

Descartes' Notion of Knowledge (work in progress)

MAREK VICIAN

Comenius University in Bratislava

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In the seventh article of his *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes writes:

“... this piece of knowledge — *I am thinking, therefore I exist* — is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way.” [4, p. 195]

This is of course one of the various formulations he gives to what came to be known as *cogito*. If we disregard the claim about the priority and degree of certainty, we are presented here with what Descartes believes is some item of knowledge, referred to by demonstrative 'this' and expression 'I am thinking, therefore I exist'. Now, to check whether Descartes isn't mistaken about the epistemic status of the thing presented, is to evaluate a statement of the form '*x* is a piece of knowledge'. And, in order to determine the truth of such claims, one need to know what is knowledge in general. Ideally, answer to this question would be one which Descartes himself would accept, for, otherwise, it would have no bearing on the question whether he was mistaken or not. But this is not the only thing required for successful evaluation of statement in question. For it is not possible to evaluate form of a statement, but only statement itself, provided the form is not a form

of tautology or contradiction. What is also needed is some substitution for the variable occurring in the form. So, we also need to answer the question what exactly is it to which Descartes ascribes given epistemic status. Yet, the identity of the thing is by no means clear, since, for example, Descartes himself does not always present it as inference. Understanding Descartes' general conception of knowledge thus has not only evaluative function but also descriptive one. For, by getting to know what knowledge is, according to Descartes, we also discover bounds in which it is possible to describe the contents of *cogito*. And we apply the concept in evaluative mode when we find such possibility, or when we conclude that there is none.

Following is an attempt to provide partial solution to some of these problems. First, I draw some conclusions about the common features of all modes of knowledge, grounding them in what Descartes has to say on this topic in *Principles*. Then, from these conclusions, I outline what needs to be done in order to arrive at distinctive features of all modes of knowledge or, in other words, sufficient conditions for truly applying the concept of knowledge. In the next part, I present some parts of Descartes theory of intuition and deduction from his early work *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*[5]. Finally, I try to integrate intuition and deduction into the theory from *Principles*, while pointing out some difficulties arising from this attempt.

So, the present paper is mainly methodological in nature. Although I make and argue for some claims about Descartes' theories, I am not attempting to evaluate given knowledge ascription, nor am I claiming that my analysis of his theory of knowledge is complete. My main aim here is rather to show what needs to be done in order to arrive at sufficiently clear picture of this theory and, in consequence, to be able to evaluate given claim or, for

that matter, any knowledge attribution Descartes made in relevant contexts¹

Cartesian Theory of Knowledge

Unfortunately, Descartes does not provide us with a comprehensive account of his theory of knowledge, nor does he explicitly states what knowledge is. Somewhat strangely, in *Principles*, after explaining what is thought, he even claims that providing definitions tends to obscure rather than clarify matters:

“I shall not here explain many of other terms which I have already used or use in what follows, because they seem to me to be sufficiently self-evident. I have often noticed that philosophers make the mistake of employing logical definitions in an attempt to explain what was already very simple and self-evident; the result is that they only make matters more obscure. And when I said that the proposition *I am thinking, therefore I exist* is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in orderly way, I did not in saying that deny that one must first know what thought, existence and certainty are, and that it is impossible that that which thinks should not exist, and so forth, but because these are very simple notions, and ones which on their own provide us with no knowledge of anything that exists, I did not think they needed to be listed.” [4, p. 162 - 163]

The passage is problematic. The claim that *cogito* depends on some other modes of knowledge seems to be inconsistent with its priority. Moreover, there is a tension between Descartes' professed ideal of making the concepts we make use of as distinct as possible, that is, of being aware of what we do and do not include in them, and his aversion to definitions. For, according to Descartes, distinctness of a concept implies its clarity and definition seems

¹Though the choice to evaluate the attribution made in relation to *cogito* is not accidental. It is made because of Descartes' claims that *cogito* is epistemically prior to all the other modes of knowledge, which can be also glanced from the quote above. This means that, for Descartes, all knowledge depends on knowledge that I exist and so the evaluation of all knowledge attributions should involve evaluation of knowledge attribution made in relation to *cogito*, but not vice versa.

to be exactly the right means to communicate to others the contents of ones concepts, if it isn't also something by means of which we can convey such information to ourselves. So, contrary to what Descartes says here, definitions should clarify not obscure matters.

