

**The Cartesian Methodic Doubt:  
A Path Toward Truth  
(Making Sense Of Discourse  
On The Method And  
Meditations In  
Philosophy In  
The Present)**

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**Abstract**

This study expounds on the fundamental insights of the Cartesian methodic doubt in the hope of redressing the epistemological scandals of the present, i.e., the explosion of the so-called fake-news and revisionism. René Descartes did not earn the title “Father of Modernity” for nothing. And this recognition is dignified explicitly in his two important works, namely, Discourse on the Method and Meditations in Philosophy. It is in these works where Descartes laid down his attempt at refining knowledge in the sciences. Here, Descartes squared it off with the skeptics who he claimed to bluff a lot and argue without nuanced justification. The skeptics, according to Descartes, distorts the path to knowledge by doubting without any qualification. But for his part, Descartes found redemption in skepticism. And the only way to redeem it is to engage it in the service of truth. This position snatches Descartes from being one with the skeptics. The Cartesian methodic doubt turns out to be in aid of truth. In this study, therefore, the Cartesian method is expounded and prospects for utilizing this method in the present are laid out.

Keywords: Cartesian Method, Truth, Modernity, Climate of Doubt

## Introduction

What is about René Descartes that qualifies him to the title of the Father of the Modern Thought” (Abulad, 2004)? This preliminary question gradually leads us to how a lofty, chill, and solitary individual who “prefers to be a spectator rather than an actor” on the global stage hails as the Father of Modernity. This inquiry lays down Descartes’ contribution to philosophy, particularly in his passionate search for the broadly construed “truth”. With a revisit to the Cartesian project, a new theoretical frontier unfolds on the horizon. The so-called Cartesian “methodic doubt” provides a prospect for a reflection of the current times. At present, when “fake news” spreads all over the places, in the social media and beyond, creating catastrophic effects on the social spectrum in general, who wouldn’t want the truth? Giorgio Agamben (2015), an Italian philosopher, hinted at the necessity of “truth” in a book called *Pilate and Jesus*. In the opening pages of his book, Agamben highlights the inseparable link between “truth” and “belief”, i.e., “credo”, as he tiptoes on the scriptural episodes that animate the trial of Jesus of Nazareth in the hands of Pontius Pilate. Was not Jesus nailed to the crucible for a plethora of “untruths” and “accusations” hurled against him? “The dialogues between Pilate and Jesus,” according to Agamben, “here acquire a density and meaning that are in every sense decisive.”

When Pilate asks whether he is a “king”, Jesus goes by saying, “I came to this world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is from the truth listens to my voice”. Although, it may also be discriminately noticed that when Pilate begs “What is truth?”, he is not really expecting Jesus to reply. Ironic, isn’t it? After those brief moments with Jesus, Pilate motions that the former commits no crime and is hinting out at his release. “The Jews,” however, “frustrate his plan by crying out: ‘Not this man, but Barabbas!’” As the story goes on, the decision turns ugly upon the insistence of the crowd on their fabricated slander against the Christ who thereafter gets flogged, and to seal the divine mission off, crucified.

What is the need, then, for truth? What practical relevance is gained from not spreading erroneous and made-up accounts, i.e., what are the antes to truth telling? But how do we best arrive at it? And what is in this deliverance to truth really for us?

At the outset, it is only fair to note that this paper does not really intend to bring about a detailed account of truth, both in the lexical and semantic levels. Philosophical theories on the nature of “truth” (*veritas*) are ample. One good example is called the “correspondence theory” of truth which dates all the way back to medieval epistemology. Very briefly, this theory accommodates three categories, namely, logical, ontological, and moral truths. Logical truth is characterized as the conformity between thought and a certain aspect of reality. While ontological truth refers to reality conforming to the categories of thought. And last is moral truth, which is about the conformity between speech/language and reality. Among these categories, it is logical truth which has received most scholarly attentions and making itself pretty ordinary. It works by simply describing the “state of affairs”. Truth in this sense is a “matter of fact”. One says that there is an elephant in the room when there is one in there. (Although, “an elephant in the room” is one famous figure of speech. It must not be taken literally.) If *le contraire* is stated when there is in fact one, then conformity is not had, thereby a regression to anything false. *Ceteris paribus*, the three categories of truth can be summed up in one word: conformity.

