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# The Impact of Descartes and Hobbes on the Meaning Crisis

## Introduction

In this article, we will delve into the profound impact of Descartes and Hobbes on the meaning crisis that emerged during the Scientific Revolution. We will explore their interactions and the implications of their ideas, particularly concerning artificial intelligence. By examining their arguments, we will gain insights into the scientific and existential relevance of the AI project, as well as the deep-rooted problems it poses for our worldview.

## Descartes and the Rejection of Hobbes' Proposal

Descartes, a brilliant philosopher and thinker, responded to Hobbes' proposal of artificial intelligence by challenging the central claims of the Scientific Revolution. Descartes argued that if reasoning involves purpose, meaning, and normative standards, then materialism and the mathematical description of reality fall short. He contended that matter, as conceived by the scientific model, lacks purpose, meaning, and normativity, and therefore cannot support the rationality that Hobbes advocated.

Descartes further highlighted that the subjective qualities, known as qualia, which constitute an essential part of consciousness, exist solely within the realm of the mind. He emphasized the distinction between primary qualities that are mathematically measurable and secondary qualities that are subjective and dependent on the observer's mind. Descartes demonstrated that matter alone cannot generate consciousness or the rich subjective experiences associated with it.

## Rationality and Its Challenges

The arguments between Descartes and Hobbes shed light on the notion of rationality itself. Rationality is often invoked as a standard in discussions of truth and behavior, but Descartes' insights reveal the difficulties in reconciling rationality with scientific materialism. Rationality involves purposeful action, normative standards, and meaning, which are absent from the scientific description of matter. Advocates of rationality must consider these criticisms and not oversimplify rationality as mere logical manipulation of propositions.

## Descartes' Existential Conundrum

Descartes' quest for certainty led him to the famous *cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am." However, his journey also exposed the limitations of his approach. While he sought absolute certainty by doubting everything, he failed to bridge the gap between psychological certainty and logical certainty. Descartes discovered that even in the most comprehensive set of illusions, the existence of his mind remained undeniable. This realization led to the affirmation of his own existence, but it did not provide a logical foundation for all aspects of reality.

# **Implications for the Meaning Crisis**

The profound impact of Descartes and Hobbes on the meaning crisis becomes apparent when we consider the implications of their ideas. Hobbes' proposal of artificial intelligence, rooted in materialism, undermines the notion of consciousness and subjective experience. If consciousness is removed from the equation, questions about the uniqueness and purpose of individuals in a purposeless universe become deeply problematic.

Furthermore, Descartes' rejection of Hobbes' proposal highlights the existential and scientific challenges posed by the AI project. Artificial intelligence, divorced from subjective experience and consciousness, lacks meaning, purpose, and normativity. This insight reveals the potential limitations of AI and its implications for our understanding of cognition and consciousness.

## **Conclusion**

The interactions between Descartes and Hobbes during the Scientific Revolution have profound implications for the meaning crisis. Descartes' critique of Hobbes' materialism and his exploration of rationality and consciousness shed light on the deep-rooted challenges we face in reconciling scientific materialism with subjective experience and existential questions. As we continue to navigate the complexities of artificial intelligence and the search for meaning, these insights will remain crucial in shaping our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

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# The Meaning Crisis and the Loss of Finesse in the Scientific Revolution

## Introduction

In this article, we will explore the meaning crisis and its connection to the loss of finesse in the Scientific Revolution. The transcript we will examine raises important questions about the nature of reality, the relationship between mind and matter, and the impact of artificial intelligence on our understanding of ourselves. We will delve into the distinction between weak and strong AI, the challenges of strong AI, and the profound implications it holds for society. Furthermore, we will discuss the philosophical underpinnings of Descartes' dualism, the existential cost it entails, and the implications for our sense of self. Finally, we will examine Pascal's distinction between the spirit of geometry and the spirit of finesse, highlighting the loss of participatory knowing and transformative truth in our current cultural context.

## The Challenge of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) is not only transforming our socio-economic, political, and cultural landscapes but also revolutionizing our understanding of who we are. As AI advances, it poses profound questions about the nature of consciousness, purpose, and meaning. To grasp the significance of AI, it is crucial to distinguish between weak and strong AI. Weak AI refers to machines designed to perform tasks that humans or intelligent

animals can do. Examples include laptops, smartphones, and automated banking machines. Weak AI has already transformed our lives and continues to do so.

