

Readers:

Here are notes I used in my "Descartes" lecture on November 14. They might have some use, but if you weren't there, perhaps not (as with jokes, a matter of timing). My central, and vague, (and common) thesis is that Descartes destabilized the theory of knowledge. Partly, this was methodological: he set terms for "The Foundations of Knowledge" that were stringent, hard to ignore and questionable. Partly, this was metaphysical: his dualism led to an incoherent account of "causality," forced reconsideration of the notion of "substance," and called sharp attention to remnants of Aristotelean thought, Platonism and Atomism. There were various radical efforts to straighten things up. We're ignoring some of the most interesting and important: Spinoza, Berkeley, Malebranche...

Of course we are not ignoring Leibniz, who "logicizes" causality by analyzing causal relations as logical relations, and who revives the primacy of "primary substances" in nature. Then, over break, we will turn to Locke, who "solves" the problems Descartes raised largely by ignoring them and plunging ahead with "Patch Job Empiricism" (I just made that up, so I suppose I'll have to explain and defend it at some point), whom we follow by Hume, who recognizes the mess Locke has made and shows where clearer thinking leads.

Kant... lies ahead.

## Mind and the World

Lecture notes: Descartes

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November 14, 2006

### I. Cartesian "subjectivity"

- a. Plato set about accounting for knowledge in the context of the:

**Realism Thesis:** (thick, vague): There are matters of fact in the world, which in some sense are independent of our ideas and judgments: (1) our ideas and judgments are (often) about these matters of fact; (2) and these matters of fact serve (often) to make our ideas and judgments correct or incorrect.

- i. *Knowledge*, not just probable opinion or working hypotheses, would be of general truths about necessary connections between unchanging entities, and such *knowledge* would enable us to *live well*. A changing world is problematic, and we must confront it by recognizing that we know less about it than we naively believe; nonetheless by aspiring to higher truths, we can seek realization of our actual natures.
- ii. Triad: Representer [R], Mind-independent Ideas [I], Sensible Reality [SR]. Representation has two modes: sensation, the representation of SR; intellection, the representation of I. Furthermore, SR exists as an *imitation* of I. So, the representation of SR is *informed* by I.
- iii. Rs' capacity to represent I's is "innate."
- iv. Method: Rs depend on one another in dispelling false opinion and in recognizing that they do not know what they naively believe they know. Dialectic is essential for apprehension of the intelligible world.

- b. Descartes' modifications
  - i. Plato's Ideas become Ideas-in-the-mind-of-God.
  - ii. What Rs represent, the content of their representations, have two modes of existence: "objective being" and "formal being."
  - iii. What Rs represent has both content and "form" in relation to what is represented: the "idea" represents through content ("similarity"), and it represents through intentionality ("aboutness").

## II. Descartes' Dualism

### a. Matter:

- i. Extension -- its only essential attribute
- ii. All other properties of matter must be "modes of extension", e.g. duration
- iii. Conservation of motion
- iv. Space is a plenum; a "void" is impossible
- v. What is the source of motion? No concept of density. Quantity of motion = Size x Speed. Proposes a principle of "conservation of motion"
- vi. Example: think of an oar moving through water – eddies, "vortices"

### b. Mind:

- i. Thought -- its only essential attribute. "...I identify the thing which understands with the intellect...only if 'the intellect' is taken to refer to the thing which understands." *Third Replies*, CSM II 123, p. 70.
  1. Gassendi objects that this tells us nothing, "What we are unclear about, what we are looking for, is that inner substance of yours whose property it is to think." *Fifth Objections*, CSM II 192-3, p. 71.
  2. Descartes replies, "...[for any attribute of a substance that can know, e.g. the whiteness of the wax] there are correspondingly many attributes in the mind: one, that is has power of knowing the whiteness of the wax; two, that is has the power of know its hardness... no matter how many attributes we recognize in any given think, we can always list a corresponding number of attributes in the case of our mind which it has in virtue of knowing the attributes of the think; and hence the nature of the mind is the one we know best of all." *Kinesis and energeia* as the attributes of substance...

