitting that there is no criterion for the truth of this principle (any empirical criterion for verification being excluded here). Ari-

stotle thus develops a subtler strategy, which nevertheless has at least one apparent flaw. The strategy functions only “if the adversary says something” (1006 a 12; 1007 a 8). But why should he say anything? We know that skeptics of this Hellenistic period cultivated “*aphasia*” and that, according to Spinoza, skeptics form “the sect of the mute”. Aristotle requires the skeptic to speak if he does not wish to “resemble a plant” (1006 a 14-15), an argument which might seem to be simply *ad hominem*, here in the strongest sense of the word (speak, if you are a man!), if he did not benefit from a more profound justification from the fact that the skeptic thinks, and therefore speaks at least to himself. This is so if we accept, as Aristotle, following Plato, seems to do, that thinking, “the soul’s dialogue with itself”,⁷ has a linguistic, or quasi-linguistic structure.

Having admitted this, the refutation can function without begging the question. For it is not necessary that the adversary affirm or deny anything at all, and he will rightly refuse to do so if he is consistent. It suffices for him simply to say something. Aristotle, who carefully refrains from reducing discourse to affirmation and negation, and who also is not unaware of the existence of discourses which are neither true nor false, such as prayer,⁸ could have noted here that the adversary is obliged at least to make a “request” and therefore to emit a discourse which is part of what today we would call performative or illocutory. In any case, it is at this level, or at the more general level of speaking (*phasis*), which is not necessarily speaking-about in propositions (*kataphasis*), that refutation occurs. The one who speaks signifies something, that is a single thing, without which discourse would be equivocal and be destroyed as discourse. But to signify a thing is to exclude from my speech everything which is not part of the significance of this thing. Here modern translations can lead to confusion, but it is clear that in Aristotle the verb *semainein* refers to what Frege calls *Sinn* rather than to what he calls *Bedeutung*. If I pronounce the word “man” in normal conditions of discourse, this word has a “meaning” independently of knowing if it designates an existing referent or not.

⁷ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 189 e; *Sophist*, 263 e; *Philebus*, 38 ce. Aristotle, *Metaph.*, Gamma, 4, 1006 b 8.

⁸ Aristotle, *On Interpretation (Peri Hermeneias)*, 3, 17 a 4-5.

This meaning is what Aristotelian tradition calls “quiddity”, which can be expressed explicitly in a definition. However, that is sufficient for attesting *de facto* (even though it is, so to speak, a fact of reason) to the truth of the principle of contradiction. To say “man” is to think “rational animal”, which consequently excludes the possibility that anything which is not a rational animal can *truthfully* be termed “man”, as well as the possibility that it can at the same time be non-man, in that it is not a rational animal, and man, in that we call him such, but without thinking of the meaning. The contradiction (*antiphrasis*) is here located at a level which is more inherent than is generally conceived: at the level of speaking (*phasis*) and not that of proposition (*kataphasis*). The impossibility of contradiction is required by meaning even before being required by logic. The skeptic must recognize that, inasmuch as he speaks, there is an ante-predicative truth inherent in everything said and which is beyond any questioning since questioning itself, being essentially verbal, contributes to reinforcing this requirement.

This refutation is skillful and its skillfulness has impressed generations of commentators. Does that make it completely convincing? The power of skepticism comes first of all from the refusal of the obligation of proof. The ruse of dogmatism is to impose this obligation on it and to show that it is incapable of providing proof without falling into contradiction. Does this mean that dogmatism has thus taken the match? I do not think so. For what does skepticism really want in the end? In even its most ordinary form, it wants to show that truth can only exist situated somewhere, mediatized, relative to a certain point of view, to presuppositions which are those of the speaker and which themselves escape any evaluation of their truth or their falsity, if we are to avoid having to continue back infinitely. There is no criterion which escapes the obligation of being based on a foundation, but there is no foundation which escapes the obligation of being based on a criterion. The skeptic thinks he avoids this circle by renouncing the notion of criterion or by relativizing it, which is ultimately the same. The dogmatic, represented by Aristotle, thinks he has discovered an

