

Wanderley Dias da Silva

Flusser and Descartes

The Unremitting Mindfulness of Thinking and Being

Section 1: Arguments in Context

To be a Cartesian can be frustrating at times. Of all modern scholars, Descartes is simply the one who has met with most criticism. And even though his formulation of the *cogito* – the affirmation that it’s madness to doubt my own existence while I self-reflectively doubt everything else – sounds pretty obvious, Hobbes, Locke, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Flusser, Žižek, Feminists, Catholics, Calvinists, Jesuits, orthodoxy, heterodoxy ... all tried to poke holes in Descartes’ ideas. Žižek, for instance, goes as far as to claim that ‘post-modern anti-humanism’ begins with Descartes’ doubt; while Vincent Macnabb states that the Cartesian doubt is the “intellectual disease in some of the noblest minds of our age.” And what’s this ‘disease’ Macnabb is talking about except *nihilism*? But there’s no surprise here: Descartes’ name often comes up in history as a colorful moniker for *whatever is wrong with postmodernity* – including *Nihilism*.

Descartes intentionally brought much of this criticism upon himself the very moment he boldly submitted the manuscript of his *Meditations* to some philosophers, theologians, a logician – and even to a self-declared intellectual enemy (Hobbes) – for objections before publishing it. However, Descartes did reply to those objections – and a set of *Objections with Replies*¹ was published as a continuation of the *Meditations*. And the author deemed these section so important that, in the Preface, he begged his readers “not to come to any judgement on the questions he was raising until they had taken care to read the whole book carefully” – including the Objections, with their relative Replies.² Needless to say, Descartes’ appeal did not help much; and his philosophical ideas have been harshly antagonized ever since.

Most objections to the Cartesian doubt – old and new – focus either on epistemological issues, such as the evident problem of circularity involved in Descartes’ usage of some allegedly clearly-and-distinctly-perceived ideas (C&D) to affirm the existence of an all-perfect God, and then relying

¹ A set of Six Objections with Replies was published in the first edition; a Seventh Objection with Reply was then added in the second edition.

² Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy, in which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are demonstrated*, translated by John Veitch (Watchmaker Publishing, 2010), p. 17.

on this all-perfect God to confirm his C&D ideas;³ or the allegedly tautology surrounding both “I”s in the sentence ‘I think, therefore I am’, etc.; or still the difficulties that plagues Descartes’ cunning reliance on God in his attempt to ‘put everything back into place’ in his metaphysics and epistemology deconstruction; or even the difficulties concerning Descartes’ philosophy of the mind (for instance, the claim that Descartes could not have maintained that the mind is a *non-corporeal thing*, unless he ‘knew everything’ about the mind); etc.⁴

The charges against Descartes’ cogito are too many to count. And his name often comes up as a colorful moniker for *everything that is wrong with postmodernity*. But for our purpose here, we’ll stick with this extravagant accusation: *Descartes as the founder of postmodern nihilism*.

‘Nihilism’ is a difficult concept to be defined, much less to understand. There are different types of nihilism – *moral, epistemological, existential, philosophical, political, extreme, weak*, and so on. But let’s start with Heidegger’s understanding of nihilism: i.e., *nihilism as the forgetfulness of being*. This pretty much covers all other forms of nihilism. Flusser’s understanding of nihilism is closely related to Heidegger’s. To Flusser, however, nihilism is the *forgetfulness of being and thinking ...* and it’s the outcome or fruit of an incomplete doubt. In short, then, Flusser too was concerned with *Nihilism*, but he was certainly not intimidated by it. And, despite claims to the contrary,⁵ Flusser has used the term ‘nihilism’ explicitly several times throughout his writings – 13 times in *A Dúvida* alone, four times in *Da Religiosidade*, for example – and all occasions are negative in nature.

To be sure, Descartes himself was anything but a nihilist. Yet, as mentioned earlier, Macnabb goes as far as to claim that the Cartesian doubt is the “intellectual disease in some of the noblest minds of our age.”⁶ And what’s this “disease” Macnabb is talking about except nihilism? But before you decide to Google “Vincent Macnabb” only to discover he was a retrogressive Catholic Irish scholar and priest writing during the early 1900’s, and for that very reason his critique should be disregarded as obsolete, hear me out: such criticism of Descartes hasn’t died out, quite the opposite. Catherine Pickstock⁷ for example, a contemporary philosophical theologian, follower of Milbank, claims that “postmodern nihilism” is ultimately the fulfillment of Descartes’ ontology. Roughly, in

³ Perhaps the only objection to Descartes worth of serious consideration. See, for example, Louis E. Loeb’ “The Cartesian Circle”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, Chapter 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), edited by John Cottingham, pp. 200-235.

⁴ See, for instance, Lex Newman’s “Descartes’ Epistemology”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2019, at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/descartes-epistemology/>. Or Justin Skirry’s “Descartes: the mind-body distinction”, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002, at <https://www.iep.utm.edu/descmind/>

⁵ See Charles Feitosa’s “No-Nada: Formas Brasileiras do Niilismo”, in *Flusser Studies* 3, November 2006, p. 7.

⁶ Vincent Macnabb, “The Father of Modern Doubt: A Study of Descartes” (Wiley Online Library, *New Blackfriars*, 2007), Vol. 10, Issue 114, pp. 1291-1296.

⁷ British Philosophical Theologian, born in 1970 and Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University.

Pickstock's view, upon radically separating mental substances from corporeal ones – or so it seems – Descartes ends up emptying the “universal given” of its “ungraspable” spiritual nature.⁸

Along the same vein, it seems one can even talk about a ‘complete disintegration’ of Western tradition after Descartes.⁹ To Macnabb, Pickstock and others, then, *Nihilism* is not just a variation of Cartesian ontology ... it's indeed inherent in it.¹⁰ This particular attack might not sound that original. And Flusser would probably agree with Pickstock and others (to some extent) – *post-modern nihilism is just a consequence of the Cartesian doubt*.

However, to Flusser, the unearthing of this universal given, of the ungraspable nature of being and thinking does not involve the sacrifice of the intellect for the sake of an old faith or the restoration of some tradition (as Macnabb, Pickstock and Milbank hope), nor does it involve the sacrifice of faith for the sake of the intellect (the goal of heterodoxy). Overcoming the problem does require sacrifice, nevertheless: and it is an absurd sacrifice, in Flusser's own words. We'll end this essay dwelling quite a bit on Flusser's absurd notion of sacrifice to overcome the problem of Nihilism.

Now, to set the stage for our discussion, here are three passages that corroborate Flusser's critique of Descartes and his doubt:¹¹ “We may say, in a certain way, that the Modern Age, the age of Western triumph, is no more than the progressive realization of the Cartesian doubt.”¹² The dichotomy Descartes establishes between matter and thought, between body and soul, between the doubtful and the indubitable is, in my view, a nefarious dichotomy. But I must confess, it's a very difficult dichotomy to overcome.¹³ Descartes is nothing but the explicitation of Christianity.¹⁴

But what exactly, in Flusser's view, is so bad about the Cartesian doubt? Why does Flusser think the “Modern Age” is no more than the progressive realization of Descartes' doubt? And how does this differ from previous similar objections leveled against Descartes? If Descartes' dichotomy is so hard to overcome, why bother? And why Flusser thinks Cartesianism is plain Christianity? In trying to answer these questions, I aim at turning the sword of Flusser's critique against Descartes' own detractors.

It's important to mention that scholarly work on Flusser has experienced trends with regards to given points of interest; and thus themes which are taken to be most dominant in Flusser's

⁸ Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

⁹ John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, editors, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 224.

¹⁰ As Peter Leithart points out, in his *Descartes, Nihilist*, Patheos, February 16, 2017, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2017/02/descartes-nihilist/>

¹¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Rainer Guldin for his guidance, patient replies, for providing copies of Flusser's articles and essays and for his enthusiastic encouragement through my studies of Flusser.

¹² Flusser, “Thought and Reflection”, in *Flusser Studies* 01, November 2005, pp. 1-7.

¹³ Flusser, *Da Religiosidade: A Literatura e o senso da realidade* (São Paulo: Editora Escrituras, 2002), p. 38.

¹⁴ Flusser, *Da Religiosidade*, p. 39.

philosophy at a given time often depend on which works are considered as most important or most accessible. And this begs the question: *Why investigate Flusser's objections to the Cartesian doubt?*

The *doubtful* in Flusser should be seen as part and parcel of his philosophy – and not just an oversized appendix. We do not have to poke too deeply into Flusser's writings to realize that the problem of *doubt* is pivotal to his intellectual project as a coherent body; the doubtful is the concept that fits Flusser's philosophical brilliance into an interconnected whole. Probably, that is why Gustavo Bernardo reminds us that “No other philosopher has investigated the climate of doubt” that surrounds Western culture more rigorously than Flusser¹⁵ – and I obviously agree, for I know no one who has spelled out Flusser's problem of the “doubtful” more carefully, and have enlisted the question of doubt and its variants (*skepticism* and *nihilism*) in his writings and readings of Flusser than Gustavo.

Following Gustavo's enthusiasm with Flusser's notion of the doubtful, then, I would say that this issue is so interlinked to, and depends so much on, other aspects of Flusser's philosophy that it's very hard, if not utterly impossible, to give solution to one of these concepts without considering the others. I would go as far as to say that: *the doubtful is the underlying thread that unites Flusser's epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, philosophies of migration and of technical images, so on and so forth into a coherent whole.* Therefore, if we are to follow Flusser's philosophy, we must learn more about the nature of the doubtful and exactly how it seduces Flusser. Let's begin.

Section 2: Descartes' Project of Doubt in Context

Descartes' whole intellectual enterprise hinges on one central aspiration: that all scientific knowledge should become as reliable as possible. For that purpose, Descartes realized that scientific explorations should begin from self-sufficient truths, moving forward through valid, demonstrative principles deducted from those self-evident first truths. In short, Descartes wanted all sciences to be sources of ‘perfect knowledge’ based on undeniable truths in the same way Euclid had made geometry demonstrative and reliable.

Guided by this ‘scientific’ desire, by 1629, at the age of 33, Descartes had already developed his analytic geometry,¹⁶ and was working simultaneously on a series of apparently unrelated projects. e.g.: solving metaphysical problems and designing a machine for grinding lenses.¹⁷ Later that year, Descartes dropped some of these projects for a while to investigate the meteorological

¹⁵ Gustavo B. Krause, “Do Pensamento como dúvida”, in *Vilém Flusser: uma introdução*, Anke Finger, Gustavo Bernardo, Rainer Guldin (São Paulo, Annablume, 2008), pp. 107-124.

¹⁶ Through which one may solve geometric problems by first converting them into problems in algebra.

¹⁷ Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 218-222.

phenomenon of *sundogs* (multiple suns)¹⁸ that had appeared in Italy some months earlier. This weather-related detour led Descartes to the idea of a yet another ambitious project, as he shared with a friend: “I resolved to write a small treatise that will contain the explanation of the colours of the rainbow, which is giving me more trouble than all the rest.”¹⁹

Descartes was so excited with his investigations into physics and meteorology that later his ambition becomes nothing less than to write a treatise to “explain” the *whole physical world*. The result of that enthusiasm and determination was a collection of texts regarded by some as the most systematic and most ambitious project Descartes has ever written – *The Treatise on the Light* and *The Treatise on Man*. Both works were published posthumously entitled *The World*, since Descartes had postponed the publications of the original texts upon hearing of the condemnation of Galilei in 1633, who had been rendered a heretic by the Holy Inquisition.²⁰

It’s interesting to note that Descartes’ passion and determination for scientific discoveries was already been heavily criticized at the time. Pierre Petit²¹, for one, claims that Descartes’ enthusiasm should provoke suspicions rather than admiration, as it was a *threat* to tradition and faith.²² Regardless, by 1630 Descartes had finished the drafts of his *Optics* and *Les Météores*, which were eventually published in his *Discourse on the Method*, in 1637. And it’s here, in the *Discourse*, that Descartes first espoused his legendary onto-epistemological ‘discovery’: *je pense, donc je suis* axiom – *I think; therefore, I am*.

We all know that by the time Descartes arrived at this ‘discovery’ (which was later, in the *Meditations*, coined into its even more famous Latin version – *ego cogito ergo sum*), he was rather disappointed with traditional thinking; namely: the prevailing Aristotelian-Thomist concepts of nature, time, knowledge, truth, the soul, etc., based on its picture of eternal, geocentric, stable natural laws. For Descartes, the problem was, above all else, the metaphysical and theological implications this Aristotelian-Thomist view imposed upon the development of science and progress in general. The detail here is pretty trivial information, but crucial nevertheless.

