VERDAD, PERCEPCIÓN, INMORTALIDAD

MISCELÁNEA EN HOMENAJE AL PROFESOR WOLFGANG STROBL

EDICIÓN POR
SALVADOR CASTELLOTE

WAHRHEIT, WAHRNEHMUNG, UNSTERBLICHKEIT
DESCARTES AND THE “ADMIRABLE CONSEQUENCE”

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Descartes’ analysis of his doubt has been viewed as an example of the “admirable consequence”. After reviewing the main features of this intriguing type of argument (section 1) and the Cartesian relevant texts (2), I examine the authors who have interpreted Descartes in the “admirable” way (3). A concluding remark is given in (4).

1. The “consequentia mirabilis”

The indirect proof of a proposition A consists in discovering that the assumption not-A leads to a contradiction, that is, to a conjunction “B and not-B”. Then of course not-A is false and (using bivalence) A is true. But there is a special, admirable case, in which the assumption of the negation of A leads straightforwardly—without any detour through a contradiction “B and not-B”—to the affirmation of A. Assume not-A, “think hard” and you will find that A triumphantly emerges, as true, from its own negation. This reasoning (which can still be regarded as “indirect”) to the extent that the starting point is the negation of A) has been called consequentia mirabilis, “Clavius’ law” and “Dilemma” (cf. Thiel, Nuchelmanns, Micalbell).

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A list of examples was compiled by Vailati towards the end of the 19th century. One of Vailati's examples is Descartes' way out from skepticism. If correct, this would certainly make a fine addition to the "admirable gallery".

2. Cartesian texts

Two types of doubt may be distinguished in Descartes: the existential doubt concerning existential propositions and the doubt concerning memory (for example, in a complex reasoning we no longer have a direct intuition of the premisses and must rely on our recollection of them). The victory over the doubt concerning memory is achieved by establishing the existence of God. In this the consequentia miraculis does not seem to play any role. Existential doubt is defeated, not surprisingly, by finding an existential proposition that is indubitable. If we look into the Cartesian texts for information on how Descartes has won his war against the existential doubt, we recognize three different strategies: a rather explicit modus ponens type of inference, hints at an admirable consequence, and a non-inferential way out. Let us look into each of these.

A. In the modus ponens analysis it is particularly important that the doubt be not "universal". In fact, two sorts of things appear to remain unaffected by the doubt: the certainty of immediate experience (I may doubt the existence of that house but I cannot doubt my awareness of it — I cannot doubt my cogito) and a set of logico-ontological principles such as the principle of non-contradiction and "nothing has no properties". The latter is best construed as having to do with individual properties rather than with properties in the sense of abstract entities. If we perceive an individual quality or action such as a cogitatio —this individual cogitatio of mine— we may infer that there is an individual substance behind it. Thus the indubitable statement cogito in conjunction with the special case of the principle "nothing has no properties": "if x cogitat then x est", yields the desired conclusion sum. Needless to say, no "admirable" reasoning is apparent in this account of the Cartesian enterprise.

B. Hints at some form of admirable consequence occur in the following passages from the Meditations:

a) In secunda, mens quae, propria libertate utens, supponit ea omnia non existere de quorum existentia vel minimum potest dubitare, animadvertit fieri non posse quin ipsa interim existat (Meditations, Synopsis, A. T. VII, p. 12).

b) Exempli causa, cum examinarem his buis an aliquid in mundo existeret, aequo adverterem, ex hoc ipso quod illud examinarem evidenter sequi me existere (Fourth Med. A. T. VII, p. 58).


Similar texts are found in other writings of Descartes:

d) si Socrates dicit se dubitare de omnibus, hinc necessario sequitur: ergo hoc saltem intelligit, quod dubitat... (Regulae, A.T. X, p. 421).


