

Locke on Descartes on Unavoidable Thoughts

Perhaps you've heard this one. Rene Descartes walks into a restaurant. It's his favorite restaurant, and he knows what he wants, so when the waitress asks him whether he would like to see the menu he says, 'I think not.' And *poof*, he disappears.

I once told this joke to an eminent early modern scholar, and he objected that it was fallacious. I defended the joke's scholarly merit on the ground that Descartes did in fact believe that if he were ever to stop thinking, he would cease to exist. Of course, we were both right. It doesn't immediately follow from *I think, therefore I am* that if I were to cease to think then I would cease to be. And Descartes did think that it followed when supplemented by other principles. I'll explain how Descartes reasoned, explain how Locke criticized Descartes's reasoning, and conclude that Descartes's method for discovering essences is unreliable.

1 Unavoidable and Sufficient Thoughts

To Gassendi, Descartes writes, "I am surprised that you should declare here that all my considerations about the wax demonstrate indeed that I distinctly know that I exist, but not however what I am or to what sort I belong; since one cannot be demonstrated without the other" (CSM 2.248 AT 7.359; Secada 146-47).¹ That is, you can't distinctly know that you

¹ References to CSM or CSMK are to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenney, 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-91. References to AT are to *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 11 vols. Paris: Vrin, 1996. References to PP are to part and section of the *Principles of Philosophy*, and may be found in vol. 1 of CSM and the first part of volume 8 of AT. I've modified the translations. References to Locke's *Essay* are to book, chapter, and section of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975. The quotation from Plato is unmodified from *Five Dialogues*, translated by G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981. The quotation from Aristotle is a modified version of that in Barnes 1993. I accessed the Greek text from the web site Bibliotheca Augustana http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/graeca/Chronologia/S_ante04/Aristoteles/ari_a221.html and took translation advice

exist without knowing what your nature is.² Descartes here invokes an instance of the ancient principle that until you know what a thing is, you can't have first-rate knowledge of anything else about it. Call this the *Order of Inquiry Principle*.

In the dialogues that seem to reflect his conversational practice, Socrates moves his interlocutors away from such questions as 'is it pious to prosecute one's father for murder?' and 'does learning to fight in armor make boys courageous?' to 'what is piety?' and 'what is courage?'. Plato has Socrates ask, "If I do not know what something is, how could I know what qualities it possesses?" (*Meno* 71b).

In the *Posterior Analytics* Aristotle emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between knowing that something exists and knowing its essence. For him, we know something incidentally when we understand it under a non-essential description.³ He seems to assume that real knowledge requires knowledge of essence, and thus, knowing that something exists requires knowing its essence: "On the one hand, insofar as we know incidentally that something exists, we don't get it at all from the essence, for we don't even know that it exists" (*Post. An.* 93a24-26). Going in the other direction, he argues that we can't know the essence of a thing without knowing that it exists, because without knowledge of existence, we lack an object of inquiry: "On the other hand, to investigate what something is without getting that it exists is to investigate nothing" (93a26-27). He concludes that there's a kind of graduated biconditional between knowledge of existence and knowledge of essence: "So insofar as we get that something exists, to that extent we also get it from the essence" (93a28-29). That is to say, the better our grasp of the nature of a thing, the better our grasp of the thing itself.

from ζ . My reference to Leibniz is to *Philosophical Essays*, edited and translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Hackett, 1989

² See also CSM 2.78 AT 7.108 and Secada 7.

³ This is controversial. Some commentators (e.g. Demoss and Devereux 147-49) take incidental knowledge to mean the sort of knowledge we can have when we don't understand the relevant term. See Barnes (218-19) for discussion and a defense of the view that I assert in the main text.

For our purposes, the important part is the first half of the biconditional: without knowledge of essence, we can't have real knowledge of existence.⁴

Judging by the *Apology*, the historical Socrates never reached the point where he thought that he was able to give accounts of the virtues. Plato thought that the best recipe for grasping the forms was a mixture of music, gymnastics, communism, and dialectic. Aristotle thought that sensation leads to memory, which leads to experience, which leads to the formation of universals, and to a knowledgeable grasp of those universals (*Post. An.* 2.19).

