

Descartes and Methodological Doubt: Was the Cogito Necessary?

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Post-Philosophy or Post-Cartesian Realism:
Toward a New Foundationalism.)**

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General Introduction.

The idea that Western philosophy took a wrong turn with Descartes is hardly new or unusual; rejections of Cartesian ontological substance-dualism are legion, the stuff of introductory philosophy of mind courses. This essay will endeavor to show, however, that substance-dualism was not the fundamental Cartesian error, just a byproduct of the error (one of many). My thesis is that this fundamental error has not been formally identified (though some have come close). In the absence of formal identification, the mistake has stood uncorrected. One of the consequences is that the scope of what can be called *Cartesian philosophy* is much broader than usually thought. Many philosophical theses and stances quite prevalent today, including those that would claim to be anti-Cartesian (Richard Rorty's is an example¹) are Cartesian in a this extended sense by virtue of their being products of the working out of the consequences, little by little over time, the unnoticed and uncorrected Cartesian error. Contrary to what is usually thought, the various efforts at "post-philosophy," however labeled, whether as antifoundationalist, antirealist, antirepresentationalist, neopragmatist or postmodernist, do not represent fundamental answers to Cartesian errors or changes in direction but rather lie at the end of the long road Descartes started us down.

What would a genuine turn off this road look like? The present investigation will develop in some detail the idea that the real Cartesian error occurred during the process of Cartesian methodological doubt—long before ontological substance-dualism seemed necessary. If we can identify where and in what way the process of methodological doubt went wrong and correct the error, we may find that a return to what Rorty and others are calling foundationalism is not just possible but the most natural thing in the world. Return to an updated philosophical realism, moreover, may be a straightforward matter—again, something entirely natural.² This theme will only be sketched briefly in the present paper, which shall have as its aim to establish what the actual Cartesian error was and sketch the immediate epistemological consequences. We will conclude with some suggestions how things look if we don't make the error.

Cartesian Methodological Doubt.

The basic idea behind Cartesian methodological doubt is: set aside all that can be regarded as dubious in any way. Strip away the layers of mere habitual belief in order to lay bare whatever can be known for certain—that which cannot possibly be doubted. Only the latter is suitable as a foundation for knowledge. The process of doubt, it should be clear, is a means. The establishment of a secure foundation for the sciences is the end. Descartes's major works are consistent on this point: whatever is doubtful should be

considered provisionally as false. Set aside whatever cannot be proven rigorously using the model of proof long established in geometry. Methodological doubt then proceeds in stages. First, Descartes doubts the senses within that range of cases where commonsense tells us we are error-prone, e.g., thinking it is Susie we see crossing the street half a block away, but it turns out as she approaches it is not Susie at all but a complete stranger who looks superficially like her. Second, Descartes doubts the testimony of the senses more broadly: does he not dream, and when he dreams, does he not have experiences that are at least similar to waking ones? However, whether one is asleep or awake, mathematics and geometry would seem to hold true. Descartes discovers a device for setting aside even these: a “malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning” (*First Meditation**) instead of the familiar all-good God might have deceived us to so great a degree that even mathematical propositions are doubtful. To be sure, fallible humans sometimes make mistakes in such matters without any such device; complex computations are hardly self-evident however much they fall along the lines of mathematical necessity.

However, I must exist in order to doubt, or to be deceived. Descartes thus arrives at the *cogito*: “... I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I think*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.” (*Second Meditation*); “Accordingly, 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” (*Principles of Philosophy Part One*). On this, and on the “clarity and distinctness” of the ideas he perceived in himself, Descartes recovers in stages all he had previously seen reason to set aside. In contemporary terms, the *cogito* is the Cartesian foundation for knowledge. He infers that his mind (incorporeal substance) is better known than anything else. Based on this, and on the ideas he perceives in his mind, he sets out to establish that there must be a God who is not a deceiver and who would not allow him to be long deceived about the testimony of the senses without also providing him with the cognitive means of correcting his errors. Through this we recover the external world (corporeal substance). We describe Descartes as a classical rationalist because he relies on pure reasoning to recover a basis for whatever trust we place in our senses; he does not rely on the testimony of the error-prone senses by themselves.

All this is doubtless familiar, but it is worth observing at this point that if somewhere along the well-trod path of Cartesian doubt there was a category of proposition Descartes for some reason bypassed, and if it turns out that the propositions in this category are (possibly not for the same reasons) as immune to doubt as the *cogito*, then it becomes possible that Descartes arrived at the *cogito* prematurely. It might even become arguable that he arrived at the *cogito* mistakenly—for there might have been no good reason for his proceeding to that point.

