

SIGNIFICATION, BEING, AND RELATIVITY: TWO CONTRASTING HORIZONS ON THE RELATION OF METAPHYSICS AND SKEPTICISM (PART 1)

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Abstract: In its broadest aspect, this essay argues for the existence of two distinct horizons of understanding regarding the relation of metaphysics and skepticism. On the one hand, the traditional horizon is represented by what is here called metaphysics of being. As will be shown, this horizon originates historically in Parmenides' poem *On Nature*, receives its initial configuration in Book Gamma of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and reaches its most recent form through Descartes' *Meditations on first philosophy*. Although the perspectives belonging to this horizon present variations, in all of them the relation between metaphysics and skepticism is understood negatively. On the other hand, this essay focuses mainly on the exposition of the alternative horizon of understanding the relation of metaphysics and skepticism, a horizon here called metaphysics of signification. In general, the metaphysics of signification is an empirically more adequate approach to the thought-language-world relation, and therefore encompasses, redefines, and criticizes the limits of the metaphysics of being. Although this horizon is contemporary, its modern origins trace back to Montaigne's *Essays*, also because of his original positive incorporation of the skeptical tropes of Aenesidemus and Agrippa. However, the main focus of this essay is to show how the metaphysics of signification represents a horizon of understanding that deepens the positive sense of the relation between metaphysics and skepticism. This positive sense is initially demonstrated through the interpretation of the tropes of Aenesidemus and Agrippa as general modalities of our relations with ourselves and with the world, whether at the level of perception (as in the case of Aenesidemus' tropes) or at the more conceptual and argumentative level (as in the case of Agrippa's tropes). Thence, analogously to the metaphysics of Hume and Kant, this possibility of positive interpretation and incorporation of the ancient skeptical tropes justifies the seemingly paradoxical characterization of the metaphysics of signification as a skeptical metaphysics.

Key-words: metaphysics; skepticism; tropes; signification; being; relativity

Resumo: Em seu aspecto mais geral, este ensaio argumenta em favor da existência de dois horizontes de compreensão distintos sobre a relação entre metafísica e ceticismo. De um lado, o horizonte tradicional representado pelo que aqui se chama de metafísica do ser. Conforme será mostrado, este horizonte se origina historicamente no poema *Sobre a natureza* de Parmênides, recebe sua configuração inicial no Livro Gama da *Metafísica* de Aristóteles, atingindo sua forma mais recente através das *Meditações metafísicas* de Descartes. Embora as perspectivas pertencentes a este horizonte apresentem variações, em todas elas a relação entre metafísica e ceticismo é compreendida de modo negativo. De outro lado, este ensaio se detém principalmente na exposição do horizonte alternativo de compreensão da relação entre metafísica e ceticismo, o qual é aqui denominado de metafísica da significação. De modo geral, a metafísica da significação é uma abordagem empiricamente mais adequada da relação pensamento-linguagem-mundo, e, por isso, engloba, redimensiona e critica os limites da metafísica do ser. Embora esse horizonte seja contemporâneo, suas origens modernas remetem aos *Ensaio*s de Montaigne, também por causa de sua original incorporação positiva dos tropos céticos de Enesidemo e Agripa. No entanto, o foco principal deste ensaio consiste em mostrar como a metafísica da significação representa um horizonte

de compreensão que aprofunda o sentido positivo da relação entre metafísica e ceticismo. Esse sentido positivo é demonstrado, inicialmente, por meio da interpretação dos tropos de Enesidemo e Agripa como modalidades gerais de nossas relações conosco mesmos e com o mundo, seja no nível da percepção (como no caso dos tropos de Enesidemo), seja no nível mais conceitual e argumentativo (como no caso dos tropos de Agripa). De modo análogo à metafísica de Hume e à de Kant, essa possibilidade de interpretação e incorporação positiva dos tropos céticos antigos justifica a caracterização, à primeira vista paradoxal, da metafísica da significação como uma metafísica cética.

Palavras-chave: metafísica; ceticismo; tropos; significação; ser; relatividade

*To Jaimir Conte, in sign of my deep
gratitude for our philosophical friendship.*

1 Introduction: two horizons on the relation of metaphysics and skepticism

In its broadest sense, the two parts of this essay will outline two different general horizons determining the limits for many particular perspectives of understanding the relations between metaphysics and skepticism.¹ As horizons of understanding, they are both methodological and at once conceptual. On the one hand, to be methodological means that a horizon determines both the space of sense and thus the general direction for many particular stances or perspectives on a given main topic. On the other hand, to be conceptual means that some basic underlying concepts or conceptual schemes determine the limits in which those particular stances can take place within that space of sense. Therefore, philosophical horizons of understanding are methodological-conceptual general unifier spaces of sense within which many particular stances or perspectives of understanding on a main topic can take place in assuming some basic concepts or conceptual schemes. Coming back to our specific concern in this essay, I will present the two contrasting horizons determining in a general way our understanding of the relation between metaphysics and skepticism.

The first is the traditional horizon constituted by what can be suitably called *metaphysics of being*. As its name suggests, this traditional horizon is determined by the basic concept of being, which a wide layer of the contemporary philosophical common sense takes for granted as “the” basic concept among all. That traditional horizon is historically and symbolically represented by the two fundamental texts that became landmarks in the history of both metaphysics and skepticism: Aristotle’s Book Gamma of *Metaphysics* and Descartes’ *Meditations on first philosophy*. Within the perspectives belonging to this first horizon, roughly speaking, the relations between metaphysics and skepticism are, in one way or another, negative ones, so that, in order to be carried out, metaphysical perspectives must oppose or overcome this or that skeptical argument or perspective. *That traditional horizon is so rooted in the shared common narrative of the history of both metaphysics and skepticism to the point of being presumed to be the only possible horizon on that relation.*

¹ The primary sense of the concept of horizon in this essay is to denote a wide general backgrounding framework within which many different and even mutually conflicting perspectives can be developed. Although the concept stems from Husserl and Gadamer, it incorporates some features of Kuhn’s concept of paradigm or model, yet applied to the field of philosophy, which entails changes that cannot be addressed here. Anyway, it is important to stress that this concept necessarily has both historical and theoretical aspects, an observation very important against those who weirdly believe that these aspects could be separated from one another. In other words, the present philosophical essay is as much historical as it is theoretical.

The main aim of the present essay is to call into question that hitherto hidden dogma. This is made up by presenting another alternative (non-traditional) methodological-conceptual horizon of understanding within which the relations between metaphysics and skepticism are, in a general sense, positive relations. That horizon can be called *metaphysics of signification*. As the name suggests, this alternative horizon is centered on the concept of signification, and although we shall speak a lot more about that concept below, it intuitively and still vaguely draws our mental attention to *relational* concepts like sense, meaning, language, and value (significance). The use of this somewhat “artificial” English word instead of these more natural ones will become clearer. From the outset, the metaphysics of signification has as its main topic the thought-language-world relation.² Despite of being to some extent a contemporary philosophical horizon in the field of metaphysics, its origins can be traced back to Montaigne, Hume, and Kant, since these philosophers, albeit of their evident differences, deeply incorporated skepticism within their metaphysical conceptions on the human condition and placed the concept of being (and thus ontology) in a secondary position, going against the still hegemonic tendency to center metaphysics on being. But beyond those three oldest forerunners, we can see the traits of a similar incorporation in many other conceptions that present themselves as critiques of the metaphysics of being from different perspectives. And such conceptions are not confined to philosophy but also come from the fields of science and the arts.

