

Notes for March 10

- Renee Descartes 1596-1650

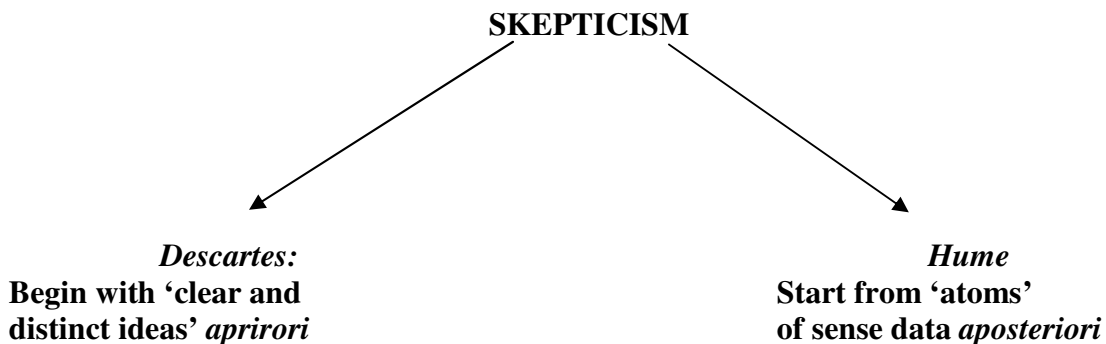
You might be wondering why you finished a previous reading by David Hume, who lived nearly a century after Renee Descartes. It turns out, however, Hume is a good segue into Descartes.

Why?

Short answers: Both Hume and Descartes were profoundly *skeptical* philosophers. You saw the consequences of Hume’s skepticism, how it informed his subtle ‘psychologism’ (i.e., that all we have direct access to is our sense-data and our *beliefs* we form thereon) towards religion and science, as mostly explicitly revealed in his remarks concerning religion in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

It scarcely needs mentioning how momentous Descartes was, as his skepticism initiated the ‘epistemological turn’ in Western philosophy.<sup>1</sup> So instead of a long historical narrative (as literature on Descartes’ impact is virtually boundless – simply “google” his name!) we move straight into the *Meditations*.

The comparisons between Hume and Descartes “stop at the start,” however, so to speak. That is to say, though Hume (lawyer, diplomat) and Descartes (mathematician, soldier-of-fortune) begin from a deeply skeptical position, they take off in radically opposite directions:



This makes Descartes’ skepticism far more radical, and disturbing. By grounding epistemic certainty the way he does, seeking to conform to the *apriori* deductive certainty of geometry, Descartes established a *rationalist* program, i.e., a program arguing for *reason alone* as the foundation of all knowledge. Hume, on the other hand, sought to

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<sup>1</sup> Recall footnote 2 in the previous notes on Hume. The *epistemological turn* represented ...a philosophical position which puts *epistemology* as its central enterprise, displacing metaphysics. In other words, questions concerning the ‘ultimate nature of reality’ were subsumed under questions concerning *how we come to know reality*.

“base” most knowledge-claims through *aposteriori* induction by establishing an *empirical* program. In a way, Hume took an ‘easier’ path, insofar as his empiricism takes direct experience of the sensory world for granted. For Descartes, on the other hand, this is unacceptable. The sensory world is the *last* thing to take for granted! As with terms like: *apriori/aposteriori* that are essential in Hume, so the notions *substance/essence*<sup>2</sup> for Descartes:

- **Defn 1:** A *substance* is a (metaphysically) independently-existing *subject*. Logically, substances form the *subject* of a statement (or proposition.)
- **Defn 2:** An *essence* is a (metaphysically) *necessary property* of a substance<sup>3</sup>. Logically, substances form the *predicate* of a statement (or proposition.)

**Example 1:** According to Aristotle, the *essence* of the substance “man” (subject) is *rationality*. (An accident [see footnote 3 below] would be hair color, etc.)

One consequence of Descartes’s radically rationalist skepticism is the profound *dualism*. There are *two substances* : Mind (subject) / Space (object). This dualism is fundamental and cuts across metaphysics, epistemology, and method:

Substance 1: MIND	Substance 2: SPACE
<p><b>Metaphysical Essence:</b>  <i>Thinking/Thought</i>            “But what am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses.” [Med II, § 28]</p>	<p><b>Metaphysical Essence:</b>  <i>Extension/Measure</i></p>
<p><b>Epistemological Essence: Certainty</b>            “...On the other hand arithmetic, geometry...which treat of nothing but the <i>simplest and most general things</i>...contain something certain and indubitable.” [Med. I, § 20]</p>	<p><b>Epistemological Essence: Uncertainty</b>            “It is not improper to conclude...that physics, astronomy, medicine, and all the other disciplines that are that dependent upon the consideration of <i>composite entities</i> are <i>doubtful</i>...” [Med. I, § 20]</p>

<sup>2</sup> “Scholastic” notions that have their origin in Aristotelean thought.