Is there such a category of proposition? Considering the structure of his defense of the *cogito*:

* All quotations from works by Rene Descartes are to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, three volumes translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

...I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something, then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. (*Second Meditation*)

Elsewhere he is more explicit about what has been assumed here: “We cannot for all that suppose that we, who are having such thoughts, are nothing. *For it is a contradiction* to suppose that what thinks does not, at the very time when it is thinking, exist.” (*Principles of Philosophy*, emphasis mine).

Descartes does not doubt that something is amiss if one finds oneself in a contradiction. In other words, Descartes relies implicitly on the Aristotelian principle of contradiction to establish the certitude of the *cogito*. But at the end of the day, does he have access to the principle of contradiction? This depends on our answer to: has he or has he not set it aside during the process of doubt? If he has, then it is perfectly fair to ask (prior to his recovering it, something not yet done), what is wrong with being involved in the contradiction of nonexistence coupled with deception? If he has not really set it aside, might it provide (either by itself or as a component of) a more suitable foundation for knowing than the *cogito*? Let us take these questions up one at a time.

Has Descartes Doubted Contradiction?

Does Descartes anywhere doubt the propositions at the foundation of Aristotelian logic such as the principle of contradiction? At what point would he have done so? Most likely, with the propositions of mathematics and geometry. All are (to use today’s familiar post-Kantian vocabulary) known *a priori*. Here is what Descartes asks:

What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable? (*First Meditation*).

Or:

Our doubt will also apply to other matters which we previously regarded as most certain—even the demonstrations of mathematics and even the principles which we hitherto considered to be self-evident. One reason for this is that we have sometimes seen people make mistakes in such matters and accept as most certain and self-evident things which seemed false to us. (*Principles of Philosophy*)

This matter is of crucial importance. For suppose by “principles which we hitherto considered to be self-evident” Descartes intended to include Aristotle’s principles of identity and contradiction, along with the entire canon of classical logic. In that case, his enterprise must stop. It has no means of carrying itself forward. Descartes’s primary instrument, after all, is *reasoning*, governing his progress from proposition to proposition, category to category, through provisional doubt in an orderly way until he arrived at something that reason tells him he cannot doubt.

Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. (*First Meditation*)

On the other hand, suppose that Descartes for whatever reason simply bypassed Aristotle’s laws of identity and contradiction and the canon of classical logic that (one may presume) lies at the core of Cartesian reason. If he didn’t subject these to doubt, then we are entitled to ask, Why not? If he somehow didn’t notice them, then he was remiss for not reflecting sufficiently on the nature of his own procedures and methods, and what these took for granted. It is far more likely that he knew that so extreme a doubt as this would be absurd and impossible. But in this case, he already had a potential foundation that had been inherent in his procedures all along. In either case, the principles of identity and contradiction have not been tabled; they have not been provisionally doubted. Descartes’s inquiry can move forward—but does he not have, right in front of him (they have to be mined from the method, as it were), propositions that he cannot doubt, well before he reaches the *cogito*?

Either way, Descartes advances to the culmination of provisional doubt without justification. In the first case (in which he does in fact doubt the laws of identity and contradiction along with the rest of the canons of logic) he has no legitimate means of moving forward and reaching the *cogito*. In the second (in which he does not doubt them because he cannot) there is no reason to proceed to the *cogito*. Either way, *the cogito proves to be unnecessary*.

In fact, direct textual evidence supports the idea that Descartes did not doubt everything; this might shed light on whether or not he doubted the principle of contradiction. Occasionally Descartes is quite open about where he suspends methodological doubt. Consider his references to the *natural light*:

Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light—for example that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on—cannot in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true. (*Third Meditation*)

Descartes also invokes the natural light as a justification for the principle of causality, expressed in medieval scholastic categories: “Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much <reality> in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause....” (*Third Meditation*) This gambit plays a crucial role in the Cartesian version of the ontological argument as it appears in the Third Meditation. But what is the natural light? Interestingly, its source is God: “...I have no cause for complaint on the grounds that the power of understanding or the natural light which God gave me is no greater than it is;...” (*Fourth Meditation*) If Descartes is relying on God’s not being a deceiver about the natural light at earlier stages in the argument than his first ontological argument, then he begs the question at a crucial juncture. He has not yet established that God either exists or is who He says He is (is not a deceiver).

