

Submission of paper, ESEMP 2025

Subject: Simon Foucher – looking for a „criterium general“

Keywords:

- Simon Foucher
- Knowledge as process
- Cartesian epistemology

The establishment of a criterion for undeniability, able to overcome scepticism, is one of the most defining features of Descartes' philosophy, being one of the central topics of discussion in university philosophy in the second half of the 17th century. So a philosophical system was to be installed, attaining a degree of validity equivalent to that of mathematics as the paradigm of incontrovertible certainty. The disputes about early Cartesianism therefore always revolve around the question of whether or not Descartes ultimately succeeded in overcoming scepticism with his 'cogito' argument.

Simon Foucher (1644-1696), who was in close contact with the Cartesians in Paris and whom we know primarily for his correspondence with Leibniz and his polemic against Malebranche, takes a middle position in answering this question. Unlike authors of the Dutch school such as Heereboord and de Raey, Foucher places Descartes and his followers in the tradition of Platonic-academic philosophies, finding its latest and final manifestation in Cartesianism. Nevertheless, critical references are made to some deviations from the Platonic tradition in texts of early 2nd generation cartesians, rooting essentially in their misjudgment of human cognitive ability. Although Foucher agrees with Descartes himself in the assumption that ultimate knowledge is also accessible to the created intellect, he argues that the fundamentally justified claim to the finality of philosophical positions is, in his view, inappropriately advocated by at least some of Descartes' pupils when it is extended to too broad parts of the system of philosophy.

He therefore juxtaposes the Cartesian concept of a potentially closed system of secured knowledge with that of an open process of human searching. In doing so, he takes up the philosophical theme of the pursuit of the wisdom that we do not yet possess and will never fully attain - a theme that

takes shape already in the Pythagorean tradition and is systematised at length by Plato and his contemporaries. The idea formulated in Plato's *Lysis*, that the wise man and only he no longer has to philosophise, appears in Foucher as an adaptation of the religiously charged topos of the 'human being on a pilgrimage', which he integrates into the context of his own epistemology. In doing so, he embraces the ancient understanding of 'philosophy as a way of life', as described by Pierre Hadot, and with this he documents the existential aspect of philosophical endeavour that goes beyond mere interest in knowledge.

Methodically, the question at the centre of Foucher's deliberations is whether or not the cognitive mind is able to find criteria for determining the epistemic status of the 'veritez' assumed by it to be certain, and with what claim to validity propositions, based on them, may therefore be asserted. This discussion is not only rooted in the philosophical discussions of his time, but also points to one of the most fundamental questions of philosophy, which must be: can we or can't we know whether the philosophical propositions we have found are in fact 'veritez constantes', or whether they only have the status of hypotheses that can and have to be falsified or verified at some point? This epistemological question of a „criterium general“ has to form the transcendental background of an evaluation and determination of the characteristics of human knowledge in total. It is transcendental inasmuch it sounds out the conditions of possible knowledge and condenses them into criteria of justified acceptance as 'true'.

The paper highlights Foucher's position between an evidentialistic epistemic optimism and a sceptical struggle for knowledge about knowledge. On the one hand, Foucher's position is informative with regard to the further development of Cartesian guidelines in the scientific community. On the other hand, it reveals fundamental questions of epistemology, with which we are still concerned today, placing it in the framework and context of early modern thought and intellectual culture. So it's the same as always: the analysis from a historical distance can further sharpen our view of the fundamental historicity of philosophical research altogether.