

JOHN CARRIERO

DESCARTES (AND SPINOZA)
ON INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCE AND SKEPTICISM

Descartes's epistemology is rooted in his profound interest in and respect for what might be called intellectual experience, especially lucid intellectual experience. Lucid intellectual experience is my term for what Descartes calls perceiving clearly and distinctly. This interest, it seems to me, was shared by Descartes's rationalist successors Spinoza and Leibniz. (Sometimes Spinoza uses the terminology "clear and distinct," sometimes he uses the word "adequate," and sometimes having what he calls a "true idea" is a matter of having such experience.) In the first part of this paper, I locate the phenomenon of lucid intellectual experience, focusing on Descartes and Spinoza. If we do not give enough attention to the character of such experience, we risk losing touch with a central motivation behind their respective epistemologies. In the second part of the paper, I consider intellectual experience in the context of skeptical doubt, particularly radical doubt. Although Descartes and Spinoza are often taken to be opposed here, I think they share more than is commonly appreciated.

PART 1: INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCE

In his *Ethics*, shortly after introducing his thesis that there is an eternal element to the human mind, Spinoza makes an intriguing remark:

Yet it is impossible that we should remember that we existed before the body, since neither can there be any traces of this in the body nor can eternity be defined by time, or be in any way related to time. Nevertheless, we feel and experience [*sentimus ex-*

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perimurque] that we are eternal. For the mind senses those things that it conceives by its understanding just as much as those which it has in its memory. Demonstrations are the eyes of the mind, whereby it sees and observes things [*Mentis enim oculi, quibus res videt observatque, sunt ipsae demonstrationes*]. (5p23s, Shirley's translation, altered by me]

And Descartes writes in the Second Replies:

When someone says, "I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist," he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind. This is clear from the fact that if he were deducing it by means of a syllogism, he would have to have had previous knowledge of the major premise "Everything which thinks exists is, or exists"; yet he learns it from experiencing [*atqui potius discit, ex eo quod apud se experiatur*] in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing. (AT 7:140–41, CSM 2:100)¹

Descartes and Spinoza are not talking about sensory experience in the passage. What they have in mind seems to be closer to, say, what goes on when one understands a mathematical argument. What is involved in this sort of experience?

I want to approach this topic through Descartes's interest in the active mind. In Rule 10 of *Regulae*, he explains why he is not going to concern himself with the syllogistic logic of the dialecticians. He writes:

[The dialecticians] prescribe certain forms of reasoning in which the conclusions follow with such irresistible necessity that if our reason relies on them, even though it takes, as it were, a rest from considering a particular inference clearly and attentively, it can nevertheless draw a conclusion which is certain simply in virtue of the form. [Rule 10, AT 10:405–406, CSM 1:36]

After expressing the concern that such forms lend themselves to sophism, Descartes says:

Our principal concern here is thus to guard against our reason's taking a holiday while we are investigating the truth about some issue; so we reject the forms of reasoning just described as being inimical to our project. Instead we search carefully for everything which may help our mind to stay alert, as we shall show below. [Rule 10, AT 10:406, CSM 1:36–37]

¹ I owe my use of this text in this context to Kristin Primus's "*Scientia Intuitiva*."

Descartes insists that the mind be actively engaged with its subject matter and that reason not go on holiday. His attitude here is connected, I believe, with his interest in perceiving clearly and distinctly: this is something that an actively engaged mind *does*. In fact, Descartes defines clear and distinct perception in terms of an *attentive mind*:

I call a perception *clear* when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception *distinct* if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what it is clear. (*Principles* 1:45)

In order to appreciate what a clear perception is, you have to be actually *thinking*. For Descartes this means that your mind must be focused and actively engaged with some subject matter, the content of the clear perception. (Ultimately this content is some intelligible subject matter, something capable of being understood.) There is a real-time, “you have to be there” quality about clear perception.

Spinoza also shows interest in the mind’s active engagement with the world. For Spinoza an idea is not some picture-like thing, but it involves the mind’s active thinking. Here is his basic characterization of what an idea is:

By idea I understand a conception of the Mind which the Mind forms because it is a thinking thing.

Explication: I say “conception” rather than “perception” because the term perception seems to indicate that the Mind is passive to its object [*mentem ab obiecto pati*] whereas conception seems to express an activity of the Mind. (2d3)

Later in Part 2, Spinoza counsels against thinking of an idea as being like a picture. At 2p43s he warns:

To have a true idea means only to know a thing perfectly, that is, to the utmost degree. Indeed, nobody can doubt this, unless he thinks that an idea is some dumb thing like a picture on a tablet, and not a mode of thinking, to wit, the very act of understanding.

My true idea of the triangle is my *understanding* of the triangle, my *active grasp* of its essence; this is what knowing it “to the utmost degree” looks like. An idea is not some inert content (“some dumb thing like a picture on a tablet”) but rather an intellectual engagement with a content or subject matter (“the very act of un-

derstanding”). I take it that the engagement Spinoza is interested in is similar to that of Descartes’s attentive mind, whose reason is not on holiday.²

INTELLECTUAL ENGAGEMENT

Intellectual experience requires that your mind be engaged in the right sort of way. Descartes’s and Spinoza’s examples are often drawn from arithmetic or geometry. An example that Spinoza employs in several places (which is similar to one Descartes employs in Rule 6³) is this: given three numbers, find the fourth that bears the same relationship to the third as the second bears to the first. For example, given 2, 4, and 3, the solution would be 6.

Spinoza thinks there are different ways in which your mind might get a hold of the particular truth that 6 is to 3 as 4 is to 2, or the more general truth that the way to solve for x in the formula $m/n = r/x$ is to multiply r and n and divide the result by m .