The natural light is the light of reason itself, in all its presumed transparency—a “supra-method” supervening over methodological doubt, as it were, and not a category of proposition subject to doubt as are the senses, etc. Descartes never casts doubt on this. Harry Frankfurt poses the crucial question:

Referring to the goal of Descartes’s undertaking makes it possible to account for the initial premise of the argument by which he reaches his criterion for sorting his former opinions, but it does not help to explain the authority he evidently accords to reason itself. It does not make it clear how he can be justified in allowing himself to be persuaded by reason at all. Reason itself is not a belief, to be sure, but a faculty. Nevertheless, why is Descartes not obliged, in the general withdrawal of assent to which he commits himself, to withdraw his assent from the opinion that his judgment should be guided by this faculty?³

It would seem that if Descartes is going to subject all his beliefs to methodological doubt, this would include his implicit belief in the efficacy of reason to deliver valid and reliable results. So then has his inquiry taken an illicit step with this implicit belief? Frankfurt responds:

[Descartes’s] aim in subjecting his former opinions to critical examination is to determine whether or not there are *reasonable grounds* for doubting them. He wishes to learn what can be doubted “not through lack of consideration or frivolity, but for valid and meditated reasons.” The task he sets for himself in the *Meditations* is, in general, to discover how a reasonable man can find a foundation for the sciences. The authority of reason is, accordingly, built into the very conception of his enterprise.⁴

According to Frankfurt, then, the status of the authority of reason is the same as that of a working hypothesis in any science, in the sense that it that could conceivably be unmasked as empty through lack of results.

Descartes’s assumption that reason is entitled to authority has the status of a working hypothesis whose tenability is itself to be tested by the

investigation he undertakes. Viewed in this light, it begs no questions; it does not contravene his resolution to empty his mind. Just as he examines in the First Meditation the assumption that the senses are trustworthy, he considers later in the Meditations the assumption that reason is reliable. Since his aim is to discover how (and whether) a reasonable person can find a secure foundation for the sciences, it would be irrelevant for him to begin his inquiry except by adopting a rational norm. But since his adoption of it is provisional and does not prejudge the question of whether using this norm is a viable procedure, he does not arbitrarily settle a question that he is obliged to leave open.⁵

The issue, in this case, then turns on the cash value of the distinction between a ‘provisional’ adoption of reason as valid and never actually questioning its authority. If Descartes’s adoption of reason is only provisional, then so is every conclusion he draws that presumably validates its use unless we can determine where logic leaves the realm of the provisional. This is clearly not the result Descartes wanted; it is not a secure foundation for knowledge in the sciences, only a provisional one. In the final analysis, then, Descartes never questions the authority or validity of reason; he is unable to, because of the dilemma posed above. So has he doubted the logical axioms in the course of methodological doubt? The inference from his thinking to his existence employs an argument from a contradiction. Moreover, we may observe his later inviting readers to “ponder on those self-evident propositions that they will find within themselves, such as ‘The same thing cannot both be and not be at the same time’ ...” (*Second Set of Replies*). Pondering, however, is not the same as doubting. According to Robert Piercey,

[i]f we pay close attention to Meditation One, it becomes clear that Descartes never questions the validity of basic principles of thought. He questions only the *objects* of his thought. He doubts whether the subject matter of his thinking corresponds to anything real outside his mind. Consciousness, or the ability to think, is a constant throughout even this process of doubt.⁶

Piercey observes: “Clearly, consciousness makes doubt possible, and so cannot itself be subject to it.”⁷ He then makes a crucial distinction: “While it is true that Descartes is doubting his ability to perform logic correctly ... [he] is not truly questioning the faculty of thinking, but rather the ability of a particular faculty to reach correct conclusions—that is, conclusions that correspond to what is objectively the case.”⁸ Reasoning cannot, that is, fully question itself, as if from the outside, whether for the purpose of validating or for questioning itself. Piercey concludes:

It is impossible to escape reason or to validate it from without. Any argument questioning the power of reason would obviously be self-defeating, because it would be convincing only to the extent that it was itself reasonable. A critique of the laws by which thinking proceeds is still itself an exercise in thinking. As such, it is reflexive; it proceeds according to the very rules it claims to question. In other words, one

cannot question the soundness of reason without assuming it, just as one cannot doubt the *cogito* without proving it in the attempt. Of course, this self-referential character of reason is circular. But it is not a vicious circularity. On the contrary, this circularity is unavoidable, since no supra-rational standpoint is available to the mind.⁹

