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Pierre-Daniel Huet: between Scepticism and Fideism

Pierre-Daniel Huet was an eighteenth century distinguished Catholic theologian whose posthumously published treatise on the feebleness of the human reason branded him as a sceptic whose views undermined Catholic theology. However, this treatise was written decades before his publication and should be viewed in the context of Huet's works written and published before this treatise and after. When placed that way, his views on scepticism turn out to fit very well the Catholic dogmatics and have been meant to enhance it.

Key words: Pierre-Daniel Huet, faith, reason, scepticism.

In 1723, a book came out, *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l'esprit humain*, which Richard Popkin, a historian of scepticism, enlisted among the landmarks of European scepticism in his many publications. Although the book did not reach the popularity of Pierre Bayle's books, particularly of his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), it caused quite a stir particularly among the Catholics, but also among the Protestants. The book was penned by a highly respected scholar and polymath, Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721), a member of the French Academy since 1674, an abbot of Aulnay since 1679, and the bishop of Avranches since 1685¹. The book was highly criticized by many authors and some of them found it incredible that it was even written by Huet, an effective defender of Catholicism, not known for any attempts to introduce any novelty to the traditional dogmas. Even when his name was associated with the *Traité*, some considered that it was possibly a translation of some other work that did not reflect

¹ [P.-J.] d'Olivet, *Histoire de l'Académie française*, Paris 1729, vol. 2, pp. 349-369; F.-A. de Gournay, *Huet, évêque d'Avranches, sa vie et ses ouvrages*, Caen 1854.

Huet's own conservative views or even that it was a forgery². The *Traité* is a book-long justification of the feebleness of the human mind, as announced prominently in the title, of the frailty and thus unreliability of the human reason in general and in theological matters in particular. However, because it was his last book that was published, in fact, posthumously, it has often been taken as Huet's last epistemological word.

The *Traité* on reason

The tenor of the book is given at the very outset, when through an interlocutor, Huet announced that after scrutinizing the many philosophical systems he found the doctrine of Arcesilaus, Carneades, and Pyrrho to have been the strongest; they seem to have known the nature of the human mind better than others. These Sceptics and his own meditations led Huet to the realization that no person has a natural ability to discover the truth with full certainty and this inability of the human mind is the source of all human errors (T 8-9)³. Huet discussed thirteen arguments for why the human mind cannot be trusted. The human mind is an inborn principle or faculty that is moved and agitated to form ideas and thoughts by the reception and impression of images (*especes*) in the brain. These *especes* are not images stemming from objects, but traces imprinted on the brain by the motion of animal spirits and nerves agitated by the senses (13). Therefore, we cannot be sure that *especes* are really similar to the objects they represent (33, 34), since the mind cannot compare images with objects (35, 181). Also, images do not represent all the aspects and properties of objects. The environment through which *especes* pass can modify them (36). Senses may have introduced some changes to images (39), and so can the diverse agitations of the nerves and animal spirits (42). Also, the brain, “the citadel of the soul, the laboratory of reason, the worker of perception” may introduce distortions (46). Even if all

² C. Bartholmæss, *Huet, évêque d'Avranches, ou le scepticisme théologique*, Paris 1850, pp. 44-49, 144-166; [J.B.M.] Flottes, *Étude sur Daniel Huet, évêque d'Avranches*, Montpellier-Avignon 1857, pp. 265-294; A.M. Matytsin, *The specter of skepticism in the age of Enlightenment*, Baltimore 2016, pp. 99-109.

³ References to the following books of Huet are used:
A – *Alnetanae quaestiones de concordia rationis et fidei*, Francofurti et Lipsiae: apud haered[itatem] Iohannis Grossi 1719 [1690].
C – *Censura philosophiae cartesianae*, Parisiis: apud Joannem Anisson 1694 [1689].
D – *Demonstratio evangelica*, Parisiis: apud Danielelem Hortemels 1690 [1679].
T – *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l'esprit humain*, Amsterdam: Henri du Sauzet 1723.

organs work perfectly, that does not tell us what is the mechanism of how the soul perceives *especies* imprinted on the brain, how it judges about objects, how material *especies* can be sensed by the immaterial soul (48). Perfect knowledge about anything is unattainable: things cannot be known with perfect certainty since they constantly change (59), because people are different and thus the scope of their knowledge varies from one person to another (63), because there is an infinity of causes affecting each aspect of reality, and obviously, infinity is beyond the human reach (65). There is no certain rule about the truth (69), a criterion allowing people to distinguish truth from falsehood (70), since a criterion would be needed to distinguish true criterion from a false one, which would require having a criterion..., etc., *ad infinitum* (73).

