

DESCARTES, SAUSSURE, AND THE PROBLEMS OF INTEGRATING VOICE INTO A DUALISTIC UNIVERSE

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The distinction of the physical and the mental is the most characteristic feature of the Cartesian philosophy. This is especially significant in the context of the rationalist theory of the subject-centered innate ideas which provides the ontological foundation for our knowledge of the material universe. In addition, because the causes of the generation and the corruption of things do not confine to their own unique and individual forms or essences, to wit, to their own unique and individual principles, the *formlessness* of the things in the material universe made the modern science possible. In opposition to the Aristotelian tradition material things lost their autopoietic features in seventeenth-century rationalist philosophy. The material universe can be perfectly known in the interiority of the intellect. Nothing happens outside the mental which could not be known in advance through and constituted architectonically in the intellect.

The distinction of the physical and the mental, however, seems to pose an insoluble problem for uttering, communicating, or speaking on our knowledge of the material universe as well as the operation of our own intellect. The problem which arises from Descartes's philosophy is the gulf between two aspects of the reality, namely, thinking and speaking. Thinking on something belongs to the mental and speaking of thinking on something belongs to the modes of the physical state of the body, shortly, to the physical. Besides, Descartes attributed so different properties to the physical and the mental that no interaction can take place between them. In spite of Descartes's explanation put forward, for instance, in *Le discours de la méthode*, the distinction of the physical and the mental paradoxically does not allow us „to use words, or put together other signs in order to declare our thoughts to others”. We are not able to communicate and understand ideas

by virtue of the exteriority of mind, to wit, language. The meaning of the speaker's thoughts can never be unfolded in or transmitted by the materiality of speaking, writing, or gesturing. Briefly, speaking as a mode of the physical state of the body can not act upon the intellect. The mind's action on the body and the body's action on the mind, of course, involve different considerations. The latter, however, was completely ruled out in Descartes's philosophy. There can not be a transfer of ideas between the interlocutors. Therefore, no possibility is left for the involvement of language in the formation, correction and modification of thinking on something. Since the two great groups of the physical and the mental can not be isomorphic my words can never bring or actualize ideas into or in the mind of others. Without recalling and actualizing the idea of something beforehand in the intellect this something is never just there as a product of sensory encounter with the abundant configuration of the material world. For this reason, to integrate voices into the dualistic universe is very problematic. The more speaking unfolds the true ontological foundation of the universe, the more it vanishes into silence.

Even if speaking as a basic constitutive element of knowledge and knowledge-formation on our external and internal worlds does not enjoy any distinguished status in the Cartesian philosophy, it remains an ontological problem for philosophers for centuries after Descartes. However, Descartes and the Cartesians – especially, Malebranche, Cordemoy, Bayle, Leibniz, Geulincx and others – managed to find a proper place for the connection of language and thought within the theological framework of the rationalist philosophy. To quote a few examples, „Only God is our immediate and external subject, we see everything through Him“, „God is the only bond of our association“, „we communicate with each other through God“, and so forth. In the last resort, God is the only guarantee of giving true utterance to the internal and external worlds in the intersubjectivity of language.

Therefore, Descartes's metaphysical distinction of the physical and the mental has not necessarily caused any profound theoretical dilemma until the role of God in the creation and the continuous preservation of the universe goes without saying. Descartes, the Cartesians and, in general, seventeenth-century natural philosophers (especially, Galileo and Newton) successfully substituted the rational and active God – who „is the only bond of our association“ – for the Platonic demiurge, or Abraham's and Jacob's anthropomorphic God. All of the interface problems between the physical and the mental, and consequently, thinking and speaking comes from the secularization of the physical-metaphysical worldview of the Cartesian philosophy. In the course of time, the Cartesian distinction lost its very essence, namely, the role of God, who is „the author of all the motions in the world“ and „also the author of all our actions“¹, meanwhile the prophanized version of the Cartesian distinction persists in its original frame of reference, a dualistic universe and tries to explain the interaction between the physical and the mental by means of either exalting the external world at the cost of the internal one or vice versa, or diminishing their ontological differences without questioning the very sense of the distinction.

