

Descartes and the objection of objections¹

We know how to say, ‘This is what Cicero said’; ‘This is morality for Plato’; ‘These are the *ipsissima verba* of Aristotle.’ But what have we got to say? What judgments do we make? What are we doing? A parrot could talk as well as we do.³

Imagine some great philosopher, say Plato, distributing his central work, say the *Republic*, for criticism among the great philosophers of his time, say Socrates, Aristotle, and others, and then responding to their criticisms. Those later studying Plato would surely study this material very carefully. This exercise never took place in the case of Plato, of course, but it did in the case of Descartes, and scholars have taken the *Objections to the Meditations*, and Descartes’s *Replies* to them, very seriously. Imagine further that Plato had identified one of the objections as, for some reason, most important, calling it “the objection of objections”; scholars would have focussed on it with even greater care. For the obvious reason, this scenario did not play out in the case of Plato, but it did in the case of Descartes, save in one important respect. Scholars have, with a single exception, totally ignored what he himself identified as “the objection of objections,” and a fortiori his response to it. The time has come to have a look at it, with a little help from Malebranche.

The response to the “objection of objections” was Descartes’s final word in his debate with Gassendi over the *Meditations*. This exchange with Gassendi represents an elaborated and systematic metaphysical confrontation. The fifth *Objections* are more than twice as long as any other set, and if Descartes

1 An earlier version of this paper was read at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro; I am grateful to members of the Philosophy Department there for their discussion of it. I am also very grateful to Alan Nelson for his discussion of it.

2 The University of Western Ontario.

3 Montaigne, adapting Seneca, in *The complete essays*:154.

thought them “not the most important”, he nonetheless replied to them at greatest length.⁴ Within a year Gassendi had replied with his *Instantiae* (Rebuttals) which with the Fifth Objections and Replies were published in 1644 under the general title of *Disquisitio metaphysica*, totaling some 150 in-folio pages in Gassendi’s *Opera omnia*.⁵ In addition, there is an appendix to the Fifth Objections and Replies, first published in 1647 with the first French edition. It consists of a fifteen-page letter from Descartes to Clerselier, preceded by an author’s note. Descartes indicates that although he had read the *Instantiae*, he did not immediately reply to the work. This was because the most intelligent of his friends had assured him that the *Instantiae* were of no interest, and he was indifferent to the approval of all others, most of whose judgments were incorrect. When Clerselier sent him a selection of its “strongest arguments” which had been culled from the work and compiled by Clerselier’s friends, Descartes deigned to reply, “more in recognition of the work [these] friends have put in than through the need to defend myself.”⁶

At the end of this selection, the compilers added an objection that Descartes says goes farther than what Gassendi had included in the *Instantiae*. It reads as follows:

...mathematical extension, which I lay down as the fundamental principle of my physics, is nothing other than my thought, and hence it does not and cannot have any subsistence outside my mind, being merely an abstraction which I form from physical bodies. And they conclude that the whole of my physics ‘must be imaginary and fictitious, as indeed the whole of pure mathematics is, whereas real physics dealing with the things created by God requires the kind of matter that is real, solid and not imaginary’.

At this point Descartes emphasizes the enormity of what is at stake in this objection by generalizing it as follows:

Here is the objection of objections....All the things that we can understand and conceive are...only imaginings and fictions of our mind which cannot have any subsistence. And it follows from this that nothing we can in any way understand,

4 CSM II:268.

5 Posthumous (Lyons, 1658). There is a modern edition of the *Disquisitio metaphysica* (Gassendi 1962).

6 CSM II:269.

conceive, or imagine should be accepted as true; in other words we must entirely close the door to reason and content ourselves with being monkeys or parrots rather than men ...For if the things we can conceive must be regarded as false merely because we conceive them, all that is left is for us to be obliged to accept as true only things that we do not conceive. We shall have to construct our doctrines out of these things, imitating others without knowing why, like monkeys, and uttering words whose sense we do not in any way understand, like parrots.⁷

Before turning to an analysis of this objection, an astonishing fact should be noted. The source of the text just cited is far from obscure. It is in the standard Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes, and it has been available in English translation both in Haldane and Ross and in Cottingham et al. Yet it seems to be entirely unknown. In all the literature there seems to be but one mention of it, from Richard H. Popkin.