<sup>3</sup> A contingent property is an “accident.”

<p><b>Methodological Essence: <i>The Four Laws of Thought</i></b><sup>4</sup>: a.) Certainty → b) analysis → c) constructions → d) generalizations</p>	<p><b>Methodological Essence: <i>The Four Rules of conduct</i></b>: a.) Custom → b) moderation → c) commitments → d) virtue</p>
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In Meditation III, his “conclusion” of God’s “necessary existence” (§ 45) involves a hodge-podge of ontological and cosmological notions, including our intuition of the infinite (§ 42) and perfection (§ 47). Rather than hash through the details of the argument, keep in mind how *essential* the notion of God is, in terms of ‘reconstructing’ oneself epistemologically (via the Four Laws of Thought) *and* the notion of an externally persisting objective substance (extension.)

“When I turn the mind’s eye toward myself, I understand not only that I am something incomplete and dependent upon another...but also the being on whom I depend has in himself all those greater things—not merely indefinitely potentially, but infinitely and actually...God, I say, that same being the idea of whom is in me: a being having all those perfections that I cannot comprehend, ***but can somehow touch with my thought...***” [M III § 52]

“ If, for example, I consider the faculty of understanding, I immediately recognize...it is very small and quite limited, ***and at the very same time I form an idea of another much greater faculty of understanding—in fact, an understanding which is consummately great and infinite; and from the fact that I can form an idea of this faculty, I perceive that it pertains to the nature of God.***” [M IV § 57]

“But once I perceived that there is a God, and also understand at the same time that everything depends on him, and that he is not a deceiver, ***I then concluded that everything that I clearly and distinctly perceive is necessarily true.***” [M V § 70]

These steps enable him to ‘reconstruct’ bit by bit a rational belief that the thinking substance is not being deceived – but at the expense remaining conceptually nebulous, do to the self-professed limitations of human thought. Yet God is also needed to keep the substances ‘in synch,’ “I am present to my body the way a sailor is present to a ship.” [M VI § 81]

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<sup>4</sup> *Discourse of Method* (1638) “The first was never to accept anything as true that I did not ***plainly know to be such***...second, to ***divide***... difficulties I would examine ***into as many parts as possible***...third, to conduct my thoughts...***by commensuring with those objects that are simplest***...in order ***to ascend*** little by little...***to the knowledge of the most composite***...And the last, everywhere to make enumerations ***so complete*** and reviews ***so general***...” §18, Descartes, Renee, *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy*, trns. Donald Cress (4<sup>th</sup> edn.) Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998, p. 11

- **Is Theism the Only Way Out from this Radical Skepticism?**

Reading Descartes' *Meditations* the unease is the extreme rational skepticism—the suspension of belief—requires an even more philosophically problematic notion to prevent oneself from sliding down a slippery slope towards radical subjectivity or solipsism.<sup>5</sup>

Consider again Descartes' opening remarks:

“I am forced to admit that there is nothing among the things I once believed to be true which is not permissible to doubt—and not out of frivolity or lack of forethought, but for valid and considered reasons....[But] long-standing opinions keep returning, and, almost against my will, they take advantage of my credulity, as if it were bound over to them by long use and the claims of intimacy....Hence, it seems to me I would do well to *deceive myself by turning my will in completely the opposite direction and pretend for a time that these opinions are wholly false and imaginary*...there is no danger or error in following this procedure...it is impossible for me to indulge in too much distrust, *since I am now concentrating only on knowledge, not on action.* [Meditation I, § 22 italics added.]

From these opening lines, one gathers that Descartes is laying all his cards on the table. He invites the reader on a skeptical odyssey by confessing that “valid and considered reasons” nag at the almost irresistibly overwhelming “claims of intimacy” of “long-standing opinions” inevitably lulling him, almost unaware, into the slumber of unquestioned assumptions and beliefs.

*I would do well to deceive myself by turning my will in completely the opposite direction...and pretend for a time.* A natural reaction might be to recoil. The question is begged: How, precisely, would one “do well” by assuming such a stance?. The burden of proof rests on Descartes to convince the reader that serious epistemological progress can be made, with “valid and considered” reasons.

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<sup>5</sup> The belief that everything exists in and for the subject, i.e., that there's no outside world.