All these fragments suggest the admirable consequence to the extent that they involve a direct move from the negation not-A of a proposition A to the proposition A itself. In (a) and (b) A is "I exist". In (a) instead of not-A Descartes has the superlative "nothing exists". In (b) not-A is rhetorically presented as a question (is A true?). In (c) A is "some proposition is true" (namely, "nothing is true"). In texts (d) and (e), particularly, we recognize the so-called self-falsifying sentences, studied by the ordinary logic of Descartes' time, as observed by the author of the seventh objections:


C. The possibility of a third type of analysis is suggested by the following passage: denique statuendum sit hoc pronunciatum, Ego sum, ego existo, quoties a me profertur, vel mente concipitur, necessarium esse verum (Second Med. A. T. VII, p. 25). Here the sentence "I exist" is assigned the extraordinary property that whenever it is asserted it is true. This is different from the admirable texts because here there is no switch from a proposition to its contradictory —in fact there is no switch at all. On the other hand, there is no modus ponens since there are no premisses.

To be sure, the phrase "cogito ergo sum" properly applies only to version A.

3. Authors who have read Descartes according to the "admirable consequence"

Several scholars from various periods in the last three centuries have viewed Descartes' way out in terms of the admirable consequence. I will consider: Geulinex, Vailati, Brunschvicg, C. I. Lewis. Hintikka may be counted as in this
group, in spite of the fact that he does not even hint at the admirable consequence and that he does not want to be seen as construing Descartes in terms of any consequentia.

As said, Vailati mentions Descartes in his survey of the consequentia mirabilis. Brunschvicg, writing on Sacchi, finds the latter's method perfectly "rigorous" and its conclusion "irresistible" because, comme la vérité du cogito cartésien, elle s'affirme dans sa négation meme (p. 316).

In the 17th century, the Cartesian Guélinx, a good logician, was well aware of the admirable consequence, which he called dilemma. Guélinx distinguishes two types of "negative demonstration": indirect (from not-A an absurdum is inferred) and direct or dilemma (from not-A the proposition A itself is inferred, Disputationes Metaphysicae, I, 8, in Opera, vol. II, p. 473). He says that the dilemma is infrequens, rarum (simply because it is rarum that a proposition follows from its own negation), Logica restituta, I, 2, 14, 4, in Opera vol I, p. 447) and that mathematicians do construct such proofs sed paucis (ibid.). He emphasizes that the argument is fortiissimum (ibid.) and that any proposition established by means of it is necessary, indeed summe necessaria (ibid.). Thus, it is not surprising that Guélinx thinks that the dilemma is the appropriate tool to secure the foundations of metaphysics, whose first truth (prima scientia) is cogito ergo sum, or perhaps more accurately just sum (Disputationes Metaphysicae, I, 9, in Opera, vol. II, p. 473).

In spite of all this enthusiasm, however, it is hard to see how exactly Guélinx understands the application of the admirable consequence to the cogito ergo sum. His best account of the first truth, at the beginning of the Metaphysica vera, is particularly disappointing in this respect:

Prima scientia: cogito ergo sum. Converto igitur me ad mean rationem, qua, ante ingressum primae scientiae, considerabam me ipsum ut ignarum prorsus et omni modo, per consequem dubitatem de quois. Et clarissime video, me haec varia cogitasse, per consequem Me esse. Impossibile enim es ut omnia ista cogitaverim et cogitata, et tamen nihil sim. Haec est ergo prima scientia, qua me cogitare et esse intelligo (Opera, vol II, p. 147).

Guélinx distinguishes three steps in his analysis of the first metaphysical truth: 1) I doubt everything (dubitandum de quois), 2) I am aware of my doubting (cogito), 3) I must exist because it is impossible cogitare and not to exist. In the third item we recognize the major premise of the modus ponens version: "if x cogitau then x est". Thus, Guélinx appears to confuse the admirable and the modus ponens strategy.

Immediately after the above quoted text, Guélinx presents a metaphor that confirms his plan of viewing the doubt as self-defeating, hence presumably of viewing the way out as admirable. He advises those who are engaged in the methodical doubt not to surrender to the skeptics because "the clouds will dissipate by themselves" (memini illas se ipsas dissipare nebulas). This, however, seems to be just a beautiful metaphor.