Descartes’ primary objective is to overcome the difficulties within Scholastic metaphysics and epistemology. For this purpose, Descartes decides to investigate the same sort of certainty we seem

¹⁸ *Multiple suns*: also called mock suns, false suns or *parahelia* (Greek: lit. with the sun), is an atmospheric optic phenomenon which appears as luminous spots on both sides of the sun. Greek myth explained the phenomenon as Zeus (the Sun) walking his two dogs across the sky. Today the phenomenon is known to be caused by sunlight being refracted off ice crystals in the atmosphere. Descartes’ explanation also involved ice crystals and snow in the highest clouds, which acted as lenses to refract the sunlight.

¹⁹ Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*, 1995.

²⁰ See Descartes’ *The World and Other Writings*, translated and edited by Stephan Gaukroger (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. viii, *Introduction*.

²¹ 1594-1677, French engineer, astronomer, physicist, mathematician and member of the circle around Marin Mersenne.

²² For a quite brilliant discussion on the different types of objections to Descartes and other modern thinkers, see Michael Heyd’s *Be Sober and Reasonable: The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden, New York and Koln, E.J. Brill: 1995).

to find in the foundations of geometry, algebra, mathematics, etc. to be also the foundation of this new metaphysics – i.e., a reliable metaphysical groundwork on which philosophy – and science in general – could be rebuilt anew. Later, Descartes presented his full project in search of certainty in the *Meditations*, and even there it sounds pretty ambitious: to raise, and then overcome, all previous knowledge he could possibly call into doubt to see if, after summoning everything into doubt, there was anything left which could be deemed as absolute, unshakable certainty. After examining a great number of falsehoods he had been taught and accepted as true during his lifetime, and after examining the subsequent false ideas and ‘unreliable truths’ deduced from those first false assumptions, he realized they all led to further disagreements.

Descartes’ method in the *Meditations* in brief: Descartes wants to find, through reason, a very simple, clear, self-evident contender for the status of a *first principle of certitude* for knowledge in general – and he wanted to start with metaphysics, i.e., first philosophy. This simple, clear contender happens to be *the ego cogito ergo sum* ... or the idea that one’s existence can be demonstrable by self-reflecting upon one’s own thinking and doubting. Descartes thinks he arrived at this discovery by methodically doubting all his previous beliefs, but the very effort of doubting everything else seemed to prove his own existence as a thing that thinks ... and that much was clear. In other words, to be able to doubt, he clearly must exist. He could not carry on denying his existence while doubting everything else, without sounding like a madman.

Why? Roughly: Descartes thinks that, in doubting everything, he has come to a C&D perception of his own self or mind. Descartes defines C&D ideas as those mental perceptions which are so self-evident that they cannot be logically doubted while they’re present in the mind. Examples of C&D ideas include propositions such as *blue = blue*, *triangle = 3-sided figure* and *I think = I exist*. And this discovery – the perception of the self as a C&D idea – will be Descartes’ foundation of knowledge which can be deemed absolute and unshakable, i.e., perfect knowledge. Of course, this is a sketchy version of Descartes’ cogito axiom, and it’ll probably suffice for our purpose here, which is to consider Flusser’s objection to Descartes’ doubt rather elaborately. But before doing so, let’s dig a bit deeper into the Cartesian doubt, as well as into some of the most famous objections leveled against it. All this will help us shed some light on Flusser’s own critique.

Section 3: Descartes’ Method of Doubt a bit further and Some Objections leveled against it

It goes without saying that no single essay can turn the problem of the Cartesian doubt and the nearly 400 years of objections leveled against it into an easy reading.

One less ambitious aim here will then be to provide the reader with a sufficient grasp of some key issues concerning Descartes' cogito, as well as some of its objections; by going over these issues, I hope to indicate some ways in which these objections do not fit well with other important things Descartes says about the Self. And with that in mind, we should begin.

In the *Meditations*, Descartes' methodical search for certainty goes through three increasingly stronger 'sceptical' arguments: 1. *the perceptual illusion argument*; 2. *the argument from dreams*; and 3. *the evil genius argument*.

In the *First Meditation*, titled "What can be called into doubt", Descartes first poses the *argument from sensory error* or illusion; i.e., the claim that we cannot fully trust our senses, taking the information acquired through them without careful consideration, simply because sensory experience can be limited, unreliable and misleading at times. Call this the problem of 'perceptual illusion' ... things are not always as they seem or sound or smell. Thus, Descartes decides to suspend the legitimacy of sensory perception as source of perfect knowledge all together. What's left?

After suspending judgment on all knowledge that comes through sensory experience, Descartes strengthens his doubt up by stressing that he does not even know for sure how to truly distinguish the external world from what is just a product of our mind, like dreams (*the argument from dreams*) – what if reality is nothing but a dream? After all, some dreams are so vivid and internally consistent that it's impossible to distinguish them from waking experiences. What if right now, even in trying to doubt everything, he's in fact dreaming? Could everything be deemed an illusion? Descartes argues that even at this extreme state of doubt some truths remain – the truths of mathematics and geometry, for instance. After all, even if he rejects all his external experiences, in dreams 2 plus 2 always makes 4, blue is always blue, triangles are always triangles, etc. Thus, in order to doubt even further, to make sure even these mathematical and geometrical certainties are not just an illusion, Descartes takes his methodical doubt to the most extreme point he can imagine. So, Descartes suggests, suppose this religious God everybody talks about, derived from traditional beliefs, is nothing but a deity fully devoted to deceiving us? If that is the case, it's possible to doubt the truth of absolutely anything, including the demonstrative truths of mathematics and geometry. Descartes recognizes that some readers may be offended to hear his rendering of God as a deceiver. That is not a problem. The person could still imagine that perhaps not God, but some evil, deceitful demon is in fact completely devoted to torture the mind with error. Either way, at this point, Descartes believes it's plausible to suppose the possibility that every belief he has entertained thus far could be the product of some supernatural deception (*the evil genius argument*). So, suppose that is the case: *that there's an evil demon using all his awesome power to deceive me*. In this case, there's nothing much I can do ... I will be deceived ... there's nothing much I can do to escape from this evil

deception. In this case, any attempt the meditator makes to determine whether something is true or not, s/he might be under the influence of this powerful, demoniac deception. In brief: if there's a powerful evil deceiver who wants me to be deceived, I will be deceived. And this is the end of *Meditation One*. Of course, this already gives us a sort of hint of what's to come. But it's advisable to pause here for a while, let all this sink in a bit, before proceeding to *Meditation Two*.

Meditation Two begins with a revision of Descartes' doubting exercise from the previous day. He reminds himself that the outcome of all that sceptical exercise had slumped him into a deep whirlpool that tumbled the meditator around so that he could neither stand on the bottom nor swim to the top. He continues nevertheless, to see if he can find his way up, out of that abyss of nothingness. And soon he discovers something unique.

In short, Descartes' solution out of that abyss is his *cogito discovery* – *Ego cogito ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am. It's a simple, brilliant solution: if, on the one hand, the doubter believes his act of doubting could go as far as doubting all of his senses, the external reality, and even the existence of a 'good' and 'honest' deity, or posing the possibility of a powerful demon devoted to deceiving him, on the other, it's impossible for him to deny that, as long as he's been deceived, as long as he's doubting, he must exist. How could he doubt, and even be deceived, if he does not exist?

It's important at this point to stress that this 'discovery' *is not* a performative statement. Descartes is not saying that *I think* produces *I am*, as many have supposed. Performative utterance is a form of statement that is not only a description of reality, but also changes the reality it is describing. One good example of a performative utterance is found in Genesis 1:3 – *Then God commanded, 'Let there be light' – and light appeared.* This is a performative statement. The proposition uttered by 'God' makes light appear. *I think, therefore I am* is not ... it's a self-reflective utterance. Another good example: when bride or groom reply "Yes, I do!" to the question 'Do you take such-and-such to be your wife or husband?' Here, *Yes, I do!* is clearly a performative sentence, because the speaker alters his or her reality upon uttering the phrase; in this case, bride and groom alter their legal marital status from single to married. The fact that the in the *Meditations* the doubter realizes in his self-reflecting action of doubting that he can doubt everything, except that he's doubting ... and hence he declares "I think (or I doubt), therefore I am" *is not* a performative statement – it's a self-reflective utterance. That is, the statement "I think" is not altering any reality; it's not creating a new state of reality, namely, *I am*. I hope this much is clear enough.

Having said all that, this 'discovery' of the self-evident nature of *I think = I exist* is not new. St. Augustine had employed a very similar argument some 12 centuries before Descartes: "And since

I am, even if I am deceived, how am I deceived in believing that I am? For it is certain that I am even if I am deceived ... certainly, I am not deceived in this knowledge that I am.”²³

We do not need to dwell on this issue here for, surprisingly, Augustine’s ‘discovery’ of the cogito did not bug philosophers as much as Descartes’.²⁴ It goes without saying that this is a rather sketchy version of Descartes’ method of doubt, and the reader should read Descartes’ *First* and *Second Meditations* carefully (if s/he hasn’t done yet.) But this will suffice for our present purpose: to consider Descartes’ doubt in the light of Flusser’s philosophy.

It’s also obvious that Flusser wasn’t the first – and surely won’t be the last – philosopher to criticize Descartes’ doubt. However, as mentioned earlier, there’s something unique about his critique of the Cartesian doubt which distinguishes him from his predecessors. But to see this, we must consider some of the previous objections to Cartesianism.

Criticism to the Cartesian doubt comes from all directions.²⁵ Some of these objections targeted his epistemology (e.g. Leibniz, Russell), some attacked his metaphysics and epistemology (e.g. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Hobbes, Hume), while others rested content just raising *ad hominem* objections, attacking Descartes’ enthusiasm, or his alleged atheism, or frenzy behavior, etc. (e.g. Pierre Petit, Jesuit priest Gabriel Daniel, Calvinist priest Maresius, to name some). Of course, we can’t look at them all. So, I’ve selected some of these objections to be considered; and below is a rough version of them, followed by some comments.²⁶

Bertrand Russell says the problem with Descartes’ *cogito* is a logical one. To illustrate his point, Russell translates Descartes’ cogito into these two premises:

1. *There is thinking going on.*
2. *This thinking is attached to something called “me”.*

For Russell, (1) can be logically proved; (2) cannot.

This is to say that all Descartes’ cogito can prove with certainty is that *there is thinking and doubting going on*, since thought, Russell argues, is the wildest ‘logical’ premise possible – i.e., *thinking* is the ultimate sense available. The “I”, however, is not part of some *pure thinking*, which seems to be involved in this process. For Russell, Descartes’ “I” (this thing called ‘me’) is already contaminated by the “uncritically apparatus of categories handed down by the scholasticism” Descartes wanted

²³ Augustine, *The City of God* (New York and Toronto: Random House, 1999), Book XI, 26, p. 370.

²⁴ It should be clear that, at this point in the *Meditations*, Descartes’ problem is still not solved: if his only certainty is the he exist to be able to doubt, how will he be able to bridge the gap between the certainty that resides in his individual, self-reflecting thinking and the uncertainties of external reality? Needless to say, this is another *problem* the Cartesian doubt has presented Western philosophy with ever since – i.e., the question of how the thinking thing can have knowledge of the outside world.

²⁵ To do justice to the philosophical brilliance of Descartes, as well as to some of his critics (Hobbes and Kant, for instance), we’d have to carefully consider both, Descartes’ arguments and subsequent objections thoroughly, however, this is not the purpose here.

²⁶ This isn’t presented in a chronological manner – because that isn’t important here.

to overcome. It's a Medieval, scholastic Self. Besides, to Russell Descartes hasn't proved that *thinking* needs a *thinker*, except "in a grammatical sense" – as in a *subject-object* relation.²⁷

Kierkegaard argues Descartes' cogito is a *tautology*, a form of circularity – meaning that the 'cogito' already presupposes the existence of the "I", which must take priority over the thought that thinks it. From this, the roots of Existentialism sprout: viz., *existence* precedes *thinking* – or, the other way round, thinking presumes existence. Leibniz had already raised a similar critique, saying that: to say "I am thinking" is already to say "I am."

Wittgenstein claims that if Descartes ever really tried to doubt everything, he wouldn't have gotten as far as doubting anything at all, since "the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty."²⁸ Wittgenstein's point: to doubt everything, really – *radical doubt* – Descartes would have had to doubt even the meaning of every word he used to formulate his *ego cogito, ergo sum* axiom – in fact, he would have to have doubted even the logical and grammatical laws of thinking itself.