I will not try to explain what does Descartes understand under the title of 'logical definition' or why should its employment have the effects he claims it have, but his reluctance to be more explicit when dealing with epistemic dependencies of *cogito* force us to construct the concept of knowledge out of the information he does provide us with. ²

Intellect and Will

Let's start with the information I have already mentioned in passing, that is, with Descartes' answer to the question concerning the nature of thinking:

"By the term 'thought', I understand everything which we are aware of as happening within us, in so far as we have awareness of it. Hence, *thinking* is to be identified here not merely with understanding, willing and imagining, but also with sensory awareness." [4, p. 195]

Knowledge, as a mode of thought, is therefore something which we are aware of happening within us, in so far as we have awareness of it. In addition to general characterization of thought, Descartes also lists some of its different kinds. The problem is that there is no indication here that the list is complete and so we cannot use it as reliable basis for construction of the concept we are searching for. But we can find such indication in passage occurring later in *Principles*:

²By the above I am not claiming that Descartes says nothing at all about knowledge. If this was the case, then we would lack the material needed for the reconstruction of the concept in question. I am just claiming that what he does say, at various places, is, by itself, too vague, or not distinct enough as means of analysis of some concrete piece of knowledge. Moreover, as we'll see, the attempt to unite his remarks from different places in his writings is not without problems.

"We possess only two modes of thinking: the perception of the intellect and the operation of the will.

All the modes of thinking that we experience within ourselves can be brought under two general headings: perception, or the operation of the intellect, and volition, or the operation of the will. Sensory perception, imagination, and pure understanding are simply various modes of perception; desire, aversion, assertion, denial and doubt are various modes of willing." [4, p. 204]

So, whatever we are aware of happening within us, in so far as we have awareness of it, is either activity of our intellect, that is, perception of some object, or operation of our will. This does seem to land us right into the conclusion that knowledge is either some kind of perceiving or some kind of willing. Moreover, the fact that Descartes places doubt among the modes of willing and that he sometimes speaks of knowledge in terms of certainty suggests that knowledge is operation of our will. But this would completely leave out perception from the picture, since perception is not an act of will. As a consequence, passages in which Descartes presents knowledge as inseparable from perception would become incomprehensible. Take for example one from *Principles*:

"... the light of nature or faculty of knowledge ... can never encompass any object which is not true in so far as it is indeed encompassed by this faculty, that is, in so far as it is clearly and distinctly perceived." [4, p. 203]

in which Descartes seems to identify our faculty of knowledge with the ability to clearly and distinctly perceive and thus constrain knowledge to the sphere of intellect. This and other similar passages suggest that knowledge is some kind of perception of an object.

Should we, therefore, construe knowledge not as an operation of will but as of intellect? We cannot, since knowledge is, as I have already mentioned, also taken to be, by Descartes, a certainty, or, in other words, an unshakeable

assent. This means that, in Descartes view, knowledge is inseparable from some act of will, since assent, while being a mode of thought, is not a perception.

So, we are in dilemma: if we consider what Decartes says at various places about knowledge, we are forced to conclusion that knowledge is perceiving as well as willing. At the same time, if we take intellect and will to be distinct faculties of our mind, as Descartes claims they are, no perception can be an act of will. Knowledge, therefore, seems to be an impossible object. Is there a way out of this conundrum? I can see few. One of them is simply to bite the bullet, stop being charitable, and concede that Descartes is inconsistent. Another way is to allow for various incompatible senses in which Descartes uses the term 'knowledge'. The last one I can see, and the one I opt for, is to distinguish not only between modes of thought by relating them to different faculties of our mind, but also to distinguish between them in regards to their simplicity. In other words I claim that there are modes which are simple and those which are not. Complex modes are composed of some other modes and those, in turn, could be made of yet another ones. But, in the end, all complex modes are made of simple ones. The inconsistency does arise, if we take some simple mode to be of perception as well as of will. But, if a mode is complex, we are not necessarily contradicting ourselves when we refer it to will as well as to perception, since it could be complex of perceptions and willings. So, If we allow for the existence of complex modes, we can say, without contradicting ourselves, that some mode of thought is mode of perception and of will at the same time, if it is made of perceptions as well as willings. Figure 1 shows the classification yielded by the two distinctions, that is, the distinction between our ability to perceive and our ability to will and the distinction between simple and complex mode.

