

# God, philosophy, universities

*A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition*

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A SHEED & WARD BOOK

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.

Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK



# Contents

Introduction	1
<b>God, Philosophy, Universities</b>	
Chapter 1 God	5
Chapter 2 Philosophy	9
Chapter 3 God and philosophy	13
Chapter 4 God, philosophy, universities	15
<b>Prologues to the Catholic Philosophical Tradition</b>	
Chapter 5 Augustine	21
Chapter 6 Boethius, the Pseudo-Dionysius, and Anselm	33
Chapter 7 The Islamic and Jewish Prologue to Catholic Philosophy	43
Chapter 8 The Genesis of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition	61
<b>Aquinas and After</b>	
Chapter 9 Aquinas: Philosophy and Our Knowledge of God	73
Chapter 10 Aquinas: Philosophy and the Life of Practice	87

Chapter 11	Aquinas: God, philosophy, universities	93
Chapter 12	After Aquinas: Scotus and Ockham	97
<b>The Threshold of Modern Philosophy</b>		
Chapter 13	From Scholasticism to Skepticism	105
Chapter 14	Descartes, Pascal, and Arnauld	113
<b>Modernity</b>		
Chapter 15	The Catholic Absence From and Return to Philosophy, 1700–1850	131
Chapter 16	Newman: God, philosophy, universities	145
Chapter 17	From <i>Aeterni Patris</i> to <i>Fides et Ratio</i>	151
Chapter 18	<i>Fides et Ratio</i> : The Catholic Philosophical Tradition Redefined	165
Chapter 19	Now: universities, philosophy, God	173
	Index	181
	About the Author	193



# Introduction

Three convictions led to the writing of this book. The first is that an educated Catholic laity needs to understand a good deal more about Catholic philosophical thought than it now does. The warring partisans on the great issues that engage our culture and politics presuppose, even when they do not recognize it, the truth of some philosophical theses and the falsity of others. If we are to evaluate their claims, we had better know something about philosophy and, if we are Catholic Christians by faith and commitment, something about Catholic philosophy.

A second underlying conviction is that Catholic philosophy is best understood historically, as a continuing conversation through centuries, in which we turn and return to dialogue with the most important voices from our past, in order to carry forward that conversation in our own time. So we only know how to direct our enquiries now, if we have first made our own the philosophical thought of our predecessors. A third conviction is that philosophy is not just a matter of propositions affirmed or denied and of arguments advanced and critically evaluated, but of philosophers in particular social and cultural situations interacting with each other in their affirmations and denials, in their argumentative wrangling, so that the social forms and institutionalizations of their interactions are important and none more so than those university settings that have shaped philosophical conversation, both to its benefit and to its detriment.

I hope to find readers for this book among undergraduates in their senior year, first-year graduate students, the teachers of such undergraduate and

graduate students, and more widely in the educated reading public. It is not a book written for scholars and academic specialists, but of course it invites and will receive their criticisms. I hope that I have made no mistakes of fact, but experience suggests that I should not be too optimistic. There will certainly be quarrels about my principles of selection, about what I have emphasized, and what I have omitted. There will be those who want a larger place for Scotus or Suarez, those who find this book too Thomistic, and those who do not find it Thomistic enough. It is generally plain, I think, which arguments I endorse and which conclusions I reject and on many issues there will inevitably be numerous dissenters, Catholic and non-Catholic.

Since 2004 I have taught an undergraduate course at Notre Dame with the same title as this book. The idea of transforming that course into a book came from James Langford, for whose exceptional gifts as a publisher I have had reason to be grateful for many years. I thank him for his insights and advice. Not everything in this book has formed part of that course and not everything in that course forms part of this book. But I owe a large debt to five generations of students, over two hundred in number, who, by their questioning participation, helped to educate me, especially by compelling me to confront *their* questions posed in *their* terms. Whatever this book's defects, they have made it significantly better than it would otherwise have been and I am most grateful. Others who have helped to improve it significantly by their critical and constructive comments are my colleagues, Fred Fredoso, Brad Gregory, Ralph McInerny, David Solomon, and especially John O'Callaghan. I thank them for their generosity.

I am also extraordinarily grateful to Claire Shely for her secretarial work in helping to produce this book; to Tracy Westlake, administrative assistant in the Center for Ethics and Culture at Notre Dame; to Randy Yoho, who kept my computer from early retirement; to David Davidson, without whom Flanner Hall would not function; and to all those who clean offices, deliver mail, cook food, and so keep in being the university in which I have had the opportunity to write.

Alasdair MacIntyre  
Mishawaka, Indiana  
August 2008

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



# From Scholasticism to Skepticism

Disagreement and conflict, social, political, intellectual, and moral, were central to the life of Europe in the High Middle Ages. But in the period of transition from the late medieval period to early modernity, the conflicts and disagreements were on a larger scale and of different kinds. So in the various prologues to the Reformation, and during and after the Reformation, theological and religious disagreements multiplied and intensified. With the large interpretative recovery of ancient culture in the Renaissance, rival and alternative literary and philosophical stances emerged. The transition from the impetus theories of late medieval physicists and the complexities of Ptolemaic astronomy to the cosmology of Copernicus and the physics of Galileo generated a quite new set of divisive issues.

Yet in the same period there were also strong pressures aimed at producing agreement and eliminating conflict. The rulers of emerging modern states were anxious to secure uniformity of belief among their subjects in order to safeguard themselves and their regimes from discord and possible rebellion. Theologians on occasion attempted to resolve their disagreements and to design schemes for church reunion. Debates on controversial issues, whether theological, philosophical, or scientific, were not always polemical. But the outcome of these attempts at reconciliation tended to be either enforced conformity or continuing and deepening disagreement. Where there was enforced conformity there was intellectual sterility and, since almost all universities were places of enforced conformity, universities ceased, with some

notable but occasional exceptions, to be the places where intellectually fruitful and exciting enquiry and debate took place, although they still, for most participants in such enquiry and debate, provided the initial education that enabled them to engage in the controversies of their age.

Such enquiry and debate engaged thinkers and groups of thinkers in widely different parts of Europe. The invention of the printing press enabled thinkers to communicate with a much larger educated public, some of them in hitherto distant places. Intellectuals traveled more widely than ever before, so that what was thought and said in Poland or Scotland speedily became known in Italy and the Netherlands. Copernicus, who had been a student first at Kraków and then at Padua, served the king of Poland, whose subject he was. But his book, in which the first compelling arguments for the heliocentric system were set out, was published as a result of the efforts of a mathematician from Wittenberg, and the most important responses to it were in Denmark, Bohemia, and Tuscany.

What no educated person could remain unaware of was the continuing depth of disagreement over a wide range of topics and the apparently intractable character of the most important disagreements. But responses to this situation were of different kinds. At one extreme there were those who continued to work within whatever intellectual tradition it was in which they had been educated, developing its theses and arguments further, and entering into controversy on its behalf. At the other extreme were those who became skeptical about the power of rational argument to overcome disagreement and who as a result defended some version of philosophical skepticism. Catholic thinkers were found at both of these extremes.

Francisco de Vitoria (ca. 1485–1546) was a Dominican priest and a remarkable thinker in and upholder of the Thomistic tradition. When Vitoria was a student in Paris his teacher in theology had been Peter Crockaert who, instead of commenting on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, the text that for centuries had been the staple of Catholic theological education, lectured instead on Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*. When, in 1526, Vitoria was appointed to the senior chair in theology at the University of Salamanca, he followed his teacher's example.

His originality was a matter of how he brought Aquinas's teaching to bear on disputed questions of his own time, especially in the areas of law and politics. Has the pope authority over temporal rulers so that he can give or take away their authority over this or that political society? Has the Holy Roman Emperor such authority? What laws govern the relationship between different political societies? Under what conditions is a ruler justified in going to war? Every one of these questions had implications not merely for

political theory, but also for the practical reasoning and decision making of those with power.

Vitoria's premises are drawn from Aquinas. He follows Aquinas in distinguishing eternal law, divine law, the natural law, and civil law of particular political societies. Political societies exist for the sake of that kind of ordered life that is indispensable to human flourishing. Such an ordered life is possible only when there is the rule of civil law framed in accordance with natural law. So each people must confer authority on a ruler or rulers whose task is to enact and enforce such law. No one has legitimate authority over a people except a ruler or rulers so authorized and their authority is limited by the constraints imposed by natural law. Hence it follows that neither pope nor emperor can have the kind of temporal authority over other rulers that some had claimed for them.

What then of the relations between political societies? Here Vitoria developed the notion of an *ius gentium*, originally found in Roman law, a set of standards prescribed—like the rest of natural law—by natural reason, standards that forbid the use of violence against other political societies, unless one's own political society has been unjustly attacked or Christians are being persecuted or the innocent are being oppressed by a tyrant, someone who lacks legitimate authority as a ruler, because his actions are dictated not by natural law, but by his own will and desires.

Here, too, Vitoria's conclusions committed him to a particular standpoint in contemporary controversy. In 1492 Cristoforo Colombo, in search of a route to Asia, had undertaken a voyage financed by the rulers of Spain that led him to the Americas. In 1493, in response to a petition by the rulers of Spain and Portugal, Pope Alexander VI ruled that all land discovered in the Americas that lay to the west of a line one hundred leagues west of the Azores was to fall under the authority of the Spanish monarchs, while all land lying to the east of that line was assigned to the rule of the Portuguese monarchs, provided that these lands were inhabited by non-Christians. In 1520–1522 Mexico and in 1531–1532 Peru were conquered by Spaniards with great ruthlessness and brutality. Responding to the latter conquest and its aftermath, Vitoria wrote to his Dominican superior “that no business shocks me or embarrasses me more than the corrupt profits and affairs of the Indies” (Lawrance 1991, 331).

Vitoria's understanding of the requirements of the *ius gentium* led him to argue that the imposition of Spanish rule on the American Indians was illegitimate. All its purported justifications failed. The pope lacked the authority to confer rule over the American Indians on the kings of Spain. The fact that the Indians were not Christians is irrelevant. What determines political



authority is natural law and natural law binds Christians and non-Christians equally. The Indians had not aggressed against the Spaniards, but the Spaniards against the Indians. If it were argued, as it was, that the Indians lacked the capacities of rational agents to rule themselves, the evidence afforded by their actions and their social institutions showed otherwise.

Vitoria had provided the philosophical resources needed for the campaign against the appalling injustices done to the Indians that was waged by his fellow Dominican, Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566), author of *Historia de las Indias*, and bishop of Chiapas in southern Mexico. Las Casas' particular concerns were with the Spanish laws sanctioning the system of forced labor inflicted on the Indians, but he also put in question the legitimacy of Spanish claims to have political authority over them. In a key series of debates at Valladolid in 1550–1551 his principal opponent was Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. Sepúlveda had studied in Italy as well as Spain and was the author of polemics against both Erasmus and Luther. He had translated two of Aristotle's works into Latin and his defense of Spanish dominion and Spanish practices in the Americas was Aristotelian. Sepúlveda followed Aristotle in arguing that there is a class of human beings who are "natural slaves." Their lack of natural capacities is such that they can only be directed toward good ends by rational agents who impose their authority upon them. Sepúlveda identified the American Indians as just such natural slaves and the Spaniards who had conquered the Americas as just such rational agents. Las Casas did not deny outright that there might be such natural slaves. But his firsthand experience of Indian life gave him the strongest grounds for rejecting the claim that the Indians fell into this category.

It was not only among the Dominicans that theses and arguments of the great medieval Catholic philosophers were developed further. Franciscan scholars had elaborated aspects of Scotus's teaching into a system, and in 1633 at Toledo a general chapter of the Franciscan order officially endorsed Scotism in both philosophy and theology. Scotus's commentary *Opus Oxoniense*, on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, became a prescribed text in universities in which Franciscans occupied chairs of theology. Scotism was presented as a rival of and superior to Thomism. But neither the Dominican Thomists nor the Franciscan Scotists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were as influential as their Jesuit contemporary, Francisco Suárez (1548–1617).

Suárez drew not only on Aristotle and Aquinas, but also on Scotus, Ockham, and other medieval writers. He did so in order to construct his own distinctive philosophical standpoint. His *Disputationes Metaphysicae* was the first systematic account of metaphysics in European thought that was not a commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. On each issue he raised he sum-

marized the relevant theses and arguments of his scholastic predecessors and then arrived at his own conclusions by subjecting theirs to criticism. So for many seventeen- and eighteenth-century thinkers Suárez became *the* representative figure of scholastic thought, the only one with whom they had to reckon in their own philosophical enquiries. Yet Suárez's synthesis also put him at odds with the heirs of all those philosophers to whom he was indebted, but of whom he was critical. So Suárez, being neither Thomist nor Scotist nor follower of Ockham, was at odds with Thomists, Scotists, and followers of Ockham.