Who was it who raised this objection, if it was not Gassendi? We don't know who, at least according to the current evidence. All that we know is that they were unnamed defenders of Gassendi who, according to Descartes, went beyond anything Gassendi ever said. A more tractable question concerns who it was that Descartes thought that he was answering, especially when he generalized the objection. For this question raises the more important question of what the objection comes to. But even this further question of the significance of the objection will require some speculative reconstruction.

Let's begin by taking seriously Descartes's allusion to monkeys and parrots. His choice of the abusive metaphor is carefully considered. Those who raise the objection, he is saying, effectively reduce themselves to the level of creatures whose behavior is entirely imitative and mechanical, requiring no natural light, no ideas, or even any conscious state. According to Descartes's view of the bestial soul, non-human animals are nothing more than machines. This famous doctrine was the almost incidental result of his mechanical analysis of the human body in *The discourse on method*, part 5, where Descartes argues on the basis of successful construction of automata with relatively few and simple parts that actual bodies, with many and complex parts, might be entirely mechanical. Machines constructed with the "outward shape of a monkey or of some other animal" would be indistinguishable from a natural animal. But it would always be possible, he says, to distinguish a natural human body from a mere machine, and thus from an animal, on two grounds. One is that

⁷ CSM II:275.

a machine could never be made to use language in an appropriate way, and second, it would act in a way explicable solely on the basis of the disposition of its parts. Both criteria come to the same, rather Chomskian point, that humans are adaptable in a way that machines are not, that a machine or Cartesian animal does not learn anything beyond what it could be programmed to do. The reason that animals do not speak is not that they lack the appropriate organs for doing so. “We see that magpies and parrots can utter [*proférer*] words as we do and yet they cannot speak [*parler*] as we do: that is, they cannot show that they are thinking what they are saying.”⁸ They don’t know what they are talking about. Strictly speaking, they are not talking about anything. The choice of animal examples, then, while initially of heuristic value in expressing the objection of objections, in the end is in fact a bit misleading: the parrot does not say something without knowing what it says — it doesn’t know anything and doesn’t say anything at all. Nor does the monkey really imitate, which would require consciousness. It no more imitates our behavior than a moving billiard ball imitates the ball that struck it. Its behavior is a matter of mechanical causation.

Who is it, according to Descartes, who thus reduces us to the level of monkeys and parrots with the objection of objections? Three, not necessarily exclusive possibilities will be investigated here: the skeptics, the scholastics and the empiricists. Perhaps the most obvious case would be the skeptics.⁹ It was their views that Descartes was supposed to be refuting according to Popkin, whose interpretation of Descartes’s entire program has become the standard interpretation. Indeed, Descartes’s account of what would be the case if the objection of objections carried, viz. that we would be nothing but monkeys and parrots, is taken by Popkin to be “precisely what the Pyrrhonists claimed must happen. We have to shut the door on reason because we are completely unable to find any objective certainty, any bridge between our subjective knowledge, indubitable as it may be, and knowledge about the real world.”¹⁰

Generally, Descartes has nothing but contempt for the skeptics. One reason for this is that, strictly speaking, there are no skeptics, at least none who have had any clear and distinct perceptions. As he puts it in *Meditations V*, “the nature of my mind [and presumably of everyone’s mind] is such that I cannot but assent to these [clear and distinct perceptions], at least so long as I clearly

8 CSM I:140.

9 By “skeptics” here I mean Pyrrhonian skeptics, not Academic skeptics, who are an altogether different kettle of fish in this period.

10 Popkin 1964:210.

perceive them.”¹¹ All that is needed to overcome skepticism is a clear and distinct perception. Very important here is a letter to Hyperaspistes, who had picked up on Descartes’s reply to Gassendi concerning whether knowledge of God is necessary in order to have knowledge of geometry. Gassendi insists that Diagoras and Theodorus though atheists could have been made certain of geometrical proofs. Descartes turns the case around, and considers the skeptics who did have doubts, which they would not have had if they had knowledge of God.¹² With respect to these doubts, Descartes explains that he was

not talking about any and every geometrical topic, but only about those demonstrations which the sceptics doubted even though they clearly understood them...Certainly I have never denied that the sceptics themselves, as long as they clearly perceive some truth, spontaneously assent to it. It is only in name, and perhaps in intention and resolve, that they adhere to their heresy of doubting everything.