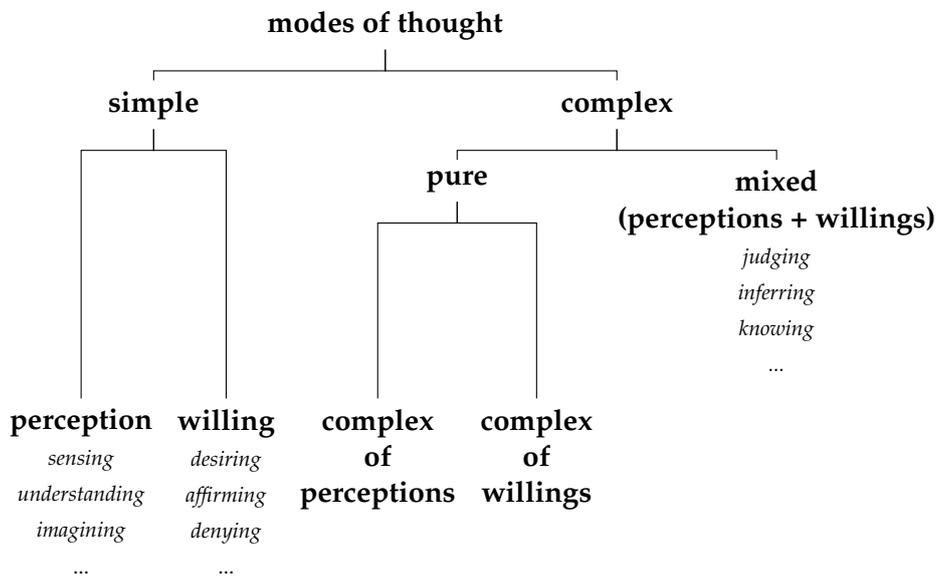


Figure 1: Classification of modes of thought (criterion: simplicity + faculty)

We can now easily explain the fact that Descartes sometimes speaks of knowledge as if it was some perception and, at other times, as if it was operation of our will: at various places he simply highlights different aspects of certain kind of complex mode of thought. So, if the proposal is correct, knowledge have to be, in Descartes view, will cooperating with intellect, or, in other words, complex mode of thought made of perceptions as well as volitions. This doesn't of course mean that knowledge is the only type of complex mode and we can find Descartes speaking, for example, of judgement as such:

“In order to make a judgement, the intellect is of course required since, in the case of something which we do not in any way perceive, there is no judgement we can make. But the will is also required so that, once something is perceived in some manner, our assent may be given.” [4, p. 204]

So, similarly to knowing, judging is also some kind of mixed mode.

Due to the conclusion we've just arrived at, concerning the nature of knowledge, and in order to distinguish, in general, knowledge from other

complex modes of thought, as our next step we ought to be taking a closer look at Descartes' theories of intellect and will as distinct faculties of our mind, on his theory of how should these faculties cooperate in uniting perceptions and volitions, and at the question which cooperations produce modes of knowledge. But, once again, Descartes is not systematic in these matters and so extensive reconstruction is required in order to get to the theories in question. Unfortunately, since such reconstruction is beyond the constraints of this paper, we'll have to proceed without detailed account of these theories. For the present purposes we'll have to content ourselves with the fact that Descartes seems to suggest in his *Passions of Soul* that what distinguishes intellect from will is that the former is passive while the latter active faculty of our mind, since perceptions are presented in *Passions* as passions of our mind and volitions as its actions. [3, p. 335]

Let's now take a look at Descartes' earlier work where he touches upon a subject which is to some extent neglected in his later writings. Deduction is the thing I have on mind here. From the passages like the following one occurring in the preface to *Principles*:

“...the word 'philosophy' means the study of wisdom, and by 'wisdom' is meant ... also a perfect knowledge of all things that mankind is capable of knowing ... In order for this kind of knowledge to be perfect it must be deduced from first causes ...”
[4, p. 179]

it is evident, that deduction is indispensable in Descartes' system. Yet, as far as I know, the clearest exposition Descartes gives of the topic can be found in one of his first works *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*[5]. So, I will now present what Descartes has to say about deduction in this work and then try to integrate it with the conception of knowledge as will cooperating with intellect which, according to previous analysis, occurs in his later writings.

Intuition and Deduction

In *Rules* Descartes presents intuition and deduction as our only sources of knowledge:

“But in case we in turn should slip into the same error, let us now review all the actions of the intellect by means of which we are able to arrive at knowledge of things with no fear of being mistaken. We recognize only two: intuition and deduction.” (AT 368) [5, p. 14]

and characterizes the faculties in following way:

“By ‘intuition’ I do not mean the fluctuating testimony of the senses or the deceptive judgement of imagination as it botches things together, but the conception of a clear and attentive mind, which is so easy and distinct that there can be no room for doubt about what we are understanding. Alternatively, and this comes to the same thing, intuition is the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason” (AT 368) [5, p. 14]

“... [deduction is] the inference of something as following necessarily from some other propositions which are known with certainty.” (AT 369) [5, p. 14]

Notice that Descartes uses the term ‘deduction’ bit more narrowly than it is used usually. For usually, deduction is understood as valid inference, that is inference, conclusion of which must be true, if its premises are true. This is also true of Descartes conception, but, on top of that, deduction is inference from true and certain, that is, known premises.

