

DISCUSIONES

Was Descartes an Individualist? A Critical Discussion of W. Ferraiolo's "Individualism and Descartes"

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RESUMEN

En su artículo "Individualism and Descartes", William Ferraiolo cuestiona la interpretación, ampliamente aceptada, de Descartes como un pensador individualista respecto del contenido mental. En este trabajo, me propongo defender esta interpretación del pensamiento cartesiano frente a las objeciones de Ferraiolo. Sostendré, en primer lugar, que no es históricamente descaminado atribuir a Descartes una doctrina individualista. En segundo lugar, trataré de mostrar que la aceptación cartesiana del anti-individualismo llevaría, o bien a la inocuidad de las hipótesis escépticas, o bien a la negación del privilegio epistemológico de la primera persona. Y, en tercer lugar, intentaré mostrar que las objeciones de Ferraiolo a la interpretación individualista descansan en dos errores importantes: una interpretación incorrecta del orden argumentativo de las *Meditaciones* y una confusión entre las nociones de dependencia causal y de dependencia constitutiva entre el contenido y el entorno externo.

ABSTRACT

In his paper "Individualism and Descartes", William Ferraiolo puts into question the widely accepted interpretation of Descartes as an individualist about mental content. In this paper, I intend to defend this interpretation of Descartes' thinking against Ferraiolo's objections. I shall hold, firstly, that attributing to Descartes an individualist doctrine is not historically misguided. Secondly, I will try to show that Descartes' endorsement of anti-individualism would lead either to depriving sceptical hypotheses of their force or to rejecting the epistemological privilege of the first person. And, thirdly, I shall try to show that Ferraiolo's objections to the individualistic interpretation rest on two important errors: a misapprehension of the argumentative order of the *Meditations* and a confusion between the notions of causal and constitutive dependence of content on the external environment.

In "Individualism and Descartes" (1996), William Ferraiolo intends to argue that there is no justification to consider Descartes a representative of

the doctrine of individualism about mental content, in spite of the wide contemporary agreement, in the context of the current debate between internalism or individualism and externalism or anti-individualism (I shall in common with Ferraiolo use these terms interchangeably), that Descartes should be interpreted in this way. There are no arguments, according to him, to ascribe individualism to Descartes. Given that, in my (1994), I have taken Descartes' *Meditations*, especially the First, to be a *locus classicus*, a paradigmatic example of internalism, and by so doing I have joined the wide agreement Ferraiolo opposes, I feel obliged to justify my interpretation of Descartes' philosophy against Ferraiolo's objections, which I consider deeply unsound. In fact, I think that crucial aspects of Descartes' work become unintelligible or incoherent unless an individualist doctrine about the nature and individuation of mental states is attributed to him.

I

I shall address a preliminary point first. Ferraiolo suggests that those philosophers who have taken Descartes to be an individualist have adopted a perspective that is untrue to history, by assigning to Descartes a position in a problem setting which did not properly arise in his times: "... This supposedly Cartesian doctrine is the product of inference and interpretation on the part of philosophers who are generations apart from Descartes (he did not explicitly address the issue as it was not a topic of inquiry at that time)" [Ferraiolo (1996), pp. 71-2]. Later in his paper, and in a similar vein, he says that "individualism was not a topic familiar to Descartes", and that "the attribution of any doctrine to a historical figure who predated the explicit emergence of that doctrine is an endeavour that requires a fair measure of caution and, perhaps, a pinch of scepticism" [p. 79]. In spite of this, Ferraiolo himself, giving signs of that historical insensitivity he charges his opponents with, conjectures what Descartes would have thought had he faced modern anti-individualism: "Had anti-individualistic challenges been raised at the time, Descartes might well have noted their force and been inclined to reformulate the relevant parts of his philosophical writings" [p. 79]. These sorts of speculations about what Descartes might have done had he read, say, Putnam's "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" do certainly seem to be out of place and lacking in historical sense. However, since I am not the first to tread this path, let me speculate in turn: I am pretty sure that, if Descartes had come to accept the force of anti-individualist arguments, he would not have restricted himself to correcting some scattered passages of his writings, for, as I shall try to show, individualism is a cornerstone of the Cartesian philosophical edifice. Nevertheless, I do not think that, if we take into account the context of