Nonetheless, as we will see later, rather than the usual metaphors of denial (mostly the ideas of overcoming and inversion), what is really at stake here is *the critical incorporation of the metaphysics of being within the horizon of the metaphysics of signification*. Although nowadays become increasingly clear the limitations, simplifications, and thus distortions of its images on the thought-language-world relation, without the historical development (and exhaustion) of the possible perspectives within the horizon of the metaphysics of being would be impossible the gradual and modern arising of the metaphysics of signification as the broader and more empirically adequate horizon of understanding and investigation of the thought-language-world relation. Following the example mostly coming from the painstaking development of Peirce’s semiotic project, *the historical, conceptual, and argumentative path pertaining to the metaphysics of signification lies in the metaphors of critical integration of the past metaphysics of being into a present and future wider metaphysical horizon*.

But before going further on in displaying some fundamentals and conceptual schemes of that alternative horizon, let us explain a little bit more why that alternative horizon has its origins in Montaigne, Hume, and Kant. That brief account will help to understand in which sense the alternative horizon represents a contemporary theoretical framework rooted in modern intellectual history (mainly in philosophy), and not simply another “novelty” on the “competitive market of ideas”. In short, that little story will show that the metaphysics of signification is the “oldest modern new” emerging from the contemporary philosophical landscape.

On the one hand, we can settle the late 16th-century Montaigne’s *Essays* as the modern starting point from which this alternative and critical metaphysical

² I use the expression ‘thought-language-world relation’ to avoid the more common form ‘relation between thought, language, and world,’ which implicitly suggests that there could be three “things” supposedly considered independently from one another. As it will be seen later, one of the central hypotheses of the aforementioned metaphysics of signification is precisely that there is a priority of the relation over the related *spheres*, such that there is not properly any ‘between’ them, but *a necessary and primary correlation, from which* we can speak of these spheres separately, but just, as it were, *a posteriori*.

horizon began to arise. The choice of this landmarking work has precisely to do with Montaigne's original incorporation and rebirth of ancient skepticism into the great stream of modern intellectual spirit, *even though he was not a skeptical philosopher in the strict sense*. Though less reckoned *today* than it should have been, without the original incorporation of the skepticism in Montaigne's work, we could hardly have Descartes' use of skepticism in his *Meditations*. From Montaigne onwards, many other philosophical, scientific, and artistic conceptions came to call into question the groundlines of the metaphysics of being. Even Descartes' metaphysics has its part in this critical lineage insofar as he constitutes a broad metaphysical perspective that constraints a massive translation of the previous Aristotelian metaphysical vocabulary into a new one *centered on the notion of thought or thinking (cogito)*, so that his use of skepticism contributes – in a first version and for the first time explicitly – to put the grounding metaphysical question on the thought-language-world relation at the center of the modern philosophical stage, yet remaining within the limits of the traditional horizon of the metaphysics insofar as he maintains the centrality of the concepts of being and truth. Anyway, the huge achievement reached by Montaigne in his *Essays* is the necessary historical and intellectual condition for the emergence of Descartes' metaphysics of thought.

However, on the other hand, it is only with Hume's and Kant's proposals of a new direction to metaphysics towards psychology and ethics that the historical conditions of possibility for the arising of the metaphysics of signification became really clear. Firstly, in a general outlook, that is so because Hume and Kant, deepening Montaigne's and mainly Descartes' examples, made an original incorporation of skepticism in their own metaphysical projects.³ But in a more specific outlook, that is so because Hume and Kant, more than any other previous philosophers, emphasized that Descartes' metaphysical response to the skeptical challenge relied on the investigation of the relation between our thought and the world we inhabit in order to make sense of how not only knowledge but also the ethical sense of human life are possible. It is from that deep understanding of the Cartesian, so to speak, "paradigm shift" in the history of metaphysics that many different radical critical perspectives on the traditional horizon centered on the metaphysics of being have arisen. Some of these perspectives are: German idealism's metaphysics of subjectivity and objectivity, the metaphysics of feeling, will, and action pervading not only several Romantic thinkers like the late Schiller, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, Hölderlin, Schleiermacher but also Schopenhauer's and Kierkegaard's philosophies, as well as Nietzsche's early works; and in the next 19th-century philosophical generation even perspectives like Marx's historical materialism, Nietzsche's late pluralistic perspectivism, Frege's logical metaphysics of sense and thought, and Peirce's semiotic pragmatism. Beholding that brief but wide panorama, we begin to understand how – starting with Montaigne, but mostly from Hume and Kant onwards – we have the groundworks for the explicit arising of metaphysics of signification.

Passing from a more historical to a first argumentative description, what more generally characterizes the metaphysics of signification is to be an alternative methodological-conceptual horizon for approaching the thought-language-world relation.⁴ Its first general hypothesis consists in approaching that fundamental

³ On that incorporation, see QUINTERO, 2022.

⁴ I use the expression 'thought-language-world relation' to avoid the more common form 'relation between thought, language, and world,' which implicitly suggests that there could be three "things" supposedly considered independently from one another. As it will be seen later, one of the central hypotheses of the aforementioned metaphysics of signification is precisely that there is a priority of the relation over the related *spheres*, such that there is not properly any

relation through the basic yet polysemous concept of ‘making sense’ in the most general scheme-structure ‘*something makes sense for someone in a significant context*’. Such a scheme is intuitively grasped through the concept of signification as an open set of processes by means of which we build up and maintain the possible senses of our ways of life in the world we inhabit. Its critical and alternative character in the face of metaphysics of being comes mainly from the simple intuition according to which the concepts of meaning, sense, and signification are previous to and conditions for any possible content of the concepts of being, nothingness, truth, and reality.

Coming closer to the main subject of this essay, in contrast with the general standpoint determined by metaphysics of being, from the general perspective of metaphysics of signification, it is possible to carry out a positive appropriation of ancient skepticism, to the point that we can say that, in a certain way and paradoxical as it can sound, *the metaphysics of signification is a type of **skeptical metaphysics**, especially because it takes Aenesidemus’ and Agrippa’s tropes as a kind of fundamental conceptual and argumentative source to establish the metaphysical priority of the relation itself over the spheres related within it.* From that perspective, these tropes are the first historical systematization of the intuition according to which thought is prior to knowledge, so that our relations with the world are previous to and conditions for any possible kind of knowledge of being. Hence, in a very precise sense, the genealogy of the horizon of understanding and investigation of the thought-language-world relation represented by the metaphysics of signification goes back from Montaigne’s ingenious incorporation of ancient skepticism to the ancient skepticism itself, as I intend to display further in the two parts of this essay. It is evident that such a reading of ancient skepticism assumes from the outset its own heterodox spirit, hoping that another renewed interpretive perspective can be opened up for those still interested in making radical philosophy through the philosophical history of the concepts, conceptual schemes, and chiefly of the arguments that they fulfill.

2 The first horizon: metaphysics of being and skepticism

2.1 A brief genealogy of the traditional view about the relations between metaphysics and skepticism: Descartes, Aristotle, and Parmenides

After a long while in a sort of intermittent meditation, I now present, as an outline, some *controversial hypotheses* regarding *the traditional view* on that subject matter to pave the way for presenting the *alternative view* on these concepts and their relations, what shall be done later. The introductory section has already given us a glimpse into the difficulties of saying something relevant about the concepts of metaphysics and skepticism, as well as about their relations. Taking these difficulties very seriously, I now outline some hypotheses attempting to tackle them.