Conformity is a staunch truth category. Unfortunately, though, it is adulterated today by the explosion of the phenomena called “fake news” and “revisionism”. In essence, these are the intentional propagation of lies. In principle, lies are the direct opposite to truth, a band of

de-formities. In short, a lie is a propagation of error. In modern philosophy, the encroachment of these two poses a scandal to reason although it is also possible to transpose it over to a literary piece called “fable”. In this way, “fake news” and “revisionism” take on a new form: they are literary this time. But as disgusting and scandalous as they may have become, the task of “sifting the wheat from the chaff” - that is, truths from lies - requires a daunting effort. Needless to say, this makes the search for truth - no matter how elementary – to never get old and eternally a noble profession. In fact, truth is the founding block of every scientific knowledge. René Descartes methodic way to truth works best hither. Hence, the forthcoming expounds his project by situating it first in the intellectual climate where no serious attention to epistemic detail could be more pressing than in the Modern Time (*Les Temps Modernes*).

### **Modernity and the Climate of Doubt**

If we were to pinpoint the most dynamic period in the history of philosophy, we would have modernity as one.

The modern age was characterized as the age of scientific discoveries and of the rebirth of the classical Spirit (Renaissance). On one hand, the scientific progress paved the widespread regional reach of both trade and commerce. On the other, the Renaissance revived the classical Greek writings which for a long period of time been suppressed and put into silence by the sole ecclesial authorities of the time, i.e., the Roman Catholic Church.

But as modernity delivered the intellectual milieu over to its very own being, “the writings of many philosophers and other great writers of antiquity once again became available” (Stumpf and Fieser, 2005). Philosophy loosened from the grip of dogmatic theology, and ceased to become the latter’s “handmaiden”. The prominence of the Aristotelian thought and the Scholastic methodology liquifies before the arid air brought about by the powerful duo of rational-scientism. In effect, skepticism, which was enjoyed only as academic leisure, was passionately rekindled outside the confines of the monastic serenity. Then on, the human soul was breathing the “air of doubt”.

In the speculative philosophical parlance, the Aristotelian thought and Scholastic methodology were the whipping-boys during the Renaissance, and the Ptolemaic worldview became a dominant hypothesis in physics. The former was fond of “torturing” the mind with its intricate employment of definitional methodology (Descartes, 1968); while the latter held the earth as the centre of the universe. The Ptolemaic cosmology was faithfully adapted and ramified by the Catholic Church until one of her faithful sons, “Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543), a Polish astronomer, formulated a new hypothesis in his *Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres* (1543), which said that the sun is the centre of the universe and that the earth rotates daily and revolves around the sun annually” (Stumpf and Fieser, 2005). Copernicus’ account shook the whole of the medieval cosmological security, initiating doubt in the natural sciences.

Meantime, Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626), challenged the assumptions of the Aristotelian logic, and scrapped it out, placing his *Novum Organum* in the former’s stead (Gower, 1997). Bacon expressed his distaste of the deductive reasoning of Aristotelian logic as it “serves rather to fix and give stability to the errors which have their foundation in commonly received notions, than to help the search after truth. So it does more harm than good” (*Novum Organum*, Prop. Xii). To Bacon, in a syllogism, “too much attention had been made to the way things were said, rather than to the way things are” (Gower, 1997).

So what needed to be done? Bacon says, “Rid the idols.” The idols are the prejudices of man, viz. idols of the tribe, idols of the cave, idols of the marketplace, and idols of the theatre. In brief, let us barrow the following explanation:

The idols of the tribe are those prejudices arising from human nature. He says that we no longer question the credibility of the senses. These are the idols of the race of men. The idols of the cave are the individual prejudices. Bacon says that there is a cave in man that ‘refracts and discolours the light of nature.’ These idols arise from one’s upbringing, association, or conversations with, or from the books one reads. The idols of the marketplace are the social prejudices of men. People together, they gather and discuss. They think the same way. Finally, the idols of the theatre are the philosophical or ideological prejudices of men. We can get these from the dogmas of philosophy that have entered into our minds. Also, we can get these from wrong demonstrations of reasoning. So rid the mind of all these (Estafia, 2008).

What, by the way, does this ridding of idols of the mind mean? For Bacon, it means a “total reconstruction of sciences, arts, and all human knowledge” (Gower, 1997). This is Bacon’s doubt and tacitly, his way to truth.

### **The Search after Truth**

At the onset of the 17th century, various skeptical views are current. This time, skepticism is refined, and subjectivism is put explicitly forward. On the one hand, the sceptics cannot decide “whether something exists, or about whether something can be known, or about whether certainty exists; on the other hand, the subjectivist declared there is no objective truth at all” (Estafia, 2008). These parallel currents apparently pose a serious epistemological dilemma. It seemed, at least in the academia that time, that there was no way to access truth as an objective theoretical and practical stance. There was a glaring crisis of truth.

In response to both the sceptics and subjectivists, Rene Descartes “guarded” himself “from falling” and devoted his life into “the search after Truth” like the “one who walks alone in the twilight” but “with much circumspection in all things.” In the Book 3 of his Discourse on the Method, Descartes expresses his disgusts over “the sceptics, who,” according to him, “only doubt for the sake of doubting and pretended to be always uncertain” (Descartes, 1968).

