



On being clear and distinct

Description

Who would not advocate for clarity and distinctness in communication? It's a big deal in American politics at the moment, as pundits wrestle with the president's messages that are anything but. The opposite of clear and distinct is something like obscure and blurry, like being in a cloud, where you can't see properly and forms merge into one another. See an article in the Huffington Post with the apt title: [Trump's confusion machine](#).

On the other hand, the far (extreme) right's brand of populism (to which he subscribes - we think) appears deceptively simple: immigrants are the cause of social problems, be tough with your enemies, global warming is a Chinese hoax, etc, with equally simple solutions: the Muslim ban, build a wall, withdraw from the Climate Accord, etc.



Academic clarity

Leaving aside addled demagogues, even philosophers and cultural commentators have trouble with the idea of clarity. Claims that you are clear and distinct can actually obscure and blur. Respected writers and academics often accuse each other of being unclear. As someone who's writing takes some getting used to, Derrida is amongst them. Here's one occasion where he wrote about clarity in a debate with the language philosopher John Searle.

One shouldn't complicate things for the pleasure of complicating, but one should also never simplify or pretend to be sure of such simplicity where there is none. If things were simple, word would have gotten around, as you say in English. There you have one of my mottos, one quite

appropriate for what I take to be the spirit of the type of "enlightenment" granted our time. Those who wish to simplify at all costs and who raise a hue and cry about obscurity because they do not recognize the unclarity of their good old *Aufklärung* are in my eyes dangerous dogmatists and tedious obscurantists. No less dangerous (for instance, in politics) are those who wish to purify at all costs." (119)

Derrida's reference to the Enlightenment is appropriate. Being *clear and distinct* was one of its hallmarks. In his writings, *The Meditations*, Descartes said "it seems to me that already I can establish as a general rule that all things which I perceive very clearly and very distinctly are true" (113).

In other words, we human beings have an ability, and under the right conditions a tendency, to think through to the truth, taking account of some basic, innate precepts. Descartes felt able to reason from a position of his own skepticism about the world (his doubt) to a resolution of all philosophical problems "eventually. That's *rationalism*. Reason gives us knowledge of the universe. He repeats the phrase "clearly and distinctly" throughout *The Meditations*.

Don't be rash

In his *Discourse on Method*, and in advocating for thoughts presented "clearly and distinctly," Descartes stated that you must avoid "precipitancy and prejudice" (41). (*Precipitancy* means rashness.) Furthermore, to reason *distinctly* is a matter of recognising the individual parts that make up your thoughts. The world as we apprehend it is made up of so many distinct parts.

The philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) took Descartes' precept about being *clear and distinct* to task. He thought that to speak of *clearness* means nothing more than to assert "familiarity with an idea" (125). *Distinctness* means that something must not only be clear at the outset (as an intuition), but that subsequent discussion must not bring to light any obscurity. I think Peirce was here pointing out a tautology. Peirce's counter to Descartes is the *maxim of pragmatism*.

In brief, I take his maxim to mean that a concept has no other scope or meaning than the practical difference it makes to hold to that concept. But to make that proposition clear and distinct, I will turn to Albert Atkin's illuminating book on Peirce "another time."

Bibliography

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Note

- Peirce's pragmatic maxim states: "Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have: then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (135).
- "Distinctivity" is not a word, but I'm sure I heard it mentioned on W1A, the satire about the BBC on a par with "inclusivity," which is a word.
- On the psychological importance of a simple idea see: [Aha moments](#).

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1. Culture

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1. Peirce
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Date Created

October 21, 2017

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