ARTICLE

DESCARTES ON THE LOGICAL PROPERTIES

OF IDEAS

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1. THE PROBLEM

There is a problem in Descartes’s writings about the logical nature of the contents of his understanding, his ideas. On the one hand it seems that such things can be true, for as is well known, Descartes argues in Meditation III that any idea he very clearly and distinctly perceives is bound to be true. However, in the same Meditation, he seems to say something incompatible with this: he says that ‘ideas considered in themselves, and not referred to something else, cannot strictly speaking be false’.¹ For the only things that can be true but cannot be false are necessary truths, and Descartes certainly is not wanting to say that all his ideas when considered in themselves are necessary truths.

The denial that ideas can, properly speaking, be false is made more odd by the fact that the first argument in its favour is notoriously bad: ‘whether I imagine a she-goat or a chimera, it is not less true that I imagine one than the other’.² The problem with this argument is that it licenses withholding falsehood from judgements no less than ideas; for by the same argument, it would be wrong to say that N. N.’s judgement that spiders are mammals is false, on the grounds that N. N. does so judge, and that his judgement is about spiders rather than anything else.³ Descartes knows perfectly well that judgements can be false: the whole of Meditation IV is taken up with an argument explaining what happens when we judge falsely and why God is not to be held responsible for such mistakes when we make them. The argument is, therefore, no explanation for why ideas should lack truth-values in themselves.

Another reason why commentators have been puzzled by the claim is that Descartes’s distinction in Meditation IV, between an idea of the

¹Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, translated by Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach (Edinburgh, 1954) 78.
²Descartes, op. cit., 78.
understanding and the voluntary act of judgement involved in asserting that the idea is true, corresponds attractively with Frege’s distinction between a propositional content and the mental act of asserting that the content is true. This correspondence is itself attractive because of the argument it suggests about why the act of judging should come from the same part of the soul as the act of desiring, as Descartes holds: for both, albeit in importantly different ways, are trained upon propositional contents. A judgement that such-and-such is so is, in a sense, the assertion that a certain propositional content is satisfied; likewise, a desire that such-and-such be so is, in the same sense, a desire that the same content be satisfied. But Frege’s thought was that propositional contents are, in general, true or false, whether or not anyone asserts that they are (in particular, any propositions embedded within an assertion, and hence not themselves asserted, are likewise true or false, independently of the assertion). If Cartesian ideas lack truth-values in advance of being judged, then this appealing analogy cannot be drawn.

2. SOME RESPONSES

It may be that there is no very deep explanation for this problem. After all, in the same Meditation in which he says that ideas cannot strictly speaking be false, Descartes vacillates (over a very short expanse of text) between illustrating his ideas as representations of mere objects taken by themselves – ‘Earth, sky, stars and the rest of what I got from the senses’ – and as representations of complexes of some kind, facts or propositions introduced by a ‘that’ clause – ‘Well, when I was considering some very simple and easy point in arithmetic or geometry, e.g. that two and three together make five, did I perceive this clearly enough to assert its truth?’ It may be that (a) Descartes just never realized that there is a distinction of logical type between objects and complexes, and between their linguistic correlates, terms and propositions; and that (b) carelessness over this distinction allowed him to flit between speaking of ideas now as being capable of having truth-values, now as not. Russell Wahl has argued for something like (a) by showing that Descartes is prepared to use ‘true’ interchangeably in some contexts with ‘real’ or ‘genuine’, and hence prepared to predicate ‘true’ both of the referents of terms, as when he speaks of ‘true and immutable natures’, and the complexes expressed by propositions. According to this view, Descartes did not see an important distinction between, say, an idea that is a

5Descartes, op. cit., 77, my emphasis. On the first sort of idea, see also 83: ‘Now my ideas include, besides my idea of myself…various ideas representing God, inanimate corporeal objects, angels, animals, and finally other men like myself’.
representation of a triangle, and an idea that is a representation of the fact that a triangle’s internal angles sum to two right angles. Even when Descartes does apparently urge that there is a difference, in a letter to Mersenne of July 1641, it is clearly not a logical one:

It is true that the simple consideration of such a Being [God] leads us so easily to the knowledge of His existence that it is almost the same thing to conceive God and to conceive that he exists; but nonetheless the idea we have of God as a supremely perfect being is quite different from the proposition ‘God exists’, so that the one can serve as a means or premise to prove the other.\(^7\)