Most of the thirteen sceptical arguments go back to Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus⁴ and, when treated in all seriousness, they seem to completely disempower human reason leaving people on shaky ground in all matters, particularly in respect to religion. This is what troubled Huet's critics, and these criticisms often made an impression that this was the pinnacle of Huet's philosophical accomplishments. Huet undeniably treated seriously his sceptical pronouncements, however, he did not find them damning.

The *Demonstratio evangelica*

The *Traité* came out posthumously, however, it was written a few decades before Huet's death. The first version of the *Traité* was written in 1680-1685 as the first part of the planned five-part *Quaestiones Alnetanae*. The second part was a critique of Descartes which was published separately as the *Censura philosophiae cartesianae* in 1689. The planned third part, on the agreement of faith and reason, the fourth part, a comparison of Christianity with other religions, and the fifth part, a comparison of Christian and pagan morals, appeared as parts 1-3 of the *Alnetanae quaestiones* in 1690. Huet revised the *Traité* at least three times and even prepared its Latin translation⁵. On the other hand, the *Traité* followed a massive and very popular apology work, the *Demonstratio evangelica* (1679). It seems that the *Traité* should be viewed as a conclusion of sorts of the *Demonstratio evangelica* and surely as an introduction to the *Alnetanae quaestiones*.

⁴ Four of these thirteen arguments actually go back to Descartes, José R., Maia Neto, *Huet sceptique cartésien*, "Philosophiques" 35 (2008), pp. 231-234.

⁵ José R. Maia Neto, *Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721) and the Sceptics of his Time*, Cham 2022, pp. 64-71.

The *Demonstratio evangelica* is an extensive and erudite defense of the authenticity of the Scriptures, which had been under attack at least since Spinoza. Having stated that “a genuine book is that which was written by that author, by whom it is said to have been written, and about the time at which it is said to have been written” (D 7) and that “every book is genuine/authentic, which has been regarded as genuine continuously by/in all the ages/times that have followed [since its publication]” (13), Huet said that, incontestably, all books of the Bible have been written by the authors whose names are associated with them⁶. Also, there had been many contestants for canonical books, however, they were not included in the canon since their authenticity had been contested from the beginning (27). Moreover, assuming that “a contemporary book is the one that was written about the time when the things/events written in it happened” (7), Huet showed that “the books of the NT are contemporary,” that is, “they have been written around the times in which the things described in them happened” and the events they describe are true, which is confirmed by the fact that many of these events had also been described in contemporary pagan sources (28).

Huet made a rather original claim that all world mythologies can be traced back to the Books of Moses. In particular, all the important ancient divinities are but distorted images of Moses: “all the fictional gods are one and the same, namely Moses” (D 140) and Moses is found in Adonis, Mercury, Osiris, Serapis, Anubis, Zoroaster, Cadmus, Apollo and many others, and the goddesses – of his wife, Sephora (144) found in Juno, Minerva, Venus, and other goddesses. His is a very strong claim and yet not entirely defensible⁷.

Writing under the assumption that “the Messiah is the one about whom all prophecies of the OT agree that he is the Messiah” (D 393), Huet proved that Jesus was the Messiah; he did it by listing 169 parallels between the OT prophecies about the Messiah and their fulfillments shown in the NT, and by providing 22 types or figures of Jesus in the OT, which confirms Augustine’s statement that the OT is a concealed form of the NT (*De civ. Dei* 16.26), that is, that the NT is the revelation of the OT (395). All in all, Huet concluded that “Christian

⁶ Incidentally, Huet agreed with a rather common view that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written by Paul (D 25).

