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The “naturalism” of Descartes and the naturalism of “Cartesians”

Abstract. *My deliberations seek to demonstrate that Descartes’s philosophy is programmatically anti-naturalistic, while its being presented and interpreted as one of the possible forms of naturalism evinces misunderstanding of its basic principles. For this reason, Descartes’s “naturalism” is referred to using quotation marks. Admittedly, his philosophy does advance such postulations and assertions which lend themselves to interpretation in naturalistic categories, but only when they are abstracted from the broader entirety of the Cartesian philosophical system. The text provides only two such examples, though more could be found in the seventeenth-century thought. In each case, they constituted a departure from the very foundations of that system.*

Keywords: *naturalism, Cartesianism, interpretive misunderstandings*

One of the controversial issues relating to Descartes’s philosophy are its associations with naturalism. Although the authors of the *Third* and *Fifth Objections* to his *Meditations on First Philosophy*—who already set out from naturalistic positions—argued that the author of the latter erred chiefly by not having adhered to the naturalistic principles, there was no shortage of those who were convinced that the tenets were indeed embraced and implemented, at least in the most crucial respects. It is my belief that such a perception and presentation of said principles constitutes a departure from the position adopted by the philosopher. Hence “Cartesians” are referred to in this very manner: in quotation marks.

1. Who is and who is not a naturalist?

Regrettably, neither in the past nor today has one ever succeeded in answering a question thus formulated in a manner which would trace a clear dividing line between the adherents and the opponents of naturalism. This has not been due solely to the fact that they differed essentially on some issues and concurred on others, but also owed to their fluctuations and shifts depending on place and time. Still, a number of issues relating to naturalism appear wholly indisputable, the first of which is the tradition of drawing on the notion of *nature*. It had already been invoked in the remote past when little was known about the human and the external world around them as well, yet one felt bound to recognize more or less close relationships between themselves and that world, with the concomitant belief that were it properly treated, it would only be to our favour and benefit. Only few knew how to perform those cultic practices; the first to do so were the magi and witch doctors, then priests, and finally philosophers and scholars.¹ This was how theistic naturalism came to be, manifesting e.g. in various forms of the cult of nature, which inevitably gained their celebrants and guardians. Over time, their social roles were taken over by those wise men who called themselves philosophers, or “lovers of wisdom.” They may not have called all competences of their predecessors into question, but they found themselves to be much more adept at elucidating both mysteries of nature and human needs, as well as suggest methods of succeeding in one’s struggle with nature, which as often as not proved less than friendly. They were the originators of metaphysical naturalism, which had its eminent representatives already in the early centuries of philosophy.² At the beginning of the modern era, there emerged a group of philosophers who effected major revisions of the views of their antique antecedents, yet there was a group of such learned natural scientists who concluded that—to use Francis Bacon’s words—the human mind needs not only wings, but also such lead that will make it tread the earth and look attentively at what was there, as well as describe and systematize that which was worthy of its interest. However, that required not only the mind and the proverbial lead; it also called for what the cited philosopher referred to as *novum organum*, which he linked with such a scientific method that is founded on empiricism and culminates in such generalization that one arrives at by way of induction.³ In this fashion, he sowed the seed of methodological naturalism.

¹ How that process proceeded or at least (hypothetically) how it might have proceeded is expounded by both Mircea Eliade in his morphology of the sacred and Max Weber in his sociology of religion.

² Those representatives and their solutions to problems with nature are presented for instance by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*.

³ Cf. F. Bacon, *Novum Organum*, PWN, Warszawa 1955.