However, I shall not be satisfied with an answer to the problem with which I began that merely leaves Descartes thoughtless on this matter, i.e. argues that (a) is sufficient for (b). I find it extremely puzzling why anyone more or less heedless of the distinction between a thing and a fact, or a term and a proposition, should ever be interested in making the fussily precise claim that ideas ‘considered in themselves’ cannot strictly speaking be false. If, as Descartes suggests in the above letter, a conception of a thing should be capable of serving as a premise in a proof, why go so far as to say that such things cannot strictly speaking be false, and hence imply that they cannot be true either? In the same letter, Descartes speaks of ideas thus: ‘It is not whether they are expressed by terms or propositions which makes them belong to the mind or the imagination; they can both be expressed either way.’\(^8\) If an idea can be adequately expressed both by a term and by a proposition, then why cannot ideas ‘considered in themselves’ be false? After all, among propositions considered in themselves, some are false and we have as yet no reason for supposing that a propositional formulation of an idea is less suitable than a mere term: they appear to be interchangeable.

3. MATERIAL FALSITY

It is even more puzzling in this context that Descartes should go on to qualify his position further with the claim that, it turns out, there is some rather refined sense, a ‘material’ one, in which ideas considered in themselves can be false: ‘… intrinsic (formalem) falsehood, can occur only in judgements, but in ideas there does occur another sort of falsehood … when they represent what is not a positive thing as if it were one’.\(^9\) Given this, the whole position now sounds uncomfortably close to the following thought: ideas by themselves cannot strictly speaking be false because, like terms, they lack the complexity of propositions. Nevertheless they have their

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\(^7\)Cited by R. Wahl, op. cit., 191. My emphasis.

\(^8\)Cited by R. Wahl, op. cit., 190.

\(^9\)Descartes, op. cit., 83-4.
own special kind of falsehood when they are ideas such as terms that fail to refer to anything. However, it is very odd indeed that someone who did not appreciate the important difference between terms and propositions could make anything like this distinction.

An article by Richard Field shows that this is in fact the wrong way to understand what Descartes means by material falsity, but his ultimate conclusion still reveals the perversity of Descartes’s claim that ideas in themselves cannot be false, as I argue below. Field argues persuasively that the material falsity of an idea is not, as I have just supposed, a matter of its failing to correspond to anything external, as when the idea of a chimera does not correspond to any real chimeras outside the intellect, and hence is apparently false in the only way an idea taken without a judgement can be. Rather, it turns on the metaphysics of the complexity of such ideas, the incompatibility of their internal relations. Hence, although Field does not explicitly draw this conclusion, the refined sense in which ideas ‘considered in themselves’ can be false is the sense in which they are complex, like propositional contents.

Field rightly observes that the material falsity of an idea cannot consist in its having no external correlate, as in the idea of a chimera: such falsity is the formal falsity engendered by the thinking subject referring the idea to something else. This is the perfectly ordinary sense of falsehood whereby the mistake lies not in the idea itself but in the judgement made by the subject who has the idea. Hence Descartes’s claim, when speaking of judgement, that

the chief and commonest error that is to be found in this field consists in my taking ideas within myself to have similarity or conformity to some external object; for if I were to consider them as mere modes of my own consciousness, and did not refer them to anything else, they could give me hardly any occasion of error.

This cannot be the special sense of falsity that ideas can have ‘considered in themselves’, for the mistake here really belongs to the act of judging rather than the subject’s ideas.

In order to discover the nature of material falsity we need an interpretation of just what it is ‘to represent what is not a positive thing as if it were one’, which Meditation III introduces as the criterion of material falsity, illustrated by the ideas of cold and heat. The standard interpretation of this, to which I used to adhere, is that ideas of such sensations as heat and cold can be materially false by virtue of representing their objects as positive qualities rather than privations. To use an example which captures this

11 Descartes, op. cit., 78.
reading more clearly, any idea of darkness as some stuff that accumulates throughout the day and eventually blocks out all the light has to be materially false, for it misrepresents darkness as being something more positive and substantial than what it in fact is, the mere privation of light. Field points out that Descartes’s text leaves open the possibility that his ideas of both cold and heat are materially false; and if they are both false, the explanation of the falsity of neither one can be in terms of how it represents its object as something positive when it is in fact a privation, for then the other idea cannot be materially false in the same way. If my idea of cold is materially false because it represents its object as a ‘something’ rather than the absence of a genuine ‘something’, heat, then my idea of heat cannot also be materially false. (I pass over as too remote the refined possibility, if it is one, that heat is the privation of one thing, and cold the privation of another.)