On the other hand, strong AI, also known as artificial general intelligence (AGI), aims to create machines that not only perform intelligent tasks but also possess consciousness and mind-like qualities. Strong AI represents a monumental challenge, as it requires addressing fundamental questions about the nature of the mind, consciousness, and the relationship between mind and matter. While computational machines will undoubtedly reshape society in the next decade or two, the profound understanding of the mind that strong AI promises remains a more uncertain prospect.

## **The Cartesian Dualism and its Existential Cost**

René Descartes, a prominent philosopher of the Scientific Revolution, proposed a dualistic view that separates mind and matter into two distinct substances. Descartes argued that the mind is an immaterial substance capable of purpose, values, meaning, and consciousness. In contrast, matter is a purely material substance extended in space and time, devoid of mental properties. This radical separation between mind and matter presents a challenge: how can these two substances causally interact if they share no fundamental properties?

Descartes' dualism raises the problem of interaction between mind and matter. If mind and matter cannot share properties, how can they influence each other? Descartes claimed that the mind could influence matter through conscious acts of will, such as desiring

water and moving to obtain it. Conversely, matter could cause mental experiences, such as pain resulting from physical impact. However, this interaction remains mysterious within Descartes' framework, leaving a fundamental gap in our understanding of the mind-body relationship.

Moreover, Descartes' dualism gives rise to the problem of other minds. If mind and matter are inherently disconnected, how can we know the thoughts and experiences of others? Descartes himself struggled with this question, realizing that he could not directly perceive the minds of others. Our knowledge of others' mental states often relies on interpreting their gestures, expressions, and behaviors. However, if mind and matter lack any connection, this raises doubts about the reliability of such inferences.

## The Fractured Grammar of Realness

Descartes' dualism leads to an inherent tension in our cultural understanding of reality. On one hand, we have the objective realm of mathematics and science, which strives for an external and universal perspective on truth. On the other hand, we have subjective consciousness, which provides a deeply personal and subjective experience of reality. Our culture oscillates between these two modes of understanding, often valuing one over the other.

This tension gives rise to the fractured grammar of realness. We swing back and forth between subjective and objective accounts of reality, attempting to reconcile the gap between consciousness and the external world. We grapple with the challenge of integrating purpose, normativity, and subjective experiences into a scientific

and materialistic framework. The resulting instability leaves us disconnected from the world, our bodies, and other minds, contributing to the meaning crisis we face today.

## **The Loss of Finesse and the Meaning Crisis**

Blaise Pascal, another influential figure of the era, observed a significant loss in what he called the spirit of finesse. Finesse represents a form of knowing that goes beyond mathematical propositions and empirical observations. It encompasses procedural knowledge, perspective-taking, and participatory knowing. The loss of finesse has profound implications for transformative truth and the sense of self.

In our current cultural context, we prioritize the spirit of geometry, which emphasizes objective knowledge, logical reasoning, and scientific rigor. While these aspects have their merits, they fall short in providing transformative experiences and wisdom. The pursuit of scientific knowledge alone, devoid of finesse, fails to offer the profound self-transcendence and meaning sought by individuals and societies.

## **The Search for Transformative Truth**

The meaning crisis we face today arises from the interplay between scientific knowledge and the loss of finesse. We grapple with environmental, economic, socio-political, and cultural challenges that demand deep transformations in cognition, consciousness, culture, and community. However, our current frameworks and institutions lack the psycho-technologies and traditions necessary for such transformations.

Religion, once a source of transformative truth, has diminished in influence, leaving a void that pseudo-religious ideologies attempt to fill. These ideologies often lead to violence and bloodshed, failing to provide the transformative experiences and participatory knowing that the spirit of finesse offers. To address the meaning crisis, we must rekindle the spirit of finesse, rediscover participatory knowing, and cultivate transformative truth through a holistic integration of scientific understanding and wisdom traditions.

## Conclusion

The meaning crisis, stemming from the loss of finesse in the Scientific Revolution, poses profound challenges for our understanding of reality, consciousness, and the self. The advancement of AI further complicates these issues, prompting us to consider the distinction between weak and strong AI and the implications for our sense of identity. To navigate the meaning crisis, we must reevaluate our fragmented grammar of realness, reclaim the spirit of finesse, and seek transformative truth that transcends the boundaries of scientific knowledge. By integrating the subjective and objective dimensions of human experience, we can embark on a path towards a more meaningful and holistic understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit.