

*Cartesian Truth*. THOMAS C. VINCI. Oxford University Press, 1998. Pp. 270.

Vinci's express aim is two-fold: "to show that Cartesian epistemology has more power and plausibility overall than contemporary philosophers are willing to admit, and to defend Descartes's rule of truth" (208). Vinci's interpretation is highly original, systematic, and carefully argued, though some readers will find its analytic style forbidding. In developing his reconstruction of Descartes' epistemology, Vinci covers a wide range of problems in Cartesian scholarship. He offers sensitive treatments of such issues as the Third Meditation causal principle, the three grades of sensation, material falsity, sensation and representation, clarity and distinctness, the teachings of nature, and much more. Vinci's most provocative work concerns Descartes' handling of the senses. Vinci argues that in contrast with the mostly negative view of the senses portrayed in the *Meditations*, the *Principles of Philosophy* presents a more optimistic view. On this optimistic account, Descartes holds that the senses underwrite a form of direct (i.e. unmediated-by-ideas) intuition of corporeal/brain states.

Among the items of central interest to Vinci is Descartes' effort to ground rigorous knowledge (*scientia*) in a rule of truth – the famous criterion of clear and distinct perception. Call this the Truth Rule. In my subsequent remarks, I'll focus on specific features of Vinci's handling of the Truth Rule.

### **Vinci's formulation of the Truth Rule**

On his interpretation, the Truth Rule is intended to provide an epistemic principle that grounds specifically existential knowledge. Vinci builds his account around Descartes' doctrine that "if we perceive the presence of some attribute, we can infer that there must also be present an existing thing or substance to which it may be attributed" (Prin. 1:51, CSM 1:210, AT 8a:25). As Vinci understands it, the Truth Rule is a principle ensuring (roughly) that *whatever properties I clearly and distinctly perceive are contained in a substance*.

Though there's no doubt that Descartes accepts this principle, Vinci seems to be confusing the general Truth Rule, per se, with what Descartes intends as a particular consequence of it. Descartes typically states the Truth Rule in some such formula as, *whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true*. Though this more general formulation is not entailed by Vinci's more specific formula, the former does entail the latter in conjunction with other claims –

e.g., those concerning the clear and distinct perception of properties, and the thesis that nothingness possesses no properties (cf. Prin. 1:52). Though the express statements of the Truth Rule in the *Meditations* do not favor Vinci's formulation, he puts heavy emphasis on the text of a letter that he takes to support his interpretation (cf. 44f, 47f, 56f, 70f). In that letter, Descartes refers to his Truth Rule as the principle that "whatever we perceive clearly is true, and so *it exists* [the item perceived] *if we perceive that it cannot not exist*" (to Mersenne, CSMK 211, AT 3:545, my italics). Vinci emphasizes the italicized remark (though even here there is no suggestion of the relation of substance to property), noting that we should prefer "the account of [this] letter to that of Meditation III" (47). Vinci appears to regard this letter as his most impressive text, yet in fact the letter confirms that Vinci's specific formula is derivative of the more general formula: the existential claim (italicized) is said to follow from the more general formula – "whatever we perceive clearly is true, *and so [ainsi] ...*"

Vinci locates further support for his account in the early Meditation III passage in which the Truth Rule is first introduced (AT 7:35). That passage presents the Truth Rule as emerging from reflection on the *cogito*. Vinci understands the *cogito* to involve "reasoning from an intuition of my *thought* to the proposition that there is an existing substance exemplifying that property." (30) Vinci thus takes the *cogito* to provide a "concrete example" of the inference from properties to an underlying substance, an example on which the derivation of the Truth Rule is based (47). Though one *can* read the *cogito* in this way, there are alternative readings that are more charitable to Descartes' project. Descartes' reference to an "I" in the "I think" need not presuppose the existence of a *substantial self*. Such a presupposition is hardly justified at this stage of the broader project of the *Meditations*, an orderly project in which Descartes purports to *discover* rather than to *presuppose* such doctrines as those pertaining to the substance-mode ontology. Arguably, what renders the *cogito* uniquely certain (in the form in which it is introduced in Meditation II) is that its certainty does not depend on presuppositions as to the ontological status of the "I". Indeed, in the very next sentence following the initial statement of the *cogito*, Descartes adds: "But I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this 'I' is, that now necessarily exists" (CSM 2:17, AT 7:25). It's noteworthy that in *Descartes'* version of the *cogito* its certainty concerns "this proposition, *I am, I exist*"; not on the proposition, "I am, I exist *as a substance*".

### Vinci on the role of the Truth Rule in grounding knowledge

On one kind of interpretation, Descartes intends that hyperbolic doubt undermines the epistemological worth of clarity and distinctness. Accordingly, if we reflect on the epistemic possibility of an all-powerful deceiver, it undermines our confidence in even such simple, clearly and distinctly perceived matters as that  $2+3=5$  (cf. AT 7:35f). Descartes thus endeavors to establish the existence of an all-benevolent deity who ensures that our cognitive faculties are infallible when we withhold assent except when forming judgments in accordance with the Truth Rule.