Field locates what Descartes really meant by material falsity in the quasi-Aristotelian hierarchy of Cartesian metaphysics, comprising substances, attributes and modes. The fundamental asymmetry of this scheme lies in the thought that attributes and modes qualify substances while the latter do not qualify anything – they are metaphysically basic. However, since they are the things in which attributes and modes inhere, what qualifies them must always appear to the human mind in terms of some substance underlying each qualifying attribute and mode: the relational character of such properties makes it psychologically impossible to conceive of them without also conceiving of there being some substance, as it were, at one end. Hence Descartes’s disagreement, in the Fourth Replies, with the standard explanation of transubstantiation, which holds that the accidents alone of the bread persist when it changes into something that is essentially Christ’s body: ‘the human mind cannot think of the accidents of the bread as real, and yet existing apart from its substance, without conceiving of them by employing the notion of a substance’.12

It is not merely that metaphysically dependent entities such as attributes and modes cannot be conceived independently of some substance: they cannot coherently be conceived without the right substance, and it is when there is a mismatch between the kind of attribute or mode represented in an idea on the one hand, and the substance they are represented as qualifying on the other, that material falsity occurs in ideas. This is what happens in the case of sensations of hot and cold: ideas that represent these sensations as attributes of extended things are as incoherent as ideas that represent matter as minded or mind as extended. They apply an attribute or mode suitable to one kind of substance to a substance of a quite different kind, of which they cannot in fact be attributes or modes. Predicating hot or cold of sensible objects is, to borrow an example Wittgenstein reportedly used for a

12Cited by R. Field, op. cit., 326.
related purpose, as bizarrely incoherent as describing certain surfaces as ‘painy’.  

One attractive consequence of this analysis, which Field does not draw, is that it is now quite easy to see why Descartes thinks there is something special about the material falsity of ideas – why this is a rather refined sense in which ideas can be false when considered in themselves. That the sense must be special can be seen from the fact that there is not, in general, any correlative notion of material truth. The material falsity of an idea consists in the mismatch between the represented attribute or mode, and the substance which the idea represents it as qualifying. It does not follow from this that there is any kind of truth in an idea where there is a suitable match between the metaphysically dependent and the metaphysically basic. To use a suitably Cartesian example, there is no mismatch in your idea of me, a thinking substance, bearing the mode of thinking about Descartes in a certain way. Such an idea is not materially false. It may of course be formally false when you judge that it corresponds to something outside your mind, namely me thinking about Descartes, when in fact I am not, but that is the ordinary sense of falsity in which an idea is false when it becomes the subject of mistaken judgement. This is not to consider the idea in itself. Likewise it may be true, but again only when taken as the subject of a judgement. Prescinding from such a judgement, there does not seem to be any sense in which it is true; which of course makes the sense in which judgements of its ilk can be false all the more special.

4. THE PROBLEM REFINED

For the purposes of the problem with which I began, what strikes me as most important in Field’s construal of material falsity is that it represents such falsity as a consequence of an idea’s complexity. Ideas of various things are materially false because they represent things as being what they cannot be – such ideas say something about their objects that cannot in fact be true of them, namely that they are attributes or modes of a certain kind of substance (or, I suppose, that they are substances of a certain kind qualified by certain modes or attributes); that is, such ideas express a necessarily false predication. This thought suggests two others that help to throw my problem into sharp relief:

1. If the only sense in which ideas can be false is that in which they are complex representations of their objects, representations that articulate something about what they represent, does that not suggest that the sense in which ideas taken without judgements cannot be false is that

in which they are *simple* representations, the mental analogues of terms?

2. Doesn’t the claim that humans cannot have ideas of attributes or modes without those ideas being ideas of certain substances so qualified suggest that *all* ideas we are capable of having are complex in this way? If all ideas are in fact complex, then there is a sense in which all ideas should be capable of having a truth-value – in which case it should be possible for ideas strictly speaking to be capable of falsehood, and not just materially.

Put like this, it seems ever odder that Descartes should treat material falsity as some special sense in which ideas can be false when they cannot otherwise be so. Why, then, did he do so? Wahl’s arguments that he never carefully distinguished between terms and propositions count against answering ‘yes’ to (1); meanwhile the power of Field’s analysis of material falsity counts in favour of answering ‘yes’ to (2). This means that, whatever the answer to our puzzle turns out to be, it is likely to lie so deeply rooted in Descartes’s philosophy that he was not even consciously aware of it himself: for surely, had he thought of the contrast between (1) and (2) above, he could not have left it unresolved. He would either have abandoned the thought that there is only some special sense in which ideas considered in themselves can be false; or he would have worked hard to make the complexity which, by Field’s lights, is a necessary condition for an idea’s being materially false, a much rarer property among ideas than it seems to be.