Suárez affirmed that nothing existed except individuals. He agreed with Aquinas and disagreed with Scotus that being is predicated of individuals analogically. He disagreed with Aquinas in holding that we have a pre-reflective knowledge of individuals, one that is unmediated by universals. He disagreed with Vitoria in holding that the *ius gentium* is part of or derivable from natural law. And there are other significant items to be added to this catalog of disagreements among the rival heirs of medieval Catholic philosophy. What it is important to note is that these disagreements, just as much as the larger disagreements between those heirs and the several new schools of philosophy that arose during the Renaissance, were not resolved, that the protagonists of each standpoint remained convinced that they had sufficient reason to reject the conclusions of their opponents. Such unresolved and apparently irresolvable disagreements posed a radical question about the powers of human reason. It is unsurprising that the nature and limits of those powers became an urgent topic for philosophical debate and that skepticism, both in the forms in which it had flourished in the ancient world and in new forms, was able to present itself as a compelling philosophy.

Two quite different and incompatible types of skepticism have been ascribed to the first notable ancient Greek skeptic, Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 365–275 B.C.). The more radical is that which enjoins us to beware of the deliverances of sense-experience and memory, which may always mislead us, so that we can be certain of nothing and ought to doubt everything. Yet, although Diogenes Laertius ascribed this radical view to Pyrrho and mocked him for adopting it, it seems very unlikely that he did in fact hold it. He was more probably a moderate sceptic, arguing that those issues on which philosophers have disagreed are undecidable, that we cannot arrive at a true account of how things are, but that we should content ourselves with taking them as they seem to be, so avoiding fruitless enquiry and needless dispute. As between opposing opinions we must suspend both belief and disbelief.

It is this latter type of moderate skepticism that was revived in sixteenth-century France by Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592). Montaigne had

experienced the devastation caused by so-called wars of religion, in which religious disagreements had been put to the service of secular political ambition and greedy self-interest. His hope was to neutralize religious polemic by making religious partisans less certain of the truth of their own opinions, so that opinion should no longer play a part in generating hatred and destruction. In his library he had put up the inscription: "Men are tormented by their opinions of things, not by things themselves." Montaigne's principal intention in deploying skeptical arguments, drawn from his reading of Sextus Empiricus, was to undermine some of the rival contentions of both Catholics and Protestants in their polemics against each other. So in his long essay on the Catholic theologian Raymond Sebond, Montaigne defended Sebond by arguing against his critics' arguments. Sebond held that natural reason, had it been uncorrupted by sin, would have been able to arrive at conclusions supportive of the Catholic faith, but that natural reason as it is, corrupted by sin, lacks this ability. Montaigne agreed with Sebond on this weakness of reason, although not on theological grounds. His follower, the lawyer and priest, Pierre Charron, carried Montaigne's philosophical project one stage further.

Charron was not the first Catholic sceptic. Gentian Hervet, the translator of Sextus Empiricus into Latin, and Francisco Sanchez, a professor of medicine at Toulouse and Montaigne's cousin, had both anticipated him in arguing that skepticism undermines all arguments against the Catholic faith and so provides it with indirect support. Charron argued further that the only matters on which we can have certainty are those about which God has revealed truths and that only faith in the authoritative interpretation of that revelation by the Catholic church provides us with a certainly trustworthy account of those truths. What then are the types of argument on which Montaigne and these Catholic followers of his rely? They begin from the inescapable fact that philosophers and theologians have over long periods of time failed to resolve their disagreements and infer that there are no *conclusive* arguments on any of these disputed questions. They proceed beyond this to what Montaigne took to be the practice of the ancient Pyrrhonians, namely that of opposing to any assertion or argument whatsoever a counterassertion or counterargument, not in order to produce conviction, but in order to show that there are never adequate grounds for full assent.

If someone should try to generalize from this and to assert that one can indeed know nothing, they will quarrel with this, too. "If you conclude that you definitely know nothing, they will maintain that you do know something. Yes, and if you present your doubts as axiomatic, they will challenge you on that too, arguing that you are not in doubt, or that you cannot decide

for certain and prove that you are in doubt. This is doubt taken to its limits. It shakes its own foundations . . .” (Montaigne 1987, 70).

Montaigne’s *An Apology for Raymond Sebond* is in part an exercise in irony, an essay purporting to defend a theologian, while undermining not perhaps any theology, but any dogmatic theology. It is clear that Montaigne’s skepticism does indeed preclude the kind of assent to doctrine that is required by the Catholic faith—and also by its Protestant opponents. But, if Montaigne’s arguments are at odds with the Catholic faith, then the use of skeptical arguments by Hervet, Sanches, and Charron is equally, if unintentionally, subversive. If the Catholic faith is to be upheld as consistent with what reason requires, then there has to be some adequate philosophical reply to skepticism. It is not only theology that has this interest in showing skepticism to be unwarranted. In the disputes between the protagonists of Copernican astronomy and Galilean physics on the one hand and the defenders of the Neoaristotelian physics of the impetus theorists on the other, both parties recognized that what was at stake was the *truth* about nature. Suspension of belief and disbelief would not have been an acceptable outcome and would have done great harm to the development of the natural sciences. So it seemed that scientists and philosophers of science needed a refutation of skepticism as badly as theologians did. Enter Descartes.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



# Descartes, Pascal, and Arnauld

Montaigne, by his skepticism, distanced himself from the Catholic faith, moved by a wish to rid himself and others of the unhappy dogmatism of the contending parties in the sixteenth-century wars of religion. René Descartes, born at LaHaye in Touraine shortly after those wars had come to an end, was throughout his life a believing Catholic. He was educated at the Jesuit school at La Flèche, among the best schools in Europe at that time. His Jesuit teachers introduced him to philosophy, to mathematics—at which Descartes was to excel—to physics, and then to theology and in each case laid the foundations for his future intellectual development.

About philosophy what impressed him—like Montaigne, like Charron—was the inability of philosophers to agree. Hence was to spring his conviction that, if any genuine progress is to be made in philosophical enquiry, it must be made on the basis of truths that cannot but secure the agreement of any rational enquirer. The physics that he was taught, and which he came to reject very early on, was the Neo-Aristotelian physics of the Scholastic philosophers and in rejecting it he rejected all the rival schools of Scholastic philosophy. The theology of his Jesuit instructors was, in some broad sense, Augustinian, and Descartes's thought is informed throughout by Augustinian presuppositions, most notably in the way he follows Augustine's injunction to seek truth by moving away from sense experience in order to discover it within the mind (on Descartes's relationship to Augustine see Stephen Menn 1998).

