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# The Condemnations of Cartesian Natural Philosophy under Louis XIV (1661–1691)

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### Abstract

The interdiction of the teaching of Descartes's natural philosophy pronounced by Louis XIV in 1671 was followed by a wave of official condemnations. The first part of this chapter gathers together the facts that led some historians to speak of the persecution of Cartesianism. In the second part, it is argued that various causes explain these condemnations, first by relativizing the importance of the doctrinal question of the Eucharist, second by placing the question in the context of the Jesuit wars, and third by showing that Cartesians appeared as a party threatening the unity of the kingdom.

### Keywords

France, condemnations, Eucharist, Jesuits, Louis XIV

# The Condemnations of Cartesian Natural Philosophy Under

## Louis XIV (1661–91)

Sophie Roux

In chapters both titled “De la persécution du cartésianisme”, Victor Cousin and his disciple Francisque Bouillier compile the many official condemnations of Descartes’s doctrine pronounced by the king, the universities, and the teaching orders in France in the last third of the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> These chapters are surrounded by a description of the influence that Descartes’s works exerted on early modern thought and by an evocation of the mundane triumph of Cartesianism.<sup>2</sup> Such a juxtaposition is perplexing. Is it possible to go beyond the polarization between institutional censorship and an inescapable diffusion into new circles? Is there a relation between the condemnations of Cartesian philosophy and its success? What were the intellectual and social forces at work?

To answer these questions, I focus on the thirty years between 1661, the year when, immediately after Mazarin’s death, Louis XIV declared that he would rule without a chief minister and wield alone an absolute monarchic power, and 1691, the year when the Parisian Faculty of the Arts was forced to reject a list of propositions of Cartesian and Jansenist origins. These thirty years were not a homogeneous period. The interdiction of the teaching of Descartes’s philosophy pronounced by the king in 1671, followed by a wave of official

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<sup>1</sup> Cousin 1866: III.297–332 and Bouillier 1868: I.466–85.

<sup>2</sup> Cousin 1866: III.140–296 and Bouillier 1868: I.437–47.

condemnations, marked a first break. The breach in 1679 of the Clementine Peace triggered the publication of numerous polemical works. Still, the unity of these thirty years is constituted by the fact that the Descartes who was admired, criticized, and condemned was the natural philosopher.

To make sense of the condemnations of Cartesian natural philosophy during these three decades, I begin by gathering the facts that have led to talk of the persecution of Cartesianism. In the second part, I argue that various causes were at stake in this censorship, first by relativizing the importance of the doctrinal question of the Eucharist, second by placing the question in the context of the Jesuit wars, and third by showing that Cartesians appeared as a party threatening the unity of the kingdom.

## 1. The Chain of Effects

### 1.1. The Early Condemnations in Louvain and Rome

The condemnations of Cartesianism pronounced in France were not the first.<sup>3</sup> After several pressing letters from the papal nuncio in Brussels, Girolamo de Vecchi, the Faculty of the Arts of the University of Louvain gathered on August 28, 1662, and “enjoined and ordered all its members, and in particular its professors of philosophy, to see that the unwary young people do not fill themselves with some dangerous theories that they read or hear by accident”. Noting,

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<sup>3</sup> For this part of the chapter, in addition to [Cousin 1866](#) and [Bouillier 1868](#), see [Armogathe 1977](#);

[McLaughlin 1979](#); [Ariew 1994](#); [Schmaltz 2002](#): 27–74; [Azouvi 2002](#): 19–47; [Armogathe 2005](#); [Ariew 2011](#): 241–94; [Ariew 2014](#); [Schmaltz 2016](#): 22–35.

moreover, that “the writings of René Descartes are in the hands of many”, it warned that “although this author seems to have been successful in many things that concern the experiments of nature, many things that do not conform to the sane and ancestral doctrine of the said Faculty of Arts are found in [his writings]”.<sup>4</sup> On August 27, 1662, two days before the defense of medical theses by Theodore Aerts under the supervision of Pierre Dorlix, de Vecchi intervened once again and asked the Rector “to consult immediately theologians and other prudent persons, and, if there are some propositions infected by Descartes’s errors, to forbid totally the defense of the theses, or, at least, to order that the propositions that contain Descartes’s innovations be expurgated; or, still, to take care in a more gentle manner”.<sup>5</sup> The theses were defended, but on September 7, 1662 the Faculty of Theology censored five propositions in Descartes’s works: the definition of substance as that which does not need anything else to exist, or, at least, which does not need anything else created to exist, because “it implies that there are no other substantial forms than the rational soul, even in animals and plants”; the rejection of real accidents, because “it implies that the accidents of bread and wine do not remain without subject in the Eucharist”; and finally the three propositions that the extension of the body is the attribute that constitutes its essence and its nature, that the world has no limits, and that it is made of one and the same matter. In Dorlix’s theses themselves, the Faculty of Theology condemned several other propositions: corporeal modes explain the virtues of medicaments and the actions of bodies; the soul is better known than the body; without the Bible, there would be no proof that animals have

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<sup>4</sup> Monchamp 1886: 614–15; Armogathe and Carraud 2001: 131–2.

<sup>5</sup> Monchamp 1886: 617–18; Armogathe and Carraud 2001: 130–1. The thesis in question is the *Repetitio thesium omnium medicarum* (Collacciani 2017). On March 31, 1662, Dorlix had already presided a thesis inspired by the *Traité de l’homme*, which was not yet published (Collacciani 2016).

souls; the soul is not in any part of the body; and it can be doubted if animals live.<sup>6</sup> The decree of the Faculty of the Arts was sent to Rome, where the Congregation of the Holy Roman and Universal Inquisition charged the Carmelite Giovanni Agostino Tartaglia and the Somascan Stefano Spinula to censor Descartes's most important works, which were finally put on the Index of Prohibited Books *donec corrigantur* by a decree of November 20, 1663.<sup>7</sup>

It remains to be established how the condemnations of Louvain and Rome were disseminated in France. In his letter to Clerselier of January 27, 1664, Antoine Vinot mentioned the condemnation of Rome<sup>8</sup> and there is a brief allusion to the condemnation of Louvain in Rohault's *Entretiens de philosophie*. However, it seems that, in France, they were known mainly through the fourth edition of Vopiscus Fortunatus Plempius's *Fundamenta medicinae ad scholae acribologiam aptata* (1664).<sup>9</sup> It is through a review of the *Fundamenta medicinae* that the *Journal des sçavans* discovered them, while warning its readers that Plempius "treats very

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<sup>6</sup> Duhamel 1705: 11–5; Monchamp 1886: 618–21; Armogathe and Carraud 2001: 133–5. I refer to the "Quaedam recentiorum philosophorum ac praesertim Cartesii propositiones damnatae ac prohibitae" published at the end of Duhamel's *Philosophia universalis* as Duhamel 1705. However, Petit Demontempuys, a professor accused of Jansenism and of Cartesianism, attributed this collection to C. de Precelles ("Pièces justificatives" in Jourdain 1862–6: 133–4).

<sup>7</sup> Their two *censurae* are published in Armogathe and Carraud 2001, which completes the documents given in Monchamp 1866: 611–22.

<sup>8</sup> Agostini 2009: II.218.

<sup>9</sup> In the third edition (1654), Plempius already inserted five letters from colleagues that condemned Descartes.

badly” Descartes;<sup>10</sup> in his *Commentaire ou Remarques sur la méthode de M. Descartes*, Nicolas Poisson also refers to Plempius, to cast doubt on the publication of the Roman condemnation and to note that there are “a thousand examples of condemnations pronounced rather out of revenge and by stubbornness than out of justice and by reason”.<sup>11</sup> That these two condemnations, as formidable as they appear today, were known by hearsay can also be inferred from the fact that the Roman procedure was erroneously attributed to the machinations of the Jesuit Honoré Fabri.<sup>12</sup> In any case, the decrees of the Index could not be implemented in France without being approved by the Parlement, which was quite punctilious about the defense of Gallican liberties and which, on May 8, 1663, actually succeeded in imposing on the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris six articles reasserting these liberties.<sup>13</sup> In view of these elements, it is reasonable to conclude that the censorship of Descartes’s philosophy in France was not simply a consequence of the previous condemnations of Louvain and Rome. These latter condemnations

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<sup>10</sup> Sallo 1666: 61.

