



On Ideal Representation and the Origins of Thought

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Reflecting on the human experience is an important concern to literate gatherers of knowledge. Insofar as greater human abundance and the overflowing of harvested natural wealth has allowed for more people to contemplate and meditate on all manner of subjects not strictly related to our survival or base instincts, the thoughts of great writers scattered across time and land are permeated with intentional and often dormant and unexamined predispositions toward the meaning and purpose of human life. Moreover, we see in our midst a special kind of institution—religion—which categorizes, stratifies, and purports to answer and indoctrinate, to deify and instruct. This matter of belief in a higher power is of consideration in this essay; as such, we will examine the importance of representation as a means of perceiving pure archetypes and themes prevalent across existence; this will be accompanied with a surveyal of how predispositions regarding the origin of thoughts and reason perhaps circularly influence our understanding of the world and the spiritual realm. This essay considers René Descartes (1596–1650) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), who dealt with these issues in their respective writings “Meditations on First Philosophy” and “Nature.”

I. On Representation

In his Second Meditation, Descartes sets forth a thought experiment in order to determine the validity of the outside world, investigating what an extended thing, or “body” is in relation to his mind. To articulate the relationship of the mind and the senses, he examines a piece of wax,

enumerating its qualities: “its colour, shape and size are plain to see, it is hard, cold and can be handled without difficulty; if you rap it with your knuckle it makes a sound” (p. 25). Up to this point in his text, Descartes has only established that he is a “thing that thinks”¹ (*res cogitans*) as ‘true,’ that is, a thing that “doubts, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, imagines, and has sensory perceptions” (p. 25). So far in his *Meditations*, our understanding of sensory perceptions is that of an impartial skeptic; Descartes has attested to previous memories of the seemingly real yet ultimately hallucinatory sensation of dreams which fooled his reason. As such, we have started this Meditation without sensory input, for Descartes cannot yet confirm the validity of corporeal existence as either true or false. Thus, he turns his attention to the piece of wax to define precisely this problem: what in the experience of bodies can be established as true or valid?

By emphasizing the nature of the wax which changes shape, scent, consistency, temperature when he puts it by the fire, Descartes affirms the identity of the specific wax, his representation of the wax in his intellect, independently of the wax’s two states, solid and liquid. His conclusion is that “having a sensory perception ... is simply thinking” (p. 24), namely, that his sensory perceptions are ‘true’ insofar as “bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone, and that this perception derives ... from their being understood” (p. 27). Hence, presupposing that Descartes’s goal in this endeavour is to categorize various phenomena and processes in the abstract terms of ‘true’ and ‘false,’ sensory perceptions of the world are ‘true’ insofar as the validity of the natural world is not affirmed—the intellect’s understanding of the manifold object alone is ‘true.’ Thus, the abstraction is apparent. For our purposes, the judgement ‘true’ is of less concern; rather, we will investigate the implications and effects of the Cartesian subject-object dualism, the self and the

¹ Rendered in the text as “thinking thing.” I prefer the more literal translation, “thing that thinks.”

outside world. Descartes's mental understanding of 'waxness' allows for the cognitive manipulation and representation of the wax, such that the particular relates to the universal; allowing Descartes to posit that this specific piece of wax is related to the essence of wax as he comprehends it in his mind.

It might be noted that the language as written might lend credence to Descartes's judgement of the continuity of the transformed thing: "*nam in cera liquescente fit major, major in ferventi, majorque rursus, si calor augeatur.*"² Here, the present participle *liquescente*, "melting," modifies *cera*, "wax," presenting the transformation as a change undergone by something still identified as wax. Hence, it seems plausible that language helps organize our recognition of identity. Yet such recognition need not depend on retaining the same word. Considering the case of a transformation from water to ice, it might be said that the identity is retained in spite of the change in symbol or language. Thus, although our investigation of language and its implications is by no means comprehensive, we will turn our attention to other problema.

