

On Eucharist (between faith and reason)

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Is there a better subject than seduction? - Specially when talking about a special effect. So, I will start telling a story, a seduction-story of a young theologian who had a fatal attraction for Descartes' most beloved Lady – I am obviously talking about Lady Philosophia. In the seventeenth century, philosophy was not a dry academic matter. Especially Descartes' new philosophy very cunningly offered herself as an irresistible temptation to ambitious theologians who hoped to save hard-pressed theology menaced by the conceptual tricks of widespread libertarians. Even if Descartes' Philosophy, after his death, was abhorred by catholic authorities as if it were the Babylonian Whore in person, he has been received, in the beginning, like a sacrosanct follower of Saint Augustine – for example by young Antoine Arnauld. He was the youngest son of an enormous and very catholic family and he was doomed to become one of the founders of one of the most important religious movements of the seventeenth century. Attracted by Descartes' splendid mistress, he tried (like Holy Augustine) to keep Lady Philosophia as an ancillary power of the catholic renewal of Port Royal – but finally he did not really succeed in resisting her tricks. But let's go over this story more slowly.

In 1640, he gets in touch with the manuscript of the Philosophical Meditations of Descartes thanks to the Father Mersenne. Enchanted with the task of commenting this text, Arnauld has to face a twofold problem: on the one hand, he has to answer it as a philosopher, making use of his reason in metaphysical matters, on the other, he has to answer as a theologian, making clear a theological position as to the entirely new use of reason proposed by Descartes. In a general way, we might say, that the main problem consisted in finding a

good, double-entry bookkeeping system, which would make compatible a concomitant use of reason and of faith. This means, in the Augustinian tradition, that reason has to be ancillary in relationship with faith, so that the latter might appear as a culmination of the further: theology being – of course – superior to philosophy. That's where the special effect comes in: the well-knit Augustinian system assuring a harmonious syntony of faith and reason is put to a test by Cartesian philosophy and this test is staged in the form of an attraction – and a final seduction – of Antoine Arnauld.

First act, first scene

In 1640, the time he had his first contact with Descartes' philosophy, Arnauld writes a treatise called *About Frequent Communion* thanks to which he obtains the title of a Doctor. This treatise, considered one of the great treatises of Catholic theology, is an essentially conservative piece of theology. Its main task is to establish a link between any possible proposition and what has been revealed in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, taking in all of the reformulations by the **Fathers of the Church**, the **Saints** and the **Councils**. According to it, what has been prescribed by faith is incorruptible; a Church, from the doctrinal point of view, does not make mistakes, although it may be corruptible in its **costumes** and in its discipline. Validity of faith still remains absolute, even if there is concrete evidence of disorder. In theological matters it is quite enough to follow tradition, there is no need to explain empirical phenomena: explaining is a sort of plague of modern times.

Consequently, the existence of God is preliminarily acknowledged as given – as a sort of 'state of affairs', something that is present and offers itself to propositions, to knowledge – but it exists of course only as a revealed truth.

In this sense, reason starts from something already existing, from a kind of substance, which is the condition of every statement relative to theological or metaphysical matters. In a way, it doesn't matter this concept of revealed truth, because, from a logical point of view, we have the existence of something that is present. We can here better measure the distance in relationship to the Cartesian's philosophy. In this philosophy, the existence of the things in general is a problem; a problem that can be solved thanks to the introduction of a new consideration of ideas, the existence of ideas. In the Augustinian tradition, God is not an object of analysis or interpretation, but of belief. So, in fact, Descartes really introduces a very serious special effect: he makes God become an idea of reason, something to be proved.

But, how, in that case, can Arnauld deal with philosophy within his theological framework? How can we conceive the effect this beautiful lady created over him? Even if his position is prudent in his book *About frequent communion*, it is nevertheless clear. He is against the heretics and the libertarians, because they use reason in order to put everything into doubt. So they end up recognizing no limit at all. Consequently, if the theologian wants to fight against the heretics, he must use reason, thus exposing himself, as Hegel will say later, to the cunning of reason. Perhaps, the organizers of this colloquium, when introducing the title "**special effects**", thought precisely about that effect of cunning.