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absolute criterion, which is the evidence of meaning. But by removing this evidence from any demonstrative justification, does it not play into the skeptic's hands? The heart of the Aristotelian argument is that every word has a meaning. But is this not already a presupposition? That this presupposition seems to be inherent in every act of speech, and not just from the particular point of view of this or that speaker, does not thereby absolutize it, for it would be necessary to specify that it is here a question of every act of speech which is sensible, reasonable, rational, intelligible or simply significant, which is a means of recognizing that there are words which are nonsense or, to say it in Greek, there are *logoi* which are *alogoi*. However, favoring the logical logos over the a-logical logos, the telling word over the empty word, healthy discourse over unhealthy discourse, but also rational thought over mythical thought, is a matter of decision more than one of evidence, as soon as the possibility of the contrary has been attested to empirically and, as is known, widely used by skeptics.

The struggle for the absence of presuppositions thus turns against Aristotle, and the victory of dogmatism, if dogmatism there be, is a Pyrric victory. For if we look carefully, the refutation of skepticism, which is thought to be based on an essential necessity from which the skeptic cannot remove himself, does not rest on this necessity except under the condition of three presuppositions previously held as true without proof:

- 1) every word has a meaning, i.e., a single meaning;
- 2) each thing has an essence;
- 3) there is a relationship between the essence of things and the meaning of words (cf 1007 a 25).

But could we not say, and Aristotle in fact says it to head off the objection that he is being arbitrary, that these three principles are thus implicitly accepted from the outset by the two speakers? If the words which I use did not have a univocal meaning, they would not be understood by the person to whom I address myself, and they would be even less understood if this univocal meaning did not correspond to a world which we share in common. "If words mean nothing, every exchange of ideas between men would be destroyed, and, in fact, even every exchange with oneself".⁹ But

⁹ Id., *Metaph.*, Gamma, 4, 1006 b 8-9.

these conditions for dialogue would become *transcendental* conditions of possibility, i.e. universal and necessary ones, only if we were actually in a situation of dialogue. However, this situation is refused by the skeptic for methodological reasons.¹⁰ We come to the conclusion then, that the speaker *must* admit these presuppositions if he believes in the possibility of communicating. But this is the very thing he doubts until the dogmatic has proven it. The power of the skeptic thus remains intact. It is he who has forced the dogmatic to admit his presuppositions, at the very moment when the dogmatic thought he had forced the skeptic to do so.

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The conclusion which we would like to draw from this analysis is that there is no doctrine of truth which can apply its own criterion to itself, and that skeptics are correct in insinuating that there is no criterion for truth other than within an already constituted doctrine which itself escapes verification. The criterion is posited outside every criterion. What is posited without criterion is what I have called “presupposition”.

I gave an example of such presuppositions with reference to what is frequently called the “ontological” definition of truth in Aristotle: the equation of meaning and essence. We would reach the same conclusion if we examined the “logical” conception of truth which Aristotle uses more frequently than the preceding one: that of the conformity between composition in discourse (the attribution of a predicate to a subject) and the composition in things (the actual possession of an accident by a substance). For it would be easy to show that this definition presupposes both a predicative structure of the proposition and an ontology of substance, which means that this “logical” definition contains no less an ontological presupposition than the previous one. In general, every definition of truth as “equation” or “conformity” comes up against a logical difficulty which has been raised frequently ever since Spinoza. The conform-

¹⁰ This seems to me to be an argument against Karl Otto Apel’s transcendental pragmatism (cf. *Transformation der Philosophie*, Frankfurt/Main, 1969), which tries to deduce all principles of reason from the “communicational situation” in which men have always found themselves. In fact, if only one single man refuses this situation, communication ceases being universal and therefore cannot serve as absolute foundation. Dialogue is an ideal, not a situation imposed on everyone.

ity between an assertion and a fact must itself be the object of an assertion, whose conformity with the fact of the conformity must itself be the object of another assertion, and so on infinitely.

