

FROM DESCARTES TO SPINOZA, FROM ANALYSIS TO SYNTHESIS

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Analysis and synthesis are clearly the methodological key concepts that can provide us with a better understanding of both Descartes' and Spinoza's *opera magna*, and they can do this in a number of ways according to the manifold meaning of this pair of concepts in Descartes' oeuvre. In my paper I would like to focus on but one aspect of Descartes' understanding of these concepts in order to propose an interpretation of Spinoza's answer to the main methodological question of cartesianism. A recent interpreter puts the question as follows:

„But there must be something more to 'geometrical order' than simply 'the structure of presentation of Euclid's *Elements*'. After all, as Descartes in effect noted in his reply to Mersenne, there is no necessity even for geometry to be laid out in this way. So there must be some *further* rationale behind this surface form. [...] It is not clear why Spinoza chose this synthetic method of presentation for the *Ethics*;¹

What I shall try to do, is to find at least „some further rationale behind this surface form”. As all we know, the most important treatment of the topic by Descartes can be found in the *Second Replies*. Here he argues that the best way of teaching metaphysics is the analysis, in contrast to the synthesis that does not seem to be apt for this task at all. Descartes refers to the *Meditations* as the work which was written in the analytic style, and I think it is not only the central, metaphysical part of the *Discours* that follows the same order but the whole work as well.² As to the *Principia* it is a disputed question whether we can take Burman's well-known statement seriously that the intended character of this

work is synthetic. But we do not need to settle this question here. What I would like to offer you is, first, a very short analysis of only one aspect of how this basic decision preforms the general structure of the *Meditations*.

The title „*Meditationes*” expresses the rationale of this decision in referring to a then well-known literary genre that aimed at transforming the whole man, converting her from the outer world to the inner, and, at the same time, 'upper' sphere of being. Nevertheless, this analogy must not be pushed too far. Descartes did not want to imitate the structure of any of the particular works pertaining to this genre. He just wanted to stress the significance of grasping the whole man as opposed to the theoretical 'part' of it on the one hand, and, on the other hand, of the process whereby the reader is being *initiated gradually* instead of being overrun by ideas and theses alien to her.

The role of extending and intensifying the methodical doubt can be best understood as an aid for distracting the reader's mind from the outer material world of the senses. The introduction of the *genius malignus* represents the last step of the overall analysis – in the sense of 'destruction' – of the everyday beliefs, an analysis which is of greatest existential import.³ Since it is not on the basis of scientific arguments that we trust in sense-experience as the only and highly reliable source of our knowledge of the world but we have been brought up in this belief, it would clearly be in vain to attempt to abolish this firm belief with the aid of some argument however cogent logically it might be. There are several statements both in Descartes and in the early Spinoza that indicate this very circumstance.

“But it is not enough merely to have noticed this; I must make an effort to remember it. My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom.”⁴

“But not without reason did I use these words *if only I could resolve in earnest*. For though I perceived these things so clearly in my mind, I still could not, on that account, put aside all greed, desire for sensual pleasure and love of esteem.”⁵

What is needed is rather a curious mixture of philosophical and rethorical devices, the later having the following sense. The author must take considerable efforts to develop a layer of presuppositions concerning the structure of the world that is familiar both to himself and the reader. This is needed because the reader is supposed to attain the new insights *as if* it was he who had found them. If Descartes uses the expression *a priori* in this context, it has none of the usual meanings but rather something like this. Our point of departure must be that part of our knowledge of the world which seems to be trivially known – before all conscious efforts to understand things. There is a number of ways this task can be accomplished. The *Discourse*, the *Meditations*, and Spinoza's early *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding* all make use of different technics. Whichever method one

might make use of, the reader has to contribute to the process, as well, in order that the therapy succeeds. A certain openness to eventually new principles of structuring the world for us seems to be inevitable. All these considerations play a role in the special Cartesian sense of analysis.

