

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 27
Issue 2 *June*

Article 7

June 1991

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Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 27, no.2, June 1991, p.100-105

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Cartesian Rationalism

by RUSSELL WAHL

PROFESSOR REUMAN would begin his courses on early modern philosophy by urging his students to understand Aristotelianism and to work through Burt's *Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science* so as to put the work of the early modern philosophers, and in particular Descartes, in their historical context, rather than attempting to understand them in a vacuum.

In this paper I am going to continue in this vein, looking not so much at Descartes' contemporaries and predecessors but at Descartes' metaphysical and epistemological pronouncements in light of some of his other claims. This situating, I believe, is especially important in Descartes studies because his work was so influential and has often been used to characterize neat positions such as the "Cartesian Quest for Certainty," "Cartesian Rationalism," "Cartesian Scepticism," etc., which have become standard caricatures in philosophy. While occasionally in the past some of these "Cartesian" views have been held up as models of good philosophy, in recent times they are generally held to be the foundations of all that is wrong with contemporary (or nearly contemporary) philosophy.

I am going to examine one aspect of the caricature of Descartes, that of Cartesian Rationalism, and argue that it needs to be radically revised in order to take into account much of what Descartes actually says. The revised position shows a much more moderate Descartes, one perhaps less useful for introducing a radical anti-empiricism to an introductory class, but one far more interesting and plausible.

Let's turn to the characterization of Descartes' rationalism that one can glean from the literature. Here are two major features of this view which lead to this characterization:

(a) One should believe only what is certain, for anything less than certainty does not guarantee truth, and so does not constitute knowledge.

(b) What the senses tell us falls short of certainty, and therefore we should not trust them; the senses do not yield knowledge; true knowledge, therefore, comes from the understanding alone.

From these points it appears to follow that all that we can know will be based on reason alone, and this may, at first thought, appear to be very little. Of course Descartes argues for the existence of a nondeceiving God and innate ideas within the mind that are guaranteed to be true by this God, and thus allows that we may know a fair amount. But it still looks as though all I can know will be based on reason and not the senses.

This view of Cartesian Rationalism is forcefully expressed by D. W. Hamlyn and J. L. Watling, who claim that Descartes was committed to the position that all truths are logically true.¹ Watling and Hamlyn appear to recognize that Descartes himself never drew this consequence, but for them this is simply evidence that he was inconsistent. Watling goes on as if Descartes were committed to the view that we could by the understanding alone come to know the truth of the proposition that there exists at least one table,² and that “Descartes believed that he could show that truths of every sort could be established without the aid of observation and experiment.”³

There are certainly many passages which may be taken to support this view of Descartes, for example, Rule 2 of the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, which ends with this remark: “Now the conclusion we should draw from these considerations is not that arithmetic and geometry are the only sciences worth studying, but rather that in seeking the right path of truth we ought to concern ourselves only with objects which admit of as much certainty as the demonstrations of arithmetic and geometry.”⁴ The “intuitions,” which he holds are able to meet this criterion, are contrasted in Rule 3 with what other people have thought and with “the fluctuating testimony of the senses.”⁵ There are also passages in the *Meditations* and the *Discourse on Method* where Descartes makes it clear that he is seeking knowledge that is completely certain and indubitable: “. . . what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it.”⁶ And there are ample passages in both works to suggest that what the senses tell us is open to doubt. However, there are two points of caution we should note before accepting the conclusion that all our knowledge should be based on reason alone. The first is that in these passages Descartes is concerned with intuitions (or ideas, in the later work) rather than beliefs. The second is that in the later works, the *Meditations* and the *Discourse*, some care should be given to the order of Descartes’ presentation, for he suggests that some things we can doubt until we have reasons (such as the proof of the existence of a nondeceiving God) that remove the doubt.

