

TWO TRADITIONS OF MODERN EPISTEMOLOGY

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ÖZET

Modern Epistemolojinin İki Geleneği

Felsefe, varlık, gerçeklik ve doğru bilgiyi araştırır; fakat Descartes'la başlayan modern felsefenin temel ilgi alanı varlık ve gerçeklikten çok, doğru bilgi olmuştur. Bu anlayış, doğru bilginin imkanını, kaynağını, kapsamını ve ölçütlerini sorgulayarak, doğru bilginin temelindeki en kesin ve apaçık olan ilkenin ortaya çıkartılmasını kendine amaç edinmiştir. Bu çalışma, modern epistemolojinin iki geleneğini ele alarak, bunları bazı yönlerden eleştirmeyi amaçlamıştır.

Birinci geleneği oluşturan Descartesçi epistemolojiye göre, doğru bilgiye ulaşmak için, en kesin ve apaçık olanı doğrudan bir kavrayışla ortaya koymak gerekir. Bilginin temelindeki ilk ilkeyi araştıran kartezyen bilgi kuramına temelci bilgi kuramı denilmektedir. Temeldeki ilk ilke en açık ve seçik bir kavrayışla ortaya konulduktan sonra, diğer bilgiler, ilk ilkenin kesinliğinden yola çıkarak elde edilir. Temelci bilgi kuramı Descartes sonrası modern kıta felsefesini de etkileyerek, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant ve Husserl gibi birçok felsefeci tarafından da savunulmuştur.

Modern epistemolojinin ikinci geleneği ise, temelci geleneğe karşı çıkan Hegel tarafından öne sürülen anti-temelci bilgi kuramıdır. Hegel'e göre, doğru bilgi en temeldeki ilkeden kalkarak elde edilemez, çünkü en temeldekini doğrulayacak veya yanlışlayacak bir başka ilkenin olması gerekir. Bu nedenle, bilgi bir tür durağan konumda değil, tam aksine bilgi

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kullanımdaki devingen süreçtir; çünkü bilgi, Mutlak Tin'in kendisini gerçekleştirme devinimindeki süreçte ortaya çıkar. Böylece doğru bilgi temelci yaklaşımla ancak kendisinin bir kısmını ortaya koyar. Doğru bilginin tümelliği, Mutlak'ın kendisini fark etme sürecini veren bir sistemde anlaşılabilir.

Modern epistemolojinin iki geleneği de çeşitli yönlerle açıklandıktan sonra, çalışmamız bu iki geleneği birçok açıdan eleştiriye tâbi tutmaktadır.

Philosophy is concerned with the knowledge of truth, reality, and being, but a central preoccupation of philosophers, since Descartes, has been together with the conditions of knowing. This has led to a desire to determine the limits of human knowledge and to examine the foundations of knowledge. Here, I will explain and discuss two traditions of modern epistemology: 1: The foundational theory of knowledge, especially in Descartes, and 2: the anti-foundational theory of knowledge in Hegel.

The first tradition of modern epistemology, the foundational theory of knowledge, is also named as a *grounded epistemology* or *Cartesian epistemology*. Descartes takes the foundations upon himself to examine only the first principle of knowledge. Namely, since Descartes, Cartesian philosophers and other philosophers have examined the foundation of human knowledge. They tried to show what its foundations and limits are. The foundational theory of knowledge affirms that "the certainty of the position as a whole depends on its initial premise or set of premises. The latter functions as a ground of foundation from which the position in question can be derived and upon which its claim to certain knowledge rests"¹. So, true knowledge depends on its initial axioms like geometrical proof. Unlike geometry, the ground or the foundation in Cartesian epistemology can be shown to be true. This form of epistemology was the predominant one in modern continental epistemology, such as in the philosophy of Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, and Husserl.

On the other hand, the second tradition of modern epistemology, the anti-foundational theory of knowledge, is not grounded on the first initial principle, and rejects self-justifying epistemology.

