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The rebirth of Descartes

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GENERAL CONCLUSION

The French Enlightenment, characterized by a desire for the unity of thought and nature through human freedom, was opposed to Cartesian thought with its basis in duality, or even 'trinality'. For Descartes, the essence of consciousness is completely separated from the essence of the external world, and both are distinct from the third substance, which is God. Sensualistic eighteenth-century French philosophy, which tried to apply the language of physics to that of rational psychology, saw Cartesian duality as highly problematic.

The encyclopaedists' notions of existence and evidence – key notions of the Cartesian method and system – proved to be incompatible with those of Descartes. Their rejection of the Cartesian *cogito* went hand in hand with the rejection of innate ideas, the religious consequences of which contradicted their views on freedom and nature. They furthermore shared Locke's epistemological objections to innate ideas and agreed with Hume that the term was vague and empty.

Kant showed that it is pointless to say anything about events that could not be given in possible experience. Against any claim about such events he maintained that the contrary could also be claimed with equal validity. With this in mind, he labelled Descartes a 'sceptical idealist'. The main difference between Kant's notion of the 'ich denke' and Descartes's *cogito* is that Kant denied that the *cogito* provides the first certainty. In the case of the ontological proof of God, Kant's stance hardly needs any explanation as his criticism of it is perhaps more famous than the proof itself. Finally, in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Kant rejected the doctrine of innate ideas. However, he later admitted that there must be a foundation in the subject by virtue of which representations originate as they do, and that this foundation must be innate.

By the end of the eighteenth century Descartes was still fairly unpopular in France as illustrated by the political debates regarding the question of what to do with the philosopher's remains. Possibly due to his being seen as a representative of the ancien régime, Descartes was not reinstated into French philosophical history until the Restoration. Due to the double function of the philosopher-statesmen the reinstatement of Descartes was accelerated at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The wide range of philosophers who tried to use Descartes's work illustrates the grand scale of his comeback. Religious motives, historiographical merits, psychological discoveries, and patriotism all provided reasons leading to the reinstatement of Descartes in France during the nineteenth century.

Part of the traditionalists' motivation for preferring the Cartesian school over the philosophical movements of their own time lies in their hostility towards sensualism. Although their anti-philosophical attitude isolated them from the philosophical discourse of the day, their religious views, which lay behind this attitude, may have inspired the discussion about the relation between philosophy and religion.

It is difficult to prove that the historiographical efforts of Degérando and Laromiguière urged French philosophers to engage with the philosophy of

Descartes. It is clear, however, that Degérando's *Histoire comparée* was frequently consulted by almost all French philosophers, including the traditionalists, and that for many it was a stepping stone for research into the thought of Descartes. Unlike the traditionalists, Degérando did not let his religious convictions interfere with his philosophical work as is illustrated by his criticism of Descartes's ontological proof.

Maine de Biran was one of the first French philosophers to take the Cartesian method seriously and to apply it to his own philosophical views. In his philosophy, which was at first sensualist, Descartes later played an important role, being considered by Biran to be the father of what he called 'reflective science'. In search of the primitive facts of consciousness, he was led to reconsider the Cartesian *cogito*, which became for him the first psychological axiom. With regard to the theory of innate ideas, he criticized both Descartes and his adversaries, but nevertheless he adopted the theory, with some modifications which emphasized the activity of the soul.

Royer-Collard sought to diplomatically reconcile the major differences between Anglo-Saxon and continental philosophy by appealing to common sense. The role Descartes played in his philosophical views had a political connotation which is not surprising if we bear in mind that the larger part of his life was occupied with administrative functions. The political instability during the period between the French Revolution and the Third Republic, in which Royer-Collard and Cousin lived, caused concern for law and order. Because the philosophy of Descartes had its conservative and its modern elements, it seemed to answer this concern. According to Cousin, Descartes was the liberator of human reason because he appealed to evidence alone. At the same time, Cousin held that Descartes did not defy authority, recognizing that of both religion and state. This combination, he thought, had led to France's constitutional freedom. The emphasis he placed on the psychological point of departure of Descartes's philosophy can be considered to be an elaboration of the thought of Maine de Biran. At the same time both his historically oriented and his systematical works reveal straightforwardly patriotic reasons for reinstating Descartes.

In Germany the rise of the historiography of philosophy also contributed to the growing acquaintance with the works of Descartes among philosophers. Not only did these works offer relatively accurate representations of Descartes's philosophy, they also discussed key elements of the Cartesian system thematically. Although the opinions of Buhle and Tennemann did not immediately point to a reinstatement of Descartes, their critical and elaborate discussions certainly set the tone for the German reappraisal of Descartes's philosophy.