After Descartes left La Flèche in 1614 his life was very much what we would expect of the son of a provincial landowner. He studied law at Poitiers and became a soldier. But his intellectual interests, especially in mathematics, still engrossed him and were developed through his own private reading and thinking and through extended conversations and correspondence with others. Although Descartes's intellectual achievements were exceptional, his reliance on and contributions to letters and conversations with colleagues and friends, who made each other aware of the latest developments in philosophy, mathematics, physics, and literature, who shared their work with each other and invited each other's criticism, was typical of his age. Universities were for the most part strongholds only of theology and of Scholastic philosophy and had become to varying degrees intellectually irrelevant.

For Descartes there was a sharp contrast between the contemporary progress being made in mathematics, in astronomy, and in physics, developments to which he himself from a relatively early age made striking contributions, and the lack of progress in philosophy, whatever the standpoint of the philosopher. It was this situation that he aspired to remedy by providing a new starting point for philosophical enquiry, one immune to skeptical doubt, one that could provide a set of foundations for the mathematical and physical sciences. But, if he was to make out a sufficiently compelling case against skepticism, he had first to provide the strongest possible case for it. So his philosophical project became that of constructing a framework within which skepticism could be both stated and refuted. His first great insight into how he might carry out his project came in 1619, while he was still a soldier in Germany, on a winter's day that he spent in a room behind the stove, making what he later called a "wonderful discovery." But it was to be quite a number of years before he provided a philosophical account of his first insights and the impulse to provide that account was reinforced by the influence of Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle, an Oratorian, and a major figure in the revival of Catholic piety in seventeenth-century France.

In 1628 Descartes was present at a gathering at which a physician named Chandoux had presented the principles of his own new philosophy, claiming for those principles "*vraisemblance*," plausibility, the appearance of truth. It was Descartes who demonstrated at that gathering the difference between plausibility and truth and the need to show that one's formulated principles were true and not merely plausible, since the plausibility of a principle is compatible with its falsity. Bérulle was enormously impressed and told him that, because God had given him great intellectual gifts, he, Descartes, would be responsible to God for his use or misuse of them. In a letter that Descartes wrote two years later to his friend, Marin Mersenne, priest and savant, Des-

cartes explained the path that he had thenceforward taken, using the reason that God had given him to know God and to know himself (quoted in Menn 1998, 49–50).

Descartes begins within himself, with his awareness of what is directly presented to his mind, of the stock of ideas that he encounters when he inspects the contents of his mind. But then skeptical questions arise. Are things outside his mind such as these ideas represent them to be? Those things include not only the various inanimate objects, plants, and animals of which he has hitherto taken himself to have sense experience, on the basis of which he has formed his beliefs about them, but also his own body. So he asks: “Is it possible that in believing what I do about all of these I am deceived?” He takes himself to have strong reasons for answering, “Yes.” We are all of us an occasion mistaken as to what we take ourselves to have perceived. We are sometimes deceived by hallucinations. When dreaming, we suppose ourselves to be awake and mistakenly take ourselves to be perceiving. We are sometimes in error in our reasoning, without recognizing the fact. So on any particular occasion I may be deceived without knowing it. And it may therefore seem to be the case that on any particular occasion I cannot know that this is not one more occasion on which I am in error. Hence I must doubt the truth of all my judgments.

Descartes allows that in everyday life we and he would all of us take such doubt to be unreasonable. But, if we are to find secure foundations for our beliefs, including our scientific beliefs, then we must find an answer to the strongest case that can be made for taking such doubts seriously. So Descartes at the end of the first of his *Meditations on the First Philosophy* imagines that there is an evil demon, as powerful as he is cunning, who is systematically deceiving him by contriving illusions of which he is the victim. Is there anything at all about which he could not be deceived by such a demon? Is there any judgment of whose truth he can certainly be assured?

Descartes replies that there is indeed such a truth and here he follows Augustine. Augustine had responded to the ancient skeptics who had asked “What if you are deceived?” by asserting that “if I am deceived, I am” (see chapter 5). So Descartes’s reply to his own skeptical doubts is to assert: “I think, therefore I am” (*Cogito ergo sum*; *Je pense donc je suis*). For, if I doubt, the one thing that I cannot doubt is that I am doubting. And, since to doubt is to think, if I doubt, I am thinking. And, since I cannot think, unless I exist, if I think, I am. But what then is it that I know to exist? All that Descartes knows of himself so far is that he is a thinking thing. He is and knows himself to be a mind, but he does not as yet know whether or not anything exists other than his mind, including his body.

The properties of what, when he is not engaged in doubting, he takes to be his own body and other bodies are quite other than the properties of a mind. Bodies are extended, three dimensional, heavy or light, occupying space. Our knowledge of them, if it is indeed knowledge, comes from our sense experience. But Descartes so far has found reasons only to distrust his sense experience. His next problem then is to find grounds for trusting the deliverances of sense experience. The first step toward identifying these grounds is to reinspect the contents of his mind, finding among his ideas that of an infinite and perfect being, God.

Descartes had identified clarity and distinctness as marks of the truth of the ideas expressed by the Cogito. The very same clarity and distinctness, so he claims, belongs to the idea of God, an idea such that no one whose grasp of its clarity and of what makes it distinct from every other idea can fail to recognize it as the idea of something that must exist outside the mind. Descartes advances two different kinds of argument. First, he argues that just as to grasp the idea of a triangle is to understand that necessarily its three angles add up to 180 degrees, so also to grasp the idea of God is to understand that God must necessarily exist. Second, he argues that the idea of an infinite and perfect being has properties such that its presence in the mind could only have been caused by just such a being, so that the idea of God itself directs us to the reality of God.

Were these arguments of Descartes sound, his further contentions might have been compelling. For such a perfect being, so Descartes contends, could not and would not deceive us by permitting us to have deceptive sense experience. We ourselves may make incautious judgments about what is presented to us in sense experience and these judgments may as a result be in error. But God ensures that sense experience itself is trustworthy and therefore that what we have taken to be knowledge of bodies is indeed knowledge. So anyone who follows Descartes's procedure, beginning from within the mind and arguing her or his way through the Cogito, the arguments for the existence of God, and the argument for the existence of bodies will, so Descartes claims, have defeated the sceptic. Our confidence in our everyday beliefs will have been justified and foundations will have been laid for the enquiries of the physicists. But is Descartes right?

