

Hobbes's Materialism

1 Background

This is a summary of the scholastic (medieval) understanding of how sense perception works. Modern philosophers, such as Descartes and Hobbes, rejected this.¹

“Cognition is a process by which the knower comes to be in a way like the known thing. The process begins when the form of a sensible quality of an object alters the sense organ, as in taste and touch, or an intervening medium, as in vision, hearing, and smell. Eventually, whether in the medium or in the senses, the sensible quality produces an ‘intentional species’, or ‘sensible species’, or just ‘species’, which was said to ‘represent’ the quality in the object. The species is received by the sensory power without literally rendering the power colored or warm or odorous; following Aristotle, its reception was described as that of a ‘form’ or ‘species’ ‘without matter’. Upon receiving a species (passively), the sensory power is actualised to its characteristic sensory activity (and it is to that extent active); in the act of sensing, a kind of identity arises between the sensory power and the object sensed, which identity permits the power to be ‘directed toward’ or ‘attentive of’ the object, and so to cognise it.”²

2 Descartes's dualism

“... the first and principal prerequisite for knowing that the soul is immortal is that we form a concept of the soul that is as lucid as possible and utterly distinct from every concept of a body. ... Finally, in the Sixth Meditation ... [t]he mind is proved to be really distinct from the body, even though the

¹ For example, see *Leviathan*, ch. 1, ¶5.

² Gary Hatfield, “The cognitive faculties” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* volume 2 (1998), p. 956.

mind is shown to be so closely joined to the body that it forms a single unit with it.”³

3 Descartes's dream argument

“How often does my evening slumber persuade me of such ordinary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the fire-place—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! But right now my eyes are certainly wide awake when I gaze upon this sheet of paper. This head which I am shaking is not heavy with sleep. I extend this hand consciously and deliberately, and I feel it. Such things would not be so distinct for someone who is asleep. As if I did not recall having been deceived on other occasions even by similar thoughts in my dreams! As I consider these matters more carefully, I see so plainly that there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep.”⁴

³ Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Synopsis, AT 13, 15.

⁴ Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, First Meditation, AT 19.