But on the other hand, there are passages where Descartes suggests, in contrast to the claim made by Watling, that observation is essential to knowledge. In the Preface to the French edition of the *Principles*, for example, we have this passage:

I am also very well aware that many centuries may pass before all the truths that can be deduced from these principles are actually so deduced. For the majority of truths remaining to be discovered depend on various particular observations which we never happen on by chance but which must be sought out with care and expense by very intelligent people.⁷

1. J. L. Watling, “Descartes,” D. J. O’Conner, ed., *A Critical History of Western Philosophy* (New York, 1964), p. 172. See also D. W. Hamlyn, *Theory of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y., 1970), p. 27. I have chosen Watling and Hamlyn here because they give an especially clear statement of this view of Cartesian rationalism.

2. Watling, p. 173.

3. Watling, p. 171.

4. *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. Cottingham, Stoodhof and Murdoch, trans., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I (Cambridge, 1985), 12–13. Adam and Tannery, Vol. X, 366. All quotations from Descartes will be from this edition, which will hereafter be abbreviated CSM; reference to the standard Adam and Tannery edition will hereafter be abbreviated AT.

5. Rule 3, CSM I, 14. AT X, 368.

6. *Discourse on Method*, CSM I, 120. AT VI, 18.

7. *Principles of Philosophy*, CSM I, 189. AT IXB, 20.

And again in the *Discourse* he suggests that a lack of observations (*experiences*) could hinder knowledge.⁸ These passages on foundations, as well as the actual claims Descartes made in his scientific work, indicate that Descartes did not think that all knowledge of matters of fact was independent of experience or that he could come to all the truths of physics by reflection on innate ideas. It should also be clear that Descartes was committed to the view that one could not come to know the existence of, e.g., a table by “the understanding alone” if this is taken as opposed to using the senses. For such knowledge would be possible only if the idea of a table contained existence, and not merely possible existence, but necessary existence, and Descartes holds that this is contained only in the idea of God.⁹ From his account of what kind of existence is contained within our ideas of bodies it should be clear that he does not hold that we can come to know the truth of the proposition “one table exists” simply by understanding it.

What conclusions should we draw? Perhaps that Descartes was inconsistent; this is certainly the conclusion that Hamlyn and Watling draw. Or we could look again at just what Descartes’ project may be and attempt to see if perhaps something else is at work when Descartes demands “certainty” and argues that science must have firm foundations which can be determined to be true by the understanding. In what remains of this paper I am going to sketch a slightly different account of Descartes’ project, which is not so much a project, as I see it, of reason replacing the senses, but rather of reason correcting what the senses give us.

The claim that in order to be consistent Descartes must hold that all knowledge is *a priori* is based on a particular view of Descartes’ project. He is concerned with knowledge, and it appears that his test for whether a proposition is known by a subject S is whether S is certain that the proposition is true. The senses cannot yield the kind of certainty demanded (and Descartes appears to be aware of this), therefore a proposition that is based on reason rather than observation is the only kind that could be known.

One puzzling thing about this account is that it is hard to find textual support for a Cartesian account of when a proposition is known to be true. What we find instead is an account of clear and distinct perception. In fact, while the fourth Meditation concerns itself with judgement and with when we may judge something to be true, Descartes’ examples of the method in the fifth Meditation consist of examining an idea and seeing what is clearly and distinctly contained within it. We can then form propositions, e.g., “God exists,” “material objects are extended,” “the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles,” on the basis of what we have perceived to be contained clearly and distinctly within our ideas of God, a triangle, and a material object. But Descartes does not dwell so much on this step; rather he devotes his attention to examining the content of ideas (or, in his terms, what is objectively contained within our ideas). This is what God guarantees: the content of our clear and distinct (mental) perceptions.

8. *Discourse on Method*, CSM I, 143, AT VI, 63.

9. In the *Replies to the First Set of Objections*, CSM II, 83, AT VII, 116.

This matter is a bit confusing because Descartes often uses the term “truth” when talking about perceptions,¹⁰ yet in the third Meditation Descartes said that, strictly speaking, only judgements are true or false, not ideas. Thus it may be natural to think that when Descartes says that a clear and distinct perception is true, that he must be talking about judgements.

