

Part II
Rationalists

Chapter 4

Descartes

4.1 Introduction



Figure 4.1: Descartes

Descartes (1596-1650) :

- High school: La Flèche – best high school in Europe
- Master in law
- Mitigated view on education
- Travels all across Europe to learn from the “great book of the world”
- Settles in Holland, for the tranquility and freedom that this country offers

- Never got married, had a relation with his servant, had one daughter who died at an early age
- Motto: “Bene vixit qui bene latuit”: he has lived well who could escape attention (letter to Mersenne 1634) – extremely cautious: did not publish *The World*, because of Galileo’s troubles with the Church.

Towards his philosophy :

- Dissatisfaction with the Aristotelian philosophy
- Insight that he has to found a new system of philosophy (dreams) – Descartes is radical in his project
- Preference for pragmatic matters (Medicine, Technology and Morals)

Works :

- *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence* 1629
- *The world and the Treatise on man* 1633
- *Discourse on Method* 1637
- *Meditations on First Philosophy* 1640 (Latin) 1647 (French)
- *Principles of Philosophy* 1644
- *The Passions of the Soul* 1649
- Plus an extended correspondence...in particular with Elizabeth

The Meditations, Aim and Method :

Topic and Style – Metaphysics. Autobiographical style and analytical, by contrast to synthetic, order:

- description of an intellectual journey
- the *Principles* are in synthetic order (textbook)
- analytic order is more appropriate for issues of metaphysics: the topic is so hard that a full involvement and a full attention of the mind is needed. Only the thought in the first person warrants this (See Second Objections and Answers).

Avowed Aim and Ultimate Goal :

- According to the Preamble: the aim is to provide a definite proof of the existence of God and the separation of the soul from the body

The proof is supposed to be definite because it has as much (if not more) *evidence and certainty* than mathematical proof: something that any mind can understand and take for himself

- His ultimate goal is different though, and it is not a small project: p. 25:

“here I am once more to treat the same questions about God and the human mind, together with the starting point of the whole of first philosophy”

Letter to Mersenne (1/18/1641):

“I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle”

→ Contrary to the appearances, Descartes is NOT a theologian. His project goes beyond the rational proof of the existence of God and of the distinction between the soul and the body. These two are part of a bigger project, which consists in *giving a definite foundation for the new science*, that is, the scientific knowledge that has developed since the Renaissance. The “First Philosophy” is ultimately supposed to serve as the roots of the entire tree of knowledge (the metaphor is taken from Descartes himself in the Letter-Preface to his *Principles of Philosophy*, another of Descartes’ favorite metaphors: building construction).

Descartes is, in that sense, a **foundationalist**:

Definition 10 – Foundationalism

Foundationalism is the view according to which there exists an absolute foundation of all knowledge. More precisely: all inferential knowledge ultimately rests on self-justified beliefs, on the knowledge of non-inferential propositions.

Obviously, the problem is to explain what kind of justification we have can have that is not an inference, that is, how certain beliefs can be self-justified!

The rational stance – Descartes explains his exclusive commitment to rational reasoning

- Descartes has to defend the project of using rational reasoning for defending the tenets of the Church (by contrast to faith and trust in the authorities)
 - Not for the believer but for the atheists
 - Reason easier and more certain
 - The new method transforms the old arguments into definite demonstrations
- Two requisites for the reader:
 1. to be free of prejudices
 2. to be able to be detached from the senses

That these requisites are rarely fulfilled is an obstacle for the comprehension and acceptance of Descartes' work.

To fulfill these requisites amounts to adhere to Descartes' project of deriving an entire system of philosophy from rational reasoning only, from within the individual thinker's mind and nothing else. The project is to reason from inside.

By contrast, the senses and the prejudices are two *external* origins of thoughts and beliefs. Thoughts which are produced this way are never truly thought through, and the corresponding beliefs are not rationally justified.

- In the Preface (p.24), Descartes repeats the same requisites, but adds one: that his philosophy be considered in order. The notion of order is very important in Descartes' philosophy. Proper order is the result of proper method. Rational reasoning goes hand in hand with proper order.

4.2 The Cartesian Doubt

4.2.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Descartes, *Meditations*, Preamble and Meditation 1

- Study Questions:
 1. What are Descartes' main aims in the *Meditations*?
 2. Explain how Descartes justifies that he rejects as false “*all* the opinions which [he] had formerly accepted” (my emphasis) even if he does not know for sure that these opinions are all false.
 3. To what aim does Descartes decide to reject all his beliefs as false?
 4. Reconstruct the argument about dreaming: which kind of knowledge does it allow Descartes to put into doubt?
 5. Why does Descartes need to appeal to the hypothesis of an evil genius to reject all his opinions and judgments as doubtful?
- Reflexion questions:
 1. Do you think it is a proper method to destroy the entire edifice of knowledge to build it anew just because not every thing is certain?
 2. Do you think it is a reasonable method to reject as false every propositions in which you have a slightest doubt? Why?
- Text analysis – pp. 28-29, from “Let us assume then” to “if I wish to find anything certain.” – TO POST ON BLACKBOARD (plus to send to me as an email attachment) BEFORE THE DAY BEFORE CLASS AT 5pm.
 1. Give an analysis of the passage:
 - a. What is the main point of the passage?
 - b. What are the arguments for it? (give an outline)
 2. Formulate 3 questions for further discussion about the passage – The questions might:
 - a. Clarification request: if you think the author is not clear on one claim he makes: justify your request and propose different ways in which this claim could be interpreted
 - b. Argument request: if you think the text contains an unsupported claim: justify your request and propose a way (or a direction) for a possible argument.
 - c. Objection: if you think that one of the author's claim is false: give an argument for this!

