

## Descartes

More than any other figure in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Descartes marks the intellectual transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern world. He stands where these streams of European thought meet. The current of medievalism flows into his philosophy and runs strongly through his metaphysics and theology, but the stream of Modernism--the current of mechanical science that has born along the European mind in the twentieth century--flows from his philosophy. In his attitude toward the Church and the mysteries of the Christian religion, Descartes might have been a good Catholic of the twelfth century. Here the spirit of Augustine is still alive. In his views of the physical world and the scientific method, he breaks sharply with the Middle Ages; he brings together in a complete system the leading ideas of the century of scientific discovery that produced Galileo, Bacon, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, and Newton.

Not that Descartes was a scientist to be ranked beside Galileo and Newton. Only one of Descartes' achievements in the exact sciences remains of value today: his geometrical method, now known as analytical geometry. He lacked the patience in observation, the love of fact for its own sake, which enables the scientist to build carefully, brick on brick, a solid structure of detailed knowledge. Like Aristotle, he was enamored of the *a priori*. He sought brilliant generalization that, in a flash, set everything in order--an order that was often reckless of details. He had a genius to seize on the generalities that were fruitful for future thought. Descartes did not lay many solid particular bricks in the structure of modern science, but he did foresee, and sketch with a vigorous hand, the entire plan of that structure. His intuition of the general natural of things leaped far beyond the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The Cartesian ego is an entity within the proposition *Cogito ergo sum*. It cannot be understood distinct from this proposition. Indeed, it could be argued that the ego is posited as this claim.

The simple logic of the proposition is not original to Descartes. This point had been made already centuries before Augustine. And one might expect Descartes to follow Augustine in expression his fundamental truth in the form *Si fallor, sum*, "If I am deceived, I exist." There is, however, a significant difference between Descartes and Augustine's proposition. Descartes' formulation is non-hypothetical. Descartes' proposition is significant because it alone can be initially claimed within his method of radical doubt.

The Cartesian method of doubt is the refusal to accept anything as true which can be doubted i.e., doubted without self-contradiction: "I suppose ... that all the things that I see are false; I persuade myself that nothing has ever existed of all that my fallacious memory represents to me. I consider that I possess no sense; I imagine that body, figure, extension, movement and place are but fictions of my mind. What, then, can be esteemed as true? Perhaps nothing at all, unless that there is nothing in the world which is certain."

The only thing that I cannot doubt is the fact that I doubt: "From the very fact that I doubt," Descartes writes, "it follows that my mind exists." This claim is not presented as a general, logically deduced proposition. It makes no claim to speak to anything outside of one's own existence. Descartes writes, "I attend only to what I

experience within myself, namely I think, therefore I am, and I do not give attention to that general notion, whatever thinks, is."

*Cogito, ergo sum*--Logically speaking, this proposition presupposes a general premise. But this does not mean that I first think of a general premise and then draw a particular conclusion. On the contrary, my explicit knowledge of the general premise follows my intuition of the objective and necessary connection between my thinking and my existing. Or, perhaps we can say that it is concomitant with the intuition, in the sense that it is discovered as latent in, or intrinsically implied in, the intuition.

There is an existential priority in Descartes' *Treatise*--That I am is primary, and what I am must follow from this claim. "I am, I exist," Descartes writes, "is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it. But I do not yet know clearly enough what I am, I who am certain that I am.

Thinking is the essence of my existence. And, hence, with the certainty of existence the ego can be affirmed as that which thinks. "What is a thing which think?" Descartes asks, "It is a thing which doubts, understands, [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines, and feels."

The existential certainty of this "thing which thinks" enables Descartes to initially posit the existential certainty of thought as thought, regardless of the actual truth of its claims. "Although the things which I perceive and imagine are perhaps nothing at all apart from me and in themselves, I am nevertheless assured that these modes of thought the I call perceptions and imaginations, inasmuch only as they are modes of thought, certainly reside (and are met with) in me." The "truth" of thought must be sought in the certainty of thinking. "I am certain that I am a thing which think; but do I not then, writes Descartes, "likewise know what is requisite to render me certain of a truth." "Truth" must reside within the certainty of individual existence, within thought. This requirement leads Descartes to posit "ideas," the pure content of thought, as the only possible truth. Ideas cannot reside in the external world, nor can they be the produce of the senses, for both world and senses have succumbed to radical doubt.