5. A HYPOTHESIS

My hypothesis is that his reason for denying falsehood of ideas in themselves was caused, although he may not have realized it, by a difficulty about what ideas can be perceived by the mind in what way, and how this fits with the theory of error in *Meditation IV*. I do not think I can prove my hypothesis with any particular text, but nor is there any text which seems to explain my original problem: it strikes me as quite legitimate here to exercise charity and suppose that, even if Descartes never explained why he denied falsehood of ideas in themselves when this sits uncomfortably with other positions he maintains, there may still be deep-seated philosophical motives among his commitments for saying such a thing, whether or not he recognized them.

Among the many problems associated with Descartes’s theory of error and how we can avoid it in *Meditation IV*, there is one especially associated with *higher-order* judgements. It is this. Descartes thinks he can avoid error by restraining his will in such a way that he only judges to be true the ideas that he clearly and distinctly perceives, and withholds his judgement from all other ideas, indifferently perceiving them without judging them true or false.
Following such a procedure, all his judgements, supposedly, will be true, and wherever there is a possibility of his going wrong he prescinds from judgement. However, Descartes offers no comment on the fact that, intuitively, anyone following such a procedure will only be refraining from making judgements about what he does not clearly and distinctly perceive on the basis of other, higher-order judgements, namely judgements that such-and-such an idea is not clearly and distinctly perceived. If I perceive an idea and refrain from judging that, for example, anything external corresponds to it, nonetheless I must still make some judgement: for my refraining was caused in turn by my judging that I did not clearly and distinctly perceive the idea in question that my understanding presented me, and so this is an occasion for suspending judgement. That, it would seem, is no less a judgement than the first-order judgement I make that a perception is true, when I have clearly and distinctly perceived it.

Descartes nowhere, as far as I know, speaks explicitly of higher-order judgements; but I do not take anything in the above paragraph to be particularly controversial, with which he might have disagreed. The trouble starts with the fact that ideas one can perceive clearly and distinctly can also be misperceived: while one cannot see falsehoods clearly and distinctly, one can certainly see truths, even the most luminous among them, with the same dimness with which one might contemplate an idea whose judgement on the part of a subject would be false. This attitude to ideas in general is required in order for evil-demon scepticism to develop; and it is conceded even in regard to ideas of God in Meditation III:

There is none of these points that is not obvious on careful reflection, by the light of nature; but when I reflect less, and the images of sensible objects blind my mind’s eye, I cannot so easily remember why the idea of a more perfect being than myself must proceed from some being that really is more perfect. 14

The same idea he perceives clearly and distinctly after a good deal of careful thought in Meditation III can also be seen less clearly and distinctly on other less thoughtful occasions.

That one might perceive the same idea now clearly and distinctly, now opaquely, is not in itself a difficulty for the theory of Meditation IV: Descartes will say that one should judge the idea to be true when one perceives it clearly and distinctly, and refrain from judging when one does not. If this tactic is not to lead us into error, then, again, there will have to be such things as higher-order perceptions and judgements. When we refrain from making a judgement about an idea, that will have to be because we clearly and distinctly perceive that we do not clearly and distinctly perceive the idea, for only then will we be free from error in judging the higher-order idea true, and hence refraining from making a judgement about the

14Descartes, op. cit., 87.
lower-order idea. If we are not, then we might be wrong in supposing that we do not clearly and distinctly perceive the idea when in fact we do: for if we can misperceive what we can otherwise perceive clearly and distinctly, it would seem to follow that we can also misperceive how we are perceiving any idea generally. In the case imagined, there will be a kind of double error, in so far as we were wrong to judge our second-order idea true as we did not clearly and distinctly perceive it (for it is false and one cannot clearly and distinctly perceive falsehoods), and wrong not to judge the original idea true, since we did in fact clearly and distinctly perceive that.

It is to head off the possibility of this kind of situation arising, I think, that Descartes says in Meditation IV that ‘if I always saw clearly what is good and true, I should never deliberate as to what I ought to judge or chose; and thus, although entirely free, I could never be indifferent’. 15

The thought is that, at least for ideas we clearly and distinctly perceive, there will be no higher-order ideas or judgements playing a part in our thinking, as we cannot help but judge ideas so seen as true: we cannot fail to judge true whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive whenever we so perceive it.

