8th LUMEN International Scientific Conference Rethinking Social Action. Core Values in Practice | RSACVP 2017 | 6-9 April 2017 | Suceava – Romania

Rethinking Social Action. Core Values in Practice

Truth and Error in the Dispute between Hobbes and Descartes on Meditations on First Philosophy

Marius DUMITRESCU*

https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc.rsacvp2017.21

How to cite: Dumitrescu, M. (2017). Truth and Error in the Dispute between Hobbes and Descartes on Meditations on First Philosophy. In C. Ignatescu, A. Sandu, & T. Ciulei (eds.), *Rethinking Social Action. Core Values in Practice* (pp. 220-229). Suceava, Romania: LUMEN Proceedings https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc.rsacvp2017.21

© The Authors, LUMEN Conference Center & LUMEN Proceedings.
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the conference

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited

©LUMEN Proceedings

8th LUMEN International Scientific Conference
Rethinking Social Action. Core Values in Practice |
RSACVP 2017 | 6-9 April 2017 | Suceava – Romania

Truth and Error in the Dispute between Hobbes and Descartes on *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Marius DUMITRESCU[1]

Abstract

When Thomas Hobbes commented on Descartes' Meditations on first philosophy in 1641, he was in his mature age, and the theoretical directions of his own worldview were probably already fully engaged. In this paper, I argue that Hobbesian objections to Descartes' Meditations reveal the philosophical thoughts of the English thinker. What seems to bind both thinkers is the idea of ego seen as a principle. But an essential difference could be traced between the two philosophical visions. For Descartes, the ego is a theoretical principle, a metaphysical one, while Hobbes thinks to it in an instrumental way, in terms of human action on which it is based. Hobbes' egoism is radical because the self is the only instance that determines and justifies the action. For Hobbes, an error couldn't be the result of limitations of the cognitive faculties as Descartes understood it, but rather the result of a failure in the action plan. In the English philosopher's thinking, the passions of the ego reflects the engine of human fulfillment and the sign of a strong mind, able to engage in real life and to assume a destiny. So, any action that leads to a victory is an obvious sign of her successful validation. A failed action signifies the existence of a false idea behind it, and this false idea is consider to be the result of weak passions that are inadequate to reality. By reading the Meditations, Hobbes defined his own thinking that could no longer accept the Cartesian dualism and replaced it with a new monistic philosophy in which he gave reality only to the sensitive world. The truth became an issue more related to a practical approach than to one with a contemplative, theoretical facet. The classical dispute between Descartes and Hobbes on one of the central subjects in philosophy which is truth can be interpreted as an incipient form, avant la lettre, of a philosophical Brexit by which nominalistic Anglo-Saxon thinking defined its originality and independence in relation to the continental philosophy dominated by Thomism and Cartesianism.

Keywords: truth, error, Hobbes, ego, action.

[1] Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, Romania, dumitrescu.marius66@yahoo.com.

https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc.rsacvp2017.21
Corresponding Author: Marius DUMITRESCU
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the conference

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited

1. Introduction

On November 11, 1640, Descartes sent a letter to Father Marin Mersenne [1] and announced him that he had completed *Meditationes de prima philosophia* and asked to help him in editing and publishing it. He had also the desire that his treaty to be accompanied by a letter dedicated to ”the Dean and Doctors of the sacred Faculty of Theology of Paris”. Mersenne seriously took the role of "godfather" of the book and decided to send it to several renowned theologians and scholars of the time so that they could write some remarks on the content of the treatise. Their views were finally attached to *Meditationes*. There were seven objectors [2]: Johannes Caterus, a Dutch theologian - first set of objections; some "theologians and philosophers", but in fact behind them was actually hiding Father Marin Mersenne himself - second set of objections; “a famous English philosopher”, later recognized as being Thomas Hobbes - third set of objections; Antoine Arnauld, a French Jansenist theologian of Port-Royal - fourth set, Pierre Gassendi, an Epicurean atomist - fifth set, again some other philosophers, theologians and geometers, whose views were gathered by Mersenne - sixth set, and the Jesuit priest Pierre Bourdin - seventh set of objections, the last being added only to the second edition of *Meditations*. To all these objections, Descartes responded with grace, attaching to each of them his replies.

2. Theoretical Background

There are some authors who consider *Third Objections and Replies,* which constitute the exchanges of views between Hobbes and Descartes, as ”disappointing” because ”the author of the *Third Objections* is dogmatic” and he ”didn’t understand the structure of the argument of the meditations” [3]. Also, Malcolm considers that ”Descartes’ philosophy was more an irritant than a stimulant to Hobbes” [4].