First, you might, using some combination of memory and testimony, apply a rote procedure you remember from grammar school. If you did this, your reason would be on holiday.

Second, you might get interested in the truth and try to work out a demonstration for yourself. That is, you might try to trace this truth to more basic things that seem to you self-evident, so that you start to get some sort of “why” here. (It is easier, perhaps, to imagine that you are doing this with the more general truth than

² Spinoza returns to this theme at the end of Part 2 of *Ethics*:

We must inquire, I say, whether there is in the mind any other affirmation and denial apart from that which the idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves. On this subject see the following proposition and also 2d3, lest thought becomes confused with pictures. (2p48s)

The rough idea here is that if you were actively engaged with the subject matter, then affirmation and denial (and suspension) would take care of themselves. There is no need for—or even room for—a separate act of volition to get to affirmation or denial, as Descartes thought. (Descartes, as I read him, would agree with Spinoza that we must assent to what we clearly perceive, but he would analyze this necessity differently, so as to include a place for will.) See also 2p49s:

I begin, then, with the first point, and I urge my readers to make a careful distinction between an idea—i.e., a conception of the mind—and the images of things that we imagine. Again, it is essential to distinguish between ideas and the words which we use to signify things. For since these three—images, words, and ideas—have been utterly confused by many, or else they fail to distinguish between them through lack of accuracy, or, finally, through lack of caution, our doctrine of the will, which it is essential to know both for theory and for the wise ordering of life [*tam ad speculationem, quam ad vitam sapienter instituendam*] has never entered their minds.

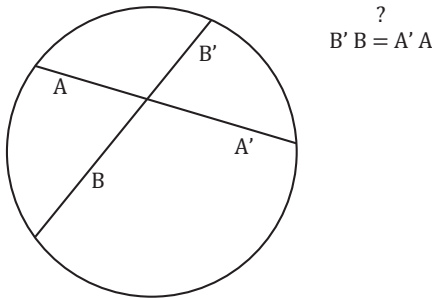
³ It is not clear whether Spinoza had access to *Regulae*.

with the particular one.) If you did this, you would no longer be on autopilot. Your mind would now be actively engaged with the subject matter; you would not be manipulating “dumb pictures of tablets” or some successor representations. Spinoza refers to this as the second kind of cognition and calls it *reason* (in a somewhat stipulated sense of “reason”).

Finally, you might simply immediately see the truth. This is perhaps easier to imagine (at least for most of us) with the particular truth: 6 is to 3 as 4 is to 2. Doing this would involve “thinking through” the relationship in the right way, and not simply relying on memory or going on autopilot. Spinoza calls this mode of cognition *intuition*.

Spinoza associates a couple of things with intuition. Intuition moves in what we might call a “forward” direction. It proceeds from essence, cause, or ground to (further) property (*proprium*), effect, or consequences. It is *a priori*, in the pre-Kantian sense of *a priori*. Also, intuitive cognition is *immediate*: someone can just see that it follows from the essences of 2, 3, 4, and 6 that 6 bears the relation to 3 that 4 bears to 2. It is easy to read past the phenomenon that interests Descartes and Spinoza, so let us try to produce a somewhat more difficult example (this example, as I understand it, is a case of reason). Consider figure 1 below.⁴

Fig. 1.

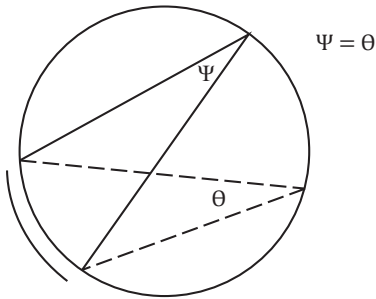


In it we have two intersecting chords of a circle. Question: Is one segment of the B chord multiplied by its other segment, equal to one segment of the A chord multiplied by its remaining segment? (Or: imagine we construct a rectangle from B' and B and another rectangle from A and A'. Are their areas equal?)

⁴ My development of this example follows Khan Academy's treatment rather than Euclid's.

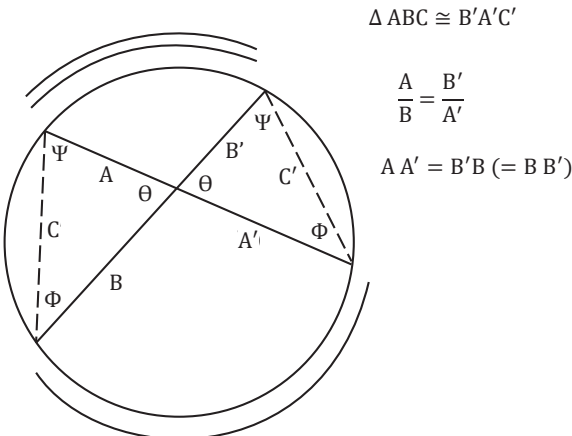
For most of us, the answer is not obvious. But now look at figure 2:

Fig. 2.



Here is an interesting relationship between two angles that cut the same arc in the circle: they are equal. Suppose you grasped this structural feature of the circle (which would demand even more of your attentive mind). This would enable you to see, in figure 3, that the triangles ABC and B'A'C' have the same angles and so are similar:

Fig. 3.



And that in turn would allow you to see that (i) the two triangles have the same angles, and so are similar, and thus that (ii) the relation between the length of B' and A' is the same as the relationship between A and B, and now, well, you can see why B' times B must be the same as A times A'.