However we may understand the methodological character of the first part of the *Principles*, the *Rationes* which are put at the end of the *Responsiones Secundae* are surely structured according to the geometrical order demanded by Mersenne and his circle, and it was this presentation which provided the basis for Spinoza's re-casting the Cartesian principles in his *Principia philosophiae cartesianae*. But what forced him to abandon his fore-runner's argumentation against the use of the synthetic, i. e. geometrical method in teaching metaphysics, at the moment he had to choose the way of presentation for his *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*? I shall argue that a gloomy picture of man's abilities and unabilities was the decisive factor that made Spinoza believe that no artificial i.e. therapeutical means are ever able to influence one's whole being if one is not already disposed somehow to think in this or that way. He was reluctant to sacrifice the persuasive force of a seemingly unitary deductive system for the sake of the unity of an analytical-inductive (in Descartes' sense) system built on the opposite presuppositions.

The *Treatise* can clearly be regarded yet as an analytical writing, although Spinoza did not make use of all the Cartesian devices: he accords the *cogito*-argument only a secondary role. But both the beginning and the end of the main line of thought as well as the mediation between the two are indisputably borrowings from the Cartesian analysis. The point of departure is our given, true ideas of finite things, the goal is the adequate knowledge of the infinite being, while the investigation and notably the definition of human understanding is expected to lead us from its own true ideas to its own condition of possibility.

„Next, because Method is reflexive knowledge itself, this foundation, which must direct our thoughts, can be nothing other than knowledge of what constitutes the form of truth, and knowledge of the intellect, and its properties and powers. For once we have acquired this [knowledge], we shall have the foundation from which we shall deduce our thoughts and the way by which the intellect, according to its capacity, will be able to reach the knowledge of eternal things, with due regard, of course, to its own powers.”⁶

Now, according to the *Treatise*, the crucial point of the argument is the definition of understanding. We are given a theory of definition, but this theory can only be applied to evaluating *given* definitions, while the question remains unanswered, how to find correct definitions. There seems to emerge two possible solutions: the definition of the thing investigated is either clear in itself, or it becomes clear after we enumerated its main properties. In the end of the *Treatise* Spinoza enumerates a couple of the properties of the intellect but we are not given the definition resulting of this process, and I suppose this is the main reason why the *Treatise* breaks down at this point. At the same time, however, it

becomes evident gradually that there is one being, the definition of which can at least be made clear in itself, and this being is „the source and origin of Nature”, „a unique and infinite being, beyond which there is no being”, i. e. God. For however it may be true that the analytical movement of the *Treatise* can principally begin with any given, true idea, the best method, we are told, can only be attained if it is based on the given idea of the most perfect being.

„[...] the reflexive knowledge of the idea of the most perfect being will be more excellent than the reflexive knowledge of any other ideas. That is, the most perfect Method will be the one that shows how the mind is to be directed according to the standard of the given idea of the most perfect Being.”⁷

But if the idea of the most perfect being is, in a sense, given, too, and if our aim is that all our ideas be united and referred to a basic idea „so that our mind, as far as possible, reproduces objectively the formal character of nature, both as to the whole and as to the parts.”⁸ then why not attempt to follow the direct way from the basic idea of God that becomes immediately clear in the definition of the „uncreated” being, instead of making a long detour through the given idea of a finite being. Or, put in another way, if we are confronted with the fact that the given idea of the „uncreated being” is much more accessible to us than Descartes has thought it when stressing the necessity of the analytical *ratio demonstrandi*, then nothing can prevent us from employing that „*ordo philosophandi*” according to which it is the consideration of the divine nature that we need first of all, „because it is prior both in knowledge and in nature”.⁹

Having followed up this line of thought we can direct our attention now to the peculiar way L. Meyer whom Spinoza asked for explaining that his Cartesian philosophy differs considerably from that of Descartes’ tries to make understandable why he has chosen the synthetic way of demonstration for his reconstruction of Descartes’ *Principles*. The author of the Preface had to show that Spinoza’s treatment absolutely agrees with the spirit of Cartesianism even if it may be at odds with the letter of Descartes’. Meyer cites Descartes’ views concerning analysis and synthesis admitting his preference for analysis. But he seems to assume his position is better than Descartes’ as to judging whether the cartesian idea of analysis achieved the aim desired by Descartes or it led to consequences contrary to his philosophical goal. Descartes’ assumption must have been this: the therapeutic analysis manages to persuade of the truth of the new philosophy even those people who would be appalled by the dry, synthetic treatment. According to Meyer, however, people are radically different with regard to their openness to new principles of knowing things in the broadest sense of the word. The one is willing to consider them seriously, no matter whether they are demonstrated synthetically or analytically, while the other is able only to parrot-like repetition even after following the analytical way, which is, of course, diametrically opposed to Descartes’ intentions.