Descartes then continues to distinguish between intuition and deduction in terms of self-evidence as property of propositions which are known through intuition alone, and some kind of movement occurring when we are deducing something, but not when the faculty of intuition is being applied:

“Hence we are distinguishing mental intuition from certain deduction on the grounds that we are aware of a movement or a sort of sequence in the latter but not in the former, and also because immediate self-evidence is not required for deduction, as it is for intuition ” (AT 370) [5, p. 15]

Here Descartes, somewhat misleadingly, claims that immediate self-evidence is not required for deduction. This has to be qualified, since, in a sense, deduction requires immediate self-evidence. Remember that, for Descartes, deduction is inference from certain premises and proposition is certain only if it is either deduced or known by intuition alone. So, if I am to know something which is not self-evident, I have to deduce it from something self-evident. Otherwise we would end up with circular or never ending series of inferences, since deduction is inference from premises which are certain. Therefore, if I am to deduce anything at all, I must have intuitions of some immediately self-evident propositions. Thus, in a sense, immediate self-evidence is required for deduction.

But why does Descartes claim that immediate self-evidence is not required for deduction? I believe it is because, in given passage, Descartes is considering knowledge as a process occurring in time. Let me explain what I have on mind here. Let's say, for example, that I know that P_1 , because I deduced it from knowledge that P_2 and P_3 . Then again, knowledge that P_2 or P_3 could be deductive, and, thus, could depend on some other modes of knowledge. Now, let's say that, in this case, series of deductions is stopped by intuition of self-evident proposition P_i . Consider now the time in which I have whatever intuition or intuitions I need to have in order to know that P_i and time when I deduce that P_1 . Clearly, intuition and deduction are not being applied at the same time. This means that when I deduce P_1 and thus know that P_1 I do not have intuitions required for knowledge of P_i (or, for that matter, intuitions required for knowledge of any other self-evident propositions, which knowledge that P_1 possibly requires). Yet, this does not contradict the claim that I need to have some intuition(s) at some time or another, if I am to know that P_1 . So, by distinguishing between structural

and temporal aspect of knowledge, we can avoid the contradiction, which seems to follow from the claim that knowledge of all propositions, which are not self-evident, requires an immediate intuition of some self-evident proposition, while, at the same time, deduction does not require immediate self-evidence. So, in what follows, we will not distinguish between intuitive and deductive knowledge, but between purely intuitive and deductive knowledge, for all knowledge is, in a sense, intuitive.

To illustrate a way in which intuition and deduction should work according to theory described above, consider proposition '2 plus 2 equals 3 plus 1'. If I am to know that the proposition is true, I have to know that:

(1) 2 plus 2 equals 4

(2) 3 plus 1 equals 4

(3) '2 plus 2 equals 3 + 1' follows necessarily from (1) and (2)

We can now ignore the question whether knowledge that (1) and (2) is deductive or purely intuitive. Knowledge that (3) is, according to Descartes, purely intuitive (as is knowledge of all statements about logical relations holding between statements, for Descartes). So, I know that $2 + 2$ equals $3 + 1$ when I move with my mind through individual modes of knowledge that (1), (2) and (3). This movement of mind, which Descartes calls deduction, should, when complete, unite given modes into single piece of knowledge that $2 + 2$ equals $3 + 1$.

Intuition, Deduction, Intellect and Will

We can connect Descartes' earlier theories with his later proposals with the claim that intuitions and deductions are modes of thought. From this it follows that intuition or deduction is either simple or complex mode. If it is

simple one, then it is some kind of perception or some kind of volition. If it is a complex mode, then it could be pure or mixed.