Second act

From this rather paradoxical concatenation of the principle of faith (revelation) with the principle of philosophical thought (reason and reasonable proof) derives a second effect, which is rather historical. Arnauld embodies Cartesian philosophy and Jansenism. Both movements have their starting point in a critique of scholastic thought: it seems that the theological and moral reform of the Church depends on a revalorization of reason, which

implies a necessary substitution of Aristotelian and Thomist philosophy by Descartes'. But there is an interesting ambiguity as to the "source of knowledge" envisaged by the two movements: one is looking for it in "Christian antiquity", that is in the "true Christian religion" of the first centuries, whereas the other, i. e. Cartesianism tries to find this source in reason or in the 'natural light'. Arnauld himself and his fellow theologues got caught in this ambiguity.

Arnauld, as well as his opponents, feel, in fact, obliged to face the heretics, to rebut their arguments – producing, thus, a curious symbiosis between theology and philosophy. Philosophy, however, is invasive; it doesn't accept the limits imposed by faith and thus start tearing down its frontiers. Even if it is a good remedy against the heretics, philosophy remains what it always has been a plague. It produces, as a priest of that time said, "two bad effects in the spirits of the religious: on the one hand, an excessive desire of science, on the other, a distraction from prayer". However, in a century invaded by libertarian habits, free thought and impious practices, which are considered as a sign of spiritual strength, the exercise of philosophy still is a lesser evil.

The plague won. But it won in a rather special way. Philosophy won as if it were acting in an Augustinian way, as if reason were the servant of faith. In the time of Descartes, there was a common opinion that the Cartesian philosophy took its roots in the thought of Saint Augustine. The "cogito", as we know, was not something invented by Descartes, but is already formulated by Saint Augustine, mainly in the *Trinitate*. In appearance, they work with the same principles, as Arnauld remarked very clearly. Nevertheless, the way both philosophers look for the proof of the "same" principle, really is not the same. For instance, the Cartesian proof of the separation between mind and body is something that is apparently common to both rational metaphysics and the Christian metaphysics. The first edition of the *Metaphysical Meditations* has the title: *Metaphysical Meditations, in which the God's existence and the immortality of the soul are proved*. Once we may prove that the soul is formally and really distinct from the body, the existence of one is not any more bound to the other. As a consequence, the body may be corruptible, but not the soul. Reason would offer to faith an instrument of conversion; an arm in the battles of thought of a century which started with the libertinism of thought and which was followed the libertinism of the body in the 18th century.

The paradoxical effect provoked by Cartesian metaphysics – hailed as a powerful instrument which might bring back to the Church the libertarians, the skeptics and the critics who became more and more important within the Spirit of the Time – is precisely its becoming a catalyst of dissolution of religious convictions. The old servant of Faith turned out to be the powerful and dominating mistress of its most precious objects: God and the Soul.

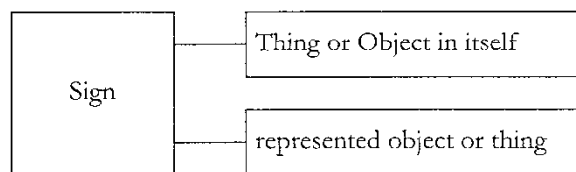
Arnauld's conclusion in his *Objections* against the *Meditations* is particularly interesting in this context, because at the same time he praises Descartes' devotion, he fears Cartesian philosophy "defending God's case against impious libertarians" will put into their hands the arms "which might fight the faith founded by the authority of the God he defends". On the one hand, reason; in its strong signification cannot defend God's cause, proving His existence even to the libertarians. On the other hand, the same use of reason enables the enemy the instruments, which may undermine the foundations of faith. God becomes an idea and his existence an object of rational proof. However, Arnauld gives in to the seduction of this philosophy. Seven years after the first acquaintance the theologian thinks that the new philosophy is totally compatible with the principles of faith, and he approves of almost everything Descartes wrote concerning *Prima Philosophia*. Arnauld is caught in the trap of reason; the God of Tradition becomes the God of philosophers.

