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The “Syllabus Theological Pendulum”

Abstract.

The Transylvanian Reformed theologians of the late seventeenth century were constrained by Cartesian philosophy and may be said to represent the orthodox theology of contemporary Calvinism. In 1673, at the Synod of Radnót (Iernut),³ János Pósaázi, a Hungarian minister and Principal of the Reformed Theological Seminary, allied himself with Reformed Bishop Mihály Tófeus and presented his *Syllabus* of 76⁴ theses to refute the theology of Cocceius, a famous Cartesian theologian of the Netherlands. Cocceius became known for developing federal (or covenant) theology, based on the rationalistic principles of Descartes, which were questioned by the Dutch Gisbertus Voetius, the famous contemporary orthodox Calvinist thinker of the times. Both Cocceius and Voetius and their successive students were mentors of Pósaázi, and for a whole generation of Transylvanian

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³ Because Transylvania was long part of Hungary, both Romanian and Hungarian place names are in usage today. In this paper, Hungarian names are used, followed by the Romanian name in parenthesis.

⁴ The book seems mistaken. There are only 74, not 76 altogether, as assertions nr. LXXIV and nr. LXXV and their refutals are missing.



pilgrims who studied in the Low Countries during that century. Pósaquí's Syllabus gained significance amid a theologically relevant controversy, in a historically, as much as a philosophically, crucial moment, in the philosophical milieu of Transylvania specifically and Hungary in general. This historical moment coincides with the Cartesian theory of the conservation of momentum. We can see the discussion of both the Cartesian and the Pascalian ego being dealt with in the philosophical and theological discourse of the time. With Descartes, there developed both a brand-new rationalism and idealism on the one hand and, with Pascal, a metaphysical existentialism and personalism on the other. Both of those orientations – whether directly or indirectly – heavily influenced successive theological developments, especially in the realms of the Reformed churches of both the Netherlands and Hungary, and Transylvania in particular.

Keywords: Reformed orthodoxy, Transylvanian theology, Peregrinatio academica, 17th-century Calvinism, Synod of Radnót (1673), Gisbertus Voetius, Cartesian-Cocceian debates, existentialist theology, cogito argument, grace-centred hermeneutics, rationalism, the Netherlands (Low Countries), Blaise Pascal, János Pósaquí, Mihály Tófeus, Dutch–Hungarian intellectual relations, East–West intellectual transfer, theological pendulum, grace and existence, substance metaphysics

A step away from the idea of the *Cartesian theory* of the conservation of momentum is Newton's pendulum, which justified Descartes's problem. This pendulum also offers a semi-valid example for our research topic.⁵ The principle of operation of the Newton pendulum is simple: it consists of an odd number of metal balls of equal mass, suspended between two-rigid rods. These balls touch each other at rest and are located in the median plane of the two rods. If you lift the first ball at one end and release it, it will hit the row of balls. The last ball at the other end of the row of balls swings out, while the other balls in between seem to remain still. Our description ends here; the further play of forces is no longer relevant from our point of view. However, the part of the demonstration so far exemplifies a process that had begun in the late Middle Ages but culminated, primarily in Transylvania, in the 16th and 17th centuries:

⁵ See: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-physics/#LawsMotiCartConsPrin> (last accessed: 30.05.2024).

the *flow of ideas and their effects was brought about by the practice of peregrinatio academica*, wandering students. Western ideas – consider them the first raised ball of Newton’s pendulum – reached Transylvania, which should be regarded as the last ball of the pendulum – if it is true that the Renaissance, and Europe itself ends at the Black Church in Brassó (Braşov). While having relatively little impact in the intermediate region, these ideas found a serious response in Transylvania.⁶

In this study, first we try to offer an overall presentation and analysis of the historical background of the theological and philosophical debates of Transylvania in the given period, to some extent comparing it with those of the West.

Second, we turn our theological analysis to a relevant aspect of the argumentation of Pósaaházi’s *Syllabus*, proposing a differentiation between the orthodox Calvinist and Cartesian interpretation of theology, which already carries in nucleon the two major orientations of rationalistic idealism and of the existentialist understanding of the Self.

Third, as a conclusion, we ponder briefly on the fact that these Transylvanian arguments and debates unfortunately did not have a larger impact on the development of Western thinking. We consider what other directions those debates might have led to if the Transylvanian arguments had been recognized in the broader ongoing philosophical and theological dialogues of the time. Particularly, we will prove our point by demonstrating that Pósaaházi traced a Cartesian “flaw” in Cocceius and refuted it theologically while not failing to make a philosophical argument along the way. The original Calvinist (and almost Pascalian) and, to some extent in its nucleon, the relational-existentialist treatment of the self is argued in a unique way, not arguing from a mere rationalistic and deistic approach (a trap which the Calvinism of the next centuries could not avoid in the West, although the Eastern/Transylvanian fathers of the Reformed Church could, to some extent). A grace-centred and Revelation-honouring hermeneutics of the self without a substance (or even *two*, as Descartes intended to split the self into two substances of mind and body) of its own cannot fall within the parameters of a rationalistic approach that ignores the *unio mystica cum Christo* principle of both the early Calvin and the Pascal of the seventeenth century. We plan to pursue that track in future articles, to which the present paper serves only as an introduction.

⁶ BEKESI, Imre et al. (ed.) (1993): *Régi és új peregrináció: Magyarok külföldön, külföldiek Magyarországon*. [Old and New Peregrination: Hungarians Abroad and Foreigners in Hungary]. Budapest – Szeged. I–III.