<sup>11</sup> Poisson 1670: 218–19. Poisson (2000 [1675]), referring again to Plempius, mentions only the condemnation of Louvain.

<sup>12</sup> Antoine Vinot to Clerselier, January 27, 1664, in Agostini 2009: II.218; Baillet (1691: II.529), who traced this attribution to Arnauld. Fabri actually intervened, but only after the decree of the king. In order to disentangle himself from the accusations caused by his *Apologeticus Doctrinae Moralis Societatis Jesu*, he informed the Congregation of the Index that some French Cartesians were introducing a new explanation of transubstantiation, which led to enquiries all over Europe (Armogathe 2005; Donato 2009: 605–8).

<sup>13</sup> Jourdain 1862–6: 219–22.

were not always known about, and if they were, local circumstances were needed to actualize them.

## 1.2. Descartes, Desgabets, and Other Cartesians

The question of whether the Cartesian thesis according to which the essence of body is extension is compatible with the notion of transubstantiation and with the dogma of the Eucharist, played this actualizing role in the Paris condemnation of 1671.<sup>14</sup> The question was twofold. First, according to the decree of the Council of Trent of October 11, 1551, the species of wine and bread subsist when the host is changed into Jesus Christ; but, in Cartesian physics, all sensible qualities are appearances that necessarily result from certain figures and motions of the corporeal substance. How is it possible, then, to explain that we continue to perceive bread and wine once their substance has been changed into the substance of Jesus Christ? Second, according to the dogma of the Eucharist, the whole body of Jesus Christ is really, and not symbolically, present in every host; but, in Cartesian physics, the essence of the body is its local extension. Considering that something cannot be somewhere without its essence being there as well, how is it possible for the body of Jesus Christ to be really in the host while it is not extended in the host?

These two questions can be referred to as the physical question of the persistence of the accidents of the bread after transubstantiation and as the theological question of the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. Descartes distinguished them explicitly (AT IV.374–5) and he provided answers to them. In response to Arnauld, he suggested in the Fourth Replies that if the sensible qualities of a body are determined by its surface, then the sensible qualities of the wine

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<sup>14</sup> On the issue of transubstantiation, see [Lewis 1950](#); [Armogathe 1977](#); [Nadler 1988](#); [Ariew 2011](#): 217–40; [Del Prete 2001](#); [Armogathe 2005](#); [Schmaltz 2002](#): 29–76; [Ariew 2011](#): 217–40.



and the bread may very well remain while their internal corpuscles are supernaturally changed into the blood and body of Christ.<sup>15</sup> In his letter to Denis Mesland of February 9, 1645, he moreover suggested, with many precautions and with the injunction that this opinion should not be attributed to him, that the real presence of the Christ in the Eucharist can be accounted for by analogy with what happens when we eat and drink: just as corpuscles of food and drink become parts of my body because my soul is naturally united to my body, corpuscles of bread and wine become parts of the body of Jesus Christ because his soul is supernaturally united to these corpuscles (AT IV.165–70). A few years later, Descartes was more discreet: he refused to communicate anything in writing to Arnauld with the argument that the Council of Trent itself did not want to explain how Jesus Christ's body was in the Host (Descartes to Arnauld, June 4, 1648, AT V.194).

While the Fourth Replies were entirely published in the second Latin edition of the *Meditations* (1642), Claude Clerselier did not include the letters to Mesland in the three volumes of Descartes's correspondence that he published in 1657, 1659, and 1667. The still extant manuscript copies of these letters show, however, that they were circulated.<sup>16</sup> In 1654, the very year when he received Descartes's correspondence from his stepfather Pierre Chanut, Clerselier discussed the Cartesian explanation of the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist with a lawyer in Tours called Denis and with the Augustinian François Viogué, a doctor of theology who was

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<sup>15</sup> AT VII.248–56. This development was omitted in the first edition of the *Meditations* to try to obtain the approbation of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris (AT III. 416, 772, and 785).

<sup>16</sup> This list is given in [Armogathe 1977](#): 70–1. The mss 366 of the Bibliothèque municipale de Chartres is partially published in [Agostini 2009](#), II.

at the time Chaplain at the French Embassy in Stockholm.<sup>17</sup> Around the same time, he communicated the letters to Mesland to the Benedictine Dom Robert Desgabets, possibly because he needed help answering the objections that a physician from the Auvergne province, Jean-Antoine Pastel, formulated against his answers to Viogué.<sup>18</sup>

By the end of the 1650s, having published the first two volumes of Descartes's correspondence, he thought that publishing the letters to Mesland would be his last task to complete the edition of Descartes's works (to Bertet, August 27, 1659, in [Agostini 2009](#): II.21). He thus communicated Descartes's explanations of the persistence of accidents and of the real presence of Jesus Christ to several theologians, among whom were the Jesuit Jean Bertet (who in turn communicated them to the Jesuits Honoré Fabri and François Malaval, who both censured them privately) and the Benedictine Antoine Vinot (who advised Clerselier to leave things as they were, because the Jesuits "would rather quit their cap and gown than reject the philosophy of Aristotle").<sup>19</sup> On March 1, 1664, Desgabets sent to Clerselier what he called a "jumble about the blessed Sacrament", actually an extract of his theology where he elaborated on Descartes's interpretation of the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. Desgabets discussed it with the Cardinal de Retz, who felt that "the thing was marvelously well thought and that it contained nothing contrary to the Faith of the Sacrament"; being however "very knowledgeable about the way in which new things are received in Rome", he advised "to hold back publishing this opinion because without doubt it would be immediately censored".<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> [Agostini 2009](#): II.60–9, 222–87.

<sup>18</sup> [Armogathe 1977](#): 88–9.

<sup>19</sup> [Agostini 2009](#): II.117 (Fabri's censure), 122–4 (Malaval's censure), 190–1 (Vinot's advice).

<sup>20</sup> [Agostini 2009](#): II.74.

Despite this prudent advice, another circle of theologians was soon consulted about the possibility of accounting for the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist while believing that the essence of matter is extension. But this time these were theologians who favored Descartes's philosophy: Nicolas Poisson was brought up to date in December 1667; Antoine Arnaud and Pierre Nicole were informed by the abbot Guillaume Le Roi at the end of the 1660s; an anonymous religious was prompted by Clerselier to write his objections, which he did in *L'incompatibilité de la philosophie de M. Descartes avec le mystère de l'Eucharistie*.<sup>21</sup> The upshot was not what was hoped for. In two detailed letters to Clerselier from Decem

ber 15 and 22, 1667, Poisson spelled out why these new opinions were contrary to the Scriptures, to the Councils, and to all the Fathers of the Church.<sup>22</sup> Arnaud wrote that they were "contrary to everything that has been taught in the Church for six hundred years, and not only in the Catholic Church, but in all Christian communities".<sup>23</sup> Three years later, Nicole reproached Desgabets for fixing his philosophical principles first, and only then trying to adjust the dogmas of the faith to them, while one should rather learn "what Church and tradition teaches about this

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<sup>21</sup> Lemaire 1901: 118–24.

<sup>22</sup> Agostini 2009: II.145–60.

<sup>23</sup> Arnaud 1775–83: I 670. Arnaud's letters are dated from October 18 and November 19, 1669. There is some dispute about this date (Arnaud 1775–83: XXXVIII.xxi–xxii; Rodis-Lewis 1950: 155–6; Schmaltz 1999: 42), but there is other evidence that Arnaud and Nicole expressed their disagreement with Desgabets's views before he wrote the *Considerations* (Arnaud [1775–83: XXXVIII.xxi] mentions two letters from Desgabets of September 1670 that refer to conversations he had with them; Desgabets, in a letter to Bossuet of September 5, 1671 [in Bossuet 1909–25: I.224–5], says that he was obliged to write to present his opinions against their "complaints and threats".)

mystery and adhere to it inviolably without considering philosophical principles”: whether we understand it or not, the Eucharist is the very body of Jesus Christ, not any body joined to his soul.<sup>24</sup> These were not ad hoc declarations, but long-standing positions. Already in 1664, Arnauld was consulted by Sébastien Joseph du Cambout de Pontchâteau about the writings of an English author. Having noted that his opinion on the Eucharist could not be received, Arnauld feared that “his condemnation could cause a backlash against principles of philosophy that seem very solid, and that can be allied with faith if one holds on to what was said in Descartes’s metaphysics in the answer to the Fourth Objections”. He ended by chastising this author for “worrying too much about adjusting our belief in mysteries that depend only on the omnipotence of God to the knowledge that we have of nature . . . while these are things of two wholly distinct orders that should not be mixed together”.<sup>25</sup> The distinction between two orders was very much

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<sup>24</sup> Nicole 1718: I.445–6, 451–2. Moreover, the records we have of the conversations that took place at the *Hôtel Liancourt* show Nicole presenting the opinions of the Cartesians on the Eucharist as “heretical” (Orcibal 1950: 97, n. 61).