Those who claim to be skeptics are so only nominally, not really. If one clearly perceives a geometrical proof, one is incapable of doubting it. If there are self-styled skeptics, therefore, who claim to doubt mathematics, for example, they should be dismissed either as hopelessly inexperienced or, more likely, as outright liars about what they have experienced as indubitably true. They mechanically repeat in the fashion of parrots what in fact they do not believe. More precisely, if the skeptics are liars in this sense, then they know what is ordinarily expressed by the words that they deliberately use, which they also know do not express what they believe. Thus, their behavior is not, strictly speaking mechanical. Still, their speech is mechanical in the sense that the words they utter are, like those of parrots, merely mentioned and not used.

Now, it may well be that Clerselier’s compilers were skeptics.¹³ Certainly, the objection of objections severs any connection between our ideas and the external world. But Descartes’s answer to it goes much deeper than skepticism. For the objection questions whether we have ideas at all — indeed, whether we have reason sufficient even to generate skeptical arguments. There are

¹¹ CSM I:45.

¹² CSM II:228, 263.

¹³ While Popkin might well therefore be correct in his interpretation, I have elsewhere argued that the details of his interpretation are open to question. See my “Huet, Descartes, and the objection of objections.” (Lennon 2004).

various ways that the situation posed by the objection might be expressed: in the language of *Meditations* III, all of our ideas are materially false, that is, they might represent non-things (for example, heat or cold) as things (that is, as real qualities);¹⁴ or, none of our ideas are ideas of a possible existent;¹⁵ or, our ideas are non-intentional, that is, they lack an object, which is to say in Descartes's technical vocabulary, our ideas have no objective reality;¹⁶ or, we have no clear and distinct ideas; or, simply, we have no ideas at all. This last way of putting it is, of course, Malebranche's use of the term 'idea' in the strict sense, for which there is more than a little basis in Descartes. Of Malebranche, more immediately below. Meanwhile, the point is that according to these ways of expressing it, someone accepting the objection of objections would literally not know what he was talking about. What this would-be skeptic says would be meaningless and would merely express epistemically opaque states, like the groans expressing pain. The skeptic would not even be a liar.

A second target that Descartes might have had in mind in responding to the objection of objections is the Aristotelian-scholastics. For all that he is supposed to have had them in mind in the *Meditations*, however, he nowhere mentions them there and hardly does so anywhere else. A relevant bit of anti-scholasticism is to be found in the French treatise on *The world*. There, Descartes considers Aristotle's definition of motion which he quotes and then comments upon as follows:

*Motus est actus entis in potentia, prout in potentia est. For me these words are so obscure that I am compelled to leave them in Latin because I cannot interpret them. (And in fact the sentence 'Motion is the actuality of a potential being in so far as it is potential' is no clearer for being translated.)*¹⁸

Here is how Descartes puts the same point in the *Rules*: when people give the Aristotelian definition of motion, "do they not give the impression of uttering magic words which have a hidden meaning beyond the grasp of the human mind?"¹⁹ The utterance, or, again, perhaps the mere mention of the words is the point, rather than anything that could be meant by them. Descartes's view

14 CSM II:30.

15 See Margaret Wilson 1978:108.

16 D. Hausman & A. Hausman, 1998, ch.1.

18 CSM I:94. Aristotle, *Physics*, 202a10.

19 CSM I:49.

in *meditations* and in *The world* is that the concept of motion is simple and easier to know than the concepts of line or surface, since geometers define a line as the motion of a point and a surface the motion of a line.

A clearer and more explicit charge that the Aristotelian-scholastics speak without knowing what they are talking about is to be found in Descartes's disciple, Malebranche. Most of his *Search after truth* (1st ed. 1674-75) is an investigation of the faculties of the soul as occasions of error: the senses, the imagination, the inclinations and the passions. Even the understanding itself can occasion error. How so? A quick way to understand his signature doctrine of the vision of all things in God is to take it as an elaboration of Descartes's view in *Meditations* III that ordinary language misleads us about the idea of God. To say that God is infinite suggests that we might derive the idea of God by negating the finite; but it is in fact the other way round. Says Descartes, "I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself."²⁰ The way in which the perception of God is prior to all other perceptions according to Malebranche is the following:

The clear, intimate, and necessary presence of God (i.e., the being without individual restriction, the infinite being, being in general) to the mind of man acts upon it with greater force than the presence of all finite objects. The mind cannot rid itself of this general idea of being, because it [that is, that mind] cannot subsist outside God.²¹

It is the idea of being in general, ever-present to the understanding, that occasions the Aristotelian-scholastic errors.

