

Descartes' Dilemma: The Mystical Foundations of Reason

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Abstract. This essay revisits Descartes' writings on method to revise its basic tenets and, having the advantage of hindsight, showcase its problems. The paper argues that the foundation of reason, as expounded by Descartes, are mystical in the sense of being unknown. The unknown foundations of reason expose the merits of nurturing beliefs. The paper eventually argues that Descartes, by rationally establishing God as the foundation of reason, argues not for enlightenment but against it.

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Men are almost always products of their times. But it is rare to find men who shape their times. Even those among the latter are often found to be in debt of some visionary or thinker whose thoughts enriched them. And yet, in the seventeenth century, one man changed the way everything would be after him while remaining independent of any debt from the past except perhaps from the scholastics who served for him an example of what precisely knowledge was not. A man who played a major role in bringing about what is today regarded as the greatest watershed in human thought ever, the Enlightenment. The man was Rene Descartes, who set out in search of the simplest of truths, in the process demolishing everything that was till then taken for granted as given.

The beginning of his famous quest for truth took off with the writing of 'The Rules for Guiding One's Intelligence in Searching for the Truth' (Hereafter Rules). This hitherto incomplete work, published posthumously, gives an insight into mind of Rene and laid the foundation for his other famous works to emerge. What was crucial for Rene was the well-founded-ness of all judgements that humans make about everything.

The rule of 'guiding one's intelligence towards making well founded, true judgements about everything that one encounters' is for Rene the first one which all studies must adhere to (Descartes, 1999: 117-118). An implicit assumption here is that there is a foundation to

everything that exists. This search for foundations is guided by his quest for that knowledge, of that truth, which can be accepted as reliable and which would eventually pave the way for more truths to be discovered. However, what perplexes Rene is that while men study particular sciences they somehow lose sight of common sense which, as per Rene, the sciences must contribute to in order to retain their relevance. Recognising this burden, over the sciences, of making constant contributions to universal wisdom, Rene concludes that

If someone wishes to investigate the truth about things, they should not choose some particular science, because all the sciences are interconnected and depend on each other. They should think instead only about increasing the natural light of reason, not in order to resolve this or that problem of scholastic philosophy, but in order for their intellect to instruct their will about what choice to make in each other's life decisions. (ibid. 118)

Rene does not explicitly throw light on the foundations of this 'natural light of reason', which in my opinion is necessary if one has to increase it. One just can't keep on adding floors on a building without knowing how much its foundation can hold. The strength of the foundations of reason is, by Rene, assumed.

Having appealed for an increase in the natural light of reason, Rene seems to have later developed scepticism regarding man's ability to do so and perhaps that is why, as the second rule, he lays down that 'We should be concerned only with those objects, for which our intelligence seems adequate to achieve a certain and indubitable knowledge' (ibid. 119). In addition to the already expounded necessity of being reliable, knowledge is now also burdened with the compulsion of certainty. Merely probable knowledge is to be rejected and only that is to be believed which is beyond the scope of doubting. Rene, it seems, assumes that every individual has some inherent capacity to gain knowledge about only some things and never everything. If this were true, individuals were better off studying specialised sciences separately, according to their abilities, which is something Rene had argued against previously. Nevertheless, taking the argument further, Rene expounds that 'among all the disciplines known to others, arithmetic and geometry alone are free from taint of falsehood and uncertainty' (ibid. 120). Rene notes that knowledge of things can be arrived at either by experience or by deduction. The former, according to Rene, has the potential to be deceptive while the latter can be done properly only by a rational intellect. For Rene, the certainty of arithmetic and geometry lies in the fact that 'these alone are concerned with an object that is so pure and simple that they evidently presuppose

nothing that experience might render uncertain, but they consist exclusively of conclusions that are deduced by reason' (ibid. 121). Thus, Rene concludes that, we should not concern ourselves with any object about which we cannot have as much certainty as there is in the demonstrations of arithmetic and geometry.

Even if an individual strictly adheres to the above two rules, Rene would still be uncertain about believing in that individual's conclusions for the simple recognition that there is hardly anything about which men don't hold opposite views. For this reason, Rene zeroes down on two actions of the intellect through which we can arrive at knowledge without any fear of error – Intuition and Deduction. Hence, the third rule says that 'We should seek whatever we can intuit clearly and evidently or what we can deduce with certainty about any proposed objects, and not what others have thought about them or what we ourselves might guess; for scientific knowledge cannot be acquired in any other way' (ibid. 121). Intuition here is understood as the clear conception of an attentive mind guided purely by light of reason which is arguably even more certain than deduction because it is simpler. Intuition, according to Rene, helps in knowing what he calls 'first principles' from which other 'remote conclusions' can be deduced. It seems here that Rene has assumed that intuition is something that is universal in the sense of occurring to every rational individual in the same manner under same circumstances producing same conclusions. The foundations of such intuitions were left unexplained. Rene compares the blind curiosity of men to the foolish desire of someone who is out on the streets to find treasure. In case they actually do end up finding something worthwhile, Rene regards this as a matter of pure luck thereby unconsciously rendering Archimedes' Eureka moment and Newton's apple fall as instances in the lives of lucky fools:

It is much more satisfactory never to think about seeking the truth about anything than to do so without a method, because it is very certain that the natural light is obscured and our intelligence is blinded by such obscure studies and obscure meditations' (ibid. 125).