Heidegger replaces the Latin verb *cogitare* (to think, to ponder), which is the root of Descartes' cogito, with the verb *peripere* (capture, perceive, understand, grasp), which Descartes himself sometimes uses. Heidegger's point: the *Cartesian cogito* is a reduction of the outside reality of the world which is, in this case, unfortunately *present-at-hand* before the cogito, which can then be grasped or apprehended by the Cartesian (modern) cogito in terms of mathematical and geometrical formulas. To Heidegger, the 'Self' is not just the seat of rationality and thinking, capable of apprehending nature as such, as the Cartesian cogito appears to be, ontologically prior to the outside world and others. No, the Heideggerian self is rather a *being-in-the-world* – i.e., for Heidegger there's not an "I" distinct from the "I" that experiences the world and others as it finds itself *in-the-world*. Put differently: to Heidegger, all consciousness – including self-reflective thinking – is always consciousness of something – and this *being-in-the-world* is, for Heidegger, a fundamental part of the facticity (*the thrownness*) of Dasein.²⁹

Nietzsche takes over Hegel's claim that Descartes' cogito is a childish abstraction to reduce the Cartesian cogito to total absurdity, a chimera ... only to make room for his own ontology of the *will-to-power*. I.e., to Nietzsche, it's the *will-to-power* that defines existence, not thinking. Thus, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche says: "What gives me the right to speak of an ego? Whence did I get this notion of thinking? Thinking comes when *it* wishes, and not when *I* want." And that is why earlier in the same text he says:

²⁷ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy and Its Connections with Political and Social Circumstances from Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), p. 567.

²⁸ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, translated by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), proposition 115.

²⁹ See, for one, Karl Löwith's *Martin Heidegger: European Nihilism*, translated by Gary Steiner, edited by Richard Wolin (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1995).

When I analyze the process that is expressed in the sentence “I think”, I find a whole series of daring assertions, the argumentative proof of which would be difficult, perhaps impossible: for instance, that it is I who think, that there must be necessarily something that thinks, that thinking is an activity and operation on the part of a being who is thought of as a cause, that there is an ‘ego’, that is already designated by thinking – that I know what thinking is.³⁰

And an even worst sample of this Nietzschean *ad absurdum* reduction of the cogito is found in the *Gay Science*, aphorism 276:

For the New Year – I’m still alive ... I still think: I must still be alive because I still have to think. Sum, ergo cogito: cogito, ergo sum. I am, therefore I think: I think, therefore I am.³¹

The above are undoubtedly rough summaries of these great thinkers’ critiques of Descartes’s cogito; and the problem with these objections are too many to count; but we must nevertheless try to highlight a few:

Descartes would probably be the last person to deny Russell’s claim that thinking is the ultimate sense; but would probably ignore his contention that thinking does not presuppose an “I” that thinks. Descartes does not need to prove (nor do I) that thinking needs a thinker – *it’s the very act of self-reflection, of doubting and thinking that accomplishes that*. Again, the thinking self in Descartes’ cogito is not the product of a performative proposition; i.e., Descartes is not making an “I” appear out of the utterance of the cogito ... the “I” that thinks is what is revealed through its reflection upon itself through its own doubting.

The cogito does not need to be part of some pure thinking either – and that is not Descartes’ claim. True, at some point, Descartes is left with this idea of a thinking thing, which seems to be floating around, only aware of ‘pure thinking’ i.e., ‘ideas’, ‘abstract concepts’ ... but we have to get past the beginning of the *Second Meditation* to see that Descartes never concluded that this thinking thing is pure thinking. However, that does not mean pure, abstract thinking is not possible at all – and that is Descartes’ whole point. Ultimately, the thinking thing must be understood as a ‘thing’ that wills, imagines, sees, understands ... and even walks – that sounds pretty much like a sensible thing, does not it? But that does not mean the thinking self cannot abstract, or reflect upon, these as ‘actions’ derived from thinking itself, i.e., as actions of the mind ... or ideas.

So, doubting everything: that is Descartes’ starting point, through which the “I” is revealed, and not pure thinking. Pure thinking seems to imply some ‘transcendental use of thinking alone ... a fascinating critique Kant has raised against the Cartesian cogito. But Descartes never argued that knowledge and certainty are acquired through the ‘transcendental’ use of thinking alone. That is

³⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Judith Norman, edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.17.

³¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, edited by Bernard Williams, translated by Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 157.

why his more careful statement is that the ‘Self’ is a per se unity of mind and body. And, when he’s being really careful, his full definition of the ‘Self’ is: “I am a complete substantial unity, an ordered system, a totality of things bestowed on me by God.”³²

Wittgenstein’s critique is interesting, but I think Descartes already replied to this objection with his madman argument, insisting that the cogito, the thinking thing presupposes at least the existence of a rational thinking self – a self that is not delusional to the point of doubting his own existence through his very act of doubting. That is why Descartes distinguishes between rational doubt and madness, anticipating Wittgenstein’s objection, perhaps. Indeed, here too Descartes seems to follow Augustine’s argument. In *Against the Sceptics*, Augustine says: “It is absurd to suppose that the wise man does not know that he is living.” Is this the origin of Descartes’ madness argument? Furthermore, there’s nothing radical about the Cartesian doubt – unless, of course, the reader never got past the *First Meditation*. Furthermore, there’s no radical distinction between mind and body in Descartes either – again, unless, of course, the objector never bothered to read other important things Descartes says about mind and body elsewhere.

Once again, Descartes exploits heavily the idea that mind and body are distinct substances³³ ... but his arguments are pretty obvious why he thinks these two are not the same. But that does not make him a radical dualist; the same way my claiming that a pilot conning a ship is distinct from the vessel itself does not make me a dualist – and no wonder Descartes uses the same argument.

We may reject Descartes’ whole project in the *Meditations*, which ultimately depends on God – why bring God – even if it is a self-certified God – into the equation? In this case, the reader has a more sanitized explanation for the union of the Self, one that does not involve gods, as the one we read in the *Passions of the Soul*. Here Descartes offers us a more *(proto)scientific*, *(proto)neurological*, *physiological* explanation for this unity. What’s more: here Descartes makes it clear that he relegated the mind-body problem to the empirical sciences. In his own words: “... my purpose has not been to explain the Passions as an Orator, or even as a moral philosopher would, but only as a Physicist or Natural Philosopher.”³⁴ That is: Descartes left the investigation of mind-body interaction wide open to the empirical sciences. In short, in the *Passions*, Descartes’ solution to the mind-body problem was a physiological one – not theological, not moral, and not philosophical – proposing then that the union of the mind and the body was purely physiological, caused by the intermediation

³² Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 85-6.

³³ Descartes, *Discourse on the Method for Conducting One’s Reason Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, third edition, translated by Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), Part IV.

³⁴ Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul, and Other Late Philosophical Writings*, translated by Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 194.

of the pineal gland. Surprisingly, this protoneurological, pineal-gland explanation is still being mocked by Žižek for instance, to ridicule the Cartesian cogito. I'm pretty sure that, if Descartes were alive today, being the eager, passionate 'scientist' he was, he would have moved on – why can't we?

Point being: we might reject both Cartesian explanations – physiological and metaphysical – for the union of the self for whatever reason, but we cannot suppose the Cartesian doubt leads to radical dualism. Nor can we claim he was a radical doubter. Towards the end of the *Sixth Meditation*, he makes it very clear how he thinks knowledge is possible, as he claims that certainty results from our capacity to call together all senses, memory and understanding for the purpose of examining our perceptions. I.e.: for Descartes, certainty is not a product of unmediated, non-sensible knowledge of objects.

Heidegger's critique is more philosophically striking and appealing, and to some extent similar to Flusser's. But I do not think Descartes would disagree with the overall idea here. Nowhere Descartes says that consciousness is not consciousness of something – as stated above, for Descartes 'knowledge' is the mediated result of sensory perception, memory and understanding working together. So, clearly the certainty of my own existence is determined by the representation of myself to myself as being-there-in-the-world ... and not because I am simply able to think purely. I do not read Descartes claiming the contrary anywhere. All the Cartesian cogito proves is simply this: I can think or doubt if and only if I exist – or, if I'm able to doubt, that means I must exist ... and I can't doubt that simple fact. And this is Descartes' starting point.

Perhaps Descartes' view is too modern (read it 'primitive' for us, postmodernists), mechanistic, and still rather theological, Scholastic still, but even so, to be fair to Descartes, we would need to reconsider everything else important he says about the cogito, etc., and even his moral philosophy, to claim that Heidegger's destruktion of the cogito has indeed accomplished its goal. And what goal was that? Why? To unearth a better version of being than the one the Cartesian cogito has concealed, of course. Let's see if Flusser's version of Heidegger's critique can do better in a bit.

Tautology? Where? There's no tautology in the formulation ego cogito ergo sum. What the cogito says is simply this: 'Thinking' implies being – and is not that Descartes' point? 'Being' does not necessarily imply thinking. Tables and books and chairs are beings ... but clearly, their beings do not entail thinking. Again, that is Descartes' point: the very instant the 'thinking thing' – which must be at least a rational thing – is aware of its own doubting, thinking, willing, feeling, etc., that thing can doubt everything, if it wishes, as long as it wishes, but it cannot doubt its own existence, without sounding foolish.

The game of doubting methodically surely presupposes certainty ... the certainty that the being that is doubting exists. Again, *ego cogito ergo sum* simply means: I can think or doubt if and only if I exist ... as an "I", not as a table, a chair or a book. Once again, Descartes' *cogito* is not a performative utterance: Descartes is not creating a self out of thinking. As already explained, the *cogito* is a self-reflective preposition – the self is revealed by itself through doubting ... and that cannot be denied.

Nietzsche's objection to Descartes' *cogito* is perhaps the worst in the list. Briefly, Nietzsche thinks Descartes is superficial; that he did not rise above the surface of the ego. Nietzsche thinks the *cogito* is nothing but a consequence of the will-to-power. So, he says, without mentioning Descartes' name: "There are still harmless self-observers who believe in the existence of 'immediate certainty', such as I think." However, eager to establish his ontology of the will-to-power, Nietzsche cannot leave behind his own prejudices, to dig a little bit deeper, to realize that the will-to-power is a result of, and not what reveals existence.

We could even agree on the *will-to-power* as the cause of Master morality ... and, perhaps, even the cause of the *décadence avec élégance* of Western civilization, and the weakness of life which, to Nietzsche, was just a shadow of Platonism and Christianity ... but it's certainly not the cause of self-reflective existence. If Nietzsche had dug a little bit deeper, he would have realized that for the *will-to-power* to dominate and direct thinking, (*or the weakness thereof*), *whether as an abstract strength of the Will or as a physiological, genetic deterioration (as for Nietzsche it seems to be the case with Socrates)*, there must be a thinking self as a bare fact. And the Descartes we read by the end of the *Meditations* would probably agree with Nietzsche that thinking is not dissociate from the ego; that it's indeed its consequence; that the "I" is merely a representation of the ego, who expresses only states of consciousness such as words, concepts, language, desires, or will – the *will-to-power*. But before 'I' can will, desire, acquire social constructions such as language, logic, or be victimized by cultural forces, etc., I must first exist.

Is not Heidegger right to see Nietzsche's *will-to-power* as the highest point of concealment of Being – the point in history in which the mindfulness of Being, has been completely ripped off.

Of course, Descartes' metaphysics is still very Scholastic, making use of obscure terms such as God, substances, attributes and modes, and this might sound confusing. In this case, we should try to sanitize such talk as well. In Descartes' language: modes are ontologically dependent on attributes, and attributes are dependent on substances. Substances can stand alone; attributes and modes cannot. We may reject that too, as too scholastic. However, in Cartesian terms what that means is this: the mind is a substance, thinking, willing, desiring are attributes of the mind, and ideas, wills, and desires are modes of thought.

Then we ask Descartes: But how do we know the nature of this substance we call ‘the mind’ is to think? Descartes replies: “Because a thing that does not think is not a mind; that is the nature of the mind (hence, it’s a substance). If a thing cannot think, cannot will, cannot doubt (attributes of the mind), cannot affirm its own existence the way the cogito does, self-reflectively, as I have explained in the *Principles of Philosophy*, this thing is clearly not a mind.”³⁵ What’s more: the content of my thoughts, my will, etc., this is what I call ‘modes’. Anyways, as I told Morin,³⁶ some metaphysical principles are even more evident than the primary notions of mathematicians and geometers; however, these evident principles often conflict with many preconceived opinions we derive from the senses ... and that is why I title my book “Meditations” and not “Disputations”... i.e., I arrived at the C&D perception of my own mind by meditating on my thoughts, and not by logical propositions ... if that makes any sense.³⁷

Before we can move on, only one question remains here: Why is it so hard to understand Descartes’ rendering of the cogito formulation in the *Second Meditation*? – “I am, I exist ... must be true whenever I assert it or think it” ... *Even if I do not yet understand sufficiently what I am – I, who now doubt, necessarily exist.*”³⁸

If one fails to understand this much of the *ego cogito ergo sum* axiom, why bother criticizing it? Indeed, Descartes proved to be a great philosopher, one that many seek to disparage, precisely by not falling into any of these ploys of the mind. What the plain awareness of the cogito reveals upon reflecting on itself is a *concrete personal, subjective fact* ... not some higher abstraction of it: *death, will-to-power, subject-object relations, grammar, logic, language games*, and so on. Descartes did not rise to this bait for these are, again, much higher abstractions than what the cogito reveals purely; they’re much further away from the fundamental ontology revealed by consciousness, the immediate awareness of being in relation to thinking which is uncovered by the cogito reflective exercise.