The *first hypothesis* can be introduced as follows. The rigor inherent to the spirit of modern genealogical analysis of concepts applied to our topic recommends that it *seems to be a mistake to assume that there would exist a simple, single, and undisputable definition or even description grasping once and for all the historical polysemy of the concepts of metaphysics and skepticism, as well as their effective and possible relations.* Thus, somewhat ironically, the rigor of this spirit seems to lead us to a certain kind of skeptical moderation in the face of the dogmatic attitude claiming to know in a “clear and distinct” manner what each one of these concepts is, as well as their

‘between’ them, but *a necessary and primary correlation, from which* we can speak of these spheres separately, but just, as it were, *a posteriori*.

relations. It was Nietzsche who named as 'historical sense' the rigor of this genealogical analysis of concepts and their relations, adding that the lack of that sense seems to be a hereditary defect of most philosophers. Incidentally, this historical sense constitutes a typically modern appropriation of the ancient skeptical spirit. Hence, the rigor of that historical sense applied to our theme entitles us to rephrase the above recommendation in the following Aristotelian-sounding hypothesis: *the terms 'metaphysics' and 'skepticism' are said in many senses because their historical relations take place in many ways*. This hypothesis points out what we will see soon: *the intertwined destiny of metaphysics and skepticism*. I now must proceed to corroborate that first hypothesis, initially showing some general facts about the concept-formation of our contemporary concepts of skepticism and metaphysics, and further how that modern configuration determines our understanding of their real or possible relations.

Let us begin by talking about the concept of skepticism. It is true that a more intense and multifaceted reception of ancient skepticism in European philosophy dates back to the mid-16th century, when a Latin translation of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* spread along with a translation of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of eminent philosophers*, and Cicero's works gained new prominence in the Renaissance Republic of Letters, including his *Academica*. However, as Mario dal Pra persuasively shows in the introduction to his now half-century-old yet still important study on skepticism (1975), the first historical-philosophical treatment of ancient skepticism that is relevant to us was carried out in Hegel's *Lectures on the history of philosophy*, written mainly in the 1820s, but only published for the first time in 1835.⁵ Since then, the complexity of the history of skepticism has become increasingly clear to us: not only in its trajectory from the Greek world to the 18th century in the so-called Western philosophical tradition, but also through studies that show forms very similar to skepticism in non-Western philosophical traditions, such as certain strands of Chinese Daoist philosophy and Indochinese Buddhist philosophy.⁶

These observations serve as a kind of somewhat general premise for the following argument: there are various forms of skepticism throughout history and, more specifically, throughout what we can call ancient skepticism. In reality, this same historical spirit compels us to make an inevitable genealogical observation: the very general notion of skepticism as a philosophical orientation probably only emerges in the 1st century BCE, especially with the important persona of Aenesidemus, although the earliest occurrences of the adjective 'skeptics' (*hoi skeptikoi*) date from the 2nd century CE.⁷ A sign of this late crystallization of the concept of skepticism is visible through the following passage found at the end of the biography of Pyrrho as narrated by the peculiar Diogenes Laertius. Right after listing some of the direct followers of the philosopher from Elis, he adds, not without a hint of irony:

On the one hand, all these called themselves 'Pyrrhonists' according to the name of the master; but, on the other hand, so to speak, according to the doctrine (*apo tou hoion dogmatos*), some called themselves 'perplexed' (*aporêtikoi*), others 'investigators'

⁵ See DAL PRA, 1975, p. 1-10.

⁶ For some important works on the faces of skepticism in some non-western traditions, see DE BRITO-REBELO, 2025; MILLS, 2018; KJELLBERG-IVANHOE, 1996.

⁷ See LIDDELL-SCOTT-JONES, 1996, p. 1606.

(*skeptikoi*), and still others ‘judgment-suspenders’ (*ephektikoi*), and also others ‘researchers’ (*dzêtêtikoi*). (D. L. IX, 69)⁸

Apparently, these different self-designations stemmed from disputes about what the fundamental meaning of the attitude exemplified by Pyrrho’s life was: whether it was a state of perplexity (*aporia*), a disposition for investigation (*skepsis*) or research (*dzêtêsis*), or even the suspension of judgment (*epochê*). Note, therefore, that Diogenes Laertius’ account places the adjective ‘skeptics’ (*skeptikoi*) alongside other possible designations for the first generation of Pyrrho’s disciples. Such dissension among these immediate disciples becomes more understandable if we recall that, like Socrates, Pyrrho wrote nothing, leaving open to those who took him as their master what the most basic possible meaning of his teaching was, accessible only through direct testimonies. Similarly, as with Socrates, Diogenes Laertius’ account suggests that Pyrrho’s life and philosophical attitude gave rise to different orientations.⁹ Another sign of this slow formation of the concept of skepticism is the fact that we, moderns, call the philosophers of the New Academy – especially Arcesilaus and Carneades – ‘Academic skeptics’. Strictly speaking, both Cicero and Sextus Empiricus always refer to them simply as ‘Academics,’ even though Sextus recognizes *some* common traits between them and the Pyrrhonists, yet only these latter are those who, in his view, properly deserve to be called skeptics (P. H. I 220-235).

Now, regarding the concept of metaphysics, unlike what a certain superficial view suggests, its formation is as typically modern as that suggested above regarding the concept of skepticism. It explicitly originates in the 1st century BCE as an abbreviation of a description that serves as the title for a set of texts by Aristotle, apparently intended to determine the content of the concept of wisdom (*sophia*) or first philosophy (*prôtê philosophia*). From the 3rd century CE onwards, it began both its tradition of commentary (with Alexander of Aphrodisias) and of appropriation (with Plotinus *Enneads*). In the Arabic philosophical tradition, particularly from Al-Kindi forwards in the 9th century, the possibility of speaking of something like a first philosophy or metaphysics slowly begins to emerge, something that likely becomes more explicit with the monumental work of Avicenna, originally entitled *Book of divine things* (*Kitab al-Ilahiyat*), written at the first quarter of the 11th century, being translated into Latin in the mid-12th century at the School of Toledo by Domenico Gundissalinus and Abraham Ibn Daud as *Book of first philosophy or divine science* (*Liber de philosophia prima sive scientia divina*).

Only after that translation (a historical fact not yet fully recognized in its greatness), in the mid-13th century and thanks to William of Moerbeke’s talents, the European Christian-Latin intellectual tradition finally translated Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* directly from Greek into Latin. What followed were centuries of commentaries and discussions that would be philosophically compiled in Francisco Suárez’s *Metaphysical disputationes*, a groundbreaking encyclopedic work published in 1597. Discounting a certain rhetorical hyperbole necessary to make the fact

⁸ All translations from the Greek are mine. Otherwise, the translators will be indicated. Sextus’ and Diogenes Laertius’ works are here quoted in the usual scholarly title abbreviations. A very similar observation is found at the very beginning of the same chapter on Pyrrho. (D. L. IX, 70) Also in Sextus’ *Outlines* we find a passage very akin to that just quoted: see (P. H. I 7).

⁹ For various accounts of Pyrrho’s personality, see RUSSO, 1978, p. 57-114; DECLEVA CAIZZU, 2020, especially chapters 1-2. For a detailed approach to Pyrrho as a philosopher who was not yet a skeptic in the sense that this concept begins to receive in Aenesidemus, see BETT, 2000; 1994; GAUKROGER, 1995.

simpler and more intelligible in its most general outline, we can say that it was only with the publication of Descartes' *Meditations on first philosophy*, in 1641, that the concept of metaphysics gained the diffusion and frequent use that we still make of it today, not far from the moment when the notion of skepticism also began to receive its current spectrum of diffusion in ordinary languages.¹⁰

Disregarding here the imprecisions of the picture just drawn for the sake of brevity, something stands out: *both concepts only became common currency in the philosophical imagination after the dawn of modernity*. More specifically, we can date the formation of this imaginary to the period from the mid-16th to the mid-17th century. During this interval, on the one hand, we see the reappearance of Diogenes Laertius', Sextus', and Cicero's texts as spiritual ambassadors of the revival of ancient skepticism and its first creative appropriations, as in Montaigne's case. On the other hand, it was also during this time that we see the transition of the notion of metaphysics from its medieval vision – first Arabic, then Scholastic and directly linked to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* – until becoming a central and controversial field of debates in modern philosophy (after Descartes' *Meditations*).¹¹