Descartes thinks that he can discover his essence by considering what he would know under conditions of extreme epistemic deprivation. Even on the supposition that there's a supremely powerful demon doing his best to deceive you, you can still be absolutely certain that you exist. Given the *Order of Inquiry Principle*, it follows that you know what your essence is, even assuming that you are in the grip of a powerful and malevolent spirit.

Descartes then considers various candidate answers to the question 'what am I?' and rejects all but one as insufficiently well known under the condition of hyperbolic doubt. The one exception is *being a thinking thing*, and he settles on that as constituting his nature. Since he affirms the traditional doctrine that "Nothing can ever be deprived of its own essence," he infers that the soul always thinks (CSMK 3.189 AT 3.423). This is, modulo some variations, Stephen Schiffer's account of Descartes's reasoning in "Descartes on His Essence," Marleen Rozemond's in *Descartes's Dualism* (Ch. 1), and Jorge Secada's in *Cartesian Metaphysics* (esp. 22-25, 143-47).

⁴ Some late scholastic thinkers emphasized the other direction, claiming that know that a thing exists is strictly and asymmetrically prior to knowing its essence (Secada 7-9). Some modern commentators read Aristotle in this way as well. According to David Demoss and Daniel Devereux (1988), Aristotle held that having a preliminary account of what a thing is is strictly prior to knowing that it exists which in turn is strictly prior to knowing its essence. In a sympathetic critical discussion, Marguerite Deslauriers concludes that the accounts of what a thing is that are prerequisites for knowing that a thing exists are indeed nominal definitions but that they nevertheless "say *something* of what the essence is" (76).

Descartes makes the principle underlying the inference explicit in a passage from the *Principles of Philosophy*: “A substance may indeed be known through any attribute; but each substance nevertheless has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred.” The examples at the end of the section reveal two principles that Descartes believes will allow us to find these attributes. First, if a substance is G and has a principal attribute F, you can’t understand that the substance has the mode G, unless you think of it as being in a F-thing: “Thus, for example, figure can only be understood in an extended thing, nor can motion be understood except in extended space; neither imagination, nor sense, nor will can be understood except in a thinking thing (PP 1.53). This is like the *Order of Inquiry Principle*, but a bit stronger. When you think with comprehension of a substance as being G, it’s not enough to have the knowledge of the essence of the substance in your hip pocket. You need to actively consider the mode as being in a substance that is F. We may call this the *Unavoidable Thought Principle*.

Principal attributes are unlike modes in that thinking that a substance has a principal attribute doesn’t require thinking of any other properties: “But on the other hand, extension can be understood without figure or motion, and thought without imagination or sensation, and so on for the rest” (ibid.) Descartes’s point is not just that we can think of extension and thought without thinking of any other properties, but that we can think of substances as extended or thinking without needing to think of any further properties. We may call this the *Sufficiency of Essence Principle*. Thinking that a substance has its principal attribute doesn’t require any further thoughts.

A nice subtlety arises in Descartes’s treatment of ‘rational distinctions.’ A rational distinction is one that obtains between a substance and one of its attributes or between two of its attributes. (In this context, an ‘attribute’ is an unchanging feature of a substance.) The

criterion for there being only a rational distinction between substance and attribute is “that we can’t form a clear and distinct idea of the substance, if we exclude that attribute from it” (PP 1.62). So, for example, a substance’s duration and the substance itself are only rationally distinct, since you can’t form a clear and distinct idea of the substance while excluding its duration (ibid.; Nolan 131-32). We might suspect that the example commits Descartes to making duration the principal attribute of every substance, but a little reflection shows that it doesn’t. Not being able to exclude an attribute is a weaker condition than being forced to consider an attribute. For example, our inability to think of a durationless Fido doesn’t entail that every time we think of Fido, we must consider his duration.