If Descartes were to apply to the corporeal world such rigor as he does to mental faculties, he might notice that the transformation of the state of the particular wax did not occur in isolation. Even in the case of the ice, we require some sort of external force ("cold"), in order to achieve the transfiguration; in the particular example of the wax melting, again, the specific wax is not melting in isolation from his environment. Rather, his manifest body, in conjunction with the external force of heat, is modifying the characteristics and appearance of the wax—it is not strictly within the capabilities or identity of the wax to undergo such a radical transformation as from that of solid to liquid; Descartes is physically moving the wax near the fire, which results

² "For [the extension of the wax] increases if the wax melts, increases again if it boils, and is greater still if the heat is increased" (p. 25)

in the reaction of the melted wax. The perception of a cloud does not influence the intellect to take it to be of the same substance of water; the wax is not evaluated in absence of the influence of an external force, that is, Descartes's hand. The obfuscating factor which complicates our understanding of his example is thus: an external force—or cause—which triggers the change—the effect—is not originating in the thing itself.

Even still, we might understand the reaction of the wax as a part of the being of the wax in itself. To understand this fully, a bowl of melted wax must be perceived free from the intellectual reflections and normative understanding which culminate in 'waxness.' If we reflect on the formation of our understanding of the process of transformation from birth to maturity—and inevitably, the demise—of the thing and so forth, as aforementioned, it is of no surprise that we often tend to disregard the external causes and forces which lend a hand in the formation of the mature thing. From the germination of a seed to the unfurling of a lily's petals, it is all too easy to mentally neglect the contributions to the seed's growth of the sun, the dappled shade of the trees which protect it from all-too-intense rays, and the well draining soil, fertile and rich in organic matter. Yet, although we have already implied the effects of outside forces on transformations, there is yet another cause hidden in this process which is obfuscating our understanding of the essence of the wax, that is, Time. The continuity of experience as influenced by the horological aspect of life is even easier to neglect as a primary cause in our perception of the continuity of identity. When taken *in medias res*, a transformation only occurs relative to its starting conditions, that is, a thing needs attributes by which it is transformed. If we understand the genesis of the scene of the specific wax as in a melted state in a bowl, it is easy to understand the continuity of the essence of liquid wax, since 'liquid' is definitionally (or originally) a characteristic of the wax. Here, melted would imply a process that has already

occurred, a modification of some kind. In Descartes's thought experiment, the piece of wax can be said to give way to 'melted wax,' since it is understood that the situation has its start with a solid piece of wax, upon which some transformation occurs, which results in the wax becoming 'melted.' The continuum of time and human experience allows our intellect to infer that, in a normative sense, the transfigured thing adheres to the archetype of the original thing in essence, since we witnessed the transfiguration or can intellectually grasp the rule of the transfiguration: now we may understand the essence of the thing as allowing for change, insofar as we actively perceive and experience the change in and through Time.

Thus, recognizing the numerous processes originating outside of the thing (the wax) allows us to better understand how we come to the continuity of the transformed thing. In fact, the intellect's primary task is to articulate the norms that allow for these changes, which would be permitted if Descartes articulated the complex web of causes, some more apparent than others, which contribute in the unification and formation of the abstract Thing.

Further, in the Fifth Meditation, Descartes considers an abstract form as independent of the senses, here, a triangle, with the hopes of proving the essence of God as related to the physical world. Descartes uses the example of a triangle to investigate the validity of ideas which have been formed entirely free of the senses, saying "When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists ... there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind" (p. 51). This is a very strong claim!—requiring Descartes to enumerate upon the varied mathematical formulae which bring him to understand the 'pure' triangle *a priori*: "its three angles equal two right angles, that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle, and the like; and since these properties are ones which I now clearly recognize ... it follows that they cannot have

been invented by me” (p. 51). Descartes’s sole purpose here is to allow for the possibility of God in His essence, in the sense of God as an indeterminable and eternal Form. Well, it is of no coincidence that it is necessary for Descartes to start us off with the imagination—as opposed to some solid Archimedean point at which his argument can rest its feet. Although, in the case of the triangle, the validity of the example is far less fantastical than that of his dreams, that is for certain, but nonetheless surely the imagination cannot be the firm groundwork that we would seek out?