The ineradicable presence of this idea is one of the main causes of all the mind's disordered abstractions, and consequently, [it is one of the main causes] of all that abstract and chimerical philosophy that explains natural effects with the general terms act, potency, causes, effect, substantial forms, faculties, occult qualities, and so on.²²

²⁰ CSM II:31.

²¹ *The search after truth*:241.

²² *Ibid.*:242.

As Malebranche sees it, the Aristotelian-scholastic notices that fire, for example, has a number of different effects (heating, drying, purifying, etc.); he reasons that it must have as many different real qualities in it different from its matter. Thus are born such notions as attractives, concoctives, retentives, expulsives and all the other real qualities ridiculed by Molière. When their proponents attempt to define them, they think they are talking about something specific and that they are giving real definitions. In fact, they are giving only logical definitions,²³ and have in mind nothing more than what they must have in mind in order to think at all, viz., being in general. We shall return to this doctrine below. Meanwhile, notice that Malebranche's charge is that the Aristotelian-scholastics are merely misled, inattentive or ignorant of what they are talking about. Descartes's charge is even worse. According to him, there is nothing that they are talking about. They willfully misuse language in the way that the skeptic does. As with the skeptic, theirs is a lie in the heart, as Plato called it.

The most threatening form of the objection of objections, however, came not from the skeptics, or from the Aristotelian-scholastics, but from the empiricist Gassendi, as I shall now try to show with a long discussion that will take us to the end of my paper. This is an antecedently plausible line to take, for, after all, the objection of objections came from the compilers of Gassendi's rebuttals of Descartes's Replies to him.

It is strictly speaking true, as Descartes reports, that nowhere in Gassendi's *Instantiae* is there to be found verbatim the objection related by Clerselier's friends, viz. that Descartes's mathematical extension is nothing but his thought, an abstraction formed from physical bodies, without (extra-mental) subsistence. There is, however, an argument in Gassendi's *Objections* themselves, and therefore in the *Instantiae* which contained them, to which Descartes replied with an argument that addresses that objection. In his *Objections*, Gassendi argues an empiricist account of abstraction against Descartes's view, expressed in *Meditations* V, that he has the idea of a triangle which is such that it has a determinate nature, uninvented by him, and independent of his thought. According to Gassendi, the understanding observes Plato, Socrates, and other men, and forms the concept of the universal nature 'man,' which it then applies to them and other men. "The same thing

23 The attempt to define what is already better known than any definition could be, as in the case of the Aristotelian-scholastic definition of motion, is what Descartes calls a logical definition. *Principles* I, 10; CSM I:195-96.

applies to [Descartes's] triangle and its nature. The triangle is a kind of rule [*veluti regula*] which you use to find out whether something deserves to be called a triangle." Gassendi does not draw the conclusion of Clerselier's friends as reported by Descartes, that all of Descartes's mathematics is fictitious, as is his physics, which ought to deal with the solid. But Gassendi at least intimates at much. He concludes the section with the observation that

something also needs to be said here about the false nature of a triangle which is supposed to consist of lines which lack breadth, to contain an area which has no depth, and to terminate in three points which have no dimensions at all; but this would have taken me too far afield.²⁴

For Descartes, what Gassendi says about the "false nature of a triangle" is not a digression at all, but the main point, and he develops it in his Reply. He cites a statement of Gassendi's concerning *Meditations* VI: "the subject of pure mathematics...cannot exist in reality." According to Descartes, the reason that Gassendi takes mathematical natures to be false in this way is his mistaken atomist, i.e. materialist, conception of reality. Contrary to that conception, physical things do in fact conform to mathematical natures. Says Descartes,

"Not that there are in the world substances which have length but no breadth, or breadth but no depth; it is rather that the geometrical figures are considered not as substances but as boundaries within which substance is contained [*sed ut termini sub quibus substantia continetur*]."²⁵

In the *Instantiae*, Gassendi replied that these boundaries are particular realities, the substances they contain, terminated as such, and hence they are something physical. They therefore have length, breadth, and depth, and are different from mathematical objects. They become mathematical objects only through the understanding's consideration. So, the ungeneralized version of the objection is in fact to be found in Gassendi, even if not verbatim. Indeed, it is not simply that Descartes failed to show that mathematical extension is nothing more than his thought — he failed to do so, according to Gassendi, because that is in fact all mathematical extension is.