Some other writers, like W.T. Lynch [5], claim that when Hobbes wrote his objections to *Meditations* he conceived his own philosophy of nature from a political point of view. On the contrary, Finn arguments that ”Hobbes' political ideas influenced him to accept *specific* philosophical positions” [6].

In this paper, I will investigate the dispute between Descartes and Hobbes as it appear in *Third Objections and Replies to Meditation* in an attempt to reveal its role for the development of Hobbes' philosophical system. For this purpose, I used the method of comparative analysis of the philosophical

texts trying to capture the internal reasons that motivated Hobbes' criticisms of the theory of truth founded by Descartes in *Meditations*.

2.1. The scientific and philosophical context: Hobbes and "Mersenne circle"

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) visited Paris several times during his lifetime [7], and in that periods he spent his time meeting French mathematicians and philosophers. In his third arrival on the Continent, together with the third Earl of Devonshire, whom he was tutor, they remained in Paris for almost a year (1634-1635) and after that they traveled to Italy in searching a copy of Galileo's *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo*, published in 1632. Upon returning to Paris, in the spring of 1636, Hobbes met with Mersenne and probably those two became friends. In October 1637, Hobbes arrived home in England, and he received a copy of Descartes' *Discourse de la méthode*, as a gift from Sir Kenelm Digby (1603-1665), a philosopher, alchemist and privateer, who converted to Catholicism, and who self-exiled in France in 1635, where he entered in "Mersenne's circle", learning quickly about Descartes' philosophy [8]. It seems that this work initiated Hobbes' first contact with Descartes' philosophy.

However, in 1640, Hobbes' *The Elements of law* manuscript circulated in philosophical circles from England, but soon it raised some debates. Its composition was influenced by the pro-Royalist activities in which Hobbes was engaged in the final years of 1630s [9]. As in the autumn of 1640 Charles's personal rule ended, and on the verge of the beginning of the Civil War in England (1642-1651), which placed the Parliament against the Crown, Thomas Hobbes went to exile to Paris and he didn't returned to England until the end of the conflict. The reason was a solid one: originally on the side of the Royalists, he was afraid of possible retaliations. Retired in France, he came closer to Father Mersenne and to some French philosophers whom he had befriended or with whom he had only scientific relations, including René Descartes, who was at that time living in Holland.

In November 5, 1640, Hobbes sent to Mersenne a letter for Descartes in which he criticized the French philosopher for believing that the soul is the one who has sensations and not the body. Subsequent letters between the two philosophers (January 21, 1641 - Descartes to Hobbes; February 7, 1641 - Hobbes to Descartes; February 18, 1641 - Descartes to Hobbes; March 30, 1641 - Hobbes to Descartes; April 21 or 28, 1641- Descartes to Hobbes, May 19, 1641- Hobbes to Descartes) [1] were full of fierce disputes, more vocal from Descartes' part. Many of them were in connection with various optical issues whose fatherhood was recalled by the

French thinker. This scientific debate determined Mersenne to propose to Hobbes, without Descartes' knowledge, to write a series of objections to the *Meditations* in order to be included in the treaty's appendix. Indeed, Hobbes' objections interleaved with Descartes replies were published as *Objectiones tertiae* to the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* in 1641 [10].

2.2. Political context: Whose side?

When initiating his correspondence with Descartes by Mersenne's instrumentality in 1640, the British philosopher was already 52 years old, and the theoretical lines of his own vision of the world were probably already fixed.

In the years of his correspondence with Descartes, Hobbes begun to separate himself from the royalist ideas and became the ideologue of Cromwell, who was in full war with King Charles I. Descartes, in turn, through his close connection with Elisabeth of Bohemia, was the doctrinal defender of the King, who was the uncle and protector of the Princess. His correspondence with Hobbes acquired strong political accents, because behind the words and the philosophical dispute laid in fact the question of a major decision. Was the murder of a king by his people justifiable? Could a king be judged by his people? These questions could have been given a positive answer only if the whole ideality of the King and of the world was annihilated, the world being reduced to concrete things, to positive facts only.

3. Arguments

3.1. The dispute about the nature of the existence and the essence of the Ego

In his objection to the *First Meditation*: *"On what can be called into doubt",* Hobbes denied the doubt that originated in the senses, considering it more as an obsolete artifice of the philosophers, and thereby proving his fascination for concrete things, for the sensitive experience, whose reality he was not willing to challenge.