Principal attributes are merely rationally distinct from their substances, according to Descartes. They can’t be intelligibly excluded from their substances. Principal attributes have two further features. First, we can’t help but think of principal attributes in forming clear and distinct ideas of substances; and, second, ideas of principal attributes don’t need to be supplemented with other ideas in order for us to form clear and distinct ideas of substances.

In arguing for dualism in the *Sixth Meditation*, Descartes refers to his argument in the *Second Meditation* that thinking constitutes his essence. If we look closely at the text, we can see that he appeals to the Unavoidable Thought Principle and the Uniformity of Essence Principle. He writes, “and thus, from the fact that I’ll know that I exist while I’ll notice nothing plainly different pertaining to my nature or essence⁵ beyond the single fact that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists in this alone, that I am a thinking thing” (AT 7.78 CSM 2.54). When we have the best sort of knowledge of our

⁵ “*interim nihil plane aliud ad naturam sive essentiam meam pertinere animadvertam*” One might put this into indirect discourse as “while I’ll notice *that* nothing plainly different pertains to my nature or essence”. On the interpretation suggested by this translation, Descartes could move directly from the premise *I notice that my essence consists only in thinking* to the conclusion that *my essence consists only in thinking*. Against this reading, it makes his appeal to his knowledge of his own existence irrelevant to the inference, which doesn’t fit the text.

existence, we notice that we think, which is what the Unavoidable Thought Principle tells us we must notice, if thinking is our nature. And we notice it without considering anything else besides thinking, as the Sufficiency of Essence Principle tells us that we can, if thinking is our nature (see Schiffer 33-34). Without these principles, or ones like them, we can't understand Descartes's reasoning.

By the *Sixth Meditation*, Descartes has argued for the existence, goodness, and omnipotence of God, which entails, he believes, that things with distinct essences can exist apart from one another and thus that minds and bodies can exist apart from one another. With the help of God's veracity and power, Descartes concludes that the essences he has discovered through psychological and epistemic criteria reveal the deep metaphysical structure of the world (Schiffer 38-39).

2 Thinking of Taste and Smell Without Extension

Locke's arguments against the Cartesian doctrine that the essence of body is extension are mostly aimed at clearing conceptual space for extension without solidity. I want to pick up two arguments that target the assumptions behind Descartes's metaphysical inferences.

The first occurs in §24 of the *Essay's* chapter on the simple modes of space. Locke tells us he is addressing "those, who conclude the essence of Body to be *Extension*, because, they say, they cannot imagine any sensible Quality of any Body without Extension," that is, he's criticizing those who argue that the essence of body is extension by appealing to the *Unavoidable Thought Principle*. To them, Locke writes,

I shall desire them to consider, That had they reflected on their *Ideas* of Tastes and Smells, as much as on those of Sight and Touch; nay had they examined their *Ideas* of Hunger and Thirst, and several other Pains, they would have found, that they included in them no *Idea* of Extension at all. (2.13.24)

We can consider the taste and smell of food without considering its extension. Since extension isn't privileged in this way, we should conclude that it "is but an affection of Body, as well as the rest discoverable by our Senses, which are scarce acute enough to look into the pure Essences of things." By the *Unavoidable Thought Principle*, it follows that extension is not the essence of any piece of food.

Locke thus believes that we can think of sensible qualities of bodies without thinking of the bodies as extended. Ideas of taste, smell, hunger, thirst, and other pains are supposed to illustrate that point. The examples are a little puzzling. He emphasizes the importance of distinguishing ideas and qualities, that is, in distinguishing perceptions in the mind and powers outside the mind (2.8.7), and in thinking about how these examples are supposed to work against the Cartesian thesis that the essence of body is extension, it's best to heed that advice. Locke asserts elsewhere that pains are "only different Constitutions of the Mind" (2.20.2), but the point of the exercise is to show that it's possible to consider the sensible *qualities* of bodies without considering their extension.

Let us distinguish between the sensations of sweet, acrid, hunger, thirst, and pain from sweeteners, caustics, appetizers, the parching, and the painful. That is, let us distinguish the ideas that he mentions and the powers to produce those ideas. According to Locke, we can think of bodies that have the powers to produce ideas of hunger and the smell of bread in us without conceiving of those bodies as extended. If we can, then, by the *Unavoidable Thought Principle*, it follows that the essence of those bodies isn't extension. Well, can we?