Judgements on such occasions are automatic, and the set-up I imagined in the previous paragraph cannot obtain. His thought that only the ideas we ought to judge true are irresistible in this way, and hence, by implication, immune to any kind of misperception, is highly implausible, and apparently at odds with the data of the hyperbolic doubt in Meditation I. Even though, by Meditation IV, Descartes thinks he has a proof that there is no evil demon deceiving him, even then it is still possible to perceive his ideas as if they came from such a being. In that case it will still be possible to misperceive wilfully what one would otherwise clearly and distinctly perceive, as it is possible to screw up one’s eyes and see blurrily what one otherwise sees with complete precision; and again, refraining from judgement on the basis of such misperceptions, albeit wilful ones, will require higher-order judgements, to the effect that one does not clearly and distinctly perceive the idea in question, and hence higher-order clarity and distinctness.

Even if we allow Descartes the thought that ideas perceived clearly and distinctly involve no higher-order ideas or judgements because they are irresistible, such things still seem to be involved in set-ups where we refrain from a first-order judgement because of second-order judgements about how we perceive our first-order ideas; and these, it would seem, in turn involve third-order judgements about how we perceive our second-order ideas, and so on ad infinitum. Given that at each higher stage there is a possibility of perceiving some lower-order idea less than clearly and distinctly without realizing it, the possibility of error recurs at each stage. In short, we can never be sure that we have not made a mistake somewhere

15Descartes, op. cit., 96.
whenever we refrain from making a judgement, if the criterion of that
indifference is our not clearly and distinctly perceiving some idea. The
existence of higher-order thought and judgement is a serious problem for
Descartes’s theory of error. Even when we think we are refraining from
judgements because we are making no first-order judgements, we may
nevertheless be unwittingly lapsing into error higher up the scale.

My hypothesis is that it is this difficulty with higher-order judgements that
leads Descartes to the odd thought that ideas are not true or false,
considered in themselves, pace material falsity. Such ideas only become true
or false when the will operates: judgement is an operation on an idea that
forms something capable of having a truth-value out of something
apparently incomplete as far as truth-values goes. It is an important logical
point that such operations cannot be iterated: syntactically, if something
forms a complete sentence out of an incomplete one, the same kind of
operator cannot be applied again to form another complete sentence. For
example, the fragment ‘– is being rude’ is not itself true or false, but can be
made into something true or false by the addition of a name, as in ‘Edmund
is being rude’. You cannot have something capable of bearing a truth-value
by applying such an operator again: applying the further name ‘David’ to
the complete sentence yields the nonsense ‘David Edmund is being rude’.
Likewise, you can have something capable of bearing a truth-value from the
name ‘Edmund’ by adding the predicate ‘– is being rude’, but again you can
do so only once: adding another predicate will give you nonsense such as
‘Edmund is being rude is going to die shortly’. By contrast, operations that
can be iterated to derive sense from sense can only be applied at the first
level to expressions already complete. Therefore, one can apply ‘It is not the
case that’ to something already capable of being true or false like ‘Edmund
is being rude’ as many times as you like and still have a complete sentence;
but you cannot apply it to expressions incomplete as far as truth-value goes:
‘It is not the case that is being rude’ and ‘It is not the case that Edmund’ are
both nonsense.16

If Cartesian judgement is the result of an operation that forms something
with a truth-value out of something lacking one, an idea, then by these lights
it will not be an iterable operation: there will be no such things as higher-
order judgements, judgements formed from judgements that were themselves
formed from truth-valueless ideas. If you obtain truth-values by applying the
will to an idea, you cannot obtain something with a truth-value by applying
the will again to the resulting judgement: forming judgements by applying the
will to ideas requires the impossibility of forming judgements by applying the
will to judgements. If, then, we are allowed to infer from Descartes’s claim
that ideas cannot be false in themselves that they are somehow incomplete as
far as truth-value goes, then for Descartes there will be in principle no higher-

16For full discussion and further illustration of these facts, see Nicholas Denyer, Language,
Thought and Falsehood in Ancient Greek Philosophy (London, 1991) Ch. 6.
order judgement. But that, I have suggested, is something Descartes needed, whether he knew it or not: for higher-order judgements are embarrassing to his theory of error. Clearly, this sounds an odd thing to say; for scarcely could one have better proof that there can be higher-order judgements, judgements about judgements, than the Meditations itself. However, that is only because it seems intuitively right to say that what one judges is true or false whether one judges it or not: and this is just what we find Descartes denying without stating any good reasons for it.

As I have said, the problem with this interpretation is that there is no smoking gun for it in Descartes’s text. This is no surprise. Were these to be his conscious motives, he could not have failed, I think, to see the logical difference between terms and propositions: and Wahl has shown that he did not really appreciate that difference. His denial of falsity to ideas in themselves still cries out for explanation: and mine at least has the merit of showing how Descartes might have been lured unwittingly towards such a claim by the pull of deep commitments within his theory of error.17

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