<sup>25</sup> Pontchâteau to Neercassel, July 12/22, 1664, in Neveu 1968: 368. Contrary to Arnauld’s editors (Arnauld 1775–83: XXXVIII.xx–xxi) and to Neveu, I think that Arnauld was here commenting on Thomas Bonart’s *Concordia scientiae cum fide*, first published in 1659, put on the Index in 1662, finally re-edited in 1664. Thomas Bonart was a pseudonym for Thomas Barton, alias Thomas Anderton, an English Jesuit who, being condemned and ordered to go to Rome, fled through Europe, left the Jesuits, and finally sought refuge in Ireland where he apostatized. Not only does *Concordia scientiae cum fide* agree perfectly with what Arnauld says, but he was well known to Jansenists, as Du Vaucel (1681: 116) makes clear.

in agreement with Augustine's words that Arnauld kept quoting: "What we know, we owe to reason; what we believe, to authority."<sup>26</sup> More specifically,

this amounts to making a sharp distinction between the question of the persistence of the accidents and the question of the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. While the first question was perfectly admissible and received a correct answer in the Fourth Objections, the second was not to be answered at a philosophical level because it is a mystery that cannot be grasped by reason.

Desgabets, who previously refused to sign the Formulary in which every member of the French clergy was supposed to condemn the five heretical propositions attributed to Jansenius in the Papal bull *Cum occasione* (1653), and who judged that Arnauld's and Nicole's *Logique ou l'art de penser* was "a masterpiece which gives a marvelous perspective on the most beautiful thoughts of M. Descartes",<sup>27</sup> was particularly affected by the low esteem in which they held Descartes's views and his own. In reaction, he wrote a small polemical leaflet of twelve pages, the *Considérations sur l'Etat présent de la controverse touchant le Tres-Saint Sacrement de l'Autel*. He presented the *Considérations* as ad hominem, since his intention was to show that Arnauld's and Nicole's disqualification of the new interpretation of the Eucharist was inconsistent with four theses that they defended in their *Logique*: "1. The idea of matter . . . is the same as that of extension or quantity . . . 2. There are no substantial corporeal forms . . . 3. There are no corporeal forms other than the local disposition of the insensible parts of matter, 4. . . .

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<sup>26</sup> [Armogathe 1977](#): 105.

<sup>27</sup> [Lemaire 1901](#): 125, and Desgabets to Clerselier, March 1, 1664, in [Agostini 2009](#): II.75. [Armogathe \(1969: 73–9\)](#) examines the criticisms that Desgabets formulated when he read Arnauld and Nicole's *Logique*.

There are no sensible qualities other than this local disposition of the parts of matter.”<sup>28</sup> If Arnauld and Nicole were consistent with themselves, they had no choice but to approve of the new explanation of real presence. Although Desgabets did not write this leaflet with the intention of seeing it in print, it was published anonymously in mid-1671 without his consent.<sup>29</sup> It was immediately presented to the king as “heretical and very pernicious” by his new confessor, the Jesuit Jean Ferrier; the king in turn sent it to the Archbishop in Paris, François de Harlay de Champvallon, who meanwhile got hold of a copy of Descartes’s letters to Mesland.<sup>30</sup>

Around the same time, in April 1671, one of the theologians of the Sorbonne, Guillaume de Lestoc, explained to Jacques Rohault, who was then identified as one of the chief Cartesians and who had just published his *Traité de physique*, that he admired him very much in mathematics but that he did not share his opinion or his physics. In June, Lestoc had the occasion to clarify that, two years before, a bachelor in theology defended the thesis that the conversion of the bread in the body of Christ is not inconsistent with Descartes’s hypothesis; that Poisson pretended that if a rabbit and a wolf carved in wood were put one in front of the other, the wolf would make the rabbit flee; and, finally, that the new philosophy did not admit the accidents of the scholastic

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<sup>28</sup> Desgabets 1671: 6. For Desgabets’s philosophical commitments, see Schmaltz 2002: 47–52, 77–212.

<sup>29</sup> Desgabets to Clerselier, July 20, September 24, October 19, November 19, and December 10, 1671, in Agostini 2009: II.90–1, 86, 95, 96, 85; Desgabets to Bossuet, September 5, 1671, in Bossuet 1909–25: I.226.

<sup>30</sup> Lemaire 1901: 123–7. Desgabets to Clerselier, September 24, 1671 and Clerselier to Desgabets, January 6, 1672, in Agostini 2009: II.86 and 105. Ferrier replaced his protector the Jesuit François Annat in 1670; in 1664, he had published two anti-Jansenist libels, *L’idée véritable du jansénisme* and the *Relation fidelle et véritable de ce qui s’est fait depuis un an dans l’affaire des jansénistes*.

philosophy (Rohault to Guyard, June 10, 1671, in Rohault 1978 [1671]: 170–8). This conversation led Rohault to write the *Entretiens de philosophie*, which, being finished at the beginning of August 1671, were to be submitted to Harlay de Champvallon (Rohault to Poisson, August 5, 1671, in Rohault 1978 [1671]: 169). Like Desgabets's *Considerations*, Rohault's *Entretiens* were not intended for publication. Still, they were published by Millet du Pertuis, with more than one guarantee of orthodoxy: a dedication to Louis II de Bourbon-Condé, a Privilege of the King dated from September 30, 1671, and the testimony that Christina, the former queen of Sweden, wrote in 1667 at the occasion of the reburial of Descartes to testify that Descartes was a perfect Catholic and that he contributed to her conversion (Rohault 1978 [1671]: 107, 155–6, 164). Contrary to Desgabets, however, Rohault did not tackle the question of the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, but only the question of how the qualities of bread and wine can still be perceived after transubstantiation. Following the Minim Emmanuel Maignan, he argued first that God, being able to dissolve the natural union that exists between the substances and the sensible qualities that they cause in our soul, can make us perceive the qualities of bread and wine while these have been transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Then he referred to Descartes's suggestion in the Fourth Replies that if the qualities of bread and wine are still perceived once transubstantiation has taken place, it is because the surface stays the same (Rohault 1978 [1671]: 117–22, 128–30). Contrary to Desgabets, but like Arnauld before him, Rohault refused to use the letters to Mesland and stuck to the Fourth Replies.

### 1.3. The 1671 Decree and its Aftermath

The moderate line opened by Arnauld and Rohault was not enough to pacify their opponents. On August 4, 1671, Harlay de Champvallon summoned the rector of the University of Paris, the

deans of the Faculties of Theology, Law, and Medicine, the procurators of the university's nations, and most of the headmasters of the colleges. Considering that some opinions that had formerly been censored by the Faculty of Theology and prohibited by the Parlement were being disseminated, he ordered in the name of the king the representatives of the university "to teach no other doctrine than the one brought forth by the rules and statutes of the university, and to put nothing else in the theses", and to do so to "prevent the diffusion of an opinion that could bring some confusion in our mysteries".<sup>31</sup> In different ways, all the bodies of the university submitted themselves to this order.<sup>32</sup> On August 7 and September 1, 1671, the Faculties of Medicine and Theology issued conclusions against the new opinions.<sup>33</sup> The Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Claude Morel, known for his violent anti-Jansenism, considered requesting the Parlement of Paris to side against the Cartesians by renewing the *Arrêt* of 1624.<sup>34</sup> Since there is no such request in the archives,<sup>35</sup> this step may never formally have been undertaken, possibly because it was known that the president of the Parlement, Guillaume de Lamoignon, would never follow it

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<sup>31</sup> Duhamel 1705: 18. There is here an allusion to the condemnations that the Faculty of Theology and the Parlement of Paris pronounced in 1624 against the anti-Aristotelian theses of Jean Bitaud, Étienne de Claves, and Jean Villon. At the beginning of August 1671, Champvallon also met Michele Angelo Vibo, Internuncio to France from July 1671 to June 1672, to report which measures were taken (Armogathe 2005: 143).