Ideas are, according to Descartes, images of things. They are the pure "subject of the action of my mind" to which I may add something else in light of my experience of this idea, i.e., in light of "volitions or affections, and other judgments." These "pure subjects of thought" cannot be false in an existential sense for "whether I image a goal or a chimera, it is not less true that I imagine one than the other."

As modes of thought, these ideas can be claimed as certain, i.e., as ontologically certain, as existing thought present to my mind. These ideas, however as thus far presented cannot lay claim to an external truth. "If ideas are only taken as certain modes of thought," Descartes writes, "I recognize amongst them no difference or inequality, and all appear to proceed from me in the same manner." Hence the insulation of thought which stems from Descartes' doubting the senses as a means of obtaining knowledge must be overcome if truth about the world is to be obtained. The assertion that what is clearly and distinctly perceived are our thoughts and ideas of things--and these ideas proceed not from objects outside of me, but rather from the mind--must be retrieved from its subjective (one sided) prison.

**Subjective:** one sided.

Descartes attempts to break out of the isolation of the mind by grounding clear and distinct ideas in necessity--a necessity that governs thinking in such a way as to bridge the certainty of ideas as modes of thought and the truth of their claims. Ideas, as images, must have a cause that this cause must be of greater--or at least of equal--"formal," or "actual" reality than the idea as an "actual" mode of thought.

The term "objective reality" is used by Descartes in contrast to "formal" or "actual" reality: the former points to the status of the idea as "image" or representation of something in understanding; and latter signifies existence or "being." In order for ideas to differ, or to "contain some one certain object reality rather than another," there must be a cause which has as much "formal" reality as the idea has "objective" reality. Idea cannot generate ideas *ad infinitum*. There must be a cause which can claim as its "formal" reality what is "objectively" represented in the idea.

If it were not for the Cartesian *epoche* which has placed the world under radical doubt, this understanding of the nature of ideas could lead Descartes to the following conclusion: insofar as the "formal" reality of the "objectively real" ideas does not reside in me, I can claim that I am not alone in the world, but that there is another that exists and is the cause of this idea. The logical flow of this conclusion, however, is problematic. It remains the case that any being beyond myself is a logically deduced conclusion from the presence of these ideas to me, the "thing which thinks." It is also the case, Descartes states, that our ideas are often obscure and confused, i.e., "they exhibit so little reality to me that I cannot clearly distinguish the thing represented from non-being." So pervasive is the imperfection of our ideas, our clear and distinct ideas are limited to things that may, indeed, have their origin in me.

Above Contradiction if we think that objective reality does not exist within us.

The derived or deduced, status of the external world prevents Descartes from positing it--in any form--as the original source of my "true" ideas. His *Meditations* are a profound turning away from the world and toward an "internal" necessity--a necessity that resides within the existential certainty of the "thing which thinks" as the principal source of truth. It is in this sense that Descartes' analytic method, his method of discovery (of primary, or first, principles) can be characterized as an ordered movement back to the certainty of one's own existence. True knowledge must be grounded in the original proposition, *Cogito, ergo sum*.

Of all my ideas, there is only one idea that cannot be claimed as originating in me. This is the idea of God, which, for Descartes, encompasses "a substance that is infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, all-knowing, all-powerful, and by which I myself and everything else, if anything else exists, have been created."

The fact that we have an idea of God but we do not formally possess these attributes leads Descartes to posit the necessary existence of God as the formal cause of this idea. Though Descartes' argument may, at first, appear similar to the argument for an actual world from one's objective ideas, there is a significant difference: God is being posited not as a logically deduced actuality, but as a necessary, ontological priority to actuality itself. In other words, whereas Descartes could not posit the existence of an external world because it was deduced from the existence of thought,

he can posit God as the necessary, or the ontologically required, actuality in the very certainty of one's own existence. Descartes writes,

When I slightly relax my attention, my mind, finding its vision somewhat obscured and so to speak blinded by the images of sensible objects, I do not easily recollect the reason why the idea that I possess of a being more perfect than I, must necessarily have been placed in my mind by a being which is really more perfect; that this is why I wish here to go on to the inquire where I, who has this idea, can exist if no such being exists.

If God is the formal cause of my idea of God in Descartes' schema, he must be the necessary cause of his very existence.

I am not capable of giving myself life, or of conserving my existence. Hence, my existence is dependent on something yet more perfect as the cause of my actual continuance. Descartes distinguishes the notion of cause from creation, and thereby posits God as the necessity within the immediacy of the proposition *Cogito, ergo sum*.