Of course, we are not done yet. We have not seen to the bottom of things. For one thing, for most of us, figure 2 is not evident to us in the right sort of way.⁵ For another, it takes some mental focus to get from the similarity of the triangles to the relationship $B'B = AA'$. Beyond this there are interesting issues surrounding how to understand the place of the parallel postulate in our thinking.

So, while the discussion so far has helped us make progress toward achieving a certain sort of intellectual cognition of a very interesting structural feature of circles, and perhaps has even instilled in us a certain amount of confidence that the rest of the way is open, it has not brought us across the finish line.

ENGAGEMENT VERSUS MUTE PICTURES

When Descartes and Spinoza emphasize the importance of an actively engaged intellect, they have in view something like the difference between allowing the diagrams to flow as a sequence of images before your mind and *thinking* through the diagrams—that is, seeing relationships and maybe going somewhere with them. This is related to the thought that the pictures themselves cannot do the intellectual work. One must know what to do with them, *interpret* them, so to speak.

The phenomenon that Descartes and Spinoza are appealing to is familiar. Something special is going on in you when you “get” the demonstration. Notice that this something special seems to be in play even when you are only *trying* to get a demonstration and are not there yet or even failing. This activity seems different in kind from what goes on when you simply let the images float before your mind. (You do not wait for the proof to happen to you.⁶) I think this is the kind of experience that requires the attentive mind or actively engaged intellect. It is the kind of experience that Descartes has in mind, when he writes that one learns “from experiencing [*atqui potius discit, ex eo quod apud se experiatur*] in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing” (AT 7:140–41, CSM 2:100), and Spinoza has in mind when he writes:

Nevertheless, we feel and experience [*sentimus experimurque*] that we are eternal. For the mind senses those things that it conceives by its understanding just as much as those which it has in its memory. Demonstrations are the eyes of the mind, whereby it sees and observes things [*Mentis enim oculi, quibus res videt observatque, sunt ipsae demonstrationes*].

⁵ To get started on that, see the appendix, where several other cases are shown.

⁶ You can be “struck” by an argument, but even that involves a contribution on your part.

It seems to me that much of Descartes's *Meditations* works by generating such experiences in the meditator. This is, in a way, especially the task of the Second Meditation. As the meditator sees some things clearly, past all possibility of doubt, including her own being, she is also *feeling* and *experiencing*, in this sense. And as the meditator continues to reflect on her doings—her affirming, denying, doubting, willing, nilling—she continues to feel and experience in this special way. Consider Descartes's description of a thinking thing:

But what then am I? A thinking thing? What is that? A doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, unwilling, and also imagining and sensing [*imaginans quoque, & sentiens*] thing.

This is a considerable list, if everything on it belongs to me. But does it? Is it not I myself [*ego ipse*] who understands, who now doubts almost everything, who understands some things, who affirms this one thing, denies everything else, who wants to know many things, does not want to be deceived, imagines many things even unwillingly, and also observes [*animadverto*] many things coming to it as if through the senses? (Meditation 2, paragraphs 8–9, AT 7:28, CSM 2:19)

Descartes is here chronicling the life of an intellectual experiencer, which, in turn, is supposed to help us see what *thinking* is. To be sure, imagining and sensing appear in the inventory, but they are taken from the point of view of the intellectual experiencer, a thinker, who is considering what to make of them.

ESSENCE AND PROPERTY; INTUITION

Let us grant that there is a difference between having a series of images flow before one's mind and "getting" the demonstration of something. There are different ways of understanding this difference. It seems to be, for example, in the vicinity of what is sometimes called the unity of judgment: the difference between thinking *Jones*, *wearing*, and *scarf*, and thinking that Jones is wearing a scarf. Descartes's and Spinoza's geometrical orientation yields a different picture: as they view things, what we are doing is noticing certain things about the *essence* of a certain figure (perhaps the relevant essence is: *intersection inscribed in a circle*). In particular, what we have seen is that a certain structural feature (having segments with equal products) follows from or "flows from" that essence. In this way, we have come to understand an essence (a certain intelligible content) more clearly and distinctly, as opposed to combining a predicate with a subject (or a concept and an object according to a rule).

It is hard to say whether the difference between the two approaches is mainly one of preferred vocabulary for capturing more or less the same thing, or reflects some more fundamental difference in outlook. For present purposes, though, I want to work with Descartes's and Spinoza's vocabulary. For them, intellectual experience is a matter of grasping essences and seeing the properties that flow from these grasped essences. It is worth keeping in mind that they think of essences as mind-independent realities, grounded in the ultimate source of the universe's intelligibility, God, its First Principle, which lends a certain systematicity to understanding.⁷

For Descartes and Spinoza, the best form of knowledge is intuition, which involves a movement from essence to property (i.e., *a priori* reasoning in the old sense) rather than from property to essence (i.e., *a posteriori* reasoning in the old sense). Let us try to demystify intuition.

What would it be like to know the truth about the inscribed intersection intuitively? Well, suppose we have been able, prompted by the diagrams, to trace this truth back to essential geometrical structure, ultimately to the basic structure of Euclidean space. Suppose, further, that we are able to move "forward" in the opposite direction, from our grasp of the basic structure of Euclidean space—from its essence—to this interesting structural feature. This would start to get us in the ballpark of intuition. But there is one more thing that is required. To the extent that my forward movement is halting, so that I need to move from step to step to step, it does not count as intuitively knowing the theorem. Notice here that the "steps" differ from a line of formal proof. The diagrams function as prompts to help me see something. Some of us need more help than others seeing things and the need for steps is an indication of a less than perfect grasp of the truth.