<sup>32</sup> Jourdain 1862–6: 234–5.

<sup>33</sup> Babin 1679: 5–6; Duhamel 1705: 15–17.

<sup>34</sup> Arnauld 1866 [1671]: 182; De Saint-Marc 1772: 403–4.

<sup>35</sup> Jourdain 1862–6: 235.



up.<sup>36</sup> Still, it gave Arnauld the occasion to write a serious memorandum where he exposed at length the danger and vanity of condemning any philosophy in the name of religion, while Nicolas Bernier and François Boileau circulated a satire of what a request to the Court of Parnassus against the introduction of new ideas in physics could have been, followed by the *Arrêt* in which this divine court prohibited blood from circulating in the human body, sent to the heart the injunction to be the principle of the nerves, and re-established into their rights entities, identities, petreities, and polycarpeities.<sup>37</sup>

More personal measures were also taken. In September, Harlay de Champvallon asked the *Procureur général* of the Congregation of Benedictines to summon and question Desgabets, who, a few months later, was forbidden to publish anything on theological matters and dismissed from his priory of Verdun.<sup>38</sup> By the end of December 1671 and at the very beginning of January 1672, Harlay de Champvallon himself met Clerselier and asked him and his son-in-law Rohault to refrain from publishing anything. While he authorized discussions of Descartes's opinions in private, he did not want them to be brought forth in public quarrels and disputes.<sup>39</sup> To be done with the matter, Harlay de Champvallon spread the good word throughout the country.

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<sup>36</sup> [De Saint-Marc \(1772: 401\)](#) mentions a manuscript according to which it was Lamoignon himself who asked Boileau to compose the *Arrêt*.

<sup>37</sup> [Arnauld 1866 \[1671\]](#), commented on in [Nadler 1988: 240–1](#) and in [Ariew 2011: 270–5](#). Bernier and Boileau 1671.

<sup>38</sup> [Agostini 2009: I.86–7](#); [Lemaire 1901: 51](#). [Armogathe \(1977: 133–4\)](#) gives a partial transcript of Desgabets's interrogation, which was transmitted to Champvallon by Clerselier ([Agostini 2009: II.106](#)).

<sup>39</sup> [Agostini 2009: II.85–6, 106–7](#).

According to a report from the Abbot of Vibo dated December 25, 1671, the order of the king was transmitted to all provincial parlements and all bishops were told that they should not let Descartes's views be taught in their dioceses.<sup>40</sup>

In a country as centralized as Louis XIV's France, a decree issued by the king and a condemnation delivered by the University of Paris were the occasion for local institutions to take revenge on the multiplying Cartesians. On October 10, 1673, the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Reims forbade the defense of Pierre Le Pescheur's bachelor thesis entitled *Do the eyes signify the whole man?*, which described the structure of the eye and explained how passions and diseases modify it, because "it swarmed with the doctrines of the moderns, especially with Descartes's doctrine".<sup>41</sup> On June 11, 1675, the General Assembly of the Benedictines of St. Maur prohibited the teaching of "the new opinions of this time touching the essence and nature of bodies, that they identified with actual extension; the opinion of the accidents, that are not really distinguished from matter; and the others that might be connected to the dogmas of Faith".<sup>42</sup> On May 3, 1677, the Faculty of Theology of the University of Caen prohibited the teaching, orally or in writing, of the principles of Descartes's philosophy "because they seem to us contradictory with the sounder doctrine of the theologians", on pain of being refused access to any academic grade.<sup>43</sup> Those who studied in Caen under Pierre Cally, who in his *Institutio philosophia* (1674) defended the claim that the body is a thing extended in all three directions and that there are no absolute accidents, were indeed denied ordination; after being

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<sup>40</sup> [Armogathe 2005](#): 145.

<sup>41</sup> [Duhamel 1705](#): 19–21.

<sup>42</sup> [Duhamel 1705](#): 28–9.

<sup>43</sup> [Duhamel 1705](#): 29–30.

accused of spreading Descartes's doctrine and of favoring Jansenism and even Protestantism, Cally himself was finally removed from his chair and sent to Montdidier near Amiens in 1687.<sup>44</sup>

The persecution of the Oratorians is the most documented. On August 2, 1675, after several months of conflict in Angers between the rector of the university, Claude Voisin, who was supported by the king, and the Oratorian Faculty of Arts, which found an ephemeral and vain ally in the Parlement of Paris, the *Conseil d'État* explicitly forbade the teaching of Cartesian philosophy in any way or manner whatsoever and ordered the works, lecture notes, and theses of the Oratorians from Angers to be thoroughly examined.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, an academic commission was tasked with taking a close look at the notebooks of Eugène Fromentier for the years 1672 and 1673, of Bernard Lamy for the years 1674 and 1675, of Cyprien de Villegroze and other professors for the years 1673, 1674, 1675, and 1676, and, later on, of Vincent Pelaud for 1676. By the end of 1675, the king forbade Lamy to preach and teach throughout his kingdom and sent him away to Saint-Martin de Miséré, near Grenoble; about two years later, Pelaud was also sent in exile to Brive-La-Gaillarde.<sup>46</sup> On March 4, 1675, Abel-Louis de Sainte-Marthe, the General of the Oratorians, sent to the superiors of all the colleges the order to abide by "the order of the king of January 20, 1675, which expressly forbids the teaching of Descartes's doctrine, which hereafter could cause some disorder in His Kingdom, which he wants to prevent for the good of His service and of the public".<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, on March 29, 1677, it was ordered that "from now on, all our professors of philosophy would be obliged to choose a Thomist author approved and

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<sup>44</sup> Cally 1674: 53–7, 180–201; Bayle 1684–9 (1687): 96–7.

<sup>45</sup> Babin 1679: 30–2.

<sup>46</sup> Babin 1679: 58–62.

<sup>47</sup> Lallemand 1888: 147–8.

received in the universities”.<sup>48</sup> At the end of 1677 and the beginning of 1678, the Oratorians Bonnet and Giraud were condemned—the first in Marseilles, the second in Toulon—for defending Baianist propositions in morals, while, because of his Cartesianism, Carryer, an Oratorian of Le Mans, was excluded, then reintegrated and exiled to Mâcon.<sup>49</sup> Much more significantly, the Oratorians declared on September 16, 1678, on the occasion of their sixteenth General Assembly, that “they do not embrace any party and do not have any opinion as a body or as a community, but they have always been and want always to stay free to be able to defend any good and sound doctrine, and they prohibit the teaching only of those doctrines which are condemned by the Church, or which could be suspected of Jansenius’s and Baïus’s views in theology and of Descartes’s opinions in philosophy”.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, they issued a decree explaining what this declaration implied for the teaching of theology, of logic, of morals, and of physics. It was only in physics that they spelled out in some detail what should be taught and what not:

In physics one should not depart from Aristotle’s physics or principles of physics that are usually received in colleges in order to grow attached to the new doctrine of Monsieur Descartes, that the king forbade to teach for good reasons.

One should teach: 1. That actual and external extension is not the essence of matter. 2. That in every natural body there is a substantial form really distinct from matter. 3. That there are real and absolute accidents that inhere in their

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<sup>48</sup> Lallemand 1888: 122.

<sup>49</sup> Babin 1679: 72–6; Lallemand 1888: 129.