"And thus," Descartes writes, "there can be no difficulty in this regard, but we must of necessity conclude from the fact alone that I exist, or that the idea of a Being supremely perfect--that is, of God--is in me, that the proof of God's existence is grounded on the highest evidence." The wording of this argument is important because it carefully draws a profound relation between my idea of God and the idea of my existence, but it resists stating that the idea of God is a result of, or derived from, my existence. Descartes is making the claim that to exist is to possess an idea of God. I cannot claim to exist without this idea, in the same manner that I cannot claim to exist without thought. Though the discovery of my own existence precedes my discovery of God's existence, the latter is not derived from the former; rather, it is required in my very claim to exist.

This distinction between a derived idea and the necessitated idea of God is drawn yet more firmly in Descartes' *Notes against a Programme*. In this work, Descartes states, "I have shown that we have a notion or idea of God such that ... we realize from this contemplation alone, that it cannot be but that God exists, since existence, not merely possible or contingent as a ideas of all other things, but altogether necessary and actual, is contained in this concept." Existence is an essential "attribute" of God. The idea of God is the necessity of existence: the essence to which existence necessarily pertains. God exists necessarily and, as such, is the ontological foundation for my own continuing existence. Neither my idea of myself nor of any other existing thing can claim this necessity or existence. For everything but God, existence is contingent.

I do not "have," or "possess" existence, for I cannot conserve my existence: I am not the necessity of my being. Insofar as I do exist, I know that I am dependent on that which exists necessarily, upon that which does conserve my existence, and hence I possess an idea of God by my very awareness of my existence.

To state that one's existence is dependent on god is to state that the faculty of thought is likewise dependent, for thinking is what is claimed in my existing. Thinking is humanity's unchangeable, necessary "attribute." I am only insofar as and as long as I think, or my thought is. To deny thought its dependency on god--

the necessity of existence itself--is to thus deny my own existence--the existence of the "thing which thinks." To realize that the faculty of thought is dependent on God is, according to Descartes, to reveal the possibility whereby the truth of thought can be grounded. All knowledge--all true ideas--derived from this faculty of thought itself, that is, ideas that are distinct from the senses and my will, must be true for it is innate to this faculty and hence dependent on God. This true knowledge makes up our "innate ideas."

The status of these innate ideas is not clearly or consistently present. I think that Copleston is, nevertheless correct to turn to Descartes' *Notes against a Programme* for Descartes' definition. In this work, Descartes writes,

For I never wrote or concluded that the mind required innate ideas which were in some sort different from its faculty of thinking; but where I observed the existence in me of certain thought which proceeded not from extraneous objects nor from the determination of my will, but solely from the faculty of thinking which is within me, then that I might distinguish the ideas or notions (which are the forms of these thoughts) from other thoughts adventitious or factitious, I termed the former "innate."

An innate idea is hence not some type of entity which somehow takes hold of our thinking; rather, it stems solely from a "certain disposition or propensity" of the faculty of thinking. Innate ideas proceed from our faculty of thinking inevitably or necessarily: they are the results of the innate disposition of the mind. They are not simply imperfect images of something external to thinking; rather, they are the clear and distinct result of the mind's natural, or innate, make-up. They could not be, in regards to their content, otherwise, unless the mind itself were made otherwise.

Ideas are innate, not in the sense of being entities that somehow reside in us despite ourselves, but in the sense that they reside in the mind "potentially," i.e., as inevitable ideas, given the innate disposition of our faculty of thinking.

Two mental operations make up the activity of the mind out of which knowledge can be achieved: intuition and deduction. Both operations are purely intellectual, i.e., distinct from the senses. "Intuition is the undoubting conception of an unclouded and attentive mind, and springs from the light of reason alone." To intuit is to grasp, or intellectually "see," in terms of conceptions. "Thus each individual can mentally have intuition of the fact that we exist, and that he thinks; that the triangle is bounded by three lines only and so on." These examples suggest that "facts" as they relate to intuition are distinguishable not in terms of the nature of their content--existential and geometrical facts are equally facts--but in terms of their degree of certainty, i.e., the "purity" with which the conception is grasped. Deduction consists of all necessary inference from other facts that are known with certainty. It is the process whereby conclusions are drawn in succession from intuitions. These mental operations are innate and hence infallible. "If left to itself, Copleston explains, "the mind is infallible. ... If this were not the case, not technique could supply for the mind's own radical deficiency." Descartes' method can thus be understood to be a set of rules for rightly employing these natural, infallible capacities and operations of the mind.