My point is that after vanishing the role of the philosophers's God from the physical-metaphysical worldview of seventeenth-century natural philosophy the original frame of reference, to wit, the notion of a dualistic universe where the physical and the mental are respectively considered as primary, or as mutually conditional of and interacting with each other as distinct substances is untenable.

If we choose, for instance, the external world as the primary reference of our knowledge and statements we can not rid ourselves of the need of some clarification of the degree of our knowledge and the truth-value of our statements about the external world. It can not be said that, on the one hand, the external world is obvious and, on the other hand, our knowledge and statements about it are contingent without knowing the clear criteria in advance of what rests on its obviousness and their contingencies. If we insist upon the belief that some interaction really takes place between two distinct substances, the physical and the mental, language and thought, for instance, in conversations (without the ceaseless assistance of God) we should give a reason for the lack of the manifestation of causality, linearity and locality in its very processes. The causal relation between language and thought assumes an isomorphic system. It reflects the conventional view that language is a denotative symbolic system for the transmission of ideas. In this case, two distinct substances are independent of each other but Geulincx's well-known clock-maker is desperately needed in order to set and guarantee the rule of the correspondence between the physical and the mental parts of reality. I would like to underline again that a conclusive argument for an isomorphic language-thought relationship in Descartes's philosophy or following Descartes's is still lacking.

Following Saussure sophisticated and enigmatic description about the principles of linguistics in *Cours de linguistique générale*, linearity as 'the natural communicative stance' is pictorially sketched in many current textbooks and essays concerning language and communication. But, these pictures can merely offer the common sense conviction, or rather a crude approximation to the act of speech in which the string of thoughts and of speech supposed to be related in a linear sequential order to each other. Many aspects of language-thought relationship rather show entirely different ordering, however, the supposition of a more abstract ordering, instead of linearity, makes the causality and locality principles quite unsettled, too. In general, to comprehend and to express something do not involve the necessity of a linear-sequential order either in the cognitive or the linguistic domains of the speaking and thinking subjects. One of the striking counterexamples of the notion of linearity is James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* where the text shows itself as a network of traces, „with signifiers spilling over into one another”.² Anyway, all the texts as well as the textuality of the world are the networks of traces whose different unfoldings reflect the thinking and speaking subjects's personal orientations in their own linguistic-cognitive domains. It must be said that linearity is, at most, the speaking and thinking subjects's conventional and cooperative description about their own communicative actions,

in other words, a particular case of ordering but beyond that does not disclose any ontological property of what the language-thought interaction is like.

Locality mainly relates to the interface problem, or using the language of the medieval theology, where the transsubstantiation of the physical and the mental, to wit, linguistic signs and ideas comes to pass in the process of the language-thought interaction. As a consequence of the distinct ontological characterization of the physical and the mental, it is difficult to imagine the process of interaction in which their two opposite attributes, for instance, locality and non-locality can be equally conceived. To sum up, it is hard to find ontologically compelling arguments for upholding the interactionist belief without the clarification of its required and closely connected concepts as causality, linearity and locality.

The Cartesian philosophy made a strong impact on the modern theories of language even if Descartes himself had little to say about it. Many twentieth-century schools of the linguistic philosophy insist upon the Cartesian distinction of the physical and the mental and place emphasis on the priority of the latter. Therefore linguistic analyses frequently aim at the reconstruction of the intellect or explain the language structure on the basis of the primary constitution of the intellect as its ontological foundation. The „mentalist theorists” of meaning frequently express their hope, as Frege articulated it, that the unfolding of the true and real ontological foundation of language „might put an end to the rule of the words over man’s intellect”.³ I think that this feature of the rationalist philosophical tradition and its ontological claim concerning the priority of the mental over the physical aspect of speaking rather make language entirely redundant and almost impossible than disclose the nature of the language-thought relationship. This view merely allows us to imagine language as a connotative system which orients the speaking subject in his/her own cognitive domain without taking the intersubjective nature of the communicative interaction into consideration. In other words, the language-thought process becomes a secular and phenomenal first-person problem without the transcendental dimension of the absolute subject.⁴