This is a problem that many others have noticed with Descartes’ project, starting with Arnauld.¹¹ Alan Gewirth correctly notes that Descartes was not concerned with whether an idea was expressed by a proposition or simply characterized by a term.¹² Not surprisingly, Gewirth, like others, is reluctant to use the term “true” except with regard to a proposition and so assumes that, when Descartes uses the word “true” with respect to an idea, the idea must have a propositional content. In the third Meditation Descartes’ concern is with an operation of the understanding, and not with judgement, which he argued always involves the will. Thus even if, as is no doubt the case, many of Descartes’ “ideas” (in the *Meditations*) or “intuitions” (in the *Rules*) would count as propositions, we need to understand Descartes’ method of obtaining clear and distinct perceptions as arriving at a correct account of the content of what is before the mind. In general, this will involve seeing what is contained within a certain concept such as that of matter or of mind.

It may well be that as a consequence of this operation we will be in a position to assent to a proposition, and thus some propositions will be such that we will be able to perceive that they are true without any observations. The propositions of the fifth Meditation (“God exists,” “material things are extended,” “the angles of triangles add up to two right angles”) are such propositions. Further, Descartes no doubt held that all genuine knowledge requires the understanding of an essence and so requires clear and distinct perception of the mind. But it does not follow that all propositions assented to need to be based solely on the understanding. Sitting in the stove may be the proper method to determine the fundamental concepts of physics, and perhaps some basic laws, but it should not be assumed that sitting in the stove is the proper method to determine all truths whatsoever.

In a few places in the *Meditations* and *Replies*, Descartes characterized obscure and confused ideas as “materially false,” and while there are certain complications involved with his discussion, part of his response to Arnauld on this matter is instructive.¹³ Descartes was defending himself against the charge that he was “confusing idea and judgement” and that there was a serious confusion in calling the idea of cold “materially false.” Roughly, Arnauld said that if an idea exhibited something as positive, and cold was not something positive, then the idea wasn’t an idea of cold.¹⁴ Descartes’ response is,

10. For example, in the fifth Meditation, at AT VII, 68 (CSM II, 47), where he talks about the “true ideas,” and at 65 (CSM II, 45), where he talks about properties being true.

11. *Fourth Set of Objections*. CSM II, 145–46, AT VII, 206–07.

12. Gewirth, “Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes,” W. Doney, ed., *Descartes* (Garden City, N. Y., 1967), p. 263, esp. n. 49. See Marjorie Grene, *Descartes* (Minneapolis, 1985), p. 8, for the view that Descartes replaces judgements with ideas as the vehicle of truth.

13. In the third Meditation, for example, CSM II, 30, AT VII, 43. For the complications, see the discussion in Margaret Wilson, *Descartes* (London, 1978), pp. 106–15, and Marjorie Grene, *Descartes*, p. 12.

14. *Fourth Set of Objections*. CSM II, 145, AT VII, 206.

This is right; but my only reason for calling the idea “materially false” is that, owing to the fact that it is obscure and confused, I am unable to judge whether or not what it represents to me is something positive which exists outside my sensation.¹⁵

And a few lines later he says that “materially false” ideas are those which provide subject matter for error. His suggestion is that ideas from the senses, uncorrected by reason, are those that will then provide subject matter for erroneous judgements. The kind of judgement he has in mind is one where we judge that a feature of an idea captures a feature of the world as it is. It is not that a judgement that is based on sensation will be untrustworthy so much as that a judgement which contains ideas which are obscure and confused, which are based simply on sensation, will be untrustworthy.