⁷ Cf., for instance, [C.-F.] Houtteville, *La religion chrétienne prouvée par les faits*, Paris 1740 (1722), vol. 1, ccii-cciv; Huet himself also mentioned some criticisms (D preface [6-9]).

religion is true” and thus, “all religions, except for Christianity, are false and impious” (749).

All the claims are heavily documented by Huet and that was the main reason to write the book, namely to show by references to historical and linguistic sources that the position of the Scripture is unassailable. In the *Demonstratio evangelica* there are also some mentions of scepticism mixed with rather non-sceptical statements of the Cartesian coloring. So, Huet says that geometrical proof has no more authority than that of the principles on which it is based and the reliability of these principles “depends on their natural (*nativa*) evidence and clarity upon which our illuminated mind can easily rely on them.” The source of our acceptance of these and of other principles is “the clarity (*perspicuitas*) by which their truth is known by itself and is open to our minds”; the inherent clarity that illuminates the human mind. They [these truths] are called principles in theoretical investigations, the rules (*dictata*) of nature in morality. Sceptics criticized even the principles of geometry, but the rules of morality were usually left intact. Such rules enable social life and, for Huet the more people accept them, the more clear and certain they are (D 3), but, still, we can know things using senses and reason, but this source of knowledge is a weak, uncertain, and deceptive means; however, we can know things by faith, which is clear, manifest, illuminating the soul (5); the lower status of reason is theologically justifiable, since God, Who wants our salvation to be the gift of His grace and the fruit of our faith, “has granted us the use of a blind and dull reason, lest, having obtained by reason a clear knowledge of the sacred mysteries, we should reject faith” (5). Interestingly, from a religious perspective, scepticism also has a very positive side: sceptics are closer to religion than it is usually assumed since they are free of prejudices and, guided by God, they more easily set aside obstacles to divine faith (5) and, therefore, some may want to bring non-believers from their dogmatism to scepticism to make them more amenable to religious persuasion (6).

The *Demonstratio evangelica* concentrated on the exploration of historical sources, only very fleetingly addressing the problem of methodology of science and of epistemology. However, very soon such issues became the center of Huet’s attention, namely in the *Traité*, the *Censura*, and the first part of *Alnetanae quaestiones*.

The *Censura*

In the *Censura philosophiae cartesianae*, Huet goes right to the heart of scepticism that constituted the starting point of Cartesianism since “Descartes erected the foundation of his entire philosophy on doubt” (C 9), the doubt that excludes the truth provided by natural light, such as that the whole is larger than the part (10).

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Descartes asserts that these are the causes of this precept: that we often experience that our senses are deceptive; that we seem to see in dream many things, which exist nowhere; nor can we distinguish what appears to us in dreams from what we sense in the waking state; that the human reason is obscure and deceitful; finally, that we do not know whether God willed to make us such that we should always be deceived, even in those things which seemed to us to be best known (11).

The foundation of his philosophy is the famous cogito-formula, quoted by Huet as *ego cogito, ergo sum*. Then, on dozens of pages Huet provides subtle, exhaustive, but also harsh⁸ criticism which, basically aims at the problem, of how the Cartesian methodological scepticism can be reconciled with the certainty of the cogito-formula to build the whole of philosophical system on it.

While doubting everything, Descartes doubts whether he exists, but who/what is the ego in his cogito-statement? “Surely, it is something which already is/exists. He thus asks whether he is and yet he assumes that he is” (C 15). However, when doubting his own existence, Descartes should also doubt whether he thinks (18). Moreover, there is an inference problem: How is “I exist” derived from “I think” (20)? “What if we say that, even if it is given to be true that he is/exists who thinks, yet it is also possible for it to be true for him not exists who thinks?” (21). Descartes himself said that it is known by natural reason that *quidquid cogitat est*, “whatever thinks, is”; thus, this statement is not derived from these: *ego cogito* and *ergo sum* (25). Descartes started with sceptics, but abandoned doubting when it was most necessary to doubt by assuming as most certain the cogito-statement, which is as doubtful as any other principle. However, for the sceptics, the goal was tranquility in things that depend on opinion and perseverance in