1. The Historical and Intellectual Setting of Transylvania

The Theological Milieu

The training of Transylvanian and Hungarian intellectuals in the early modern period took place almost entirely abroad. This is especially true for the Protestant intelligentsia, since for them there was no institution of higher education within the country due to the aggressiveness of the authorities inspired and influenced by the Habsburgian political and religious efforts of (the Roman Catholic) Counter-Reformation. Thanks to the research of the past decades, a clear picture of the most important tendencies has been compiled about the extent, targets, and numerical proportions of university peregrination, the *peregrinatio academica*, as well as its qualitative characteristics, content components, and the nature of the intellectual processes and concepts learned and acquired during the student years spent abroad.⁷ Until the Reformation had gained ground, about 9,000-9,500 Hungarian students enrolled in foreign universities, of which approximately 2,500 are known to have been Transylvanian. Between 1520 and 1849, we know of the enrolment of nearly 7,500 Transylvanian students, but this number is relative because one student was usually enrolled in several universities. Protestants travelled mainly to Wittenberg, Heidelberg, and Basel, then to the universities of the Low Countries: Leiden, Utrecht, Franeker, Groningen, and Harderwijk. Many of them also went to universities in England, spending a semester at Oxford or Cambridge. In the matricula of a total of 70 European *studium generales* and universities, we can find Hungarian and Transylvanian names alike. The returning young people became the leading intellectuals of Transylvania, pastors, doctors, school rectors, etc.⁸

For a long time, the English university system consisted exclusively of Oxford and Cambridge. These two universities had a monopoly position in England, where no new universality was established until the 19th century. In addition to these two, Hungarian students visited another institution, Gresham College, a non-chartered but extremely prestigious and popular free university, founded in 1597 in accordance with the will of

⁷ SZÖGLI, László (2017): A magyar protestáns peregrináció a 16–18. században [Hungarian Protestant Peregrination in the 16th–18th Centuries]. In: *Gerundium*. VIII, 1. 71–78.

⁸ SZABÓ, Miklós – TONK, Sándor (1992): *University Attendance of Transylvanians in the Early Modern Period. 1521–1700*. Fontes Rerum Scholasticarum IV. Szeged.

Thomas Gresham. In the case of research on the peregrination of Hungarian students in England, university enrolments are not the primary source since Hungarians did not have the money to enrol and could not swear an oath to the Anglican Church. However, the visitor books of the Bodley Library in Oxford prove that quite a few Hungarian students visited the famous university. After 1623, an increasing number of Hungarian students went to England, and this boom was unbroken in the two middle quarters of the 17th century. Most travelled to England only for short periods, spending a few months or weeks in Oxford, Cambridge or London between enrolments in the Netherlands. The number of Hungarian students did not decrease during the English Civil War, although it was dangerous to mention a visit to England at home because one could easily be accused of spreading revolutionary doctrines.⁹

It was on the routes of peregrination that ideas arrived in Transylvania, finding fertile ground here. In early modern Hungary, there was no institutional system dealing with the book trade, and the offerings of itinerant booksellers did not extend to scientific book materials. Bookbinders and printers who were also engaged in trade did not base their activities primarily on the needs of professional intellectuals (theologians, lawyers, doctors, etc.). Therefore, peregrination was an important opportunity to purchase books, something of which the students tried to take advantage, since it was difficult to get the necessary textbooks in Hungary. In addition, it was customary to donate to the library of one's *alma mater* a book brought from abroad. Entries in books indicate when and where they were purchased, but in many cases, they also indicate the price of the book. The museum book collections of Reformed colleges are mostly made up of such books brought home by students, read and, in many cases, annotated. In the more than two centuries following the Reformation, we know of nearly 2,000 Transylvanian students who attended foreign academies and went on to ecclesiastical careers. Of these, barely 1% have sources for their readings. With such proportions, each contemporary book list or possessor entry is a serious figure. Similarly, references and quotations in works originating in Transylvania provide insight not only into the culture of the author concerned but also into the intellectual network of the time.

⁹ SZÖGL, László (2017): Peregrináció és reformáció. Milyen külföldi egyetemekre jártak tanulni a 16–18. századi magyar diákok? [Peregrination and Reformation. What Foreign Universities Did Hungarian Students Go to Study at in the 16th and 18th Centuries?]. In: *Rubicon*. 2017/12. 50–57.

János Pósházi (1628–1686)

Our study highlights one of the main figures of the Cartesian versus orthodox Reformed debate at the Synod of Radnót in Transylvania. János Pósházi was a teacher at the Reformed College (or Seminary) of Sárospatak and one of the representatives of the polemical literature.¹⁰ Pósházi studied at the Reformed College in Sárospatak, enrolled in 1650. He studied under teachers Johannes A. Comenius, János Tolnai, János H. Szölősi, and Mihály Tófeus. With the support of Zsuzsanna Lorántffy, the widow of Prince György Rákóczi I, he set out for foreign universities in 1653. In August 1653, he enrolled at the University of Utrecht, studying with internationally renowned theologians such as Gisbertus Voetius,¹¹ among others. Here he defended his doctoral thesis on 19 June 1655 and became a Doctor of Philosophy. In August 1656, he resumed his studies in Franeker, returning home in 1657.¹² We know from György Gömöri's research that Pósházi also visited England, probably after his studies in Utrecht and before enrolling in Franeker. There is no record of when he crossed to England or how long he spent there, so we can only speculate. We know when he left England: on 8 July 1656, he received a travel permit from the English authorities to sail to Amsterdam together with Mihály Szántai Molnár.¹³ Evidence of Szántai's stay in Oxford is that he enrolled in the Bodley Library on 29 May 1656. Despite the fact that Pósházi's name cannot be found on this list, it is likely that he was in Oxford with Szántai, who was an old acquaintance of his from Sárospatak, in Oxford, although his stay there was relatively short, probably a few weeks. Another possibility is that Pósházi

¹⁰ MAKKAI, Ernő (1942): *Pósházi János élete és filozófiája* [The Life and Philosophy of János Pósházi]. Cluj-Napoca [Minerva]; HELTAI, János (2007): Kis Imre és Pósházi János hitvitája a kálvinista vallás régiségéről [Imre Kis and János Pósházi's Faith Debate on the Antiquity of Calvinist Religion]. I–II, In: *Magyar Könyvszemle*. 2007/2–3. 177.