In the 20th century the logician Hintikka argues against the interpretation of Descartes in terms of inference and defends a "performance" interpretation. It turns out however, that by "inference" Hintikka means merely the modus ponens version A, while under "performance" he includes not only version C, which is certainly non-inferential, but also an admirable inference, without recognizing it as such. In fact, in addition to referring to the text corresponding to our version C as crucial for the right understanding of Descartes (p. 17), Hintikka insists on the self-defeating nature of the sentence "I do not exist": "Descartes realizes that its indubitability [of the statement "I am"] results from [...] an attempt to think the contrary" (p. 16). Here we have, but Hintikka fails to mention it, the first half or antecedent of an admirable consequence: "if I do not exist then I exist". Thus we may count Hintikka as a virtual supporter of the admirable reading of Descartes, although he does not appear to be aware of this and it is not clear that he would approve of it.

The titles of the two Hintikka's papers cited in the bibliography should not really include the phrase "cogito ergo sum" which, as said, properly applies to the modus ponens inference only. In fact, Hintikka, in his papers, suggests that the cogito is a metalinguistic, reflective piece, in the end extrinsic to the Cartesian way out.

Incidentally, Hintikka's "naive objection" (p. 7) to the modus ponens version is based upon an interpretation of the major premis "x cogitau 2 est" which is not, in my view, the best. Hintikka regards this conditional as an instance of the logical truth PaP implies xP, which of course depends on the "existential presupposition" that all our singular terms (represented by "a") have a denotation. Thus, surely, the conclusion "1 exist" becomes circular. Contrary to this, I think that the major premis is more plausibly read as an instance of an ontological axiom stating that whenever you run into an individual accident you may be sure that there is an individual substance behind it ("nothing has no properties"). In my reading, the major premis involves no circularity, but reveals to what an extent Descartes depends on the classical ontology of accidents and substances.

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1 According to Hintikka, the sentence "I do not exist" is not logically inconsistent (as for example "3<5 and not-3<5") but "existentially" inconsistent, which means that nobody can both assert it and claim that it is true.
Finally, another logician, C. I. Lewis, views the Cartesian way out from skepticism as an instance of “reaffirmation through denial”, which he does not like:

For example, the fallacy of arguing from the undeniable existence of thinking to the self which does the thinking vitiates Descartes’s use of the ‘I think’. But quite apart from that, the man who should assert “I am not thinking”, so far from contradicting himself, would give the best possible evidence of the truth of his statement. The proposition, “I am not thinking”, does not imply, “I am thinking”. It may be that the attitude of will which we suppose to underlie the making of any assertion is such as to be incompatible with the admission, “I am not thinking”, so that we may be sure that whoever could make such a statement would find himself at cross purposes. But the reason for this is contained neither in the proposition nor in any implication of it. There is here no logical inconsistency whatever (p. 510).

It is not clear how this negative view really affects the admirable passages we have found in Descartes. In Lewis’s text two claims appear to be made: (1) It is fallacious to infer from “thinking” (“there is thinking”) that “there is a self who does the thinking”. (2) the proposition “I am not thinking” is not logically inconsistent. The first claim, however, is irrelevant since it is not a criticism of the admirable version but rather of the major premises of the modus ponens version. The objection contained in the second claim can be perhaps met by applying to it Hintikka’s distinction of logical vs. existential inconsistency. Lewis seems to have in mind an existential inconsistency when he writes: “whoever could make such a statement would find himself at cross purposes”.

4. Concluding remark

Several Cartesian texts suggest an admirable escape from the doubt. Curiously, both a strong, authoritative supporter of the admirable reading (Geulincx) and an equally strong opponent (C. I. Lewis) turn out to be disappointing in their respective comments. Not less curious is the case of Hintikka, who only considers the modus ponens and the performance strategies, and fails to recognize, as a second type of inferential way out (in addition to the modus ponens) the *mirabilis consequentia*.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


