

Insight and Inference: Descartes's Founding Principle and Modern Philosophy

MURRAY MILES

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In his work, *Insight and Inference*, Murray Miles provides a thorough and illuminating analysis of many topics in Cartesian philosophy, each of which would be worthy of a focused study in its own right. But Miles's treatment of each of these matters is subordinated to that which remains throughout the principal object of his study, namely, the correct interpretation and analysis of Descartes's sentence, *cogito ergo sum*, taken as a formula of the principle upon which first philosophy and indeed science in general may be finally well founded. Given his interpretation and analysis, Miles goes on to show how, in employing this sentence as such a principle, Descartes transformed the very ideas upon which the order of being, no less than that of knowing, could be framed. This transformation, Miles argues, has been largely neglected in recent scholarship, as when Descartes's works are read as concerned with primarily epistemological problems regarding the foundations of a mathematical science of nature, or misrepresented, as when some version of idealism or anti-realism is attributed to Descartes. As a corrective to this, Miles tries to show that while taking the existence and nature of the knowing finite mind as the point of departure for metaphysics, as otherwise traditionally conceived, Descartes did not accept or commit himself to any version of idealism or anti-realism. Instead, Miles argues, Descartes developed together with a novel ontology of separable, finite minds a new and rather robust direct realism with respect to our ordinary and philosophical knowledge of the natural world. It is perhaps as just such a corrective that Miles's extensive study of Descartes's founding principle of philosophy is most intriguing and compelling, not only for the Descartes scholar but for any philosopher interested in metaphysics—the future of metaphysics, no less than its past.

Miles's interpretation and analysis of Descartes's *cogito* principle is developed and defended throughout the body of his study in three parts, each part focused upon one key feature of the formula as a whole.

In the first part, Miles discusses the precise meaning of *cogito* as Descartes employs this sentence in the formulation of his first principle. His account of the meaning of *cogito* is based upon a distinction he draws in Descartes's writings between *conscientia* and *cogitatio*, consciousness and thought. According to Miles's account of this distinction, whereas ordinarily one directly intends external things under some form of representing them, one is ordinarily immediately conscious of one's thoughts, not through representing them but simply through having them. It is only through performing such philosophical reflection as Descartes displays in his *Meditations* that one makes this immediate consciousness explicit. In doing so, one learns to conceive one's thoughts precisely through the following three essential features:

- (i) The real inherence of the thought in an actual thinking substance.
- (ii) The specific act-character of the thought, which is a feature by which simple acts of seeing, imagining, and purely understanding are distinguished from one another, as well as from more complex acts, such as willing.

- (iii) The presence in the mental act of a form of intending some object or objects. (This form is what Descartes means by an idea in one of the strict senses, and, on his account, may or may not coincide with the form of some real thing.)

It is thought conceived through these features, says Miles, which Descartes predicates of himself when he affirms the judgement, *cogito*. Since, on Miles's account, they are supposedly always immediately evident to consciousness, Miles is able to assign a meaning to *cogito* that frees its affirmation from any dependence upon knowledge of external or extra-mental things, while preserving his attribution to Descartes of some version of direct realism.

In the second part of his study, Miles gives an account of the truth, certainty, and necessity of the thought, *sum*, taken as an affirmation drawn immediately from the thought, *cogito*. This account is probably the most intriguing and controversial part of the book. Even so, it is the most compelling.

On most contemporary accounts, the certainty and necessity of *sum* are given broadly anti-metaphysical interpretations of a narrowly logical, normative, or psychological nature. In contrast, the real truth of the judgement (that is, its truth as judgement about the reality of some real thing) is more often than not assumed to consist in some form of correspondence between thought and a possibly independent reality. But, for well-known reasons, unless Descartes is read, instead, as trying to give an anti-realist account of truth, any combination of interpretations of these types would leave Descartes's proof of the existence of God and of the truth principle (that whatever is clearly and distinctly conceived really exists as conceived) open to all the traditional charges of circularity or invalidity.

In contrast with these accounts, Miles offers what he calls a phenomenological interpretation of the necessity, truth, and certainty of the affirmation, *sum*. To begin with, on Miles's phenomenological account, Descartes has at least three basic concepts of certainty. Two of these, *persuasio* and *scientia*, are conceptions of perfect certainty, certainty consisting essentially in what truth, in the first instance is, namely, real being clearly and distinctly conceived. The distinction between these is that whereas *persuasio* is perfect certainty now and is not limited with respect to the nature, necessity, or contingency of its subject matter, *scientia* is permanent, perfect certainty about unchangeable or eternal things, including God and the essences of finite minds and bodies. Contrasting with these two forms of perfect certainty is the moral certainty we normally have in our pre-reflective experience of the world and in our memory of our past activity—e.g., our past *persuasio*. Given the truth principle, this certainty necessarily coincides with truth, but not essentially or intrinsically. The necessity of the affirmation, *sum*, on Miles's account, while it may consist in the psychological irresistibility of the affirmation, once the thought is properly considered, is more importantly for Miles the mind's immediate consciousness of the real truth of that which it affirms.

The mind, then, may first possess *persuasio* with respect to all proximate matters of ordinary immediate consciousness without possessing certainty about God's existence or, consequently, of the truth principle. *Persuasio*, on these last matters, however, just is *scientia* and is required, on the one hand, for the demonstrative validation of moral certainty in general and, on the other, for *scientia* on any necessary subject matter about which we can have certainty. The proofs of the existence

of God, and the truth principle, moreover, are sufficiently simple that the affirmations of their respective conclusions are made with respect to a background of present immediate consciousness of the grounds from which they were inferred, and so do not depend upon any form of memory that is merely morally certain. They are inferences productive of perfect, and not merely moral, certainty.