By method Rene refers to 'easy and certain rules such that, if anyone were to use them carefully they would never accept what is false as true' (ibid. 125). Thus, as a fourth rule, Rene renders method into a fetish. However, the method itself cannot explain us how to use intuition and deduction simply because they are the simplest and primary acts of the intellect. It is necessary for the intellect to learn to use intuition and deduction properly before it can comprehend rules or methods required to know the truth about things. So, while on the one hand, Rene says that

proper use of intuition is necessary for understanding the methods, on the other hand he makes the non-obscurity of natural light of reason (which in turn guides intuition) dependent on the very method which cannot be understood without the capacity for intuition which again depends on approaching studies methodically which again requires capacity to intuit and so on. In short, one feels that, while recognising that the natural light of reason can be obscured, Rene does not consider the possibility that intuitions which depend on it may also be obscure or even false which would then shake up the very foundations of knowledge. The reliability of intuition is again, assumed. In his discussion of rule five, Rene comments further on the nature of the method saying that

The entire method consists in the order and arrangement of those things to which the mind's eye must turn so that we can discover some truth. But we shall observe this method exactly if we reduce convoluted and obscure propositions step by step to more simple ones, and if we then try to ascend by the same steps to knowledge of all the others, beginning from an intuition of all the most simple propositions' (ibid. 130).

But before talking about breaking down of propositions into simpler ones, Rene states that there is a tendency of human intelligence to always bypass what it thinks it can learn easily and to hurry towards sublime novelties. It is for this reason perhaps that all men clearly end up breaking the important rule of reducing seemingly obscure propositions into simpler ones. And yet, elaborating on this human tendency to break rule five, Rene asserts that the reason for this is that 'the order required in this context is often so obscure and complicated that everyone is not able to recognise what it is like' (ibid. 131). So, if humans are naturally more inclined to look towards not simple but sublime novelties, and, the breaking down of obscure propositions into simpler ones clearly requires an inclination towards the sublime by virtue of its complexity, then Rene here appears to somewhat fall into his own trap. Firstly its a puzzle how the order required to break down the obscure into the simple can in itself be obscure and complicated. Secondly, Rene too, like all intelligent men on whom he had commented, is very much inclined towards the obscure and sublime act of breaking down everything into its simplest form through the various rules he has set himself the task to put down. In short, Rene fails to recognise, that his own rules are very much sublime. He assumed, without any foundation, the simplicity of his own methods.

Having discussed the first five from the total of twenty one rules that Rene laid down, I decide to here pause. Rene's work, as mentioned earlier, remained incomplete. Now whether

some unexpected turn of events led Rene to leave the text incomplete or whether he simply abandoned the project on realising that it was perhaps unfruitful or simply never ending is something I cannot say with any clarity for I lack any certain knowledge on the issue. What others have said on this issue is something I do not intend to explore for one wouldn't really know how solid the foundations of those explanations would be. Also it is very much possible that others have given opposing views on this issue which would leave me without any clarity. But, having gone through the initial five rules, I intuit that it was perhaps the latter case i.e. he abandoned the project because he felt it was never ending or simple useless. I have deduced this out of the fact that after 'Rules', Rene wrote several other texts and in case he had any inclination towards completing this text, under normal circumstances, he would have. Nevertheless, I make no claims here of knowing the complete truth about this matter.

But if there is one thing that I can say with some certainty it is this, that Rene, as a philosopher in the search of ultimate truth, through methods that aid the attainment of certain knowledge based on solid foundations, nevertheless made of lot of assumptions whose foundations he did not reveal. Rene's methods for reaching the ultimate truth are pregnant with assumptions which defies the very standard of enquiry that he seeks to set.

While writing on the second rule mentioned in Rules, Rene proclaims that 'someone who doubts a lot about many things is no wiser than someone who has never thought about them' (ibid. 119). Nevertheless, it is doubt itself that Rene held dearest. To the extent that he ended up doubting his own existence. For someone who assumes the strong foundations of reason and assumes the reliability of intuition as a source of knowledge, the fact of his own real existence should not bother much. And yet, Rene ends up doubting that which he could have perhaps most safely assumed, the fact that he existed.