In order to know the truth intuitively, I would need to see it "immediately." Perhaps this means that I would need to know it the way we might imagine a very gifted mathematician would know it, so that the theorem's failure becomes simply *unthinkable* to me. Unthinkability itself is tricky. For example, the failure of the Euclidean postulate was once unthinkable for many, until another way of looking at things was discovered to show us how it might be thinkable. And now there arises a delicate question as to what extent we have changed the subject so that our original sense of unthinkability remains intact. I won't try to adjudicate here, except to say that a new discovery does not supplant our original sense, to use Descartes's terminology, that we did see *something* clearly, even if we failed to distinguish what we saw from other things in the neighborhood.

⁷ See my "Epistemology Past and Present" (p. 185) and my "Spinoza's Three Kinds of Cognition" (p. 114).

Getting to where we can intuit the relationship in the diagram is not a practical goal, at least not for many of us. But Descartes and Spinoza think that this is something human beings should strive for. They see value in trying to get our minds to where we can do this, see the truth in a single intuition. Spinoza describes intuition as the highest form of cognition (2p40s2). And Descartes writes (somewhat notoriously) in Rule 11:

If, after intuiting a number of simple propositions, we deduce something else from them, it is useful to run through them in a continuous and completely uninterrupted train of thought, to reflect on their relations to one another, and to form a distinct and, as far as possible, simultaneous conception of several of them. For in this way our knowledge becomes much more certain, and our mental capacity is enormously increased. (Rule 11, AT 10:407, CSM 1:37)

Descartes goes on to describe a situation in which, working with a series of several things, “it is necessary that I run over them again and again in my mind until I pass from the first to the last so quickly that memory has practically no role to play, and I seem to be intuiting the whole thing at once” (AT 10:409, CSM 1:38).

Now, it can sound as if what lies in the background is some skepticism about memory. Memory is untrustworthy, so we need to reduce reliance on it. That is not the main point here, however. Rather, Descartes believes that if I knew the theorem in the best possible way—in the way in which one might imagine that God or at least a very gifted mathematician knows it—I would simply see its truth. Of course, to the extent that I can acquire an intuitive grasp of the truth—to the extent that I can know the way that God or the very gifted mathematician does—I *do* become more certain.

We can acquire some taste of this through practice and familiarity. Steps that are halting and tentative on the first day of geometry class become easier and more natural as the course moves on, and I become more sure-footed. Descartes and Spinoza think of this as our having acquired a better grasp of the essences, one more like God’s. Conversely, if I do not have that sort of fluid mastery, but continually need to look things up in my notes or in my textbook, my grasp is, to that extent, imperfect.

As mentioned earlier, one might wonder about the practicality of achieving intuitive cognition for human knowers. Descartes’s qualification “as far as possible” in the statement of the rule and his use of the word “practically” (“memory has practically no role”) in the body of the rule both seem to be concessions here. It is an open question how far I can get to know the theorem I’ve begun to sketch in

my mind all at once—how far practice will take me toward knowing the theorem in the way that an angel does.

Leibniz is an interesting intermediate case. He emphasizes, in a way that Descartes and Spinoza resist, the importance of symbols for human cognition. He writes, for example:

And so when I think about a chiliagon, that is, a polygon with a thousand equal sides, I don't always consider the nature of a side, or of equality, or of thousandfoldedness ... but in my mind I use these words (whose sense appears only obscurely and imperfectly to the mind) in place of the ideas I have of these things, since I remember that I know the meaning of those words, and I decide that explanation is not necessary at this time. I usually call such thinking, which is found both in algebra and in arithmetic and, indeed, almost everywhere, *blind* or *symbolic*. (G 4:422–26, translated by Ariew and Garber)

And he sees symbolic cognition as a practical necessity for us:

All human reasoning is performed by means of certain signs or characters. Indeed, it is neither possible nor desirable that the things themselves or even the ideas of them be always distinctly observed by the mind. So, for reasons of economy, signs are used for them. For, if each time that, in a demonstration, a geometrician mentioned a hyperbola, a spiral, or a quadratic curve, he would be compelled to recall their definitions or modes of construction exactly, as well as the definitions of the terms which comprise those definitions, this would retard the attainment of new discoveries. (GP 7:204, translated by Dascal)⁸

Even so, Leibniz regards symbolic cognition as second best. For him, too, intuitive cognition is the highest form of cognition. It is just that we, with our limitations, are not in a position to meet that standard, which is why he calls attention to symbols. For our minds to get anywhere, they must go on holiday and, at least to some extent, rely on symbols.

PART 2: INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCE, INDUBITABILITY, AND SKEPTICISM

Let us call the intellectual experience you have when you are actively seeing that the structural feature $B'B = AA'$ follows from the nature of the inscribed intersection, *lucid* intellectual experience. An interesting thing that seems to go with

⁸ I owe this point and these texts to Torsten Odland.

lucid intellectual experience is this: when you are focused and engaged, a certain kind of doubt is impossible. If you are engaged and focused, you cannot *not* think $B'B = AA'$. Similarly, when appropriately engaged, you are unable not to think that 4 bears the same relation to 2 as 6 to 3. By way of contrast, when your reason is on holiday and you are on autopilot, this is not so. When you release your concentration, you can doubt just about anything, even your own existence. This is why Descartes thinks that when I perceive something clearly and distinctly, I *must* give my assent to it; and this is what Spinoza has in view when he writes, “He who has a true idea knows at the same time he has a true idea, and cannot doubt its truth” (2p43s).