The logical impurity of this theory was recognized by the most scrupulous of contemporary logicians who were preserved in this way from the real positivist consciousness. W.O. Quine speaks of the “inscrutability of the reference”,¹¹ J. Hintikka sees no other means of escaping “the ineffability of truth” than by admitting “the inexhaustibility of semantics”,¹² which is not much better. But these authors retain the hope of overcoming this impurity by the construction of “models” destined to localize what cannot be demonstrated and to render it inoffensive from then on. However, the very expression used by Quine to designate the “ontological commitment” of every theory evokes more an existential decision than an hypothesis which can be logically neutralized. It seems to us that this unspoken, even unthought, element, which is part of every one of our discourses and whose silent presence condemns to circularity every discourse which would pretend to submit them to criteria of truth which presuppose them already, is less a part of logic, which is at ease only in the realm of the explicit, than a technique of interpretation, *hermeneutics*, whose function is to seek everything underlying the components, the hidden behind the evident, the forest behind the trees. It is no doubt not by chance that Aristotle gave the title *Peri Hermeneias*, “On Interpretation”, precisely to the work in which he subjects to interpretation the conditions for the possibility of a discourse which can be considered true. This anchoring of logic in hermeneutics, which is responsible for extricating its logical presuppositions, is no doubt what has made it possible for Aristotelian dogmatism, more than any other system, to get off the hook, aided in this by the provocations of sophistry.

But it could be shown that all of western thinking is based on such presuppositions. Parmenides thought that truth was the identity of the idea with *being*. But being is not a simple neutral designation for reality or the conformity between what I say and

¹¹ Cf. W.O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, 1969.

¹² In a presentation to the conference of the International Philosophy Institute on “The Present Forms of Truth” (Palermo, Sept. 1985).

reality. The verb “to be” certainly has a veritative function,¹³ but there is also a determined meaning: that of permanence, of presence. Truth is then idea through permanence and presence; truth excludes becoming. There is a decision there which nothing has imposed¹⁴ and which dominates western metaphysics, as Heidegger incessantly proved with regard to metaphysics in a much more critical sense than frequently is thought.

At the other end of the line, the reduction of truth to what can be verified empirically, characteristic of the ideology of modern science, is no more devoid of presuppositions than the archaic concept. These presuppositions are even an extension of the previous ones. They reduce reality to what can be objectified or expressed from it, that is what can be represented or presented. The presupposition is seen at certain times to be restrictive, at other times arbitrary, impoverishing, no doubt fruitful in the scientific sphere but probably disabling for the higher, or at least more encompassing, interests of reason.

Truth today remains, in its definition as in its function, dependent on human interests, whose excellence or prevalence are not verifiable themselves. Historically variable, these interests must be explained. This is the role of hermeneutics which, by constantly attempting to topify the implicit contexts and the non-objectified (and in fact non-objectifiable) horizons, shows itself to be the worthy heir of ancient skepticism. Certainly there is a higher authority—let us call it “reason” for now—which has the right to judge the greater or lesser legitimacy of these interests. But where does this authority reside and who has it unquestionably in his position? Even though it is impossible to answer this question clearly, a great step forward could already be taken if, while waiting for their still delayed appearance before a universal tribunal of reason, every culture and every system of thought would recognize that they are deeply rooted in a series of presuppositions (in the eighteenth century these would have been called prejudices) which this culture and this system are incapable of justifying without

¹³ What Charles H. Kahn calls its “veridical use” (*The Verb “be” in Ancient Greek*, Dordrecht, 1973).

¹⁴ Cf. P. Aubenque, “Syntaxe et sémantique de l’être dans le Poème de Parménide”, in *Etudes sur le Poème de Parménide*, edited by P. Aubenque, vol. II, Paris, Vrin, 1986.

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falling into a vicious circle, since they are founded on these “prejudices”. Western philosophy, of Greek inspiration, even though it may claim to be universal, cannot escape any more than the others from this particularity nor from the precariousness of this situation. At least it has had the merit of sheltering within its bosom, in the person of the skeptic, the embarrassing guest who unendingly forces admission of this fact.

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