The spectrum of disparities between those varieties of naturalism was nevertheless substantial. Some departed from the precursors so much that those naturalists who were attached to their notions found them difficult to accept. However, its essential cards had already been laid out “on the table,” and those who wanted to state anything in the matter were compelled to take them into account to some degree. At any rate, this was the case when its nineteenth-century admirers and propagators joined the party at “the table,” including Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Although they exchanged the notion of naturalism for *materialism*, they did not dissociate themselves wholly from the historical modalities of naturalism, going even so far as stating that after certain correction it may be considered the progenitor of their philosophies and ideologies.⁴

Still, given the issue stated in the title, I will continue to employ the notion of naturalism, not only in view of its historical legitimacy, but also, or even most of all, because it is more capacious and spans—besides ontological questions (which had been termed metaphysical in the past)—the issues of cognition which carried so much weight in Descartes’s eyes. I would count the following to constitute his fundamental assumptions: 1. nature encompasses everything which exists in time and space; and 2. it comprises physical elements and functions in accordance with the laws of physics; and if anything happens not to belong to that physical world, it is at least essentially dependent on it. It may also be worthwhile to recall that naturalism was such a kind of philosophical monism which provided grounds to either negate the existence of a supernatural world, or at least to situate the former within the domain of knowledge and the latter in the realm of faith.⁵ This involved a particular reductionism, evinced—among other things—in the postulation to reduce the mental world to the physiological one, which was then further pared down to the physical world. Not infrequently, even more reductive stages were applied, while places where the thresholds were set determined the more and less radical strains of naturalism.

2. The principles of Cartesian philosophy

Descartes’s philosophy represents a singular system of deductive reasoning. Its principles constitute the core of the framework while everything else is their derivation, be it close or more remote. The main difficulty consists not only in identifying and describing such principles, but also in establishing the superordinate goal

⁴ Which in their case meant the presumption of the primacy of matter over any other kind of beings; those who did not share their positions were called idealists. Cf. F. Engels, *Ludwik Feuerbach i zmięch klasycznej filozofii niemieckiej*, in K. Marks, F. Engels, *Dzieła wybrane*, Vol. II, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1949, p. 352 et seq.

⁵ Cf. A.C. Danto, “Naturalism”, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Editor Stone, 2008; D. Papineau, “Naturalism” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2007.

in their practical application. In Cartesian philosophy, that goal was in attaining knowledge. One has to add that the philosopher recognized knowledge solely in that which was certain and true, expressing that conviction in all his treatises. The principles of that philosophy were articulated explicitly in two works, namely in *Meditations on First Philosophy* and *Principles of Philosophy*. The latter provides relevant supplements to the former, as well as delivers certain revisions of the principles laid out previously, which presents quite an obstacle when one attempts to enumerate them and even—as the divergent interpretations demonstrate—gives rise to misunderstandings that have also led some interpreters to classify it as a version of naturalism. In my attempt at outlining Cartesian principles, I shall set out with the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The reason for my doing so is that not only did they convey the tenets which the philosopher considered primary, but also because they established a pattern of reasoning which in his opinion could have resulted in the determination and description of all other principles, as well as enabled delineation of the boundaries beyond which the endeavour of thought had little to do with rationality.

What, then, are the foremost Cartesian principles in the lights of *Meditations*...? The answer may be found in each of the six meditations. However, it would not suffice to enumerate them; the prime one should be identified, as all others depend on it logically. I am inclined to claim that the principle of principles in Cartesian philosophy is that of intellectual intuition. It is the same *organon* (instrument) of which Aristotle wrote in his *Prior Analytics* and without which not only would it have been impossible to accurately determine other principles, but also to aptly articulate that which belongs to *res cogitans* (mental substance), and that which belongs to *res extensa* (corporeal substance). To Descartes, that intellectual intuition is a faculty of the human reasons of which all people are possessed. However, according to the philosopher the art of rational thinking and attaining knowledge does not consist in merely having it, but in the skill of utilizing its cognitive capacities in conjunction with those mental abilities which may support it in the task. The latter include memory and imagination, for instance.