Everything turns on the arguments for the existence of God and those arguments fail. The first is simply fallacious. What we understand, once we have grasped the idea of a triangle, is that, if anything is a triangle, then necessarily its three angles add up to 180 degrees. But we are not entitled to conclude that there are any triangles. What in parallel fashion we understand, when we have grasped the idea of God, is that, if God exists, then he



exists necessarily. But we are not entitled to conclude that God exists. As for Descartes's further arguments, it is too unclear what Descartes means for us to arrive at any unqualified verdict. If those arguments were to be compelling, much more would have had to be said. Neither Descartes nor any subsequent Cartesian has said it. So that Descartes's chain of arguments breaks down after he has by means of the *Cogito* established a justification for his belief in his own existence as a thinking being, but before he has established a justification for his belief in God. Yet without sufficient grounds for belief in God Descartes takes himself to lack sufficient grounds for belief in anything at all outside his mind, including his own body. The victory over the skeptics accomplished by the *Cogito* is too limited a victory, and Descartes has not discovered a foundation for the natural sciences that is immune to skeptical doubt. Should this matter to us as well as to Descartes?

The answer is "No" and this for two reasons. The first is that skepticism does not require an answer. The skeptic's claim is that our beliefs and judgments are open to doubt, because it is always possible that we may be mistaken in believing as we do and in judging as we do, because there is always the possibility of error. But to point out—quite correctly—that it is possible that we are in error gives us no reason whatsoever to believe that we are in fact in error. And, until we are given such a reason, we have no reason whatsoever to doubt what we otherwise have good reason to believe and to judge. The skeptic's claim that we can only truly say, "I know that such and such" or "I am certain that such and such" or be entitled to assert that such and such, if there is *no* possibility at all of our being in error about how things are, is a claim that the sceptic has given us no good reason to accept. It follows that the natural sciences do not need the kind of foundation that Descartes aspired to provide for them.

That this is so becomes even clearer when we consider what kind of foundation a natural science does need and can have. Every science aims at the achievement of a perfected understanding of its particular subject matter. To achieve such a perfected understanding is to be able to make some set of phenomena—tides, thunderstorms, glaciers, the firing of neurons in the brain, the production of chemical reactions in the bloodstream, falling rates of economic growth, or rising rates of violent crime—intelligible and explicable as the outcome of whatever are the fundamental determinants of those phenomena. The concepts and the generalizations through which we identify those fundamental determinants and the complexities of their relationships to the particular phenomena are what provide each particular science with its foundations.

However, what we have learned from the history of science—something that neither Aristotle nor Descartes were in a position to learn—is that over time in the course of our scientific enquiries our conception of what it would be to achieve a perfected understanding of this or that set of phenomena changes. We find that we have good reason to reject or to revise, sometimes radically, our earlier accounts of what the foundations, the first principles, of this particular science are. But, until and unless we find that we have good reason to do so, we have no reason to put in question our present understanding of those foundations. The knowledge that we may later on need to reject or to revise—the knowledge, that is, of our own fallibility—of itself gives us no reason to reject or revise.

The skeptical challenge was therefore a phantom challenge. Happily it almost immediately ceased to influence philosophers at work within the Catholic tradition. Catholic skepticism was soon recognized as the aberration that it was and attempts to respond to the skeptical challenge were seen to be fruitless, although not perhaps for the reasons that I have given. The principal cause of the dismissal of skepticism in French seventeenth-century philosophy may have been the very different response to it by Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). Pascal, having surveyed the arguments of the skeptics and concluded that there was no way to answer them, asked, “What then is man to do in this state of affairs? Is he to doubt everything?” and replied: “No one can go that far, and I maintain that a perfectly genuine sceptic has never existed. Nature backs up helpless reason and stops it going so wildly astray” (*Pensées* 1966, 64). We are so constituted, that is, that the arguments of the sceptic, even if unanswerable, carry no conviction. One can pretend to be a sceptic, but no one actually lives and acts as if skepticism were justified.

This inability both to refute the arguments of the sceptic and to accept them is for Pascal one more symptom of the paradoxical character of the human condition. On the one hand we human beings can be satisfied only by a perfected grasp of truth and the achievement of a happiness that is without flaw. We are by our nature inescapably directed toward these goals. Yet on the other hand we recurrently have to recognize that it is just these goals that we are unable to achieve and that our inability to achieve them is deeply rooted in what we are. It is only because we have a capacity for and an ineliminable desire for happiness that we are as unhappy as we are. It is only because we have the powers of reason and the ability to exercise them that we are able to understand that we cannot achieve the truth to which we aspire.

We try desperately to conceal from ourselves what our condition is. “The only good thing for human beings therefore is to be diverted from thinking

of what they are, either by some occupation which takes their mind off it, or by some novel and agreeable passion which keeps them busy, like gambling, hunting, some absorbing show, in short by what is called diversion” (*Pensées* 1966, 136). So the lives of worldly human beings are devoted to a series of projects designed to disguise from them their unhappy state. To understand that unhappy state more adequately and why they are condemned to it is something that lies beyond their powers, so long as they remain in their worldly condition. So long as they remain in that condition, they deny themselves the self-knowledge they would need to recognize the nature of their diversions. How then might they achieve this kind of understanding and this kind of self-knowledge?

Pascal’s answer is that these are to be achieved only by a change of heart, by conversion to belief in God and trust in Christ’s saving work. Pascal himself had been brought up a devout Catholic. When he was twenty-three, he and his family were introduced to the pastoral theology of the Abbé de Saint-Cyran, who had been spiritual director to the nuns of the convent at Port Royal before his imprisonment and subsequent death in 1643. Pascal as a result came to believe that a worldly life, a life devoted to a professional career, for example, was incompatible with a Christian life. His acute sense of the division between these two ways of life, the one an expression of the need for diversions and so of the divided and unhappy nature of human beings, the other an expression of contrition and of acceptance by God, was further sharpened by his experience on the night of November 23, 1654, which he recorded on a piece of parchment sown into his clothing that was found after his death.

