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The rebirth of Descartes

Zijlstra, Christiaan Peter

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THE REBIRTH OF DESCARTES

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THE REBIRTH OF DESCARTES

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France and Germany*

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Promotores: Prof. dr. D.H.K. Pätzold
Prof. dr. M.R.M ter Hark

Beoordelingscommissie: Prof. dr. H.-P. Schütt
Prof. dr. H.G.C. Hillenaar
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INTRODUCTION

Although the name of Descartes is familiar to anyone with the slightest affinity for philosophy and his ideas have become commonplace to philosophers, it is not generally known, even amongst historians of philosophy, that his fame is actually the result of his revival in the nineteenth century.

René Descartes (1596-1650) provided the bridge between the analytic knowledge of scholasticism and the synthetic knowledge of modern philosophy by creating a method which was inextricably bound to all the fundamental thoughts of his philosophy. The central theme of his works is the acquisition of indubitable knowledge and the grasping of all things in a system based on simple principles. However, the attainment of indubitable knowledge was not a goal for Descartes in itself, but such a basis was required if he was to fulfil his ambition of changing the whole scientific conception of the world. His quest for an indubitable metaphysical foundation led him to the *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). Relying on this foundation he tried to obtain clear and distinct knowledge of the outside world by appealing to his doctrine of innate ideas and the proof for the existence of God. These elements: the *cogito*, the proofs of the existence of God, and the doctrine of innate ideas characterize the Cartesian system and are nowadays immediately associated with Descartes.

However, during the eighteenth century these metaphysical themes were neglected, misunderstood and sometimes ridiculed. Throughout this period, Descartes was at most moderately appreciated as a mathematician and a physicist, while his metaphysics, which in the present day we regard as essential to his philosophy, had fallen into oblivion. In an era that was dominated by sensualism, Descartes's philosophy simply appeared to be erroneous. This general view that philosophers had of Descartes was prejudiced and highly incorrect, and was further exacerbated by the absence of a sound historiography of philosophy.

Despite his detractors, in the course of the nineteenth century Descartes made a spectacular comeback. Philosophers of the most diverse movements began to acclaim him for a great variety of reasons. In France, the nineteenth-century reinstatement of Descartes's philosophy can be understood as the result of a desire to start philosophy from a fresh beginning. Descartes's metaphysics was thought to fulfil this wish for a stable basis for philosophy and for establishing something constant in a period characterized by cultural and scientific dynamism. After the defeat of Napoleon, the ideology of the Enlightenment was reconsidered and problematized. It is remarkable to observe that this tendency took as its starting point the thought of René Descartes, considering that it had barely been appreciated in the eighteenth century. This movement, which continued for more than a hundred years in both France and Germany, is the subject of our research. The goal of this research is to discuss both the cultural-historical and the epistemological aspects of the reevaluation of Descartes.

German philosophers continued the reassessment of Descartes's philosophy which had begun in France, especially in relation to his epistemology. In most cases he was reconsidered in relation to the doctrine of Kant, which was firmly

established in intellectual Germany. To some, Kant's doctrine formed a new point of departure, yet others found it to be seriously flawed. System builders like Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel were dissatisfied with Kant's philosophy because they considered that 'the philosophical system' would perish as a result. Furthermore, they found the discord of Kant's 'Architektonik' unacceptable and on this basis, to put it briefly, absolute idealism and its later critics resolved that Kant must be overcome.

Halfway through the nineteenth century, attempts to counteract materialism and absolute idealism arose. One of the movements that reacted against the claims of absolutist philosophy, but still strove after the ideal of philosophy as system, was that of the Marburg School. Departing from the transcendental method, they aimed to construct a 'logical' system which incorporated all scientific knowledge.

Just as Descartes seemed to fulfil the need for stability and offer a graspable basis for philosophy in France, he appeared to provide the principle of evidence needed by German philosophers. However, Descartes's principle of certainty was grounded in his theory of innate ideas, and more specifically, in the innate idea of God. How German philosophers interpreted this constitutive element, missing in Kant's doctrine, without appealing to the notion of God, is a significant issue.

