

Habilitation Thesis Reviewer's Report on Jan Palkoska: *The a priori in the Thought of Descartes*

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The thesis addresses the application of the *a priori* – *a posteriori* distinction in Descartes' thought. Overall, I find it a thorough scholarly work, exhibiting remarkable philological accuracy and acumen. The author offers his own solutions to some outstanding problems in the literature (e.g., concerning the Cartesian Circle) and proposes a convincing interpretation of Descartes' understanding of the *a priori* and its development. In my opinion, it clearly meets habilitation requirements in the field of history of philosophy.

In the following, I make some critical remarks or take issue on certain points (which, however, do not concern the main merits of the thesis):

1. As the author remarks, „while Descartes' usage [of *a priori*–*a posteriori*] is thematically and functionally unified in the general way we have just indicated, he employs the terms in question in very different cognitive fields, most importantly in mathematical, physical, and metaphysical contexts”. It seems to me that the latter, that is, the metaphysical contexts, and the associated literature (for one example, Martin Pickave: *The Notion of A Priori in Descartes and the Medieval Philosophers*), received less attention on the author's part than it could have.

2. „As innate count precisely those ideas with a full proximate cause or origin strictly coincident with (presumably an action of) the very nature (*ipsa natura*) of the mind that has them, this nature being in turn identified with the mind's *facultas cogitandi*. The source of innate ideas can then aptly be described as the mind's reflexion upon its own operations and processes of thinking, or else inferences from such reflexions.” (p. 31.) It is plausible that the proximate cause of an innate idea is the mind itself. However, it seems much more controversial to claim that the way the mind produces or activates innate ideas is by reflection on its own operations. Descartes' argument for the existence of – at least certain – innate ideas is that their contents exceed the representational capabilities of the mind (e.g., actual rather than potential infinity in the case of the idea of God; perfection in the case of geometrical figures). If, in turn, the statement „The source of innate ideas can then aptly be described as the mind's reflexion upon its own operations and processes of thinking...” is to be construed as making the claim that there is a merely causal connection between the mind's reflexion upon its own processes and the innate idea, while the former does not appear in the content of the latter, this would seem to contradict the assertion that „the entities that enter into [innate ideas'] causal antecedents (i.e. the nature of the mind [...]) also form—quâ cognized—at least a part of their *realitas objectiva*” (p. 33.). (At the same

time, innate ideas are discovered rather than invented in and by the mind, as it were. In *this* – trivial – sense we may come by them through reflexion, e.g., trying to identify our precise idea of God.)

Another consideration against taking innate ideas to arise from reflection on the operation on the subject's own mind or the subject's own mental states and processes is that there *are* such second-level ideas, which are, however, *not* innate. Examples are the intellectual emotions (e.g., in AT XI 441, CSM I 381 and in AT IV 602, CSMK 306).

3. I find the following statement too strong in the light of Descartes' overall view of sense perception: „there are no obstacles of principle to treating not just pure understanding but also imagination and even the senses as capable of taking an essential part in delivering cognitions that deserve the title of scientia in the strict sense” (80 p.). Descartes repeatedly declares sense perception by its nature unreliable, also systematically „cheating” in the case of secondary qualities, e.g., “...for all the rest, like light and colors, sounds, odors, flavors, heat and cold and the other tactile qualities, these are thought by me only in a very confused and obscure way” (AT vii. 43). A way to render sensory ideas clear and distinct is by disregarding their relation to all things extramental, including those they purport to represent: „[...] pain and colour and so on are clearly and distinctly perceived when they are regarded merely as sensations or thoughts [*cum tantummodo ut sensus, sive cogitationes spectantur*]” (AT viiia, 33; CSM i. 217). Scientia, however, certainly would not be confined to the intramental.

4. Perhaps the relationship between the intellect and the senses could have been addressed more directly (taking into consideration such works as Alison Simmons' „Descartes on the Cognitive Structure of Sensory Experience”).

In sum, I definitely recommend the acceptance of thesis for habilitation.

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