In it he speaks of fire, certainty, and joy in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ. Two phrases from that record are relevant to his philosophy: “‘God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,’ not of philosophers and scholars” and “The world forgotten, and everything except God” (*Pensées* 1966, 309). The contrast between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the God of the philosophers expresses Pascal’s conviction that any God about whom we judge that he exists because of some set of philosophical arguments would not be the God in whom we need to believe. The need to forget everything except God expresses his conviction that any kind of pre-occupation with worldly concerns is a barrier between oneself and God. So it might appear that, on Pascal’s view, there can be no intellectual justification for belief in God. But this is not so and in two different ways.

Pascal first of all believes that once we come to believe in God we become able to understand our human condition in a way that was previously denied to us and also to understand why, without belief in God, human beings are

unintelligible to themselves and their nature an enigma. It is only as we come to know God that we come to know ourselves adequately, since what we are and have been is intelligible only in and through our relationship to God. So the justification for our beliefs is one that we arrive at only after we already believe. In so thinking Pascal shows himself to be a follower of Augustine. Does it follow that, until we have come to believe in God, we can have no good reason to believe in God? Pascal's response to this question is to construct an argument for belief, one that is very different from any of the traditional arguments for the existence of God, such as Anselm's and Aquinas's.

Pascal, in his work on mathematics, was one of the founders of modern probability theory. His friend, the Chevalier de Méré, an outstanding example of amiable and able worldliness, who frequented the gambling tables, asked Pascal to calculate for him the least number of throws of a dice that make it probable that two sixes will turn up. Pascal's answers to this and related questions and the generalizations on which he based his answers led him in correspondence with the mathematician Fermat to construct a calculus of probabilities. He considered the practically rational, worldly person, such as de Méré, to be someone for whom probability, the probability of achieving his own happiness, should be the guide to life. Such a one could not but agree that, if there were a wager in which the difference between winning and losing were the difference between infinite and eternal happiness on the one hand and infinite and eternal pain and suffering on the other, then it is worth staking whatever one has or is upon any chance at all of winning rather than losing. It does not matter how long the odds are, how improbable the outcome on which one wagers, if wagering on that outcome gives one any chance at all of such happiness rather than such pain and suffering. And, Pascal argues, just this is our situation in deciding whether or not to believe in God (*Pensées* 1966, 418).

Wagering on whether or not God exists is something that we cannot avoid doing. For either our way of life will presuppose God's existence or it will presuppose his nonexistence. There is no third way. Where an infinitely happy life is to be won or lost, while what you are staking is finite, "That leaves no choice." Rationality requires that we wager that God exists. To this it may be retorted that, even if Pascal gave us sufficient reasons for believing that it would be better for us, more conducive to our happiness, to believe that God exists, he has given us no reason to believe that, in fact, God exists. And Pascal does not disagree. What he provided us with is a sufficient reason for transforming ourselves into believers. How are we to do this? We are to follow the example of others who have already achieved such a transforma-

tions. “They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally . . .” (*Pensées* 1966, 418). We are, that is to say, to subject ourselves to a course of psychological conditioning designed to produce belief where formerly there was unbelief.

How seriously are we to take this? If we suppose Pascal to be speaking in his own voice in these passages, then he is giving us psychological advice that is bad advice, as he must surely have known. For it is notorious that conditioning of such a kind is only effective with those who are unaware that they are being subjected to conditioning. Moreover, as Pascal must also have known, it is bad theological advice. For there is no reason to believe that God finds belief arrived at in this way acceptable. The irony is that someone who wagers on God’s existence and then conditions himself, so duping himself into believing in God, may find that it is those very actions that prevent him from achieving eternal happiness. So what is Pascal doing in presenting us with these thoughts? What are we to make of Pascal’s account of the wager?

We need first to take note of Pascal’s intentions in writing what his friends later published as the *Pensées*, a work unfinished at his death. Pascal seems to have intended to cast his thoughts in the form of a dialogue between a devout Christian and a worldly unbeliever and the order that he gave to those thoughts, as he wrote them down, may have been only a provisional order, so that there is much room for scholarly speculation about his intentions in particular passages. What I want to suggest is that perhaps the account of the wager is to be read not as Pascal’s view of what is involved in becoming a Christian—about which he tells us a good deal elsewhere—but instead as Pascal’s view of how conversion to Christianity must appear from the standpoint of a worldly unbeliever, a view of conversion that is deeply flawed. Pascal’s argument would on this interpretation be designed to show that the worldly unbeliever is irrational from his own standpoint in refusing to do whatever he can to become a Christian. Yet in fact the worldly unbeliever cannot arrive at the truth unaided by grace, for only God’s grace-conferring action—the kind of action that Pascal had experienced on the night of his conversion—can transform one into a genuine believer. This, however, is not how what Pascal wrote about the wager has been understood by his readers.

I noted earlier that Pascal owed his conception of the Christian life to the pastoral theology of Saint-Cyran, a conception that had been embodied in the rule of life of the convent of Port Royal and of the community of the *Solitaires*, those professional men who had abandoned their worldly careers

and devoted themselves to prayer, spiritual reading, and the service of the convent. Saint-Cyran's friend from his student days, Cornelius Jansen, bishop of Ypres, had provided him and them with a definitive statement of their shared theological standpoint in his book, *Augustinus*, published in 1640, two years after Jansen's death. Jansen's formulations of what he took to be Augustine's doctrines seemed to leave no place at all for the exercise of human free will by individuals in either assenting to or refusing the offer of God's grace and this led first to accusations of heresy and finally to a papal condemnation of five propositions said to be asserted and defended in *Augustinus*. At the same time the Jansenists at Port Royal were involved in extended controversies with other Catholics, especially, but not only Jesuits, who had a very different conception of the relationship between Catholic faith and the pursuit of a secular calling. In those multiplying controversies the Jansenists' protagonist was Antoine Arnauld, priest and doctor of theology at the Sorbonne, until he was expelled from its faculty. His oldest sister, Angélique, had, as abbess, been responsible for the reform of the rule of life at Port Royal and for appointing Saint-Cyran as its spiritual director. Arnauld himself also contributed to the life of Port Royal in other ways.

The community at Port Royal had founded its own schools and it was for their pupils that Arnauld designed a logic textbook, although the schools were to be closed down before the textbook was published in 1662. *Logique ou l'art de penser (Logic or the Art of Thinking)* was written in collaboration with Arnauld's secretary, Pierre Nicole. It was to become during the next 150 years widely influential and, although its intellectual importance is in some ways independent of the Jansenist theology that it presupposed, it opened up a new way of integrating Catholic faith and secular philosophy.