Does it share any traits with naturalism? Even if it does, then certainly not with the naturalism espoused by such critics of Descartes as Thomas Hobbes, who in his *Third Objections to the Meditations* unequivocally stated his *votum separatum* with respect to those views. It follows from the objections that the fundamental error on the part of the author of *Meditations* is that he took the primary world to be *res cogitans* as opposed to *res extensa*, while the price to be paid for the error is not only the inability to ascertain significant differences between components of that first world (such as dream and waking life), but also precluding oneself from proving that “external objects exist at all.”⁶ Descartes’s views also display

⁶ Cf. Th. Hobbes, *Third Set of Objections*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II, transl. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoof, D. Murdoch, Cambridge University Press, Lon-

little affinity with the naturalism to which Pierre Gassendi subscribed. In the light of the latter’s *Fifth Objections* Descartes not only posited an erroneous baseline assumption, but also wrongly attributed cognitive faculties to human intellect (e.g. its being “capable of conceiving infinity”). In consequence, Gassendi argues, Descartes becomes entangled—among other things—in diverse contradictions, such as claiming at one point that “the mind is united with the whole body,” whilst asserting elsewhere that it resides “only [in] the brain, or only [in] one small part of it.,” i.e. in the pineal gland (an endocrine gland situated between cerebral hemispheres).⁷ Descartes responded to *Third* and *Fifth Objections*. It follows clearly from the replies that those were his adversaries who could be alleged to have erred in their reasoning. Apparently, their essential mistake was that instead of the mind they set their stakes on the senses or—which amounted to much the same—they were adherents of naturalism, not only cognitive or methodological but also metaphysical, which presumed the primacy of the corporeal with respect to the spiritual, including the intellectual.

In *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes attempts to answer what it means to be an anti-naturalist, not only in terms of acquiring the knowledge of the world and its cognition, but also acknowledging such rules of its functioning which render it rationally cognizable. In part one of the treatise, he restates the argumentation contained in *Meditations*...—albeit in a greatly abridged manner—as well as moderates his requirements relating to certainty and truth.⁸ However, in part two—*The Principles of Material Things*—not only does he not question the existence of such things beyond the human mind, but also demonstrates that their existence is corroborated by our perception of various sensations (“colour, smell, pain etc.); while “[t]he mind is aware that these sensations do not come from itself alone, and that they cannot belong to it simply in virtue of its being a thinking thing; instead, they can belong to it only in virtue of its being joined to something other than itself which is extended and moveable - namely what we call the human body.”⁹ It might seem at first glance that a version of naturalism is embraced there, yet only at the first glance, as further into the disquisition Descartes strives to show and demonstrate that the wealth of diverse experience is not any godsend to the human in their efforts

don – Cambridge – New York – Melbourne – Madrid – Cape Town – Singapore – Sao Paulo, 1984, p. 121 et seq.

⁷ Cf. P. Gassendi, *Fifth Set of Objections*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I, transl. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoof, D. Murdoch, Cambridge University Press, London – New York – New Rochelle – Melbourne – Sydney 1985, p. 235 et seq.

⁸ The mitigated pre-requisites include such a fundamental cognitive issue as clarity and perspicuity of the cognitive approach or of that which is subject to cognition. In a nutshell, Descartes agrees that our cognition may be clear enough but insufficiently perspicuous not to mistake falsity for truth. Yet he agrees nonetheless “[f]or it is of the nature of a created intellect to be finite; and it is of the nature of a finite intellect that its scope should not extend to everything.” Cf. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I, p. 205 et seq.

⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 224 et seq.

to explore the corporeal world but a major hindrance. Without the cognitive powers afforded by the intellect we would be doomed to numerous mistakes, or random truths at best; however, accident cannot be decisive for rational thought. Descartes's argumentation proceeds along those lines in Part Three of *The Principles*, entitled *The Visible Universe* (which is seen rationally by virtue of the human intellect), and in Part Four, concerned with "this Earth which we inhabit [...], composed solely of the matter of the first element"¹⁰; still, we do not owe the knowledge that it had thus come into existence to the senses but to those minds which managed to rise above the volatile testimony of the senses.

