

Reason and Sense-Experience in Descartes

The ideal of Cartesianism is a purely rational one, as Descartes himself asserts, for he makes the reduction of all the concepts of philosophy to clear and distinct ideas its goal, and he regards the ideas of mathematics as patterns of clarity and distinctness. He is not fully satisfied, however, with the degree of clearness obtainable in mathematics, and desires to find instances of perfectly clear and distinct ideas from which to develop his system. These he believes he has found in the ideas of the self and of god, the one containing the minimum and the other the maximum of conceivable content. According to him, their conception embraces their existence. These are the sole cases of immediately certain (or intuitive) knowledge which he admits into his system of philosophy; his doubt of everything which cannot present these claims for metaphysical consideration (which are, it seems, pretty stringent).

however, he himself admits to be forced and artificial,^{and}, and he does not extend it to the sphere of natural science, so long as the latter refrains from ontologizing its conceptions. He finds a place for science in his system by appealing to the necessary truthfulness of a perfect deity, which, he believes, guarantees that ~~sense-~~ experience must refer to something, which, as it is limited, must ~~be~~ not be God himself.¹⁹ It would seem on first sight that this necessary truthfulness of god would guarantee absolute clarity to the ideas which we obtain through sense-experience, but Descartes tries to account for the unclarity of the ideas of sense-experience through the fact that God has created us free to err, and that we may ~~not~~ voluntarily choose to connect an idea in our experience with the wrong reality. Even yet, however, it would seem ~~to~~ natural to suppose that to a person who earnestly desired to know the truth sense-experience would furnish ideas of
¹⁹ He does not see that truthfulness is a limitation. c.f. Spinoza on determination and negation in the deity.

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absolute clarity. How, then, are we to explain the fact that even the man who wills to see things rightly has dreams, illusions, and hallucinations, and that a man cannot be responsible for choosing the false unless he knows that it is false, and therefore already knows the truth? Descartes would, ^{have to} respond that these difficulties are answered by the fact that the free will makes its choices by pure chance. He does not hold this view consistently, however, and indeed it cannot be held consistently. In the first place, such a will ~~would~~ could not be determined in its action by any motives, and therefore could not be a moral will. In the second place, the unlimited power of error resistant in such a will would make absolutely null and void all the ~~certainty of~~ ^{certainty of} ~~safety~~ for the validity of sense-experience furnished by the absolute truthfulness of God. Of what avail is it if the ~~infinitely~~ ^{absolutely} truthful deity has carefully arranged the sense-

ideas in our soul to correspond with some outer spatial reality, if our irresponsibles will promptly proceeds to rearrange our ideas of sense haphazard. One can get no adequate solution of the problem of error by regarding sensation as a mixture of truth and error, — truth and error will not mix. It is only by taking an organic view of the situation, by making the phenomenon of learning the point of attack rather than error, that we can ever hope to approach a solution of this difficult problem. The two questions, 'why is my knowledge at all true?' and 'why is my knowledge at all false?' cannot be separated. It was the conceptual atomism of Descartes which rendered a satisfactory solution of the problem of error impossible for him, as it was the perceptual atomism of Hume which later prevented him from giving an adequate answer to the converse opposite problem, — the problem of mathematical certainty.

¹) Descartes regards spatiality (as the subject matter of geometry, and therefore a clear and distinct idea) as the true criterion and attribute of the matter. One reason why he was so interested in the physical science of his day is probably that he regarded it as akin to mathematics in nature as well as in actual use.

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