¹¹ For the record, Voetius was approached by Descartes, and they exchanged ideas and disputed the emerging Cartesian philosophy.

¹² SZABÓ – TONK 1999, 125 – item 1291 of the repository.

¹³ GÖMÖRI, György (2005): *Magyarországi diákok angol és skót egyetemeken 1526–1789* [Hungarian Students at English and Scottish Universities 1526–1789]. Budapest, ELTE Archives. 22; GÖMÖRI, György (2015): Járt-e Pósházi János Angliában? [Has János Pósházi Been to England?]. In: *Korunk*. III, 8. 124.

may have travelled to England earlier, shortly after his *magisterium*, that is, the defending of his “magister” thesis, in Utrecht (19 June 1655), and only later joined Szántai in Oxford. However, there is not much evidence of this.

Pósaaházi returned home in 1657 and got a post at the College in Sárospatak. Since the widow of György Rákóczi II, Zsófia Báthori, who had reconverted to Catholicism, made the operation of the College impossible, the College moved to Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia) after a short interruption. Pósaaházi taught here until his death in 1686.

His polemical writings on philosophical and theological subjects were mostly dealt with in connection with the controversies in Upper Hungary (1663–1672). Church history literature also canonized him primarily as a debater of the faith. As a defender of Reformed Orthodoxy, he debated intellectuals of Cocceian and Cartesian convictions within his own denomination and, beyond that, Catholics, especially Jesuits.¹⁴

The Synod of Radnót and the *Syllabus* of Pósaaházi

Between 1673 and 1685, there were serious debates in Transylvania concerning the relationship of the philosophy of René Descartes (1596–1650) and the theology of Johannes Cocceius (Hans Koch, 1603–1669) to Calvinist orthodoxy. In March 1673, Prince Mihály Apafi summoned the leading professors of philosophy and theology of the College of Nagyenyed (Aiud) and Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) and entrusted the assessment of their heterodox doctrines to the Synod of Radnót, which was held in June

¹⁴ HELTAI, János (2005): A 16–17. századi magyarországi hitviták adattárának tervezete [Draft Repository of Religious Debates in Hungary in the 16th and 17th Centuries]. In: Heltai, János – Tasi, Réka (eds.): *Tanulmányok XVI–XIX. századi hitvitáinkról* [Studies on Our Faith Debates of the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries]. Miskolc, ME BTK Régi Magyar Irodalomtörténeti Tanszéke. 251–299; HELTAI 2005, I–II: 169–184, 310–343; GARADNAI, Erika Csilla (2012): Metatextualitás a felsőmagyarországi hitvitában [Metatextuality in the Upper Hungarian Faith Controversy]. In: Kecskeméti, Gábor – Tasi, Réka (eds.): *Filológia és textológia a régi magyar irodalomban* [Philology and Textology in Old Hungarian Literature]. Miskolc, ME BTK Magyar Nyelv- és Irodalomtudományi Intézet. 315–322; GARADNAI, Erika Csilla (2018): *A felső-magyarországi hitvita (1663–1672). Sámbar Mátyás, Pósaaházi János, Matkó István és Czeglédi István polémiája* [The Upper Hungarian Controversy (1663–1672). The Polemic of Mátyás Sámbar, János Pósaaházi, István Matkó and István Czeglédi]. Budapest.

of the same year.¹⁵ The representative for the prosecution at the Synod was János Pósházi. Since the case of the accused professors was taken up by high-ranking politicians in Transylvania, the defendants were acquitted of the charges with an admonition. The decrees of the Synod of Radnót, which raised several questions, were confirmed by the Prince in 1680, but we do not know what continuation of the events of 1673 made this subsequent act necessary.¹⁶ However, it seems that the developments of the Cartesian–Cocceian disputes in Transylvania did not end after the Synod of Radnót, and János Pósházi played an important role here. In 1685, he published a Latin work in Debrecen entitled *Syllabus*, thus entering the ranks of anti-Cartesian figures in the history of Hungarian ideas.¹⁷ The work contains a total of 76 (or 74 – see footnote 2 of this paper) assertions, discussing and condemning theological statements 1–39 and Cartesian philosophical statements 45–76.¹⁸ Pósházi refers to his 40th–44th sources as *M. D. p. E. in Apologico m. s.*¹⁹ According to Jenő Zoványi, this refers to the manuscript *Apologia* submitted by Professor Márton Dézsi of Nagyenyed (Aiud) to the Synod of Radnót in 1673, of which a copy no longer exists.

¹⁵ ZOVÁNYI, Jenő (1898): Dézsi Márton. In: *Protestáns Szemle*. 1898/2. 79–90; A Dési Márton, Csernátóni Pál és Pataki István elleni vádpontok [Charges against Márton Desi, Pál Csernátóni, and István Pataki]. In: Buzogány Dezső et al. (eds.): *Erdélyi református zsinatok iratai I: 1591–1714* [Documents of the Reformed Councils of Transylvania I: 1591–1714]. Erdélyi református egyháztörténeti adatok 1/1 (Kolozsvár Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület, 2016). 285–294.

¹⁶ ZOVÁNYI, Jenő (1889): A radnóthi zsinat végzései [The Decrees of the Synod of Radnóth]. In: *Protestáns Közlöny*. 1889/19. 344–345, 362–364; SIMON, József (2023) *Vésmadarak: Pósházi János és a németalföldi karteziánus viták a 17. század második felében* [Alarmists: Pósházi János and the Dutch debates around Cartesianism in the Second Half of the 17th Century]. In: *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények*. 127/3. 280–281.