Now, remember that intuition and deduction are both taken to be, by Descartes, sources of knowledge. But knowledge, as we have seen, is will cooperating with intellect or, in other words, complex of perceptions and volitions. It thus seems that intuition, as well as deduction, have to be, in the context of Descartes' later works, complex of perceptions and volitions. The problem is that, in *Rules*, Descartes refers intuition and deduction solely to intellect [5, p. 14], which is at odds with the conclusion that will also play some part in given modes. We could, of course, make the same move as we've made before and claim that Descartes simply highlights one aspect of intuitions and deductions without denying the other. But I don't think this is something we should do in this case. One reason is that, before, construing knowledge as complex of perceptions and volitions enabled us to interpret Descartes' text consistently. But, in the context of *Rules*, Descartes does not refer intuition, deduction or knowledge also to will and so there is no inconsistency internal to the text which we need to avoid. In making the same move we would be therefore applying our earlier solution solely in order to make consistent two texts separated by almost two decades. Surely it is not uncharitable to claim that Descartes changed his mind in given matters. The other reason is that will is seldom mentioned in *Rules* and even less it is mentioned in relation to intuition, deduction or knowledge. And when it is mentioned in connection with these things, it is presented as something opposite to them, as in following:

“[Intuition and deduction] are the most certain routes to knowledge that we have. So far as our powers of understanding are concerned, we should admit no more than these and should reject all others as suspect and liable to error. This does not preclude our believing that what has been revealed by God is

more certain than any knowledge, since faith in these matters, as in anything obscure, is an act of the will, rather than an act of the understanding." [5, p. 15]

So, it seems that Descartes' theories of our cognitive faculties changed significantly over the time and we should be cautious in attempts to unify his works from different periods.

Nevertheless, I believe that we can still salvage something useful from *Rules*. Intuition seems to me to correspond quite neatly with one kind of perception. Namely with pure understanding, which Descartes also contrasts with sensing and imagination and entitles as 'the light of nature'. The difference is that, in the context of Descartes' later writings, intuition cannot yield knowledge without the help of will, since no perception is capable of such feat. Deduction, on the other hand, cannot be construed as a simple intellectual mode. The reason is that deduction is inference of some kind and, as such, depends on premises and conclusion, that is, on some judgements. Therefore, even if we allow for the movement which occurs in inferences and which distinguishes them from intuitions to be itself a perception³, deduction have to be complex of perceptions and volitions, since judgements are mixed modes of thought.⁴

So, we can distinguish between two types of modes of knowledge — inferential and non-inferential. Let's call the former as deductive and latter as purely intuitive modes. Both of these types are complexes of perceptions and volitions, but what differentiate deductive from the other ones is that former contains whatever perceptions and volitions are required for knowledge that something follows with necessity from something else and also whatever perceptions and volitions are required for knowledge of premises

³Which does not seem plausible, since perceptions are passions not actions of mind.

⁴The question remains whether there are, in inferences, volitions or perceptions distinct from whatever volitions and perceptions are needed in order to make judgements which inferences unite.

of such inferences.

Conclusion

As I've said earlier, material we have at our disposal now, does not allow for the evaluation of Descartes' knowledge ascription mentioned at the beginning of the paper. For we have yet to discriminate, in general, between mixed modes of thought which are modes of knowing and those which are not, and to determine the identity of subject of given ascription. My point is that in order to do so, we need to get clear picture of Descartes' theories of intellect, will and of how should these faculties cooperate in uniting perceptions and volitions into modes of knowledge.

Nevertheless, if what I've said so far is correct, we can, at least, draw some conclusions and hypotheses about the general character which *cogito* is supposed to have, since we are now in possession of features which are shared by all modes of knowledge. So, as a piece of knowledge, *cogito* should be some complex of perceptions and volitions or, in other words, some sort of cooperation of our ability to perceive and our ability to will. If we, moreover, allow for the distinction between inferential and non-inferential modes of knowledge, found in *Rules*, then *cogito* should be either purely intuitional or deductive mode of knowledge. If we then combine this conclusion with the expression 'I think, therefore I exist', which Descartes used to refer to the subject of given knowledge attribution, and which suggests that it is an inference, then it seems that *cogito* should be a deductive mode of knowledge⁵. This would mean that *cogito* should involve knowledge of

⁵This claim is not without problems, since, at times, Descartes seems to deny that it is so. On the other hand, the alternative is also problematic, for the expression does connect two sentences which seem to express different propositions, namely that I think and that I exist. They cannot be the same, since not everything that exists, thinks. So, if *cogito* is, indeed, not an inference, then either one and the same intuition should be somehow capable

more than one proposition and also knowledge that some of them follow from the others. So, in abstract, evaluation of knowledge attribution made in relation to *cogito* involves either (in case of positive appraisal) finding a complex of perceptions and volitions which, together, make up these propositions and inference uniting them, and which also possess features distinctive of all modes of knowledge, or (if we end up condemning the attribution) concluding that there could not be such complex.

of encompassing several propositions at once, or *cogito* involves two distinct intuitions. But the latter possibility is dubious, since, then, there wouldn't be **the** first item of knowledge, for knowledge that I exist would be known independently of knowledge that I think, and vice versa.

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