We end up with an inescapability of reason, i.e., an inescapability of logical axioms and whatever follows from them, to be employed in philosophical reasoning. Descartes cannot doubt them. His procedure is to employ them in removing doubt about the veracity of the senses, the existence of God and even the truths of mathematics. This is a result, rightly understood, that need not be different in its overall result from Aristotle's! It should raise the issue of whether Descartes needed to proceed to the *cogito*. For what were those "self-evident propositions"—the laws of existence, identity, contradiction and causality—but prime candidates for the foundation for knowledge that he sought, and as existents outside of any particular acts of reason on his part, prone to error, would have prevented the need for the subjective turn that has haunted philosophy since Descartes. For Aristotle's negative demonstration went beyond "self-evidence," a term invariably flavored with psychologism. Aristotle's argument concluded that one must presuppose the principle of contradiction in the very act of questioning it, since any assertion capable of being communicative (even to oneself!) must be determinate and determinacy means self-identical and non-contradictory. Thus the principle of contradiction is an axiom: a proposition that must be presupposed in the very act of questioning it.¹⁰ Setting it aside makes no sense; the thinker who did would cease to think, and fall into silence, like a Buddha. If this is the case, then the principle of contradiction (and its correlates) might now make a better foundation for all knowledge than the *cogito*. It need not purport to inhere in a "substance" nor depend for its validity on a "natural light" nor require a proof of God's existence to apply to something beyond the philosopher's private consciousness.

If in fact Cartesian doubt went wrong at this juncture, the results are of the first importance. For Richard Rorty is doubtless correct in his historiography when he contends that epistemological problems assumed center stage in philosophy following Descartes.¹¹ The idea of founding the philosophical enterprise on a methodology presuming implicit doubt instead of on propositions taken to be axiomatic has haunted Western philosophy ever since. The hypothesis here is that philosophy took a wrong turn at this juncture, with Descartes advancing to the *cogito* and finding his foundation of indubitability there, rather than recognizing in the instruments of his own progress the necessary preconditions for the intelligibility of any inquiry or progress whatsoever, whether to establish one's own existence or for any other purpose. After the establishment of the *cogito* and consequent discovery that the "mind" is better known than the "body," Descartes continued his reasoning to develop the familiar ontological substance-dualism of corporeal and incorporeal substances, the one extended in space but unthinking, the other extended only in time and thinking. Before he was finished he found himself in the nasty predicament of having to explain how two substances fundamentally opposed in nearly all their basic properties could interact with one another. Invocations of "animal spirits" proved inadequate, as one could immediately ask of what "substance" these were comprised, and one was back where one started? It would be fair

to say that Descartes failed to solve the interaction problem—for he had established for himself a problem that was unsolvable on the terms made available. The “mind-body problem,” too, has haunted philosophy ever since, whatever the vocabulary used to express the problem or whatever the methods used to try and rid oneself of it. Previous philosophers in the various Aristotelian, Christian and Thomistic traditions then available accepted a body-soul duality, but it did not have this result.

The Epistemological Consequences of Methodological Doubt.

The problem of how “mind” and “body” can interact can be seen as having an epistemological dimension, and this would help explain the ascent of epistemology to center stage in philosophy. The epistemological dimension of the interaction problem would pose the problem in the following way: how is it possible that units of incorporeal substance (“minds”) can interact with units of corporeal substance (“bodies”) as a necessary condition for the former (construed as “knowing substance”) acquiring knowledge of the latter (construed as “known substance”). On these terms, the acquisition of knowledge is possible only given interaction; a rational justification for knowledge is possible only given an explanation of interaction. Thus in Cartesian terms an adequate epistemology *requires* that the interaction problem be *solved*. If the interaction problem should turn out to be unsolvable on its own terms (those Descartes set for it) then so are the consequent problems to which Cartesian philosophy gave special meaning: the problem of our knowledge of an external world (external to the mind, that is), the problem of determinate properties of the entities / processes in this world science was busy exploring, the problems of causality and induction, the problem of other minds, and so on.