3. Naturalism of the seventeenth-century "Cartesians"

In that century, there were admittedly few philosophers who professed to being adherents of both naturalism and Cartesianism, but they did mark their presence in the intellectual life at the time. In any case, they receive substantial attention from the modern-day experts on that period in philosophy. One of those is John Stevenson Spink, author of the monograph entitled *French Free-Thought from Gassendi to Voltaire*, to whom e.g. Louis de la Forge (1632 – 1666) and Gerould de Cordemoy (1620 – 1684) were such "Cartesians." Regarding the former, Spink observed that "[t]aking one of the articles of Descartes's *Principia philosophiae* (Part II, Art. 36) as his starting point, he tried to show that the cause of this union is to be looked for on the level of the First Cause and not on the level of second causes. God is the only true cause; the union of soul and body is to be found in God." As for G. de Cordemoy, the researcher noted that "[h]e denied the divisibility of matter to infinity and accepted the existence of atoms on the purely rational ground that matter would not be a substance if it was divisible to infinity; it would be nothing at all or mere space. For the rest he was as rigorously mechanistic as Descartes in his explanations..."¹¹ Still, is that enough to pronounce someone a Cartesian? It would therefore be worthwhile to examine the views of the supposed "Cartesians" in greater detail.

The first of those, de la Forge, was not only an avowed Cartesian, but also entertained a profound conviction that the allegations against Descartes's philosophy, formulated by the then naturalists, were a misunderstanding. Hence, in his *Treatise on the Human Mind*, undertook to elucidate and complement the philosophy in a way that would demonstrate their groundlessness.¹² However, even the

¹⁰ R. Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, transl. by V.R. Miller, R.P. Miller, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht – Boston – London 1984, p. 181.

¹¹ Cf. J.S. Spink, *French Free-Thought from Gassendi to Voltaire*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2013, p. 207 et seq.

¹² Cf. L. de la Forge, *Treatise on the Human Mind (1664)*, transl. by D.M. Clarke, Springer Science+Business Media, Dordrecht 1997.

demonstration of “the agreement between Saint Augustine’s teaching concerning the nature of the soul and the views of Mr Descartes” announced in the preface may give rise to a suspicion that the author of the treatise either misconstrued the principles assumed and applied by the medieval theologian (such as the principle of utter human dependence on God), or erroneously apprehended *The Principles of Philosophy* by Descartes (one of which presumed that a human using their intellect was capable of handling thinking well), or failed to fully grasp the general import of one and the other. An examination of de La Forge’s argument warrants the conclusion that the third possibility is the most likely. Augustine was obviously a theist, and on top of that a theist who set out from the spiritual and—which was no less important—the divine, only to arrive at the spiritual and divine in the end. Indeed, Descartes took the spiritual to be his point of departure, but it had little to do with divinity (with the exception of the idea harboured in the human mind, in which God was in all respects a perfect being) and arrives at what is actually not only spiritual and human, but also corporeal and extra-human; yet, unlike the perfect being which the human envisions as immutable, it is changeable, i.e. remains in motion.

Although Art. 36 in Part Two of Descartes’s *Principles...* to which Spink refers states that it is God who is “the general cause of all the motions in the world” (whilst “being immutable himself”), material things—once having been set in motion—are subsequently subject to nothing but the laws of nature itself, “which are the secondary and particular causes of the various motions we see in particular bodies.”¹³ The fact that we can perceive them should be credited to our senses, but our ability to discern the laws and regularities within nature is due to the mind, in particular that part where intellect resides. De La Forge, as every naturalist affirming confidence in the testimony of the senses, is inclined to overestimate their credibility and at the same time downplays the role of the mind and even those difficulties which arise as one seeks to know its faculties and properties. The title of Chapter Two in de la Forge’s work already proclaims that “the human mind [...] is easier to know than the body.” In the parts to follow, the author attempts to demonstrate that it is relatively easy to describe its component elements and their functions (actions). In these circumstances, it is no wonder that the issue of “knowledge in general,” which Descartes had analyzed so comprehensively and in such detail, is devoted the brief Chapter 9, ending with the following appeal: “Let us therefore not waste any more time in explaining the nature of knowledge, which is known much better from what experience teaches us about it [...].”

