

# Descartes's Clarity First Epistemology

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*Abstract:*

Descartes has a Clarity First epistemology: (i) Clarity is a *primitive* (indefinable) phenomenal quality: the appearance of truth. (ii) Clarity is *prior* to other qualities: obscurity, confusion, distinctness - are defined in terms of clarity; epistemic goods - reason to assent, rational inclination to assent, reliability, and knowledge - are explained by clarity.

(This is the first of two companion entries; the sequel is called "Descartes's Method for Achieving Knowledge.")

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It is well known that Descartes sought certainty in the a priori subjects of mathematics and metaphysics. In his view, the only way to become certain of truths is to perceive them clearly and distinctly. As I will explain, a perception is “distinct” when and only when it is *perfectly clear*. Clarity is the key. To understand Descartes’s epistemology, then, we need to address three questions: (1) What is clarity? (2) What does clarity do? (3) How do we achieve clarity? I cover Descartes’s answers to the first two questions in this entry, and the third question in the subsequent entry, “Descartes’s Method for Achieving Knowledge” (hereafter “the Sequel”).

Altogether, we’ll see that Descartes’s epistemology is a remarkably elegant, powerful system, built around his notion of clarity in a unified framework I call *Clarity First*.

## 1 What Clarity Is

Descartes uses the term “perception” more broadly than we do, to refer to any conscious mental representation. He posits three kinds of perception: sense-perception, imagination, and intellection (i.e., intellectual perception). Intellection may seem mysterious but it’s actually familiar, and it comes in two forms. You have one form of intellection when you consider abstract matters in logic or mathematics, for example. The other form is introspection, when you gaze inward to observe your own current thoughts.

Sense-perception and imagination can be clear and distinct to varying degrees, often enough for practical purposes (7:83; see Simmons 2014). But Descartes is a Rationalist, in one sense of the term, because he maintains that only perceptions from the pure intellect or pure reason (*ratio*) can be perfectly clear and distinct, as required for perfect certainty (7:145).

What does it mean for a perception to be “clear and distinct”? The running joke is that Descartes’s “concept of clear and distinct perception is the least clear and distinct concept in his philosophy” (Markie 1988: 161). But it needn’t be such an enigma.

Clarity, for Descartes, is the appearance of truth. I will also refer to it as “presentationality.” I offer these terms as synonyms, not as an analysis. To say that you perceive something clearly is to say, in other words, that it appears/seems true to you – that it is presented to you, or strikes you, as true. Clarity/presentationality is a phenomenal quality, a matter of what it’s like, or how it feels, to have a certain kind of perception.

Like many philosophers, Descartes holds that phenomenal qualities are *primitive* or unanalyzable in the sense that they cannot be defined in terms of other, more basic qualities. The only way to understand what it’s like to see a certain colour, for example, is to experience examples of that colour for yourself – a point Descartes himself illustrates with the colour white: “Thus it would be pointless trying to define, for someone totally blind, what it is to be white: in order to know what white is, all that is needed is to have

one's eyes open and to see white" (10:524). Since clarity is a phenomenal quality, it too is primitive.

Since he holds that clarity cannot be defined, he says the difference between clarity and its opposite, obscurity, is to be "learned by examples rather than by rules" or formal definitions (7:164). So let's consider examples.

Start with visual experience. If you're looking at a deer from far away, it may be obscure to you that it's a deer. When you get closer, it may then become clear to you that it's a deer. There is something it's like to see the deer clearly, a quality which is absent when you see it obscurely. The more clearly you see that it's a deer, the more strongly that proposition is presented to you, or strikes you, as true.

Intellection is unique, for Descartes, in that it can be perfectly clear, and when it is, he argues, what it presents as true must actually be true (see §2.3 below). The relevant truths range across mathematics, logic, and metaphysics. It's especially useful to consider a case where a truth *becomes clear* to you after being obscure to you at first:

The sum of the numbers 1, 2, and 3 is equal to their product.

This proposition should become clear to you through a simple deduction:

$$1+2+3 = 6$$

$$1 \times 2 \times 3 = 6$$

$$\text{Therefore, } 1+2+3 = 1 \times 2 \times 3$$

When the proposition becomes clear to you, it goes from being a proposition you are merely considering to one that strikes you as true. Notice what it's like when that happens. It's like the truth gets *illuminated*. That is why Descartes describes intellectual clarity as "a light in the intellect" (7:192).

