DESCARTES AND ORTEGA ON THE FATE OF INDUBITABLE KNOWLEDGE*

My intent here is to carry out an examination of the role that consciousness played for Descartes, the putative father of modern Western philosophy, and to do so in view of a particular thematic nexus, namely, the problem of the possibility of indubitable knowledge. However, before proceeding to discharge such a task, two disclaimers are, in my opinion, appropriate.

On the one hand, it is clear from the historical record that my choice of focus is neither whimsical nor accidental. Descartes himself framed the questions concerning science and reality that he was living so intensely precisely in such terms. Without great fear of distortion, one could even say that subsequent philosophical developments and difficulties may be traced to the problem of whether absolutely certain cognition is at all possible.

On the other hand, I do not propose to be guided in this investigation merely by a historical interest in establishing the logic of thought unfolding on the basis of adopting Descartes’s point of departure and leading therefrom to the present. No matter how meritorious and attractive such a procedure may be in itself, I believe it would not be self-sufficiently or ultimately rewarding. After all, real questions cannot be raised out of sheer curiosity, or on the grounds of simple erudition; on the contrary, they must be born of actually pressing preoccupations, which we think genuinely exist for us and that could be characterized, in a way, as Husserl himself did in presenting the situation prevailing in his time, for, as he put it,

[1]he splintering of present-day philosophy ... sets us thinking .... The comparative unity that it had in previous ages, in its aims, its problems and methods, has been lost. When, with the beginning of modern times, religious belief was becoming more and more externalized as a lifeless convention, men of intellect were lifted by a new belief, their great belief in an autonomous philosophy and science ....

But meanwhile this belief too has begun to languish not without reason. ... Instead of a serious discussion among conflicting theories that, in their very conflict, demonstrate the intimacy with which they belong together, the commonness of their underlying convictions, and an unswerving belief in a true philosophy, we have a pseudo-reporting and a pseudo-criticizing. ... The philosophers meet but, unfortunately, not the philosophies. The philosophies lack the unity of a mental space in which they might exist and act on one another. ...²

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Indeed, it seems highly paradoxical that thought – the aim of which is the attainment of clarity about and insight into reality – and particularly philosophical thought (which is systematically directed toward that goal) find themselves in such a predicament, a situation of crisis that, to avail ourselves of Husserl’s own assessment of it, appears to be “similar to the one encountered by Descartes in his youth. ...”³ This is especially confusing when one encounters so many philosophical schools, which, in their incommunicant and dysfunctional glossolalia, make a mockery of their essential vocation. If nothing else, philosophy, when practiced with the “radicalness of self-responsibility”,⁴ consists in searching after ultimate foundations, for no questionable or grounded view can satisfy the philosopher’s quest, and yet one sees that today, more than ever, the confusion is so vast and profound that, again, many so-called philosophers – knowingly or unknowingly – take historically-rooted ideas or socio-politically determined notions as means to articulate what they take as valid answers to age-old difficulties. No wonder did Husserl consider our crisis as betraying not simply a difference of opinion or just a passing befuddlement concerning principles; rather, he understood it radically, if one employs this word etymologically, for he conceived it as affecting reason precisely as the modern principle of principles. All theories, schools of thought, and theoretical or scientific propositions are fundamentally one, for they are all attempts to live, formulate, and recast the workings and products of reason, taken as the power and endeavor to grasp reality as it is. But now it is this ultimate source and sustenance of radical thought which is being cast in doubt, obscured, and even disregarded in view of the chaotic multiplicity of opinion⁵ identifiable as the issue of present-day philosophical thinking.

To follow Descartes’s and Husserl’s injunction and example does not mean, however, to interpret their advice and attendant practice as if they impelled us – to say it once more – to carry out a mere literary or historical examination that would determine the components and qualities of what the latter described as the “medley of [the] great traditions ...” of the “immense philosophical literature ...”.⁶ On the contrary, the path to be trodden and charted in order to overcome our predicament must be genuinely philosophical; that is to say, the ultimateness of the end pursued thereby must be consistent with, and supported by, the radicalness of the procedure chosen to follow after it. Now, I suggest that the sort of path to be traversed is already indicated by some of the expressions Husserl himself employed, to wit: the “comparative unity” of philosophy “in previous ages”⁷ and the “commonness of ... [the] underlying convic-