¹⁷ PÓSAHÁZI, János (1685): *Syllabus assertionum, thesium et hypothesisum illarum (e multis), quibus neoterici quidam theologi et philosophi hoc tempore in Belgio, Hungaria et Tra(n)-sylvania scholas et ecclesias turbant, ex propriis ipsorum scriptis collectus succincta ad illas animadversione. Authore Johanne Posahazi a. l. m.* [Debrecen] MDCLXXXV [István Chargei]. A4 –E4 = fol [20]. – 4°; RMK II 1567. RMNy 4585.

¹⁸ Syllabus A4 b–E4a.

¹⁹ Syllabus C4a.

The main part of the discussion paper begins with the title *Assertio I*. Each *assertio* is headed by a brief Cocceian or Cartesian theological statement, followed by its orthodox Calvinist refutation, the *Animadversio*. The publication closes with a few lines of *Conclusio*. In his letter of recommendation, János Pósa-házi addresses Hungarian and Transylvanian preachers and professors who adhere to Reformed orthodoxy and says that the army of Cocceians and Cartesians is growing day by day, and therefore he is publishing his theses against “scandals and divisions”. He warns the reader that the contagion, which began a few years ago in the Low Countries, is already causing serious internal strife in Hungary and Transylvania. He wrote his work both to protect the Church with authority and to prove that he himself has always defended and will always defend the orthodox truth.²⁰

An interesting feature of the publication history of *Syllabus* is that it was previously considered a Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) publication, but, in fact, it was printed in Debrecen by István Töltési. The printer, Töltési, probably as a victim of a power struggle, lost his job, and one of the accusations against him in his trial was that he dared to publish the work of Pósa-házi without approval.²¹

The Response

Of course, a response to Pósa-házi’s discussion paper came quickly, but it was not printed unfortunately. Márton Dézsi had obtained a manuscript copy of Pósa-házi’s work before it was printed in January 1685, and as early as the end of 1684 he replied to it in manuscript in Latin and Hungarian. The answer in Hungarian (*Summa of the Replica to the Syllabus of My Lord Pósa-házi*) was presented by Jenő Zoványi in an extract from the original manuscript preserved in the library of Bethlen College in Nagyenyed

²⁰ ZOVÁNYI, Jenő (1890): *A coccejanismus története* [The History of Cocceianism]. Budapest. 138–150.

²¹ ECSÉDY, Judit V. (2016): A hatalmi harc áldozatául esett tipográfus. Töltési István tragikus véget ért debreceni működéséről és a meg nem valósult bibliakiadásról [A Typographer Who Fell Victim to the Power Struggle. About István Töltési’s Tragic End and His Work in Debrecen and the Unrealized Bible Publishing]. In: Bíró, Csilla – Visy, Beatrix (eds.): *Hatalmi diskurzusok. A hatalom reprezentációi a tudományokban és a művészetekben* [Power Discourses. Representations of Power in the Sciences and Arts]. Budapest. 38–47; Cf. RMNy 4584.

(Aiud).²² Another reply, written in Latin and also preserved in manuscript, is currently kept as a copy of the original, in the manuscript collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, entitled *Vindiciae assertionum Cartesianarum adversus animadversiones clarissimi domini Iohannis Pósaquí rectoris scholae Albensiis*.²³

According to József Simon, the text of *Vindiciae* is only part of the text written in response to Pósaquí's entire work. The manuscript we have at our disposal is obviously a copy and is erroneous in several places. The autograph manuscript, which may have been more complete, is either lost or has not yet been discovered, and its author was previously unknown in the literature. However, József Simon's research revealed the identity of the second author. The two parts of the manuscript are preceded by an introduction in Latin written by two authors indicated by their initials: *M. D. E. P. & S. P. C. R. C. P.* The first monogram indicates *Professor Martinus Desi Enjediensi*, Cocceius's most important follower in Transylvania: Márton Dézi. Scientific research clearly considers him to be the formulator of the points against the Cocceian theses condemned by Pósaquí.²⁴ Márton Dézi studied in Dézs (Dej), Nagybánya (Baia Mare), and then Sárospatak (located in modern northeast Hungary). Next, as an alumnus of György Kapy, he enrolled at the University of Leiden at the age of 26 in November 1665, where he studied theology and then defended his doctoral thesis in 1666. A student of Cocceius, he came home in 1669, and from 1671 he was a teacher at the Reformed College of Nagyenyed (Aiud). He died in 1691.²⁵

József Simon posits that the other monogram most likely refers to István Pataki (cca 1640–1693), who was rector of the Reformed College in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca)

²² ZOVÁNYI 1890, 150–154.

²³ *Vindiciae assertionum Cartesianarum adversus animadversiones clarissimi domini Iohannis Pósaquí rectoris scholae Albensiis*. Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Manuscript Collection and Old Books Collection, Budapest, Church and Philosophy Warehouse, 8r 16.

²⁴ MAKKAI 1942, 90–95; NAGY, Géza (2008): *A református egyház története. 1608–1715* [History of the Reformed Church. 1608–1715]. II. Budapest – Gödöllő, Attraktor. 238–239; SZABÓ, Géza (1943): *A magyar református orthodoxia* [The Hungarian Reformed Orthodoxy]. Budapest. 111–112.

²⁵ SZABÓ – TONK 1999, 169 – item 1730.

in 1685.²⁶ The abbreviation is therefore thus resolved: *Stephanus Pataki Claudiopoli Reformatorum Collegii Professor*. István Pataki, together with Márton Dézsi, was one of the persons summoned before the Synod of Radnót of the Reformed Church in 1673 on the charge of preaching and teaching the ideas of Cocceius and Descartes.²⁷ In 1673, the accusations against Pataki were of a theological nature, and the target of philosophical accusations at that time was Pál Csernátoni. In the 1660s, Csernátoni studied in the Low Countries, then in Switzerland, and also in England: London and Oxford.²⁸ After returning home, Csernátoni, who taught philosophy at the College of Nagyenyed (Aiud), died in 1679, so he cannot be considered the author of *Vindiciae*. Based on this, József Simon considers it likely that the *Vindiciae* is the work of István Pataki,²⁹ who also had a serious history of peregrination. He matriculated in Franeker in 1663, debated there in 1664, then enrolled in Groningen and the following year in Leiden to study philosophy and theology, where he defended his doctoral thesis in March 1666.³⁰ After returning home, he became the court pastor of his patron, Countess Dénes Bánffy. From 1668, he taught philosophy for decades at the College in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca), which he headed, and was the tutor of Prince Mihály Apafi II. He was acquitted from his trial at the Synod of Radnót because of his noble connections. He died in January 1693.