The mention of Descartes' *Meditations* allows us to move from a synopsis of the historical polysemy of the concepts of skepticism and metaphysics separately to the also polysemic history of their ancient and modern relations. Indeed, the *Meditations* constitute one of the fundamental moments for thinking about how the relations between metaphysics and skepticism were historically settle up. Without going into irrelevant details already extensively covered in the specialized literature, I would like to advance, as corollaries to the first hypothesis put forward, two extensions of it. The first is that the *Cartesian use of skeptical arguments as a starting point for finding the supposed indubitable certainty of the cogito takes up the Aristotelian characterization of the principle of non-contradiction in Gamma 3* as (i) "impossible to be mistaken", (ii) a condition for all knowledge, and (iii) non-hypothetical.¹² It is certain that this latent reference to the main features of the principle of Aristotelian metaphysics is mediated by his knowledge of the Aenesidemus' and Agrippa's tropes either from his acquaintance with Diogenes Laertius' and Sextus' classical texts or through his knowledge of the highly original philosophical reinterpretation of these same arguments in Montaigne's *Apology for Raymond Sebond*.¹³ It is precisely the certainty of this mediation between Descartes' *Meditations* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Gamma that allows us to state the second extension of the first hypothesis: *we are, as it were, condemned to see the relations between metaphysics and skepticism in antiquity from the way that same relations came to be configured by Descartes*.

In the context of this essay, that hypothesis means more specifically: it is impossible for us to think about the relation between metaphysics and skepticism, in and from at least Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Gamma, abstracting from the post-Cartesian context of the history of modern metaphysics. The unmistakable sign of

¹⁰ For a general survey of my view on the history of metaphysics, see DE ALMEIDA, 2024, chap. 1.

¹¹ Concerning that historical retrieve of the ancient skepticism in Renaissance, see SCHMITT, 1972; 1983; POPKIN, 2003, esp. chaps. 1-8; concerning the decisive and original assimilation of the skepticism in Hume's and Kant's philosophies, see QUINTERO, 2022.

¹² For an accurate analysis of the strong resemblances between and the most likely direct emulation from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Gamma (esp. chaps. 3-4) and Descartes' metaphysics in his *Meditations*, see WOLFF, 1997.

¹³ On the kinds of relation of Descartes with the skeptical tradition, see CURLEY, 1978 (esp. chap. 1); POPKIN, 2003, chaps. 9-10. On the likely relation between Montaigne's *Apology* and Descartes' incorporation of skepticism, see BRUNSCHVICG, 1945, chap. 2.

this inexorability lies in the fact that the aforementioned rigor of genealogical analysis applied to the history of skepticism must begin by distinguishing modern or post-Cartesian conceptions of skepticism from those conceptions belonging to the history of ancient skepticism. We could summarize these two corollaries of the first hypothesis as follows: from a point of view that is both historical and necessary, there are several *correspondences* between the ways in which Descartes' *Meditations on first philosophy* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Gamma have shaped for us the relation between metaphysics and skepticism.

The term 'correspondences' must be understood here in the sense that Baudelaire gave to it in his homonymous poem: *the correlation between symbols representing "things" belonging, at first glance, to distinct and apparently incompatible realms*. Among these correspondences, the most profound of all lies in the fact that both texts became fundamental for the historical-conceptual configuration of the previously mentioned traditional horizon of understanding the thought-language-world relation represented by the metaphysics of being. In short, having the concept of being as its main center of gravity, the concepts of thought, language, world, and their correlations gain their peculiar movement and position.

That deepest correspondence indicates something not easy to express briefly, but let us try to: whereas metaphysics is initially attached to the concept of being, skepticism enters the picture attached to the thought-language-world relation, *inasmuch as it is determined by the concept of being*. So, primarily, the concept of world is identified with this or that sense of the concept of being. From that point onwards, thought is identified with some cognitive or epistemological capacity to grasp that being of the world, and, finally, language is identified with some kind of discourse (declarative statements) able to receive some truth-value in the classical conception of truth as correspondence. *Within that general outlook, metaphysics turns out to be that set of philosophical perspectives that claim to have achieved the thought-language-world relation conceived in that way, and skepticism turns out to be that set of philosophical perspectives that doubt this or that metaphysical perspective has really made it*. Stemming from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Gamma and Descartes' *Meditations*, that became up to now the most common-sensical picture of the relation between metaphysics and skepticism. Thus, in a nutshell, we can display the general features of that deepest correspondence by saying that Aristotle and Descartes share both the centrality of the concept of being and, shaped by that centrality, the inexorable need to make up some suitable conception of the thought-language-world relation. And that deepest correspondence enables us to see that *its background common source relies on another poet: Parmenides*. It is since Parmenides' poem *On nature*, the birthplace of the metaphysics of being, that the traditional horizon acquired the just sketched outlook, within which Aristotle's and Descartes' mentioned works are situated.

Yet, although Descartes' metaphysics shares with Aristotle that same "conceptual space" opened by the mentioned correspondences, in becoming the beginning of the modern metaphysics (a current historical interpretation coming from Hegel's history of philosophy), Descartes' metaphysics, differing from that of Aristotle, has a peculiar ambivalence. On the one hand, Descartes' work for grounding a new model of thought (almost like a new language) becomes possible through his renewing the concept of thought/thinking (*cogito*) as a wide range and polysemous notion, intrinsically linked to the concepts of consciousness and representation (*idea*), conceived as renewed and firmer foundations for knowledge, particularly through an analogy with the procedure of mathematical analysis, also grounded in Descartes' work in the field of geometry. In other words, Descartes set up a new era in the history of metaphysics (and, with it, in the relation between metaphysics and skepticism), placing the thought-language-world relation at the

very center of this new metaphysical age, and thus (along with Montaigne) starting to open the possibility of the metaphysics of signification, since he is, to some extent, departing from and criticizing Aristotelian metaphysical tradition, and, in so doing, criticizing to a certain point the metaphysics of being grounded firstly in Parmenides' *On nature* and further consolidated in Aristotle's works, chiefly in his *Metaphysics*.

On the other hand, however, the repeated "I think, therefore I am" – as the popularized form of 'I am a thinking thing' – still contains within itself the underlying postulate and imperative determining the metaphysics of being and known today as fragment 3 of Parmenides' poem: "for thinking (*noein*) and being (*einai*) are the same." This amalgam of continuity and rupture has obtained its historical weight in Hegel's celebrated maxim at the beginning of the *Phenomenology of spirit*, according to which reality should be grasped and expressed not only as substance, but also as subject. In any case, the historical-philosophical condition of possibility for the explicit emergence of the notion of subject in the idealism of Kant and Fichte – as a creative and profound conceptual translation of the Cartesian thinking thing (*res cogitans*) – is only a substitute for the Platonic-Aristotelian notion of substance (*ousia*), which, in turn, only becomes historically and philosophically possible as a creative and profound translation of the notion of being or entity (*to eon/to on*) established by Parmenides. Hegel's famous maxim, therefore, closes a cycle in the history of metaphysics that begins with Parmenides, passes through Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Avicenna, Aquinas, Scotus, Suárez, Descartes, Kant, and Fichte, just to mention those in whom the Parmenidean postulate-imperative of the identity between thinking and being is most evidently at stake, though always under new configurations. In any case, throughout these two millennia, the traditional horizon of understanding the thought-language-world relation still dominates, a horizon determined by the metaphysics of being.

Indeed, viewed from the transformative and decisive impact of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel's philosophies, the metaphysics of being – settled in the Greek world and gaining its modern configuration in those authors – represents what we are calling here the traditional horizon of understanding the thought-language-world relation. In the light of what we just seen above, from this traditional and still hegemonic horizon, the relation between metaphysics and skepticism, even though polysemous, must be thought of as a relation of opposition. In other words, in the traditional methodological-conceptual horizon of understanding the thought-language-world relation, any metaphysical perspective would only be possible and legitimate by "overcoming" or "surpassing" the skeptical challenge that calls into question any claim to knowledge of intelligible being in opposition to opinions that deal with sensible appearances. In short, from the point of view of the metaphysics of being, centered on the concept of truth as correspondence and the ideal of definitive knowledge of being by itself (*to on kath'hauto*), skepticism is the "enemy to be overcome" for the constitution of science, especially metaphysics as the most basic science.