In *Principles* i.45, Descartes writes:

I call something 'clear' when it is present and open <Fr. manifest> to the attentive mind - just as we say that we see something clearly when, being present to the eye's gaze, it strikes it with enough force and openness. (8A:22\*†)

Even here, he does not define clarity in terms of anything more basic. Instead, he points your attention to clarity itself as it occurs in your own experiences. One way he does so is by identifying a typical cause of visual clarity, when (light reflected from) an object strikes your eye forcefully and without obstruction, as the aforementioned deer does when you get close. He also employs other terms for clarity by which you might recognize it: 'open' and 'manifest' (*aperta, manifeste*)

are synonyms for 'clear' (*clarus*). Something is 'evident' (*evidens*) when it is perfectly clear (10:369-70, 408), 'plausible' (*probabile*) when it is imperfectly clear, and more generally, to the extent that it is clear it "seems or appears to be true [*videri, aut apparere verum*]" (7:511).

What about distinctness?

I call a perception 'distinct' when, as well as being **clear**, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself **only what is clear**. (8A:22†)

Distinctness is defined as clarity *in the absence of* – "sharply separated" from – anything *unclear*. A perception is distinct when it is fully or perfectly clear. When they are used in their strict senses, then, the terms 'clear' and 'distinct' are synonyms, and the conjunction 'clear and distinct' is an emphatic redundancy, like 'the one and only'.

We've now gotten a glimpse of Descartes's Clarity First framework, which has two main planks: clarity is a *primitive* (indefinable) phenomenal quality, and clarity is *prior* to other epistemically significant qualities or properties. Clarity is *definitionally prior* to the three other perceptual qualities Descartes identifies – obscurity, confusion, and distinctness – since each of these is defined in terms of clarity. *Obscurity* is the absence of clarity in a perception. *Confusion* is the condition whereby one perception is literally "fused with" (*confusio*) another in a way that lessens its clarity. *Distinctness* is perfect clarity (Paul 2020).

## 2 What Clarity Does

Unpacking more of Descartes's Clarity First approach, we'll now see that clarity is prior in a different way – not definitionally but explanatorily – to four cognitive goods. To the extent that a perception is clear:

- (i) it provides a reason for assent,
- (ii) it inclines assent,
- (iii) it is reliably true, and
- (iv) it may provide knowledge.

Clarity delivers all four of these goods because of its very nature, as we'll now see.

### 2.1 Reasons for Assent

Clarity provides reason for assent or judgement. Descartes is not merely interested in psychological factors that influence whether or not you do assent (*pace* Larmore 1984). He is keenly concerned with the normative question of what provides "justification" or

“warrant” (*titre*) for assent (2:598). And his answer to that question is nothing other than clarity:

We must distinguish between the subject-matter, or the thing itself which we assent to, and the formal reason which moves the will to give its assent: it is only in respect of the reason that transparent clarity is required. (2O/R, 7:147-8\*)

Descartes contrasts the *content* or “subject-matter” of a perception with the form of perception – namely clear perception – which provides a reason to assent to the content. Indeed, he adds, “this formal reason consists in a certain inner light” (*Ibid.*), and that light, as we’ve seen, is clarity. Mental illumination – clarity – is something over and above the content it shines upon, and what gives you a reason to assent is not the content itself but the clarity with which you perceive it, the quality you experience whereby it is presented to you as true. More precisely:

#### **Descartes’s Presentationalism**

Because of the (presentational) nature of clarity, to the extent that you are perceiving *p* clearly (i.e., to the extent that *p* is presented to you as true) you thereby have a reason to assent to *p*, and so you should assent to *p* – unless your reason to assent is defeated by a reason not to assent.

Since clarity comes in degrees, so too does the quality of the reason it provides. When you are looking at something from afar and it is only somewhat clear to you that it’s a deer, you have some reason but not very good reason to judge that it’s a deer. When you get close and it becomes clear to you that it’s a deer, you now have much better reason to judge that it’s a deer.

Even so, vision does not afford perfect clarity, so the kind of reason it gives you is accordingly imperfect. Imperfect reasons for assent can be *defeated* by reasons for doubt, such that, all things considered, you should doubt.

This point is illustrated at the end of *Meditation One*. Having confronted a battery of skeptical arguments culminating with the hypothesis that she has been created by a deceiving God who brings it about that all of her perceptions are fallible, the meditator concedes that she has “powerful and well-thought out reasons” to doubt “all of my former opinions.” Paying special attention to her sensory beliefs, she says:

I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions, so long as I suppose them to be what in fact they are, namely very plausible opinions – opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has just been shown, it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny. (7:22\*)

The meditator's visual experience that she has hands, for example, is very clear – very “plausible” (in other words, it “appears true”) – and so it provides very good reason for assent, making it much more reasonable to assent than to dissent.

At the same time, however, it strikes her as possible that God is deluding her with such perceptions, so she has reason for doubt. Thus, she experiences a conflict between her reason for assent and her reason for doubt. Which reason determines what she should do?