3. On the distinction between Mind and Body, Thought and Motion (extension), Descartes admits, "The only way of understanding the distinction is to realize that the notions of a thinking thing and an extended or mobile thing are completely different, and independent of each other; and it is self-contradictory to suppose that things that we clearly understand as different and independent could not be separated, at least by God." *Sixth Replies*, CSM II 285-7, p. 74] He assumes (?) that what can be clearly and distinctly understood as separated *must* be separated. Otherwise, God would be a deceiver.
- ii. All other properties, e.g. sensations, emotions, must be modes of thought (albeit "confused" ones).
    1. *Sixth Replies*: CSMN II 296, p. 65, "...it is the intellect alone which corrects the error of the senses."
    2. Dogs don't think... then, neither do they have sensations (because sensation is a mode of thought)
  - iii. Simple, i.e. clear and distinct, ideas are innate (their source is God) and (God's goodness having been established) true, "...no matter who the perceiver is, nothing can be clearly and distinctly perceived without its being just as we perceive it to be, i.e. without being true." (*Seventh Replies*, CSM II 310, p. 67)
  - iv. Acts of thought are "self-revealing": they need not be represented to be known.
    1. When coming to the realization that one's existence is indubitable, "...[one] recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind."
    2. "[While] It is true that no one can be certain that he is thinking or that he exists unless he knows what thought is and what existence is. But this does not require reflective knowledge, or the kind of knowledge that is acquired by means of demonstrations; still less does it require knowledge of reflective knowledge, i.e. knowing that we know, and knowing that we know that we know, and so on *ad infinitum*. This kind of knowledge cannot possibly be obtained about anything. It is quite sufficient that we should know it by that internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge." *Sixth Replies*, CSM II 285, p. 69

3. "The initial thought by means of which we become aware of something does not differ from the second thought by means of which we become aware that we were aware of it, any more than this second thought differs from the third thought by means of which we become aware that we were aware that we were aware." *Seventh Replies*, CSM II 382, p. 75.
- v. Descartes approaches "the problem of knowledge" with a strict subjectivism. All the resources he needs to gain traction on mind-independent reality can be found within a self-revealing, personal set of realities. The starting point of philosophy is that of the indubitable data of the individual consciousness. This weighed heavily on British Empiricism particularly, and it set the course for much that was to follow in "analytic philosophy."
  - vi. M.F. Burnyeat argues several points in "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed," *Phil Review*, Vol. 91. No. 1. (Jan., 1982), pp. 3-40<sup>1</sup>:
    1. He radicalizes "the problem of knowledge" with his move from the Dream argument to the possibility of an all-powerful, deceiving deity. This takes him beyond the earlier Academics and Pyrrhonian Sceptics (Sextus Empiricus, e.g.). (*Theaetetus* as well.) It leads him to ground his methodology on *knowledge* on one's own subjective states.
    2. Descartes was the first "...who put subjective knowledge at the center of epistemology." Thereafter, *modern* philosophers have to address the question "Is there anything other than mind?" Berkeley becomes the first to answer and argue for the negative.
    3. Descartes was aware the skeptical arguments he raised in the *First Meditation* were "old cabbage," as he put it (in *Replies*), but he was putting them to *methodological* use. Hyperbolic doubt and the problem of the existence of the external world become the avenue for a sound "scientific method."
    4. This leads him to the strikingly modern position that one's own body becomes, methodologically, a part of the external world.

To sum up, it is no accident that in Descartes' philosophy the following elements are found in the closest association: hyperbolic

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<sup>1</sup> This article is available on JSTOR. I found it clarifying and useful.

doubt and the problem of the existence of the external world, subjective knowledge and truth, the dualism which makes one's own body part of the external world – and the refutations of the ancient skeptical tradition. (Burnyeat, p. 39)

vii. Philosophers mentioned:

1. René Descartes (1596-1650)
2. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) author of *Third Objections*
3. Pierre Gassendi (1592- 1655) author of *Fifth Objections*
4. Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) metaphysical monist
5. Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) Cartesian “occasionalist”
6. Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1714) “logician”
7. George Berkeley (1685-1753) rejects “material substance”