Despite that traditional horizon has been intensively and variously criticized for its limits and shortcomings over the last two centuries, it still remains hegemonic in the current ways of conceiving the thought-language-world relation, either in being taken affirmatively or negatively. Taken positively, through the "rebirth" of ontology in the last century, it reveals itself as this persistent kind of "nostalgia" for the metaphysics of being, supposedly now purified by the powers of some methodology, be it that coming from phenomenology or that coming from logic. Negatively, this still hegemonic character is shown in the mistaken idea of an overcoming of metaphysics, when what is needed is precisely to push forward the "overcoming" of the centrality of ontology in metaphysics. When regarded from

the wider outlook of the metaphysics of signification, both paths turn out to be symptoms of the increasingly empirical inadequacy of the perspectives carried out within the boundaries of the metaphysics of being in their ways of understanding the plurality of forms that the thought-language-world relation historically assumes. In both cases, the relations between metaphysics and skepticism are seen in a limited and thus distorted manner: for those who dedicate their efforts to construct metaphysics as ontology, skepticism is something to be defeated in order to supposedly kept save the Holy Graal of this or that *a priori* truth; for those who dedicate their efforts to deconstruct metaphysics as ontology, skepticism is something to be assumed as some type of relativism remaining after we arrive at Waste Land of a putative post-metaphysical epoch.

From a genealogical and retrospective point of view, *the history of the relation between metaphysics and skepticism can be precisely marked by the Parmenidean explicit constitution of the concept of being*. We must remind here that it is exactly in Parmenides that the distinction between the sensible (*aisthêton*) and the intelligible (*noêton*) is settled in its strongest and purest possible form, a distinction fundamental for understanding not only the emergence of Plato's and Aristotle's metaphysics but also (and more importantly here) for understanding the entire conceptual architecture permeating Sextus Empiricus' synthesis of ancient skepticism: at bottom, a distinction based on the separation between being and phenomenon at the ontological level as well as on the separation between knowing and believing at the epistemological level.¹⁴

Bearing in mind that general scenario, we can expose the second controversial hypothesis of that part of the present essay: *the relation between metaphysics and skepticism is not only accessible to us from a post-Cartesian point of view, but it is necessarily configured within the horizon of the metaphysics of being*. This horizon is the one initially set forth from the moment when the concept of being was brought to fore in the history of metaphysics by Parmenides, a beginning that, in a more than two millennial journey, brings ontology as the center of gravity of metaphysics, a journey whose fundamental role belongs precisely to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Gamma, due to the way in which our varied and complex philosophical tradition interpreted and appropriated this text.

Exploring the reasons for proposing that second hypothesis, the aforementioned complex and elusive beginning of skepticism proper is marked in various ways by the rejection of the pretensions of the metaphysics of being, either seeing such a beginning situated in Pyrrho's lifetime (partially contemporary with Aristotle) or in Aenesidemus' Pyrrhonist revival in his seemingly philosophical rejection of the so-called Academic skepticism. Moreover, considering the most important ancient sources¹⁵, they all indicate that such an arising somehow goes back to thinkers who preceded the skeptics proper, either such thinkers are those coming after Parmenides (such as Gorgias, Democritus, and Protagoras), or earlier than him (such as Xenophanes), or even some of his contemporaries (as is the case of Heraclitus).

In fact, it is with these proto-skeptics that Aristotle is discussing in the second part of *Metaphysics* Gamma. Most of them seem to be so well-known to his audience that Aristotle is satisfied with identifying them with the indefinite pronoun 'some'. Assuming that at least some of them belong to the Megarian

¹⁴ On the skeptical operational assumption and argumentative use of that distinction in Sextus' works, see CELLUPRICA, 1981.

¹⁵ In their chronological order, such sources are Cicero in the *Academica*, Sextus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and his various *Adversus*, and Diogenes in his *Lives of eminent philosophers*.

School – as Enrico Berti persuasively argued for¹⁶ –, then Aristotle's arguments are determined by the shadow of the Eleatic School, even though these undetermined relativists are placed in continuity with a venerable lineage of philosophers and, surprisingly, even to Homer!¹⁷ *Whatever, the pivotal conceptual scheme determining the formation of this lineage is none other than the separation between being and phenomenon that is unequivocally established with Parmenides.* To such an extent that distinction is radical in Parmenides that Aristotle's list of quotations in Gamma 5 includes a fragment of Parmenides' poem, currently placed as the 16th.

As Anthony Long rightly glimpsed in his seminal text on the possible (and for him needed) Aristotle's place in the history of ancient skepticism¹⁸, the criticism of all these predecessors is made because the Stagirite intends to apply the principle of non-contradiction also to the phenomenal world, contradicting the presupposition latent in Parmenides' poem and unconcealed in some of Plato's dialogues according to which the principle of non-contradiction would have as its exclusive domain intelligible being and not sensible appearance. So strong became that presupposition from Plato's perspective that it ended up being projected onto Heraclitus, despite the complete absence of the concept of being from his philosophy – which is why Plato can place him as the antipode of Parmenides. But the force of this division is felt where it explicitly reverberates, in two figures who, moreover, developed antithetical philosophies, namely: Democritus and Plato. In both, there are several doubts as to the possibility of extending the principle of non-contradiction to the level of phenomena. Let us remember that, according to Diogenes Laertius' account, Homer and Democritus were Pyrrho's favorite authors (See D. L. IX, 72-74). And it is the Platonic Socrates, read in a certain way, that becomes the source of the Academic skepticism of Arcesilaus and Carneades.¹⁹

Thus, at the deepest roots of the explicit emergence of ancient skepticism underlie philosophies that, each in its own way, radicalize the conceptual distinction between being and appearing originated in Parmenides' poem. In more direct terms and returning to the hypothesis stated above: *there is a profound correlation between the metaphysics of being that has been settled thanks to Parmenides and the gradual emergence of the skeptical methodological-conceptual horizon.* Initially, in the arising of the several forms of proto-skepticism preceding Pyrrho and the Academics, and further in the explicit emergence of skepticism, mostly due to Aenesidemus' original construction of the *Pyrrhonian* skeptical horizon in which, at last, Sextus willingly situates himself. If this hypothesis is correct, then there is a kind of symbiotic and inexorable relation between the emergence of metaphysics of being and the various forms and degrees of skepticism that somehow call its claims into question. From this perspective, the second part of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Gamma is not a secondary or residual moment, but an initial and subsequently fundamental *locus classicus* in the consolidation of an umbilical link. However, it is not within the scope of ancient and medieval philosophy that the relation between metaphysics and skepticism will crystallize as we currently conceive it, but only from Descartes

¹⁶ See BERTI, 1981.

¹⁷ It is worth noticing that Diogenes Laertius explicitly also remarks at the beginning of his account of Pyrrho: "Some say that Homer would have been the founder (*κἀταρχαί*) of that philosophical stance (*haireseōs*)."¹⁷ (D. L. IX, 71) That common reference to Homer shows that such a belief was very embedded in the Greek philosophical imaginary, once there are more than five centuries separating Aristotle's text from that of Diogenes, and it would be doubtful to take Aristotle's text as the source of Diogenes' remark, given the absence of any textual evidence for it.

¹⁸ See LONG, 2006.

¹⁹ For an excellent reconstruction of the relations between Academic skepticism and the Socratic spirit of Plato's dialogues, see KOŁOSKI, 2025.

onwards. This connection is – as already foreshadowed in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Gamma – a complex relation: simultaneously one of dependence and opposition.