It depends on the context. For “the conduct life,” Descartes says, we shouldn't doubt for such a skeptical reason, as we need to rely on our senses in order to act. But meditator is “dealing solely with the contemplation of truth,” temporarily suspending practical matters to aim for perfect certainty, the slightest reason for doubt means she should doubt (7:149):

I *should never* make a judgement about anything which I did not clearly and distinctly understand. ... In this *improper* use of free will may be found the privation which constitutes the essence of *error*. (7:59-60†\*; cf. 7:149; 6:24-5; 8A:5)

While contemporary Presentationists settle for imperfect, defeasible reasons for assent (Bengson 2015; cf. Huemer 2001: ch. 5), Descartes boldly maintains that during the time that you perceive something with perfect clarity, you thereby have a perfect reason for assent, one that precludes you from simultaneously having any reason for doubt. Thus, he says it would be “highly *irrational* ... to doubt something which is ... manifest by the very light of nature” (7:134†). For as long as a proposition is perfectly clear to you, it is *rationally indubitable* for you.

## 2.2 Inclinations to Assent

Clarity inclines assent. When you are looking at something from afar and it is only somewhat clear to you that it's a deer, you are only somewhat inclined to judge that it's a deer. When you get close and it becomes clear to you that it's a deer, you are now strongly inclined to judge that it's a deer. Other things equal, the more clearly you perceive that *p* is true, the more strongly you are inclined to assent to *p*.

So long as your perception is less than perfectly clear, however, you can resist the inclination to assent if you also have reason to doubt. At the end of *Meditation One*, as we saw, the meditator confesses that she habitually gives in to the strong pull of “very plausible” sensory perceptions, but she is able to resist that pull while she attends to the deceiver scenario.

By contrast, perfect clarity doesn't merely incline assent; it commands it irresistibly:

[M]y nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I *cannot but believe* it to be true. (7:69†; cf. 7:65, 3:64, 8A:21)

According to some interpretations, Descartes thinks clear and distinct perception is rationally indubitable because it's psychologically indubitable (Loeb 1990). But for Descartes, the order of explanation goes the other way around.

This fact stems from our “rational nature”. We are naturally endowed with two complementary rational faculties: intellect and will. Your intellect is your capacity to *have* reasons (in virtue of having clear perceptions). Your will is your capacity to *respond* to reasons. Thus, clarity provides a “reason which moves the will to assent” (7:147-8; cf. 7:58, 149). The rational nature of the will means that you cannot assent to or pursue something if you have no reason for doing so, i.e., if that thing doesn't strike you as true or good: “the will tends only towards objects that have some semblance of goodness” (11:464; cf. 1:366, 7:432, 1:366). Likewise, you cannot doubt something if you have no reason to doubt it: “before we can decide to doubt, we need some reason for doubting” (9A:204). When something is perfectly clear to you, you have reason to assent and no reason to doubt, and so you assent irresistibly and you cannot doubt. “Perfect clarity” provides a “reason which moves the will to assent” (7:147-8; cf. 7:58, 149). In other words, given the rational nature of the will, perfect clarity is psychologically indubitable because it's rationally indubitable. And by extension, weaker degrees of clarity explain weaker inclinations to assent. (Paul 2024).

## 2.3 Reliability

Clarity is reliable. Other things equal, the more clearly you perceive that  $p$  is true, the more likely it is that  $p$  is true. Imperfect clarity is imperfectly reliable. Perfect clarity is perfectly reliable – i.e., infallible: “whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true” (7:35; cf. 7:39, 58; 3:64, 147), a claim known as “the Truth Rule”.

When Descartes argues that perfectly clear perceptions are infallible, in *Meditation Four*, he also grants that, by contrast, perceptions that are (to any degree) obscure are fallible. His argument begins with the claim that, since God is perfect, God cannot be a deceiver. From there, Descartes needs to identify some pivotal feature that perfectly clear perceptions have but other perceptions lack. Crucially, this feature does explanatory work. It is *because* fully clear perceptions have this feature that God must make them infallible, on pain of being a deceiver. And it is *because* perceptions which are not fully clear lack this feature that God can allow them to be fallible without being a deceiver. The pivotal feature is rational indubitability:

1. God cannot be a deceiver.
2. God would be a deceiver if God allowed *rationally indubitable* perceptions to be fallible.
3. Perfectly clear perceptions are *rationally indubitable*.

Consequently,

Perfectly clear perceptions are infallible; they must always be true (= the Truth Rule).

If we substitute “perfectly clear perceptions” with “perceptions which are not perfectly clear”, the argument fails because the latter perceptions are *not* rationally indubitable, and so the counterpart to premise 3 would be false. Given the context noted above, the argument is meant not only to prove the conclusion but to explain it: given that God cannot be a deceiver, God must ensure that perfectly clear perceptions are infallible, *because* they are rationally indubitable. Since perfect clarity explains rational indubitability, as we saw, it follows that perfect clarity explains infallibility, too. And by extension, weaker degrees of clarity explain weaker degrees of reliability.