Indeed, this fact about lucid intellectual experience can be useful for determining whether one is having such an experience. Suppose you are studying figure 2 and wondering whether you are seeing why the two angles must be equal. You might ask yourself, “Well, can I deny it?” and if your answer is, “Yes, I can,” that is an indication that you do not see it yet. Conversely, if you have gotten yourself in a position—perhaps by working through the diagrams in the appendix—where you can no longer deny this, that is an indication of your having seen through to the truth.

Of course, Descartes and Spinoza are not claiming you cannot be mistaken about whether you are having a lucid intellectual experience. You might mistakenly think that something is undeniable when it is not. For example, you might have missed a case (What if $x = 0$?), or overlooked some subtlety or nuance, e.g., failed to distinguish continuity from uniform continuity. But both aforementioned philosophers believe that if you are having a lucid intellectual experience, you will be unable to doubt. Being unable to doubt is integral to an experience.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

In view of the emphasis on the difference between being alert and focused, on the one hand, and being on automatic pilot, on the other, it is natural to think of intellectual experience, especially lucid intellectual experience, as being conscious. It is hard to understand what it would be to “see through” to the truth of our theorem unconsciously. “Seeing through” seems to require your being focused and attentive. It is not the sort of thing you can do on autopilot. You cannot simply tick off boxes—check, check, check. That would be your reason taking a holiday.

Interestingly, Descartes and Spinoza both seem to take it as obvious that some sense of one’s self as a cognitive being enters the picture at this point. That is, they seem to suppose that when I am having a lucid intellectual experience,

I am aware of myself as getting onto some aspect of reality. So, in the Second Meditation, Descartes moves, without comment, in the cogito passage, from my first-order clear perception of my own existence to the following claim: “So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this pronouncement [*pronunciatum*], I am, I exist, whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind, is necessarily true.”

Through the cogito discussion, then, not only do I come to appreciate the first-order truth that I exist, but also come to appreciate a second-order truth to the effect that *I* am getting onto the truth.

Spinoza writes in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TdIE), §22: “from that fact that I know something, I know what it is to know something [*quod aliquid novi, scio, quid hoc sit aliquid nosse*].” He makes a related point at 2p21s: “as soon as anyone knows something, by that very fact he knows that he knows, and at the same time he knows that he knows that he knows, and so on ad infinitum.” Finally, at 2p43, he says: “He who has a true idea knows at the same time he has a true idea, and cannot doubt its truth.” (Here, we need to keep in mind that true ideas, for Spinoza, are perfect acts of understanding, so what he is saying is that when you understand something well, you know that you do.)

When you were lucidly thinking through that interesting feature of the inscribed intersection, you were not only conscious of the intersection, but you were also conscious of yourself as getting onto this aspect of reality in a particularly lucid way. You may have noticed, for example, that it had become unthinkable to you that the ratio between the segments of the two lines should fail to be equal. Appreciation of that unthinkable brings your mind into the picture: thinking otherwise is something that your mind finds itself unable to do.

Although there is something natural about Descartes’s and Spinoza’s view here, it is not indisputable. Perhaps we can imagine someone who gets the geometry but does not get their getting of the geometry. Maybe children go through such a stage. That is, we might imagine a child who is starting to make the correct moves but is not yet aware of herself as getting onto the truth. She has not yet learned how to reflect on what this might involve. If she has made it far enough in the first-order seeing through so as to appreciate the necessity in the situation—so as to appreciate the unthinkable of $B'B = AA'$ failing to be the case—then it is natural to think that there is some conception of herself as a knower nearby, but the child may not yet have learned to do the kind of reflection that would make that conception vivid. What remains to be done is to draw the child’s attention to this self, whose presence is implicit in her lucid intellectual experience. In the Second Meditation, for example, Descartes leads the meditator through a series of

intellectual exercises in which she tries to think away her own existence and thus finds herself unable to do so. This seems to be part of a process whereby she not only learns a first-order truth (she exists), but also learns something about herself: roughly, that she is a being for whom certain things can become unthinkable.

LUCID INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCE AND SKEPTICISM

I want to turn to how skepticism relates to lucid intellectual experience. Let us begin by considering some well-known remarks by Spinoza. In *Ethics*, Spinoza writes at 2p43: “He who has a true idea knows at the same time that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt its truth,” and adds in its scholium, “Truth is its own standard.” These remarks have often been taken to suggest impatience with skepticism, and to indicate some disagreement between Spinoza and Descartes over the bearing of skeptical considerations on lucid intellectual experience.⁹ Such a disagreement is not obvious to me.

Let us situate these remarks in their context. Here it is helpful to begin with a discussion from the TdIE in which Spinoza seems to be covering similar ground, concluding, “truth, then, needs no sign.” Spinoza’s concern there is rather narrow: it is the relation of my second-order cognition to my first-order cognition—roughly, the relation of my knowledge that I know *p* to my knowing *p* or, better, the relation of my understanding that I understand *e* to my understanding *e*.¹⁰ Spinoza thinks one’s understanding *e* does in fact generate an unending series of further understandings. According to him, when one has the idea of Peter’s “objective essence,” she will also have the idea of the idea of that objective essence; and she will have an idea of this second idea, and “so on without end.” But the point Spinoza is concerned to make is that higher-order knowledge depends on first-order knowledge and not the other way around:

From this it is evident that, to understand the essence of Peter, it is not necessary to understand the idea of Peter, and far less the idea of the idea of Peter.¹¹ This is no more

⁹ Richard Popkin takes Spinoza to be in direct opposition to Descartes here (see *The History of Scepticism*, pp. 243–44). In “Spinoza on Skepticism,” Dominik Perler offers a more nuanced account of the relationship, according to which Spinoza is producing a “theoretical diagnosis” in which “Cartesian skepticism is the product of a theory that uncritically accepts certain assumptions about the structure and origin of ideas” (p. 222). I offered a conjecture along similar lines in “Epistemology Past and Present” (p. 183), but I have come to think that that was mistaken.