Thus, I can surely reject everything else Descartes is going to claim from this point onwards ... especially his reliance on God – or his version of God – but I can’t deny the unembellished mindfulness of my own existence from the awareness of my thinking, even when my thinking is trying to doubt everything else. As a matter of fact, long before the publication of the *Meditations*, when Descartes first drafted his *cogito argument*, in the *Discourse on Method*, he (ironically or not; afraid of the inquisition or not) invited readers to reject his method ... or find their own: “My intention is not to teach here the method which everyone must follow in order to direct his reason correctly, but only to show the manner in which I have tried to direct mine. But since I am proposing only

³⁵ Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21st edition.

³⁶ Jean-Baptiste Morin (1583-1656), French physician, mathematician and astronomer.

³⁷ See Morin’s “Second Objections” to Descartes’ *Meditations*.

³⁸ Descartes, *Meditations*, p. 64

this work as, so to speak, a history – or if you prefer, a fable – in which, among many examples, you might imitate, you will perhaps find as many others which you will have reason not to follow.”³⁹ Some may argue that this is a sample of Cartesian irony. Other might say Descartes’ claim here reflects his fear the ‘Holy’ Inquisition. Still, the passage is useful. I can reject everything Descartes asserts from the beginning of the *Second Meditation* onwards – or the whole *Meditations*, for that matter –, insofar as I might not agree with Cartesian ontology. However, to claim that Descartes couldn’t have derived the stark awareness of his own existence from the bare perception of his own thinking the moment he’s thinking, and doubting, and is fully conscious of his mental activities, is a rather allegorical move – and surely not a sign of philosophical decency. How much logic and reasoning does one need to understand that before the *thinking self* can grasp the potentiality of its own death, before it can realize the dimension and depth of the *will-to-power*, before it can understand any social and physiological constraint imposed to the *thing* that it’s now *thinking* and *doubting*, it must first be a recipient of such realizations – i.e. *it must exist*; and it must exist as a *thinking self* ... because existing as a table or a chair is not enough ... and that is the whole point Descartes is making. That much should be clear.

Having said all that, it’s not easy to understand what bothered Descartes’ critics so much, since, as pointed out earlier, his critics come from all walks of life, and their philosophical and theological agendas are mutually exclusive.

Definitely, it appears that Descartes’ attempt to extend the methods of mathematics and geometry to all domains of knowledge, including science – and every subsequent discipline (*modern physics, biology, chemistry, sociology, anthropology, psychology*), which are but offshoots of the Cartesian method, is the very seed of *Nihilism* to some.⁴⁰

Leithart, for instance, goes as far as claiming that whether or not Pickstock’s interpretation of Descartes’ ontology is correct, he cannot tell; what he can tell for sure is that she has clearly demonstrated the “inner connection” between Descartes’ subjectivism and “postmodern nihilism”. He then adds: Descartes’ ontology opens the way to Nihilism because in its stoic attempt to purify doubt in search for certainty, it “ends up clearing away the ‘contaminants’ of time, history, language and relation that make the subject a subject in the first place.”⁴¹

But how exactly did the Cartesian doubt left the door to nihilism ajar? Leithart does not give us a clear answer. We have to rely on Donald Crosby who gives us a clue: it seems to be a matter of chain reaction to Descartes’ cogito. See, one particular problem with Descartes’ subjectivism is *solipsism* – or the view that ultimately there’s nothing else outside one’s mind. (Yes, yet another

³⁹ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, p. 5-6.

⁴⁰ Donald A. Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticism of Modern Nihilism* (New York: SUNY: 1988).

⁴¹ Leithart, “Descartes, Nihilist”, *Patheos*, February 16, 2017, at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2017/02/descartes-nihilist/>

accusation against Descartes.) Then, in trying to solve Descartes' solipsism, Crosby will argue, Empiricists such as Locke and Hume tried, in their own conflicting ways, to demonstrate the possibility of knowing the existence of things outside of my mind, which must be inferred through the senses (something Descartes does not deny). The ultimate consequence of these extreme disputations, ranging from fanatical rationalism to radical empiricism, Crosby adds, turns out to be utter *disappointment* and *despair* ... complete uncertainty regarding the possibility of truth, which ends in "radical skepticism and nihilism."⁴²

Alright, *founder of postmodern nihilism* Descartes shall be ... and only Nietzsche and Dostoevsky knew how the Western mind fear the looming possibility of Nihilism. So, let's see what Flusser has to say about all that.

Section 4: Flusser's Objections to Descartes' Doubt

To recall: through his methodical doubt, Descartes insisted that all sciences should start from self-sufficient truths, and then move forward through valid deductive, demonstrative principles. The ultimate result of his methodical doubting, however, turned up to reveal an ontology fully grounded on human reason alone.

Descartes' turning towards reason thus concomitantly opened up the path to scientific and technological progress, contributing to the development of the empirical sciences. However, in his obsession with certainty, thus placing human reason at the center of metaphysics, it seems Descartes took humanity's mastery of nature to a whole new level. It would appear that, by placing the ego of the cogito at the center of knowledge – even as the center of the certainty of God's existence – Descartes' cogito ended up destroying much of the medieval religious, traditional views of nature and the soul ... as well as destroying the idea that the meaning of life had to be found in the ideals of those religious views and traditions. Certainty, including moral certainty – and perhaps even *salvation* – now depended solely on the ego. In sum, Descartes' *egocentric* ontology becomes the pivotal turning point that allowed Western thought to move away from orthodox Christianity into a secular modernity – a slippery slope on to *all that is wrong with postmodernity*, some would say. That is the overall orthodox view, anyhow. That is what is behind Pickstock's, Macnab's, Leithart's and Milbank's critique of Descartes. In truth, they fail to see that Descartes' cogito ended up demonstrating the inferiority of the authoritarian medieval sources of knowledge and meaning; that is, the inferiority of religion and tradition when it comes to scientific progress.

⁴² Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd*, p. 245.

And we should wonder whether that is not what's behind Žižek's critique as well. What if orthodox logic is also what's behind the unorthodox critique of Descartes? Did not Flusser say the age of Western triumph is the progressive realization of the Cartesian doubt?⁴³ *What if we are all still too Augustinian?*

Flusser formulates the Cartesian problem less apocalyptically in *Da Religiosidade*, where he explains the problem in the inner logic of Descartes' cogito – or rather, the attempt to eradicate doubt – thus:

I doubt = I think.

I think: I am a chain of thoughts. One thought follows another.

Why? Because a thought is never enough for itself. It requires yet another thought to verify it.

Thinking doubts itself. I am a chain of thoughts that doubts itself. I doubt it, thus I am. I doubt that I am, so I confirm that I am. I doubt that I doubt it, so I doubt that I am.

So, why I am? Because I doubt.

But why I doubt? Because I am. Therefore I doubt that I am. Therefore I doubt that I doubt.

It's a dead end. It's the alley the Ancients reserved for Sisyphus. It's a form of madness. It's the suicide of the intellect.

This extract is Flusser's poetical exposure of the whole inner problem with the Cartesian doubt: *trying to eradicate doubt from the realm of thinking and being*. Flusser's point here is so evident that trying to explain it would be like sawing sawdust. But let me make that mistake; let me rearrange (*translate*) Flusser's verses more absurdly:

I am.

How so?

Because I doubt and I think ... it's a categorical syllogism, you know?

...

Look: if thinking is part of being, doubt is also part of being, because doubt is part of thinking.

In syllogistic terms:

Thinking is part of being.

Doubt is part of thinking.

Therefore, doubt is part of being.

So, I think = I doubt = I am. Or: To be = to think = to doubt.

But why I think and doubt?

Because Being is a chain of thoughts.

Still, why I doubt?

⁴³ Flusser, "Thought and Reflection", in *Flusser Studies* 01, November 2005. Available at: <http://www.flusserstudies.net/archive/flusser-studies-01-november-2005/>, pp. 1-7.

Because the doubtful is the essence of thinking.

So, thinking doubts, including itself, and since I am a chain of thoughts, I cannot help but doubt ... because I'm also a chain of doubts.

So, to reiterate it: I doubt = I am. But one thought requires another thought to confirm it – thus I doubt. And the thought that revealed my being as a thinking self is not just that one single instance of thinking that self-reflectively revealed my Self while doubting; because that very disclosing instance of thought is itself the self-reflectively revelation of a previous thought in a chain of thoughts and doubts.

Thus, the fact that I now doubt and think reveals the very nature of thinking; that it ways doubt, being and itself through doubting and thinking and being. To be the type of being that I am, a chain of thoughts, thinking keeps doubting itself.

So, I doubt. So, I am.

Thus, I doubt that I think; I doubt that I doubt.

And I doubt the doubt that doubts thinking that doubts being.

Doubt is part of the fabric of thinking and being – it's the very foundation of Being. Indeed, it's what allows for the unremitting unfolding of thinking and being. Thus, trying to eradicate doubt is pure madness. And this is the point Flusser is making in his poetic rendering of the problem; I just wanted to magnify the madness Flusser had already exaggerated.

What's more, in comparing existence – the unfolding of thinking and being – with the alley the 'ancients' had reserved for Sisyphus, i.e., the way of the 'gods' wanted Sisyphus to suffer ... Flusser is rather stressing the *unescapable* character of existence as a chain of thought and doubt, as if it were a divine curse. The elimination of the doubtful is the end of thinking and being. But there's something else: as the myth goes, contrary to what Zeus intended, Sisyphus chose to be happy despite his punishment ... beyond his fate. And Flusser would certainly agree with Camus here: that, deep down, existence is an *absurd*; and for both philosophers, there's no absurdity which cannot be surmounted by scorn.⁴⁴

To Flusser, authentic scorn is philosophical irony. And that is why he says: *irony is reason's weapon against nothingness; it's fiction against fiction*. In Flusser's words: "Irony is an ontological weapon against agony and death, because it shows not only how resilient the weak is ... but also how his oppressor is fragile."⁴⁵ And this notion of 'irony' permeates every aspect of Flusser's philosophies. Ultimately, it's irony that let the unremitting mindfulness of thinking to unfold itself as the foundation of Being; and not as a servant or anchor to life, as Camus and others wished. That is: the notion of

⁴⁴ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays* (USA: Vintage, 1991), p. 121.

⁴⁵ Flusser, "Da Ironia", *Folha de São Paulo, Posto Zero*, 1 March 1972. Available at: CEFIB – Centro de Filosofia Brasileira: <http://textosdevilemflusser.blogspot.com/2008/08/da-ironia.html>

irony touches all of Flusser's epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and philosophy of language and media theory. On this picture, we may say, for instance, that for Flusser language, in its totality – as it encompasses poetry, faith, proper names, etc. – is a dynamic movement which, whether in its external (sentences) or in its internal (thoughts) forms, continuous to project itself towards nothingness, toward chaos⁴⁶ ... only to be 'created' again. That is one way of accounting for the fact that words and ideas lose their meanings in the course of history – and also the fact that what is often taken to be true, for example, to one particular civilization may sound more like laughable mythology to another. Thus, for Flusser, what this “dynamic movement leaves behind is a cloudy trail we call past civilizations.” In other words, according to Flusser, in fulfilling itself, thinking continues to surpass itself ... creating novelty to replace what has become obscure, what can no longer be explained or understood.⁴⁷ But thinking can only fulfill itself thus through the doubtful. The role of irony is to transgress the mask of reason in face of the doubtful.

Therefore, the blatant dissatisfaction against the doubtful in the philosophical circle, a form of intellectual bohemianism against a life full of improvidence and surprises and doubts is, for Flusser, the very road to *Nihilism* – or the sudden arrival of thinking and being over the abyss of nothingness. For Flusser, however, Nihilism only arises when thinking tries to eradicate the doubtful from its core ... that is the suicide of the intellect. In short, the problem of nihilism only arise from the forgetfulness of the unrelenting nature of being and thinking.