Charting the full scope of the history of the influence of this Cartesian problem in this broad sense unfortunately goes beyond what can be attempted in a paper of this length. To speak very briefly: Locke’s interest in epistemology no doubt began when he read Descartes and was lead to speak of what Descartes had called “corporeal substance” as (to paraphrase) “a something I know not what.”¹² Berkeley then eliminated Cartesian “corporeal substance” altogether in favor of “ideas of sense,” permanent perceptions in the eternal mind of God.¹³ Then Hume turned the very arguments these writers had used against “corporeal substance” against “incorporeal substance,” yielding an impressionism that led to skepticism about any possibility of finding rational justification for causal inferences or other beliefs about “body,” as Hume called it (that which exists behind the impressions). Hume wasn’t really a skeptic but a kind of proto-pragmatist whose justification of belief rested on “natural” habits of thought.¹⁴ But the demand for rational justification would not go away; a kind of solipsism locking us all into “world” consisting exclusively of the stream of our sense impressions had reared its ugly head—if indeed we pursued the reasoning to its conclusion instead of stopping short, as did Hume. Later British epistemology would introduce even stranger notions such as Mill’s “permanent possibilities of sensation.”¹⁵

Not long after Hume, Kant was “awakened from his dogmatic slumbers” through having studied Hume. Kant’s first *Critique* stands at the next great juncture in the history of ideas. Kant offered solutions to the problems posed by Hume, especially regarding causality, and also for those posed for the Christian religion and human free will and moral responsibility that seemed to be posed by a rapidly advancing Newtonian science. Kant’s solution to this range of problems was to jettison the notion of a “passive” reason which apprehends reality (what could be called a *reflectionist* interpretation of knowing) and replace it with an “active” reason which, through its forms of intuitions and categories of understanding, shapes reality (what could be called an *impositionist* view).¹⁶ Kant construed causality (for example) not as something known through experience—Hume, he believed, showed that this could not be the case—but nevertheless we know causality *a priori* because it is part of how our minds work. It is, however, a feature of *us*, not of an unknowable *Ding an Sich*. Scientific determinism became the *de facto* correct approach as the results of our explorations of a world that was empirically real but transcendently ideal. Transcendental idealism left the door open for God, free will and immortality by placing them forever beyond what science or reason could tell us. Meanwhile, the materialist worked to eliminate not corporeal but incorporeal substance. De la Mettrie had published *L’Homme Machine* (*Man, the Machine*) which offered the first materialist theory of the human person: the other stepchild of Cartesianism offered in the name of an increasingly successful science.¹⁷

For the philosopher, however, at the end of this road is an inability to say anything useful or even coherent about a determinate world that is mind-independent and language-independent: there are philosophical realists, but they hardly represent what has been the philosophical mainstream for well over a hundred years. Nietzsche anticipated postmodernism when he made statements like: “It is perhaps dawning on five or six minds that physics, too, is only an interpretation and exegesis of the world (to suit us, if I may say so!) and *not* a world-explanation;...” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 14). Comtean positivism, meanwhile, declared metaphysics to be outmoded in the face of advancing science; logical positivism declared it to be meaningless. Anglo-American philosophy thus enshrined a particular metaphysics—materialism—which then became a metaphysical ideology. Positivism eventually fell out of favor, of course; there are efforts to do metaphysics, but within parameters that have been long established by the schools of analytic antirealists.¹⁸ This, again, is a much longer story than can be more than too-briefly sketched here.

Suffice it to say: *if the original Cartesian cogito really is optional because of a mistake Descartes made in reaching it, then so is the entire Cartesian philosophical road that took us to postmodernism*. The move recommended here is actually more *radical* than anything Rorty proposed (Rorty tells us that it is just “philosophy as it has understood itself since the middle of the last century” that is optional¹⁹), or is proposed by any academic philosophers associated with recent tendencies in the field. I will submit that were any philosophers to take a genuine turn off the Cartesian superhighway (as opposed to going down what we might call the frontage roads of postmodernism and/or relativism), they might find themselves—startled speechless, no doubt!—back at a surprisingly untroublesome realism. It would have as its starting point those very

features at the foundations of logic that Descartes could not doubt. Let us consider one likely variant of what I will call post-Cartesian systematic realism would look like.

Notes Toward a Post-Cartesian Realism.

It is important to note that such a realism would not be entirely alien to postmodern thought in that it would question one's motive for philosophizing (possibly even in Nietzsche's sense)—but then it wouldn't hesitate to offer a philosophical program. Does one philosophize because of doubt? Does one turn to philosophy because one is a cultural outsider, in some sense, dissatisfied? No doubt these are valid reasons, however unspecific. Let us look at them and see if we can make them more specific. We ask questions, and seek to find things out, because of unease of various sorts—because of the desire to substitute better states of affairs for worse ones.²⁰ Knowledge is usually a better state of affairs than ignorance. What Peirce calls “real and living doubt” seems to be contingent on *cognitive* unease: intellectual awareness that one does not know something or is dubious about something and wants to *do* something about it. Doubt just doesn't appear as an end in itself, only as a means to the end of relieving unease. To paraphrase Peirce, we doubt because we have a positive reason for doubting and not because of a Cartesian maxim.²¹ Once we realize this, we have begun the turn off the Cartesian road. It is perfectly viable that different persons might have different specific positive reasons for doubt. This will be okay. One of the results of post-Cartesian systematic realism will be an intellectual division of labor. We do not all need to be working on the same problems or share the same perplexities.