We can still wonder whether the Cartesian view is that we replace the ideas of sense with ideas of the understanding, or rather use the understanding to correct the ideas of sense. At one point, in the third Meditation, Descartes says he has two ideas of the sun: “One of them, which is acquired as it were from the senses and which is a prime example of an idea which I reckon to come from an external source, makes the sun appear very small. The other idea is based on astronomical reasoning, that is, it is derived from certain notions which are innate in me (or else constructed by me in some other way), and this idea shows the sun to be several times larger than the earth.”¹⁶

Now Descartes does certainly imply that these are two different ideas, and as this example is given in the course of a discussion on the origin of ideas, one might certainly think that ideas are *either* from outside *or* innate *or* constructed in some way where the “or” is taken as exclusive. Such a conclusion would certainly support the standard characterization of Descartes’ rationalism. But should we really foist on Descartes the view that the second idea of the sun comes from the understanding alone? In the fairly late *Comments on a Certain Broad-sheet* Descartes said,

I have never written or taken the view that the mind requires innate ideas which are something distinct from its own faculty of thinking. I did, however, observe that there were certain thoughts within me which neither came to me from external objects nor were determined by my will, but came solely from the power of thinking within me. . . . This is the same sense as that in which we say that generosity is “innate” in certain families, or that certain diseases such as gout or stones are innate in others: it is not so much that the babies of such families suffer from these diseases in their mother’s womb, but simply that they are born with a certain “faculty” or tendency to contract them.¹⁷

Descartes is denying that innate ideas are little mental objects always existing in the mind and suggesting they are more like capacities or faculties for thinking certain things, abilities to process certain information and come to certain conclusions. It would be absurd to think of this second idea of the sun (including its size) as being innate in the sense that it is always there independent of any observations we have made. But what is there is the ability to do geometry and operate on what the senses give and “correct” the initial picture that the senses

15. *Fourth Set of Replies*, CSM II, 164, AT VII, 234.

16. *Fourth Meditation*, CSM II, 27, AT VII, 39.

17. *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, CSM I, 303–04, AT VIII, 357–58.

give. This second idea of the sun, then, is not so much an idea of the understanding which has replaced the one from the senses, but rather an idea formed by the understanding operating on the idea from the senses.

We are now in a position to sketch a more rational picture of Cartesian Rationalism. There is indeed an emphasis on certainty and on the role of reason. But I would suggest the primary emphasis of the quest for certainty is not on the justification of beliefs but on the clarification of concepts which go to make up those beliefs. Once these are clear, one is then in a position to make observations. These observations will be directed toward certain features in the world, those that reason says are important because they are contained within the concept of matter. The fundamental principles of physics will be based solely on the concepts, and thus knowable *a priori*, but many other principles will be based on hypotheses. The hypotheses formed and then tested will be based on these antecedently given principles, in that these principles will limit the possibilities of acceptable hypotheses.¹⁸

The use of observation and hypotheses may still seem at odds with the Cartesian exhortation to “hold back assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable,”¹⁹ and, keeping this exhortation in mind, we may well wonder whether we should believe anything at all about the size of the sun (except perhaps that it has some size), but in the sixth Meditation Descartes is much more optimistic:

Despite the high degree of doubt and uncertainty involved here, the very fact that God is not a deceiver, and the consequent impossibility of there being any falsity in my opinions which cannot be corrected by some other faculty supplied by God, offers me a sure hope that I can attain the truth even in these matters.²⁰

Here we see a familiar argument: that if there is no way to correct what we have before the mind, then, if it is not true, God would be a deceiver.

The conclusion should not be that by reason alone (if this is taken in contrast to the senses) we are able to know what the correct size of the sun is. Rather, that if we understand what a material substance is and the laws of geometry, and we make careful observations with these principles in mind, we can trust our results to be accurate. Here we have reason interpreting what the senses give it. (And correcting what the senses give, if you think, as Descartes appears to, that the senses give us a small sun.) This interpreted account will not be something the senses *by themselves* tell us, but it does not appear to be anything that reason *by itself* tells us either.

18. See Desmond Clarke, *Descartes' Philosophy of Science* (University Park, Pa., 1982), especially Chapters V and VI for more on Descartes' use of hypotheses, and Gary Hatfield, “First Philosophy and Natural Philosophy in Descartes,” A. J. Holland, ed., *Philosophy, Its History and Historiography* (Dordrecht, 1985), for a discussion of observation.

19. First Meditation, CSM II, 12, AT VII, 18.

20. Sixth Meditation, CSM II, 55–56, AT VII, 80.