

Part II
Rationalists

Chapter 4

Descartes

4.1 Introduction



Figure 4.1: Descartes

Descartes (1596-1650)

- High school: La Flèche – best highschool in Europe
- Doctorate 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

Towards his philosophy

- Suspicion over the philosophers of his times
- Preference for pragmatic matters (Medicine and technology)
- Insight that he has to found a new system of philosophy – Descartes is radical in his project
- Motto: “Bene vixit qui bene latuit”: he has lived well who could escape attention (letter to Mersenne 1634) – extremely cautious: see the story of the publication of *Le Monde*, because of Galileo’s troubles with the Church.

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

- 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).

- 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, not a small project: “all the errors and false opinions which have ever existed regarding these two questions will soon be effaced from the minds of men”
- 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 root of the entire tree of knowledge (the metaphor is taken from Descartes himself in the Letter-Preface to his *Principles of Philosophy*).

Descartes is, in that sense, a **foundationalist**, that is to say, he maintains that all inferential knowledge ultimately rests on 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.

- 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)
- 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. Thought produced that way were never truly thought through, and the corresponding beliefs are not rationally justified.

In the Preface (p.86), 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. 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 they are all false.
 2. To what aim does Descartes decide to reject all his beliefs as false?
 3. What is his argument for not trusting his senses?
 4. Why does Descartes need to appeal to the hypothesis of an evil genius to reject all his opinions 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?

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.

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 infallible means 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

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

- Argument by analogy: painting
 - painters cannot invent colors
 - we cannot invent the corporeal nature, that is to say, extension in time; extension has some figure and some magnitude – any imaginary representation, even the most inventive there is, represent some figures and magnitude in time.
- THUS: the point is that Representation 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.
- extension, duration, figure and number are going to be the fundamental attributes of bodies in the Second Meditation.

4.2.5 Metaphysical Doubt

Can we doubt mathematical notions?

- Evil genius:

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

- The case of the atheist: the atheist has no reason to believe he can reach the truth at all.

Is this true?

4.2.6 Conclusion

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.