Even further, how is the pure form of the triangle perceived and understood by Descartes? Not through pure reason do we find the cause for the origin of the pure form of the triangle, in fact, Descartes finds it necessary to enumerate through the definitions and characteristics (his ‘ontical perception’) of the triangle; in the example of the wax, Descartes similarly finds himself enumerating the characteristics of both states of Wax, ‘liquid’ and ‘solid,’ in order to establish the essence of wax as not related to its isolated ontic understanding (insofar as his ontic understanding does not account for change). It seems as though the essence or ontology of the triangle hinges upon our grasp of rules and characteristics of ‘triangleness,’ in the sense that the only way we can describe the triangle is to represent it, perhaps even imagine it? So, ultimately, is it not inevitable that we defer to our ontic understanding? Exalted human Reason is seemingly incapable of grasping, in isolation and not influenced by time, the the pure thingness of things; or rather, human understanding of material things will always be dependent upon our sense-receptors in order to establish our own ideal archetypes. In the case of the triangle, it is through the mathematical definitions, our ontic understanding of the triangle, in which we catch a glimpse at the essence of the triangle, which does not seem to work in favor of Descartes.

Perhaps human reason is capable of an *a priori* realization of God, or thingness, but if so, it is absent from Descartes's meditations on the subject.

To address the position of representation in Emerson's essay "Nature," it is necessary to consider what remains constant for Emerson. His premise is found in the Introduction: "We must trust the perfection of the creation so far, as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy" (p. 6). This passage will be made clearer when interpreting "the order of things" to mean what he will call Nature, in that man is perceiving and questioning nature, while all questions are answerable by the Spirit, which is relating to both Man and Nature. Here, it is necessary to stress his usage of "we must trust," where the command is clear: "Believe in the whole, in the unity, in the natural state of affairs. Those who question the ability to question will not travel far!" Emerson's positing of the "order of things" as described in relation to Spirit is an assumption that he will retain throughout the text; this view will color the following interpretation of Emerson's "Nature."

If Descartes seeks to understand the perception of wax as a form in the intellect, Emerson intends to understand the world and the self through their dependence on the unity of God (as seen in the Spirit). Emerson directs our attention toward "this tyrannizing unity in [man's] constitution, which evermore separates and classifies things, endeavoring to reduce the most diverse to one form" (p. 83). Heretofore, it should be clear that Emerson finds the process by which all physical manifestations are understood in ideal form to originate in man's constitution—man's understanding produces the capacity to identify the unity of nature. As yet, this is mere representational thinking; a general statement, and not a particularly new statement at that. So, Emerson seeks to connect Man and Nature in some novel way, not solely via the understanding, by redirecting the claim regarding the origins of the spiritual understanding.

Expounding on the correspondence between man and nature, Emerson posits that “Unity ... lies under the undermost garment of nature, and betrays its source in Universal Spirit. For, it pervades Thought also” (p. 56). Humans perceive the world as emblematic of Spirit, since Spirit pervades thought, and Spirit also pervades nature. Emerson in this way connects Nature, Man, and Spirit by determining the ground of that understanding which allows for the human capacity for the avowal of Spirit as the cause of Nature in Spirit itself—a rabbit out of his own hat!

This understanding gains complexity when Emerson discusses the importance of reason as a faculty in apprehending the Sublime and Spiritual: “If the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them” (p. 62). Here, “Transparent” suggests that the manifold appearance allows access to the underlying unity of the world; Emerson thus presents Reason as a more penetrating vision, capable of catching—albeit temporary—glimpses of what ordinary perception and existence fail to grasp.