²⁴ CSM II:223-24.

²⁵ CSM II:262.

Below, we shall return to the text in *Meditations V* that generated this exchange. Meanwhile, we might ask, how does Descartes get from the objection above to the generalized form of it expressed by the objection of objections? For this we again look forward to Malebranche's *Search after truth*, which explicitly sets out a principle that seems to be precisely what is challenged by the generalized form of the objection of objections. The context in which Malebranche introduces the principle is important, so I shall develop it at some length.

In Book four of the *Search*, Malebranche considers the obstacle to the speculative sciences posed by pleasure and sensible qualities generally. As an example, he offers our greater readiness to accept the principle that the whole is greater than its part, which seems confirmed by the senses, than the metaphysical principle on which it actually rests, viz., the Cartesian principle of clarity and distinctness.²⁶ People fail to see that, because of the priority of this principle, the fact that God exists is no less certain than the principle that the whole is greater than its part.

Here is the first principle: one should attribute to a thing what one clearly conceives to be included in the idea that represents it; we clearly conceive that there is more magnitude in our idea of a whole than in our idea of its part;...and that necessary existence is included in the idea we have of God, i.e. in the idea we have of the infinitely perfect being; therefore, the whole is greater than its parts...therefore, God or the infinitely perfect being necessarily exists.²⁷

Malebranche goes on to offer an elucidation of this proof, Descartes's ontological argument of *Meditations V*, in terms of his own doctrine of the vision of all things in God. When we commonsensically see a finite thing, what we strictly see is its essence, an idea of that thing in the mind of God that represents it. (Hence we commonsensically can see it without its existing.) God cannot be seen in this way because no such finite idea could represent an infinite being; hence "one cannot see God without His existing; one cannot see the essence of an infinitely perfect being without seeing its existence ... if one thinks of it, it must exist."²⁸

In the fifth edition of *The search* (1700), Malebranche provided an elucidation of even greater importance. In a long addition to the text, the

²⁶ *The Search after truth*:316.

²⁷ *Ibid.*:317.

²⁸ *Ibid.*:318.

Cartesian principle of clarity is construed as dependent on a principle that is still more basic.

It is certain that nothingness or the false is not perceptible or intelligible. To see nothing is not to see; to think of nothing is not to think ...nothingness is not perceptible. Properly speaking, this is the first principle of all our knowledge....For the principle generally accepted by the Cartesians, that whatever is clearly conceived to be contained in the idea representing a thing can be asserted of that thing, depends on it.²⁹

This principle of intentionality, as we might call it, thus comes to supersede the principle of clarity as the first principle of all our knowledge. How so? The likely answer is that he read Descartes more closely.

When Malebranche initially appeals to the principle of clarity in this context, calling it the first principle, he adds a footnote, saying that “this reasoning [based on it] is drawn from Descartes’s *Meditations*.” But he does not say where in the *Meditations* he found it. When Descartes first introduces clarity in *Meditations* III, he does so with the generic principle that “whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true,” deriving it from the *cogito*.³⁰ The version of the principle cited by Malebranche, and picked up by the Port-Royal *Logic* as its basis for the certainty of knowledge,³¹ is to be found in *Meditations* V. For here too it is construed as a derived principle:

If the mere fact that I can produce from my thought the idea of something entails that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to that thing, is not this a possible basis for another argument to prove the existence of God?³²

Descartes’s answer is yes, of course, and he proceeds to give his ontological argument, which is what Malebranche is elucidating when he appeals to the principle of intentionality. That Malebranche was citing this text in his elucidating passages, rather than *Meditations* III, or any other, is thus confirmed. Moreover, the principle is derived from a premise that suggests Malebranche’s principle of intentionality. Descartes says that he can produce from his thought

²⁹ *Ibid.*:320.