I. The foundational theory of the human knowledge:

Many modern philosophers have inquired into the limits of human knowledge, so the limitation of knowledge is the result of a basic view of the

¹ Rockmore, T. *Hegel's Circular Epistemology*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986. p. 490.

Critical philosophy. According to most modern philosophers, before one wants to attempt to know about God, the essence of being, etc., he or she must first investigate the capacity of knowledge itself in order to see whether it is able to accomplish such an attempt. Descartes is the first seeker of the ground or the foundation of true knowledge in modern philosophy:

We should attend only to those objects of which our mind seems capable of having certain and indubitable cognition.²

I think that Descartes' whole philosophy depends on this rule which tells us that all knowledge must be certain and evident cognition. Descartes sees that the problem of method is identical with the problem as to the nature and limits of knowledge, since all men, as rational beings, are alike in the power of perceiving rational connection. But all are unlike in the knowledge of method. Therefore, for Descartes, the method is everything in order to have certain and indubitable knowledge. For this reason, Descartes examines the mathematical method since he sees certain, simple and self-evident truth in mathematics. After his examination of the mathematical method, he maintains that intuition is the source of our all knowledge. By intuition Descartes means the intellectual cognition of the simplest and the most direct kind.

By 'intuition' I do not mean the fluctuating testimony of the senses or the deceptive judgment of the imaginations as it botches things together, but the conception of a clear and attentive mind, which is so easy and distinct that there can be no room for doubt about what we are understanding. Alternatively, and this comes to the same thing, intuition is the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason. Because it is simpler, it is more certain than deduction, though deduction, as we noted above, is not something a man can perform wrongly. Thus everyone can mentally intuit that he exists, that he is thinking, that a triangle is bounded by just three lines, and a sphere by a single surface, and the like³.

To determine the nature of intuition is really to determine the nature of consciousness or mind, and this determination of the nature of method gives us simple and innate ideas. Innate ideas are not derived from the senses but from the mind itself. Therefore, for Descartes, the intellectual consciousness is the starting point of all knowledge. On the other hand, his

² Descartes, R., "Rules for the Direction of the Mind", *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, Vol. I and II. New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988. p. 10.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

creation of true knowledge is clearness and distinctness. What is the most distinct and clear knowledge? If there is knowledge which is clear and distinct, it must be the most fundamental knowledge because it is the most indubitable and certain knowledge. For Descartes this kind of knowledge can be found in the knowledge of "*I think therefore I am*" or "*Cogito ergo sum*."

The notion of certainty brings us to what is probably the most discussed aspect of Descartes' conception of knowledge. The philosopher, for Descartes, is the seeker after wisdom of understanding, one who *supra vulpus sperere cupit* desires a level of knowledge that is above the ordinary⁴.

Descartes uses the Latin concept *Lumen naturale, lumen nature*, and *lux rationis* (natural light, light of nature, and light of reason) in order to describe the mind's innate cognitive powers. For him, human mind has natural light to see the most clear and distinct idea which is innate idea. Everyone has this power, but he or she has to open his or her mind to natural light and to the right method.

Descartes' purpose is to provide a methodology for guiding the intellect in its quest for the truth. The essentials of the method are stated in Rule Five:

The whole method consists entirely in the ordering and arranging of the objects on which we must concentrate our mind's eye if we are to discover some truth. We shall be following this method exactly if we are to discover some truth. We shall be following this method exactly if we first reduce complicated and obscure propositions step by step to simpler ones, and then, starting with the intuition of the simplest ones of all, try to ascend through the same steps to a knowledge of all the rest⁵.

In order to attain Descartes' first certain, clear, and distinct knowledge of "*Cogito Ergo Sum*", Descartes takes twelve doubtful steps in his first meditation:

1. Descartes rejects the testimony of the senses.
2. However, the doubt is limited in scope, for example, I am sitting by the fire.
3. If it is possible that I am now dreaming that I am sitting by the fire.

⁴ Ibid., Vol. II, p. 21.

⁵ Ibid., Vol. I, p. 20.

4. But dreams are presumably composed of elements originally drawn from real life, just as paintings of imaginary objects are made up of elements based on reality.