<sup>50</sup> Babin 1679: 82–3; Duhamel 1705: 30–1. Such a freedom had been granted to them in their Fifth Assembly (1644).

subjects, that these accidents are really distinct from any substance, and that they can supernaturally exist without any subject. 4. That the soul is really present and united to the whole body and to all the parts of the body. 5. That thinking and knowing are not the essence of the rational soul. 6. That there is no contradiction that God can produce several worlds at the same time. 7. That the void is not impossible.<sup>51</sup>

The Genofevins followed suit immediately. The same year, they condemned Jansenism in theology and Cartesianism in philosophy.<sup>52</sup> On August 14, 1685, the Faculty of Arts, which, contrary to the superior faculties, had not taken sides in 1671, prohibited the teaching of “the new philosophy of the moderns, that is of Gassendi and Descartes”.<sup>53</sup> While Gassendi was often associated with the new philosophers in the polemical works in the 1680s, this is, to my knowledge, the only mention of Gassendi in an official condemnation in this period. In 1691, Harlay de Champvallon, and soon after the king himself, were notified that eleven dangerous propositions were being taught in Parisian colleges.<sup>54</sup> Among these propositions, the first five were of Cartesian origin and the last six were taken from Jansenius. This was not without some tension, the former affirming the power of reason and the latter emphasizing the infirmity of sinful human nature.<sup>55</sup> On October 28, 1691, at the demand of the king, all the professors of the Faculty of Arts were summoned by their rector Renault Gentilhomme. After these eleven

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<sup>51</sup> Babin 1679: 85; Bayle 1684: 11–12; Duhamel 1705: 31.

<sup>52</sup> Babin 1679: 93–4.

<sup>53</sup> Jourdain 1862–6: 269.

<sup>54</sup> Duhamel 1705: 33–4.

<sup>55</sup> Schmaltz 2017: 55–6.

propositions were solemnly read, they had to sign a document certifying that they had never taught these propositions and would never teach them. In the case of the Cartesian propositions, the main issue was no longer natural philosophy, but the metaphysical doubt of the *Meditations*. There had already been some concerns about the Cartesian practice of doubting,<sup>56</sup> but it was the first time that it figured so prominently in a condemnation. This marked the end of the period when Descartes's natural philosophy was at the center of censorship in France.

## 2. The Networks of Causes

The collections of condemnations on which the historians rely were compiled by people who, themselves involved in condemning the Cartesians of their time, gathered as many authorities as they could to establish that the Cartesian doctrine had been unanimously condemned.<sup>57</sup> In such collections, the condemnations are separated from their original context, so that they seem to engender one another: latter condemnations appear as applications of the 1671 royal decree, which itself appears as the consequence of the condemnations of Louvain and Rome almost ten years earlier. I have already suggested that the impact of the condemnations of Louvain and Rome on what happened in France is far from clear. In what follows, I will moreover argue that

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<sup>56</sup> Ariew 2014: 37–44.

<sup>57</sup> Babin was appointed Professor of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Angers in May 1676, apparently against the advice of Henri Arnauld, Bishop of Angers and one of Antoine Arnauld's older brothers; C. de Precelles was responsible for the accusation of Demontempuys ("Pièces justificatives" in Jourdain 1862–6: 133–4).

the French condemnations cannot be understood in isolation from a variety of causes and circumstances that intervened at different levels.

## 2.1. The Doctrinal Question: The Eucharist—and Other Questions

As we have seen, the question of the compatibility of Descartes's views of extension with propositions central to the Catholic faith is what sparked things off. Moreover, this question took up many pages in many books published in the period under consideration.<sup>58</sup> Still, there are several reasons for thinking that the reference to the doctrine of the Eucharist is not sufficient to explain the condemnations that took place in France.

First, orthodoxy, far from being fixed once and for all, is always subject to negotiation. A first possible compromise was rooted in the difference between the question of the permanence of the sensible qualities and the question of the presence of Jesus Christ in the Host. Considering that only the latter involved Catholic dogma as such, Arnauld, Rohault, and later Bossuet suggested that only the answer to the first question should be considered as “Cartesian”.<sup>59</sup> It is precisely because he did not think of the letters to Mesland as “Cartesian” that Arnauld could protest that “it is about thirty years since M. Descartes published his philosophy, and among other things his *Metaphysics*. The silence it [the Sorbonne] has kept since that time . . . shows

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<sup>58</sup> Besides the books already referred to, see [Rochon 1672](#): 4–17, 66–81; [De La Font 1673](#); [La Grange 1675](#): 2–6, 99–135; [Vincent 1677](#): 55–60; [Le Valois 1680](#): 99–317, 173–85; [Malebranche 1958–67](#): XVII–1.477–531; [Arnauld 1990 \[1680\]](#); [Du Vaucel 1681](#): 113–16; [Charles-Joseph de Troyes 1682](#).

<sup>59</sup> See above in the case of Arnauld and Rohault; [Bossuet 1900 \[1674–5\]](#); Bossuet to François de Nesmond, February 9, 1701 (censoring Cally), and to Jean Antoine Pastel, March 24, 1701 (censoring Descartes himself), in [Bossuet 1909–25](#): XIII.34–6, 45–46.

sufficiently that it is only because of some secret desire for quarrel that now one wants to find in it things contrary to Faith, since there was none to be found for so long”.<sup>60</sup> In this sense, a first compromise could have amounted to renouncing the letters to Mesland; as we have seen, this compromise was rejected, with Descartes’s philosophy being taken *en bloc*. A second compromise could have consisted in a separation of the respective domains of faith and reason. In this compromise, reason should not be used to judge the mysteries of the faith, but, reciprocally, faith should not be used to decide matters of reason, so that one can, as a mere physicist, talk about things as they are in their natural state.<sup>61</sup> This compromise was refused as well, the adversaries of Descartes claiming that faith is the rule of truth.<sup>62</sup> Rather than taking orthodoxy as established once and for all, we need an explanation as to why these two compromises were not accepted.

Second, the question of the Eucharist, as important as it was, was not the only charge against Cartesian philosophy. Taking the Louvain condemnation as paradigmatic, one scholar has shown that the five propositions that were at stake were criticized and condemned again and again in France until the end of the century; but three of these propositions (that substance is what does not need anything else to exist, that the world extends indefinitely, and that there is only one world) have nothing to do with the Eucharist.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, the censures written by Tartaglia and Spinula that led to Descartes’s works being put on the Index involved a variety of considerations, among which are the propositions that the Earth moves circularly and is one of the planets, that

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<sup>60</sup> [Arnauld 1866 \[1671\]](#): 308–9. See also [Rohault 1978 \[1671\]](#): 110; [Baillet 1691](#): II.529.

<sup>61</sup> [Arnauld 1866 \[1671\]](#): 310–13; [Rohault 1978 \[1671\]](#): 111; [Clerselier 1682](#).

<sup>62</sup> [La Grange 1675](#): 90,100; [Babin 1679](#): 42; [Le Valois 1680](#): 119–39, 147–9, 183–220.

<sup>63</sup> [Ariew 2014](#): 27–31.



passions are not vital acts but only motions of the spirits, that the soul can acquire an absolute empire on passions, and that there is no demonstration, no mathematics, and no philosophy for atheists.<sup>64</sup> Though they are not condemnations strictly speaking, two theses defended in June 1665 at the Collège de Clermont are worth mentioning here.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, they reveal which principles in Descartes's natural philosophy were difficult to accept for a Jesuit teacher: some arise from the identification of matter and extension, others from Descartes's definition of motion, and others still from the reduction of sensible qualities or of life to matter and motion. But it is only at the very end of the second thesis, and only in passing, that it is noted that a follower of Descartes cannot explain the conversion of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ.<sup>66</sup> What was revolting for the Jesuit professor who wrote these theses was not the incompatibility of Descartes's philosophy with the dogma of the Eucharist, but rather the paradoxes that it implies, a paradox being, true to etymology, what goes against received opinions.<sup>67</sup> The most remarkable example of the variety of condemned theses is to be found in the Angers affair. The problems associated with the Eucharist are indeed important in that case, but, among the condemned propositions, there were many that had no relation or a very tenuous relation to that: one should once in a life put everything in doubt; sensation has to be denied to beasts; the mind cannot be better defined than as a thinking substance; there is no force to act in the bodies themselves; pain is in the soul; we perceive things through their ideas; one should not trust the senses; we have innate ideas and images (*species*) of God and the angels; we do not

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<sup>64</sup> [Armogathe and Carraud 2001](#): 110–20.

<sup>65</sup> See [Ragayne de la Picottière 1665a, 1665b](#).

<sup>66</sup> [Ragayne de la Picottière 1665b](#): 16.