Vinci rejects this conventional reading. Since, on his account, the Truth Rule warrants genuine knowledge even for the atheist, he takes hyperbolic doubt to have a different impact on the Truth Rule than typically supposed. As Vinci notes, the assurance provided by the Truth Rule is conditional on actually being in the phenomenological state of clarity and distinctness. An additional criterion is thus required to provide assurance that one is in the requisite phenomenological state – a problem Gassendi portrays in the Fifth Objections. It is here that Vinci takes hyperbolic doubt to play its role. The principal phenomenological indicator of being in a state of clarity and distinctness is that a perception compels one's assent. Hyperbolic doubt, says Vinci, is intended to undermine our confidence that assent-compulsion is in fact a reliable indicator of clarity and distinctness (cf. 21-22). A demonstration is thus needed to establish assent-compulsion as a reliable guide, and "the only device available to Descartes to provide this demonstration is a draft on God's benevolence" (22). On this account, there are two proofs validating some aspect of clear and distinct perception. The atheist-available proof occurring at the outset of the Third Meditation establishes clarity and distinctness as the criterion *of truth*. The theistic proof of the Fourth Meditation establishes assent-compulsion as the criterion *of clarity and distinctness*.

On Vinci's reading, it is sufficient for genuine knowledge that one's perception *is* clear and distinct. This is first-order knowledge. In contrast is second-order knowledge – what Descartes calls *certain* knowledge, or *scientia*. *Scientia* occurs only if one goes on further to establish a divine guarantee of assent-compulsion as the mark of clarity and distinctness. The atheist can achieve first-order knowledge, but not *scientia*. Vinci holds that this feature of the

account is essential to maintaining Descartes as a foundationalist: foundationalism requires that there *be* foundational perceptions – i.e. *known* beginnings out of which to construct further known superstructure.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it allows Descartes to escape circularity since the premises out of which the proof of God is constructed are genuinely known.

Though Vinci touts his account as preempting the famous Cartesian Circle, the account does no more than to relocate the circularity. On Vinci's interpretation, we need to prove that God is no deceiver in order to validate assent-compulsion as a "reliable indicator" of clarity and distinctness. But if we lack a reliable indicator of clarity and distinctness, we *ipso facto* lack a reliable means of identifying a clear and distinct proof of God. Before we could reliably identify any such proof, we would need already to have established the conclusion of such proof. This circle has the same logical structure as the more famous version of the Cartesian Circle.

Putting the issue of circularity to the side, a number of texts are unfriendly to Vinci's account. His Descartes presupposes faculty reliability: where our cognitive faculties present us with a supremely evident matter (i.e. when we perceive it clearly and distinctly), this is taken as sufficient to guarantee truth; there is no effort to entertain doubts about the reliability of our cognitive faculties themselves. The texts suggest, however, that in posing hyperbolic doubt Descartes means to take seriously the possibility that our creator has endowed us with flawed faculties. Descartes means to entertain the possibility that our faculties conduce to falsehood even granting that we're using them optimally – i.e. even when our perception *is* clear and distinct. For all we know, writes Descartes, God "may have wished to make us beings of the sort who are always deceived even in those matters which seem to us supremely evident" (CSM 1:194, AT 8a:6; cf. AT 3:64-65, 7:36, 7:70, 7:77, 8a:9-10, and 8a:16). And thus as Descartes concludes, unless I can establish that "there is a God" and that he is not "a deceiver", "it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else" (CSM 2:25, AT 7:36) – I have "only shifting and changeable opinions" (CSM 2:48, AT 7:69). The theistic proofs that Descartes pursues provide further confirmation that he intends hyperbolic doubt to undermine our confidence in the truth-conduciveness of clear and distinct perception. The conclusion he alleges

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<sup>1</sup> Vinci does not elaborate the point, but the assumption seems to be this: unless knowledge of God is built up from premises that themselves count as genuine knowledge, there's no intelligible sense in which knowledge of God is grounded in cognitive foundations as opposed to a system of coherent belief (cf. 22). I challenge this assumption in my "Circumventing Cartesian Circles" (with Alan Nelson, *Noûs* 33 (1999):370-404), though the aim of this paper is not a systematic defense of a foundationalist reading of Descartes.

to ground in theistic principles is not the claim that assent-compulsion is the mark of clarity and distinctness, but that clarity and distinctness is the mark of truth (cf. AT 7:15, 7:62, 7:70, 8a:16).<sup>2</sup>

The ambitious nature of Vinci's project makes it inevitable that readers will find much to contest, and I have focused attention on what I take to be shortcomings in the account. But readers will also find much in Vinci's book to applaud. At the very least, Vinci forces one to rethink numerous interpretive presuppositions in light of his own creative proposals. This book deserves serious attention by students and specialists of Descartes.

LEX NEWMAN

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<sup>2</sup> In my "The Fourth Meditation" (*Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 59 (1999):559-591), I argue that the *cogito*-derived formulation of the Truth Rule is a provisional proposal. It is intended to get at that phenomenological state that will issue as the mark of truth – if any cognitive state will. Upon discovering, however, that even the credibility of clear and distinct perception is undermined by hyperbolic doubt, Descartes then embarks on an effort to provide a theistic foundation of the truth criterion.