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Descartes Paper

To Err or not to Err? Exploring the Cartesian Model of Error and its Limits

Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* elegantly tackles questions of truth, perception, and existence. However, arguments for an omnibenevolent being, ontological proofs, and pure reason overshadow other key elements of his work. In his Fourth Meditation: Truth and Falsity, Descartes formulates a model which he uses to describe error. While this model is clear in definition, there are many grey areas within his description that need to be addressed. This paper will first explore Descartes' model of error through analyzing its components of judgement, will, and intellect, as well as questioning what truly constitutes error. The limits of the Cartesian model will be tested by investigating differences between error, accident, and achieving the right outcome with the wrong means. Undesired outcomes in relation to error will also be explored.

In the beginning of the Fourth Meditation, Descartes claims that his faculty of judgement was given to him by God. Descartes also presupposes that if God existed he would be an omnibenevolent being and assign him a perfect faculty of judgement. This faculty if used correctly, is supposed to be perfect due to the fact that God would not wish to deceive what he creates. At first the idea of a perfect faculty of judgement seems ludicrous given the fact that people make errors of judgement all the time. Descartes quickly reminds us of this and cites his own experiences as a source of his errors when he says, "But when I turn back to myself, I know

by experience that I am prone to countless errors” [54].¹ Descartes also suggests that “...error is not something that depends on God, but merely a defect” [54]. Does that mean that error is part of the faculty of judgement? The answer is no according to Descartes. Error isn’t caused the faculty of true judgement in and of itself, but the fact that the faculty is not infinite. Descartes elaborates on this when he says, “Hence my going wrong does not require me to have a faculty specially bestowed on me by God; it simply happens as a result of the fact that the faculty of true judgement which I have from God is in my case not infinite” [54]. For example, I can have true judgement about whether some foods are healthy or unhealthy, but my true judgement might not expand to every food in existence. Since my true judgement on the health of foods is limited, I am capable of making in error in discriminating between healthy and unhealthy. Through this set of assertions Descartes argues that if one uses their faculty of judgement correctly then an error can not be made.

The question still remains; what constitutes error? First, it is necessary to note that error and judgement are not mutually exclusive. “For error is not a pure negation, but rather a privation or lack of some knowledge which somehow should be in me” [55]. In this excerpt, Descartes clarifies that error isn’t negating judgement itself, but using judgement when there is a lack of knowledge. This leads to the two primary components at play when an error is made: will and intellect. According to Descartes, his errors, “...depend on both the intellect and the will simultaneously” [56]. He further explains by saying, “It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand” [58]. It is also made clear that even if one has the

¹ Renee Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham. (Cambridge: Cambridge University site, Pres. 1960.

*All quotations are derived from the same work, cited by section, not page number.

proper intellect to not make an error, if that intellect is not being exercised when a judgement is being made then an error can still occur. “What is more, this indifference does not merely apply to cases where the intellect is wholly ignorant, but extends in general to every case where the intellect does not have sufficiently clear knowledge at the time when the will deliberates” [59]. Descartes claims that *any* time will is exercised outside of intellect that an error has occurred.

While the Cartesian model for error is simple in its definition, but drawing the lines as to what Descartes would define as error becomes far more nebulous. A key to determining how far the Cartesian model extends lies in discriminating between action and judgement. Descartes does not give mention to action, but does define will as also being “freedom of choice.” However, this description still does not create a dichotomy between action and judgement. Actions can occur where judgements do not. For example, in talking with a friend, one might make certain hand gestures or sit in a particular manner, but these actions don’t constitute a true judgement of any kind. Many actions do not have a necessity for intellect, nor do they require will. This issue is best demonstrated through a specific kind of action known as an accident.

An integral component to an accident is lack of intellect. Perhaps while in conversation with a friend, one extends their arm back and knocks over a glass of milk. It is likely that the person had a lack of knowledge about the glass’s whereabouts in regards to the proximity of their reach. Furthermore, the person did not will for the glass to be knocked over. It appears from this scenario that an accident occurred due to a lack of intellect and lack of will for a particular outcome. It might have been thought that the total lack of intellect might be surpassed by the will for someone to act, regardless of the amount of will being exercised. However, it could be argued

that the will isn't being exercised toward the accident which occurs, if will is even exercised at all.