5. Perhaps a painter may produce a wholly imaginary creation.

6. However, this wholly imaginary creation must conform to certain very simple and universal categories, for example, extension, shape, number, etc.

7. Therefore, whether I am asleep or awake, geometric forms are always the same, the simplest and the most general things. For example, two and three added together are five in a dream and while awake.

8. Could no God make me go wrong every time?

9. Maybe there is no God, and I am created out of a series of coincidents.

10. Therefore, there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not be properly raised.

11. In the closing stages of the meditations, Descartes suspends all his previous beliefs.

12. After suspending all his beliefs, he proposes that there is no malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning who deceives him. Therefore, the whole external world may be a sham. Descartes doubts until he manages to find his first firm foothold, the proposition *I exist*⁶.

The critical point about Cartesian doubt is that it is essentially a means to an end, it is a mechanism for the production of the first principles. That the point of the whole exercise is the search for first principles is made clear by Descartes from the outset of the meditation. "I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life time, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last⁷. Descartes continues this idea in his writing as in the following: "...by the way in which I discovered them, namely by rejecting everything in which I could discover the least occasions for doubt, for it is certain that principles which it was impossible to reject in this way which one attentively considered them, are the clearest and most evident that the human mind can know."⁸

The starting point of Descartes' philosophy is the realization *I think, therefore, I exist*. Or even the better known Latin formulation *Cogito ergo*

⁶ See Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Laurence J. Lafleur. New York, The Liberal Arts Press, Inc., 1980.

⁷ Descartes, R. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 183.

sum appears in the principles of philosophy and in the Latin translation of the Discourse, but this proposition is stated most clearly in the Meditations:

I have just convinced myself that nothing whatsoever existed in the world, that there was no sky, no earth, no minds, and no bodies; have I not thereby convinced myself that I did not exist? Not at all; without doubt I existed if I was convinced for even if I thought anything. Even though there may be a deceiver or some sort, very powerful and very tricky, who bends all his efforts to keep me perpetually deceived, there can be no slightest doubt that I exist, since he deceives me; and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never make me be nothing as long as I think that I am some thing. Thus, after having thought well on this matter, and after examining all things with care, I must finally conclude and maintain that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true every time that I pronounce it or conceive it in my mind⁹.

Therefore, the proposition "I think therefore I exist" -Descartes accepts without scruple-is the first principle of philosophy which Descartes seeks, but this proposition does not give the entire system of knowledge as the first starting point for Descartes because of my existence or I am not a perfect creature, therefore my existence needs a perfect existence in order to avoid further doubts. For this reason, there can be no reliable knowledge until after God's existence is proved. The existence of God makes my fundamental innate ideas have some foundation of truth.

For Descartes, the proposition *I think, therefore I exist* must depend upon the existence of God. If there is a God who is omnipotent, then there must be an external world. Namely, Descartes goes from self to God and then to the external knowledge.

For Descartes, the certainty and the truth of all knowledge depends on my knowledge of the true God. If all knowledge depends on God, then can I know the premises without first knowing God? Descartes says in the fifth meditation that "And thus I recognize very clearly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends solely on the knowledge of the true God, so that before I knew him I could not know any other thing perfectly"¹⁰.

Therefore, in the theory of Cartesian knowledge, there is a circle. The Cartesian circle occurs between the fundamental self, which is the most clear and distinct knowledge of Cogito, and the knowledge of God. Furthermore, the foundation of knowledge based on indubitable self-

⁹ Descartes, R. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, p. 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

awareness which is most clear and distinct. Although I see that there is a Cartesian circle of the foundations of knowledge, some think that Descartes escapes from his circle in his explanation of human memory. Therefore, it is not circular but it is over-ambitious.

Traditional Cartesian fundamental knowledge of ideas can be distinguished according to origin and distinctness bearing on their nature.