In investigating such issues, this thesis elaborates on Hans-Peter Schütt's study *Die Adoption des »Vaters der modernen Philosophie«. Studien zu einem Gemeinplatz der Ideengeschichte* (1998). Schütt's aim is to examine the various episodes – from Voltaire to Heidegger – of the influence of Descartes on European philosophy from the perspective of the title 'father of modern philosophy'. One of the conclusions Schütt draws is that in the course of the nineteenth century professional philosophy, which had established disciplinary self-awareness of the famous 'Erkenntnisproblem', needed a 'proper' philosophy orientated by this problem. Such a philosophy had to understand itself as a science in its own right which, both in its claims and method, is strictly distinct from the individual sciences. The problem of knowledge was thus projected onto Cartesian philosophy and as a result, in order to make this projection plausible, Descartes was raised to the status of the 'father of modern philosophy'.¹

In distinction to Schütt, our study is limited mainly to the nineteenth-century reappraisal of Descartes in France and Germany. Furthermore, instead of using a leitmotiv which is somewhat external to philosophy – such as the phrase 'father of modern philosophy' – we focus on three philosophical themes which, as we have said, play a crucial role in the Cartesian system. These themes, the *cogito*, the proofs of the existence of God, and the theory of innate ideas, which were neglected, ridiculed and misunderstood before making a sudden comeback during the nineteenth century, form the systematic framework of our discussion of the reinstatement of Descartes in the nineteenth century.

'I think, therefore I am' is one of the most famous statements in philosophy. For Descartes it was the first indubitable certainty established by his method of doubt. It is no surprise that countless books and articles have been written on this subject as it attempts to resolve such crucial philosophical problems as certainty,

¹ See H.-P. Schütt, *Die Adoption des »Vaters der modernen Philosophie«* (1998), p. 184.

self-consciousness and knowledge. Our thesis is that the philosophical value ascribed to the *cogito* stems from the nineteenth century. The domination of eighteenth-century French philosophy by sensualism led to an inability to see the importance of the *cogito* and as a result scarcely any attention was paid to it. Meanwhile, in Germany, while it appeared that the Cartesian *cogito* was appreciated by Kant who took it as the original synthetic unity of apperception, closer reading reveals that the Cartesian *cogito* and the Kantian ‘ich denke’ are two entirely different concepts. On the basis of his criticism of Descartes, we can even doubt that Kant actually had first-hand knowledge of Descartes’s works.

The ontological² proof for the existence of God has stunned philosophers and is one of the most criticized subjects in philosophy. The most famous criticism came from Kant but clearly the French Enlightenment was severely critical as well. Although we shall not claim that this proof was restored during the nineteenth century, the fact remains that correct representations of the Cartesian version of this proof stem from the nineteenth century. Furthermore, generally speaking, nineteenth-century philosophy sometimes displayed the tendency to reconcile itself with religion, leading to the question of whether the reevaluation of the doctrine of innate ideas led to the acceptance of the most important innate idea in the Cartesian system – the idea of God – albeit in a different form.

The doctrine of innate ideas is our clearest example of the reinstatement of Descartes in the nineteenth century. Reviled during the eighteenth century by nearly all philosophers, its comeback was especially remarkable in Germany. Descartes’s theory of innate ideas formed the backbone of the Cartesian system as it rendered possible clear and distinct knowledge of the outside world. Hence, it is surprising that there has not been more research done on this subject in contemporary philosophy.

Although to some extent we discuss the political background which played a role in the reinstatement of Descartes in France, we expressly refer to the recent study of François Azouvi, *Descartes et la France* (2002) in which the relation between Descartes and France is discussed from a socio-political point of view.

It is not our intention to give a complete account of the influence of Descartes in the nineteenth century, but to find out in what ways his thinking became an important factor for various philosophical views. Our methodology distinguishes four levels which on a sliding scale move from general to specific. The first level is that of the history of ideas in which we simply take Descartes as our subject. The second level is more specific to the extent that we discuss the reception of Descartes in the nineteenth century. On this level it is not our intention to make a systematic comparison of Descartes with later philosophers, but to outline their view of Descartes in so far as they made explicit statements about him. This approach strongly determines the selection of our source texts. The third level is

² The term ‘ontological’ in this context stems from Kant. In Kant’s view, there were only three possible ways of proving the existence of God by means of speculative reason, and one of these ways he called the ontological way in which people ‘... abstract from all experience, and argue completely *a priori*, from mere concepts, to the existence of a supreme cause’, KrV B 619. In chapter 2.2 we will discuss Kant’s criticism of this proof and in chapter 11.3 we will discuss Schelling’s criticism of Kant’s criticism.

that of the history of philosophical problems (Problemgeschichte). On this level we do not strive for completeness but focus on three systematic themes. This necessitates a fourth, ‘conceptual historical level’, in which we discuss the various ways in which these Cartesian themes underwent ‘begriffsgeschichtliche’ alterations and were then reused. An example of the latter is the transformation of innate ideas into a priori principles.