Now, moving on, according to Flusser, we, *postmodern creatures*, “are the first or second generation to be experiencing this form of nihilism.” *Nihilism* is: “... the total loss of faith – the madness of the all-encompassing nothingness. And the symptoms abound. Formal logic reduces thinking to a tautology. It's the 'clear night of the anguish of nothingness' of existentialism ... that the 'I' has discovered.”⁴⁸

Flusser's rendering of the problem of the cogito was *less* apocalyptic – but barely. To Flusser, this total loss of faith is madness because, paradoxically, “faith is the primordial state of the spirit.”⁴⁹ So, “in order to doubt, and thus negate and replace a naïve faith, doubting has to replace that previous faith with a new, better one” – even if it's faith in nothingness.⁵⁰ But doubting to put an end to the doubtful is also madness, because the doubtful is the essence of thinking. We'll consider this further in a bit.

Notwithstanding, Flusser's point concerning Descartes' formulation of the ego 'as the source of meaning and knowledge' is further reiterated in *A Dívida*, where he says: *we, postmodern beings, are*

⁴⁶ Flusser, *Da Religiosidade*, p. 36.

⁴⁷ Flusser, *Língua e Realidade* (São Paulo: Herder, 1963), p. 184.

⁴⁸ *Da Religiosidade*, p. 48.

⁴⁹ Flusser, *Da Dívida*, p. 27.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 11.

the outcome of this ego displacement. It's in *us* that the Modern Age achieves its goal. But of course this suicide of the intellect, this *nihilism*, is an unsustainable existential situation. "It's the total loss of faith" ... the madness of the all-encompassing nothingness ... we are indeed the overcoming of the Modern Age ... we are its reduction to absurdity.⁵¹

On the face of it, then, Flusser's critique of the cogito formulation is akin to that of other scholars, as explained above, who have rendered Descartes' method of doubt as the seed of *postmodern nihilism*. However, to overcome such nihilism, some have proposed – insisted, actually – we return to Plato, or other form of pre-modern thought (any form, perhaps Aristotle, perhaps Aquinas, perhaps Augustine); after all, Descartes' method has destroyed the naïve faith in the "Augustinian self who had found the possibility of knowledge and reality" in God (and nothing else).⁵²

While others (including Flusser), still, claim precisely the opposite: that Descartes' formulation of the cogito was Augustinian through and through. What does that mean? It means two things, depending on who we ask.

First, it could simply mean this: Descartes ripped off Augustine's own formulation of doubt = existence in *The City of God* for his own purposes. There, in his arguments against the skeptics, Augustine says: "And since I am, even if I am deceived, how am I deceived in believing that I am? For it is certain that I am even if I am deceived ... certainly, I am not deceived in this knowledge that I am."⁵³

Those who argued Descartes could not have 'derived' his own existence from doubting probably never read through Augustine's own formulation of the cogito. But that is surely not why Flusser says the Cartesian cogito is too Augustinian.

Still, to say that the Cartesian cogito is 'too Augustinian' can also mean something else. William Desmond, for instance, also compares Augustine to Descartes, and his point is worth considering. To Desmond, Descartes clearly shares Augustine's passion of knowledge: God and the soul I wish to know. Nothing else? Nothing at all. The difference, says Desmond, is that Augustine wishes to know "nothing more, not because he has 'clear and distinct' understanding of God, and his own self, but because "God is the 'more' that ever resists encapsulation in clear and distinct ideas." This 'more' that is God keeps calling the spirit for "further unremitting thought, mindfulness, before the mystery of the ultimate other."⁵⁴ However, after Descartes, says Desmond, modernity has

⁵¹ Flusser, *Da Dávida*, p. 27.

⁵² Pickstock, "After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy", pp. 111-116.

⁵³ Augustine, *The City of God*, p. 370.

⁵⁴ See Renée Köhler-Ryan's "Thinking Transcendence, Transgressing the Mask: Desmond Pondering Augustine and Aquinas", in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*, edited by Christopher Ben Simpson and Thomas Sammon (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), chapter 7.

become “infatuated with the systematics to the neglect of the *poetics* – especially in its religious significance.”⁵⁵ With Descartes’ *ego cogito sum*, then, says Desmond, we “no longer bow to the master on high ... we have become masters of what is other ... and masters of ourselves.”⁵⁶

This is closer to Flusser’s understanding of the problem. Overall, Flusser (and Heidegger) would definitely agree with Desmond; though Flusser would certainly try to point out some flaws in Desmond’s conclusion.

Flusser would agree that *the quest for certitude is a problem in Descartes’ method* – even agreeing that Descartes’ method reduces the *more*, the *unremitting*, the *mindfulness* of the poetic of being into mathematical, geometrical systems. Moreover, both philosophers would surely agree – once again, via Heidegger – that the Cartesian cogito has ultimately turned man into the masters of what is other, nature and of ourselves. But for Flusser, the problem *is not* that Descartes’ enterprise undermined orthodoxy, as Desmond claims (though more elegantly than the rest of orthodoxy mentioned above) – after all, Desmond’s *poetics* ‘significance of the master on high’ is stranded in Augustine’s God. No, to Flusser, the Cartesian cogito errs because it tries to abolish the very essence of thinking itself, which is the doubtful. And, in this, the Cartesian doubt is not different from Augustine’s certainty.

That is one reason why Flusser says Descartes is Christianity through and through. Both claimed to have eradicated the doubtful from thinking and being. Christianity claims to have eradicated the Jewish doubt surrounding the Mashiach; and Descartes tried to, according to his critics, eradicate doubt itself. Thus, for Flusser, Cartesianism is disguised orthodoxy. But how can you eradicate the essence of thinking and being and still hope for the best?⁵⁷ In the same vein, Flusser further reiterates the inner logic of his *I doubt = I think poetical solution* quoted above: “The definition of the doubtful, though absurd, is the aim of thought; in fact, it is the ultimate aim of the process of thought in its entirety. Should thought ever reach that aim, should it ever define the doubtful, this wouldn’t mean only the end of the doubtful, but also the end of thought itself, which would have nothing left to doubt, and therefore nothing to think about. In fact, if the doubtful were finally defined, we would be back in Paradise.”⁵⁸

So, this much is clear: for Flusser *the ultimate foundation of thinking is the doubtful*. And the ultimate sacredness of being is that which remains unsaid, untouched, unnamed. And here is where Flusser shakes hands with Desmond and Augustine, and then departs.

⁵⁵ William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2008), p. 11

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 62.

⁵⁷ Again, Descartes can surely be defended here, since his new principle of certainty, being based on reason itself, allows for the unremitting mindfulness of being and thinking. Put differently: Can it really be said that Descartes’ metaphysics fosters the forgetfulness of being and thinking?

⁵⁸ Flusser, “Thought and Reflection”, pp. 4-5. Emphases added.

However, while departing, Flusser would leave both thinkers waving in bewilderment, as he utters the other half of his ontology: *Faith is the primordial state of being, of spirit*. Clearly, neither Augustine nor Desmond would disagree with that statement. But placed side-by-side with the other half of Flusser's ontology – *that the ultimate essence of thinking is the doubtful* – it seems we have a paradox: *doubt is the foundation of thinking; faith is the primordial state of being*. And how do we resolve this paradox?

Dialectically, of course. To Flusser, the attempt to eliminate doubt from the process of thinking is akin to trying to return to Paradise. That might sound great to orthodoxy. But at what point exactly into *Paradise* must we return to, if we were to solve the Cartesian problem? Clearly, to follow the orthodox logic, it must be to a point before the *fall*, before the seed of doubt was implanted by the Serpent in the Garden, as a necessary human characteristic. It's a necessary human characteristic because, as Hegel reminds us, before the fall, Adam and Eve lived in innocence, in a childlike state of existence. However, as it will become clear below, for Flusser, much like for Hegel, the 'solution' to this paradox is dialectical ... the way out does not involve the resurrection of dead faiths, or a return to a childlike state of mind in paradise.

But let us get back to Descartes' formulation of the cogito in the very beginning of his *Second Meditation*: "What am I ... I who now necessarily exist? This much is clear: whatever I am, I am a thing that doubts" ... and for Flusser, if there is any problem in Descartes' cogito argument, which hasn't be revealed yet, that is where we will find it.

Let's then take a step back, to reconsider Descartes' argument from Flusser's understanding of doubt: *doubt is the foundation of thinking* – that much is clear for Flusser.

Firstly, this point must be reiterated: Descartes' axiom "I think, therefore, I am" is not a tautology, as Kierkegaard and others supposed, but an *enthymeme*⁵⁹ – a form of argument in which one of the premises is not explicitly stated – in which case, Descartes' cogito argument must be reread and understood as implying that missing or hidden premise. Most objections to Descartes' cogito simply do not seem to take this implicit premise into account. But before going further, let's understand *enthymemes*; we could even ask Mr. Bod Dylan for help. In his *With God on Our Side* Dylan sings:

"The First World War, boys, it came and it went
The reason for fighting, I never did get, but I learned to accept it
Accept it with pride, for you do not ount the dead, when God's on your side.

⁵⁹ A well-known argument, originally presented by Pierre-Daniel Huet in 1689, but still widely discussed. See, for instance, Roger Ariew's *Descartes Among the Scholastics* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), or "Cogito Ergo Sum", by Jim Stone, in *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 90, No. 9 (Sept. 1993), or "Thought Experiment: Analyses of Descartes' Cogito", by C.P. Hertogen, in *SciELO, Transformação*, vol. 39, No.3, (July/Sept. 2016).

The Second World War came to an end, we forgave the Germans. And then we were friends, though they murdered six million, in the ovens they fried ... the Germans now too have God on their side.”⁶⁰

This is a classic example of enthymeme. Dylan’s whole message has to be understood in light of the premise which has been omitted for whatever reason. So, in this light, whoever has ‘God’ on their side *will win* – i.e., no matter who they fight, when they fight, who they support ... they (and the ones they support) will win. In this vein, then, in World War 1 and World War 2 the Germans were defeated because they did not have God on their side; but now that they’re our friends, they too have God on their side ... thus, *they will win*. This is, by the way, a direct reference to Psalm 108:13 – *With God on our side, we will win; He will defeat our enemies*. That is where we find the missing premise of Dylan’s song.

Though quite fascinating, the content of Dylan’s lyrics is not the matter here. More to the point: *enthymemes* are rhetorical tools which require the participation of an active audience. As Mary McCabe explains: *Enthymemes require a dynamic, proactive audience, seriously engaged in the discourse being uttered; or else, the whole point will fall on deaf ears*. Furthermore, this active role “gives the audience autonomy”; i.e., the receivers of the message are not just pets in a game but are rather active, responsible rational and moral agents.⁶¹

The same active role of a moral agent applies to the reception of Descartes’ cogito formulation, for there’s an implicit premise in Descartes’ whole cogito thing, which has often been ignored (though not by Flusser). Nevertheless, once that ‘missing’ premise, which is there in Descartes’ whole metaphysics all the way through the *First Meditation*, is added, doubting becomes the foundation of thinking; and the full statement can be rewritten thus: Ego dubito – ergo cogito – ergo sum ... I doubt – therefore, I think – therefore I am. To Flusser – and perhaps only to Flusser? – this logic makes it incredibly paradoxical that Descartes (and some of the noblest minds thenceforth) thoughtlessly had wished to put an end to doubt itself.

Descartes wanted to replace an old faith, the Aristotelian-Thomist faith, with some unshakable certainty, after which doubting is no longer possible. But we already know that, to Flusser, that would imply the end of thinking itself, since the doubtful is the essence of thinking. And this much is already implied in Descartes’ first step into the cogito formulation. Does not Descartes’ first thesis states this:

⁶⁰ Bob Dylan, “With God on Our Side”, in the Album *The Times They Are A-Changin*, track 3, Originally released in 1964, Sony BMG Music Entertainment, Spotify.

⁶¹ Christopher Tindale, *Acts of Arguing: A Rhetorical Model of Argument* (New York: State University of New York, 1999), p. 12.

In order to establish the truth, it's necessary, "once in the course of one's life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations" – i.e., to doubt everything which can be called into doubt?⁶²

For Flusser, doubting is the essence of thinking; thus, there's nothing wrong with the Cartesian doubt insofar as it wants to doubt. The problem lies somewhere else: the cogito only makes sense if it can doubt its own actuality. As it happens, it seems the Cartesian cogito does not doubt itself; and this is what Flusser holds to be a grave inconsistency with Descartes' method. According to Flusser, the "intellect is the field of doubt" – and Flusser's philosophy as a whole hinges on the epistemological and ontological correlation of doubt, thinking and being ... as a *fundamental unremitting dimension of Being*.