²⁶ SIMON, József (2021): Az elme teljessége: esettanulmány egy erdélyi karteizianizmus-vitáról (1685) [The Fullness of Mind: A Case Study of a Cartesianism Controversy in Transylvania (1685)]. In: *Kellék*. 2021/65. 89–105; DIENES, Dénes (2013): Pataki Tóth István. In: *Református Szemle*. 106, 1. 63–72.

²⁷ ZOVÁNYI 1889, 38–39, 344–345, 362–364.

²⁸ SZABÓ – TONK 1999, 219 – 2229 items.

²⁹ SIMON 2021, 93.

³⁰ SZABÓ – TONK 1999 – items 267, 2666.

2. Our Hypothesis Concerning the Theological Position of the *Syllabus*

Traces of Proto-Existentialist Calvinistic Ideas in Pósaquí's Thinking

János Erdélyi, an expert in Hungarian philosophy (and himself a remarkable and meticulous philosopher of the nineteenth century) stated, quoting Mátrai, that “the Calvinist philosophers of the period (such as János Apáczai Csere and Pósaquí) ‘expressed’ the social conditions of both the Low Countries and Transylvania”.³¹ We cannot be quite sure what he had in mind, but he seems to have been pointing to the historical and scientific-theological ties of those two regions since the Reformation. The reception of Descartes as an authority in philosophical discussions and the far-reaching effects of Cartesian philosophy upon the frequent theological debates were similarly sharply critical, progressive, and complicated while by and large open-minded in both places. What was similar in both mindsets and in the flourishing development of the overall philosophical thinking of the seventeenth century is the strong criticism, mostly Cartesian, of the previous Aristotelian and Scholastic way of thinking.³² Calvinism provided a fertile ground for this, even in its more conservative “orthodox” versions.³³

³¹ ERDÉLYI, János (1981): *Filozófiai és esztétikai írások* [Philosophical and Esthetical Writings], Ed. by T. Erdélyi Ilona. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó. 944.

³² Ungvári observes, “As Michel Foucault has pointed out, the desire of people in this period to participate directly in spiritual life, to experience election to salvation, was a struggle for subjectivity in the interpretation of the doctrine set out in the book. This struggle spread over time, through the various currents of the Reformation, to the eastern regions of the continent. The crisis of individuality was above all a crisis of individual self-expression, of individual certainty, which claimed a place as a defining experience both in theology (Calvin’s doctrine of ‘election by grace’) and in philosophy (Montaigne, Descartes, Pascal). This is also reflected in Pierre Chaunu’s summary statement that the whole of the 17th century was in search of God.” See in UNGVÁRI-ZRÍNYI, Imre (1997): Erdélyi magyar karteziánizmus a 17. században. Descartes eszméi Apáczai Csere János műveiben. [Transylvanian Hungarian Cartesianism in the 17th century. Descartes’s Ideas in the Works of János Csere Apáczai]. *Kellék*. 1997/8–9. 157–176. [The above text was translated from the original into English by the authors of this study.].

³³ Ábrahám Kovács finds a different “landscape” of faith of Hungary/Transylvania; and totally different kind of ties between the Western Calvinists and the Hungarian Reformed churches two hundred years later, as he states: “Although liberal theology still held a grasp on some of the intellectual mind of the Reformed Church in Hungary after the mid-1870s, it was the Scottish

However, what we miss in both regions is the lack of a more “radical criticism” of Scholasticism: the forgotten insights on the *theologia crucis* of Luther (see his 40 *sub contradictio* statements in the Heidelberg Disputatio of 1518, the 1–28 theological theses –especially on the dichotomy between theses 19–20 and 28 – and his stand against Aristotle, in particular, theses 29–40) or the ignored theological and philosophically existentialist challenges that Pascal’s *Pensées* could have provided. Asserting that a more integral theological criticism is missing, we wondered why theologians in both the Low Countries and Transylvania seemed unfamiliar with Pascal’s ideas.³⁴ The introductory parts of the autobiography³⁵ of the Transylvanian chancellor, Miklós Bethlen, where he sets out some ideas and thoughts on the “double nothingness” of human existence

Reformed theological impact coupled with German intermediating theology (*Vermittlungstheologie* in German) that began to fertilise the soil of Hungarian Reformed spirituality to a degree that was perhaps *last seen in the 1600s due to Puritanism* [emphasis added]. It could be stated that Reformed evangelicalism was conveyed through a Scottish Reformed tradition, which also integrated continental Pietism because the leaders of the Scottish mission station were Dutch or German Pietists for decades.” See KOVÁCS, Ábrahám (2019): Is Christ Proclaimed to Christians? The Impact of Scottish Evangelicalism on Hungarian Theology, Piety, and Praxis (1841–1945). In: *Perichoresis* 17, 4. 111–131. DOI: 10.2478/perc-2019-0031.