³⁰ CSM II:24.

³¹ Part IV, chapter 6. Antoine Arnauld & Pierre Nicole, *Logic or the art of thinking* (1996:247).

³² CSM II:45.

the idea of something; Malebranche says that to think at all is to think of something. When Descartes says that the fact that he can think in this way entails the principle of clarity, he explains how Malebranche might have gotten his principle of intentionality. How so?

Recall that, earlier in *Meditations V*, Descartes had claimed that he has certain ideas of things whose nature is uninvented by him and independent of this thought. He also produces a little-noticed argument that proleptically answers Gassendi's empiricist account of this claim in an even more revealing way than he did in his *Replies*. Not incidentally, the argument also makes the connection we are seeking between the principle of clarity and the principle of intentionality. Here is what he says:

It would be beside the point for me to say that since I have from time to time seen bodies of triangular shape, the idea of the triangle may have come to me from external things by means of the sense organs. For I can think up countless other shapes which there can be no suspicion of my ever having encountered them through the senses, and yet I can demonstrate various properties of these shapes, just as I can with the triangle. All these properties are certainly true, since I am clearly aware of them, and therefore they are something, and not merely nothing; for it is obvious that whatever is true is something; and I have already amply demonstrated that everything of which I am clearly aware is true.³³

Here is the argument: if I am clearly aware of x , as I am in the case of some figures that I have never perceived by the senses, then x is true; if x is true, then x is something; therefore, if I am clearly aware of x , x is something. Or, if I am clearly aware of x , then x is not nothing, which is the contrapositive of Malebranche's principle of intentionality, restricted to awareness that is clear. Descartes restricts the principle to awareness that is clear, but the restriction is not necessary: only clear awareness (i.e. successful, genuine awareness) is of something. So what we have is the following. Malebranche: to see nothing is not to see, or, if [the] x [that I see] is nothing, then I do not see [x]. Descartes: if I see x , then the x that I see is not nothing.

Truth is the middle term in Descartes's argument. What sense is given to it? How is the x which is not nothing also true? In Cartesian terms, the argument seems to rely on the notion of *material truth*. In *Meditations III*, Descartes distinguished falsity "in the strict sense, or formal falsity, [which] can occur

33 CSM II:45.

only in judgments,”³⁴ from material falsity, “which occurs in ideas, when they represent non-things as things.” Now, according to Margaret Wilson,

several texts strongly suggest that when Descartes asks whether an idea represents something real, or *rem*, he is asking whether or not it in some way gives him cognizance of a possible existent. With a clear and distinct perception there can be no question: ‘In the concept or idea of everything that is clearly and distinctly conceived, possible existence is contained...’ [CSM II, 83] From obscure and confused ideas, however, we ‘cannot tell’ whether or not they represent a possible object.³⁵

The idea of cold that Descartes considers in *Meditations* III is just such an obscure and confused idea; we cannot tell whether it represents a real quality or is merely the absence of heat. From this Descartes concludes, “since there can be no ideas which are not as it were of things, if it is true that cold is nothing but the absence of heat, the idea which represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called false; and the same goes for other ideas of this kind.”³⁶ (Incidentally, we have here the reason why Descartes frames the truth rule of *Meditations* III the way he does as a positive rule about the acceptance of truth rather than as a negative rule of rejecting what is false: we can never be absolutely and definitively certain that an obscure and confused idea is a materially false idea, i.e. that it does not represent a real possibility.)

The materially false idea is false, then, in the sense that a false friend is false, and the idea like the friend who is not really a friend is not an idea at all. And, in so far as it is not a true idea, it does not represent something that could exist. A materially true idea, conversely, is the genuine article; it really does succeed in representing something that could exist. The conclusion of Descartes’s argument, then, is not that there exists some individual in the world external to his mind. He explicitly denies this when introducing the example of the triangle: “I find within me countless ideas of things which even though they may not exist anywhere outside me still cannot be called nothing.” Rather, what he finds is the “true and immutable nature” of such possible existents, which nature Gassendi, as we have seen, tried to account for in nominalist-empiricist terms.