„That is why many who have been led, either by a blind impulse, or by the authority of someone else, to enlist as followers of Descartes, have only impressed his opinions and doctrines on their memory; when the subject comes up, they know only how to chatter and babble, but not how to demonstrate anything, as was, and still is, the custom among those who are attached to Aristotle's philosophy.”¹⁰

Consequently, we can see here two excellent reasons emerging for Spinoza why betray the therapeutic analysis as overall methodic ideal.¹¹ He was, first of all, entitled to draw our attention to the fact that the firm contention Descartes himself insisted on was that the basic ideas of the ethico-metaphysical system are somehow in the minds of the particular human beings who, for this very reason, must be led to the consideration of these ideas in such manner that it appeared to them as if they found these ideas themselves. Secondly, he could, with L. Meyer, refer to the experience that those people whom Descartes tried to persuade in this way to follow him attained only to the consideration of Descartes' letter instead of leaning on the inborn ideas of their own minds. And those who really appropriated Cartesian thinking, they would have been willing to approve it even if it was treated synthetically. That is, it does not seem to be worth while attempting to create therapeutic devices. One has simply to divide people in two groups. Those searching the truth seriously, *par la lumière naturelle*, can be given Cartesian, synthetic writings without further ado while everybody else will remain dominated by rules either of reason or the imagination of others stylized as commandments of either some clever imposteurs regarded as theocratic rulers or of some rare pious men, whose transcendent origin can, of course, hardly be argued for within the confines of Spinoza's system.

Notes

¹ R. S. Woolhouse: *Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz The Concept of Substance in Seventeenth Century Metaphysics* London and New York Routledge, 1993, pp. 29, 31.

² „In the *Discourse on Method* and the *Meditations*, where the order is analytic [...]” M Guerot: *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Vol I. p. 7

³ Amongst other meanings of analysis we can mention the conceptual analysis where one can follow how some most important innate ideas emerge from the chaos of everyday concepts on the one hand, and how they are given a clear and distinct face, i. e. how they are brought to be ideas instead of remaining only „*quasdam res*”, „*verae et immutabiles naturae*” or faculties of knowing their '*ideata*'. The most important examples are the idea of the *ego*, the emerging of which takes place hand in hand with that of the *cogito* and *sum*; the idea of God that emerges from the opinion of an all-powerful God who is able to deceive us through the „inductive” reasoning of the Third Meditations which issues in the idea

of the most perfect Being of the Fifth Meditation, where existence, omnipotence, veracity, being the *summum bonum* and being the union of all the perfections are included as perfections; and in a somewhat modified sense the idea of the idea itself as well as the co-operation of understanding and will as the cause of our being liable to failures.

⁴ AT 22. *The philosophical Writings of Descartes* Translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984 Vol II, p. 15.

⁵ *The Collected Works of Spinoza* Translated by E. Curley Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985 Vol. I p. 10

⁶ *The Collected Works* Vol. I p. 42 sq.

⁷ *The Collected Works* Vol I, p. 19.

⁸ Op. cit. p. 38.

⁹ Op. cit. p. 454 (*Ethics* II. 10. Schol.)

¹⁰ Op. cit. p. 227.

¹¹ For Spinoza has never abandoned the therapy itself: it has an important role to play both in *Ethics* V and in the *Theologico-political treatise* where he considers the consequences of the fact that the majority of people cannot be persuaded by rational arguments that they should follow the „dictates of reason”, while the same rules can govern their behavior if they are presented as commandements of a king or of a God conceived as a ruler.