Saussure’s approach towards language is a very elegant and productive, but in my view it remains inside the worldview of the Cartesian philosophy. Generally speaking, Saussure shifted a bit the original Cartesian distinction to the direction of the mental which, at the same time, does not belong to an absolute, transcendental subject. In Saussure’s theory the split can be localized between the concept and the acoustic image, in other words, the acoustic image as some kind of inner language was rescued from the material sphere and integrated into the mental one. The core of the problems in linguistics consists of the concept-acoustic image structure constituted by signs in the interiority of the subject, however, the acoustic-auditive phenomena of language as the material part are not its primary consideration. The latter is merely proximate to the inner language therefore there is not the connection between langue (the concept-acoustic image) and the acoustic-auditive language.

I do not venture to say that I know the right answer to the above-mentioned problems. However, I would like to emphasize that any feasible attempt to overcome the interface problems between the physical and the mental should be based on an entirely different ontological interpretation of reality. First of all, the primary ontological claim about the existence of two distinct substances should be critically discussed so that we could account for the creative aspects of language in the formation, correction and modification of our knowledge upon the universe as well as its ability of expressing it. Briefly speaking, after vanishing the role of God from the physical-metaphysical worldview of the rationalist philosophy, its original frame of reference, to wit, a dualistic universe should be also replaced.

The distinction of the physical and the mental is, of course, a powerful and attractive scientific conceptualization of reality which fairly well explains all of the mechanical phenomena in the framework of the Cartesian grid and brings them into accord with the explicate order of the universe, especially, if we do not let the problems of time, space, continuity, interaction, the condition of the individualization of things, the cause of locomotion, locality, change, force and so forth to bother the basic tenets of our original conceptualization. However, the attribution of the independent existences to the various sets of reality outside our analysis becomes the limitation of our understanding about the reality, as well. Heisenberg so vividly described this situation in his *Physics and Philosophy*: „If one follows the great difficulty which even eminent scientists like Einstein had in understanding and accepting the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory, one can trace the roots of this difficulty to the Cartesian partition. This partition has penetrated deeply into the human mind during the three centuries following Descartes and it will take a long time for it to be replaced by a really different attitude toward the problem of reality.”⁵

This different attitude, what Heisenberg pointed to, was formulated in Bohr's complementarity conception. According to this conception there is no place for distinct substances as ontological entities and their exclusive properties but only for processes in the unbroken whole of reality. The distinction of the physical and the mental rather originates from the fact of giving „too much emphasis to the analytic side of our thought processes”. Beyond that distinction, the physical and the mental without having real and distinct ontological features „are only aspects that serve as terms for our analysis”.⁶ The conceptualization of the language-thought process by means of the inscription of our analytic terms into it can, of course, contribute to our understanding of the particular sets of reality and productively serve certain limited purposes, as well. However, it does not give reason to suppose that, on the one hand, there is such a thing as language, and, on the other, there is such a thing as thought which interact to each other in a dualistic universe.⁷

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¹ AT XI p. 46-47.

² J. Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, Ithaca, N.Y. 1986, p. 132.

³ G. Frege, *Begriffsschrift*, Jena, 1880.

⁴ H.R. Maturana – F.J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*. Dordrecht, 1980. p. 32.

⁵ W. Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, London, 1958. p. 75.

⁶ D. Bohm – B.J. Hiley, *The undivided universe. An ontological interpretation of quantum theory*. London – N.Y. 1993. p. 387.

⁷ D. Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', In: E. LePore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation*, London, 1986. pp 433-446.