

“For it is not enough to possess a good mind”: Descartes’ Method of Reason and the Influence of  
the Church in His Life

A Term Paper

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“For it is not enough to possess a good mind”: Descartes’ Method of Reason and the Influence of  
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René Descartes was revolutionary during the time that he lived for developing a method pertaining to the acquisition of knowledge. Unlike other earlier philosophers, such as Thomas Aquinas, Descartes was not a theologian. His primary focus was on philosophy and understanding. Through the use of simple reason, Descartes proved several ideas for which the Church did not necessarily have a definitive explanation for, such as the existence of God. He focused on the idea of the discovery of truth through reason, as opposed to belief in something because the acting authority dictates it. A major aspect of using such reason, along with intuition and deduction, is skepticism. Descartes believed that everything should be doubted, a practice known as Cartesian doubt. His reason for such doubt was a response to the environment in which he lived.

The period in which Descartes lived is branded by the Church’s heavy involvement in almost all aspects of life. Although he subscribed to the Catholic faith, Descartes firmly believed that the quest for knowledge and understanding should be carried on without any interference from the Church. One has only to look at the religious persecution that occurred during this time to understand why Descartes thought this. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were characterized by the Church’s unforgiving nature when it came to conflicting views and beliefs. Galileo Galilei, another important scholar at this time, faced serious repercussions for his discoveries. Descartes ultimately relocated to Holland in order to conduct his studies outside of Church influence. His ideas during this period have led to his being considered the father of

modern philosophy.

Descartes believed that all truth could be found through the process of reason. The foundation for this idea was his belief that “good sense is the most evenly distributed thing in the world” and that “the power of judging correctly and of distinguishing the true from the false (which is what is properly called good sense or reason) is naturally equal in all men.”<sup>1</sup> He thought that due to man’s capacity for reason, each person had an equal opportunity to gain understanding. He constructed his method as one that any man might conduct. One must simply know how to correctly apply reason to all matters to achieve the truth, which was where his *Discourse* came into effect.

In Descartes’ *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One’s Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, Descartes stated, “I have fashioned a method by which, it seems to me, I have a way of adding progressively to my knowledge and raising it by degrees to the highest point that the limitations of my mind and the short span of life allotted to me will permit it to reach.”<sup>2</sup> However, he does make one clarification. The method that he discovered was not meant as a guide to instruct other men how to follow the path of reason. He used this method as a way to show the path he followed in conducting his own.<sup>3</sup> His *Discourse* was not meant as an intentional guide, but more as a collection of his thoughts. He wanted to discover the truth for his own betterment. The creation of a guide for others to follow was an unintended byproduct that was successful nonetheless.

Descartes’ motive for seeking truth through reason was explained when he stated, “I found myself bogged down in so many doubts and errors, that it seemed to me that having set out to become learned, I had derived no benefit from my studies, other than that of progressively revealing to myself how ignorant I was.”<sup>4</sup> Although he had been afforded a top education that

was supervised by the Church, as most education was, he still thought that he was not learning enough. The study of texts was not enough for him – he wanted to get out into the real world amidst society and its many problems. Descartes believed that he “could discover much more truth from the reasoning that we all make about things that affect us and that will soon cause us harm if we misjudge them, than from the speculations in which a scholar engages in the privacy of his study.”<sup>5</sup> He believed that he would benefit most from applying his reason to real-life situations. Simply creating hypothetical situations on his own would not do. Thus, the *Discourse* was born.

Descartes created his method in order to combat his own feeling of ignorance. However, according to Harold H. Joachim, when studying his, work “we have next to consider why a method is necessary for investigating the truth of things.”<sup>6</sup> The acquisition of knowledge should not be an aimless pursuit. In order to garner the full effect of one’s studies, one must follow a method, and “by a method he means certain and easy rules such that anyone who precisely obeys them will never take for truth anything that is false, and will advance step by step, in the correct order without waste of mental energy, to the knowledge of everything that he is capable of knowing.”<sup>7</sup> Reason was the method that Descartes deemed appropriate for his studies because it was a method that was easily applicable and simple to conduct and follow.