3 The second horizon: metaphysics of signification and skepticism

3.1 An historical and argumentative overview of the metaphysics of signification

Although the hypotheses presented above attempt to map a good deal of the polysemous historical and conceptual relations between metaphysics and skepticism, they by no means exhaust the possibilities of that relation. *Rather, the comprehensive map just drawn by these two hypotheses and their extensions applies only to the relations between skepticism and the metaphysics of being.* During the time in which that traditional metaphysical horizon reaches its accomplishment – running across the historical arc linking Descartes' and Hegel's philosophies – that same horizon reaches its exhaustion, and from that double-sided process of accomplishment and exhaustion began to emerge the elements of another broader metaphysical methodological-conceptual horizon. That larger horizon was previously called '*metaphysics of signification*'.

Leaving aside unnecessary details here and as pinpointed earlier, the metaphysics of signification "displaces" the metaphysics of being by critically encompassing it within a broader horizon. By no means does the metaphysics of signification overcome the metaphysics of being in the way the notion of overcoming has been conceived in various philosophies since the 19th century, as if it were possible to move to a supposedly "post-metaphysical" new stage of philosophy, whatever way such a supposed moment may be characterized. Analogously to how Euclidean geometry went from "the" geometry to the status of "one among others" mathematically possible geometries, so too does the metaphysics of signification encompass the metaphysics of being as a particular kind of configuration of the thought-language-world relation.

Contrary to the misconceptions of these supposed "post-metaphysical" perspectives, *the central issue is that the metaphysics of signification achieves a peculiar kind of "overcoming" of ontology as the center of the metaphysics in general.* In more specific and less propagandistic terms, the metaphysics of signification contains in its conceptual and argumentative structure a form of perspectivist and pluralist meta-ontology, which avoids the two extremes of ontological foundationalism and ontological relativism, extremes that both stem from assuming the mistaken synonymy between metaphysics and ontology. But we will have to talk more about this configuration of meta-ontology in the next part of this essay.

Initially seen in contrast with the metaphysics of being, the fundamental idea of this alternative horizon consists in assuming that *the concepts of meaning and sense must be seen as prior conditions for the possible contents of the concepts of truth and, thus, of being*, indicating that the former concepts are not only more basic but also broader than the latter ones. That priority was already acknowledged both by some ancient and by some modern philosophers. That precedence is latent in Plato and Aristotle: in the former case, in the *Sophist*, when Plato determines both the correct relations among the highest Ideas and the correct relations between the general parts of the statement (*logos*); in Aristotle's case, when, in the *De interpretatione* (chap. 4), he explicitly says that every discourse (*logos*) is significant or meaningful (*sēmantikos*), although not every discourse is declarative (*apophantikos*), the latter type of discourse being "defined" as that one to which belong (*hyparchei*) the truth-values true or false.

But that anteriority of the sense conditions over truth conditions is fully retrieved in the renewal of the theories of signification worked out around the passage of the 19th to 20th centuries. That priority of the sense and meaning over truth and being is explicit both in Frege's conception of sense (*Sinn*) and Husserl's conception of pure grammar. But that priority of sense and meaning over truth and being is also present in the poetics of artistic movements like symbolism, dadaism, and surrealism. Even on the level of the development of linguistics during the above-mentioned period, that priority is also working. Within the history of this science, it is worth noticing that Saussure, at the very beginning of his posthumously published *Course of general linguistics*, determines linguistics as a particular part of a broader theoretical field he then baptizes as semiology. Once the fast spreading of Saussure's seminal work, that indication became the source of the French-centered movement of semiology, with authors like Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Algirdas Greimas, Jean Baudrillard, among others.

However, among these recent sources, it is undoubtedly in Peirce's unfulfilled project of semiotics that we can see the most explicit recognizing of the priority of sense and meaning over truth and being, chiefly into the labyrinth of concepts gathered under the label of 'speculative grammar', whose main task is *to determine the sense conditions of any possible kind of semiosis*, a concept denoting *the types of inferential processes carried out through the synergic, kaleidoscopic, and schematical correlation between signs, their senses (interpretants), and the objects (partially) referred to by those signs-senses*. That *relational inner structure* of the semiosis is precisely what makes it a metaphysical concept and, at once, a powerful explanatory and empirically adequate concept for grasping aspects of the thought-language-world relation that has been hitherto underestimated or simply ignored by the traditional model dominated by the metaphysics of being.

At once deepening and transforming Peirce's operational concept of semiosis, the metaphysics of signification acquires its widest range of "vision" on the thought-language-world relation. Firstly, the word 'signification' intends to give us a kind of Latinized and more familiar cloth to the Greek and sounding technical word 'semiosis', once etymologically the suffix '-ation' in 'signification' stands precisely for the concept of action, so as 'signification' means something like 'sign in action'. Secondly, yet 'signification' still sounds technical in English, following the ethics of philosophical terminology proposed by Peirce, that same word helps us to avoid the ambiguities surrounding the more ordinary term 'meaning'. Anyway, even the semantic intersection between 'signification' and 'meaning' is further solved using the word 'semanturgy' as the way in which the concept of signification is understood in that radicalization of Peirce's semiotics: the core of the concept of semanturgy can be grasped by saying that it attempt to describe the many historical and semiotic processes through which we produce and reproduce sense for individual and collective human life into the world we inhabit. That world, however, is not the purely physical world, but our world mediated by culture, conceived through the concept of semiosphere. In short, semiosis as signification, and signification as semanturgy, which is only undertaken within some semiosphere.

Taking into account that general conceptual outline, we can begin to understand why the metaphysics of signification furnishes us with a much more empirically adequate picture of the thought-language-world relation than, until recently, the idealized, reductionist, limited, and thus distorted image stemming from the horizon represented by the metaphysics of being. Claiming a higher empirical adequacy (beware: not truth as correspondence) to the metaphysics of signification over the metaphysics of being points to the acceptance of a kind of naturalization of metaphysics, but in another direction than that concept is

currently understood.²⁰ In more intuitive and direct terms, the concepts of sense and meaning are more fundamental to addressing the complexity of the thought-language-world relation than the concepts of being and truth, provided we do not use that latter concepts to understand those of sense and meaning (as usually it is done), but rather handle them through the semiotic concepts just pinpointed above, beginning with the concept of signification. From that standpoint, the multiple possible forms the thought-language-world relation historically assumes are accounted for as processes of signification in which a construction of sense and meaning for human life in the world takes place, and no longer, as in the metaphysics of being, a relation whose primary and “natural” purpose (or final goal) would be to achieve definitive knowledge of reality in itself.

Two mutually dependent hypotheses delineate the broader methodological-conceptual scope of the metaphysics of signification in contrast to that marked by the metaphysics of being. The first of these is precisely the need to consider the thought-language-world relation as prior to the related spheres. The first consequence of this priority is that the historically contextualized meanings of the related spheres can only emerge from their relation. Another consequence of this priority of the relation is the need to reject comprehensive realist or anti-realist positions, that is, those that seek to establish the anteriority of one of the related spheres over the others. To abbreviate, let us call this *the hypothesis of the priority of the relation*. The second of these foundational hypotheses is the impossibility of reducing the historical polysemy of the concepts of thought, language, and world, respectively, to the concepts of reason and intellect, of declarative discourse and objective reality. From this reduction – which began to appear neatly as a distortion from the mid-19th century onwards – arises the idealized and limited image of the thought-language-world relation as a special type of truth-based and cognitive relation between an abstract and disembodied mind and an objective reality that would be expressed in declarative statements, whose end, ultimately, would be taking the form of a definitive theoretical explanation of the world. Again, for brevity, let us call this *the hypothesis of the polysemy of the relation*.