Analyzing, in the objection to the *Second Meditation*s: *"The nature of the human mind",* the identity between the thought process and the thinking being, Hobbes noted that when Descartes has been used expressions such as *Je pense donc je suis,* he added the expression *I am reasoning (Je pense)* to the concept of *existence (Je suis)*. He considered that there was no solid ground for this merger because someone could understand: *I am thinking, therefore I am a thought*, or *I am walking, therefore I am a walk*, without distinguishing a subject from his faculties and acts [2]. Such approaches were regarded by the British

philosopher as unnatural precisely because they didn't take into account the difference between one thing and its essence.

The thinking subject, however, cannot be a thought, for then we would have a regression to infinity. The idea is also found in the Baroque plays where the characters often play the role of the dreamer who dreams the dream of a dream. Hobbes breaks this poetic regression to infinity, indicating that the subject of ordinary acts is material, corporeal.

3.2. Affections cannot exist outside the physical world

The idea of emotions is analyzed in Hobbes' *Sixth objection*. In his view, the emotions cannot exist in the absence of what determines them. These are the affective states, the feelings as such, which Hobbes cannot accept as dissociated from the objects that cause them [2]. For Hobbes, closer to Jung's archetype theory, the affective mechanisms of reporting to things only come into contact with sensitive experiences. A pertinent objection to the Cartesian dualism, as it is presented in the *Meditations*, thus becomes the idea of the impossibility of attaching a concept that would reveal an affective state, such as *fear*, to another concept, such as *the lion*. Talking about geometry of passions of the soul, not including sensitive things is something the British philosopher cannot accept.

3.3. Hobbesian critique of Cartesian dualism

In *The Third Meditation*: *"The existence of God",* Descartes says that we have two ideas about the Sun, one given by sight, and another by the arguments of astronomy. In the *Eighth objection*, Hobbes argues that, in fact, we have only one idea of the diurnal star. For the astronomical idea is not a true idea in itself, but merely the conclusion of a reasoning that shows us that the sun, as a measurable star, would be greater if we look at it more closely than what we perceive when we look at it from Earth.

This objection reiterates the criticism of the two perspectives: one of the sensible Ego, which is *Je suis*, and another view imposed by the metaphysical Ego, which is *J'existe*. Hobbes wants to clarify the ambiguities of a possible double truth coming out of the Cartesian text. For the British philosopher, there are no two ideas about the Sun, i.e. a sensible one, which is certified by our eyes, and a reasoning one, which is provided by astronomical data through mathematical computation. There are no two realities, one provided by the senses and another by the intellect, but the reality is unique and the Sun is also unique. What provides the science of astronomy is nothing more than a bunch of reasoning about the same reality. The universe of reasoning does not build another world, but just

another perspective. We cannot speak of a world offered by the senses, which is patronized by an evil Genius, and another, provided by reason, which is guaranteed by an Almighty and Good God. The British thinker cannot accept this kind of Manichaeism, of sensuous retribution; in no case will there be so many Suns as many theories there will be about the Sun, but it remains unique, no matter how many theories and visions will be built on it.

Hobbes interpreted the ideas of the *Meditation* as the sign of a dualism assumed by the French thinker, which would have been under the strong fascination of Platonism. However, unlike Plato, who was a monist, rendering authentic reality only to the world of ideas, Descartes actually struggled between a sensualism of Aristotelian origin and the Platonic fascination of a notional reality with mystical tendencies.

Hobbes separated himself from both visions by opting for activism based on the will of power and its fulfillment in the sensible, a place for test and validation of a new type of truth that we can call it as being of practical success. We find out how, well ahead of William James, the ideas of pragmatism made their place, through Hobbes' thinking, into the Anglo-Saxon space.

3.4. Hobbes denies the omnipotence of the conscience

An essential theme of the Hobbesian critique addressed to Cartesianism is related to the omnipotence of the consciousness and this topic constitutes the core of the *Tenth objection* to the *Meditations*. How can we deceive our conscience? What is beyond us? Hobbes launched one of the fundamental subjects of philosophy, i.e. that one concerning the continuity and discontinuity of consciousness in the state of awakening and the state of deep sleep. Since ancient Greek antiquity, Hypnos, the god of sleep, was imagined as being a brother of Thanatos, the god of death. The twinning of death and sleep implies that death can be seen as a deep sleep, without dreams, without consciousness. In Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, the famous monologue of the Prince of Denmark combines precisely this ambiguity of the relationship between Hypnos and his twin brother Thanatos: "*To be, or not to be, - that is the question: -/ Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,/ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,/ And by opposing end them? - To die, - to sleep; -/ …. To sleep! Perchance to dream: ay, there-s the rub; /For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,/ When we have shuffled off this mortal coil*" [11]. The identity between sleep and death is for the Cartesian system, which placed the principle of its philosophical system in consciousness, in the thinking self, a genuine heel of Achilles. Hobbes might