⁸ It was not beneath Huet to resort to name calling and even to rather underhanded satirizing as exhibited in his *Nouveaux mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du cartésianisme*, 1692, where he portrayed Descartes as hiding among Laplanders. On the other hand, “the discussion of philosophical topics in the *Censura*, which comprises most of the work, is even by modern standards of very high caliber”, T.M. Lennon, *The Plain Truth: Descartes, Huet, and Skepticism*, Leiden 2008, p. 22

things that cannot be avoided; doubt was only a proximate goal (78). If everything is in doubt, then to clear everything, a rule of truth has to be known, that is, this rule has to be established first: what is truth, what is the mark/sign of truth, what character, what criterion distinguishes it from falsehood? (86). That is, every truth must be authenticated by a characteristic that distinguishes it from falsehood; this characteristic is also a truth with its own characteristic, which is another truth, etc. to infinity (88).

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A positive input made by Huet in the *Censura* seems to miss the point of his own criticism: what is a criterion of truth? Huet only described a low level of the cognitive processes, so, we learn that the body senses, not the soul, since when the abstract mind is stirred (*revocatur*) by the sensory organs, so, it is necessary that the body feels/senses before the mind understands it (C 134). Somewhat strangely, the soul only bestows (*tribuere*) the body with the faculty of sensing and of knowing the impressions made on it and the affections/state of the senses (135). Platonic and Cartesian innate ideas are rejected. The idea of God is the faculty of thinking about God and thus does not differ from any idea that is not inborn (137; cf. T 195-197). The ideas of external things are formed by the soul after the soul is urged to do so by some corporeal motion and through the senses incited by external things and these corporeal motions impress a stroke or mark (*plagam sive notam*) on the brain. The soul detects this stroke and forms a new idea; at least, it presents this idea to itself and recognizes it as though it was there before. Universal ideas are derived (*exceptae*) from singular ideas (C 139). We know that God exists not from an inborn idea but we derive it from the agreement of all people, from the order of the world, from the existence and motion of things, and from other arguments (163). We know it also from faith (164). It does not result from the idea in us of an infinite and perfect being that an infinite perfect Being exists outside of our minds (166, 174). A distinction has to be made between existence only in the mind and the real existence outside the mind (167). Sensory experience and some mental processing appear to be Huet's answer. In a way, it brought Huet back to Descartes' starting point, the unreliability of sensory data and of rational constructs based on them. At that point, in his own mind, Huet may not have found it necessary to address this unreliability problem, since, he had already done it, at least to himself, in his as of that time yet unpublished *Traité*. Possibly the work on the *Censura* made him realize that the *Traité* is overly non-constructive and needed a better fine-tuning.

The main problem was, how to find the truth, which is not only a problem driven by mere curiosity, but it has eternal consequences if a person holds on to wrong religious beliefs. If reason is not an ultimate guide, what is? Huet provided some answers already in the *Traité*.

The *Traité* on faith

The truth is known with certainty or uncertainty (T 16). People know by faith, with divine certainty, things revealed by God, since God is the Author of this certainty. With human certainty people know that the whole is greater than its part (17), by natural light they know with certainty that two plus two is four, from an authority or experience they know with certainty that there was a Roman emperor called Augustus (18). The certainty concerning geometrical axioms is inferior to that of faith which, in turn, is inferior to the celestial certainty of the blessed (cf. 1 Cor. 13:9, 12) (20), so human certainty is not the supreme or perfect certainty (21). The Bible clearly states that the human mind cannot attain perfect certainty (22), and so did Church Fathers (28-31), but faith can.

This appeal to faith is made in the *Traité* rather abruptly. Huet defined reason and ideas and briefly discussed them, but a rather sudden leap to faith seems to indicate that the idea of faith is non-controversial; also, the criteria of accepting something by faith are lacking, which was also indicated by Huet's critics⁹.

