

**** Descartes' Solution to the Problem of Error ****

1. Descartes' solution involves a bifurcation of the faculties involved in the fixation of belief: **Conception** (sensation, imagination, ideation) on the one hand, and **Volition** (desire, aversion, affirmation, denial, doubt) on the other hand.
2. This bifurcation owes its origin to a puzzle found in Aristotle's *De Caelo* (295b32) and popularized in the 14th Century by Jean Buridan. The puzzle, usually referred to as "Buridan's Ass," begins with the presumption:

(P) Choices among alternative goods/truths should always be arbitrated by reason.

The puzzle emerges when we imagine the plight of an ass confronted by two equally attractive bales of hay (A & B) such that there is no reason to prefer A over B or B over A. Given (P), it would seem to follow that the ass should starve in indecision. One way to resolve the problem is to contend that in addition to reason, there must be another INDEPENDENT (and higher-order) faculty of choice: free will.

3. This solution, however, implies that freedom of the will (the faculty whereby choice is effected) is opposed NOT to determinism (the desirable state of choosing the good/true), but to INDECISION.
4. Error, consequently, consists in insufficient determination of the will by objective facts of the matter.
- 5 In adopting a variant of this view, Descartes establishes the following scale:

| | | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Complete Freedom: | We assent to clear and distinct ideas | TOTAL DETERMINATION |
| Privation *ERROR*: | We assent to confused ideas | PARTIAL DETERMINATION |
| Bondage: | We neither assent nor deny | TOTAL INDIFFERENCE (INDECISION) |

6. Error is thus a privation of the highest form of liberty--to be determined by what is most true--being determined instead by what is only obscure and possibly false.