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, Miles provides in the third part of his study a rather elegant account of all those inferences—whether intuitive or discursive, inductive or deductive—which are, according to Descartes, productive of perfect certainty. Not only *sum* but *cogito ergo sum* and all the principles of natural light, including those of first philosophy, pure mathematics, and natural science, are supposedly conclusions of such proofs.

On Miles's general account, the logical sequence of thought followed in any basic step of a perfect proof, for Descartes, is always valid, but not always, nor ever merely, formally valid. Nor is explicit knowledge of the formal or material principle grounding the connection between antecedent and consequent in the sequence required for the inference to preserve or produce perfect certainty. All that is required is immediate consciousness of the grounds given by the antecedent and of the connection holding between the antecedent and the consequent. Whether the inference is intuitive or discursive, this immediate consciousness is always present as part of the affirmation of the conclusion. In contrast, explicit, perfect certainty on the universal principle underlying the inference is obtained as the result of subsequent inductive proof, which is produced by the mind's analysis of singular instances of the subject matter of the principle.

Underlying this account of intuitive and perfect discursive proof, Miles claims, is not only a dispositional, rather than an imprint, theory of the innateness of our knowledge of the principles of natural light but also a new guiding idea of the order of being, the efficiently realized, but not finally effective, attribute.

On Miles's interpretation, the subject matter of all wisdom, that is, knowledge of principles of the natural light, is constituted by objects of immediate awareness, objects that are in varying degrees and ways necessarily connected to the subject matter of one's present thoughts, according to the order of perfect proof. Wisdom, then, is innate, for Descartes, in the sense that once the mind begins to reflect upon its own nature precisely, it can begin to produce this wisdom in itself through following these necessary connections in the proper order, that is, in an order through which perfect certainty can be first produced and conserved. The ground of the mind's potentiality for this explicit knowledge is its own immediate, but ordinarily implicit, consciousness of the subject matter.

Overall, Miles's account of the foundations of Cartesian philosophy is rich with insight, and quite compelling. However, concerning the last major point in Miles's analysis, we may wonder whether his model of innateness does not after all support a version of the imprint-theory of innateness. Granted, on Miles's model, before the finite mind does prove any of the truths of wisdom, it has essentially only the disposition or potency to produce this knowledge within itself. But it is the fully present system of these truths as an object of immediate consciousness that is the ground of the disposition. The presence of this system in and for immediate consciousness at each moment is just what it is for the principles of the natural light to be imprinted on the mind. This account is not only in keeping with much of what Descartes says regarding the innateness of wisdom, it is also much more in

keeping with seeing God as an efficient cause of the finite mind's conception of the divine nature. The finite mind must by its own agency produce the concept within itself. However, God is the efficient cause of the imprint to which the mind must inwardly and explicitly attend to produce the idea.

Notwithstanding this problem, however, Miles's study more than succeeds in compelling its reader to take Descartes's first philosophy seriously again, and is highly recommended.

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Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism? On the Uses and Abuses of a Philosophy

JACOB GOLOMB et ROBERT S. WISTRICH, directeurs de la publication
Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002, 341 p.

L'ouvrage édité par Golomb et Wistrich remet à l'ordre du jour une question chaudement débattue voilà pas si longtemps, à savoir si la philosophie de Nietzsche se constitue en véritable initiatrice du nazisme et du fascisme. C'est plus de nazisme que de fascisme à l'italienne qu'il sera d'ailleurs question. L'illustration de la couverture du livre ne trompe pas : on y voit un Nietzsche songeur et son reflet inversé, l'un étant marqué en surimpression d'une svastika rouge. Le titre nous met sur la piste : on veut se questionner sur cette supposée parenté de Nietzsche avec le nazisme (et, par extension, le fascisme). La philosophie de Nietzsche est-elle fasciste? proto-fasciste? antifasciste? Si Nietzsche ne peut être considéré comme fasciste, quels éléments de sa pensée ont pu avoir un attrait pour les fascistes du XX^e siècle? On cherche à savoir, avec Derrida, ce qui dans cette philosophie se prête aussi bien à une lecture nazie : pourquoi Nietzsche? pourquoi pas un autre? La question du politique chez Nietzsche fait nécessairement partie des points abordés dans les différents articles. En effet, il faut prendre parti et dire si Nietzsche était politique ou apolitique. Ne serait-ce pas la plus grande ironie s'il s'avérait que Nietzsche l'apolitique a été utilisé à des fins politiques? La question de la grande politique, si elle n'est pas résolue dans cet ouvrage, le hante et le traverse. S'agit-il donc d'un autre ouvrage de réhabilitation? L'entreprise n'est pas aussi naïve, et on n'assiste à aucun escamotage, même si l'on sent une nette sympathie pour le philosophe dont on a détourné la pensée. Il sera donc question de ce détournement : quels passages de l'œuvre ont pu être utiles aux idéologues nazis et comment ont-ils manipulé l'œuvre? Mais on dit aussi comment ces mêmes idéologues considéraient cette pensée comme suspecte, surtout au niveau de ce que Nietzsche avait à dire sur les Juifs. La «question juive» est donc omniprésente : que pensait Nietzsche des Juifs? Nietzsche antisémite? Pro-sémite? Anti-antisémite? Philosémite?

Comme dans tout collectif, les contributions ne sont pas d'égale valeur ou d'intérêt égal. À mon sens, les contributions de Berel Lang, Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, Alexander Nehamas, Daniel W. Conway et Robert C. Holub sont les plus intéressantes. Je m'attarderai donc à celles-ci et dirai ensuite quelques mots sur les autres contributions. Dans son «Misinterpretation as the Author's Responsibility (Nietzsche's Fascism, For Instance)», Berel Lang veut utiliser la méthode nietz-