³⁴ Presumably insofar as the compound resulting from a judgment fails to represent a compound fact of the matter.

³⁵ Wilson, *op. cit.*108.

³⁶ CSM II:30.

Before concluding, I might offer two observations on the dialectic that I have been developing. First, the principle of clarity is *not* the principle that what is in the idea is also in the object, where idea and object are really distinct in the way a portrait and its original are distinct, and where, therefore, a cleavage or discrepancy might occur between idea and object in a way that grounds the objection of objections. Rather, as Descartes explains in the First Replies to Caterus, the idea is the object itself in so far as it exists in the mind, i.e. in so far as it is perceived. Hence there cannot be any cleavage between them.³⁷ The question whether we know something is whether we have an idea of it. That is, whether we perceive it. As for Plato, to know (*savoir*) is to be familiar with (*connaître*). And, as for Plato, what we are familiar with is an essence or nature, not some individual exemplifying it. There is a cleavage involved, but it is a cleavage between the existence and the nature of the individual thing. This is why Malebranche distinguished, as he did above, between the idea of God and the ideas of all other, finite things. God as an infinite being can be perceived only in Himself. Nothing represents this being to us, and therefore to perceive Him is to perceive Him as existing. Finite beings, by contrast, are represented to us by their ideas, which for Malebranche are essences in the mind of God. To perceive these ideas is to perceive something that may or may not have been instantiated in the world as a result of divine creation. Veridical perception is thus a matter of correspondence. To establish the correspondence and overcome the cleavage between the essence and the existence of individual things and thus the existence of a created, material world, Malebranche notoriously appealed to religious faith. Only if there is a created, material world, he argued, can it be true that the walls at Jericho fell when Joshua blew his trumpet.

In *Meditations* VI, instead, Descartes appealed to coherence to distinguish between veridical and non-veridical perceptions. Neither a veridical nor a non-veridical perception is of individuals in a mind-independent world, for there are no such individuals. The lack of correspondence between perception and mind-independent individual is obvious in the case of non-veridical perception. Macbeth is hallucinating when he reports seeing a dagger; *ex hypothesi* there is no dagger to be seen. But even when he earlier reports hearing Lady Macbeth's bell, there is nothing mind-independent involved other than

³⁷ Here, a point of contact is to be found with the work of Professor Chappell, who gives a very different reading to Descartes reply to Caterus. According to him, in neither of the two senses of the term 'idea' that Descartes distinguishes is the idea of the sun to be understood as the sun itself. "The theory of ideas," in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations* (1986:185).

the essence of all material things, viz. (geometrical) extension. The bell as an *individual* material thing exists only in the mind.³⁸ Moreover, the non-veridical perception of the dagger involves the same essence, namely extension. For, as Descartes insists, even in a dream it can be known that a square has no more than four sides.³⁹ The dagger and the bell both satisfy the axioms of geometry, but the bell coheres with the rest of our perceptions while the dagger does not.

Second, as long as we know what we are talking about, the sentence operator 'I clearly and distinctly perceive that ...' can be dispensed with. It adds nothing more to what follows than the sentence operator 'It is true that...'⁴⁰ does to what follows it. Even if it is false that I clearly and distinctly perceive what I claim to, what matters to you is what follows the operator, whose truth must be established for you independently of any claim of how I perceive it. This is why Descartes responds as he does to Gassendi, who wanted, not the rule only to assert what is clearly and distinctly perceived, but a method of determining what is clearly and distinctly perceived. Descartes says that he already supplied the method when he "eliminated all preconceived opinions and afterwards listed all [his] principal ideas, distinguishing those which were clear from those which were obscure or confused."⁴⁰ That is, the method of distinguishing clear and distinct ideas just is the method of arriving at those that one is prepared to endorse as true.

To invest the operator with some magical power of guaranteeing the truth of what follows is the mistake of the compilers who, just before the objection of objections, also insisted against Descartes that "[his] thought is not the standard which determines the truth of things." After insisting that he nowhere tried to set himself up as an authority, Descartes points out that the only acceptable sense of the compilers' description is that everyone's thought is individually the standard of truth for everyone, i.e. that everyone is his own authority. The alternative to this is the "absurd and grotesque mistake" whereby someone would "make judgments that do not correspond to his perception of things."⁴¹ The expendability of the operator is why, for example, at the end of the second Replies Descartes is able to express the ontological argument with no mention of ideas, thought or perception.⁴² It just goes without saying that he is telling it as he sees it. Here, we have still another sense in which people

38 For more on this, see my *Battle of the gods and giants: The legacies of Descartes and Gassendi, 1655-1715* (1993:191-210).

