

Report on the habilitation thesis of Dr. Jan Palkoska

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Thank you for the opportunity to read Dr. Jan Palkoska's book, The a priori in the Thought of Descartes. The title of the work does not justly reflect its ambitions. Palkoska proposes to discuss and illuminate Descartes's conception of the a priori/a posteriori distinction. As Palkoska rightly points out there are only a few texts in which Descartes uses the terms "a priori" and "a posteriori" and they clearly don't present a worked-out theory. Palkoska's approach therefore is indirect. He seeks to understand Descartes's theory of the a priori by building a comprehensive interpretation of Cartesian epistemology, very broadly construed, in which to situate it. (The work might be more aptly described as an essay on Descartes's – well-developed, if not well-understood – theories of synthesis and analysis).

The five chapters are dense with arguments which show both philosophical ingenuity and deep familiarity with the relevant texts. They touch on a wide array of topics: Descartes theory of cognition and account of scientia, certainty and the Cartesian circle, innate ideas, the Cartesian logic of intuition and deduction, and Descartes's theory of modality. Descartes's theory of algebra and his search for a universal method of discovery are the objects of particularly extensive and deep discussion. (In the midst of these discussions I sometimes lost sight of their connection to the central thesis of the book in view, but Palkoska generally brought things back around later). In this report I will lay out the structure of the work. I will focus on a few central issues for more detailed discussion, but much more in this rich work deserves close attention.

The first chapter, "Cognition and Scientia" lay the ground for the study. Here Palkoska discusses the general structure of cognition in Descartes. Roughly, a cognition consists of an affirmation, which is an operation of the will, of some content or proposition provided by the (operations of) the understanding. Palkoska also discusses the central problem of Cartesian epistemology. This involves an elucidation of the concepts of certainty and scientia. Certainty is fundamentally understood by Palkoska in descriptive-psychological terms, rather than normative-epistemic terms. An occurrent clear and distinct perception is psychologically certain because it compels assent, rendering the perceiver psychologically incapable of doubting the cognized proposition. However, if a previously certain cognition does not carry with it assent-compelling clarity and distinctness, then it may be rendered psychologically uncertain by the relevant skeptical doubts.

Scientia involves the notion of metaphysical certainty. This is characterized in terms of the logical impossibility of the relevant skeptical doubts rendering a cognition uncertain. Cognitions involving occurrent clear and distinct perception are metaphysically certain. Others are rendered metaphysically certain by the clear and distinct perception of a non-deceiving God. Palkoska argues, however, that Descartes is not entitled to claim metaphysical certain for these sorts of cognition because it's logically possible that one could fail to have clear and distinct perception of the existence of a non-deceiving God in the future. At this point, however, it is unclear to me that occurrent clear and distinct perceptions render a cognition metaphysically certain. It does not appear logically impossible that clear and distinct perception compels assent, As Descartes presents it this is just a fact about our nature.

The second chapter dives more deeply into the operations of the understanding. The primary focus is the development of doctrines of Descartes's early Rules for the Directions of the Mind, specifically the theory of simple natures and their (non-analytic) necessary connections. This forms the basis for the theory of intuitions as the fundamental items of metaphysical certainty, and so the building blocks of scientia. Fundamental certainties are based on either the perception of simple natures themselves or on their necessary connections. The results of deduction are certain just in case the entire chain of reasoning, tracing back to necessarily connected simple natures, is perceived all at once.

Questions arise about the necessary connections between simple natures. Some of these connections are supposed to be "integral parts of mind-independent reality" (call this realism). These connections are primitive and seemingly brute or arbitrary. Hence, they require an explanation. Palkoska finds an explanation in Descartes's doctrine that eternal truths are God's creatures. He accepts the controversial claim that this doctrine implies that modal truths/facts are, in themselves or absolutely speaking, contingent. This (plus the criterion for necessity on p. 111) seems to make necessary connections mind-relative rather than integral parts of mind-independent reality.

A common objection to the creation of the eternal truths doctrine is that it makes God a deceiver, since we (clearly and distinctly) perceive as necessary, things that are contingent. Palkoska answers that Descartes is only committed to the claim that the only thing we perceive clearly and distinctly in such cases are the non-modal propositions and not their modal status. This text from the Second Replies seems to tell against this response:

Now some of these perceptions are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true. The fact that I exist so long as I am thinking, or that what is done cannot be undone, are examples of truths in respect of which we manifestly possess this kind of certainty. (Second Replies: CSM II, 104, my underlining)

The underlined is a necessity claim (taking "cannot" as "necessarily not"). If everything is contingent, from God's point of view, then the past can be undone and so our clear and distinct, assent-compelling, perception is false. There are other points where Descartes seems to say that we have clear and distinct, assent-compelling, perceptions of modal truths, e.g., the real distinction between the mind and body, the impossibility of atoms and the void.

A complex argument running through the last three chapters is built on the general framework laid in the first two. The argument concerns Descartes's analytic method and his preference for it over the synthetic method, which was the model of scientific inquiry among his Aristotelian predecessors. It begins in chapter three which develops Descartes's analytical method in mathematics is developed. Of particular interest here is Descartes's view that the objects of algebraic study are general quantities rather than geometrical objects or numerical units. This shows how Descartes took algebra to be a fundamental and unifying branch of mathematics. It also lays the groundwork for the claim that analysis is the work of the pure understanding. The argument continues in chapter four where a general method of discovery is developed from Descartes's logic and previously-discussed mathematical method.

Descartes theory of the a priori is presented in the final chapter, where Palkoska examines the continuities and discontinuities of Descartes's theory with the Aristotelian tradition. He develops an interpretation of Descartes that preserves, to an extent, the Aristotelian reading of the a priori/a

posteriori distinction in causal terms. Descartes however reverses the traditional relationship between this distinction and the distinction between analysis and synthesis. He closes with a "speculative suggestion" which I hope to see developed more fully in the future.

In summary, The *a priori* in the thought of Descartes, demonstrates Palkoska's wide-ranging mastery of Descartes's texts and Cartesian scholarship, his ability to develop and sustain a complex interpretive argument. The questions I raise here should not be seen as reservations about the work but as an indication that it will stimulate further debate. I recommend, without reservation, that the thesis be accepted as part of Dr. Palkoska's habilitation process.



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