Last act

In 1662, together with Pierre Nicole, Arnauld publishes the *Logic of Port Royal*. This is 12 years after the death of Descartes, 18 years after his first acquaintance with Descartes' writings and only a few years before the work of the philosopher are put on the index of the Church. The *Logic of Port Royal* is a sort of Cartesian *Organon* of the XVIIth century, which was supposed to substitute Aristotle's *Organon*. It continued, up to the XIXth century, as an important propagator of Cartesian philosophy. As the title shows, theology is not the main object of this work. We find in it rather a logical and grammatical approach of Eucharist, which is highly interesting. Let's look at it more closely, beginning with the distinction between divine and human nature:

Men being made of body and soul, they depend on meaning in order to communicate. Consequently, there is a shared convention as to the use of certain signs, which arouse in different persons the same thoughts. These thoughts are either ideas methodically elaborated by the thinking substance, or thoughts transmitted by revealed truth. **Once** thought is always accompanied by words which are necessary for our communication with other persons; **once** finite rational and corporal beings in their relationship have to fall back on exterior signs which are not exclusively intellectual but also sensitive. For those gentlemen, reflection about thought comes together with a reflection about language; logic is accompanied by grammar. Adopting an Aristotelian distinction, Arnauld distinguishes between an internal discourse, proper for demonstration or elaboration of ideas which is, in that sense, incontestable, and an external discourse, concerned with the communication and persuasion. It is in the external world that we are exposed to ambiguities and misunderstandings provoked by different meanings attributed to the words, whereas the internal world is mainly occupied with the deduction of ideas.

Concerning the idea of a thing, we consider the object in itself, in its own being, "without having the mind's eye look at what it might represent (Arnauld, *Logic*, I, VI), which would be the case, for example, with the idea of the earth or the sun. Concerning the idea of a sign, on the contrary, we consider a certain object as something which represents something else. This object is called sign (i. e. pictures or maps) and consequently comprehends two ideas – the idea of the thing it represents and the idea of the thing represented: that means, it specifies that the idea of the thing represented is **aroused or excited** by the idea of the thing it represents.



The linguistic concerns of Port Royal is strictly philosophical, they deal with the ways of examining our access to the ideas. The question is how to operate a sort of division of ideas in a way which assures that meaning of the represented thing in a proper sign is founded on the doctrine of ideas and judgement. That is why Arnauld and Nicole insist on the necessity of an investigation, which pays attention to the "particular nature of the sign"¹. The linguistic concern, however, unfolds into a theological one, because the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharistic mystery can be conceived only in function of the 'particular nature of the sign': the sign being simultaneously thing and representation.

In fact, one might say that the polemics of the Gentlemen of Port Royal with the Protestants are based on the way they conceive the sign. In the protestant interpretation, the Eucharistic bread is a **figurative representation** of the Christ: bread as well as Christ are conceived as two **real ideas**, one is taken as representing the other in a figurative way. The Protestants have thus a particular conception of the sign. The sign is valid for the meaning of the things of the external, finite world in general, subjected to temporality, but valid **also** to signify the body of the Christ, and that means, a “body” whose nature is divine and eternal, according to revealed truth.

In the protestant conception, bread is, at one time, an empirical object, at another time, the figurative representation of an immaterial, divine body.

(Let me just say that our own, modern conception tends to be closer to the protestant one, since we tend to have a representational concept of meaning. But we are free to chose, adopting, for example, the conception of the late Wittgenstein, where the meaning depends on the intentional use – and then we come close again to the conception of Port Royal)

So let me go deeper into the disagreement between Port Royal and the Protestants: According to Arnauld, the Eucharistic bread is a thing which is, **at the same time**, and not in two successive moments or states, thing and sign. This theological play around revelation is hinged on a particular form of **presence** – present in time -, although subtracted to time. This means, philosophically speaking, that the Cartesian theory of ideas is theologically embedded in a form of justification of the presence of the Christ - thanks to a ‘rational’ grammar, which thus reveals its theological marks.

Thus, the words of Jesus Christ “This is my body” represent, for Arnauld, a clear and distinct proposition signified by the use of precisely those words, which excite or arouse an idea in the spirit of the listener. Consequently, one must not add to it ideas which are not included in this proposition – for example, ideas emerging from a confusion concerning the meanings of certain words in certain propositions. “This is my body” uses “bread” as a sign, which arouses the idea of a divine, incorporeal body, not the empirical eatable object bread. We must not forget that the adequate comprehension of the meaning of these words presupposes the truth of this proposition **as revealed truth**. This is the condition of intelligibility of this proposition, which has a specific context of enunciation, within which the intention of the speaker in front of his listener plays an important role.

