

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Discourse on Method

René Descartes. (1596-1650)

Discourse on Method (1637)

Historical change

With Rene Descartes, a French philosopher, mathematician, and moralist, we move away from the full-bloom of the Renaissance—with its vibrant reassertion of the Greek and Roman classics, its devotion to historical precedent, and its warm embrace of the new—and into a period in which math and cosmic sciences are beginning to redesign our sense of the world, in fact to adumbrate the world view predominant in many cultures of our world today.

The text before us.

It is worth thinking about the full title of the text before us: 'Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting one's Reason and of seeking Truth in the sciences.' The writer was particularly sensitive to the claims of skepticism, and for this reason he laid emphasis on the correct access to works of thought. It is hard not to view him as the harbinger of a new cultural world, and in the very broad sense, yes, Descartes seems to belong to a new era, as sharply distinct from Montaigne as Moliere (Descartes' contemporary) was from the author of the *Heptameron*, Marguerite de Navarre. Yet at the same time, Descartes was particularly picky about the conditions demanded by truth statements, and about the folly of giving its head to ignorance. Descartes was a stickler for style and clarity.

General structure and leading tenets of the *Discourse on Method*

The Discourse on Method addresses six issues, which Descartes characterizes:

Cognitive care

Various scientific issues, the first rule for tangling with which is *common sense*—an expression unapologetically employed for *intelligence* in Descartes' age. Descartes was extremely disappointed by his own education, which he thought deficient in rigor and insufficiently skeptical—that is too ready to accept the presented world without questioning it. (In this epistemological skepticism. Descartes reminds us constantly of Montaigne, with his 'que sais-je,?' 'what do I know,?' and his own semi systematic querying of all alleged but untested truths. Descartes is a new version of the skeptic so deeply embedded in Montaigne.

Principal rules of proceeding in thought

Descartes carried out his seminal thinking inside a large heated room, in a building in Germany— where he had gone to study. (And also to observe the fall out of the religious wars, which were playing out as savagely in Germany as in France.) The truth came to Descartes in an angelic shower, three overwhelming dreams offering insights into the whole thought-scope ultimately available to him. With the expression of that purity of thought commitment, Descartes will come to realize that he must think for himself, construct one set of ideas in seamless sequence with another, until he has constructed homogeneous structures of thought, in the fashion that would be followed by a savvy architect. (There is to be no place in Descartes' thought for scattered design or digression, just as, we shall discover later, there is no room for erroneous measurement or ignorant guesswork.) His skepticism is a guard rail against wandering thoughts. Moral strategies for carrying out the methods of skepticism.

Descartes' radical skepticism, the thought project he holds out before himself, as his revolutionary experiment in philosophizing, was too experimental—too nearly involved a bracketing of all effectual thought in the real world—so that he needed simply to live it as an experiment. (Who can live the thought practices he is simultaneously employing as his contribution to thinking?) An experiment like skepticism is an experiment. Compromises with day by day existence were necessary, even for a skeptic, and from the range of necessities grew Descartes's practices for moral existence. It was necessary to accept the practices and assumptions of the society in which you found yourself placed. You could not carry your skepticism beyond that point. You needed to conform. All manner of extremism was excluded by Descartes, as was any questioning of the overall presence of God. Resolute adherence to these necessary conditions was a requirement of the skillfully managed life. One's own thoughts were the battlefield in which one should struggle to control and take responsibility; don't try vainly to control fortune, but control yourself. All these personal measures will guarantee freedom for the practices in pure thought which are the philosopher's unique engagement with the truth.

Radical skepticism turned on its head

Unwilling to accept radical skepticism—his philosophic adventure—without putting it to its own test, Descartes asks whether the practice of systematic doubt is itself to be accepted as firmly based. His first conclusion, in this self-reflexive inquiry, is that even to doubt assumes a person behind the doubting, *je pense, donc je suis*. ('I think therefore I am' takes its place as the banner assertion of Descartes' work, and as a turning point in the development of modern philosophy.) The presence of the knowing I, even in the process of doubting the validity of his own knowledge, is the ultimate discovery of the limits of doubt. Not only the self, but the reason by which self-assesses the knowable, is also beyond doubt; it is a *sine qua non* of the doubting process. The introduction of reason, as an irremovable element in the doubting process, introduces the presence of God, as a third unquestionable factor supporting the doubting process—God is not to be doubted as the foundation supporting doubt; a point shored up, by Descartes, with recourse to the three classical proofs of the existence of God. The onto-Logical proof of the existence of God—St. Anselm's argument for the power greater than all—serves as the capstone for the proofs existence gives of the most indubitable form of construction in the mind.