Aquinas in the thirteenth century, confronted with the physics, metaphysics, psychology, ethics, and politics of Aristotle, had asked how these could be integrated with Augustinian theology. Arnauld in the seventeenth century takes Aristotle's philosophy to have been on central issues decisively defeated in the course of the rise of the new science and the transformation of philosophy. It is Descartes who has now set philosophy on a new path, one concordant with and supportive of the changes in physics and other sciences and, insofar as those who hold the Catholic faith have to concern themselves with philosophical issues, it is from within a Cartesian standpoint and in Cartesian terms that they should do so. It was not that Arnauld agreed with Descartes on every point. He had presented objections to some theses in the *Meditations*. And, unlike Descartes, he believed that skepticism presented no threat and did not need to be answered. How then do Arnauld and Nicole proceed?

What they intend is not a textbook in logic, either as we now understand it or as Aristotle understood it. Their subtitle is apt: they aspire to teach the art of thinking and the aim of that art is to correct our tendency to make false judgments. Sometimes such false judgments are indeed the result of mistaken inferences, and so Arnauld and Nicole do pay some considerable attention to syllogistic rules. But this is not on their view the principal source of human error. Most false judgments “are caused only by impetuosity and lack of attention, which make us judge recklessly about things we know only confusedly and obscurely” (Arnauld 1996, 6). We tend to be either too willing to believe, victims of our own credulity and superstition, or too unwilling to believe, too cynical or skeptical. Arnauld and Nicole agree with Pascal in holding that no one ever is a genuine sceptic. But they go beyond Pascal in leveling moral accusations at skeptics.

Of skeptical views they say “that no one was ever seriously convinced of them. They were games and amusements for idle and clever people. But they were never views that they inwardly endorsed and on which they tried to act. This is why the best way to convince these philosophers is to recall them to their consciences and good faith” (Arnauld 1996, 228). Skepticism is then one kind of moral fault. Credibility, a willingness to be persuaded of absurdities, is another. Underlying both skepticism and credibility is vanity. *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, therefore, has a moral as well as an intellectual purpose. Sound judgment and good character are inseparable. Throughout *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, examples are chosen, so that they are morally and religiously edifying. Compound propositions with more than one attribute are illustrated by “A sound mind hopes for prosperity in adversity and fears adversity in prosperity” (Arnauld 1996, 97), while one example of a disjunctive syllogism cited is “All wicked persons must be punished either in this world or the other. Now there are wicked persons who are not punished in the world. Hence they will be in the other” (Arnauld 1996, 171).

Although the instruction provided by *Logic or the Art of Thinking* enables us to identify those axioms that provide the sciences with their foundations, the study of it is not intended as a prologue to the study of such sciences as geometry, astronomy, and physics, since such sciences “are completely worthless, considered in and for themselves” (Arnauld 1996, 5). The study of the sciences finds its true point and purpose in exercising and perfecting the capacities of the mind. What we have to learn is to be attentive and observant in respect of whatever it is that is presented to the mind, so that about what is thus presented we may judge truly. For true judgment is not a matter of bringing standards derived from elsewhere to bear upon what is presented to our minds. “Just as no other marks are needed to distinguish light

from darkness except the light itself which makes itself sensed sufficiently, so no marks are necessary to recognize the truth but the very brightness which surrounds it and to which the mind submits, persuading it in spite of itself” (Arnauld 1996, 8).

What then is presented to the mind? The answer that Arnauld and Nicole give is Descartes’s answer: “The simple view we have of things that present themselves to the mind is called *conceiving*, as when we represent to ourselves a sun, an earth, a tree, a circle, a square, thought, and being, without forming any explicit judgment about them. The form by which we represent these things is called an *idea*” (Arnauld 1996, 23). But what it is to have an idea is not further definable. “The word ‘idea’ is one of those that are so clear that they cannot be explained by others, because none is more clear and simple” (Arnauld 1996, 25).

Conceiving something is to be distinguished from imagining it. We can conceive of a geometrical figure with ten thousand angles, but we cannot imagine such a figure. Failure to make this distinction results in confusions about ideas and about their origins. Arnauld and Nicole deny what Pierre Gassendi had asserted, that all our ideas originate from our sense experience. Among those ideas that do not and cannot so originate are the idea of God and the ideas of thought and being. For, asserted Arnauld and Nicole, “There is nothing we conceive more distinctly than our thought itself, nor any proposition clearer to us than this: ‘I think, therefore I am’” (Arnauld 1996, 29). The Cogito is thus invoked, not as an answer to skepticism, but as a paradigm of clarity and distinctness in ideas and clarity and distinctness are marks of truth (Arnauld 1996, 227–28). What is not clear and distinct is confused, and Arnauld and Nicole stress that it is important not to confuse the confused with the obscure. An idea may be obscure without being in the least unclear. Such is the idea of God, the idea of a being who is eternal, omnipotent, all wise, and all good (Arnauld 1996, 27), and who is incorporeal, invisible, and everywhere present (Arnauld 1996, 30).

God is not the only incorporeal, invisible being. When we inspect our ideas, we discover that we have ideas of two different and distinct kinds of substance, substances whose essential properties are those of thought and substances whose essential properties are those of extension, minds and bodies. Such properties as those of “thinking, doubting, remembering, willing, and reasoning” belong to mind. Such properties as those of “extension, shape, mobility, and divisibility” belong to body. Moreover no property that belongs to body also belongs to mind and vice versa (Arnauld 1996, 32). Arnauld and Nicole use the words “mind” and “soul” interchangeably and they argue that, while bodies can be destroyed by change or dissolution



of their several parts, the soul, because it “is in no way divisible or composed of parts,” “cannot perish, and consequently is immortal” (Arnauld 1996, 237).

By adopting Descartes’s view of body and mind or soul Arnauld puts himself at odds with Aristotle and Aquinas. Aristotle’s account of substances in terms of form and matter is, say Arnauld and Nicole, not so much false as trivial: “After having learned of those things we seem not to have learned anything new, nor to be in a better position to make sense of any of the effects of nature” (Arnauld 1996, 20). Moreover, when the relationship of soul to body is understood in terms of form and matter, as Aristotle and Aquinas understand it, errors about the soul result. For, when Aristotle defined the soul in the *De Anima*, he did so in such a way that we can and must speak not only of humans, but also of nonhuman animals as having souls. Yet on Arnauld’s Cartesian view, he thereby “defined a chimera” (Arnauld 1996, 128), since nonhuman animals lack souls. They belong to the world of bodies, a realm that has its own regular order, events in which are to be explained mechanically. “No body is capable of moving itself” (Arnauld 1996, 250) and “No body can move another body if it is not itself in motion” (Arnauld 1996, 251).