Maybe and maybe not. You might try it and succeed straightaway. Or you might try it and find the idea of extension sneaking around the corner. We should take up the issue from a more historical angle. Descartes's recommended analysis of color perception is "that we perceive something in the objects whose nature we do not know, but which produces in

us a very manifest and vivid sensation which we call the sensation of color” (PP 1.70).

Visible color and shape both make us certain of the presence of a body, “but we recognize much more evidently what it is for a body to be figured as compared to what it is for it to be colored” (PP 1.69; Downing 118-28). Even though sensations of color and shape are sure indications of an external body, we comprehend the extension of bodies more clearly than their colors.

The *Order of Inquiry Principle* is compatible with having a true but second-rate grip on things without knowing their essences. In the *Meno*, Plato distinguished between knowledge, which requires an account, and true opinion, which doesn’t. True opinion is a useful guide for behavior, but it isn’t stable, and it can’t be taught. Pericles stumbled upon true opinions about virtue, without having an account of its essence, for example. He could lead Athens but he couldn’t teach his sons to be virtuous. Aristotle, as we have seen, allows that we may have incidental knowledge of a thing even when we don’t know the thing’s essence. *Principles of Philosophy* 1.53 gives a necessary condition on understanding a substance, and understanding is a relatively high cognitive level for Descartes. He denies that our indirect and relative judgment that something produces a sensation in us makes the grade.

Locke himself believes that the idea of yellowness is “not really in the Gold, considered barely in itself” (2.23.37) and that an idea of a primary quality is “an *Idea* of the thing, as it is in it self” (2.8.23). He is happy to say that ideas of secondary qualities only give us a relative and indirect grasp of substances. If we restrict the level of understanding involved in the *Unavoidable Thought Principle* to cases where we have some grip on substances as they are in themselves, then ideas of secondary qualities don’t provide counter-examples, even by Locke’s own lights.

One might worry that restricting the relevant knowledge to knowledge of features of the thing as it is in itself will make the *Unavoidable Thought Principle* and the *Order of Inquiry Principle* into tautologies, as if to say that you can't know the essence of a thing without knowing the essence of a thing. But the restriction I have in mind is that you can't know the features that belong to a thing as it is in itself without knowing the essence of a thing. Not every quality that belongs to a thing intrinsically constitutes its essence. Plato's height and his cleverness may belong to him as he is in himself, but they don't constitute his essence.⁶

3 Unity as an Unavoidable Thought

Locke offers a second criticism of the principle behind Descartes's reasoning. Locke writes,

If those *Ideas*, which are constantly joined to all others, must therefore be concluded to be the Essence of those Things, which have constantly those *Ideas* joined to them, and are inseparable from them; then Unity is without doubt the essence of every thing. For there is not any Object of Sensation or Reflection, which does not carry with it the *Idea* of one (2.13.25)

He appeals to the *Unavoidable Thought Principle* to derive the conclusion that unity is the essence of each thing. It isn't absurd to think that each thing is essentially one. Locke's argument isn't a *reductio ad absurdum*, but rather a *reductio* to a conclusion to that Descartes doesn't accept. Nor does Locke accept the conclusion. He offers it as another example to show "the weakness of this kind of Argument" (ibid.).

In favor of the conclusion that everything's essence is unity, we may observe that each thing is one thing.⁷ To divide a thing into two is, in the ordinary case, to destroy it. Still, unity doesn't do the explanatory or taxonomic work that we might want from an essence. If each thing is one thing, then knowing that a thing is one tells you very little about it, nor does it separate unified things off from other more diverse objects.

⁶ I owe the objection to x.

⁷ As Leibniz emphasizes in his April 30, 1687 letter to Arnaud (AG 86)

Even so, granting the conclusion that unity is the essence of each thing, that everything is one, doesn't seem like a very bitter pill to swallow. Whatever rhetorical force the argument may have had against contemporary Cartesians, it doesn't have much rhetorical force for me.