What might we find off the Cartesian road to oblivion? We might do well to examine what Descartes bypassed—the Aristotelian axioms: identity and contradiction. The initial question, given our preceding paragraph, might be, does anyone really experience cognitive unease because of them, i.e., because one suspects that they face counterexamples and might therefore be false? Are the counterexamples “real and living” ones or the products of contemporary anti-Aristotelian logicians attempting to score points against Aristotle?²² If the cognitive unease is real, one might return to Aristotle and discover that Aristotle's classic defense of the principle of contradiction is really quite outstanding on its own terms, and has never been surpassed. One of the lessons is that not everything can be accorded a formal “proof”; certain propositions are logically presupposed in the very concept of a “proof.” When thinking we must use signs in consistent ways, and this respects the principles of identity and contradiction. When interacting with others through communication we must assume that our use of signs is consistent unless we find specific grounds for doubting this assumption in a given case—and then the principles appear as a means to regulate our communication (equivocation is a fallacy, after all). In other words, what results from abandoning the principles of identity and contradiction is unintelligibility and an impossibility of further communication—a state surely invoking greater and not lesser unease than the absence of a formal, non-question-begging proof of the principle of contradiction. There is no reason, moreover, for assuming that there could be alternatives to these basic axioms. Once we have established that there are, indeed, absolute preconditions for intelligible

thought, writing and communication—preconditions that must be assumed in every act of doubting or questioning them—and that the consequences of doubting and questioning them are worse than the consequences of accepting their status as axiomatic for philosophical reasoning, then we have acquired all the “foundations” knowledge would seem to require.

The next step in reconstructing philosophy by virtue of constructing a post-Cartesian systematic realism would be to reflect closely on what we have just done—which is to conduct an inquiry in order to relieve our cognitive unease. What sort of thing is this or any other *inquiry*? It is a cognitive *action*. We may generalize from this specific action and learn some truths about action generally. An inquiry, after all, is an cognitive action. There are other sorts of actions to contrast inquiry with. And other sorts of unease, obviously, than cognitive unease. What is action? It is the choice, by a person, of an end and the employment of at least one means in order to attain that end.²³ Action may be contrasted with motion, e.g., a reflex, which responds to a stimulus but which does not have an end, only an immediate physical sufficient condition. The denial of action would itself be a linguistic and cognitive action, and so be self-contradictory and self-invalidating. Thus there is a dichotomy between acting persons and moving bodies—and it is not the duality of “incorporeal” and “corporeal substances” we found in Descartes. Action, in this view, functions as a conceptual bridge between thought and reality and provides the basis for a realist epistemology—along with the entire Austrian school in economic thought as well as whatever other inquiries may eventually fall under the scope of *praxeology*, the term used in Austrian circles for the logic and science of human action in all its aspects.²⁴

Action, moreover, if it is to employ means to attain an end, must find that means in an *environment*. Here we use *environment* essentially the same way as James J. Gibson uses it at the beginning of his magnificent *Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* in which *environment* “will refer to the surroundings of those organisms that perceive and behave ...”²⁵ We are, of course, interested in the special case of human beings, acting persons whose capacity to grasp the principles governing their surroundings far surpasses that of any animal. Our capacity to conduct actions both individually and to coordinate with others to have built civilization calls for no less. This assumption of an environment consisting of myriad objects, processes, interacting states of affairs and events, leads directly to the “natural realism” mentioned at the outset; our own interaction with these objects, processes, etc., is, of course, just partial, and our knowledge, never complete. But that we have in some sense “constructed” them hardly follows. That the environment has been “constructed” has, in fact, been refuted decisively by thinkers who have inferred that what may be called direct perceptual realism is justified.²⁶