<sup>67</sup> [Roux 2017](#): 113–15.

need a Master to learn the sciences but only a Monitor who excites in us the ideas of all things that are innate in us; those who are outside a prince's territory are not bound by his law; virtue is nothing other than charity and love.<sup>68</sup> One cannot read such condemnations without having the feeling that all that an author—here Malebranche rather than Descartes—wrote was suspected and condemned in principle.

Last but not least, it is significant that Descartes's philosophy was also condemned in Protestant universities. In a Protestant university, the question of the compatibility of Cartesian philosophy with the dogma of the Eucharist was irrelevant. And yet Cartesian philosophy was condemned in Utrecht.<sup>69</sup> This shows that the problem that Cartesian philosophy posed to institutions was not limited to this question. Rather, an equally important reason for its condemnation was that it challenged authorities by introducing new doctrines. This dimension appears well in Babin's *Journal*, in which we see a professor deploring the dramatic degradation of education when the Angers affair began:

The old and true doctrine was absolutely banished from the schools and the novelty and falsehood were with impunity established in their place. Young people were no longer taught anything else than to get rid of their childhood prejudices and to doubt all things, even if they are in the world . . . They were taught . . . that children think in the bellies of their mothers, that when they grow up they have less need of teachers . . . than of monitors . . . It was no longer fashionable to believe that fire is hot, that marble is hard, that animate bodies are

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<sup>68</sup> Babin 1679: 35–45, 67–71.

<sup>69</sup> See Verbeek 1988.

sensible to pain: these truths were too ancient for those who loved novelty. (Babin 1679: 2)

If one wants to understand why the 1671 decree was locally implemented, one must take such testimonies into consideration. It was not only that there were more and more Cartesian teachers who were abandoning Aristotle's doctrine. It was also that Cartesians were teaching outside traditional institutions, calling into question the professional status of teachers. This was the case in Paris at Rohault's "Wednesdays", while in Toulouse, meetings of the *Lanternistes* took place under the leadership of M. de Nolet, in which François Bayle and Pierre-Sylvain Régis participated.<sup>70</sup> Cartesians and anti-Cartesians gave the same account of the audiences of these conferences, but had opposite judgments about their value. Clerselier praised Rohault for giving his lectures before "people of all stations and conditions, prelates, abbots, courtesans, doctors, physicians, philosophers, surveyors, regents, schoolboys, provincials, foreigners, artisans, in a word, people of all ages, sex and profession", while Jean Vincent, a doctrinaire from Toulouse, was horrified that the Cartesians "divulge this doctrine that in the schools is extended only to a few men, to all kind of people, young people and adults, men and women".<sup>71</sup> It was not only what Cartesians taught, but also how they taught it and to whom they taught it, that was threatening for the professors of the schools.

## 2.2. The Political Question: Jesuits and their Enemies

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<sup>70</sup> About the Cartesian companies in Paris, see Roux 2014. For Toulouse, see Fermat to Oldenburg, September 21, 1668, June 5 and 25, 1669, in Oldenburg 1965–73: V.53 and VI.95, 445.

<sup>71</sup> Clerselier 1682; Vincent 1677: 521.

Jansenists and Cartesians were often associated in this period.<sup>72</sup> Some historians, starting with Bouillier, consequently tried to identify the doctrinal affinities between the two groups—in particular, the common reference to Augustine—to argue that the condemnations of Descartes’s philosophy were only one episode in the long war between Jesuits and Jansenists in the second half of the seventeenth century. As regards the doctrinal affinities between Cartesians and Jansenists, however, it has been established that Arnauld may have been the exception rather than the rule.<sup>73</sup> Du Vaucel castigated him for having conceded to Jurieu in his *Apologie pour les catholiques* (1681) that the Messieurs de Port-Royal were Cartesians. In fact, Du Vaucel argued, “many of them are against Descartes, others are indifferent in that respect, he [Arnauld] is the only one with Nicole who can be called Cartesian”.<sup>74</sup> But even this was already too much in the case of Nicole. When he received the *Traité des vraies et des fausses idées*, Nicole complained that Arnauld “demonstrates everywhere a tender love for Descartes, who does not lack in faults”.<sup>75</sup> For Nicole, Descartes’s philosophy was indeed better than any other philosophy; still it was only a human doctrine. In a letter of 1664 to Dom Joseph Hemassel, who was prior of

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<sup>72</sup> Mme de Sévigné to her daughter, September 16, 1676 (Sévigné 1853: III.172), presents Le Bossu as “Jansenist, that is, Cartesian in perfection”; Simon notes in 1682 that “the people of Port-Royal, who are in everything at the antipodes of the Jesuits, strongly take sides with Descartes’ party” (Simon 1710: IV.99); Jurieu insinuated that Jansenist theologians cared more for Cartesianism than for Christianity (in Arnauld 1775–83: XIV.615); according to Daniel (1691: 197), Arnauld was responsible for the fact that “one saw few Jansenist philosophers who were not Cartesian”.

<sup>73</sup> Lewis 1950; Nadler 1988: 229–30; Schmaltz 1999.

<sup>74</sup> Lewis 1950: 145, n. 56.

<sup>75</sup> Nicole to Quesnel, May 30, 1682, in Lewis 1950: 147.

Verdun when Desgabets was professor of philosophy there, he warned that Cartesians took philosophy too seriously:

The most solid Philosophy is only a human science . . . However much we praise the philosophy of Monsieur Descartes, we must nevertheless recognize that what is most real about it is that it makes us understand that all the people who spent their lives philosophizing about nature, talked to the world and to themselves only about dreams and chimeras . . . Descartes is undoubtedly more reasonable than the others: but this quality should not induce us to make an open profession of it . . . In fact Cartesians are not better than the others, and are often more proud and more self-important. (Nicole 1718: I.430, 444)

Similarly, Louis-Isaac Le Maistre de Saci explained that “with regards to Aristotle, M. Descartes was like a thief who came to kill another thief and to take away his remains . . . Aristotle having usurped such an authority in the Church, was it not just that he was overthrown and dispossessed by another tyrant, to whom the same will perhaps happen?” De Saci reproached Descartes for having destroyed the admiration of God derived from the contemplation of nature by pretending to give reason for everything.<sup>76</sup> In a word, except for Arnauld, the high-profile Jansenists were ready to concede that Descartes was better than Aristotle, but still, he was nothing compared to the word of God.

Does this mean that the condemnations of Cartesianism had nothing to do with the all-out war that the Jesuits declared on Jansenists? Certainly not. But we should not focus so much on doctrinal issues rather than on the power games that the Jesuits were playing. Many testimonies suggest that the determination of the Jesuits to destroy everything that was contrary to them, or

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<sup>76</sup> *Fontaine 1736*: II.54.

in any case everything that was independent from them, played an important role in the condemnations of Cartesianism. Not surprisingly, this was insinuated by Arnauld in the memorandum he wrote against the intervention of the Parlement in 1671 (Arnauld 1866 [1671]: 303–4). The condemnation of the Oratorians in 1678 was particularly impressive. Madame de Sévigné commented to Bussy Rabutin that “the Jesuits are more powerful and more enraged than ever. They prohibit the fathers of the Oratory from teaching Descartes’s philosophy, and consequently that the blood circulates. They again rekindled the five propositions; it was compulsory to promise and disavow what they wanted; the threat of letters of cachet is a powerful argument for making a doctrine persuasive” (October 12, 1678, in Sévigné 1853: III.433). The Oratorian Pasquier Quesnel suggested that the Jesuits focused on Angers because the nearby Jesuit Collège de La Flèche was losing its pupils.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Bayle claimed that the Jesuits were furious “either because they feared that the colleges of philosophy where the Oratorians were regents could attract all the youth, who find the new philosophy much more tasty than the old, or because they feared that Descartes’s principles would cause a breach in religion”. In case his opinion was not clear, Bayle immediately added: “There were apparently both of these elements in their fear, but much more the first than the second” (Bayle 1684: Avis au lecteur, n.p.).