Or, translated into the languages of some of Descartes' detractors mentioned earlier: for Flusser, the *universal given*, the *ungraspable*, the *unremitting mindfulness of spirit* does not apply to God only. No! Having been made in the image of spirit, it means there's something unremitting, ungraspable about the human element as well. There's something relentlessly incomplete about being and thinking.

That is why Flusser says somewhere else that the "I" is an *empty concept* (from an epistemological point of view), and a *lack* (from an ontological standpoint) – and, to some extent, it should remain so.⁶³ Ontologically, the fulfilment of being, the eradication of such lack would mean death; epistemologically, the fulfilment of thinking through absolute certainty, i.e., the eradication of the doubtful is also death. This is to say that thinking is fundamentally incomplete, and this essence is revealed in doubt, which is an absurd; being is equally incomplete in essence, since its core is faith, which can be understood as the assent of thinking towards being ... thus faith, as the essence of being is equally absurd. Hence: *being and thinking are themselves paradoxes* – i.e., thinking is a paradox of being and *vice-versa*. And this *is not* a theoretical, but a phenomenological paradox, which means it can never be fully grasped logically, but only through experience. In short, the very ontological ground of being and thinking is an absurdity.

Thus, for Flusser, it's obvious that, to unearth the fullness of thinking and being, as Gustavo rightly puts it, it's necessary to doubt ... but doubt must doubt itself; it must remain open to the mindfulness of the unremitting nature of being and thinking. Therefore, it is "necessary to doubt the Cartesian doubt because, even if hyperbolic, it imposes upon itself an unacceptable limit" – i.e., the end of itself.⁶⁴

⁶² Descartes, *Meditations*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 17.

⁶³ See *História do Diabo* and "Da Gula", for instance. And this is the basis of what can be called Flusser's ethics.

⁶⁴ Gustavo Bernardo, Preface to Flusser's *A Dívida*, p. 9.

Now, let's consider Flusser's notion of doubt *per se* – doubt that is not afraid of doubting itself – more carefully; and consider its implications: *to unearth the fullness or unremitting nature of being?*

Section 5: Flusser's Further Objections to Descartes' Cogito

For Flusser, then, the starting point of the doubtful is always a calcified certainty, some faith. And that is why he claims "faith, certainty, is the primordial state of the spirit. The "naïve" and "innocent" spirit believes; and it deems so in "good faith." This is to say, then, that doubt does away with the primordial state of naivety and innocence of the spirit. To Flusser, then, returning to that original, primordial state before the doubtful, wherein faith was innocent, is an impossible task. Why? Because in the corrosive acid of doubt that lies within the chain of thought that is being: "The ingenuity and innocence of the spirit is dissolved ... the process is irreversible. And the attempts of the corroded spirit to return to an original, authentic state of faith is nothing but frustrated nostalgia."⁶⁵

So, for Flusser, there's indeed an exit; but it lies ahead; not in times gone by, not into an original paradise, but outwards, into banishment. And Flusser's arguments in this context are rather Hegelian.

In his interpretation of the Fall of Man, Hegel also says that spirit, life itself, being, appears first in its immediacy as innocence, naïve faith. Hence, once doubt arises, spirit is uprooted from its primordial ground, thrown into the horizon of being and thinking, into a state of disunity, akin to Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise. In such state of disunity, in exile from the Garden, the task of spirit is to advance dialectically, not by nostalgically willing to return to an original Paradise, but by a walk into and through exile, a very painful and tortuous ascent through which Spirit has to toil its way to a higher state of unity. In Hegel's own words: "Man is pictorially thought of in this way: that it once happened, without any necessity, that he lost the form of being at one with himself through plucking the fruit of the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil, and was thus expelled from the original state of innocence, from Nature, which yielded the fruit without toil, and from Paradise, from the garden with its creatures."⁶⁶

So, to Hegel, after the fall, the task of the spirit is to advance – walk ahead. But this path implies sacrifice. And to Hegel (and Flusser would agree), that is the whole point of the myth when it affirms: *through painful toil you will eat ... for cursed is the ground upon which you stand.* Does not Flusser also say the path is painful and tortuous? It requires a fundamental sacrifice. But what sacrifice is this?

⁶⁵ Flusser, *A Dívida*, p. 22.

⁶⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller (Delhi: Molital, 1998), p. 468.

To be clear, for Flusser, all supposed solutions to the Cartesian problem require sacrifice. Orthodoxy have criticized the Cartesian cogito and suggests a return to some form of tradition, i.e., it wants to sacrifice the intellect for the sake of faith ... some faith. Heterodoxy, on the other hand, (including Descartes') says the problems with doubt can be overcome by sacrificing faith for the sake of the intellect. The former, although reasonable, supposes an impossible sacrifice – a return to some original state, assuming that the divine origin of the intellect and being lies somewhere akin to a paradise. But for Flusser the orthodox solution is clearly a significant, absurd sacrifice; after everything the intellect has accomplished so far, including the 'discovery' of the orthodox faith itself, how can we sacrifice it? Hence, this is ontologically impossible. Who wants to sacrifice the intellect for the same old faith, launching thinking and being deep back into the uncertainties of primitive times?⁶⁷ On the other hand, the sacrifice of faith for the sake of the intellect is clearly more appealing, promising even, as it has long ago rendered itself quite fruitful.

However, Flusser rejects both forms of sacrifice. But supposes there's a sacrifice to be made nevertheless. What's this sacrifice Flusser is talking about, then?

To anticipate, (if the hints dropped throughout our discussion so far haven't made this point clear yet): Flusser's notion of sacrifice to solve the problem of the *Cartesian cogito* – and thus *Nihilism* – is perhaps the most absurd of all. In comparison to Flusser's solution, the suggestions promoted by both orthodoxy and heterodoxy sound like a cakewalk.

First, says Flusser, the solution is not to resurrect dead faiths. Yes, the sacrifice of faith for the sake of the intellect seems to lead to nihilism ... *and nihilism is an unsustainable existential place to being and thinking*. But nihilism itself should be taken as the starting point⁶⁸ – and not as a forbidden path guarded by fearful archangels wielding flaming swords. Once again, to Flusser the 'solution' is not to resuscitate dead faiths, to return to a childlike state in some original paradise. It's the road ahead, which is always tortuous and painful – that is the path that lies ahead of being and thinking toward its unity or the mindfulness of itself and the other. But that does not mean the road to the past is blocked. Much like to Heidegger, to Flusser the unremitting mindfulness of being and thinking requires a dialogue with the past. But not only with the Greeks, as Heidegger supposed. In his path towards the unremitting mindfulness of thinking and being, towards solving the problem of Nihilism, Flusser is eager to talk to all "initiators of our great feast, the mythical figures" of Orpheus, Abraham, Jacob, Sisyphus, Inanna, Aphrodite, and so on, as these "proper names ... call us to the sacrifice they themselves initiated." For Flusser, it's "from this time of conversation that the ultimate sacrifice can take place."⁶⁹ Thus, the dilemma of Adam and Eve couldn't fit into a

⁶⁷ *A Dívida*, pp. 111-112.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 30.

⁶⁹ Flusser, *A Dívida*, p. 120.

metaphysics of either-or. For Hegel, the fall reveals an eruption of the possibilities of being and thinking to overcome the immediacy of nature; and the toil, which is also a curse, is both the result of the fall and the overcoming. Similarly, the doubtful, for Flusser, represents the possibility of the attainment of a truly human life – it's what allows spirit to move beyond the immediacy. Nihilism, to Flusser, is the 'localized' instance, to accept nihilism as the starting point is the very possibility of overcoming doubt. How? In his words, by embracing the doubtful. "Beyond that thinkable horizon, which is the horizon of the intellect, everything is doubtful ... beyond this horizon, doubt dissolves itself, and to reject the possibility of doubt to doubt itself is, ultimately, not to accept the horizon of doubt (and thinking, and being) ... it's the sacrifice of the intellect for the sake of the intellect, the sacrifice of thinking for the sake of thinking. But thinking of what? Thinking of all that *is* different."⁷⁰

In this state of perplexity and sacrifice, the intellect may recognize its limitations; and that is the way out. How exactly? One, by letting that what cannot be said remain untouched and mysterious; by letting Being remain what it is: "I am who I am". By sacrificing the intellect not for the sake of something else, but for the sake of *nothing* – *nada*. Flusser himself recognizes the absurdity of this claim; so he says: "... it's not surprising that this attitude is not easily observed and popular within the current trends"⁷¹ towards trying to solve the problem of *Nihilism*.

However, it should be clear by now that the sacrifice of the intellect is already absurd because every attempt involves the sacrifice of the intellect for the sake of something else: *experience, existence, will-to-power, volition, Paradise, religious faith, tradition*, salvation of the soul, etc. For Flusser, the problem of all these sacrifices lies in this: that they all seek some form of compensation for what's been sacrificed. So, Flusser is proposing a sacrifice of the intellect without expecting any form of compensation. And that is the absurdity! But to rescue Flusser's logic here, let me tell a little Buddhist story about a monkey and a bunch of bananas in a cage I once heard.

It seems that once upon a time, a common method trappers used to catch monkeys for the zoo, or whatever, involved placing a bunch of bananas inside a small cage, and then placing the cage into the forest and wait. Soon enough, a monkey will come along and try to get the bunch of bananas by reaching through the narrow rungs of the cage. Clearly, the monkey won't be able to get the bunch of bananas out through the rungs, no matter how hard he tries, twisting his primate hands up and down, back and forth. However, the monkey will keep on trying, because he is already attached to the bunch of bananas ... thus, even upon noticing the trapper approaching, the monkey won't let the bananas go. Sure thing, all the trapper has to do is grab the helpless monkey.

⁷⁰ Ibid. pp. 111-113.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 113.

Now, watching from outside, in the distance, if we could say anything at all to save the poor monkey, what would that be? We'd probably shout out loud in desperation and compassion: *Drop the bananas, silly!* Sounds pretty obvious, does not it? But that is precisely what Flusser is suggesting to solve the problem of nihilism – *drop the bananas*. *No bananas* sounds better than a life in a cage ... in a rational zoo. For Flusser, to free itself from the small cage of the cogito, the intellect must let the bunch of bananas in the form of *idolatries*, *textolatries*, the *calcified beliefs and truths*, etc. go ... it must sacrifice itself for the sake of “a radically diminished intellect, the attitude of the humiliation of the intellect, without any compensation.” The recognition and acceptance of the ultimate emptiness and lack of the self.

Again, Flusser himself recognizes this to be a solution that does not, “quite understandably, find a multitude of adherents.” Still, for Flusser, this “sacrifice is just as an integral part of the feast” of being-and-thinking-in-the-world ... and much like the monkey in the presence of the unremitting possibilities of the forest ... the intellect has a choice to make, *viz.*, to engage itself in authentic conversation – conversation that does not seek to reduce the unremitting fullness of being and thinking into concepts.⁷²

Flusser's *A Dívida* is definitely a fundamental place to dwell in in order to consider this issue closer. However, the string of Flusser's theses there – the question of *verses*, *conversation*, *sacrifice*, *proper name*, etc. – is rather complex and beyond the scope of this discussion. Luckily, we can sanitize such talk with a simpler formulation Flusser presents somewhere else:

This summarizes all the activities of the intellect: the intellect is accomplished by welcoming, converting and reverting themes, in one word: talking. Conversation is the realization of the intellect. Conversation is, therefore, an authentic project ... and intellect that does not accept, convert and revert themes, and intellect that does not speak authentically, decays in small talks, apprehends nothing, understands nothing, articulates nothing ... and thus, does not take place.⁷³

This passage is pretty clear. The next question is: who creates this form of open, authentic conversation – *an authentic type of conversation that accepts, converts and reverts, accepts, converts and reverts* ...? It's in this same text we'll find Flusser's answer: *the poets*. Yes, Plato wanted to banish the poets from his perfect State; Flusser wants to bring them back to the feast. For Flusser, conversation, and thus politics, is a sub product of poetry.

To be clear, Flusser is using the word *poet* here in the original Greek sense, namely: *maker*, *creator*, *producer*. Poetry is the primary industry of the intellect ... the poet is the producer *par excellence*, as he produces “ex nihilo” – it's the creator; it's God's spirit hovering over the watery chaotic void,

⁷² Flusser, *A Dívida*, p. 113.