With this conviction, it became evident that Rene Descartes was neither a skeptic nor a subjectivist. He believed in the existence of the clear and distinct ideas that are preconditions to arriving truth claims. And the arrival at these vivid thoughts motivated the very goal of his rational enquiry. He says, “I thought I could not do better than endeavour once for all to sweep them [all opinions] completely away, so that they may be later on replaced, either by others which were better, or by the same, when I had made them conform to the uniformity of the rational scheme” or as he put it most beautifully as “Good Sense”.

This made Descartes the Founder of the Continental Rationalism, emphasizing “the rational capacity of the human mind which is considered as the source of truth of both human nature and the world” (Stumpf & Fieser, 2005). Later on, Rationalism was carried out and even furnished by Benedict Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz.



## **The Methodic Doubt**

What is beautiful with the Rationalists is that they always employ method in their enquiry, although they did not consider it as that with the medieval period when “the study of the method was ancillary to the study of the physical world, and the study of the physical world points out to the idea of God” (Ruth, 1937). No, the Rationalists looked at it differently with its remarkable significance. A metaphor goes, “Methods are ladders which will enable us to climb up from experimental histories to conclusions, and a ladder we can use to descend from conclusions to new experiment” (Gower, 1997).

Descartes employed the universal methodic doubt, to question everything “so far as this is possible.” But if Descartes himself professed that he was neither a skeptic nor a subjectivist, then, what is with this methodic doubt?

Bernard Williams characterizes the Cartesian doubt: “The doubt about the possibility of knowledge will be a sceptical doubt, and seen as a response to this, the Method of Doubt takes on the form of pre-emptive scepticism, which serves the aim of answering sceptical doubts by taking them as far as they can be taken and coming out on the other side” (Williams, 2005).

Simply saying, on the surface at least, Descartes’ methodic doubt resembles a skeptical doubt. To wit, let us take the first Principle as an example. Descartes says, “That in order to examine into the truth, it is necessary once in one’s life to doubt of all things, so far as this is possible” (Descartes, 1968). If we take the first Principle without care, we fall into the conclusion that Descartes was advocating the sceptics by the “doubt of all things.”

But at a very careful scrutiny, we will find Descartes to be proving the contrary. He was not only disarming and discouraging, but also dismantling further skeptical bid by casting out the “universal doubt” in order “to examine into the truth”. Descartes wanted to arrive into the “truth” taking doubt as a method. Thus, “it is important to bear in mind that Descartes is not a skeptic. [In fact] he thinks he is the first to have offered a satisfactory reply to skepticism” (Fine, 2000).

## **The Method**

Descartes stretched his “pre-emptive skepticism” to an extent to which all things were now subject to the methodic doubt. And to come up with a solid foundation of truth, he went doubting the very foundations of the human knowledge, i.e., both sensibilities and reason, believing that “the destruction of the foundations of necessity brings with it the downfall of the rest of the edifice” (Descartes, 1968). Firstly, Descartes doubted the knowledge which comes from the (perceptual) senses. According to him, the senses deceive us and it is prudent for one not to trust that which already deceived us once. Secondly, he was also dismissive of the knowledge deduced from rational demonstration since, he said, even the greatest mathematician can err in his proof.

The deficiencies of the senses and of the rational demonstration necessitated Descartes to scrap everything and to build on a foundation which is entirely [his] own:

The first on these was to accept nothing as true which I did not recognize clearly to be so: that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitation and prejudice in judgment [...]; the second was to divide up each of the difficulties which I examined into as many parts as possible [...]; the third was

to carry on my reflections in due order, commencing with objects that were the most simple and easy to understand, in order to rise little by little, or by degrees, to knowledge of the most complex; the last was in all cases to make enumerations so complete and reviews so general that I should be certain of omitting nothing.

In brief and in essence, the first is the articulation of the universal doubt; second, an analysis of every datum which comes into the doubter; third, a careful reconstruction of data from simple to complex; and lastly, a synthesis of all data (also known as phenomenological enumeration). No doubt, Descartes was using here a mathematical deductive methodology. (This interests me because Bacon already abandoned this. This may be considered as Descartes' subversion. Although, this is just a curious thought for now. I have no literature to support this alleged subversion.)

In *Discourse*, Descartes speaks that he has "reaped many fruits" in his method, though his design "is not here to teach the Method which everyone should follow." But the method seems to be verily easier said than done. So, when Descartes is asked how this method is to be carried out, he answers:

Supposing he had a basket full of apples and fearing that some of them were rotten, wanted to take those out lest that they make the rest go wrong, how could he do that? Would he not turn the whole of the apples out of the basket and look them over one by one, and then having selected those which he saw not to be rotten, place them again in the basket and leave out the others?