Descartes' own writings, it is misguided at all to ascribe to him an individualist conception of the nature and individuation of mental states, for this ascription is solidly supported by Descartes' texts and the lines of argument that can be detected in them. Of course, I am not talking about the term "individualism", which is certainly alien to Descartes, but about the individualist doctrine itself. The latter is not foreign to the frame of Cartesian thinking. To characterize Descartes' doctrine as individualist (or internalist) is the result of the outbreak of anti-individualism and of the debate it gives rise to, but the conception itself that is now labelled as "individualism" or "internalism" is not the result of this debate, but is firmly rooted in the tradition in the philosophy of mind that starts with Descartes' thinking. The attribution to Descartes of an individualist or internalist doctrine (unlike the words "individualism" or "internalism") does not represent the attribution to him of a contemporary doctrine, very distant, historically speaking, from the French philosopher, but of a doctrine whose bases were established by him and which is now better appreciated in the light of contemporary debates in philosophy of mind. Studying the classics of philosophy from the point of view of contemporary discussions contributes on occasion (and, in my opinion, this is one of those occasions) in digging deeper and more illuminatingly into their thought. Interpreting Descartes as a defender of individualism is not to misrepresent his thought by placing it in the wrong historical setting: rather, it allows us to get a better understanding of his thought and perhaps allows us to find in it an unsuspected depth and richness, a depth and richness which contribute to a fruitful clarification of our present philosophical concerns. This is a peculiar feature of the relationship of philosophy to its classics, a feature which cannot be found in many other fields of knowledge.

II

Curiously enough, given his demand of historical accuracy, Ferraiolo interprets Descartes' thought in terms of a distinction which is most probably alien to it, namely the distinction between phenomenological and intentional aspects of mental states. Ferraiolo ends by holding that

Descartes is an individualist with respect to the determination of phenomenological (or narrow) content — those appearances or representations to which he has immediate access. I am afraid, however, that nothing follows about his being an individualist in the full-blooded sense of the term without begging the question against the anti-individualist about what constitutes the "whole" content of a mental state [p. 83].

Leaving aside the fact that Ferraiolo treats the terms “phenomenological” and “narrow” seemingly as obvious synonyms, which they clearly are not, he seems to think, then, that Descartes might well be an individualist with respect to phenomenological content, but an anti-individualist regarding intentional content, i.e., that Descartes might have admitted that a subject, placed in a ‘normal’ context, could have, say, mental images qualitatively identical to those which he would have in a context constituted, e.g., by an Evil Demon, but different from the latter in their intentional aspects, so that the former might represent things or situations that are distinct from those represented by the latter. I do not think that Descartes could coherently hold such a view, and coherence is surely a salient virtue of his thought. For suppose that Descartes should hold something like that. Now, if we ascribe to him, as we have to do and as Ferraiolo himself does, the thesis, related to the *Cogito*, that a subject has a privileged and infallible access to his own mental states, then Cartesian sceptical arguments would lose all of their force, for in that case this subject could distinguish, by mere inspection of his own mind, when he is in a ‘normal’ environment and when he is in an environment constituted by an Evil Demon, or when he is awake and when he is dreaming, or when he is veridically perceiving something and when he is hallucinating. But if this subject could distinguish, by mere introspection, between different objective environments he is in, scepticism would be defeated in a way that the most optimistic anti-sceptical thinker had never dared to dream. And, if we do not want to hold such a view, we are then forced to deny that Descartes held the thesis of privileged access, since there would then be differences between mental contents, between, say, what is represented by two qualitatively identical mental images in two distinct objective contexts, which the subject would be unable to detect. Accepting anti-individualism with respect to intentional content would have catastrophic consequences for Descartes’ philosophical thought. On the other hand, to restrict Descartes’ individualism to the phenomenological aspects of mental states (a view which many anti-individualists would be content to endorse) is to ascribe to him so innocuous, so harmless a position that it is hard to see how anybody could have taken some of the Cartesian arguments in the *Meditations* to be landmarks of philosophical thinking and a chief intellectual challenge. It seems to me simply obvious that Descartes admitted that a subject might have beliefs with the same content, might believe the same, in whatever sense we may give to this expression, might have, for instance (if we want to be a-historical) beliefs with the same truth-conditions in completely different objective environments. That a subject might have beliefs with the same intentional content, e.g., beliefs to the effect that he is sitting by a fireplace, both when he is in fact sitting by a fireplace and when he is not and this belief is induced in him by a power he has no control over, is something that has to be accepted for the sceptical arguments in the *Meditations* to get off the ground. It also has to be accepted that this

subject would not be able to discriminate between both beliefs. This undoubtedly implies, assuming the thesis of privileged and infallible access, that these two beliefs really have the same content, which presupposes in turn the view that this content is not even partially determined by the objective environment, that is: the thesis of individualism.