Assume there is another scenario in which a person is conversing with a friend and deliberately bumps the glass, assuming that it wouldn't be knocked over. Instead of a lack of information regarding the outcome of the milk, the person had misinformation as to what the outcome of bumping the glass would be. Another key difference in the scenarios is that the person who erred had willed to bump the glass, while the person who accidentally knocked the glass over did not will to bump it. Neither person willed for the outcome of the glass of milk being knocked over, but the person who erred had focused their will toward the glass.

When elaborating on error, Descartes says, "It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand" [58]. However, the person who accidentally knocked over the glass did not extend their will to what they understood. The difference between accident and error is twofold; accidents occur due to lack of knowledge and one's will directed elsewhere, while errors occur due to misinformation and one's will directed toward an outcome. Judging can be performed mentally, and has a discriminatory property, while actions can seemingly occur without said power. While accidents and errors do share unexpected outcomes in light of their causal actions, accidents do not fall under the Cartesian model for error due to their lack of will toward the event or object in which the error occurred.

It is now established that accidents are not necessarily Cartesian errors, but another grey area in the realm of error still beckons to be explored. Take for example a student taking a standardized test. The student comes across a problem they do not know the answer to, so they

guess and by chance happen to answer correctly. Does error occur when a person achieves the right answer by the wrong means? If the student had selected the wrong answer it would be clear that an error had been made since intellect was lacking and the element of will is still present, much like the person who bumped the milk and thought it wouldn't be knocked over. But he student willed to answer correctly, and the outcome was in his favor. Suppose the same principles applied to the person deliberately bumping the glass of milk, but this time the glass wasn't knocked over. Does this outcome affect what qualifies as error? Take for example, a person who is driving to the symphony and deviates from the directions that were given to them. Regardless of whether that person arrives at the symphony or a cornfield, the fact remains that they willed to go to the symphony, but their lack of intellect took them a different way than the directions originally prescribed. One could argue that arriving at the right outcome outweighs using the wrong means. However, the Cartesian model for error seems indifferent to outcome and suggests the person bumping the milk or driving to the symphony still committed an error.

An important distinction should be made when evaluating outcomes and determining what qualifies as Cartesian error. In a situation where one wills incorrectly and the outcome is right, most people would be satisfied. However, Descartes would still say an error occurred, and would likely suggest that the action of extending the will past the intellect itself is bad in nature.

According to Descartes one does not err when they do not extend their will beyond their intellect. He states, "If however, I simply refrain from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly" [59-60]. It is clear that he believes that one does err when they judge beyond

their intellect. Revisiting the person driving to the symphony provides another interesting dilemma. Say perhaps, the person who desired to go to the symphony did in fact have the intellect necessary to get there, but didn't go. Their will was not strong enough to drive to the symphony at all. This event could be described as having a negative outcome since the person desired to go and didn't, but according to Descartes the person did not commit an error.

Exploring Descartes' Fourth Meditation in *Meditations on First Philosophy* gave rise to many questions in regards to error. The Cartesian model for error was clearly defined with three conditions; first, that judgement must be used, second, that will and intellect must be exercised simultaneously, and third, that will must exceed intellect and operate outside of one's understanding. After the model was clearly defined, its limits were explored, chiefly by creating a dichotomy between accident and error, evaluating situations where the desired outcome is achieved by the wrong means, and exploring when error occurs despite a negative outcome. It was then determined that accidents do not fall under Cartesian error due to lack of will toward the object or event where an outcome occurred. Regardless of outcome, Descartes claims that error occurs whenever the wrong means are used due to lack of intellect, regardless of a good, bad, or neutral outcome. After analyzing Descartes' model for error, it is clear that it operates under a specific framework that successfully delineates between other situations in which undesired or unexpected consequences arise.

Works Cited: Renee Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham.
(Cambridge: Cambridge University site, Pres. 1960.