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Different meanings of the word “modus” in the World and Principles of Philosophy

The word “modus” is an integral part of Descartes' ontology. It should be noted that the word “modus” in Descartes' philosophy can refer to things that have different ontological status and consequently carry different ontological implications. The lack of a distinction between the different meanings of the word thus leads to the distortions of Descartes' ontology, which manifest themselves in interchanging the different ontological distinctions: the real, the modal, and of reason. That the word has multiple meanings applies not only to texts from different periods of Descartes' writing but no less to individual texts. This paper will work out the nuances of the word's meaning by contrasting the two terminological differences. On the one hand, it will identify the different uses of the word “modus” in the mature account of Descartes' thought, i.e. in the Principles of Philosophy, which most systematically define the different shades of meaning of the word. He will then compare these shades of meaning with the use of the word “modus” in The World. In the Principles of Philosophy, Descartes distinguishes between modes of things and modes of thought. While he uses the former to denote the accidental actual properties of things, he uses the latter to denote certain characterizations of things that arise not from the nature of these things themselves, but from how we conceive of them. The latter could also be called beings of reason. In addition to the modes of things, he introduces a special kind of actual properties of things, which he calls qualities. These are supposed to make things one way or another. Descartes does not define what is meant by this. In The World, Descartes speaks of both modes and qualities. But while he uses the word “quality” frequently, he uses the word “modus” only once, and he does not indicate that he ascribes several different meanings to it. In the seventh chapter of The World, he juxtaposes it with the so-called beings of reason and real qualities, claiming that he ascribes no reality to any of these, which contradicts the definition of the modes of things found in Principles of Philosophy. The thesis of the essay is that the meaning of the word “modus” in The World is semantically identical to the phrase “modes of thought” in the later Principles of Philosophy, while the meaning of the word “quality” is largely identical to the meaning of the later phrase “modes of things”.