⁷³ Flusser, “Poesia e Verso”, in *FlusserBrasil*, available at <http://flusserbrasil.com/art36.html>.

to use the language of the myths Flusser (and Hegel) loved too well. Or in Flusser's own terms, the new verses of the poet are the life-giving rain on the prosaic plain of conversation.⁷⁴

To Flusser, then, *authentic conversation* is the unfolding of thought and being, which originates in poetry. With time, however, through conversation thinking and being become too solid, too rigid, for that is the nature of reality. In this state, the intellect becomes idle: it accepts nothing new; it apprehends nothing new; it articulates nothing new ... till it eventually dies.⁷⁵ The advancement of civilization can only happen through the conversation of the intellects. But who produces the topics of this conversation? Certainly, not the rabbles; for they gather happily outside of the ivory tower of history, relying on some form of solid, rigid beliefs capable of reassuring their naïve faith. Who produces the new conversation, then? *The poets*, of course.

However, once this new 'poetry' is grasped by the rabbles, conversation seeks to devour what was once inarticulate, the unremitting mindfulness of thinking and being, and carries on "digesting them and expelling them in the form of civilization." Conversation devours the 'inarticulate' before the inarticulate can devour conversation. Put differently: faith devours the doubtful before the doubtful can devour faith. It's in this process of devouring and expelling that faith becomes consolidated. This is also to say that it's the poet who chooses the direction of progress, the direction of civilization, by choosing its themes. As Flusser has it, "poets are like holes through which the inarticulate penetrates the conversation ... *they are mouths of the gods*"⁷⁶ through which order and direction is re-established. Put differently: they are the "mythologists (the tellers of myths) ... the prophets, the priests and critics" of this feast called civilization ... which is nothing but the conversation of intellects.⁷⁷

But there is more: *progress* is only progress if it moves towards what's not yet articulated. Thus, conversation and progress are always acts of self-devouring. And in this process of dialectical self-devouring, guess who is a threat to faith? *The poet*, again. Why? The 'inarticulate' threatens the intellect of the poets – and the intellect of the poet only. And the process of poetic creation starts all over, once again. Understandingly, this always *ex nihilo* creation of the poet is too intense, too full of heroism and beauty and unarticulated novelties which are never immediately apprehended. In short, 'new poetry' takes a long while, and countless devouring of old faiths, and revolutions, and persecutions, and objections, and ridicules – and, why not, crucifixion – before the rest of the world, the rabble, can capture the underlying transcendence of the new message. And when it finally does; *the poet has already moved on*; has a new message. Examples of such self-devouring dialectics in history abound.

⁷⁴ Flusser, "Poesia e Verso."

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid. *Emphasis* added.

⁷⁷ Flusser, *A Divida*, p. 100.

Again, we can try to sanitize Flusser's dialectics of self-devouring by referring to one of his more 'relaxed' explanations of this whole self-devouring process in terms of his idea of the dialectical transition from the magical to linear writing to technical image.

In a 1999 interview to Miklós Peternák, Flusser says: In the magical world, before the invention of linear writing, power was in the hand of those who mastered the art of divination, of foretelling, of magic. With the invention of linear writing, power is displaced, a new class of rulers appear – the literati, (the brahmanas), the clerks, etc.

Now reality is no longer explained in terms of cyclical phenomena, seasons, feasts, destiny, fate, but in terms of causality. This is a historic, univocal perception of reality, and those who mastered writing had control over society – because society as a whole continued to exist in a magical state.

Then, around the 16th century, with the invention of the printing press, that code of the literati becomes profane, widely available; and the foundations of power are disestablished. Thus, a new code is created: that of science, mathematics. Again, here, only a few mastered such code, while the rest of society are still grappling with their newly discovered alphabetic codes, which has just become accessible to them.⁷⁸

We could surely dwell on this interview a bit longer, for Flusser's conversation is delightful. But the main points here is this: it takes a long time for society in general, the rabble, to have access to the new codes of mastering. And when it finally does, a *newer code* has already been invented – because the master-slave dialectic must be maintained. That is why Flusser says that the Medieval civilization, the one that Descartes wanted to surpass, emerged from Augustine's poetry: "God and the soul, that is all I desire to know ... nothing else - Deum atque animam cognoscere cupisco. Nihilne plus? Nihil."⁷⁹ In other words, the world that was resisting to Descartes' cogito and enthusiasm for the new science in the 17th century had been 'created' by another great poet, some 12 centuries earlier, and had been assimilated through a long *devouring-expelling process*.

But if Descartes' pre-modernity was a product of Augustine's poetry, what are we, postmodern creatures? For Flusser, bluntly, to some extent, we're still pretty much devouring and expelling the themes of the conversation that emerged from Descartes. Or rather, the objections leveled against Descartes' 'discovery' of the cogito, etc. And here Flusser (and Desmond) would agree with Heidegger (yet another poet), that what comes out of these long chain of objections is nothing but the concealment of being and thinking, which reached its highest point in Nietzsche's *will-to-power*.

⁷⁸ Flusser, [Arquivo Vilém Flusser: São Paulo]. (1999, October 17). *On Technical Images, Chance, Consciousness, and the Individual*. [YouTube: Miklós Peternák Interview]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFCBzzMtdE8>

⁷⁹ Flusser, "Poesia e Verso."

Thus Flusser says, if he had to choose one ‘verse’ to describe our present predicament, it would be Nietzsche’s *Alles ist Wille zur Macht – Will and Power* – i.e., *everything can be if wanted, because will is power*. This verse, says Flusser, is obviously much closer to our reality – and thus more exciting to us, postmodern creatures – than that verse of Augustin, so infatuated with the poetics of God.⁸⁰ Why? Is not Nietzsche the poet, the prophet, the mouth of God who announced the Death of Augustin’s God, and the imminent coming of Nihilism?

But how, according to Flusser, could the intellect possibly escape this self-devouring dialectics? Put simply: becoming humble; becoming a tool of adoration of the unremitting fullness of thinking and being, and not of mastering. But how can the intellect become a tool of adoration? Flusser has already showed us one possibility: through *authentic conversation* ... one that approaches the unremitting fullness of thinking and being in awe, and not intending to empty their transcendence. Authentic, open conversation unfolds the verses of the prophets, the poets, the philosophers into “multiple layers of meaning, accepting, converting, reverting and explaining the meaning contained and implied in the verse. Authentic conversation multiplies, branches, unfolds and specializes thinking. If the conversation is authentic, thought and being becomes rich”⁸¹ – however, what the intellect has to accept is that no amount of accepting, converting, reverting will empty chaos of its full unremitting transcendence.

Without this openness to the multiple layers of meaning, to the ungraspable fullness of thinking and being, to the acceptance of every myth, to the indistinct source of poetry, conversation falls into the repetitive and tedious process of Nietzsche’s eternal return. In this, it seems we’re still waiting for the “new verses” of a “new poetry”⁸² ... and this anticipation or urging, for Flusser, can be summarized poetically as well, in the Psalmist’s verses: *I will sing a new song to you, my Lord; on the ten-stringed lyre I will make music to you* (Psalm 144:9).⁸³

Flusser’s whole point: *authentic conversation recognizes the mysterious source of transcendence, the inarticulate, the mindfulness beyond full grasp, the more that is the Other*. The intellect has to come to this encounter humbly, ready to accept defeat – and this is the beginning of a new sense of reality – “the rebirth of the sense of proximity to all that is different within the intellect.”⁸⁴

To Flusser, then, the sacrifice involves a radical change in the course and nature of Western discourse: i.e., the sacrifice demands from the intellect to no longer see itself as an instrument of conquest, as the master of others and of itself, but as a tool of worship. Worship of what exactly? We have already stated: of the unremitting mindfulness of thinking and of being. In plain words:

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Flusser, *A Dívida*, p. 85.

⁸² Flusser, *A Dívida*, p. 89.

⁸³ “Poesia e Verso.”

⁸⁴ Flusser, *A Dívida*, pp. 120-122.

we must philosophize not in order to eradicate doubt, to empty reality of its transcendence, but to recognize the mysterious sources of the spirit.

In “Of the Name”, Flusser talks a bit more about the limitations of the intellect, as well as its overrated powers – it’s this overvaluing which, apparently, leads Descartes to affirm the self and God only to proceed towards the new sciences of mathematized nature. This same overvaluing of the intellect, however, is also behind the subsequent objections to Descartes’ cogito. To accomplish this overvaluing, both Descartes and his detractors, sought to eradicate the doubtful. However, as Flusser already explained, the doubtful is the ultimate aim of thinking.

So, the doubtful, at the same time it’s the whole aim of the intellect, it’s also one aspect of its limitations. And it’s here that *nihilism* – in its innocent form, as *fear of the doubtful* – may arise. This fear is, however, unjustifiable. As mentioned earlier, Flusser sees nothing mystical or mysterious about this limitation. Again, the boundaries that hinder the advancement of the intellect towards the unremitting nature of ‘reality, towards “God”, towards the inarticulable are not archangels wielding flaming swords ... nor are they infernal furies to be purified ... nor demons to be expurgated. Those boundaries, says Flusser, are very prosaic in nature; they are names.⁸⁵

But what kind of names to be precise? It’s important to have some grasp of this bit of Flusser’s philosophy, as it can clarify his notion of poetry – and thus clear up ‘another’ solution to nihilism – as briefly discussed above. Let me try to summarize a very complex and enthralling set of ideas in a few words, then.

There are, says Flusser, two types of names or words: *Proper (primary) Names* and *secondary names* (all other forms of words). Poetry, Myths, the Sacred, the name of ‘God’ which cannot be pronounced – in fact, even the whole poetic verse Moses brought down from Mount Sinai to be delivered to the people, namely: ‘I am Jehovah, your God’ – are all forms of Proper Names ... and that is why Poets can create reality in order to propel civilization towards the future: because *poets are mouths of the gods.*⁸⁶ Proper names, says Flusser, are thus novel and powerful sources of mystery, and are, therefore, difficult to be articulated, and they often need the visual aid of gestures, symbols and myths in order to be expressed or translated. In short, *Sacredness* and *mystery* are the marks of Proper Names.

Secondary words, on the other hand, are easily spoken and assimilated into conversation. Proper names urge to be ‘called upon’, to be worshiped, to be ‘invoked’ – not to be fully grasped and dissected, because there’s something about its source that resists the emptying of the inarticulable – the emptying of itself. Put differently: the creation of Proper names enriches the intellect but does not empty the realm of the unthinkable. Secondary names do expand the territory

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 74.

⁸⁶ Flusser, “Poesia e Verso.”

of the thinkable too, of what can be articulated into conversation, but they lack that holiness so characteristic of Proper Names. Thus, through conversation, the intellect seeks to overcome its limits that is, it seeks to expand itself ... but the inarticulable remains unremitting.

Once again, this is a fascinating part of Flusser's philosophy, and my rendering of it is a very rough summary. But the lesson to be taken from here is this: for Flusser, the intellect is itself the realm of the doubtful. In short: language, thinking, ideas, beliefs, concepts, etc. do expand the territory of the intellect ... but unremitting chaos does not abate.⁸⁷

Having said all that, there's one thing we shouldn't ignore here: Flusser's repeated usage of the word *God* – as when Flusser compares God with the whole of reality, or sometimes with chaos; or as in stressing the importance of the intellect to recognise its limitations and accept the mysterious, unremitting nature of the source of thinking, of being, Flusser refers to the Psalmist verse: "I will sing a new song to you, my God."

'God' has already been used too often to be overlooked at this point. We could surely use this word to illustrate Flusser's dialectics of proper names into secondary names – call it: *from-inarticulate-to-ordinary dialectics*.

For Flusser, stripped of its mysteries, a proper name becomes either trivial or empty of its unrelenting content. Thus, when Flusser uses the word *God*, very so often it seems he wants to restore that mysterious, unremitting value to where it belongs – 'I am who I am'. Perhaps etymology can help us clarify this point further. Let's see.

We know the word 'God' comes from the Sanskrit word **huta* – meaning 'The Invoked One'. *Huta* is indeed an epithetic of Lord Indra, the primordial God in the *Rig-Veda*.⁸⁸ Hence, in his heydays, as the primordial deity, Indra was often addressed as *Purubuta* or *Parambuta* (**puru* and **param* both mean 'supreme'). In other words, even within the *Rig-Veda* Indra was also called the 'Supreme Invoked One' – perhaps because the Primary, original, Name **huta* (God) was already becoming empty of its transcendence, and thus a 'new' Proper Name, **param*, needed to be added. Unsurprisingly, then, over ¼ of the *Rig-Veda* is devoted to Indra, and Vedic Poets and worshipers thought Indra merited a number of other divine epithets such as *King of Heavens*, *Leader of all Gods*, *King of Kings*, *God of War*, etc.

However, notwithstanding all this distinction and apparent unremitting celestial glamour, few centuries later Lord Indra starts to witness hopelessly his sovereign unrelenting power be challenged by the new 'poetry' of the Puranas, which favoured new Gods such as Vishnu and Rudra (Shiva).

⁸⁷ Flusser, *A Dívida*, pp. 79-89.