Gerauld de Cordemoy was a declared Cartesian as well, but the premises on which his philosophy rests differ from those adopted by de la Forge. They were laid out in *Discours physique de la parole (Physical Discourse on Speech)* published in 1668. In the foreword, the author states that what he proposes in the work is

¹³ Cf. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I, p. 240 et seq.

“knowledge of oneself.” Without doubt, this is a preeminent question in Descartes as well, who struggled to resolve it throughout his *Meditations*... In the fourth, he reached a threshold which emerges between the spiritual world (*res cogitans*) and the corporeal one (*res extensa*). According to the philosopher, the threshold can be and even should be crossed, though it is perhaps not that certain that one will attain the conviction of having penetrated to the other side, and even when such conviction has been gained, there remains considerable uncertainty as to how far one can venture on that volatile soil of the corporeal world. Still, according to Cordemoy the matter is fairly straightforward: in order to know oneself, one should “merely distinguish between the workings of the soul and the body within oneself.” It is therefore necessary to assume not only the existence of some bodies, but also to acknowledge that “souls exist within all those bodies that resemble mine, and admit that it is not possible for those bodies to speak that sensibly whilst possessing no reason.”¹⁴ To use Cartesian language, this is the “Archimedean point” of both Cordemoy’s naturalism and all its varieties which put their trust in the “speech of the senses” as well as all that is corporeal and which— as “the movement of eyes or face” for instance— utters that “speech.” The problem is that already in the first of his *Meditations*—entitled *Of Those Things Than May Be Called Into Doubt*—Descartes questioned the credibility of that “speech” and then, in the succeeding ones, attempted to lay firm foundations for such a “speech” of the mind which is thoroughly controlled by the intellect. Cordemoy not only challenges the legitimacy of the Cartesian doubt in the credibility of the “bodily speech” beyond his point of departure, but also tries to demonstrate in further stages that there are situations in which it cannot wholly do without soul. As an example, Cordemoy cites animals which “need no soul to cry or to be moved by voices, nor even to imitate the sounds of human speech.”¹⁵

In the later *Six Discourses on the Distinction between the Body and the Soul*, Cordemoy defends both the Cartesian duality of substance (that “distinction between the body and souls”), theistic monism, whose overriding principle is to combine everything that exists in God as the “first cause of motion,” as well as the prime cause of the soul’s effect on the body and the body’s on the soul, and theistic occasionalism (which makes all relationships occurring in the earthly world contingent upon divine power and will). On the other hand, his vision of the order of the earthly world emanates a mechanistic naturalism in which the world created by God constitutes an immense mechanism: as “in a clock [where] the arrangement of

¹⁴ Cf. G. de Cordemoy, *Rozprawa fizykalna o mowie*, Warszawa 1993, p. 27.

¹⁵ Unlike the body speech of animals, human utterances are “ever accompanied with some thoughts; and that in speech there are always two things, viz. the formation of the voice, which cannot proceed but from the body, and the signification or the idea that is joined therewith, which cannot come but from the soul.” *Ibidem*, p. 28 et seq.

its parts is the cause of all its effects” with the elements indicating “days, months, or years, or even does things more difficult and more rare than these.”¹⁶

The answer to the question whether Descartes would have endorsed that position is not and cannot be indisputable. Still, I am inclined to argue that he would not have subscribed to such an occasionalism in which much hinges on God and little on human intellectual activity thanks to which one undertakes the most consequential cognitive challenges and, relying on intellect, surmount the most serious obstacles on the way to truth. On the other hand, it is conceivable that he would have to some degree accede to such a vision of the material world in which, using a mathematical model of thinking, one discovers an almost mathematical order; nonetheless, “almost” should be emphasized here, as the world of mathematics can be navigated with fairly substantial certainty while its problems can be resolved without any major quandaries. In contrast, the material world is replete with doubt which endures even when one has exhausted the entire range of cognitive measures available. Naturally, one can always resort to reductions and simplifications which would relieve one of the burden of nagging dilemmas. Obviously, Descartes did take advantage of such possibilities in his philosophy, and encouraged using those to all who aspired to attain the truth. This is borne out by e.g. the recommendations contained in Part IV of his *Discourse on Method*, where he speaks of the “foundations of metaphysics” and such hardly realizable goals as the “knowledge of God and human soul,” and in Part V (which discusses the “order of the physical questions,” including the system of planets and comets) and in Part VI (where the author refers to “some particular specimens” in which he employed that mathematical model of thinking about the world and, in his own opinion, was quite considerably successful in the endeavour.¹⁷ The essential difference between Descartes and Cordemoy on the latter issue is that the former treated such a vision of the world as its singular model or—as one would put it today—idealization, whereas to the other it was not so much a model but an accurate description of what was to be found in that world and how it functioned.