39 CSM II:14.

40 CSM II:250.

41 CSM II:272.

differ from parrots. As in the epigraph above taken from Montaigne, we can (and, according to Descartes, always *should*) judge the truth for ourselves; a parrot can only parrot what we do.

To conclude, let us return to Gassendi, who, as it happens, criticized, not only Descartes's claim about true and immutable natures, but also his statement of the entailment between the fact that he can produce the idea of something and the conclusion that everything that he clearly and distinctly perceives to belong to a thing really does belong to it. That he should have done so is not surprising, of course, since part of what Descartes claimed to be entailed just is that he is aware of true and immutable natures.

In the *Instantiae*, Gassendi takes the entailment as applied to the idea of God in the ontological argument to rest upon a fallacy of equivocation.⁴³

The thing and its true and immutable nature is taken by you, [Descartes,] not as you would know it outside your understanding or conception, or in itself, but only in so far as you have it within the understanding, or in idea, by the faculty of thought...And if from what you observe in the idea extracted from your thought and contained within your understanding...you would move to what the thing is or ought to be in itself, or in reality [*in ipsamet rerum natura*], the fallacy is clear.⁴⁴

According to Gassendi, Descartes concludes something about God as He is in Himself, outside the mind, (namely that He exists) on the basis of how God is conceived, as idea, inside the mind (namely that He exists). Gassendi thinks that the argument is of the form:

1. horse is an attribute of many things.
2. Bucephalus is a horse.

Therefore,

3. Bucephalus is an attribute of many things.

This is Gassendi's actual example; he thinks that the ontological argument equivocates in the way that this one does.

Exactly what is the equivocation according to Gassendi, and how is it expressed? The conclusion and the second premise are clear:

2. necessary existence is conceived as belonging to God.

Therefore,

⁴² CSM II:117.

⁴³ *Disquisitio*:500-04.

⁴⁴ *Disquistio*:501-03.

3. God necessarily exists.

But what is the first premise? It must be:

1. whatever is conceived as belonging to *x*, belongs to *x*.

If the consequent of this premise means ‘really belongs to *x*, i.e. outside the mind,’ there is no equivocation and the argument is valid. If it means ‘is conceived to belong to *x*, i.e. in the mind only,’ then there is an equivocation and the argument is invalid, but the premise is a tautology and, presumably, not the one asserted by Descartes. Gassendi either begs the question: we cannot think about *God* (or about any extra-mental thing). Or he is just incoherent, not unlike the way Descartes claimed the objection of objections would render us: Gassendi wants us to think, or speak, about *God* without thinking about *Him*; he wants us to have a *God*-thought, or to say something about *God*, without thinking about *God*. But to do so is not to think at all; it is to act like a parrot or a monkey.

References

- Arnauld, A. & P. Nicole. *Logic or the art of thinking*. Trans. Jill Vance Buroker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Chappell. “The theory of ideas”. In *Essays on Descartes’ Meditations*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- Descartes, R. *Philosophical writings [CSM]*. Transl. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, & D. Murdoch. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Gassendi, P. *Disquisitio metaphysica*, ed. and trans. B. Rochot. Paris: J.Vrin, 1962.
- Hausman, D. & A. Hausman. *Descartes’s legacy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.
- Lennon, T. “Huet, Descartes, and the objection of objections.” In J. L. Maia Neto & R. H. Popkin (eds.). *Skepticism in renaissance and post-renaissance thought*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2004, pp. 123-42.
- *Battle of the gods and giants: The legacies of Descartes and Gassendi, 1655-1715*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Malebranche, N. *The search after truth*. Transl. and ed. T.M. Lennon & P.J. Olscamp. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1980.

Montaigne, M. *The complete essays*, trans. and ed. M.A. Screech. London: Penguin, 1991.

Popkin, R. H. *The history of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*. New York: Harper and Row, 1964.

Wilson, M. D. *Descartes*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.