

## René Descartes

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I received the book as a Christmas present. It must have been in 1968 and given to me by my father, who was aware of my philosophical interests. I have no recollection that I read it back then and it has thus traveled with me back and forth across oceans for more than half a century untouched. But now on the eve of getting to lecture on a couple of French philosophers, I recalled the thin volume unobtrusively residing in my library.

The 'je pense, donc je suis' I had been told by my father many years before, and in the spring of 1965 I read the account of 'Descartes' in E.T.Bells 'Men of Mathematics' in a Swedish translation, and as a consequence identified him as a mathematician. Still in the history of ideas, it is foremost as a philosopher he is remembered. He is considered as the first modern philosopher, who made a break with classical scholastic philosophy based on Aristotle and instead introduced a mechanical world view. The real significance of this was that it allowed a systematic exploration, of what later has been seen as the scientific project. As a scientist he was mostly mistaken but his approaches, unlike those of the scholastic philosophers, could be, in the terminology of Popper falsified, thus challenged, verified (if only provisionally) or refuted, and as a consequence modified. Given his emphasis on method it provided a way for systematic exploration, while the discussions of the scholastics only lead to quibbles over meaningless questions. Why does a stone fall to the ground? Rather than how does a stone fall to the ground. The Aristotelian explanations were teleological in nature, they postulated ultimate goals for which it was in the nature of objects to pursue; while in a Cartesian world view one looked for immediate mechanical causes, not unlike that in a logical argument. In fact a logical-deductive argument has much in common with a mechanical contraption, such as a clock-work. Still Descartes was a rationalist, meaning that true knowledge can only be apprehended by the reasoning power, i.e. by disciplined thinking. One has a moral obligation not to accept the teaching of authorities, and only to accept such things that can be comprehended by the intellect. It was this moral obligation that made him embark on a journey of unmitigated doubt in order to get to the rock-bottom of belief, namely his oft quoted words (originally written in colloquial French). How can you doubt your own thinking, the very doubt itself is a sign of thinking, who thinks? Logical pedants point out that the very word 'donc' suggests that it is in the nature of a syllogism, and hidden is the assumption that everything that thinks exists. However, how can you attain such knowledge, and is it really knowledge as apart from a convention? We never encounter 'thinking' in general as intimately as we confront our own thinking. The insight is only presented in the form of a conclusion, this is not the way it really emerges in the thinking itself. The point is that the meaning of the simple statement is clear to any thinking person regardless of formal education. Now from this indubitable fact he then tries in a strict logical way to build up a whole ontology, starting with the existence of an all-powerful and perfect God, who by virtue of his being perfect cannot but be good. This extended exercise is surely conducted in a scholastic way, and

is but an embarrassment, be it a charming such, to modern man.

Another embarrassment is so called Cartesian dualism, psychologically very seductive, but intellectually a dead-end. Descartes makes a distinction between a material world, consisting of objects extended in time and space, i.e. objects in motion, and an immaterial world distinct from it. This complies very well with the way most of us view the world, making a distinction between objects having consciousness, i.e. possessing a 'soul' and those which do not. Descartes held that plants and animals were nothing but machines, lacking souls (something we nowadays take exception to, meaning in the sense of consciousness) and only differing from man-made machines, that the parts involved were too small to be sensed by our limited organs. The great intellectual problem such a philosophy presents is how to explain the interaction between the soul and matter. As an ordinary individual you can ignore it as being beyond human inquiry, but as a philosopher you have an obligation to address it. Descartes tried, by pointing at a specific anatomical link - the pineal gland, but his attempts are hardly convincing.

Descartes emphasized methods of inquiry, and although making some experiments himself, he basically trusted his common sense, of which he was inordinately proud, after all it was called upon to do very great things, namely to explain the world on purely mechanical principles. He did write on many things, optics, anatomy, the movements of the heavenly bodies, and some of it was acceptable, such as his first clear formulations of the laws of inertia, later to be given the ultimate formulation by Newton, while much of it did not survive sustained inspection. His theory of whirls was up for ridicule by Newton and its many consequences shown to be false by experiments. Also his explanation of the circulation of the blood was inferior to that presented by Harvey<sup>1</sup>. He showed a lively and engaging imagination when it came to making up hypotheses and explanations, but they were too often marred by being the fruits of unrestrained speculation degenerating into mere fantasy. Probably his most enduring scientific influence, as opposed to philosophical, is to be found in mathematics, wedding geometry to algebra, and thus reducing geometrical reasoning to algebraic manipulation (which is rather mechanical in nature).

Descartes was born into petty nobility holding important offices, such as his father and great-grandfather. He was a sickly child given to late rising and cuddled at a Jesuit institute of learning due to his obvious talents. He was caught up in the excitement of Galileo's discovery with the telescope and an ardent proponent of the Copernican heliocentric theory, but as he pushed its consequences far more than Copernicus had done or could have foreseen, he became in due time very careful as to public acknowledgment and suppressed much of his initial writing on the subject. He enrolled in a French regiment stationed in the Netherlands and took part in the early engagements of the Thirty Years War and recalled from that time (November 10, 1619) an intellectual revelation, the specific nature of which he never revealed. After his military service he settled in the Netherlands, where he had a friend Isaac Beeckman, whose existence and extensive diary was only discovered in 1905<sup>2</sup> and which revealed the influence he had had on him. The friendship

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<sup>1</sup> Descartes did not think of the heart as a muscle, but an organ who drove the circulation by its heat

<sup>2</sup> By the Dutch mathematics teacher and historian of 17th century science Cornelis de Waard (1879-1963). The Journals of Beeckman which comprised the years 1604-34 and were published in 4 volumes between 1939 and 1953.

came to an end, as Descartes was very jealous of any claims that cast his own originality as a thinker into doubt. In Beeckman, a student of Stevin and Snellius, one discovers many of the ideas of Descartes, in particular he had correct formulations of the law of inertia, and developed an atomistic theory which greatly influence Descartes. At his time he was considered one of the most educated individuals around, but posterity is not sentimental.

Descartes ideas, his cartesianism, met with strong opposition, especially religious, which he tried to circumvent. His teachings were prohibited in many Dutch universities, in spite of their reputation for liberalism, but nevertheless they spread quickly, and his reputation reached the Swedish court and he was invited to Sweden by its Queen to teach her. It was a fateful journey which ended in his death the next year. Of the court's interest in his philosophy he had only scorn.

There is little on gossip in this book but we learn that Descartes were for many years cohabiting with a Dutch maid and had a daughter, who unfortunately died at the age of five. There is much that is known about his life, although he was born more than four hundred years ago. A significant part of his correspondence is preserved not only to people like Mersenne but also to the princess Elisabeth von der Pfalz (1618-1680) <sup>3</sup> who lived in Holland and eventually retreated to a convent, and who also corresponded to a host of other intellectuals. She in particular questioned Descartes as to the interaction between the soul and the body, never being satisfied with his attempts at answering, probably because he did not have any explanation. Finally we learn that several thousand books on Descartes had been published by the 1960's and since then many more.

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<sup>3</sup> born to the Winter King Fredrick V and his wife Elisabeth Stuart, daughter of James I, thus niece to Charles I, and having twelve siblings. She was set to marry the new king of Poland after Zygmunt III Vasa had died. But she being Lutheran and he Catholic prevented it; just as the religious issue also prevented the father to hold on to the Swedish throne, of which he was the legitimate successor after his own father. Thus another, if somewhat long-winded connection between Descartes and the Swedish Monarchy.