Justified as such criticism is, the central point of the discussion can be missed, namely, scepticism is an avenue to faith: scepticism's proximate goal is "to avoid error, obstinacy, and arrogance" and the distant goal is "to prepare the Spirit to receive Faith." Since people were created to love and to serve God and to enjoy eternal happiness after death; thus, God instilled in people the desire of happiness (209) and because the knowledge of truth is part of happiness and people have a great desire to know it. Although true happiness in this life cannot be realized, and the ultimate truth cannot be known either, the inborn inclination to know it drives people to at least approach it. To that end, God put in the human mind the sparks of obscure knowledge of things insufficient to know the truth (210), but sufficient to guide us in this life (211). Faith is a heavenly gift to those who do not trust too much the powers of their nature, who do not assume too much about the penetrating power of their reason, and are not attached too

⁹ See, e.g., [J.-P.] de Crousaz, *Examen du Pyrrhonisme ancien et moderne*, La Haye 1733, pp. 751-752, 768.

much to their own opinions (212). What is contrary to the revealed faith should not be accepted and people should hold on to what God marked/wrote in their souls through faith, the guide and mistress of reason (216). Faith has nothing to fear from reason since reason's own light is weak and obscure. Without resistance, people should submit themselves to the divine light which enlightens human understanding from the source that surpasses natural laws and when they receive faith, they are obligated to follow its precepts in their lives (273).

These are forceful statements, but there still remains the problem of the relation between reason and faith, the value of unreliable reason in the face of the reliability of faith, and since faith is the gift of God, can people count on receiving it? These problems have been addressed more carefully in the *Alnetanae quaestiones*.

The *Alnetanae quaestiones*

Having defined reason as “the faculty of our mind, by which it tries to know the truth, either by reasoning or by simple perception” and faith as “a gift of God, so that after He has illuminated our mind with the light of heaven, and awakened the will with His inspiration, we may assent to those things which He proposed to us to believe” (A 6)¹⁰, Huet repeats his conviction that the Scripture speaks about walking by faith not by sight (4) and that the Fathers of the Church also gave preference to faith (5), and this sentiment permeates this work.

Reason has its own light, which is dim and dubious (James 1:17) (A 8), but this obscurity does not condemn reason to uselessness and rejection:

Reason has its own light, its own rays: they are indeed fallacious and ruinous, if one allows the sharpness of his mind to be blunted by them; on the other hand, they are useful for the preparation of the reception of Faith, and for strengthening the mind. (...) Human Reason, although lacks a clear, firm and constant view of truth, does not illuminate our minds with a light bright enough to look at it, it surely does provide weak and rather obscure lights, by which we either see, or think we see, the right way to the truth (9).

Reason's realization that it is inherently limited comes from the fact that there is an unbridgeable gap between ideas and objects of these

¹⁰ According to the Doctors of the Church, faith is a gift of God by which we believe in revealed truths contained in the Scriptures and in the tradition and which are taught by the Church, abbé [A.] Hespelle, *La Théotrescie ou La seule véritable religion, démontrée contre les athées, les déistes et tous les sectaires*, Paris 1780 [1774], vol. 2, p. 196.

ideas and hence the adequacy of these ideas can never be tested: I cannot compare the idea of Peter with Peter himself, whereby the origin and similarity of the idea is uncertain, so, I will never know for sure that Peter is present (T 255). Now,

since the truth is placed in the acknowledgment of judgment (*in confessione iudicii*) which the mind makes from the observation of the ideas which are in us about external things, from which those ideas have proceeded, it thinks that there is some truth, and that its judgment agrees with external things.

Although reason understands that it is possible that those ideas did not come from external things, and even though they did, they may not be similar to them, yet it is inclined to accept them as such, so that it judges them to come from the outside and that they are consistent with their origin. But this is just a desirable assumption, a convenient supposition. Ultimately, the mind sees that it cannot reach external things from ideas, and thus, it cannot reach the truth through reason; however, it has an innate desire to reach it, so, it looks for another guide; thus, instructed by reason, we do not follow its own guidance and seek another guide to which we can unhesitatingly commit ourselves (A 11).