According to such testimonies, when the Oratorians had to submit in 1678, it was neither Descartes’s philosophy nor Jansenius’s theology that was at stake, but the fact that the Jesuits saw Oratorians as rivals in the education market. Certainly, we should not take these testimonies at face value. Arnauld and Quesnel were avowed Jansenists, while Madame de Sévigné and Bayle were sympathizers of Port-Royal; after several years of Jansenist persecutions, they were

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<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Girbal 1964: 33.

ready to see signs of Jesuit malice everywhere. But these testimonies certainly capture something of the rivalry between religious orders. Still, they are not sufficient to explain the decision of the king, who, even if he had Jesuit confessors, had reasons of his own when he issued the 1671 decree. To understand these reasons, one should come back to the manner in which, on Christmas Eve, Harlay de Champvallon exposed the motivations of the king:

His Majesty, having appeased the last troubles which arose between theologians on difficult and thorny questions, and having thereby brought peace and tranquility to his state, desired to preserve it and to prevent such a debate from taking place again among the learned, which . . . could later cause divisions and disorders in his kingdom . . . As the philosophy of M. Descartes seemed to alarm the learned and to throw the seeds of a division which could in the end catch fire, if it were not provided early . . . he [Harlay de Champvallon] . . . had orders to tell me [Clerselier] that we [Clerselier and Rohault] had from now on to restrain ourselves from doing anything that could break out and incite against us those of the opposite party . . .

The following clarification was added a week later:

Since he [the king] does not condemn in substance this way of philosophizing, which he sees to be approved by so many clever people, the only thing he apprehends . . . is the altercation between the learned, whom he has ordered to be prevented with all his power. So that, provided that no quarrel or dispute arises in the public, he accepts that a private individual may try to discover the truth by this way, if it is possible, and that the Cartesians make every effort in that direction. He does not intervene so that peace might prejudice truth, but he does not want it

to happen that, under the pretext of defending or seeking the truth, which one is not certain of finding, one disturbs the peace . . .<sup>78</sup>

Two aspects of Clerselier's account are worth commenting on. First, the king did not fear Descartes's philosophy as such, and not even Cartesian philosophy in so far as it was seen to be incompatible with the dogma of the Eucharist, but rather its public defense. Working privately on transubstantiation in the framework of Descartes's philosophy was allowed, but it was not permitted to make such work public. This distinction was to re-emerge just after the sixteenth General Assembly of the Oratorians. In September 1678, their general Sainte-Marthe sent François-Ignace de Baglion de Saillant, who besides his function as General Prosecutor was close to Harlay de Champvallon, to report to the king what happened. Louis XIV read the declaration that the Oratorians issued and commented that he prohibited Descartes's philosophy "for very good reasons. Not that I want to prevent it to be taught as it is taught to Monseigneur, but I do not want us to make it the foundation of doctrine" (Lallemand 1888: 408). Indeed, the teachers of the Dauphin that were appointed under the guidance of Bossuet included Gérard de Cordemoy and Jean-Baptiste Denis, who were acknowledged Cartesians.<sup>79</sup> What exactly Louis XIV was prohibiting depends on the meaning of the expression 'foundation of doctrine': if

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<sup>78</sup> Clerselier to Desgabets, January 6, 1672, in Agostini 2009: II.104, 107. Similarly, at the beginning of August 1671, Champvallon told the Internuncio Vibo that he took steps "because he saw that a school of philosophers, calling themselves Cartesians, had begun to form, and that they were making *public* their theses" (Vibo to the Secretary of the State, August 14, 1671, quoted in Armogathe 2005: 143; my emphasis).

<sup>79</sup> Desgabets to Bossuet, September 5, 1671 (in Bossuet 1909–25: I.227–8), rejoiced that the general principles of Descartes's philosophy were to be taught to the Dauphin.



‘doctrine’ refers specifically to the Catholic doctrine, he is asserting that Descartes’s philosophy is not appropriate for grounding Catholic doctrine, probably with the issue of transubstantiation in mind; however, if ‘doctrine’ means ‘established knowledge’ in general, he is saying that he does not want this philosophy to be taught in colleges and universities. In either case, the problem with Cartesian philosophy is its eventual publicity.

Second, if Descartes’s philosophy was to be kept private, it was because its public defense could create disorders and divisions in France. More precisely, it was feared that it could contribute to disturbing the recent Clementine Peace that put an end to the persecution of Jansenism for ten years (1668–79). The Peace stipulated in practice that the members of the French clergy, when signing the Formulary that listed the five propositions condemned as heretical in 1653, could add the precision that they were de facto not in Jansenius’s *Augustinus*; and it seems that the Jesuits received from their General the order to keep an “inviolable silence” on Jansenius’s followers. A symbolic event in this regard was the appointment, in September 1671, of Simon Arnauld de Pomponne as Minister of State; the king went as far as to give an audience to his father Robert Arnauld d’Andilly, marking in the eyes of all the goodwill of the king toward the Jansenists.<sup>80</sup>

If we consider the Jesuits’ desire to bring down all that could diminish their power, and the desire of Louis XIV to preserve peace, we begin to have a fairly clear idea of the situation. Publicly defending theories on transubstantiation inspired by Descartes amounted to provoking the Jesuits and thus calling into question the fragile peace that had just been established. However, we still need an explanation as to why the Cartesians seemed powerful enough to threaten the peace of the Kingdom.

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<sup>80</sup> Bluche 1986: 317–21.

### 2.3. The Social Question: Cartesians as a Party

A passage in the *Memoirs* of Louis XIV provides an interesting clue: in the year 1661, the king notes that “I applied myself to destroying Jansenism, and to dispelling the communities where this spirit of novelty was fomented, well-intentioned perhaps, but which ignored or wished to ignore the dangerous consequences it could have.” Commenting on this passage, François Bluche remarks that not only were some Jansenists linked to the *Fronde* of the princes and to that of the parliamentarians, but that Jansenism appeared as “a sect, a Chapel, a semi-secret semi-visible society”—in short, as a particular body in the state, thereby threatening absolute monarchy.<sup>81</sup> The hypothesis about this remark that I would like to defend is that, regardless of the doctrinal affinities that would have brought together the Jansenists and the Cartesians—which, as we have seen, were finally quite weak—they both appeared as a party, a sect, and a particular body susceptible to creating divisions in the kingdom.

It should first be remarked that only those who have gained reputation enough to threaten the established order are condemned. In 1675, Jean-Baptiste La Grange asked with surprise why no one cared to condemn Descartes some twenty years earlier (La Grange 1675: 40). Vincent answered this question by noting that, at the time of publication of his own *Cursus philosophicus* (1658), Descartes “laid almost anonymous; if he had some reputation among the peoples of the North, he had none in France, or almost none” (Vincent 1677, Dédicace to Gérard du Bourg: n.p.). But, from the late 1650s on, an intense Cartesian propaganda campaign emerged in France, which involved ostentatious manifestations such as the reburial of Descartes at Saint-Étienne-du-

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<sup>81</sup> Bluche 1986: 309.

Mont in 1667, but also some family and patronage networks.<sup>82</sup> Just like Jansenism, Cartesianism was a family matter, actually organized around Clerselier. Chanut, who inherited the papers that Descartes left when he died in Stockholm, was (since 1626) the brother-in-law of Clerselier, who in turn became the father-in-law of Rohault in 1664. Patronage intervened as well, among others with Pierre d'Alibert, Henri-Louis Habert de Montmor, Jean-François Paul de Gondi known as cardinal de Retz, and Prince Louis II de Bourbon-Condé.

Jansenists were famous for their publications, especially in the domain of pedagogy; similarly, Descartes's followers not only published his unedited works, but they established an editorial continuity between their master's work and their own by commenting on these works. Even if there was sometimes disagreement between them, they expressly identified themselves as supporters of Descartes. They did not seek to found a new system of philosophy, but rather to make Descartes's ideas accessible and to apply them to new domains. The year 1664 saw the publication of *Le Monde* along with two pieces presented at the Académie Montmort: the *Discours. . . touchant le mouvement et le repos* by Cordemoy and the *Discours de la fièvre* by Rohault; of the *Traité de l'homme*, together with Descartes's *Traité de la formation du foetus*, an *Épître*, a long *Préface* by Clerselier, copious *Remarques* of Louis de La Forge, and finally the French translation of Schuyt's Preface to the 1662 Latin edition; and, lastly, of the second edition of Arnauld and Nicole's *Logique*, which included excerpts of the thirteenth and fourteenth (yet unpublished) *Regulae ad directionem ingenium*. In 1666, Louis de La Forge issued his *Traité de l'esprit de l'homme . . . suivant les principes de M. Descartes* and Cordemoy his *Le discernement du corps et de l'âme en six discours*; in 1667, André Martin published under the pseudonym of Ambroise Victor the first five volumes of his *Philosophia cartesiana*; a sixth volume defending

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<sup>82</sup> Baillet (1691: II.429–43) gives a long description of the ceremonies associated to the reburial.

the thesis of animal-machines was to be published in Saumur in 1671. 1668 is the year of publication of a volume containing the *Explication des Machines* and of a French translation of the *Compendium Musicae* with ample elucidations written by Poisson, but also of Cordemoy's *Discours physique de la parole* and of a letter in which he defends the idea that Descartes's explanations of the action of animals and of the formation of the world were not dangerous for religion. In 1670, Poisson issued his *Commentaire ou Remarques sur la méthode de René Descartes*, which, he thought, would be the first of a long series—except that he was then forbidden to publish anything of the sort by his superiors.<sup>83</sup> Finally, as we have mentioned, Rohault published both his *Traité de physique* and his *Entretiens sur la philosophie* in 1671.