³⁴ Karl Löwith in his grand oeuvre, *Meaning in History*, tried to clarify why, beginning with the Cartesian turn into modernism, the Kingdom of God-oriented classical interpretation of history turned into a “neither Christian, nor pagan” new kind of view of human history. From the reception of Descartes’s rationalist philosophy, to the detriment of the theological interpretation of history, modernity “sees it with one eye of faith and one eye of reason”. As a result, the view of history is confused. Its interpretations of history are Christian in derivation and anti-Christian in result. To develop this theory, Karl Löwith, analysing the Cartesian and successive philosophies of history up to the nineteenth century, tried to trace it back again to the Bible. See especially his analysis of Vico’s *Scienza Nuova* (Cf. Chapter VI: Vico) in LÖWITH, Karl (1949): *Meaning in History. The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press. To follow in his footsteps, we are using the Hungarian translation [*Világtörténelem és üdvtörténet. A történelemfilozófia teológiai gyökerei*. Budapest, Atlantisz Könyvkiadó, 1996] based on both the German and the English versions; see pp. 161–186). The German edition’s title: *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*. Stuttgart – Berlin – Köln – Mainz, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 71979 [1953].

³⁵ BETHLEN, Miklós (2004): *The Autobiography of Miklós Bethlen*. Transl. by Bernard Adams. London, Paul Kegan.

and its Calvinistic tune in the mirror of the careful analysis of József Simon, is a possible exception.³⁶

Pascal made an apparent refusal of the *ego cogito ergo ego sum* by challenging, if not questioning altogether, the Aristotelian tradition (and even the Calvinist orthodoxy, on its Aristotelian-based foundations) of perceiving the self³⁷ as a similar substance conceivable and comparable to the substance of God. Descartes split the human mind

³⁶ See SIMON, József (2020): A semmi problémája Bethlennél a németalföldi tanulmányok tükrében (1662–1663): De Raey- és Gassendi-dilemmák [The Problem of Nothingness in Bethlen in the Light of the Studies of the Low Countries (1662–1663): The Dilemmas of De Raey and Gassendi]. In: Horn, Ildikó – Laczházi, Gyula (eds.): *Reformer vagy lázadó?: Bethlen Miklós és kora* [Reformer or Rebel? Miklós Bethlen and His Era]. Budapest, L'Harmattan. 257–274.

³⁷ See his fragments on the self, where he expresses his cautious scepticism in perceiving what the ego is, moreover what epistemic chances we have to get a proper understanding of it, in opposition to the rational self-confidence of a Cartesian; cf.: Fragment 175: “We know ourselves *so little*, that many think they are about to die when they are well, and many think they are well when they are near death, unconscious of approaching fever, or of the abscess ready to form itself.” Then again, in Fragment 66, although he is sceptical in regard to the chances of discovering any truth or first principle of any rational philosophy, he is confident in the life-changing effect of a self-examined life almost in the modern sense of existentialism: “One must know oneself. If this *does not serve to discover truth*, it at least *serves as a rule of life*, and there is nothing better” [emphasis ours]. Cf. Frag.100: “*Self-love*. – The nature of self-love and of this human Ego is to love self only and consider self only. But what will man do? He cannot prevent this object that he loves from being full of faults and wants. He wants to be great, and he sees himself small. He wants to be happy, and he sees himself miserable [p. 31]. He wants to be perfect, and he sees himself full of imperfections. He wants to be the object of love and esteem among men, and he sees that his faults merit only their hatred and contempt.” – etc. The fragment proves the perverse will of men to see themselves better than they are and, as a result, unable to gain a proper and infallible knowledge of the self. This serves as a criticism against the epistemological optimism of the Cartesians. And if Kant in the footsteps of Descartes believed that self-deception cannot be maintained because of the possibility of a rational self-knowledge, the Pascalian existentialists and the radical Calvinists would believe the contrary, that self-knowledge cannot be guaranteed because of the possibility of self-deception. Miklós Bethlen, the protector of those Cartesian-Cocceian theologians who were prosecuted by Pósházi, as Simon argued (see above), is very “Pascalian” in his thinking as he could in his Calvinist/Augustine scepticism double the “nothingness” lurking around the soul and creeping into the possible “meaninglessness” of one’s life, produced by the fall and doubled by the combination of human imperfection – as a created entity – and of human sin as a result of the Fall / original sin.

and body into two substances, as separate entities. The Self, the ego of Descartes, is the idea equated with the human soul as the very mind, and different from the *res extensa*, the body. That criticism of the Aristotelian substance-concept in the spirit of the Cartesian reductionist form of rationalism and idealism served later as the foundations for the Enlightenment idealism of the next centuries. It seems to us that those thinkers in both the Low Countries and Transylvania lacked the existentialist insights of Pascal, or the roots of the existentialist and personalism-oriented impact of the Jansenist philosopher, despite the fact that Jansenists were regarded as “crypto-Calvinists” and later (after the death of Pascal) suffered papal anathema. Maybe for this reason we can assume that the orthodox Calvinists were not radical enough in their perhaps quasi-Cartesian rationalistic criticism of the Aristotelian Scholastics on the ego, creating an individualistic rather than dualistic view of the self within the parameters of Descartes’s thought. On the other hand, because of the Calvinist persuasion, it is puzzling how they could not be aware of the subtle ego-logicalism of the Cartesians, over against the emphasis of *theologia crucis* of the Reformed view that could have been called a peculiar “Divine Ego-logic” of the “I am who I am”, the God of the covenant.