¹⁰ Spinoza uses both “knows” (*scire*) and “understands” (*intelligere*) in this passage. Since we are concerned with knowing an essence, the focus would seem to be on understanding.

¹¹ Shirley leaves out one of the “idea of’s.”

than to say that, in order to know, I need not know that I know, and far less do I need to know that I know that I know ... Indeed, in the case of these ideas it is the other way round; for in order to know that I know, it is necessary that I must first know.

Spinoza concludes that “truth, then, needs no sign” and that “to have objective essences of things, or—which is the same thing—their ideas, is enough to remove all doubt.” Although my understanding of the relation between the line segments engenders some understanding of what it is to understand that relation, it does not depend on second-order understanding. The first-order lucid experience suffices to “remove all doubt,” without any assistance from second-order understanding.

These points resurface in *Ethics*. In 2p21s Spinoza affirms the infinite series: “as soon as anyone knows something, by that very fact he knows that he knows, and at the same time he knows that he knows that he knows, and so on ad infinitum.” And at 2p43 Spinoza states, “He who has a true idea knows at the same time that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt its truth.” This is followed by a lengthy scholium, part of which reads:

I have explained in the 2p21s what is an idea of an idea; but it should be noted that the preceding proposition is sufficiently self-evident. For nobody who has a true idea is unaware that a true idea involves absolute certainty. To have a true idea means only to know a thing perfectly, that is, to the utmost degree. Indeed, nobody can doubt this, unless he thinks that an idea is some dumb thing like a picture on a tablet, and not a mode of thinking, to wit, the very act of understanding. And who, pray, can know that he understands some thing unless he first understands it? That is, who can know that he is certain of something unless he is first certain of it? Again, what standard of truth can there be that is clearer and more certain than a true idea?

This is in line with what we just saw in the TdIE: our first-order lucid intellectual experience takes care of itself. Someone can doubt this only if they, say, substitute the diagram (a mute picture) for the intellectual experience that the diagram is designed to elicit.

But would Descartes disagree? Translated into his terms, Spinoza’s point is that when I am perceiving clearly that I exist or that $B'B = AA'$, I can see that I am getting onto the truth. And Descartes thinks that when I am perceiving clearly and distinctly I can see that I am getting onto the truth. (He does not think that I see $B'B = AA'$ only in virtue of some higher-order knowledge—say, my second-order knowledge (i) that I am perceiving $B'B = AA'$ clearly and distinctly and (ii) that everything that I perceive clearly and distinctly is true.) So far, then, he would seem to agree with Spinoza’s observation that “truth is its own standard.”

This leaves us with something of a puzzle. Descartes raises and responds to a radical doubt that takes even lucid intellectual experience in its wake, which might seem to open up some distance between him and Spinoza.¹² Whether this is in fact so, however, depends on what one makes of radical doubt and its relation to lucid intellectual experience.

In my view, radical doubt, for Descartes, is primarily designed to elicit a question about the author or origin of my nature.¹³ He thinks understanding my origin is required for *scientia*. Characterizing *scientia* is a difficult matter; but we should keep in view that it involves systematic understanding rather than piecemeal items of knowledge. Descartes thinks my knowledge will not be perfect or complete—will not count as *scientia*—until I come to have an understanding of myself as a knower, which includes some understanding of why it is that my thought should connect me with reality.

For Descartes, arriving at that understanding of myself as a knower is a straightforwardly metaphysical enterprise. It involves tracing back the origin of my mind to a First Principle¹⁴ who is supremely perfect, and would not have made me so that my thought was not appropriately related to reality. We might think of this account of myself as a knower as being akin to the contemporary project of epistemology naturalized, which also aims to provide a substantive account of myself as a knower, but with this very important difference: Descartes thinks providing such an account is a purely intellectual, as opposed to sensory or empirical, matter. Understanding my mind's origin in the First Principle is something that I can be brought to see no less clearly than that $B'B = AA'$.

How does radical doubt bear on lucid intellectual experience? When one is having a lucid intellectual experience—when one is actively seeing why $B'B$ must equal AA' —there is no room for doubt. Doubt is impossible, in that context, because my experience not only enables me to see that $B'B = AA'$, but also that, in so doing, I am getting onto the truth. But lucid intellectual experience requires focus, and when I relax my concentration I can indirectly, as it were, doubt what I am no longer seeing clearly. I might do this, in particular, if I have an incomplete understanding of my position as a knower and am unable to explain why ideas that belong innately to my mind should have anything to do with a reality

¹² See, for example, Stuart Hampshire's *Spinoza*, chap. 3, "Knowledge and Intellect."

¹³ See my *Between Two Worlds*, 53–60.