Reason, weak as it may be, is an indispensable element to know the truth even though only faith provides the perfect truth, “for to believe and not to know what is believed, is madness” (A 16), and this knowledge has to be filtered by reason. It appears that faith as the result of divine illumination has no reasoning powers; it accepts something or it does not. However, faith is not supposed to be a blind acceptance of any dogmas; therefore, it needs reason and its reasoning power to bring down to the human level as much as possible its dogmatic content. Faith by itself may be light, but this light is so bright that it is blinding, and thus, invisible by the human mind; therefore, faith, uses reason, as it were, as a subcontractor to make this light shine on the human level.

Huet agrees that faith is attainable through traditionally accepted means, miracles and prophecies. However,

the miracles performed by Christ and the Apostles, the prophecies of the Prophets, the Tradition, and other external supports of the Faith, can be used in no other way than by Reason to prepare the souls to embrace the Faith. Therefore, the oracles of God revealed in the sacred books do not separate Reason from Faith in such a way that they command Faith to abstain altogether from the association with Reason;

on the contrary, they point [to reason] preceding Faith and preparing the way to it.

Consider the example of Virgin Mary, “by which is most clearly set forth the preparation used in the soul/mind through Reason to receive the Faith.” The angel spoke to Mary about what would happen; she pondered on it in her mind and expressed her doubt raised by reason: how can that happen not knowing a man? Finally, she submitted herself to the will of God recognizing how fallible human reason is (A 17). However, this involvement of reason does not undermine the position of faith: “Reason is the instrument of Faith, not the cause of believing; [reason] precedes faith as a companion, as a forerunner, not as a leader; for the sake of service, not of dignity; as a warrior in battle, not as an emperor” (23, 50), so that when a city has been captured, the victorious king enters it, when the attendant defeated the enemy; indeed, the reason why the king entered the city was not the attendant, but the victory; the king only employed the service of the attendant, that he may use the opportunity of entering in victory. Faith is also accompanied by reason in the Councils, when decrees derived from the principles of faith are proposed. For example, when from the point of faith stating that Christ was truly God and truly man, the sixth Synod of Constantinople concluded by reason that Christ was endowed with two wills, divine and human; this became another point of faith; “between these two points of faith, reason carries itself in the middle, and connecting the one to the other, it is implicated in and connected to both.” However, the second point requires the assent of faith just as much as the first (26). In fact, when rejecting reason and relying on faith alone, anything can be believed (42); the whole of theology would be nullified without the use of reason since “theology, which from the roots of the Faith brings forth and explains the offshoots of all the Christian doctrines, will be nothing at all, unless it advances the skill of Reason by clear consequences and manifest conclusions” (30). And so, “Faith, after it has settled in the mind, does not even then reject the aid of reason; on the contrary, it seeks strength and defense from it, and uses its support to shape the mores of people, and to amplify their piety” (27, 43).

In all this, the distinction between reason and faith has to be constantly kept in mind: reason is a natural endowment, faith is a gift from God, “an inner inspiration (*afflatus*) of God” (A 30). And so, even the sharpest reason and the most far-reaching reasoning powers cannot be the *cause* of faith. Reason can prepare the way to it or confirm the faith already accepted and Huet’s own *Demonstratio evangelica* was

a book-long reasoning meant to introduce readers to Christian faith, to prepare their minds, with the hope that the faith would be infused in them by God. Therefore, although the direct, as it were, catechetical introduction of someone to Christian dogmas is not rejected, it is implicitly considered as not necessarily effective. Scepticism is proposed to be a more conducive introduction to the acceptance of faith since it possibly puts in doubt any counterarguments someone being introduced to faith may have.

Reason should take a stand in the case of religious controversies against the enemies of faith who must be confronted with the weapons that reason supplies. “Therefore, Faith is not ashamed to call upon Philosophy with its reasonings as a support either for the display of its power, or for its own defense, as if backed up by some auxiliaries” (A 30). This includes accusations that faith forces people to believe in what is contrary to reason. However, although faith does not always propose to believe in those things which are entirely in accordance with the common use of reason, it is never quite opposed to reason. Even in the case of the Trinity, reason can agree that three things can be one when the mind investigates its own nature to discover that it consists of memory, intellect, and will, three things are one; moreover, the mind, its self-knowledge, and its self-love are also one (36).

Importantly, reason has a great deal of autonomy.