Although Emerson is engaging with the world and mind in a more poetic manner than Descartes, everything emanates from Spirit; Spirit is reflected in Nature, while retaining an influence upon Man and his thought.

II. On the Origins of Thought

It may also be of interest to examine the role and origin of thought in both Emerson and Descartes’s writing, starting with Emerson. If we understand Emerson’s claims about man and Nature, it is clear that Emerson believes in the Unity, the one, that which could be interpreted as the Holy Spirit, as the force through which all of existence and Nature depends upon. Yet, how does Emerson posit that mankind learns and first conceptualizes such a unity? Although Emerson may not be alone in this belief, the influence of Spirit upon man and nature is not of

universal recognition across all of culture, time, and societies. The chapter “Spirit” offers this quote to discuss the final important questions of matter and existence:

But when, following the invisible steps of thought, we come to inquire, Whence is matter? and Whereto? many truths arise to us out of the recesses of consciousness. We learn that ... spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound, it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves: ... spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us. (p. 79).

In this manner, it is apparent that Emerson is claiming that Spirit is not only the universal essence behind nature but also a force that acts through us; both man and nature are dependent upon Spirit as their cause. Consciousness can reveal the world’s spiritual source because it participates in that source, even while man is allowed to recognize that participation through what consciousness reveals—insofar as the cause of man’s perception of Spirit is Spirit itself.

Thus, it seems that we have prescribed to man a self-referencing circle in which Spirit is both the cause of Nature and the cause of the manly perception of Spirit as seen through Nature, that is, our thoughts. This is seen most clearly in the previously examined quote by Emerson, in which he sets forth that “[this Unity] is easily seen... and betrays its source in Universal Spirit. For, it pervades Thought also” (p. 56). This tension might never be resolved; Emerson is content to allow this circulation to exist, perhaps as the cycle of life and our understanding of it.

Descartes cannot escape his understanding of things as ‘true’ in order to ascertain their reality, and this influences his unique perspective on cause and effect: “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” (p. 33). Descartes seems to presuppose that all things, including internal and less clearly defined procedures such as thinking, are beholden to the law of cause and effect—insofar as this may be inferred from his above statement. Although this may be a logical leap of faith, in that we have not rigorously determined the limits and bounds of causation, we

can disregard our qualms in order to understand Descartes's purpose: to define God as a higher, supreme being and thus the ultimate cause, and to define humanity, existence, and nature as the effects. This allows all effects to be true insofar as the originator, namely God, is true.

In the actualities of human existence, it is on the whole difficult to pin down the true origin or cause of most phenomena, and even more so when regarding abstract processes of the mind, oftentimes because of the cultural and humanly manufactured nature of such things and perhaps animal instincts of humanity which may cloud the clear perception of rational thought. Moreso, and perhaps more interestingly, another cyclical turn of thought is revealed here: to what (or whose) authority does Descartes turn to? In order to assert the equal validity of the effect as the cause, Descartes turns to "the natural light." In some way, this is no different than the Emersonian turn to Spirit, and it is evident that Descartes's Third Meditation is riddled with such appeals to the natural light, which is easy to interpret as some understanding of God. In this way, Descartes perhaps did not uphold his original purpose as described in his introductory letter to the Sorbonne, where he describes common arguments 'proving' God's existence as unconvincing since "they would judge it to be circular" (p. 4).

We can now see more clearly the whole of both Emerson's and Descartes's understanding of nature, existence, perception, Reason, God, and the relation of all of the parts of human existence in the world. Although radically different in substance and intent, we can find in both writings similar paths they trod, paths which are inviting and convincing to most. It is for good reason that these paths are clear, free from brambles, and twist and turn upon no precipice! These are the paths to which we return, the paths to which we whisper: "There is a peak over yonder. Just as I climbed you, too, I will soon aspire toward the heights!"