1. Innate ideas are derived not from the senses but from the mind itself.

2. Adventitious ideas come to us from external objects¹¹.

In the Cartesian tradition, innate ideas are very important. There are, according to the theory of innate ideas, certain conceptions of universal principles and non-sensory objects which are innate in the mind either exists before birth or exist chronologically before sensory experience. Therefore, they are a priori, and they provide the basis for all scientific knowledge. The existence of God establishes the basis for innate ideas; so they are clear, distinct, necessary, sufficient, and true. The argument of innate ideas as the basis for all scientific knowledge, I think, is the Cartesian foundationalism in the general sense; it has been discussed by many philosophers after Descartes. For example, John Locke attacks the theory of innate ideas in the first book of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

In summary, the foundationalist aspects of the Cartesian doctrine of knowledge based on the most clear and distinct idea (I think that it is an innate idea) of *Cogito Ergo Sum*. And everything started from this proposition. Therefore, the human mind or the subjectivity becomes the central point of all discussions and philosophies. The starting point of foundationalism is raised from the foundation of the human knowledge.

Therefore, Descartes begins from unproved and unprovable assumptions through a method which has been found widely useful in modern science. The Cartesian position is almost always understood or based on the concept of the cogito, which functions as an absolute foundation, since the cogito bases knowledge through the concept of application of man's rational faculty, the correctness of his perceptions can be guaranteed. For this reason, Descartes begins with the standpoint of the self, and his intention is to provide a position based on self-subsistent and independent reason. The rationalistic theory of knowledge has its basis on reason. For Rationalists such as Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza, knowing is independent from knower, i.e., object and subject are two different things. For them, the truth of reason is the certain truth. For example, " for Leibniz

¹¹ Descartes, R. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I, p. 303.

the truths of reason are true in all possible world"¹². The main idea of the rationalist is that one can be sure only of truth in reason. In other words, the certainty of truth lies in a priori and analytic statements. For Leibniz, both mathematics and metaphysics are a priori, and all a priori propositions are analytic. In rationalism the problem is to explain the knowledge of the material world if the certainty of truth belongs to reason.

Foundationalist philosophers seek the limits of human knowledge and the foundation of knowledge before proceeding with the construction of the edifice. Starting with Descartes, Locke also saw the foundation of his purpose to inquire into the origin, certainty, and extent of human knowledge. Moreover, for Berkeley, philosophy consists solely of the study of wisdom and truth. However, Hume denies the possibility of explaining the ultimate principles of human knowledge, although he has some kind of foundation for the sciences. Kant, influenced by Hume, undertakes a critique of the faculty of human knowledge. Namely, after Descartes, as I stated above, many philosophers inquired into the limits and foundation of human knowledge in very different senses.

According to foundationalists, unless a limit was drawn, there would be nothing to prevent those metaphysical flights of fancy which, from time to time, have showered discredit upon the activity of philosophy. Fear of metaphysical extravagance has led many philosophers to apply a limit to the wandering of the human mind. For example, Kant holds that experience can provide the limits of human knowledge.

II. Anti-foundational aspects of Hegel's philosophy

Hegel rejects the foundational approach of previous philosophers. What are the consequences of a non-foundational approach to the problems of philosophy and of the sciences? It is necessary to understand why Hegel rejects the foundational approach. In order to understand, we should look at some of his conclusions. Hegel is the first philosopher to question the intelligibility of a critique, and to reject the assumption that the foundations of human knowledge can be examined as a precursor to their active employment. Hegel sees human knowledge as an activity to be described, as it appears, rather than as a passive object to be examined in isolation from its content. Therefore, Hegel's method is descriptive.

Hegel maintains that consciousness stands in an immediate relation to its object. Therefore, the purpose of the introduction to the phenomenology is to break down the artificial distinctions between knowledge and

¹² Quine, W. V. "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", *Philosophical Review*, 60, 20-43. January, 1951. p. 20.

its objects¹³. For Hegel, critical philosophy involves a distinction between the means of knowing and what is known. Therefore, foundational epistemology conceives of an external distinction between means (cognition) and ends (knowledge). According to Hegel, foundational epistemology has failed to grasp how knowledge is bound up with certain activities. Therefore, Hegel's criticism of foundational theory of knowledge ushers in a new concept of knowledge. If knowledge is bound to performance, then our examination of the faculties of cognition is impossible. This is the fundamental distinction between Kant and Hegel. Kant thinks that cognition is an active process. However, Hegel maintains that knowledge is creative, and cannot be assessed apart from performance. For Kant, the faculty of cognition can be examined separately¹⁴. For Hegel, knowledge is bound to performance.