rightly say in this case: "If I sleep, the Ego disappears, for in the deep sleep the Ego is no longer present; it is decoupled from the course of life." Moreover, we want to sleep, we want this decoupling. The state of awakening consciousness is one that involves at one moment a great effort, and the deprivation of sleep is impossible if it becomes indefinite, as this state would lead, sooner or later, to death, to the collapse of the whole body. In Hobbes' view, the disappearance and involuntary reappearance of the Ego in sleep and awakening decrees it from the status of a principle as Descartes has transformed it into something relative, something dependent on another reality to which it must obey, ordering it to "leave or enter the great scene of conscious life." This psychic control center may be *the unconscious*, which seems never to be totally disconnected from consciousness.

Descartes' or Hobbes' texts were far from the idea of *the unconscious* as it was later thought by thinkers such as Arthur Shopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, or physicists with philosophical vocation such as Jean-Martin Charcot, Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, along with his disciple, Carl Gustav Jung. At this hidden level of psychism, the Ego has only limited access through the missed acts and especially through the dreams. It is just as we can have a certain control of the conscious Ego in breathing or seeing when we hold our breath or close our eyes, but not in the heartbeat or the work of the internal organs in general, whose activity is independent of our will. In this case, we are only powerless to assist the activity of mechanisms that are too complex for the Ego to control them. The Ego is just the tip of the iceberg of what it means to be human. It is, in fact, only the power to decide and act in a certain direction. Hobbes perfectly guessed that the Ego is not almighty and masterful of its activities, but it also has a dark, irrational side that it is often subjected or dependent upon the "information" it receives from all sorts of diurnal consciousness data, such as those coming from the complex universe of the body, or those coming from the deep, sometimes extremely troubled depths of the unconscious.

3.5. The error cannot be based on the idea of a "lack" in the knowledge

In the *Twelfth objection* to the *Fourth Meditation*, named "*Truth and Falsity*", Hobbes penetrated the very core of Cartesianism, criticizing its vision on the truth. He couldn't accept the Cartesian idea that "*l'erreur … est seulement un défaut*", a defect, a lack of knowledge. Hobbes found out that if it is certain that ignorance is merely a defect, it isn't so in the case of the error. For inanimate things, like sticks and stones, cannot err, because they cannot

reason or imagine; so, in order to err, one must have the positive faculties of reasoning and imagining, and not a deficiency, an absence, a lack of them [2].

Further, in the Cartesian text, it is stated that the error is caused by two causes, the intellect and the free will, or for Hobbes this statement appears as a manifest contradiction to the thesis on error as a defect.

By this, Hobbes criticized Descartes' idea of the hierarchy of degrees of knowledge according to the degree of imperfection of the human intellect as compared to the divine one. We can also see here an attempt to justify the events of the era that involved a political engagement of the English philosopher, who was assuming the path of the parliamentary uprising against King Charles I, which was an approach initiated by Oliver Cromwell. The mistakes in a Hobbesian meaning could not be a lack, but rather a failure. The king could not possess a superior truth to the one the people possessed. The defeat of the king on the battlefield was in fact the failure of his decisions. For Hobbes, error cannot be assumed by a lack of knowledge, but rather by a lamentable practical failure or, in other words, by a lack of success on the practical plane. One thing which in one part of the world was a successful experience, like the absolute monarchy in France, was simply a lamentable failure in England; a true idea in France could be proven by the impossibility of its false accomplishment in the British space.

Thus, in his *Thirteenth objection*, Hobbes attacked the most vulnerable thing in Cartesian thought, namely the idea of the universality of common sense, and consequently the truth [2]. The British thinker was not interested in the Cartesian theoretical perspective, according to which there are certain universal truths, such as 2 + 2 = 4, and one square cannot have more than four sides. These statements are banal, and the ancient philosopher Plato has revealed their universality, even though he could not prove them to be true. Descartes himself, in *First Meditation*, thinks that we still have an opinion by which God, if He is all-powerful, can do it in such a way as to deceive us even with these seemingly universal affirmations. It is, in fact, the famous idea of the free creation of eternal ideas (*les vérités éternelles*) by a God whose intellect is infinite and who creates a certain state of tension in terms of the confidence in the finitude of human intellect when it confronts the truth.