Faith does not reject the use of reason from itself, allowing to be adorned, fortified, and defended by it; nevertheless, it considers it beneath its dignity to interpose itself in matters of Reason which have nothing to do with it [Faith]. (...) And while it has Reason in its power, it [Faith] allows it [Reason] as its servant to have a domain separate from the things of the Lord, and it does not even consider to have the right to it.

All the disciplines which human reason has discovered by its own industry, especially philosophy, belong to this domain. However, some aspects which refer to faith are disputed in this domain, such as the existence of God, the distinction between the soul and body, or the freedom of the human will; therefore, in such inquiries reason must submit itself to the dictates of faith or remain altogether silent. This is because the truth is one and simple, and it belongs to faith; thus, whenever reason differs from faith, it must also differ from the truth. As for the rest of topics which are proper to its own domain, reason can make decisions as it pleases (A 57). More interestingly, “from this it follows that those who refer questions that have nothing to do with Faith to the judgment of Faith, and who seek to resolve purely

philosophical controversies by the sacred authority of the Scriptures, act perversely,” where philosophical controversies should be understood broadly to include natural philosophy, that is, natural sciences. Therefore, for instance, those should not be accused of impiety who deny that the sky is bound together by solid spheres because the Bible states that the heavenly spheres are said to be *the most solid, as if cast from bronze* (Job 37:18) and that God made the firmament to divide waters above and below (Gen 1:7).

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Outrageous are people who make the Holy Spirit the teacher of philosophy [and science] and who turn the Divine Word, which is the rule of faith and conduct, into unsuitable (*alienus*) and profane uses, by which people can neither become more faithful to God, nor better (58).

So, science should deal with natural causes and although God created the world with all its natural laws, He does not micromanage it; therefore, Huet considered it to be inadmissible “to invent miracles where nature does not depart from its usual course, and constantly maintains its course (*tenor*).” At best, God can be seen as the prime and indirect cause while acting through the means of natural laws. God is the universal cause of all things, but the reference to the universal cause in explaining phenomena is like saying that Troy is on earth. The sacred should not be mixed with the profane (59).

Actually, reason can have its own say in matters that touch upon faith if what it says does not undermine faith. Reason may try to explain some things of faith. For example,

Faith teaches that in the most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ by mystical words, and that only the species of bread and wine remain. As to the true manner in which that miraculous change takes place, whether they are species, or accidents according to the Peripatetic doctrine, Reason has been allowed to argue back and forth. (...) Faith proposes something to be believed in general; it decides nothing about particulars (A 62).

Faith introduces the dogma of transubstantiation, without explaining its mechanism; reason makes philosophical attempts to provide some competing explanations, which may be just interesting and harmless efforts of the human mind if they do not undermine the core of the dogma.

However far-reaching reason can be on its own, Huet tried to show it in the second part of the *Alnetanae quaestiones* in which he performed a systematic, very detailed and learned comparison of Christianity with other religions. He showed that all the aspects of the Christian

religion can in some form be found in some other religions as well: the existence of God and His attributes, eschatology, sacraments, etc. Even elements which could be viewed as very specific to Christianity are also found elsewhere, for example, some doctrines include “the obscure and hidden mystery of the most holy Trinity, as if through clouds and mist, but that they nevertheless saw it with the help of Reason.” For Huet, finding such elements was “the most certain proof of Christian truth” (A 92). It can be contested, for instance, whether the comparison of the Elysian Fields with the heavenly place for the blessed soul is justified. Certainly, not in respect to all details, however, the common theme is the interest in the afterlife, although the way of getting there can be completely different according to Christianity and other religions. However, all in all, such a comparison in Huet’s mind points to the primacy of the Christian religion, although this may be a perilous sentiment since an unbeliever may retort, why believe in Christianity if its elements are spread across other religions?¹¹