For instance, in the case of the demonstrative pronoun “this” (hoc) appears, although in a confused way, the idea of the thing present, because the idea of bread is not “precisely meant by this term”, but it is only “stirred/aroused/excited”. Arnauld pays particular attention to a distinction – which is not recognized by the Protestants – between the ‘excited ideas’ and the ‘precisely meant ideas’. The bread, in this particular theological use, belongs to the first kind of idea, whereas the Christ’s body belongs to the second one.

Empirically speaking, the bread is only the occasion of the meaning and, consequently, of the intellection of the (immaterial, divine) body of the Christ. The problem to be solved is “how did the [Apostles] conceive Him”, how can we translate the Apostle’s revelation into the linguistic-theological rules of a logically valid conception. In this perspective, the pronoun “this” is the confused idea of the present thing, the “bread” the aroused or stirred idea (occasional and dependant on the circumstances), the “Christ’s body” is the meant idea. Thus, the distinct idea of “bread” is not meant by the use of the pronoun “this”.

Arnauld’s analysis shows a very important difference from the protestant Minister’s conception: they consider that “this” is the bread – more clearly it is not *really* the body of the Christ, but only *figuratively*. In that conception the whole Eucharistic mystery of the

proposition dissolves in the representational meaning: “This is figuratively [the representation of] my body”.

Arnauld’s opposition against this conception is based on a very subtle logical distinction between two types of incidental propositions: incidental explicative propositions, on the one hand, incidental determinative propositions on the other. (I apologize for the rather difficult technical aspects I will have to expose in order to get to my final – and theologically most exciting – special effect). Let’s see the two types first:

- a) Incidental explicative propositions add terms, which do not alter the idea of the subject, they explicit what is included in an idea without restricting its essential properties. They are appropriate for theological propositions like: “The men who have been created in order to know and love God”³
- b) Incidental determinative propositions restrict the extension of the subject, thus determining its meaning. For example, the proposition: “The men who are pious” determines only a certain number of men, not humanity as a whole

It may happen, however, that the determinative element (the relative pronoun “who” or “that which”) of the incidental proposition does not affirm anything relative to the subject implied by “who” or “that which”. Arnauld show this analyzing the role of the incidental proposition in the Eucharistic formula “This is my body”. This formula implies an ostensive definition evoking (along with “This”) an implicit determinative element: “which is the bread”. However, this element is only implied and not affirmed of the pronoun “this”, because this pronoun is the subject of the attribute “my body”, meaning the Christ’s body, as we can abolish the determinative proposition without changing the meaning of the whole proposition.

Arnauld and Nicole observe very subtly that our judgement of the nature of these propositions (in order to find out whether they are explicative or determinative) depends entirely on the attention we pay to the meaning and the intention of the speaker. We can have access to the truth of a proposition, theological propositions included, only supposing that those who proffer them determine the meaning and the intention. In other words, the meaning of the Eucharistic proposition depends on the meaning and the intention of Jesus Christ at the moment he pronounced it.

Coming back to the dispute between Arnauld and the Protestant Ministers we can see now the truly stunning solution proposed by his logic-linguistic analysis. Arnauld shows that it were the **Apostles** (not Christ) who determined the idea of the thing present as being the bread. But this, according to Arnauld, does not exclude another determination, which may have escaped the attention of the Christ’s listeners. As the Christ’s proposition is based on revealed truth, the Apostles (or any of their readers) may subtract what they added: the bread is, in fact, an incidental determinative proposition, which can be cut out without the least alteration to the truth of the main proposition. This one talks about the idea of the Christ’s body together with the “thing present”, whose presence is situated in the representation of the one who conceives.

Arnauld reveals to his readers the indeed very special effect produced by the Christ’s words – an effect that escaped, however, the attention of the Apostles!

Notas

¹ Ibid, I, IV.

² Ibid., I . XV.

³ Ibid. II, VI.