Hegel rejects both the task to examine knowledge before using it and the tool as a metaphor, since knowledge must be used to examine knowledge, and the task to examine knowledge before using it is paradoxical. It is like "waiting to know before one knows" and "an attempt to swim without going in the water" or "wanting to learn to swim before venturing into the water."¹⁵ For Hegel this amounts to knowing before you know, since the faculty of cognition and the analysis of knowledge are both part of *knowing*.

For Hegel, knowledge can be examined only in use since knowledge is a process, and not a stage. He denies only the possibility of a preliminary examination. The analysis and criticism of certain concepts must not precede their use; however, they must accompany it. Hegel thinks that if knowledge is bound up with its use or its performance, then with an examination of the faculties of cognition as a preliminary to their use, it is impossible, I think, that this could be the basic difference between Kant and Hegel. With this criticism, I think that Hegel is right because without exercise, performance and use, the theory of knowledge is one-sided. Here, the analogy which is an attempt to swim without going in the water is very clear. In order to have knowledge of an object, I believe, knowledge must accompany both with the faculties of cognition and performance. "Everything we know must come before us in a living phase of experience."¹⁶

¹³ Hegel says in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* that "where knowledge finds itself, where Notion corresponds to object and object to Notion", translated by A.V. Miller. Foreword by J.N. Findlay. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 51.

¹⁴ See Kant's, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman K. Smith. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1965.

¹⁵ Hegel, G.W.F., *Encyclopedia*, translated by William Wallace, Second Edition Clarendon Press, Oxford, Section I0.

¹⁶ Hegel, G.W.F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 591.

For Hegel, the critique of the foundation of knowledge is circular. This circle arises from critical methods. For this reason, Hegel thinks that from the standpoint of philosophy, the purpose of a critique is to determine whether consciousness can ever take hold of the absolute. Therefore, knowledge of the absolute is not determined by the application of a critique. The question is not whether absolute knowledge lies beyond the limits of human attainment but, for Hegel, the absolute is present all the time; therefore science knows without hesitations. and "the beginning must be an absolute"¹⁷.

As it was said before, critical philosophy assumes the intervention of the means of knowing between consciousness and what it knows. Hegel develops this idea. For Hegel, the absolute is not something apart from the activities which possess the knowledge. Therefore, critical philosophy is faulted for showing that a theory of knowledge is dependent upon the assumption of subjective conditions which act as an intervening medium between the knower and the absolute. All knowledge is ultimately subjective as shown by the Kantian principle of the synthetic unity of apperception. According to Hegel, absolute knowledge is bound up with any system of knowledge, and the critical philosophy presupposes knowledge of the absolute.

From Descartes to Kant, the principle of doubt required no justification since Descartes maintains that the existence of Cogito is guaranteed by the ability to doubt. Moreover, Kant accepts that nothing is more certain than the *I think*. The knowing subject possesses within itself the laws of reason. Hegel's critique of the foundational aspect is the *knowing before you know*. In other words, the inquiry of the reality of human knowledge, for Hegel, cannot take place without presupposition in the foundational approach of epistemology. For this reason, Hegel gives his alternative to the foundational approach which is to describe knowledge as it appears within a given system. By 'system', Hegel means any organized or rule-governed practice found in the sciences, art, religion, and even philosophy. There is no knowledge outside of the system. For this reason, Hegel maintains that the truth is only realized in the form of a system. Hegel thinks that in the foundational approach of epistemology, there is a partial truth but not the whole truth. For Hegel, whole truth can be found in the system. And the absolute knowledge manifests itself in the various systems of knowledge. "...the science [knowledge] exhibits itself as a *circle* returning

¹⁷ Hegel, G.W.F., *Science of Logic*, translated by A.V. Miller, Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press, 1990, p. 70.