Fideistic rationalism

The discussion of scepticism occupies a prominent place in Huet’s writings; however, although he considered Pyrrhonism the best philosophy, this does not mean that he was a sceptic. Huet made a distinction between philosophy and theology, the former being based on reason, the latter on faith. Experience shows that human reason is fallible, thus, an attempt to reach the ultimate truth through reason alone is simply doomed to failure. The achievements of reason need to be treated with caution, with doubt, and considered to be at least tentative and probable and be used with circumspection. So, rational investigation itself points to doubt to be used in measuring its accomplishments. On the other hand, building a philosophical edifice on doubt alone by wobbly reason only is a wasted effort. This is what Descartes tried to do and Huet treated it as a testbed for the viability of doubt as a constructive philosophical tool. Not rejecting philosophical scepticism, Huet showed in the *Censura* that even a capable

¹¹ Cf. Houtteville, op. cit., p. ccvi-ccvii; Bartholmèss, op. cit., p. 30. In one of his letters, Arnauld expressed a concern that Huet’s book was a “horrible matter suitable to inspire young libertines that one has to have a religion, but all of them are equally good and even Paganism can become comparable to Christianity,” *Lettres de Messire Antoine Arnauld*, Paris: Sigismond d’Arnay 1775, vol. 3, pp. 400-401. Similar sentiments have been expressed by Jean Racine and by Jacques Bossuet, cf. G. Verron, *Pierre Daniel Huet, le “savant universel”*, Milon La Chapelle 2020, p. 324.

philosophical hand such as Descartes' it will not amount to anything since it quickly leads to contradictions or to a tacit suspension of doubt.

Unrestrained reason may bring error and harm, particularly in religious matters. Huet, first and foremost a clergyman, could not allow that to happen. When it comes to religious doctrines, reason must clearly be submitted to faith. Religious dogmas as considered to be of the divine provenance, cannot be contested by reason. Interestingly, however, the role of reason is not altogether excluded from religious matters; reason is only required not to contradict them. And thus, it may try to provide details to general doctrinal statements or support them philosophically. And hence, rational proofs of the existence of God are theologically permitted, even encouraged. In fact, Huet mentioned the Lateran Council under Leo X (A 38), the 8th session of which took held in 1513 declared that there is only the truth proclaimed by reason and urged philosophers to use their arguments to address such matters as the immortality of the soul. Huet mentioned, among others, the proofs of existence of God as safely belonging to rational investigation (57). Huet heeded that call since his major intellectual effort was to prove rationally by scrutinizing the history and mythology of various nations, using his expansive knowledge of philology, that all elements of Christianity are foreshadowed, sometimes in an obscure form, in the religious traditions of these nations.

Dogmatic
Theology

Huet also recognized the autonomy of reason in its investigations of matters not related to faith; in these matters, reason has a free rein, even if it relies on fictions; for instance, the earth is treated in astronomy as a point (T 244), geometry speaks about points without parts and lines without breadth (D 9). Also, reason, and thus science, is free to investigate natural phenomena in its own way not necessarily holding on to the literal images of these phenomena presented in the Bible. And so, Copernicus is mentioned next to Tycho de Brahe without giving precedence to any of them (T 244).

The truth of faith was always of primary importance for Huet, a clergyman who was concerned about happiness of people in this world and in the next and he saw that by leading them to this truth he will bring such happiness into their lives. So, his pastoral concerns directed him to expose his readers to the way they should view the highest human faculty, their reason, as fallible and deceptive and yet by self-realization of this fallibility, it can become an excellent guide to faith which by divine inspiration removes all fallibility. Scepticism on its own right is a rather depressing endeavor, but, in the context of Christian life, it is an excellent tool to lead to the acceptance of faith. Scepticism on its

own right is also depressing since it nullifies any human effort to gain even partial truths about issues that are not directly related to human salvation. Huet would not have it, he opened before reason the entire nature, God's gift itself, to investigation to appreciate the wisdom in God's creation, but also to improve human lives – and Huet himself was involved in some purely naturalist enterprises. And so, to somehow summarize Huet's views, it can be said that he was a fideist, as it could be expected of a Christian theologian, but, to use a phrase with a somewhat oxymoronic ring, he was a fideistic rationalist: faith has clearly an upper hand over reason and any possible conflicts between the two are always resolved in favor of faith, but reason was necessary to lead to faith, to ground and justify it, and it had a great deal of autonomy in the domain not directly related with theological matters.

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