¹⁴ I will sometimes use the term "First Principle" to refer to God, to keep in view God's place in the scheme of things in standard philosophical theology: the being on which everything else depends and the ultimate source of the universe's intelligibility. The rationalists believe we have access to the First Principle's essence, which informs their conception of *scientia*.

that is independent of my mind. Because of this, Descartes thinks I will not have *scientia* but only “changing and shifting opinions [*vagas tantum & immutabiles opiniones*]” until I know the author of my being. However, once I recognize that I originate from the supremely perfect First Principle of the universe, God, I see that such a worry is not real, and I achieve *scientia*. This gives knowledge of the First Principle a privileged place in my realizing *scientia*. As Descartes puts it:

Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge [*omnis scientia certitudinem & veritatem*] depends uniquely on my awareness [*cognitione*] of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge [*perfecte scire*] about anything else until I became aware of [*nossem*] him. And now it is possible for me to achieve full and certain knowledge [*plane nota & certa*] of countless matters, both concerning God himself and other things whose nature is intellectual, and also concerning that corporeal nature which is the subject-matter of pure mathematics. (AT 7:71, CSM 2:49)

My knowledge that I originate from a supremely perfect being is part of a theory of why lucid intellectual experience works as it does, part of a theory of why my lucid intellectual thought connects me to reality as it does. I come to possess this theory through increasing my understanding. It helps to fill out and complete lucid intellectual experience; it is not a precondition for lucid intellectual experience to accomplish what it does.¹⁵

What does Spinoza make of all this? Well, Spinoza, too, has a theory of why our lucid intellectual experience accomplishes what it does, a theory that, like Descartes’s, draws heavily on his views about the universe’s First Principle. According to Spinoza, the human mind is part of God’s infinite intellect (2p11c). Because of this, our lucid intellectual experience mirrors reality, just as God’s does.

What bearing does Spinoza think this second-order theory has on our first-order lucid intellectual experience? Does he agree with Descartes that understanding ourselves as knowers lends our intellectual experience some special completeness? This is hard to say. In both texts that we have considered, where Spinoza says that truth is its own standard (TdIE §34 and 2p43s), he seems aware that there is an issue in the vicinity that might be raised about how it is that our minds should be in a position to understand. In a note to TdIE §34, he writes:

Note that we are not here inquiring as to how the first objective essence is innate in us. For that topic belongs to the investigation of Nature, where these matters are dealt

¹⁵ This is why there is no Cartesian circle. For further discussion, see my *Between Two Worlds*, 337–58.

with more fully and where we also demonstrate that there is no affirmation or negation or act of will apart from the idea.

That the first objective essence is innate in us is a part of Spinoza's theory of us as knowers. While he recognizes that this is something that might be on the reader's mind at this point, he distinguishes the question from his current inquiry, which is about how one knows that one is getting onto the truth. For that, "no other sign is needed but to have a true idea" (§35).¹⁶ Something similar happens in 2p43s. There, when Spinoza takes up the question "how can one know for certain that one has ideas which correspond with that of which they are ideas?" he offers the following answer:

As to the ... question, how can a man know that he has an idea which corresponds to that of which it is an idea, I have just shown, with abundant clarity, that this arises from the fact that he does have an idea that corresponds to that of which it is an idea; that is, truth is its own standard. Furthermore, the human mind, insofar as it perceives things truly, is part of the infinite intellect of God (2p11c), and thus it is as inevitable that the clear and distinct ideas of the mind are true as that God's ideas are true.

Spinoza makes two points. First, our lucid intellectual experience itself makes clear that we are getting onto truth ("truth is its own standard"). And, second, if one wants to raise a (second-order) question about how it is that our clear and distinct ideas should relate our mind to the truth or reality, the answer lies in the theory of the origin of the human mind as a part of God's infinite intellect.

In neither of these texts does Spinoza suggest that the theory of ourselves as knowers he is offering is required for *scientia*; but it does leave room for the thought that without such a theory one might well find oneself plagued by nagging questions. We can sharpen this a bit and ask, what would Spinoza make of Descartes's suggestion that, absent the possession a theory of myself as a knower, I am liable (retrospectively) to fall into doubt concerning what I lucidly experienced? In the TdIE (§79), Spinoza seems open to the possibility:

Hence it follows that it is only when we do not have a clear and distinct idea of God that we can cast doubt on our true ideas on the grounds of the possible existence of some deceiving God who misleads us even in things most certain. That is, this can happen only if, attending to the knowledge we have of the origin of all things, we find nothing there to convince us that he is not a deceiver, with the same conviction that we have when, attending to the nature of a triangle, we find that its three angles are

¹⁶ Recall that to have a true idea, in this context, is to grasp an essence, that is, to have an understanding of something.

equal to two right angles. But if we do possess such knowledge of God as we have of a triangle, all doubt is removed.

Here it helps to keep in mind that “a clear and distinct idea of God” is an understanding of God which brings with it an understanding of our place as knowers in the universe. Once such a systematic understanding of reality is in place, “all doubt is removed.”¹⁷

One does sense that coming to an understanding of oneself as a knower occupies a more privileged place in Descartes’s philosophy than in Spinoza’s. After all, the project of responding to radical doubt is a central arc of the *Meditations*, starting with the proposal of the truth rule near the beginning of the Third Meditation and culminating in the explanation of how “the certainty and truth of all knowledge [*omnis scientia certitudinem & veritatem*] depends uniquely on my awareness [*cognitione*] of the true God” toward the end of the Fifth. But this emphasis may be a function of the rhetorical posture of the *Meditations* as a meditative exercise that guides the meditator into skepticism and then back out. Descartes felt that the dreaming doubt would be valuable for freeing the meditator of a sensory ideology arising from an Aristotelian commitment to the thesis that human thought’s purchase on reality fundamentally runs through the senses; and that raising radical doubt would provide a way of eliciting, and eventually quelling, certain natural worries that crop up once that commitment is abandoned in favor of nativism.¹⁸ While Spinoza seems to recognize the question raised by radical doubt—how is it that a human mind’s thought comes to have a purchase on reality—and has his own answer, he seems to find it less fraught. Perhaps by the time he was writing *Ethics*, issues surrounding the abandonment of the Aristotelian commitment in favor of nativism seemed less pressing.

