ABSTRACT. If Descartes’s Cogito can be held as the opening of the era of modern subjectivity, it is to the extent that the “I” is taken for the first time in the position of foundation, i.e., as the ultimate condition for the possibility of all philosophical discourse. The question raised in this paper is whether the crisis of the Cogito, opened later by Hume, Nietzsche and Heidegger on different philosophical grounds, is not already contemporaneous to the very positing of the Cogito.

Taking as our guide the first three of Descartes’s Meditations, I should like to stress two points: I want first to underscore the radical discontinuity introduced into philosophical investigation by the cogito ergo sum, set in the position of primary truth. Next, I want to show to what extent the Cogito, such as it was actually formulated by the historical Descartes, falls short of satisfying the unlimited ambition with which philosophical tradition has credited him. Descartes’s Meditations – or, to give them their complete title, which is not without importance for our purposes, Meditations on the First Philosophy in Which the Existence of God and the Real Distinction of Mind and Body are Demonstrated – do present the strange character that, in order to begin to philosophize, the certainty of the self has to be put in the position of first truth, but that, in order to continue to philosophize, this same certainty must in a sense be toppled from its dominant position. The recognition of this crisis of the Cogito, contemporary to the positing of Cogito, constitutes the thrust of the present investigation.

1. POSITING THE COGITO

The first two Meditations attest to the immense ambition belonging to a philosophy which the Cogito inaugurates. The universal and radical nature of the project are apparent in the opening lines: “I was convinced of the necessity of undertaking once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted, and of commencing anew the work of building from the foundation, if I desired to establish a firm and abiding superstructure in the sciences” (Meditation I). The universal character of the undertaking is of the same magnitude as the doubt, which does not exempt from the region of opinion common sense, the sciences – both mathematical and physical –
or the philosophical tradition. However, the radicalness of the undertaking is just as important as its universality. This radicalness has to do with the nature of a doubt, itself incomparable to that one might exercise within the three aforementioned domains. The fact that all reality can be suspected of being no more than a dream, that the simple truths of geometry and arithmetic can be held to be uncertain, that the distinction between seeming and being vacillates — this threefold questioning is incomparable to the localised doubts that stand out against the backdrop of some sensible, scientific or metaphysical certainty, which itself is uncontested in the moment of doubt. The hypothesis of being completely fooled stems from a doubt that Descartes calls “metaphysical” in order to signal its disproportion in relation to all doubt kept within a space of certainty. In order to dramatize this doubt, Descartes forges the incredible hypothesis of a great deceiver or a malignant demon, the inverted image of a veracious God, reduced to the state of simple opinion: “How do I know”, Descartes asks, “that I am not also deceived each time I add together two and three…” (ibid.).

What happens to the self in this dramatic episode? There are, it seems to me, two important points to stress here. On the one hand, all subjectivity has not fallen with the collapse of opinion, although the human body has followed the fate of all bodies: if I can doubt the reality of sensible things, I can also doubt “that I am in this place, seated by the fire”; with this body-self all the reference points of deictic terms are abolished. And yet, all subjectivity cannot be swallowed up in the depths of doubt, since someone is performing the doubt. The doubt, indeed, is not merely suffered, it is directed: “I will at length apply myself earnestly and freely to the general overthrow of all my former opinions” (ibid.). Even the hypothesis of the malignant demon is a fiction that I invent: “I become my own deceiver, by supposing, for a time, that all those opinions are entirely false and imaginary…” (ibid.). The I is, in this way, raised to a power proportionate to the radical nature of the doubt it exercises. From this stems our second remark: the I that doubts, who is it? It is assuredly Descartes’ I: in the Discourse on Method, the autobiographical features of the adventure are heavily stressed. Nor are these features erased in the Meditations, as is confirmed in the opening lines: “Several years have now elapsed since I first became aware that I had accepted, even from my youth, many false opinions for true…” (ibid.). But, as the doubt becomes ever more radical, the I gradually loses its “token” character. This is not, however, in order to resort to the “I as type”, to the empty I found in the table of personal pronouns. The strangeness adhering to doubt results in the I stripping itself of its autobiographical character in order to become, not just anyone, in the sense of indicators and deictic terms, but an I as metaphysical or