Three avenues of thought converge on the point we have reached here: (1) what could be called the brand of neo-Aristotelianism that recognizes that Aristotle’s defense of the principle of contradiction was entirely adequate, and stands as the single most important philosophical treatise on the subject even after over 2,000 years; (2) investigations into perception such as those of Gibson’s and possibly certain areas of

systems theory such as were developed by Ludwig Bertalanffy and James Grier Miller²⁷; and (3) the scholarship that has grown out of Austrian school economics, especially the work of Ludwig Von Mises.²⁸ Each of these closes the gaps in the others; each corrects excesses in the others. Together, they present the potential for a philosophical realism and viable foundationalism for any present or future philosophers who happen to be interested in it. Its epistemology will stress the scope of knowledge as a product of our successful interactions with our environment and the comprehensible patterns running through it.²⁹ The development of these latter stances will have to wait for future occasions. Suffice it to say in this short treatment: it will contain no automatic prescriptions of methodological doubt, no bifurcations based on differences between “substances,” no interaction problems—and no postmodernist antirealism or skepticism.

¹ See especially his treatment in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), chs. 1 and 2.

² Literary theorist Stanley Fish once wrote a tract entitled *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change Rhetoric and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies (Post-Contemporary Interventions)* 2nd Ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990). My suggestion will be that the contemporary tendencies are hardly “doing what comes naturally” but that a “natural realism”—grounded in a “natural foundationalism” are both possible and desirable, and the result will be a far healthier philosophy than what we have at present.

³ Harry Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes’s Meditations* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), pp. 27-28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28. Italics his.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶ Robert Piercey, “Does Descartes Validate the Natural Light?” *The Cogito* 3 (1992), at <http://www.mun.ca/phil/cogito/vol3/v3doc3.html>.

⁷ Robert Piercey, *ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House), pp. 736f. For a recent defense of Aristotle’s own position cf. Douglas B. Rasmussen, “Aristotle and the Defense of the Law of Contradiction,” *The Personalist* 54 (1973), pp. 149-62. I discuss this in the context of a general defense of the principle of contradiction and other forms of deductive reasoning from axiomatic principles known a priori in my *In Defense of Logic*, work in progress. Cf. also my, “Self-Referential Arguments in Philosophy,” *Reason Papers* 16 (1991): 133-64.

¹¹ Richard Rorty, *op. cit.*,

¹² Here is what Locke wrote:

So that if anyone will examine himself concerning his notion of pure substance in general, he will find he has no other idea of it at all, but only a supposition of he knows not what *support* of such qualities which are capable of producing simple ideas in us; which qualities are commonly called accidents. If any one should be asked, what is the subject wherein colour or weight inheres, he would have nothing to say, but the solid extended parts; and if he were demanded, what is it that solidity and extension adhere in, he would not be in a much better case than the Indian before mentioned who, saying that the world was supported by a great elephant, was asked what the elephant rested on; to which his answer was—a great tortoise: but being again pressed to know what gave support to the broad-backed tortoise, replied—*something, he knew not what*. And thus here, as in all other cases where we use words without having clear and distinct ideas, we talk like children: who being questioned what such a thing is, which they know not, readily give this satisfactory answer, that it is *something*: which in truth signifies no mere, when so used, either by children or men, but that they know not what; and that the

thing they pretend to know, and talk of, is what they have no distinct idea of at all, and so are perfectly ignorant of it, and in the dark (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*)

¹³ Here is what Berkeley wrote:

9. Some there are who make a distinction betwixt primary and secondary qualities. By the former they mean extension, figure, motion, rest, solidity or impenetrability, and number; but the latter they denote all other sensible qualities, as colours, sounds, tastes and so forth. The ideas we have of these they acknowledge not to be the resemblances of anything existing without the mind, or unperceived, but they will have our ideas of the primary qualities to be patterns or images of things which exist without the mind, in an unthinking substances which they call Matter. By Matter, therefore, we are to understand an inert, senseless substance, in which extension, figure, and motion do actually subsist. But it is evident from what we have already shown, that extension, figure and motion are only ideas existing in the mind, and that an idea can be like nothing but another idea, and that consequently neither they nor their archetypes can exist in an unperceiving substance. Hence, it is plain that the very notion of what is called Matter or corporeal substance, involves a contradiction in it. (*A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*)

¹⁴ Here is what Hume wrote:

Shou'd it here be asked me, whether I sincerely assent to this argument, which I seem to take such pains to inculcate, and whether I be really one of those sceptics who hold that all is uncertain, and that our judgment is not in any thing possest of any measures of truth and falsehood; I shou'd reply, that this question is entirely superfluous, and that neither I, nor any other person was ever sincerely and constantly of that opinion. Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel; nor can we any more forbear viewing certain objects in a stronger and fuller light, upon account of their customary connexion with a present impression, than we can hinder ourselves from thinking as long as we are awake, or seeing the surrounding bodies, when we turn our eyes toward them in broad sunshine. Whoever has taken the pains to refute the cavils of this total scepticism, has really disputed without an antagonist, and endeavour'd by arguments to establish a faculty, which nature has antecedently implanted in the mind, and render'd unavoidable.