From these two mutually dependent hypotheses and their first consequences, the metaphysics of signification presents a horizon in which the thought-language-world relation must be understood and investigated historically through a pluralistic, perspectivist, and contextualist stance. In short, the metaphysics of signification just makes explicit the general outlines of a horizon symbolized by diverse philosophical, scientific, and artistic perspectives that have, in various ways, critiqued the traditional horizon of the metaphysics of being since the 18th century, perspectives that have multiplied exponentially since the mid-19th century. The

²⁰ The current proposal to naturalize metaphysics differs from the way this concept is here used in at least two directions. First, the debate takes for granted the equivalence between metaphysics and ontology, so that naturalizing metaphysics means naturalizing ontology. By contrast, so to speak, the metaphysics of signification naturalizes metaphysics precisely in separating metaphysics from ontology. The second difference is precisely in what scientific field these two naturalizations are carried out: the naturalization of ontology mainly goes in the direction of “fusing” ontology with physics. Otherwise, the naturalization of metaphysics (through the metaphysics of signification) goes in the direction of “fusing” metaphysics with human sciences and of defending a (meta-)ontological pluralism, according to which there are many equally legitimate ways of making ontology. For a detailed account of that conception of meta-ontological pluralism, see DE ALMEIDA, 2026. That way of thinking metaphysics converges with the recent field of research and debate shared by anthropology and philosophy and generally called ‘comparative metaphysics’, although encompassing that field into a wider horizon. For interesting and important perspectives and conceptions on and in that field, see CHARBONNIER-SALMON-SKAFISH, 2017.

pluralism, perspectivism, and contextualism that mark the emergence and consolidation of this broader alternative horizon of the metaphysics of signification in the last two centuries have in common the fact that they adopt various types of classical skeptical arguments as starting points for understanding the multiple forms of the thought-language-world relation. *These types of skeptical arguments are none other than the so-called tropes of Aenesidemus and Agrippa.* Let us start to see how the metaphysics of signification can fulfill that process of assimilation that began to be more visible two centuries ago, but goes back to the ingenious work of Montaigne.

3.2 Aenesidemus' and Agrippa's tropes as modalities of our relations with the objects of the world

Among other reasons (which will become clearer later), the retrieval and incorporation of Aenesidemus' and Agrippa's tropes into the horizon of the metaphysics of signification is generally due to the fact that the two hypotheses mentioned above intend to tackle the numerous aporias generated by the forms of realism and antirealism that animated and still animate the horizon of the metaphysics of being, as well as the aporias generated by the growing empirical inadequacy of the idealized, simplified, and even distorted image of the thought-language-world relation generated by reductionist conceptions of both the related spheres and the relation itself. *In general, the metaphysics of signification has an elective affinity with the skeptical stance contained in the tropes of Aenesidemus and Agrippa because both are laid down from the critiques of the presumptions and the limitations of the metaphysics of being initiated in Parmenides.* But it is necessary to move beyond the level of generalities to show in detail how this heterodox reading and positive incorporation of skeptical tropes into the horizon of the metaphysics of signification is possible.

To begin the discussion, it is necessary to provide a summary presentation of these types of skeptical arguments and their general significance for our outlook. There are several ways in which Aenesidemus' tropes are presented in their general sense. The form that will be presented here is already in convergence with the heterodox perspective of rereading and appropriating these tropes within the horizon of the metaphysics of signification.

From and within that horizon, but also closely following the way they are presented by Sextus, *the general meaning of Aenesidemus' ten tropes can be interpreted as modalities of differentiation of phenomena.* Given the *intrinsically relational sense* of the concept of phenomenon, the tropes can be interpreted as ***modalities of the relation intercurrent in the appearance of something to someone.*** If we understand that the relation of something appearing to someone constitutes the most basic meaning among the multiple meanings of the concept of *experience*, then *Aenesidemus' tropes present themselves as descriptions of the modalities of our experience of the world.* In short: *the fundamental conceptual scheme at play in the tropes involves the relation between phenomenon, appearance, and experience.*

According to the understanding of the notion of phenomenon present since at least Heraclitus and, above all, Parmenides, skeptics assume that our opinions or beliefs are directly conditioned by the way things appear to us, that is, by the way phenomena appear. Such opinions or beliefs are generally represented by declarative statements that epistemologically are judgments in the form 'S is P' or 'S is not P'. *Finally, as modes of differentiation of phenomena, tropes show that there is no way to find a criterion to decide whether something really is such or not such beyond appearances and experience.* Consequently, *as modes that show up the differences in the*

way things appear, tropes become ways to suspend judgment in relation to conflicting conceptions about the true nature of objects beyond their way of appearing to us. In this critical role in relation to ontological conceptions belonging to the horizon of the metaphysics of being, Aenesidemus' tropes acquire their traditional negative and epistemological meaning, as they establish limitations for the claims of universality and necessity of these very same ontological conceptions.

However, within the horizon of the metaphysics of signification, as modalities of our experience of the world, Aenesidemus' tropes are **general meta-ontological conditions** that determine the possible meanings of the ontological concepts and conceptions through which we organize our experience of the world.²¹ This interpretation still needs further clarification. For now, it suffices to clarify the conception of tropes as meta-ontological conditions through a provocative analogy: instead of an experience organized through the twelve Kantian categories of understanding, within the horizon of the metaphysics of signification, **Aenesidemus' ten tropes are incorporated as ten modalities that determine the most general conditions of experience as the most basic space-time of the thought-language-world relation.** Just as Kant "subordinates" ontology to an analytics of concepts (categories) and principles (schematism), analogously metaphysics of signification constitutes itself as a meta-ontology that set up the general conditions of possibility of the multiple ontologies, conditions including Aenesidemus' tropes as modalities that configure any phenomenal relation happening between us and with world, and thus being general conditions of possibility (as sense conditions) of the multiple conceptions through which we organize our experience of the world. From that standpoint, these tropes become the foundation for the constitution of a phenomenology that is more anthropologically relevant and more empirically adequate than those of Hegel, Husserl, and even that roughly sketched by Peirce, who was also intending to incorporate some general skeptical concepts and arguments, since he was attempting to open another methodological path critical to that laid down by Descartes.

Once displayed the general lines of this heterodox rereading, here is the order of presentation of Aenesidemus' tropes as found in Sextus' *Outlines* (P. H. I 36-163): (1) the difference in the way phenomena appear for human beings and for other animals; (2) the difference in the way phenomena appear to different human beings; (3) the difference in the way phenomena appear to different senses of the same person; (4) the difference in the way phenomena appear according to the variation in the psychophysical dispositions of different people or of the same person at different moments in their life; (5) the differences in the way phenomena appear according to the space-temporal variations of objects; (6) the differences in the way phenomena appear according to the mixture of their parts or with other objects; (7) the difference in the way phenomena appear according to the variation of their sensible qualities and their shape; (8) the difference in the way phenomena appear according to the variation in our relations with them or among themselves; (9) the difference in the way phenomena appear according to their frequency or rarity; (10) the difference in the way phenomena appear according to the diversity of postures, customs, conventions, beliefs and conceptions of certain communities.²²

²¹ They can also be seen as *meta-epistemological conditions*, as already suggested by Fogelin, for instance, but for the sake of brevity and to maintain de focus on the centrality of ontology in the metaphysics of being, I will set aside the discussion of this aspect of Aenesidemus' and Agrippa's tropes.

²² For a detailed treatment of Aenesidemus' tropes comparing their three different ancient sources, see ANNAS/BARNES, 1983.