The Unique Approach of the Transylvanian Thinkers

Were there any exceptions? In our hypothesis, here we can observe a movement of the pendulum from the West to the East. At least in that one area of thought, Transylvanian thinkers were unlike their counterparts in the Low Countries, despite the former not taking into relevant consideration both the thoughts of Pascal and of Calvin on the relational rather than substantial character of the human soul or self. However, the next generation of students of Pósaázi and the like, some of those illustrious theologians, such as István Hatvani, tried to take a more critical approach towards the entailing Cartesianism that followed. Hatvani’s intuition and ability of thought in philosophy and theology can be compared with the ingenuity of Pascal, both in his scientific discoveries based on probabilism (previously researched also by Pascal) and in his apologetic “vision” to refute the new sceptics (like Pierre Bayle). Moreover, he could question and refute even the idea-theories of Descartes. As Béla Tóth observed in connection with Hatvani’s foundational book:

István Hatvani “assumes that there are two kinds of truth: one is the *Evidentia simplex*, which, by means of the senses (*sensus*), testimony (*testimonium*), and analogy, arrives, if not at complete certainty (*certitudo*), then at complete conviction (*persuasio*), which can be as solid as if it had been obtained by mathematical means”. In the preface:

[he] confesses that he had a double purpose in the work he has presented. On the one hand, to refute (...) the contradiction (*contradictio*) and the principle of sufficient reason, which are so prevalent, and which are now (in his day) so much in vogue; and, on the other hand, to obviate the procedure that, following the principles and the method of their master, brings everything within the sphere of mathematical proof, that is, on the ground that what cannot be proved mathematically cannot be true and that man is not bound to believe it. But by this doctrine, they are throwing a spanner in the works of the “naturalists” (i.e. the pioneers of the Enlightenment, the atheists – TB). Therefore, the main aim of his work is to provide a remedy and antidote (*remedia et antidota*), first and foremost to his disciples, against the ever-increasing “plague” of irreligion and atheism, by revealing the true foundations of truth.³⁸

Observing the argumentative fight against the predicted and rising “plague” of atheism in the footsteps of Descartes, carried out by the orthodox/Calvinist (and yet, to some extent still, “emerging” semi-Cartesian theologians of the period), based on these presuppositions presented above, let us now illustrate that fight with the *Syllabus* of Pósaaházi. In the 68th assertion (Assertio LXVIII), he quotes Descartes:

This proposition, “I think, therefore I am” (that is, the thinking mind exists; for through “I”, it understands only the mind, of which substance is truly distinct from the body),³⁹ is the first and most certain of all principles that occur to anyone engaged in the ordinary practice of philosophy. The same is stated in Part I of the Principles, §. 7.: “What we call the soul or our thinking, I have assumed the existence of this thinking as the first Principle.”⁴⁰

³⁸ HATVANI, István (1990 [1757]): *Introductio ad principia philosophiae solidioris* [Introduction to the Principles of a More Solid Philosophy]. Transl. from Latin by Péter Tóth, ed. and preface by Béla Tóth. Bilingual edition. Budapest. 5. [The fragments quoted are the translations of the authors of this study from the original Latin and Hungarian text.].

³⁹ The Italics refers to Pósaaházi’s comments; he quotes Cartesius from the contemporary edition.

⁴⁰ Pósaaházi: *Syllabus*, E2: Haec propositio, Ego cogito, ergo sum (id est, mens cogitans existit; nam per Ego intelligit solam mentem; estque substantia realiter a corpore distincta) est

Basically, in the refutation of this central argument of Descartes, Pósházi in his second counter-argument used a peculiar statement, which is as ingenious as the counter-argument of Pascal. In other words, Pascal could have said the same. We plan to elaborate more on this comparison in a successive study into the further theological analysis of the *Syllabus*. Let us examine now the Transylvanian philosopher's second counter-argument presented in the *Animadversio* for the 68th assertion:

Because principles must be apodictic, that is, they must not be proven through prior ones: but this proposition, “I think, therefore I am”, is not such. It is proven through the prior statement: “There are no properties [affections] of non-being.” Or: “Given the effect, it is necessary to posit a cause.”⁴¹

In his analysis of the above argument, Simon noticed:

Pósházi's point is clear: thinking is a property that is perceived by the mind. In order to infer the existence of the mind as the subject of the perceived property of thinking, we must accept the principle “the non-existent has no properties”. An inference to the existence of the mind can only be conclusive if we allow, and thereby presuppose, the validity of the principle introduced. If we do not allow and presuppose the validity of “the non-existent has no properties”, then the perceived property of the mind need not exist on any underlying substrate, substance. The insight into the existence of the mind cannot provide the first principle because it is preceded by the principle “the non-existent has no properties”.⁴²

omnium prima & certissima, quae cuilibet ordine philosophanti occurrit. Principiorum: Idem I. Part. Princip. §. 7. Item in Praefat. Quod animam seu cogitationem nostram vocamus, existentiam huius cogitationis assumpsi pro primo Principio. Cf. Descartes: AT VIII-1, 7, 7–9.

⁴¹ Pósházi: Syllabus, E2: Quia Principia debent esse Anapodictica, id est, non debent probari per priora: at haec propositio, Ego cogito, ergo sum, non est talis. Probatur enim per prius illud: Non entis nullae sunt affectiones. Aut: Posito effectu, necesse est poni causam.

⁴² “Pósházi álláspontja világos: a gondolkodás egy olyan sajátosság, amit észlel az elme. Ahhoz, hogy az elme mint a gondolkodás észlelt sajátossága szubjektumának létezésére következtethessünk, el kell fogadnunk »A nem-létezőnek nincsenek sajátosságai« elvet. Az elme létezésére vonatkozó következtetés csak akkor lehet konkluzív, ha megengedjük, és ezáltal előfeltételezzük a bevezetett elv érvényességét. Ha nem engedjük meg és nem előfeltételezzük annak érvényességét, hogy »A nem-létezőnek nincsenek sajátosságai«, akkor a gondolkodás észlelt sajátosságának nem kell fennállni semmiféle alapul szolgáló hordozón, szubsztancián. Az elme létezésére vonatkozó belátás nem szolgáltathatja az első alapelvet, mert azt megelőzi »A nem-létezőnek nincsenek

But Simon also analyses the counter-argument of the Anonymous (author) of the *Vindiciae*. The unknown enigmatic author tried to refute the charges of Pósaázi against Descartes when accusing the French thinker of syllogism. Simon remarks:

The answer clearly denies that the principle “I think, therefore I am” is a syllogism in the strict sense and then regards the inferential structure “therefore” as a simultaneous temporal relation: “As long as I think, I am nothing, or as long as, I think I exist.”