It goes without saying that we cannot apply all four levels to every author we discuss to an equal extent. Nineteenth-century historiographical texts, for example, are clearly set at the second level, whereas systematic texts address issues at the third and fourth levels. A consequence of our historical approach together with the fact that we also concentrate on philosophers who are not very well known is that we remain close to the texts of these philosophers.³

The first part discusses the eighteenth-century view of Descartes on the basis of the Encyclopaedists and Kant as they are more widely considered to be the most influential for the following period in the two different philosophical traditions of France and Germany respectively. The reason why our study does not begin immediately after Descartes’s death, a period in which Cartesianism flourished, is that we do not wish to examine the Cartesians, whose range of ideas sometimes diverged far from their master. To separate Descartes’s thought from that of the Cartesians would be a study in itself and certainly exceeds the scope of the present study. Instead our aim is to demonstrate that during the eighteenth century most philosophers had no sound idea of Descartes’s philosophy, and notwithstanding a moderate esteem for his geometry and his application of algebra to geometry, mistakenly neglected or misinterpreted, and sometimes even ridiculed his metaphysics.⁴

Parts II and III discuss the reinstatement of Descartes in France during the nineteenth century. In order to show the breadth of reasons for Descartes’s return, we discuss a wide range of philosophical texts. The reasons why traditionalists, who opposed the socio-political results of the Revolution, reappraised Descartes or Cartesianism, differ from those of historiographers who did not have a political agenda. We also consider that the psychological direction Maine de Biran gave to philosophy played a part in the reassessment of Descartes, while in the works of Royer-Collard and Victor Cousin who both held high political functions, we find patriotic reasons for the reinstatement of Descartes in France during the first half of the nineteenth century. Leaving the detailed discussion of the political environment to the above-mentioned Azouvi, we shall only discuss the political background in relation to the patriotism which was involved in the reinstatement of Descartes in France. By the end of Part III we shall have discussed religious, historiographical,

³ Most quotes will be given in their original language (mostly French and German) but occasionally we have translated passages into English. Quotes from the texts of Descartes are mainly given in French but on locations where more clarity was required we also use the Latin and English editions.

⁴ Short after the completion of this study appeared *Descartes im Licht der französischen Aufklärung. Studien zum Descartes-Bild Frankreichs im 18. Jahrhundert* (2003) by Tanja Thern. Despite some minor overlaps her study wonderfully completes ours in that it underlines the thesis that the contemporary view of Descartes stems from the early nineteenth century, and, on the basis of a widely varied corpus of texts, gives a very precise impression of the French eighteenth-century view of Descartes.

psychological, political, and patriotic reasons for the reinstatement within France. As well, throughout our study we shall discuss the mutual influences between French and German philosophers, examining as much as the textual evidence and the anecdotal accounts of intercultural observers allows.

Parts IV and V focus on the question of which elements of Descartes's philosophy interested philosophers in Germany during the nineteenth century. A simple explanation for the interest in Descartes was the rise of the historiography of philosophy. Scholars started to read Descartes in the original and interpret the actual source material, in contrast to the eighteenth-century philosophers who were satisfied with second or third-hand opinions.

Against the background of the relation between Descartes and Kant, we focus specifically on the Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas. This doctrine interested many German philosophers as they thought it explained the Kantian notion of the a priori. Descartes was seen as the father of modern philosophy and German philosophers wanted to connect him with Kant. As a result Descartes was considered to be the predecessor of Kant; in Part V we discuss how this involved a change of interpretation.⁵

⁵ For a synopsis of this study see Zijlstra, 'The Appropriation of Descartes in Nineteenth-Century Philosophy', in MacDonald and Huussen (eds.), *Scholarly Environments* (2004).