Locke could have used the example slightly differently by appealing to the *Sufficiency of Essence Principle*. If it is true that you can't think of a thing without thinking of it as unified, then it would follow that extension isn't the essence of body, since you couldn't think of a body as extended without having the further thought that it is one. A similar argument would show that thinking is not the essence of mind.

Descartes would presumably grant that a thing's unity is merely rationally distinct from the thing, that is, that we can't form a clear and distinct idea of a thing while excluding its unity.⁸ But Descartes denies that simple substances can have more than one principal attribute (CSM 1.298 AT 8B 349-50; Rozemond 24-28), so he'll have to deny that every thought of a substance requires us to consider the unity of the substance.

Is it true that the idea of unity is inescapably joined to our thoughts of everything? Can you think of something as extended without thinking of it as one thing having extension? Well, the reader must be a rational agent. Go ahead and try. Consider the nearest table without thinking of it as one table. Did you succeed? You might reasonably complain that this is a trick question, like asking you not to think of an elephant. Normally, it's easy to not think of unity. It's only in the special context where you're asked to not think of unity that the appearance of a problem arises. I don't think that the revised version of the argument works, since we can think of things without considering their unity.

⁸ I owe this point to y.

So much is true, but these considerations still reveal a problematic feature of Descartes's method in inquiry into essence, its susceptibility to framing effects. If I ask you to consider Lassie as a dog, you can succeed, and once you start, it may be hard to stop. But if you think of Lassie as an extended thing, it may be hard to think of her without thinking of her in that way. Examining yourself, you can think of yourself as human, and, if I asked you to stop, you may find yourself at a loss.

Now those sympathetic to Cartesian metaphysics may observe that we may at least tell a story in which Lassie isn't a dog, e.g., if she turned out to be a robot of some sort. It's harder and perhaps impossible to tell a story in which Lassie isn't extended. Likewise, you can tell a story in which you aren't a human being, e.g. the story told at the end of the *First Meditation* and at the beginning of the *Second Meditation* in which an evil deceiver fools you into thinking that you have a body. At this point, the argument breaks down. We can tell a story in which we don't think all the time. That's the story that we usually tell ourselves.

Descartes generally focuses more on knowledge and understanding than he does on storytelling. In canvassing various answers to the question 'what am I?' in the *Second Meditation*, Descartes rejects 'human being' since that answer requires an inquiry into what it is to be an animal and what it is to be rational, and "I don't have enough leisure now that I'm willing to waste it on subtleties of this sort" (CSM 2.17 AT 7.25). This isn't the complaint of a lazy philosopher, but rather an expression of his conviction that the meditator must already know the answer, and that the complexity and obscurity of the concept of humanity is a sure sign that it isn't the concept that he's looking for.

Descartes proposes various skeptical exercises mainly for the sake of leading his readers away from their previous opinions and away from the senses (CSM 2.9 AT 7.12; Hatfield, Secada 16-19). He supposes that once these obstacles have been cleared away, the

innate ideas and other psychological structures that God has placed in us will shine through. He hopes that God's goodness and power will make these structures match the deep structure of the world.

But why should the essences of things be revealed by seeing what's easiest known under conditions of extreme doubt? Why should things be so easy and why should we be so lucky? Descartes said that his method made possible the discoveries of the *Optics*, *Geometry* and *Meteorology* (CSM 1.149 AT 6.75). His testimony gave philosophers a reason to test his method, but the Cartesian research program ran out of steam by the time Locke publishes his *Essay*. In the decades following his death Descartes's collision rules become objects of criticism and correction (Murray, Harper, and Wilson), Ole Rømer determines the speed of light which Descartes had confidently asserted to be infinite (Van Helden), and Isaac Newton shows that Descartes's account of the variable speeds of the planets isn't compatible with the observed facts (Bertoloni Meli 2006: 283). We can no longer point to the success of Cartesian science to justify Cartesian metaphysics. We may reasonably be skeptical that the thoughts that we find ourselves having under conditions of hyperbolic doubt reveal the essences that govern the world and make it intelligible.

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