III

Ferraiolo's resistance to accept an individualistic interpretation of Descartes' philosophy rests, in my opinion, upon two fundamental errors. There is, first, a confusion about the logical relations between individualism and other Cartesian theses. Ferraiolo assumes that individualism, if it could be correctly ascribed to Descartes, should be deduced from the following theses: "1) First-person privileged access to one's mental states, 2) the possibility of an agent's being radically wrong about the external world..., and, 3) mind/body distinction" [p. 72]. And what he intends to show in his paper is precisely that individualism does not follow from these theses. In his own words, "the central project of this paper is the presentation of an argument that 1), 2), and 3) do not jointly entail **B** [individualism, C.M.]" [p. 72]. Once Ferraiolo believes to have shown that these theses do not logically entail individualism, he thinks he has demonstrated his thesis that attributing this doctrine to Descartes is mistaken or, at least, unjustified. However, it does not seem to have occurred to him that the logical order of Descartes' line of argument in the *Meditations* might well be the reverse, i.e., that individualism might be the doctrine underlying the other theses, the basis on which these other theses can acquire their plausibility (even if, on a last analysis, they turned out not to be strict logical consequences of it). But this, in my opinion, is precisely the argumentative order of Descartes' *Meditations*. Now, if this is so, then the fact that individualism is not a logical consequence of the aforementioned theses does not prove that it cannot be correctly attributed to Descartes, as Ferraiolo intends to show. I shall try to further justify this contention at a later stage.

The second fundamental error in Ferraiolo's paper, as I see it, is the confusion between external or causal dependence and internal or constitutive dependence of one thing on another, and in particular of mental content on the objective environment. This confusion can be clearly appreciated in the following text:

Even at the moment of his most sceptical hypothesis concerning the external world (the articulation of the evil demon doubt), Descartes does not imagine his mind in the absence of external influence. The demon, though not physical, is

nonetheless external to Descartes' mind and also responsible for its content. If the possibility of something external to Descartes' mind is suggested as responsible for the individuation of his mental content even before he is certain of the existence of anything external to himself, then any hopes of extracting individualism from the mere independence of the mind from the body are hopelessly dashed. Surely, it is not allowable to attribute individualism to Descartes in virtue of a passage [the passage in question being that of the Sixth Meditation where Descartes, after conceding that he has a body, speaks about the different ideas he has of it and of himself as a thinking thing, C.M.] which never depicts his mind in any condition that is not dependent upon some entity external to it" [p. 81].

In this text, terms such as "influence", "responsible", "dependence", and so on, are used in at least two senses, namely a causal or external sense and a constitutive or internal sense, with no indication about which of these two senses is intended on each occasion. The distinction between causal and constitutive dependence is essential if the question of Descartes' (or, for that matter, of any other author's) individualism is to be discussed with a minimum of rigor and clarity. An individualist is someone who accepts that there is no constitutive or internal dependence between mental content and objective environment, so that, for him, it is logically possible that a subject has the same set of mental states, concerning both their phenomenological and their intentional aspects, either if this set is caused by an environment A or if it is caused by an entirely different environment B. But an individualist is not obliged at all to hold that a subject could have mental contents without any causal influence of one environment or other. In other words, an individualist can accept perfectly well that there are causal relations, and indeed as many of them as he may wish, between mental contents and the external environment, and that there are no mental contents unless they are caused by some external or physical environment; what is essential if he is to remain an individualist is that he does not take the external context that is causally responsible for a subject's mental states also to be constitutively responsible for the content of those states. So, no conclusion about Descartes' (or anybody else's) individualism can be drawn at all from his acceptance that mental states have external causes, contrary to what Ferraiolo assumes in the text quoted above. This gap between causal and constitutive dependence is what gives Descartes' sceptical hypotheses their force. Descartes obviously accepted that someone's current mental states might have been caused (even if they in fact are not) by an Evil Demon without their representational or intentional content being affected at all by that alternative causal dependence. Acceptance of a relation of causal dependence between mental states and environment does not prevent anybody from being an individualist provided that he holds that those causal relations do not determine the representational content of those states. And this is precisely Descartes' position. If it were

not so, either his sceptical hypotheses would be innocuous or a subject would lack privileged access to his own mental states.

Let me finally say that an individualist does not need to accept that we might have mental intentional states without having a body. Individualism and materialism (either in the form of a type identity theory or in the form of a theory of supervenience of the mental on the physical) are perfectly compatible; hence, dualism does not logically derive from individualism and Descartes' efforts to the contrary are not successful, as a number of authors have shown. In order to be an individualist, a materialist needs only hold that mental contents constitutively depend, in an exclusive way, on physical factors internal to a subject's brain or body, no matter whether these internal physical factors also have external causes.

IV

Let me finally say, as I promised to do, something else in favour of my thesis — contrary to Ferraiolo's — that individualism is, in Descartes' *Meditations*, a presupposition, rather than a consequence, of theses 1), 2), and 3), as stated above.