Finally, it may be recalled that the eighteenth century saw philosophers who no longer had any doubt that Cartesian views had little in common with naturalism

¹⁶ In the *Third Discourse—On Natural and Artificial Machines*—the author explicitly assumes “that everyone knows the makeup and all the pieces of a clock, I will not take the time to explain how one wheel moves another, nor how each wheel guides the various parts of the machine with which it is in contact in various ways, thereby preparing them, all at the same time, for different purposes. We know the artifice through which all of the motions of the clock are regulated, and I will not digress by examining how the cord or the chain that serves to wind up the spring makes all the pieces follow its motion.” Cf. G. de Cordemoy, *Six Discourses on the Distinction between the Body and the Soul and Treatises on Metaphysics*, transl. by S. Nadler, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, p. 82 et seq.

¹⁷ The specimens in question are *Dioptrics*, *Meteorics* and *Geometry* (whose numerous pages contain diverse mathematical calculations and geometrical diagrams).

but showed quite an affinity with speculativism, which they called *metaphysics* and considered something of a meaningless pursuit. Such an interpretation is conveyed in Voltaire's *Letters to the English* and in *Treatise on Systems* by E.B. Condillac. The latter questions not only Descartes's system but also the legitimacy of devising that kind of deductive systems.¹⁸ In his monograph on Enlightenment rationalism, Panagiotis Kondylis associates that philosophical system clashes with opposition against deductive hypotheses and a shift towards empirical-inductive approach in natural sciences.¹⁹ It may also be noted that a number of philosophers of that period still found that Cartesian physicalism attested to having embracing mechanistic naturalism. One of those was Julien Offray de la Mettrie (1709–1751), author of e.g. the treatise entitled *Man a Machine (L'homme-machine)*. In the work, Descartes is cited as a philosopher who “was in fact often mistaken” yet who did not err when he asserted that “animals are pure machines.” The treatise also features a controversial suggestion that the Cartesian duality of soul and body was “plainly but a trick of skill, a ruse of style, to make theologians swallow a poison, hidden in the shade of an analogy which strikes everybody else and which they alone fail to notice,” meaning the “analogy” which states that “these proud and vain beings, more distinguished by their pride than by the name of men [...] are at bottom only animals and machines which, though upright, go on all fours.”²⁰ In my opinion, this essentially demonstrates the failure to comprehend not only the principles of Cartesian philosophy, but also the meaning of Cartesian metaphysical dualism.

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¹⁸ Cf. E.B. Condillac, *Traité des systemes*, in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, Vol. I, Paris 1947, p. 144 et seq.; Wolter, *Listy o Anglikach czyli listy filozoficzne*, PIW, Warszawa 1953, p. 105 et seq.

¹⁹ “The fight against hypotheses now [in the Enlightenment] means embracing empirical-inductive bias in natural sciences as well as fundamental objection against Cartesian metaphysical dualism and intellectualism, whereby Newton—in a somewhat roundabout fashion—became the precursor or an ally of the materialistically oriented positions.” Cf. P. Kondylis, *Die Aufklärung im Rahmen des neuzeitlichen Rationalismus*, Ernst Klett Verlag, Stuttgart 1981, p. 226 et seq.

²⁰ Cf. J.O. La Mettrie, *Człowiek-maszyna*, PWN, Warszawa 1984, p. 83 et seq.

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