## 2.4 Knowledge

When you perceive a truth with perfect clarity, Descartes holds, you thereby enjoy an occurrent, conscious state of certain knowledge, which he calls *cognitio*. (We should not assume too quickly that what Descartes means by “*cognitio*” is what we mean by “knowledge”, especially since most epistemologists hold that the latter *doesn't* require certainty.) Descartes says that full clarity is necessary for *cognitio* (8A:21–2; 7:145, 146). He says further that when you assent to a truth that you perceive with full clarity, this is sufficient for *cognitio* of that truth. Some of Descartes’s objectors read him as holding that you must have *cognitio* of God in order to have *cognitio* of anything else. But this is a *misreading*, as he explains in reply:

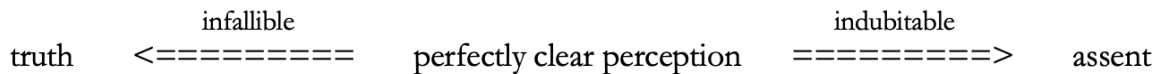
The fact that an atheist can “clearly know [*clare cognoscere*] that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles” is something I do not dispute. (7:141\*).

If you’re an atheist, you can still perceive a truth clearly and distinctly, you are rationally compelled to assent to it when you do, and the judgement you thereby form is a state of *cognitio*. *Cognitio* does not have any higher-order requirements. In order to have *cognitio* of *p*, your perception of *p* needs to be fully clear, but you do not need to have higher-order *cognitio* that your perception is fully clear.

*Cognitio* is the optimal case of judging, in which you assent to a kind of perception which leaves nothing to chance. In this optimal case, perception aligns the will to the world with maximal strength so that the link between them holds not just accidentally or contingently but with necessity. A perception secures this necessary connection when and only when it is fully clear. In relation to the object, a perfectly clear perception is not just reliable to some degree; it’s *infallible* – it must be true. In relation to the subject, clear and distinct perception is not just persuasive to some degree; it’s *indubitable*, both rationally and psychologically – you cannot help but assent to it, as you should. See Figure 8.1, where the arrows indicate complementary relations of necessity.



Figure 8.1

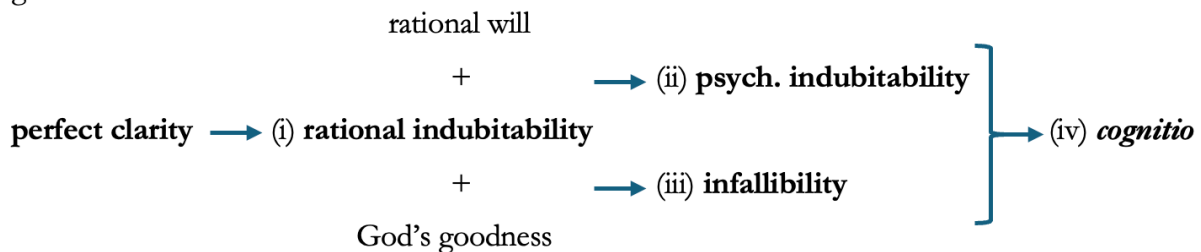


Clear and distinct perception necessitates both truth on one side and assent on the other, establishing an airtight connection between the two.

Thus, *cognitio* is constituted by a necessary link between assent and truth; this link is what sets *cognitio* apart from mere true judgement and what makes it the kind of knowledge it is. Standing between judgement and truth, clear and distinct perception forges this link in two complementary directions, securing the goods of infallibility on one hand and indubitability (both rational and psychological) on the other. Since *cognitio* is made up of these goods, whatever explains these goods also explains *cognitio*. As we've seen, psychological indubitability and infallibility are both explained by rational indubitability, which is explained in turn by perfect clarity. By extension, weaker degrees of clarity provide weaker approximations of *cognitio*. Your visual experience provides you with "moral certainty" that there is a page of writing before you - "certainty which is sufficient to regulate behavior ... though we know that it is possible, absolutely speaking" that your experience "may be false" (8A:327).

Summing up, see Figure 8.2:

Figure 8.2



All four goods are ultimately explained by clarity. Perfectly clear perception delivers the last three goods - it is psychologically indubitable, infallible, and yields *cognitio* - all because it is rationally indubitable. And it is rationally indubitable because it is perfectly clear. Lesser degrees of clarity provide lesser variants of these optimal goods. In all cases, clarity does this epistemic work because it is presentationality, it is the appearance of truth. Clarity does what it does because of what it is. (Paul forthcoming). Clarity First.

*References for this entry are included in the Sequel.*