The purpose of Descartes’ focus on reason as his method was that he believed that “reason does not dictate to us that what we see or imagine in this way is true. But it does certainly dictate that all our ideas or notions must have some foundation in truth.”<sup>8</sup> However, Descartes had to first prove that reason was a valid method to use. He subjected his own reason to doubt in order to do so. Despite the fact that he observed his method of reason with doubt, he was able to prove that reason is usable because “it *is* possible to use reason to overcome a doubt

about the reliability of reason itself.”<sup>9</sup> A person might ask why Descartes would subject his reason to doubt if it was the method he intentionally chose to employ. One explanation is that he had to subject reason to doubt as a part of his Cartesian method, in which he doubted almost everything. Also, Descartes doubted his reason because of his own inferiority. If God was an all-powerful being, he could effortlessly give man defective reasoning.<sup>10</sup> Descartes therefore provided an explanation for the existence of God. He believed that God was an omnipotent and all-knowing being. However, he also firmly believed that God was inherently good. Thus, God is “a perfect being who, while still fully *able* to deceive his creatures would not *wish* to do so.”<sup>11</sup> God would not give man faulty reason, so Descartes’ reason for doubting reason was void. His method of reasoning was sound.

Descartes chose reason as his method of seeking the truth, but he still needed rules by which to employ his reason. Rules were necessary because “a set of rules is of great utility, even though these rules presuppose the mind’s natural capacities and operations.”<sup>12</sup> If rules were to go against the mind’s natural operations, then “what are these fundamental operations of the mind?”<sup>13</sup> These operations are instinctual, and “they are two, namely, intuition and deduction; ‘two mental operations by which we are able, entirely without fear of illusion, to arrive at the knowledge of things.’”<sup>14</sup> What is important to fully employing intuition and deduction is to know that one cannot develop these operations. They are inherent. Joachim states, “Not only are *intuitus* and *deductio* the sole means of knowing—this they must be in order to be *vis cognoscens* at all—but we could not *learn* to use them, because we should have to use them in order to learn, and unless we both possess and use them from the first we could get nowhere.”<sup>15</sup> Through his Cartesian method, Descartes submitted all of his sense experiences to doubt. Intuition and deduction were necessary to be able to reason and determine the truth.

In order to understand Descartes' reason for creating his method of seeking truth, it is important to consider the time period in which he lived. Descartes lived during the Age of Discovery, but Europe was also just coming from the Middle Ages. During the Middle Ages, theology was the most revered of the sciences.<sup>16</sup> However, Descartes was not considered a theologian. In fact, he tried to avoid discussion of matters pertaining strictly to theology altogether.<sup>17</sup> Descartes' reason for avoiding theology was explained when he stated, "I revered our theology and hoped as much as anyone to reach heaven; but having learnt as an established fact that the path to heaven is as open to the most ignorant as to the most learned, and that the revealed truths that lead there are quite beyond our understanding, I would not have dared submit them to my own puny reasoning powers."<sup>18</sup> So how was this study related to what was happening during this Church-controlled period? Descartes avoided theology, but his beliefs regarding philosophy still could have gotten him in trouble with the Church, which was known for being volatile at this time.

Descartes was not against the Church. He actually "professed himself a Catholic and died piously in that faith."<sup>19</sup> Even then, his study was hindered by the actions of the Catholic Church at this time, mainly by the Inquisition. The Inquisition was a centuries-long period in which the Catholic Church reigned supreme in people's lives. It was initially founded as a way to combat heresy within the Catholic Church. The practice quickly blew out of proportion until it made people terrified to continue their lives the way they had been prior to the Inquisition's founding. To understand the extent to which persecution occurred, it is important to know that "no husband was to be spared on account of his wife, or wife on account of her husband, or parent in consideration of helpless children; neither sickness nor old age should claim mitigation. Every one who did not come forward within the time of grace and confess and denounce his

acquaintances was liable to this penance, which in all cases was to be lifelong.”<sup>20</sup> Repercussions for supposed heresy included execution and being burned alive. People were so terrified of being punished for heresy, even if they were innocent, that they began to turn on each other. Family members were forced to betray one another in order to stay alive and unpunished. Still, innocents were often tortured and killed, and those whose beliefs differed from the Church’s were persecuted.

Galileo Galilei was another important scholar who lived during the same time period as Descartes. Galileo was directly affected by the Inquisition. Due to his study, Galileo was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1633 by the Roman Inquisition.<sup>21</sup> Galileo was the one directly punished by the Church, but his imprisonment influenced Descartes’ study at this time. In fact, “the publication of his *Traité du monde* was suspended because of the condemnation of Galileo, and the work was not published until 1677,” well after Descartes’ death in 1650.<sup>22</sup> Galileo’s case is only one example of the controversy that existed between the Church and scholars at this time. In fact, his “condemnation was only a high point in a much broader controversy concerning the relation between religion and science or, more specifically, between Catholicism and modern science.”<sup>23</sup> The Church was interested only in being the main authority at this time. Any scientific revelations that went against the Church’s teachings, no matter whether they were true, were not tolerated.