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Alyhough	56	32	Although
intellegientsia	57	1	intelligentsia
emphasized	63	29	emphasize
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For Hegel, history is teleological; it has a goal; the goal is the realization of freedom. For Hegel, philosophy is the problem of knowledge which is to identify the subject and the object. Therefore, the task of philosophy is to complete the unity of being and thought or the unity of the identity of subject and object.

All previous philosophies attempt to solve the unity of subject and object, but they all have failed and all are incomplete. For Hegel, they failed because they do not grasp absolute reason. Therefore, philosophy must deal with absolute reason which reorganizes itself. Philosophy looks for absolute truth and historical-philosophical phenomena. For Hegel, there is no method with which to begin as Descartes or the foundationalists maintain; and also there is no a priori notion of philosophy as Kant asserts. For Hegel, philosophy depends only on itself. Reason is the only criterion and philosophical claim, since reason can only reflect on itself. For Hegel, the beginning is just a beginning without any a priori beginning.

Furthermore, the foundational aspect of epistemology has been criticized by critical theorists who maintain that theory is related to critique, practice, social content, and so forth. According to the critical theorists, the Cartesian view makes an absolute claim in epistemology. For example, Descartes makes absolute certainty of the subject as a first principle of everything. According to Horkheimer, the Cartesian view does not have any usefulness. He calls it traditional theory. He says that Descartes takes science and philosophy for the sake of themselves. For Horkheimer, traditional theory is socially irrelevant and critical theory is different from traditional theory. Critical theory takes society as an object. For this reason, critical theory has a relevance with society. Critical theory is concerned with understanding society; therefore, practical theory is useful, and not for itself but for society¹⁹. Like Horkheimer, Habermas also maintains that knowledge and human interest are the same; so, the unity of knowledge and interest proves itself in a dialectic way²⁰.

Rockmore says that "although the modern problem of knowledge, in a different form, is already to be found in Greek thought, the approach to this problem in terms of a ground or a foundation crisis only in the modern tradition.... Certainly since Descartes the problem of whether philosophy can be grounded has become a basic philosophical concern...."²¹ Rockmore maintains that Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* points out two things: The synthesis of different schools and providing certain knowledge against

¹⁹ See Max Horkheimer's *Tradition and Critical Theory*, New York, 1982.

²⁰ Habermas, J. *Knowledge and Human Interest*, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro. Boston, Beacon Press, 1971, pp. 312-315.

²¹ Rockmore, *Hegel's Circular Epistemology*, p. 110.

skepticism. "Descartes can claim that the Cogito can serve as the necessary Archimedean point which will ground or absolutely justify epistemological claim, and will also secure clear and distinct ideas which cannot err...."²² After stating Descartes' foundation of certain knowledge, Rockmore maintains that Fichte and Marx both reject the view that knowledge can be grounded. According to Rockmore, the anti-foundationalist approach is

1. Mostly, epistemology is circular
2. The loss of certainty gives rise to a change in the conception of truth
3. Because of refusing the apodictic, knowledge is a renewed interest in the relation between the process of knowledge and the subject of the process.
4. The criticism and the knowing must be part of the same system of thought development.²³

Rockmore says in his book *Hegel's Circular Epistemology* that Hegel's claim that if philosophy is presuppositionless, it must be circular, is a form of what recently has come to be known as the anti-foundationalist theory of knowledge. Therefore, for Hegel, philosophy begins without foundation, since philosophy cannot justify itself through its deduction from its initial principle, beginning, which is itself not justified, it must be the case that the result of the theory justifies its beginning. Philosophy, which must justify itself in part and in whole, can carry out this process only through a return to itself in the form of a circle. Rockmore maintains that Hegel's doctrine of circularity leads to an anti-foundationalist epistemology.

²² Ibid., p. 111.

²³ Ibid., p. 118.