How then are minds or souls related to their human bodies? For both Descartes and Arnauld this presents a problem. Descartes and Arnauld recognize that mind and body do interact. Yet, if they are defined as Descartes and Arnauld define them, it is difficult to understand how such interaction could be possible. How can the immaterial interact with the material? Here, if Descartes and Arnauld are right in understanding mind and body as they do, we seem to have reached one of the limits of human understanding. We also move toward those limits whenever we think about God and about his effects in the material world.

Since matter cannot move itself, the first motion must have been imparted to bodies by God (Arnauld 1996, 166). But God sometimes acts, not through the normal regularities of matter in motion, but by miraculous interventions, by events that do not conform to those regularities. What reasons have we to believe that such events do in fact occur? The only reasons are provided by the testimony of trustworthy individuals to the occurrence of such events. So Arnauld in his otherwise Cartesian catalog of those truths that may be used as axioms, as foundations for our knowledge, includes not only such axioms as “Everything contained in the clear and distinct idea of a thing can be truthfully affirmed of it” (the first) and “No body is capable of moving itself” (the sixth), but also axioms about whose testimony is to be treated as trustworthy.

The first of these concerns God: “The testimony of an infinitely powerful, wise, good, and true person should have more power to persuade the mind than the most convincing reasons” (the tenth axiom). So on matters on which God has spoken to us directly through his self-revelation it is rational to accept what God declares as true, no matter how strong the reasoning to be adduced for believing otherwise. With human beings, of course, it is not so, since “All humans are liars, according to Scripture and it can happen that people who assure us that something is true may themselves be mistaken” (Arnauld 1996, 261). Nonetheless, so Arnauld and Nicole’s eleventh axiom declares, on matters of sense experience, where there are a number of individuals with firsthand experience “from different times, different nations, and diverse interests,” on whom no suspicion of having conspired together rests, their testimony “should be considered as constant and indubitable as if we had seen them with our own eyes” (Arnauld 1996, 251).

Arnauld and Nicole are careful to distinguish between questions about the occurrence of events, where nothing is at stake except the trustworthiness of human testimony, and questions about the occurrence of events where it is of crucial importance whether or not we have faith in God’s word and action. But even in these latter cases we need to exercise our reason in evaluating the credibility of witnesses. So he considers miracles reported by Augustine, including miraculous cures in Italy and in Africa, and concludes on the basis of the testimony of those who were present “that there is no reasonable person who should not recognize the hand of God” (Arnauld 1996, 269).

The importance of whether or not certain alleged particular miracles have or have not occurred concerns for Arnauld and Nicole not only those miracles reported in scripture or in the history of the earlier church, but also those apparently miraculous events that had occurred in and around Port Royal. These were taken by the Jansenists to be signs of God’s special favor and the enemies of Port Royal responded by doubting their occurrence. The difficulty for these doubters was that the occurrence of the relevant events was attested by numerous observers. These observers were, it is true, members and friends of the Port Royal community. But since moral rigorism and more especially rigorism about truth and falsehood—on this see Pascal’s *Provincial Letters*—were central to the Jansenist way of life, it was difficult to impugn the credibility of those reports. For any sincere Jansenist who was less than scrupulous about the truth believed that she or he thereby risked the eternal pain of hell.

It is not unimportant that, when in the next century David Hume advanced an argument designed to discredit all and any belief in the occurrence of miracles, his argument purports to show that no report of any miracle can

be credible, no matter how strong and no matter whose testimony is in its favor. The sheer improbability of such an event outweighs all and any testimony. Hume's dislike of the Catholic religion was at its most intense in his scorn for Pascal and it seems likely that, when he wrote against miracles, he had the miracles at Port Royal particularly in mind. Certainly his argument seems to be aimed directly at the arguments of Arnauld and Nicole.

Arnauld and Nicole by contrast take it that the improbability of an event, no matter how great, cannot outweigh the firsthand testimony of sufficient numbers and kinds of witnesses who are known to be reliable. They also of course hold that it matters, in assessing whether or not an alleged event happened, how probable or improbable it is that in these particular circumstances this type of event should have occurred—and the more improbable the event, the more and better the testimony we need. This holds true of life in general and not just in matters of religion. We are to guide our lives by probability in predicting the outcomes of alternative courses of action between which we have to choose.

Here as elsewhere we have to strike a mean between excessive caution and rashness. Arnauld and Nicole follow Pascal's lead in thinking about the probabilities of outcomes in terms of games of chance and lotteries. There are some bets that we should never make, whether in such games or in life: "Sometimes the success of something is so unlikely that however advantageous it may be, and however little risk there is in obtaining it, it is preferable not to chance it" (Arnauld 1996, 275). So we should proportion our hopes and our fears not only to the greatness of the benefit or harm, but also to the probability of our receiving that benefit or suffering harm.

Yet there are benefits and harms so great that even the slightest chance of gaining or avoiding them is worthwhile. Such are the infinite benefits and harms of salvation and damnation. So "all reasonable people draw this conclusion, with which we will end this *Logic*, that the greatest of all follies is to use one's time and life for something other than what will be useful in acquiring a life that will never end" (Arnauld 1996, 275). This thought with which the *Logic* ends is a characteristically Jansenist thought. Intellectual enquiry, like all other secular pursuits, is taken to have no worth whatsoever in itself, but to be worthwhile *only* as a means to our salvation. Contrast Aquinas, for whom many secular pursuits and, notably, intellectual enquiry are worthwhile in themselves and as such to be offered to God as part of that offering that is the path to our salvation.

Arnauld's Cartesianism was a philosophically daring, but doomed enterprise, just because it identified Catholic Christianity with a dualist view of human nature that is not only philosophically untenable, but also a view

that makes it impossible to understand the unity of the human being. Its unfortunate legacy was to reinforce the assumption that we must understand the relationships of soul, mind, and body *either* in materialistic *or* in dualist terms, so obscuring from view the very possibility of a third way, such as Aquinas's.

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