Be that as it may, Spinoza and Descartes agree on the following points. When one is having a lucid intellectual experience, one can see, *inter alia*, that one is getting onto the truth. Because of this, such an experience is indubitable while one is having it. And they offer (competing) theories of the mind that trace its origin back to the First Principle in a way that explains why the mind gets onto reality. Without such knowledge, one may retrospectively doubt something shown by a lucid intellectual experience. For the aforementioned philosophers, we can avoid this situation by increasing our understanding through further lucid intellectual

¹⁷ I am indebted in this paragraph to Willis Doney’s “Spinoza on Philosophical Skepticism,” especially pp. 628–30.

¹⁸ For discussion of the deleterious effects of sensory ideology, see *Between Two Worlds*, 37–38 and 269–70.

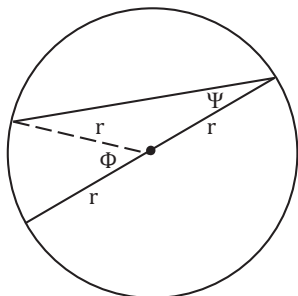
engagements with the world, especially with the essence of the First Principle, from which our mind originates. It is not necessary to have these engagements before we start to understand. But until we do, our knowledge will lack a certain systematicity and, with that, a certain stability.

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Appendix

Case 1

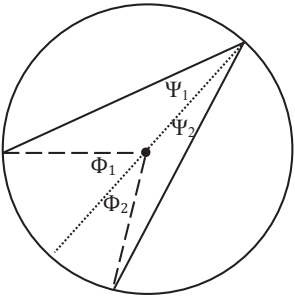
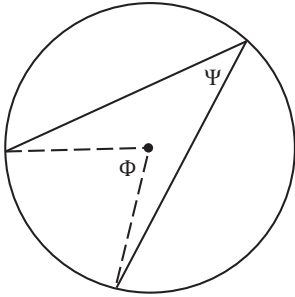


$$2\Psi + (180 - \Phi) = 180$$

$$2\Psi = \Phi$$

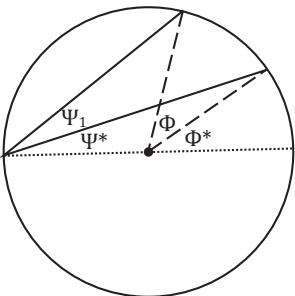
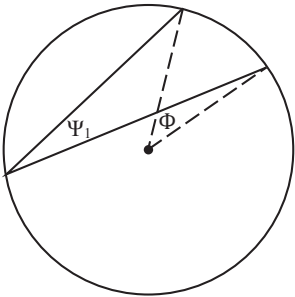
$$\Psi = \frac{1}{2}\Phi$$

Case 2



$$\Psi = \Psi_1 + \Psi_2 = \frac{1}{2}\Phi_1 + \frac{1}{2}\Phi_2 = \frac{1}{2}\Phi$$

Case 3



$$\Psi + \Psi^* = \frac{1}{2}(\Phi + \Phi^*)$$

$$\Psi^* = \frac{1}{2}\Phi^*$$

$$\Psi = \frac{1}{2}\Phi$$

DESCARTES (AND SPINOZA) ON INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCE
AND SKEPTICISM

Summary

Descartes's epistemology is rooted in his profound interest in and respect for what might be called intellectual experience, especially lucid intellectual experience. (Lucid intellectual experience is my term for what Descartes calls perceiving clearly and distinctly.) This interest, it seems to me, was shared by Descartes's rationalist successors Spinoza and Leibniz. In the first part of this paper, I locate the phenomenon of lucid intellectual experience, focusing on Descartes and Spinoza. I try to show if we do not give enough attention to the character of such experience, we risk losing touch with a central motivation behind their respective epistemologies. In the second part of the paper, I consider intellectual experience in the context of skeptical doubt, particularly radical doubt. Although Descartes and Spinoza are often taken to be opposed here, I think they share more than is commonly appreciated.

Keywords: epistemology; indubitability; consciousness; skepticism; intuition.

KARTEZJUSZ (I SPINOZA) W KWESTII INTELEKTUALNEGO
DOŚWIADCZENIA I SCEPTYCYZMU

Streszczenie

Epistemologia Kartezjusza jest zakorzeniona w jego głębokim zainteresowaniu i uznaniu dla tego, co można by nazwać intelektualnym doświadczeniem, lub dokładniej przejrzystym intelektualnym doświadczeniem (przejrzyste intelektualne doświadczenie jest moim terminem oznaczającym to, co Kartezjusz określał *ujęciem jasnym i wyraźnym*). To zainteresowanie intelektualnym doświadczeniem, jak mi się wydaje, podzielali inni racjoniści, Spinoza i Leibniz. W części pierwszej artykułu staram się ulokować fenomen przejrzystego intelektualnego doświadczenia w ramach doktryny Kartezjusza i Spinozy. Usiłuję pokazać, że jeśli nie uwzględnimy w sposób właściwy charakteru tego doświadczenia, to ryzykujemy utratą wglądu w centralne motywy leżące u podstaw ich teorii poznania. W drugiej części artykułu rozważam intelektualne doświadczenia w kontekście sceptycznego wątplenia, w szczególności radyklanego wątplenia. Chociaż często przyjmuje się, że Kartezjusz i Spinoza zajmują opozycyjne stanowiska, gdy chodzi o kwestię radykalnego wątplenia, to ja sądzę, że ich stanowisko były bardziej do siebie podobne w tej sprawie niż się zwykle przyjmuje.

Słowa kluczowe: epistemologia; niepowątpiewalność; świadomość; sceptycyzm; intuicja.