All the other students of the class must read and comment on the text analyses.

4.2.2 The project and the method

General Project: build a new foundation for science :

Why would we want to do this? because none of what we take for true is truly rationally justified:

- it comes from our youth, in which sensations are overwhelming and our power of judgment is poor;
- such history of learning is contingent: it does not correspond neither to rational foundation, nor to a rational order (we did not learn what we know by rational deduction).
- SO: we possess body of beliefs, which are neither fully founded, nor properly ordered. Hence, all these beliefs are nothing but prejudices.
- By contrast, the true system of knowledge is both ordered and founded – rationally unified. True foundation and proper order are the true warrants of certainty.

—→ *It is important to remember that the ultimate goal of the Cartesian Doubt is not destructive, quite the opposite: it is to found the new science.*

Method: Methodological and hyperbolic doubt : The Cartesian doubt is:

- *universal*: rejects all opinions without exception;
- *hyperbolic* – deliberately excessive: any slightly doubtful proposition is considered false – this is a choice, not a confession of ignorance;
- *radical*: attacks the roots of knowledge, so that the entire edifice collapses.

longrightarrow Is this a reasonable procedure? Does not Descartes throw the baby with the bath water? It seems that, since he rejects some true knowledge as false, he is mistaken and loses precious knowledge. Analogy with a bag of apples, in which some are contaminated (Reply to the Seventh Objection AT 481. The crucial point is that the Cartesian doubt is methodological

Another question: is it possible to question everything?

Descartes uses doubt as a means : his doubt will not have any consequences as far as the normal, everyday life is concerned. He does not cast any true doubt either on his needs to eat or on the institutions. The Cartesian doubt is part of an intellectual procedure, not to be applied practically. Thus the requisite is to be free from the outside world necessities

- maturity of mind
- mind in peace (no passion)
- no care
- leisure

See also the before last paragraph: Descartes admits

- that it is difficult to doubt all your beliefs
- that there is much more reasons to believe these opinions than not to believe them

But again, this is not the point: the point is to *use* doubt as a method to found true knowledge.

4.2.3 The senses

The foundation of all our current knowledge are the senses – this is a scholastic thesis, which Descartes implicitly attacks here: their truthfulness is thus what is to be rejected first.

- Senses are deceiving: right, but Descartes does not consider this easy and traditional argument as sufficient – it would seem that we can give a list a criteria for having a good perception of something (is that true? what about optical illusions?),

- Madness and Sleep: we could think that appealing to madness is not convincing, but we, sane people, have experienced a kind of “sane madness”: dreams

Now Descartes’ point is that *there is no sufficient criterion to distinguish dream from reality.*

- Here again, even the slightest doubt is hyperbolized: “Now let we assume that” our representations of the bodies in the external world, as well as my own body, are illusions.
- Note that here again, the doubt is methodological: it is an *assumption*

4.2.4 Mathematical Notions and The Metaphysical Doubt

The most fundamental constituents: Extension and Duration – What is left when I take out of my body of knowledge the existence of the external bodies and my own body?

- Representations are made of something

It might seem that the point is that representations being representations of something, there must be something out there for us to be able to have representations at all.

But *this is not* the point here. Descartes is not saying that because there are representations, there must be something in the world which corresponds to our representations. Instead, he remains within the realm of representation.

- Argument by analogy: painting

- painters cannot invent colors // we cannot invent the corporeal nature

Any imaginary representation, even the most inventive there is, represent some bodies.

- The corporeal nature: extension in time; extension has some figure and some magnitude – Beware! This is brand new and anti-Aristotle. Extension, duration, figure and number are going to be the fundamental attributes of bodies in the Second Meditation. This correspond to the *mechanistic view of the world*: the world is not made of particular substances characterized by

specific qualities and function as in Aristotle's view. Rather, the world is extension and duration, both characterized with quantities.

- THUS: the point is that Representations themselves are *made of* something: However crazy is your dream, you still dream of extended stuff in space and time
- SO: There are some notions that are more difficult to doubt than the composed bodies: they correspond to *mathematical notions*, by contrast with natural sciences.

Can we doubt mathematical notions? – The Deceiving God

- How do I know that God does not deceive me? Again, note that Descartes does not pretend to show that God is deceitful, but only that it is a workable hypothesis in the context of the hyperbolic doubt, by which we commit to take as simply false anything of which we are not completely certain.

Descartes applies the same method here as before: God (just as the senses) deceives me sometimes: therefore I assume He/She is deceiving me all the time

Argument against objection of benevolence: *reductio ad absurdum*

- The case of the atheist:
 - The atheist takes that the origin of the world (and us) is not a God, but rather something less powerful
 - Assumption: the less powerful the “creator”, the less perfect the “creation”
 - So: the atheist has even more reasons to doubt that he or she can reach *any* kind of knowledge.

→ *Is this argument valid? Is it sound?*

Conclusion – nothing is indubitable in my body of knowledge. The entire building is down.

4.2.5 Conclusion: Will and Attention against Habits

The absolute power of doubt is the absolute power of the faculty of judgment, which is also the absolute *power of the will*.

It is certainly a powerful power, but which is always threatened by the *habit* we have to assent to our long cherished opinion. *The full attention* of our mind is required to use our reason. Habits are one of the worse enemy of knowledge according to Descartes – what we do with habits we do without thinking about it.

Even in the hypothesis that there is an evil genius who deceives me in every matter, I possess the liberty to reject whatever he sends to me as true.