3.6. The new criterion of truth: practical accomplishment of an aim or a purpose

By reading the *Meditations*, Hobbes defined his own thinking that could no longer accept the Cartesian dualism, unethical when it was confined to the truth, and replaced it with a new monistic philosophy in which he gave reality only to the sensitive world. The spirit, on its turn, was perceived more

as a sort of energy, an inner *conatus*, seeking to objectify in sensitivity through human action. In this new vision, the truth grasps the connotations of a success in the plan of action, becoming an issue more related to a practical approach than to one with a contemplative, theoretical facet.

The British thinker created a new framework for approaching and validating the truth that was thought only from the point of view of the action, of the decision. Through the Hobbesian model of action, the universalization of truth is no longer made so easy as by the rule of evidence of Descartes' common sense, which isolates the thought from life, the interiority from the outside world, but by the way of practical success of some ideas. Thus the truth, even if it manifests itself, still loses its absolute character in the sense that, at some point, it can still lose his validity. When this idea was transposed into politics, it legitimated the *status - quo* of a power, but annihilated its absolute character. So, this Hobbesian model of truth ultimately confirmed Cromwell's authority to the detriment of the absolute leadership model imposed by Charles I.

4. Conclusion

A careful analysis of the text concerning the sixteen objections to Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* reveals the general features of Hobbes' philosophy. What seems to connect both thinkers is the idea of the Ego seen as a principle. But the difference will be one of essence between the two visions. For Descartes, the Ego is a theoretical, metaphysical principle. Hobbes sees it in an instrumental manner, from the point of view of the action that it justifies.

In fact, *Third Objections and Replies* highlight the beginning of Hobbes' philosophical creation, which contradicted Descartes' philosophy. At the same time, they represent the moment when the post-Cartesian philosophy was born, Hobbes being one of the first post-Cartesian thinkers.

We consider that both Descartes and Hobbes are exemplary thinkers of the modern spirit because they developed a philosophy centered on *Ego*, but there are some differences related to the way in which the two thinkers understand it. In Descartes' philosophy, the self has the quality of a metaphysical principle. Hobbes, being more fascinated by the sensitive reality, seeks to anchor the self in this reality, annihilating through his philosophy the idea of *res cogitans* which for Descartes meant the very essence of the self. Thus, for Hobbes, the essence of the Ego is primarily in action, in its power to affirm itself in sensitivity.

The classical dispute between Descartes and Hobbes on one of the central subjects in philosophy which is *truth* can be interpreted as an incipient form, *avant la lettre*, of a philosophical Brexit by which nominalistic Anglo-Saxon thinking defined its originality and independence in relation to the continental philosophy dominated by Thomism and Cartesianism.

References

[1] Descartes R. Corespondenţa completă (1639-1644). 2nd Volume. Iasi: Polirom; 2015.
[2] Descartes R. Méditations Métaphysiques. Objections et réponses suivies de quatre letters, Chronologie, presentation et bibliographie de Jean-Marie Beyssade et Michelle Beyssade. Paris: Flammarion; 1979.
[3] Curley E. Hobbes versus Descartes. In: Ariew R, Grene M, editors. Descartes and His Contemporaries: Meditations, Objections, and Replies. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press; 1995. 97 p.
[4] Malcolm N. Aspects of Hobbes. New York: Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press; 2002. 14 p.
[5] Lynch WT. Politics in Hobbes's Mechanics: The Social as Enabling. Stud. Hist. Phil. Sci. 1991; 22(2): 295-320.
[6] Finn SJ. Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Natural Philosophy. New York: Continuum; 2006. 102 p.
[7] Rosenberg A. Thomas Hobbes: An English Philosopher in the Age of Reason. New York: The Rosen Publishing Group. 2006. 35-36 pp.
[8] Digby K. Two Treatises: Of Bodies and of Man's Soul, Edited and with an Introduction by Paul S. MacDonald. The Gresham Press; 2013. 5-9 pp.
[9] Bunce RER. Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers: Thomas Hobbes Volume 1. New York/London: Continuum; 2009. 8 p.
[10] Graber D. Natural Philosophy in Seventeeth-Century Context. In: Martinich AP, Hoekstra K, editors. The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes. New York: Oxford University Press; 2016. 114-115 pp.
[11] Shakespeare W. Complete Works. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Bucureşti: Adevărul Holding; 2009. 138-140 pp.