Just like the Jansenists, the Cartesians thus appeared as a closely-knit group of people who were able to deploy an enormous intellectual activity, particularly in terms of publications, and to set the tone in cultivated circles. An illuminating comparison with Gassendists has often been proposed in this regard: Gassendi's atomism was as difficult to reconcile with the dogma of the Eucharist as Descartes's doctrine of extension was, and, more generally, his natural philosophy was as damaging to Aristotle's natural philosophy. Still, Gassendi was not put on the Index, and his works, even if they were criticized, were not officially condemned in France in this period. This is yet another proof that the issue of transubstantiation is not sufficient to explain the condemnations of Descartes's natural philosophy; as has been noted, “the success of the Gassendists in avoiding harassment is a sign of their failure to package and promote Gassendi's system”.<sup>84</sup> For a better understanding of what packaging and promoting Cartesianism meant in

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<sup>83</sup> [Lallemand 1888](#): 120–1.

<sup>84</sup> [Schmaltz 1999](#): 48. Before Schmaltz, see [Lennon 1993](#): ch. 1; [Brockliss 1995](#); and [Ariew 2011](#): 267–

terms of the social organization of intellectual life, we can consider how some anti-Cartesians—Samuel Sorbière and Jean Chapelain, the two main Gassendists in France, but also Pierre Petit and Edmé Mariotte, who embodied what I have elsewhere called a “radical experimentalism”<sup>85</sup>—regarded Cartesian natural philosophy.

At first, Descartes was for Sorbière and Chapelain an author to be promoted, both for the renewal of philosophy to which he contributed and for the beauty of his style. But, by the end of the 1650s and the early 1660s, they reproached Descartes for behaving like the head of a party and Cartesians for bowing submissively to his views. Although “sect” may refer neutrally to a philosophical school, there is no doubt that it was used in a negative fashion in this case. Thus, Chapelain wrote that Descartes was “happy to have disciples [*sectateurs*] who swore on his dogma and believed things that he did not himself believe”.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Sorbière noted that Descartes was “very affirmative, as every Doctor has to be if he pretends to become a head of a sect”, and that he required from his disciples “docility and patience to mull over [his] doctrine in their mind until it was strongly imprinted on their memory”.<sup>87</sup> In the parallels he establishes between Gassendi and Descartes, Sorbière notes that, while the former did not hesitate to present his thoughts in a familiar fashion to those with whom he conversed, the latter refused all dialogue and referred those he spoke with to his writings (Sorbière to Petit, November 10 and

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<sup>85</sup> Roux 2014.

<sup>86</sup> Chapelain to Carrel de Sainte-Garde, May 27, 1662, in Chapelain 1880–3: II.235–6. See also Chapelain to Heinsius, February 6, 1659, to Carrel de Sainte-Garde, December 15, 1663, and to Bernier, February 16 and April 26, 1669, in Chapelain 1880–3: II.17, 341, 622, 640.

<sup>87</sup> Sorbière to Saumaise, March 10, 1650, and to Petit, November 10, 1657, in Sorbière 1660: 535 and 679–80.

February 10, 1657, in Sorbière 1660: 679, 691). Or, still, that Gassendi tended to suspend his judgment and to note that we can reach only conjectural knowledge, while Descartes pretended to “become the head of a party, or the founder of a sect, and to impose on the half-learned by the bold efforts of a fertile and strong imagination” (Sorbière 1665: 18). If Descartes succeeded in seducing so many disciples, it was because his works were brilliant—though not very solid. Chapelain wrote to Carrel de Sainte-Garde, who published his *Lettres contre la philosophie de Descartes* in 1663, that in Descartes’s system, he found “great brilliance, great novelty, and a happy use of the ancient doctrine of Democritus for the multiplication of worlds and the modern experiments with magnets for the constitution of his machine, as well as beautiful applications of the nature of motion that could only arise from a greatly inventive mind clever at using everything to his ends”.<sup>88</sup> As for Sorbière, he compared Descartes to an acrobat jumping and pirouetting on a wooden horse to impress passing onlookers.<sup>89</sup>

According to other anti-Cartesians, the problem of the Cartesian party was not only that Descartes imposed his views on his disciples. Another important aspect of Cartesian dogmatism, which was not developed by Sorbière and Chapelain but by those who wished to establish a new physics based only on experimentation, was that Descartes and the Cartesians neglected experiments. They preferred to say what they thought, and more precisely what Descartes had thought, than to say what they saw. So Pierre Petit, in his *Discours sur les comètes* (1665), underlined that subtle matter was only invented as an ad hoc explanation of Torricelli’s

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<sup>88</sup> Chapelain to Carrel de Sainte-Garde, February 16, 1662, in Chapelain 1880–3: II.203–4. Descartes is said to have “great brilliance (*brillant*)” and to be “more glistening (*luisant*) than solid” (Chapelain to Carrel de Sainte-Garde, February 16, May 16 and 27, 1662, in Chapelain 1880–3: II.203, 236).

<sup>89</sup> Sorbière 1694: 93–4.

quicksilver experiment; that “sense and experiments” refute the “nice words and arguments drawn from the obscure, arrogant and presumptuous principles” through which Descartes pretended to explain how fire comes from flintstone; and that Nicolas Steno proved that most of Cartesian anatomy is a fantasy.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, these false explanations derived from the sophism that a hypothesis is proven if it accounts for an effect (Petit 1665: 230–1, 251–2). Similarly, three of the reasons given in Mariotte’s *Essai de logique* (1678) for the lack of progress made by physics came from the neglect of experimentation that characterized Cartesians. First, notes Mariotte, philosophers stubbornly search for the causes of the principles of experience; examples of this fault are the Cartesian explanations of elasticity and magnetism.<sup>91</sup> A second reason for the lack of progress is that Cartesians want to explain everything with a few hypotheses that are insufficiently established from an experimental perspective. From the *Essais de physique*, we see that a typical example of this fault is the Cartesian subtle matter (Mariotte 1992: 98 and Mariotte 1717: I.170–1; II.341). The case is even clearer for the third cause of the lack of progress in physics, which amounts to explaining a natural effect by a single cause, while experience shows that several causes actually contribute to producing it. Mariotte follows this diagnosis by propositions of his *Traité de la percussion* that establish that one cannot explain the communication of motion between bodies solely by the conservation of motion, the fundamental Cartesian law of nature.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Petit 1665: 222–3, 252–4. Interestingly, some Jesuits also developed this criticism of Cartesianism (Roux 2013: 83–7).

<sup>91</sup> Mariotte 1992: 97, 103.

<sup>92</sup> Mariotte 1992: 98. For more on Mariotte’s epistemology, see Roux 2011.

The point is not that Sorbière and Chapelain, or Petit and Mariotte, were better physicists or philosophers than Descartes. But these testimonies can help us to understand the characteristics of the Cartesian party in the 1660s and 1670s that played a role in the condemnations of Cartesian philosophy. The question of the proper method of physics had nothing to do with the theology of transubstantiation. Through the testimonies mentioned above, we see that the Cartesian party appeared as a sect to which the dogmas of a master were preferred to the exercise of judgment and to the lessons of experiments. This meant the establishment of a new authority, and this was certainly threatening to the old authorities.

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