The way I comprehended the apple analogy, I surmised that Descartes alluded the apples to our beliefs and knowledge, or to use Bacon's term, to our idols. Descartes believed that some of them may be "rotten", of which we never cared, since youth, to inspect. So, before the rotten beliefs ones infect the rest, it is required that we doubt and take all our beliefs into scrutiny and dismiss that which we found to be infected - just as "one has to raze the entire edifice upon seeing that the foundations are deteriorating."

However, despite that he was at the peak of his philosophizing, Rene Descartes never wavered the call to moral responsibility. On the proceeding, we shall discuss his personal codes of conduct.

### **The Maxims**

A pious Catholic, Descartes wanted to remain reserve in his actions, while being entranced with the "perversion" of his doubt. In order not to be astray, he personalized moral codes for his guidelines: an "other house where we can be comfortably lodged during the time of rebuilding."

The first was to obey the laws and customs of my country and to adhere to my, adhering constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed since my childhood and in all other things to direct my conducts by opinions the most moderate in nature [...]; my second maxim was that of being firm and resolute in my actions as I could be, and not to follow opinions the most dubious [...]; my third maxim was to try always to conquer myself rather than fortune, and to alter my desires rather than to change the order of the world, and generally, to accustom myself to believe that there is nothing entirely within our power but our own thoughts: so that after we have

done our best in regards the things that are without us, our ill-success cannot be possibly a failure in our part [...]; and to conclude, I felt it incumbent on me to review the various occupations of men in this in order to choose and live on with the best...in occupying my whole life in the activity of Reason and in advancing myself as much as possible in the knowledge of the truth in accordance with the method which I had prescribed myself.

I comprehend it that Descartes dedicated the third part of the Discourse in his tacit moral treatises. These treatises can never be separated from his Methodic Doubt; in fact, they are concomitant to the universal doubt.

But again, what conclusions did Descartes wish to derive from this doubt? To answer this, let us allow Eudoxus to be Descartes' mouthpiece:

Just give me your attention; I am going to conduct you further than you think. For it is really from this universal doubt which is like a fixed and unchangeable point, that I have resolved to derive the knowledge of God, of yourself, and of all that the world contains.

### **The Certitudes**

It is always the clear and distinct ideas that Descartes wanted to attain. He made it a goal that "the end of the study should be to direct the mind towards the enunciation of sound and correct judgments on all matters that come before it" (p.1). To arrive at the clear and distinct idea, and to enunciate only the sound and correct judgments simply means to be certain.

Descartes arrived at the crux of his search. He arrived at the certitudes:

"*Cogito ergo sum.*" "I think therefore I am." (*Res cogitans*) – This is the first certitude, and therefore the most knowable. We can doubt everything under the sun: our own bodies and all the other bodies that we see around us, whether awake or asleep. We can doubt of all ideas that are given to us by our mentors, by our friends, by our parents, and even those which are given to us by our religion. Doubt all this. But one can not go further because one cannot doubt that condition under which doubting is possible, that he thinks and by thinking it is necessary that he exists.

God. The Perfect Being. – This is the second certitude. Descartes argues that it is certain that he exists because he doubts. But he further says that his being is not perfect since "to doubt" is to signify imperfection and deception. Then it necessarily follows that there must be an "evil genius", whose existence is higher than him and whose ingenuity causes him to doubt and be deceived. But imperfection is a consequence to the existence of a perfect being. Therefore, the perfect being is not the cause of his doubt and deception, since to deceive is contrary to the nature of the perfect being. Therefore the perfect being is always good and cannot be an evil genius without contradicting his nature. And this perfect being is God.

The Extended Body. (*Res extensa*) – This is the third certitude and finally, therefore, the least knowable. By the term body, Descartes means the physical bodies around whose essence is extension. For Descartes, although we can distrust or doubt the bodies that we see either awake or asleep, as in a dream, we cannot deny that since physical bodies form the objects of our doubt, they exist.

In brief, Descartes discovery of the first certitude is not through syllogistic reasoning, but through intuition. While the second and the third certitudes are arrived at through demonstration.

### **Conclusion**

For what does it bring to one when he is certain in every pronouncement that he takes? Is it not sublime security which settles us when what we say is always error-proof? In other words, what is our price to certainty? Rene Descartes too must have had conceived these queries prior to his search. Confronted by the call of his time, Descartes took his steps for the following reasons: first, to respond to the sophistry of the sceptics; secondly, certitude aids and improves the sciences which are man's tool in controlling nature; and thirdly, to attain certitude for his personal guide since he believes that to be certain is to come up with the best judgment, "and the best judgment brings the best action – that is to say, the acquisition of all the virtues and all the other good things that it is possible to obtain."

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