⁸⁸ Probably the oldest collection of Vedic Sanskrit religious hymns, compounded around 1700 – 1100 BCE.

In Flusser's proper-name-secondary-name dialectical terms, we could say that once the inarticulate, unremitting poetic mystery of Indra's name had been properly digested and expelled, digested and expelled ... and thus assimilated into normal, trivial conversation, it becomes a secondary name ... a trivial name deprived of its full poetic nature.

And now it's the time for the Poets to take action on create 'new poetry' ... on composing new Gods. Indeed, that is when the *Puranic Poets*⁸⁹ started creating new Divinities, by promoting deities like Vishnu and Shiva to the position of *Parambuta*. Eventually, Indra – the once *King of the Highest Heaven, God of Gods*, etc. – is demoted to the status of a much lesser god, a simpler god of weather ... and is often depicted as jealous of the now superiors Vishnu and Rudra. In short, then, Indra, Vishnu, Rudra, were all once Proper Names, and as such urged to be called upon, to be invoked, and their unremitting natures were the sources of devotion. However, once properly digested, assimilated into secondary conversation, these names seem to lose their unremitting nature. No surprising, then, that for half of the world, the names of Indra, Vishnu, Rudra are nothing but laughable myths.⁹⁰

To summarize, then, etymologically speaking, it's reasonable to claim that the Primary (*proper name*) Word God is related to *invoking*, to *pouring*, to *calling out* – the very ontological status of proper names, as Flusser sees it: *proper names urge to be called upon*; not to be apprehended. Once apprehended, however *Proper Names* are gradually transformed into secondary word, when it is used to mean this or that deity. Further down into this self-devouring dialectics, then, secondary names are further diluted into idols.

And here, Desmond and Flusser, these two very distinct philosophers, who have never met, would again agree on this: the problem with the Cartesian doubt – and all subsequent post-metaphysics – is one: *it seems to leave no place left "for unremitting thought ... for the mindfulness, the mystery of the ultimate Other – of being and thinking."*⁹¹

Put it differently: *the spectre of objections that followed the Cartesian doubt has slowly but steadily emptied thinking, being and Being of their transcendence*. We'll return to this unremitting, mindfulness of being and thinking from a Flusserian perspective a bit later, eventually leaving Desmond and his Augustinian God behind for good. Now, let's summarize Flusser's issues with Descartes' doubt.

⁸⁹ The *Puranas* – such as the *Mahabharata*, which includes the *Bhagavad-Gita* – are later Sanskrit religious texts, probably compiled between c.300 BCE to c. 300 CE, promoting a new pantheon of Gods and, thus, a new form of adoration and conversation.

⁹⁰ Having said all that, at some point **buta* migrates into European languages through its Greek form **ghu-to*, "to pour", from the verb **gheu*, to call, to invoke, to cry out. From this, the word becomes the Proto-Germanic **guthan*, Old High German **got*, German **Gott*, English **God*. See, for instance, Odwirafo Kwesi Ra Nehem Ptah Akhan, *Anidabo: The Origin of the Term 'God'*, July 2014, available as PDF at www.odwirafo.com

⁹¹ Köhler-Ryan, "Thinking Transcendence, Transgressing the Mask: Desmond Pondering Augustine and Aquinas", in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*, chapter 7.

To Flusser, then, what Descartes' method of doubt – and much of the objections leveled against it – conceals is not only a mask of make-believe to a universal accessibility to truth and certainty, a mad desire to dominate and control nature, but rather ... an imaginary dualism that opposes thought to matter, subject to object, etc. This is to say that Flusser is critical not only of Descartes' egocentrism, but also the distinction between apparent substances. Flusser ultimately derives one consequence from the Cartesian meditative exercise: *forms of dualism are pure abstractions*. Following Heidegger, then, Flusser wants to blur the clear and distinct background of the Cartesian "I" – what "does exist is an interpersonal relationship, a networking, an intersubjective fields of relations," from which we may "extrapolate" particulars; but, truly, all we have is an *opacity*.⁹²

That is another reason why, for Flusser, *the Cartesian doubt is unmistakably Christian*: for one, Christianity poses a false dualism as the foundation of all reality; put differently, without 'dualism' – body and soul, heaven and hell, good and evil – there'd be no Christianity. And, much like Descartes, Christianity wants to eradicate the unremitting opacity of being and thinking. However, as Flusser says, this dualism is very hard to overcome. But why? Perhaps because it's the alley the Sumerian poets reserved for reason. The moment those poets devoured the inarticulate, translating it into the thought of Babylonian gods separating heavens from earth, dualism becomes the underlying themes of reason: some see dualism as illusory, some deem it real – but it's the underlying theme of reason nevertheless, as fundamental as the doubtful itself. Furthermore, Descartes wanted to eradicate doubt to secure certainty; Christianity wanted to eradicate the doubt concerning the Mashiach to secure salvation; while Flusser wants to push the doubtful back to where it belongs – within the realm of thinking and being.

So, if Descartes (and Christianity) appealed to skepticism only to put an end to it, Flusser pushes the doubtful back onto the centre of being and thinking again; to Flusser, it's only when philosophy protects the *ontological function of doubting* and accepts *Bewilderment, Fiction, Poetry, Myths, the Sacredness of Proper Names* and *Absurdity* humbly – and, above it all, learns to laugh at its own ignorance – that philosophy as authentic conversation, as *poetry*, can truly be the way out of nihilism.

In Flusser's words: "Should philosophy become rigorous, we would lose our capacity for amazement; no new words, no new thoughts would then emerge, and we would revolve in repetitive circles of idle talk."⁹³ Hence, it's only reasonable to protect and treasure the doubtful, accepting that thinking is not a tool to master and manipulate Chaos or Gods or Proper Names. In doubting, thinking becomes rather "a song of praise to the never-conquerable", unremitting and mindfulness of the nameless chaotic principles of reality. Like 'God', "the doubtful is therefore not

⁹² Flusser, "Conversation Between Vilém Flusser and Patrik Tschudin", in *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*, edited by Anke Finger, translated by Kenneth Kronenberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp. 88-106.

⁹³ Flusser, "Thought and Reflection", p. 7.

something to be defined, but something to be thought; indeed, it's the very horizon of thinking."⁹⁴ In doubting, thinking should remind us of the point where (to quote the myth of the fall, again), "we were expelled from Paradise and where our critical thinking, which is our exile, began."⁹⁵

To be fair to Descartes, it's possible to argue that his unbounded enthusiasm and strong-headedness in search for certainty ended up saving philosophy from the calcified discourse of Thomist-Aristotelianism, which claimed, among other things, Earth to be the centre of the universe, for example. The same 'philosophy' that persecuted and condemned Galileo for claiming that Thomist-Aristotelian geocentrism was mistaken ... that, in fact, it was earth which moved around the Sun, now the centre of the universe. True, over 350 years later, in 1992, Pope John II rectified the mistake. But perhaps that only proves Flusser's point: that it takes a while for conversation to devour and expel new poetry. The problem are the critical mistakes – the atrocities, the millions fried in ovens or murdered elsewhere – committed in the between. If philosophy – authentic conversation – is to avoid such mistakes, it must treasure the mindfulness of thinking and being: *the very essence of philosophy*. Besides, the full title of his *Discourse on Method* makes it clear that Descartes was concerned with the proper method to conduct scientific investigation: *Discourse on the Method for Conducting One's Reason well and for Seeking Truths in the Sciences*.

True, Descartes makes no bones about the fact that, in order to accomplish his goals, he first had to clear the path from the rubbles of pre-scientific Aristotelian-Thomist ideas. But can it really be said that Descartes 'closed' the path to the unremitting mindfulness of being and thinking? Can the Cartesian doubt really be blamed for having emptied the universal given of its ungraspable spiritual nature? I think not. All the Cartesian method of doubt reveals is the power of authentic self-reflection – and authentic self-reflection can hardly accomplish that. Furthermore, is not Descartes the one who insisted that it's necessary, once in a while, to demolish everything completely, to sacrifice the intellect and its prejudices, and start again right from the foundations? I think it was him.

Of course, in a sense we can affirm that Descartes established reason to be the ultimate source of certainty; but *that* can hardly be posited to be the cause of the forgetfulness of the *unremitting mindfulness of being and thinking*. As mentioned above, Descartes never claimed the existence of something called 'unshakable, absolute certainty of reason' ... unless, of course, the reader never made it through to the *Sixth Meditation*. There Descartes claims that 'certainty' can only result from our capacity to call together all our senses, memory and understanding for the purpose of examining our perceptions. I.e.: certainty is not a product of some unmediated, transcendental, rational absoluteness. The *Cartesian cogito*, then, does opens the path towards a transition from a

⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 5.

⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 2.

childish like intellect in paradise to a state of rationality ... by uprooting the intellect from that idle state of calcified faiths and ideas.

Now, Flusser's philosophical solutions all sound *absurd*, but not because they're unreasonable, but rather because they're akin to Descartes' stoic notion of the passions of the soul (mind), which has also been severely criticized. In brief, in his combined writings, Descartes constructs the basis for an ethics which begins with the maxim that human beings should take control of their passions rather than try to control nature. But that is a different topic altogether, is not it? The point is: Flusser seems to be making exactly the same claim here. Thus, with Flusser and Descartes, we should say: let's continue this great adventure that is the sacrifice of thinking, of the arrogant madness of wanting to dominate everything that is different. That is, let's become thinking beings – let's become humans again ... let's treasure the mindfulness of thinking and being.⁹⁶ However, although all this 'Stoicism' sounds simple ... it is not at all easy. It requires us to come to grips with the bare fact that we might be less than we think we are ... and that is a very hard thing to do.

Regardless, for Flusser, one possible way to accomplishing the task of becoming humans again is to be thrown into exile – I said Flusser's solutions are all absurd, did not I? Thus Flusser says: *exile or unsettledness is man's 'best way of becoming a human being in the full sense of the word.'*⁹⁷ Because the deepest hell is also the highest.⁹⁸ To Flusser, then, one of the sublime tasks of authentic philosophy is precisely that: *to throw thinking and being into exile* – to disclose the deepest, highest hell. Truly, if we were to summarize Flusser's complex set of ideas into one catchphrase, it had to be this: *a Philosophy of Being and Thinking in Exile* ... and that ought to be the main feature of Flusser's philosophy. Or, (perhaps) less dramatically, we should say that, for Flusser, *the task of philosophy proper is the reiteration of the painful and the agonizing.*

For Flusser, there are different forms of exile or unsettledness. Exile might be induced or invoked epistemologically, as it's the case with the ironic exaltation and embracing of the doubtful, the limits of the intellect, the unremitting mindfulness and *sacredness* of proper names, etc.; unsettledness might as well manifest itself within a sort of onto-epistemological dominion, as one engages oneself in *translation* and *self-translation*, for instance; but, of course, it can also be *real exile*, as it's the case with migrants and expellees; and it can surely be the ultimate self-imposed exile of the *ironic philosopher*⁹⁹ – the philosopher who has realized that the true spirit of philosophy lies not in its statements, in its systems, in its concepts, but in its ludic mood. This understanding, for

⁹⁶ Flusser, *A Dúvida*, p. 124.

⁹⁷ Flusser, "To Be Unsettled, One First Has to be Settled", in *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections Against Nationalism*, edited by Kenneth Kronenberg, translated by Anke K. Finger (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp. 25-27.

⁹⁸ Flusser, *A História do Diabo* (Coimbra e São Paulo: Universidade de Coimbra e Annablume, 2012), aphorism 8.1, p. 198.

⁹⁹ Flusser, *A História do Diabo*, Aphorism 8.2, p. 199.

Flusser, is most advanced philosophy: *to understand that every philosophical concept turns crucially around its own irony is to really understand.*

Perhaps it's this same form of self-realization that prompted Socrates, once the jury gave him the death penalty, to speculate with excitement about the nature of his afterlife: death would be a wonderful, unique opportunity to meet with great heroes such as the Trojan warriors and Sisyphus ... Socrates couldn't wait to converse with them and ask them questions, to see who were indeed heroic and wise and who just pretended to be.¹⁰⁰ Surely Flusser stands heir to Socrates in this long-lost tradition of ironic philosophers.

In short, for Flusser, in exile, by reiterating the painful and the agonizing, *Philosophy* is itself its own fiction and glory. And wherever there's reiteration of the painful and the agonizing, in exile, there can be no emptying of the universal given of its ungraspable spiritual nature. Indeed, this might be the topic of our next discussion. Some people may find Flusser's philosophy of thinking and being in exile intriguing, encouraging even; but we can hardly count most of Descartes' detractors among them.

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¹⁰⁰ See Plato's *Apology*.

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