But the way that Anonymous was able to exempt Descartes from this accusation makes the observation of Simon, which follows, more interesting:

By denying the syllogistic nature of the cogito-reason, the author stresses the immediacy of reflection, which precedes all mental acts. The theme of nothingness, of non-existence, which has arisen in the meantime, reappears a few lines later: Furthermore, with regard to that which we have already conceived to exist in the mind in this way, and then to shine forth in the case of other objects, as in the case of God, etc., should I rather conclude that it comes from nothingness rather than affirm that it has some truth in itself?⁴³

The Latin text translated into English and used by Simon omitted “the grace of God” from “ut exempli gratia de Deo etc.”. That is probably just a typo, yet it is extremely important! When we think over its relevance from a particular theological point of view, namely that in existential relations we cannot speak of just a God, but of *the grace of God*, which is given as a gift, in a given time, in a personal-relational way, then it is impossible not to make an exception there. Anonymous, according to Simon, “regards the inferential structure [‘therefore’] as a simultaneous temporal relation” (see above). Augustine (cf. his *Confessions* on the mystery of time, where he asks: What is time?) placed the “simultaneous temporal relation” in the nothingness. It is like in the thinking of the Scholastics, “a

sajátosságai» elve.” See in SIMON, József (2023): A cogito-érv mint első alapelv. Kartezianus dilemmák a 17. századi Erdélyben [The Cogito Argument as a First Principle. Cartesian Dilemmas in 17th-Century Transylvania]. In: *Különbőség*. 23, 1. 95.

⁴³ “Item quomodo id, quod in mente ita existere certo deprehensa, amplius etiam de aliis obiectis explendescit, ut exempli gratia de Deo etc., illud vel nihil esse, vel a nihilo procedere potius concludam quam affirmem aliquid habere in se veritatis?” In English, it reads: “And how is it that what, when clearly apprehended to exist in the mind, extends even further to other objects, such as, for example, the grace of God, that I would rather conclude it to be either nothing or to proceed from nothing, than affirm that it contains any truth within itself?” Ibid.

possibility can become a reality, but a reality cannot become anymore a possibility” type of paradox denial, yet would that be in correlation with the flow of time towards the future? What nullifies the forgiven past in order to make room for the future? Only grace (*gratia de Deo*) can be an exception here. Grace issues from nothingness, just as creation issued from nothingness. Nothingness is the picture of grace,⁴⁴ and as the present tense dissolves into the future, after it was dissolved into the past, thus its very presentness is also dissolved as if nothing happened. We do not see in the argumentation of Anonymous “I think, therefore I exist”, but rather the opposite: I received a gift / I am “graced”, and that dissolves time into nothingness. Once that simultaneous temporal structure has placed me by grace in a temporal relation with the atemporal and personal God, I can say, I am pardoned, my very selfish Self (egocentric self), therefore I do not exist! Paradoxically, I *have* existence. God’s (“unselfish”, yet justified and praised “egocentric”) “Ego” encompassed me in Himself and that crucified my “old self”. This is how Pósaházi argues with the old Calvinists, and Simon found something similar in Bethlen’s perception on the existential “nothingness”, which is not just essential weakness out of the fact that humans are fragile creatures, but that weakness is being doubled by the effect of the original sin upon our humanness. That radical perception of total depravity and sinfulness was described in many ways and became an underlying doctrine for the theologians of the time in every debate concerning Descartes versus Calvinism, on both ends of the pendulum, whether in the Lowlands, or in Hungary and Transylvania.

⁴⁴ When we speak of grace, we mean reality. But nothingness is the picture of Reality itself. For a comparison, see the Puritanism-influenced Transylvanian philosopher KULTSÁR, András Diósadi (1922): *Új gondolatok régi titkokról, Tentamen* [New Thoughts on Old Mysteries, Tentamen]. Szamosújvár. 16: “Thus I have arrived to the thesis of *absolute contradiction*. I have realized that the notion of *nothing* is that from which every knowledge of the human mind on this earth *necessarily* proceeds, because to every reality and, as such, even to the *thinking* reality, i.e. man’s, the most perfect contradiction to it, evidently, is – nothing. The thinking man cannot base his own knowledge on anything outside of himself because he does not know anything outside of himself, i.e. outside of *reality*. He knows nothing else other than *nothing*.” Then he goes on to criticize Descartes on page 32: “Descartes was mistaken when he based human thinking on the “*cogito ergo sum*” as if he wanted to base it on *thinking* itself. Evidently, this is as if somebody wishes to build a house, and so he would say that *in order for it to be stronger*, he will lay down a foundation on the foundation itself, i.e. on *the new foundation*, he would lay down his foundation. So, on what does not exist *but never can exist either*.”

We can summarize that in line with the “theologian of the cross” concept of Luther, as follows: I died to myself “inside” of Him, there is no other way for one to die to him or herself “outside” of Him. And yes, “there are no properties [affections] of non-being”, except in the case of grace. We will argue and approach this point later, in a successive study, when we take a closer look at the Pósaházi (typically Pascalian-type) solution to the matter. It is enough here to state from the above that there is not any “substance” for the self; individualism is an illusion (no wonder that some, mainly naturalists, would argue similarly, both at that time and today, that even our consciousness is / could be an illusion); the ego can survive only in non-being, “choked” (or rather immersed) into God’s being, meaning into a relation issued by grace; and Buber proves correct: In the beginning there was relationship. Even when I think, I do not exist, and even when I do not think, I exist – neither the new Cartesian Anonymous nor the old Aristotelian Scholasticus but the eternally grace-centred Pascalian Posahasius. But perhaps that argumentation could be the challenging topic of our next study on Pósaházi’s *Syllabus*, following the move of the curious seventeenth-century “theological pendulum”.

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