Although his focus was on philosophy and not science, Descartes still had to consider the prospect of his work’s angering the temperamental Catholic Church at this time. In 1628, he relocated to Holland, where he, for the most part, remained until his death in 1650.<sup>24</sup> His move to Holland was an attempt to escape the reaches of the nearly all-powerful Church. Due to delays caused by the social environment at the time, a portion of his works was published only

posthumously. Translations of his writings were later released with objections, which were unsurprisingly raised by Church officials.<sup>25</sup> Descartes' desire to increase his own knowledge and understanding in philosophy was what set into motion his creation of the method. The Catholic Church's actions, primarily those of the Inquisition, most likely strengthened his desire to discover the truth.

Descartes' method, although groundbreaking during his time, seems more like common knowledge by today's standards. People do not have to be told to use their reason to deduce the truth because they do it on their own through critical and logical thinking, even if they are unaware that this is what they are doing. Advances in modern science have made what is considered to be the truth a much more definite answer. Refuting scientific data today is nearly impossible with the amenities afforded to scientists and scholars. In the time frame during which Descartes lived, scientific theories were not as easily proven. Science then was simply not up to par with today's capabilities. Thus, Descartes had a need to subject all his prior opinions based on his senses and what he had learned in school to doubt, whereas most people today can trust that what they are being taught in school is the truth.

Descartes' desire to pursue philosophy and understanding outside of Church influence pertained more to what was happening during his time. In most developed countries today, if people do not wish to receive an education that is administered by the Church, they do not have to because other options exist. As a former attendee of a Catholic education institution, I am familiar with Catholic administration's tendency toward one-sidedness. In classes such as Church History, we were often provided with a biased view of historical events. Events that shed an unfavorable light on the Church were avoided altogether. In other religion classes, incorrect information was given about the practices of other faiths. What religion teachers perceived as the

truth about other faiths was taught despite their having no firsthand experience with those faiths. When Descartes lived, such an education was the only option. However, public schools that are mandated to teach only what is true and avoid theological matters altogether are an option for today's citizens.

What is so fascinating about Descartes' method is that he never intended for it to be a guide for others. The *Discourse* is Descartes' attempt to collect his thoughts and write down the path he followed for his own personal reference. As Copleston states, "Descartes' philosophy was an intensely personal enterprise."<sup>26</sup> He sought only to rectify what he perceived as his own ignorance. Aristotle taught his ethics to others in an attempt to better society. Descartes did not create his method with the intention of teaching others for the sake of society. As selfish as it may sound, he was trying only to better himself. He did so by increasing his own knowledge and testing everything that he had been taught up until the point at which he decided to conduct his method. Although tedious, it was an extremely thorough method.

Despite the fact that the *Discourse* was for Descartes' own personal use, it still reads like an instruction manual, which likely contributes to his success as a philosopher and the success of his method. As he stated, every man has reason and good sense. He never thought that he was better than others, and he even stated, "I have never presumed my mind to be any way more accomplished than that of the common man."<sup>27</sup> Though instructional, the *Discourse* does not take on the tone of a teacher speaking down to a student. The beauty in his method is that Descartes was instructing himself. He knew what his mind was capable of, and he acted accordingly. The method worked because he was not overtly trying to teach anyone. In trying to instruct himself and gather his own thoughts, Descartes produced a method that is easy for any man to follow.

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<sup>1</sup> René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2006), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Descartes, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Descartes, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Descartes, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Descartes, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Harold H. Joachim, *Descartes's Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1979), 62.

<sup>7</sup> Joachim, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Descartes, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Georges Dicker, *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2013) 170.

<sup>10</sup> Dicker, 172.

<sup>11</sup> Dicker, 174.

<sup>12</sup> Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1985), 73.

<sup>13</sup> Copleston, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Copleston, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Joachim, 63.

<sup>16</sup> Copleston, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Copleston, 66.

<sup>18</sup> Descartes, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Copleston, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1887), 485.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Segre, "Light on the Galileo Case?" *Isis* 88, no. 3 (September 1997): 484.

<sup>22</sup> Copleston, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Segre, 485.

<sup>24</sup> Copleston, 64.

<sup>25</sup> Copleston, 65.

<sup>26</sup> Copleston, 152.

<sup>27</sup> Descartes, 5.

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