In his paper, Ferraiolo only refers to the sceptical argument of the Evil Demon. But, in the *Meditations*, the dreaming argument plays an interesting role and occupies an intermediate position on the way to the stronger sceptical hypothesis of the Evil Demon. The Dreaming argument is intended to show that a subject might have the same beliefs as he has at a given moment — for instance, the belief that he is sitting by a fireplace — if he were dreaming at that time, and, given that there are no decisive clues that allow him to distinguish which state he is in, he cannot know whether his beliefs, at a given moment, are true, even if in fact they are. Now, if a subject might have the very same beliefs he has while he is awake if he were dreaming, this implies that the situations which cause those beliefs, and in particular the objective environment a subject is in, do not determine the content of those beliefs. Even if the objective situation constituted by my sitting by a fireplace, if I am awake at that time, may be among the causes of my belief that I am sitting by a fireplace, this objective situation is not constitutive of the content of my beliefs, for, if I were dreaming at that time, that belief would not be caused by such a situation, but by something else. Different objective situations can co-exist with beliefs with the same content. So, the Dreaming argument is intended to establish, as a presupposition for its sceptical efficacy, the constitutive independence (though not necessarily the causal independence) between intentional content and objective situations, i.e., a form of individualism about content. Why does Descartes not take this argument to be suffi-

cient to his purposes and feels forced to state a second, more radical sceptical hypothesis? Descartes gives us the answer himself. The reason is that the Dreaming argument is not powerful enough to establish individualism in its full generality: a complete separation between causal and constitutive relations, between mental contents and objective contexts. What this argument proves is that the objective situations I am in do not constitutively determine the content of my thoughts, but it does not conclusively establish that the ideas with which I represent this content — say, my idea of fire, of chairs, of my body — do not constitutively depend on their external causes. That is, in order for me to dream, and to believe, that I am sitting by a fireplace when I am not, those ideas have to be available to me, and their presence in my mind might be due to my causal contact, while I am awake, with the corresponding objects. If so, then my causal relations with external objects would determine the content of my ideas, though these might combine, while I am dreaming, in a way that is capricious and independent of the way the corresponding objects are related to each other in the world at that time. Descartes himself admits that this is a possible answer to the Dreaming argument:

Nonetheless, it must surely be admitted that the visions which come in sleep are like paintings, which must have been fashioned in the likeness of things that are real, and hence that at least these general kinds of things — eyes, head, hands, and the body as a whole — are things which are not imaginary, but are real and exist. For even when painters try to create sirens and satyrs with the most extraordinary bodies, they cannot give them natures which are new in all respects; they simply jumble up the limbs of different animals. Or if perhaps they manage to think up something so new that nothing remotely similar has ever been seen before — something which is therefore completely fictitious and unreal — at least the colours in the composition must be real. By similar reasoning, although these general kinds of things — eyes, head, hands and so on — could be imaginary, it must be admitted that certain other even simpler and more universal things are real” [Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch (1984), pp. 13-4].

The Dreaming argument, then, does not exclude the possibility that my ideas, or some of them, do represent that which causes them, and does not establish in its full generality the constitutive independence between mental content and objective context, that is, the individualist thesis.

It is in order to establish this thesis in its full generality that Descartes goes on to formulate the hypothesis of the Evil Demon. My present ideas of fire, of my body, and even my simpler ideas of extension, figure, and so on, might be exactly as they are now and represent what they now represent if, instead of being caused by external things, they were caused by a power outside my control such as an Evil Demon, though, if this were the case, what they represent would not exist at all. Therefore, my present ideas being the

same, in every respect, as those which I would have in that other extraordinary causal context, there is, in general, no internal connection between their representational content and their causes, even if these causes are external things and not an Evil Demon.

On the basis of this constitutive independence between intentional content and objective environment, that is, on the basis of individualism, scepticism (Ferraiolo's thesis 2) can be intelligibly construed: the possibility that my beliefs about the external world be radically wrong. And on the basis of this sceptical stage Descartes develops his thesis about the *Cogito*, about the epistemological privilege of the first person, that is, Ferraiolo's thesis 1). Mind/body dualism (Ferraiolo's thesis 3) depends in turn on theses 2) and 1): if I can doubt that anything physical, including my own body, exists, but cannot doubt that I exist while I am doubting, then I, the subject of this doubt, cannot be identical to my body. Fallacious as this argument may be, it nonetheless seems clear to me that Descartes' line of argument in the *Meditations* has precisely this structure. The founding relation goes from individualism to theses 1), 2) and 3), and not conversely. Therefore, even if Ferraiolo had shown that individualism cannot be logically deduced from those theses, this could not possibly establish that the former is not justifiably attributed to Descartes.*

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NOTAS

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