Having made this basic characterization of Aenesidemus' ten tropes, let us move on to Agrippa's five tropes.²³ In the case of these latter, there is much controversy both regarding their general meaning and their order. We will have to return to such a field of controversy in the next part of that essay. As in the case of Aenesidemus' tropes, they will be characterized here in their general form and significance already in the light of the metaphysics of signification, postponing the arguments in their defense. First, as Sextus suggested, these tropes both involve, complement, and extend Aenesidemus' tropes. From the point of view here at stake, this indicates that Agrippa's tropes do not only remain at the level of sensible objects (*ta phainomena*) but also encompass intelligible objects. In general, intelligible objects (*ta noêta*) are conceived in the philosophical tradition from the Greeks onwards through two characteristics. The first characteristic is that they are conceived as those objects that go beyond sensible objects, whether this transcendence is conceived through rupture and difference (as in the case of Parmenides and Plato) or through continuity and complementarity (as in the case of Democritus, Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics). The second characteristic is that they are only accessible through some kind of action of abstract thought (*nous*, intellect, reason, etc.). *When extended to the domain of intelligible objects, Agrippa's tropes present themselves as **modalities of our relations with objects in general**, whether sensible or intelligible.*

Secondly, Agrippa's tropes set forth the different modalities of grounding our ontological conceptions about sensible and/or intelligible objects. Since these modalities of grounding always reveal some kind of partiality or incompleteness, such features also affect the truth-claim inherent in the very assertion of our ontological conceptions about objects. This partiality or incompleteness represents a devastating critique of the claims of ontological conceptions belonging to the horizon of the metaphysics of being, since, in this horizon, there can only be one true ontological conception according to the presupposed notion of truth as identity or as complete correspondence between thinking and being. By contrast and as we will see in the next part of this essay, *when incorporated into the horizon of the metaphysics of signification, Agrippa's tropes become meta-ontological sense conditions, for that horizon operates with notion of partial or pragmatic truth*, a "weaker" and broader notion of truth than that systematized by Tarski, and in which the partiality and incompleteness of our ontological conceptions is a starting point in the process of their possible enhancement and not a defect which we would have to avoid at all costs.

²³ Although the presentation of the five tropes immediately follows the presentation of those of Aenesidemus, it is important to remember that Sextus does not mention Agrippa as the one who systematized them. Such a mention is made only by Diogenes Laertius. Instead of what we conventionally call 'Agrippa's tropes', Sextus speaks only of 'the younger skeptics' (*hoi neôteroi skeptikoi*), that is, those closest to the time he is writing and subsequent to Aenesidemus (P. H. I, 164). This point is important because, when we look at Diogenes Laertius' text in which he presents these tropes immediately after those of Aenesidemus, we find literally the following expression "those around Agrippa" (*hoi de peri Agrippan*. D. L. IX, 88), suggesting that the five tropes were systematized by various skeptical philosophers. This historical detail is of great importance for understanding that the five tropes were appropriated and acquired a certain methodological configuration after Aenesidemus, perhaps within the circle of skeptics gathered around Agrippa. However, as several modern scholars already have pointed out (but the first seminal and detailed work is that one of Anthony Long, first launched in 1978), these tropes are already present in the work of Aristotle, playing a decisive role in the conceptual and argumentative framework of the second part of Book IV of the *Metaphysics*. See LONG, 2006, and CODE, 2010.

Once the perspective from which we will approach Agrippa's tropes in the next part of this essay has been briefly clarified, let us proceed to their enumeration, *partially* following Fogelin's proposed order, which will be discussed later. According to that proposal here already adapted, these tropes should be divided into two groups:²⁴

(A) First group: the relativity of our conceptions about objects – either sensible or intelligible ones – gives rise to disagreement between different conceptions.

(1) The trope of relativity: be they sensible or intelligible, objects can only appear through the relations of those who perceive or think about them.

(2) The trope of disagreement: given the relativity of sensible or intelligible objects, so as these objects present themselves in different ways to different people and groups, it follows that there will be disagreement between them regarding the intrinsic nature of these objects (their being in itself) beyond the way they present themselves. This disagreement of conceptions is presented in the form of declarative statements in disjunctive form 'S is P' or 'S is not P'.

Two possibilities follow: (2.1) one can suspend judgment on whether 'S is P' or 'S is not P'; or (2.2) one can try to find some criterion (ground/justification) to determine which side of the controversy is correct.

(B) Second group: if someone decides on possibility (2.2), then there will be three possibilities to set up some criterion to decide which of the contradictory conceptions of the disagreeing disjunction is correct:

(3) The trope of infinite regression: the first possibility is to establish a superior criterion taken as a premise, and ground from it one of the disagreeing conceptions against the other. But such a premise will have to be accepted as true by itself or derived from another superior one. If it is not accepted by itself and is derived from another, then the same process can be repeated indefinitely, virtually regressing to infinity.

(4) The trope of circularity: the second possibility is trying to set down a superior criterion taken as a premise and derive from it one of the disagreeing conceptions. If this premise is not accepted as true by itself, it is possible to resort to some premise that grounds it. But instead of the latter being taken as superior (to avoid infinite regression), another premise of equal level is postulated. Thus, a mutual foundation is formed between premises, without preventing the possibility of both being equally false.

²⁴ See FOGELIN 1994, esp. chap. 6; see also HANKINSON, 1995, chap. 10. The pioneer philosophical and exegetical effort to set up the argumentative order of Agrippa's tropes is due to Jonathan Barnes, though excluding (for reasons to be seen and discussed in the next part of this essay) the trope of the relativity. See BARNES, 1990. For another important accurate analysis of these tropes, see SIENKIEWICZ, 2019.

(5) The trope of hypothesis: the third possibility is to establish some superior premise to derive one side of the disagreement, but taking such a premise only as hypothetically true. In this case, however, nothing prevents another premise from being taken as hypothetically true, though for grounding the opposite conception.

Leaving many things to be further discussed in the second part of that essay, we can propose a kind of ending to this part. Thus, from the most general and intuitive point of view possible, the metaphysics of signification assumes these classical skeptical tropes as a kind of conceptual background understood as a set of conditions of possibility both for the existence and for the correct understanding of the plurality of forms and perspectives that the thought-language-world relation historically assumes. Consequently, instead of the relation of dependence by opposition or negation between the metaphysics of being and classical skepticism, the relation between the metaphysics of signification and skepticism is one of dependence by incorporation of what these tropes describe. These tropes, as we shall see in the second part of that essay, should be considered as fundamental sense conditions for the multiple historical forms of signification processes in which the thought-language-world relation is configured. Sense conditions contrast directly with truth conditions, which are those conditions in which the thought-language-world relation supposedly attains the truth of certainty and definitive knowledge of something. *Thus, so paradoxical as it may sound, the metaphysics of signification is a type of skeptical metaphysics when compared to the dogmatism of the metaphysics of being.* More specifically, against the dogmatic image of the thought-language-world relation – since idealized, disembodied, decontextualized, reductionist, and limited – pervading most philosophies placed within the horizon of the metaphysics of being, *the metaphysics of signification seeks to present the skeptical image of this same relation* – because, starting from skeptical tropes, it necessarily presents itself as an empirically plural, perspectival, partial, and historically situated image.

Taken as modalities of our relations with ourselves and with the world we inhabit, Aenesidemus' tropes make possible another kind of phenomenological analysis of our experience as the space-time of the thought-language-world relation. Now, we have just glimpsed the possibility of understanding Agrippa's tropes as modalities of a wider range of relations, including that kind concerning intelligible objects and the ways we have to ground our ways of thinking them. The task of the next part of this essay will be to show how that heterodox interpretation makes these tropes convergent with the two grounding hypotheses of the metaphysics of signification (namely, the priority and the polysemy ones) through the priority that Aenesidemus' and Agrippa's tropes concede to the trope of relativity, and to the key-role given to the understanding of the plurality of conflicting stances on some topics. Finally, I must show how both Aenesidemus' and Agrippa's tropes can be interpreted as meta-ontological sense conditions for our ontological conceptions, so that these tropes could count as a constitutive part of the arguments in favor of the metaphysics of signification.

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