My intention then in displaying so carefully the arguments of that fantastic sect, is only to make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis, that all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv'd from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures. (From Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature, Being An Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning Into Moral Subjects.*)

¹⁵ John Stuart Mill wrote:

Matter, then, may be defined, a Permanent Possibility of Sensation. If I am asked, whether I believe in matter, I ask whether the questioner accepts this definition of it. If he does, I believe in matter: and so do all Berkeleians. In any other sense than this, I do not. But I affirm with confidence, that this conception of Matter includes the whole meaning attached to it by the common world, apart from philosophical, and sometimes from theological, theories. The reliance of mankind on the real existence of visible and tangible objects, means reliance on the reality and permanence of Possibilities of visual and tactile sensations, when no such sensations are actually experienced. (From Mill's *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*)

¹⁶ For this distinction between reflectionism and impositionism see Barry Smith, “The Question of Apriorism,” *Austrian Economics Newsletter*, Fall 1990, p. 2; here is what Kant famously wrote:

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them a priori, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. (*Critique of Pure Reason*, Preface to Second Edition)

¹⁷ De la Mettrie wrote:

Man is so complicated a machine that it is impossible to get a clear idea of the machine beforehand, and hence impossible to define it. For this reason, all the investigations have been vain, which the greatest philosophers have made a priori, that is to say, in so far as they use, as it were, the wings of the spirit. Thus it is only a posteriori or by trying to disentangle the soul from the organs of the body, so to speak, that one can reach the highest probability concerning man’s own nature, even though one can not discover with certainty what his nature is. Let us then take in our hands the staff of experience, paying no heed to the accounts of all the idle theories of philosophers. To be blind and to think that one can do without this staff is the worst kind of blindness....

To be a machine, to feel, to think, to know how to distinguish good from bad, as well as blue from yellow, in a word, to be born with an intelligence and a sure moral instinct, and to be but an animal, are therefore characters which are no more contradictory, than to be an ape or a parrot and to be able to give oneself pleasure.... I believe that thought is so little incompatible with organized matter, that it seems to be one of its properties on a par with electricity, the faculty of motion, impenetrability, extension, etc.

...Let us then conclude boldly that man is a machine, and that in the whole universe there is but a single substance differently modified....(*L’Homme Machine*)....

¹⁸ Kripkean essentialism is probably the best example.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

²⁰ See Ludwig Von Mises, *Human Action* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1949), p. 13 et al.

²¹ Charles Saunders Peirce, “Some Consequences of the Four Incapacities,” In *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover Books, 1950), pp. 228-29.

²² I have in mind here Graham Priest’s rather strange “dialetheism” which purports to supply counterexamples to the principle of contradiction—in which case one could infer that Priest both has and has not supplied such counterexamples.

²³ See Mises, *op. cit.*

²⁴ For some development of this point see Hans-Hermann Hoppe, *Economic Science and the Austrian Method* (Auburn, AL: Ludwig Von Mises Institute, 1995).

²⁵ James J. Gibson, *An Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 1987), p. 7. Cf. also Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Sensory Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

²⁶ See, e.g., Stuart Katz and Gordon Frost, “The Origins of Knowledge in Two Theories of Brain: The Cognitive Paradox Revealed,” *Behaviorism* 7 (1979): 35-44.

²⁷ See Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory* (New York: George Braziller, 1976); James Grier Miller, *Living Systems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978). The latter in particular is an encyclopedic tome dealing with nearly every aspect of systems theory.

²⁸ Mises, *Human Action*, *op. cit.*, and Ludwig Von Mises, *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1962). Cf. also Hans-Hermann Hoppe, *Economic Science and the Austrian Method* (Auburn, AL: Ludwig Von Mises Institute, 1995).

²⁹ Cf. Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Analysis* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962); Roger Trigg, *Reality At Risk* (Sussex, UK: Harvester Press, 1980); Thomas Russman, *A Prospectus for a Triumph of Realism*

(Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1992); Nicholas Maxwell, *The Comprehensibility of the Universe* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998); Robert Nozick, *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2001).