

Descartes without Clear and Distinct Ideas. A Proposal

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The article advances a reading of Descartes's Meditations on First Philosophy that dispenses with "clear and distinct ideas". Since Descartes's lifetime, these concepts have become a trademark of his philosophy and a target for his critics, on account of their vagueness and inconsistency. The article provides evidence that, by and large, "clear and distinct ideas" were intended by Descartes to convey in simpler, catchier terms a much more elaborate argument, ultimately grounded on the system of the mind's faculties. The article argues that, through this enquiry, Descartes meant to provide a space of reasons wherein to establish key contentions of his philosophy, to include those involving the existence of both mind and bodies. The article concludes by showing that the traditional portrayal of Descartes as an unmitigated intuitionist is, at best, one-sided.

Keywords: *Descartes; Ideas; Clear and Distinct; Faculties; Truth.*

1. Introduction

Descartes has gone down in history as the philosopher of "clear and distinct ideas", an expression that soon became a shibboleth for his supporters and detractors alike. This lore is not without foundation. Descartes himself insisted a great deal on casting his arguments in these terms. Most importantly of all, Descartes stated his well-known "rule of truth" along these lines, arguing that "whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true". Descartes set forth this principle at the onset of the *Third Meditation*, as a "general rule" inferred from the case of the *cogito* argument which, at that stage of his enquiry, had emerged as the one piece of knowledge able to withstand all sorts of doubts:

I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting, which of course would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true¹.

¹ *Meditationes* III, AT VII 35, CSMK II 24. "AT" stands for C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.), *Ceuvres de Descartes*, vols. I-XI, Paris, Vrin, 1964; "CSMK" for J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D.