The position allotted to Descartes in German Idealism can best be described as the point of departure for their own systems. The philosophy of Descartes served as an example for Fichte or at least inspired him to found and structure science. For Hegel it indicated the beginning of modern philosophy because it realized that self-consciousness was the essential moment of truth. Schelling also maintained that modern philosophy started with Descartes and at the same time showed that Descartes had been misrepresented and misunderstood. According to Feuerbach, we are all Cartesians because we all have to recognize the *cogito*.

The revaluation of the Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas in Germany gradually revealed Descartes as the predecessor of Kant. In this respect, philosophers criticized Kant's view of Descartes and some even doubted whether he had actually read the *Meditations*. On the basis of a comparison between innate ideas and a priori principles, Cartesian philosophy became eligible to be considered as an early form of critical philosophy. According to Trendelenburg, the general concepts of the Cartesian system could not be considered as innate in the Kantian sense of the a priori. He held that Descartes was similar to a nominalist in that he allowed general notions to ensue from individual representations and that by doing so he was unable to explain the development and the coherence of these innate ideas. Grimm and Gutzeit on the other hand, believed that they could show the development and coherence of the Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas. As a result, they found that it was justified to compare this doctrine with Kant's notion of apriority.

Neo-Kantians went further than this drawing of comparisons, as they sought to understand Descartes from the point of view of transcendental philosophy. The Marburg School saw philosophy as the theory of the exact sciences and they based this theory on Kant's transcendental philosophy. In their search for the logical conditions of natural science and mathematics, they reconsidered the philosophy of Descartes and brought it into relation with the Kantian doctrine. As a result, the metaphysics of Cartesian philosophy was transformed and interpreted in the Kantian transcendental sense. We might add that it was also taken in a meta-transcendental sense as they found the transcendental conditions for Kant's doctrine in the philosophy of Descartes. The special interest Cohen took in Kant's notion of apriority led him to the age-old question of whether our representations are innate or acquired. By interpreting Cartesian innate ideas as the criteria of knowledge, Cohen tried to resolve Kant's ambiguous position regarding innate ideas. The critical character of Cartesian philosophy was most extensively demonstrated by Paul Natorp. On the basis of the *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, Natorp demonstrated that Descartes already laid a foundation for epistemological rationalism in his early period. Furthermore, he claimed that Descartes had not abandoned this early critical intention in his later works. By interpreting the *cogito* as an a priori synthesis, Natorp could avoid its metaphysical connotation and its relation to the notion of God. Concerning the latter, Natorp showed the shortcomings of Kant's criticism of Descartes's ontological proof of God. Although Natorp maintained that Descartes had not distinguished between epistemology and religion sharply enough, he did not see a problem in assuming the idea of God as an *ens rationis*. Natorp's analysis of Descartes's theory of knowledge brought forward its critical character and revealed an interesting view of historiography in which the line of thought, the immanent consequences of this theory, are preferred over adequate representations.

On the level of the history of ideas we have examined the changes in the view of Descartes from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. On the level of the historical reception we have discussed the variety of reasons why philosophers reappraised Descartes. Finally, we once again focus on the *cogito*, the notion and

proofs of the existence of God, and the theory of innate ideas for our conclusion at the ‘problemhistorische’ and conceptual historical level.

Concerning the *cogito*, eighteenth-century sensualism and the unfamiliarity with the works of Descartes stand in contrast with idealism, the rise of psychology, and the rise of historiography that characterize the nineteenth century. After having been represented and understood in an historically accurate manner, the *cogito* offered nineteenth-century philosophers something positive to work with. In various ways and from different perspectives it was seen as the point of departure for the foundation of science. This is explicitly the case for Fichte and Maine de Biran, but is also true for a wide range of nineteenth-century historians of philosophy.

With regard to the notion and proofs of God, eighteenth-century Enlightenment stands opposed to nineteenth-century Romanticism and Traditionalism. With Voltaire, Hume, and Kant the notion of God and its possible functions in philosophical systems were banished from theoretical philosophy. However, during the nineteenth century various movements sought to restore the notion. French traditionalists such as de Maistre and de Bonald supported the supremacy of religion over society and philosophy. In the thought of Cousin, the notion of God plays a crucial role, borrowed from German Idealism. The emphasis that German Idealism places on such notions as ‘necessary existence’ and the ‘absolute’ tempt us to say that the notion of God returned to philosophy in an altered form. Kant’s attempt to prove the impossibility of Descartes’s ontological proof was taken up by Schelling and Natorp who demonstrated the inaccuracy of Kant’s representation.

The nineteenth-century interest in the Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas is a clear example of the conceptual historical reinstatement of Descartes. This theory, which was widely rejected throughout the eighteenth century was recovered, transformed, and reused by many nineteenth-century philosophers. In order to avoid psychologisms – the reduction of logical entities, such as propositions universals, and numbers, to mental states or mental activities, – philosophers compared innate ideas with a priori principles. This resulted in the most charitable reading of Descartes’s theory of innate ideas, namely that the theory was a precursor to the Kantian doctrine of a priori forms.