Cosmology

Physics is the study of the way God assembled the parts of the universe to follow a coherent pattern of laws. (By retracing the origins of these laws, we can gradually, and systematically, think our way back into the making mind God is. In carrying out that return in thought we put ourselves inside God's plan, the order which regulates the pace, function, and durability of the bodily organs—particularly with reference to the circulation of the blood and the regularities which make the heart a central support of our mortal existence. It is to be remembered that in thinking science Descartes is observing phenomena, doing science as we intend it today, but at the same time maintaining the integrity of his thought experiment, the absolute skepticism which compels his entire cognitive construction to stand the test of being denied or radically questioned.

Truth and the senses

Descartes is a scrupulous thinker, trusting God and his world, including the discoveries of the senses. (The mediaeval axiom, *nothing is in the mind which was not previously in the senses*, formulates Descartes' conviction that God's created world, as it lays itself out before us, is trustworthy. (Trustworthy, though demanding a skeptical access.) At the same time, as we note from the entire thrust of the *Discourse*, a skeptical lens must test convictions. Idea and sense may align with one another, but only a kind of suspension of disbelief will give the go ahead to the truth of nature. In the interests of guaranteeing the trustworthiness of that truth, doubt must have provided its dour vetting. It will be evident, from this widely spread view, taken from more than one location in the *Discourse*, that truth not only expresses itself in the material of the senses, in what we learn from our eyes, ears, touch, but that the truth belongs to God's revelation and not to the creative mind in man.

The misleading charms of imagination

As a mathematician, who will join algebra to geometry in his invention of what we call analytic geometry, Descartes is above all interested in the truth, and in God as the creator of it. Imagination, which we will find a dominant presence in humane thinking later in the European centuries would continue—say in Romanticism-- to consummate the critical thought of the Enlightenment, and to provide a key driver of modern philosophic and aesthetic thought. (The highest priority for transformative imagination would be the poetry of Wordsworth, who transformed nature into a presence that 'hath ample power to chasten and subdue.')

In the seventeenth century thinking of Descartes, however, and in contemporaries like Locke and Hobbes, imagination would continue to be viewed as little other than 'decaying sense.')

In Descartes' thinking, imagination is deviant thought, in no way furthering the search for truth or inspiration.

Opening the seventeenth century

The *Discourse on Method* cannot fail to remind us of Montaigne, who is as concerned as Descartes with methods of correct thinking, moves for the assurance of clarity, and the issue of the importance of human creativity as a marker of change. Montaigne writes about imagination, and does so warily, referring us back to the Roman concept of *imago* (visual image) and *imaginatio*, which is not much more transformative than we might understand by 'depiction.' Yet as we track Montaigne's thought we see how deftly he marks the transitions of his observations—for example in the wry and often piquant descriptions of indigenous people's customs, or in the adroitness with which he characterizes the irrationalities of sorrow or the dangers of counterfeiting. Fanciful Montaigne is not, but extremely alert to the potential of the world to almost be a fanciful replica of itself. One might say that the imaginations of More, Erasmus, or Campanella wear the same clothes as those of Montaigne, opening spaces through which the world can be seen transformed, into a new light of itself—though into a display of God's truth, as we find it shining in Descartes.

Opening the seventeenth century

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Study guide

Descartes attributes ultimate importance to truth and clarity of thought which discerns truth. 'Thought' is what he calls the search for truth, and in pursuing 'thought' he makes a crucial discovery for his and for western 'philosophy.' He formulates his discovery in this way, 'je pense donc je suis, 'I think therefore I am,' which founds existence on thought. The ontological centrality given to thought, here, guarantees to being an intelligible character. The implications of Descartes' point would fly in the face of a materialism, like that of Descartes' contemporary, Thomas Hobbes, which would find matter the fundamental stuff of the universe. What is your own position, in this radical ontological issue?

It is tempting to dwell on Descartes' concern with clear and distinct ideas. Greek and Latin, as inflected and on the whole self-consistent languages, with a strong pull on the sense of shaping and organization, were the stuff of the educational growth of the majority of Renaissance creators; and thus, of course, of the mind and thought sets of the majority of Western European writers far into the nineteenth century. (What do you think was the turning point that broke the continuity of the power of the classical languages

in education?) How did the classical tradition entrench itself in the western European systems of education, not to mention into literary work materials?

Like Montaigne, Descartes proclaims himself a skeptic. However there is a sharp difference between the skepticism of the two men. Montaigne recognizes an inherent occludedness to problems presented by daily life. The moral, social, and religious dilemmas, which confront the individual as he examines himself, are not inherently resolvable. Montaigne behaves as though he is inherently unable to penetrate all these perplexities. Descartes, however, begins by promoting the supreme importance of 'idées claires et distinctes,' 'clear and distinct ideas.' He believes intensely in the order of thoughts, and in drawing conclusions strictly from their orderliness, and the pathway by which they can be tracked back to God, the author of the chain of *intelligibilia*. From the orderly processes of investigation, which this world picture assumes, one can indeed uncover and learn to understand the truth, though to do so is only as possible as the individual's capacity for clarity of thought. Do you feel that Descartes' is what we would today call the basis of scientific thinking? If so, what kind of thinking would you call Montaigne's?