But before dwelling onto this doubt, a word on the method that he employs to go about his business as mentioned in his 'Discourse on the Method for guiding One's Reason and Searching for Truth in the Sciences' (hereafter Discourse). This work was written in 1637, nine years after Rene abandoned writing 'Rules' in 1628. Clearly his belief in the feasibility of developing a well-founded and certain method for knowing the truth was not diminished, and for this Rene must be credited. However, since in the previous work he depended solely on increasing one's natural light of reason, which eventually led him nowhere, over here Rene adds

an additional need of guiding the reason in a particular direction without letting it digress. Clearly the act of giving reason a free hand did not prove to be very fruitful for him. Hence, Reason is now to be tamed, structured and fixed through a method. Writing in Part one of the Discourse, Rene clarifies that his plan is ‘not to teach the method that everyone must follow in order to guide their reason, but merely to explain how I have tried to guide my own’ (ibid. 07). And yet, Rene very much ensures that all other paths to truth towards which reason can be guided stand negated through his works thereby establishing his own method as supreme. Thus, reason is not only to be tamed, structured and fixed but is also to be standardised, it is to be established as *the* reason. However, Rene refuses to acknowledge this:

But, since I am proposing this work merely as a history or, if you prefer, a fable – in which, among a number of examples that may be imitated, there may also be many others where it would be reasonable not to follow them, - I hope it will be useful for some readers without being harmful to others, and that everyone would be grateful for my frankness (ibid. 07).

If Rene was true to his own words, he would have left the judgement of his works purely on the reader’s sense of reason reason but instead he consciously decides to give them possible options, even before the main body of the text is revealed, which are clearly products of his reason and not theirs. It is a conscious effort to not appear as articulating a standard. His is a clever play of modesty and honesty, a strategy to constantly appear above the fray. Now I request my reader not to take these comments on face value. I do not claim any certainty for the views expressed here. It’s a product of my judgement with Rene’s writings serving as foundations, guided to the best of my ability by the natural light of reason which, as Rene himself accepts, is distributed in all humans equally (ibid. 05).

Nevertheless, a discussion on the rules that Rene expounded in Discourse is necessary. The first rule entails Rene’s warning ‘never to accept anything as true if I did not know clearly that it was so; that is, carefully to avoid prejudice and jumping to conclusions, and to include nothing in my judgement apart from whatever appeared so clearly and distinctly to my mind that I had no opportunity to cast doubt on it’ (ibid. 16). The second rule is ‘to subdivide each of the problems that I was about to examine into as many parts as would be possible and necessary to resolve them better’ (Ibid. 16). The third rule is ‘to guide my thought in an orderly way by beginning with the objects that are the simplest and easiest to know and to rise gradually, as if by

steps, to knowledge of the most complex, and even by assuming an order among objects in cases where there is no natural order among them' (ibid. 16). The fourth and last rule is 'in all cases, to make such comprehensive enumerations and such general reviews that I was certain not to omit anything' (ibid. 16). A glance at these four rules would reveal to the attentive reader that these do not vary a lot from the five rules which we discussed previously in his work *Rules*.

Imagine a situation where an individual untrained in biology wants to know the truth about the functions of the human body based purely on the rules laid out by Rene in *Discourse*. True to rule one, the individual may refuse to accept that it is a body in the first place. To know that, he must subdivide it into simpler parts. Now he does not have any knowledge of internal structure of the body so he cannot decide with clarity how he should go about cutting the body and reducing it into its simplest parts. He cannot start cutting it from whichever place he pleases because there is no clarity regarding the effectiveness of the approach. Moreover, cutting the body into simple parts will lead to it being totally damaged unless the skill of the surgeon is learnt, which however Rene's method does not allow us to trust. In short, Rene's method is silent on the rules that are to be followed for breaking down a complex whole into its simplest parts which is an essential rule for knowing the truth.

To overcome this obvious limitation, Rene uses the analogy of the house and suggests that we simply break down the house to build a new one without caring for preservation of the former (ibid. 13). It is easy to understand however that a house pulled down without care would eventually pose problems of rebuilding it for there is ignorance of the internal structure. To overcome the confusion that may ensue in the rebuilding process, Rene comments that one would follow the approach that travellers follow when they get lost in a forest (ibid. 20). He warns against making the mistake of turning from one direction after another in the forest but instead suggests walking in one direction in a straight line even if the direction was chosen initially only by chance. In this way, even if we don't reach where we want to, we will eventually reach somewhere and be better off than roaming around aimlessly in the forest. And yet, Rene fails to recognise, or at least does not make the recognition explicit, that walking in a straight line continuously does not give us any certainty about the nature of the forest, its internal structure or its process of maintenance. Even if we do end up knowing something essential about the forest, it will be the product of pure chance and not a systematic method. It is like saying that

after breaking up the house, instead of learning the art of architecture, we simply continue adding bricks one over the other so that even if we don't end up making a new house we will definitely end up constructing a tall wall which is a significant achievement in itself. Nevertheless, it is this approach that Rene seems to follow in his meditation, which he talks about in part four of Discourse. The foundation of this meditation lies in Rene deciding to

Reject as absolutely false everything that I could imagine the slightest doubt and to see, as a result, if anything remained among my beliefs that was completely indubitable. Thus, because our senses sometimes deceive us, I decided to assume that nothing was the way the senses made us to imagine (ibid. 24).

By completely negating what our senses tell us, Rene, in a way, negates the possibility of attaining a large number of truths, since senses deceive only sometimes and not always. But since Rene is in search of not just truth, but certain and un-doubtful truth, such a negation of the senses seems sensible. In addition, Rene observed that we often have the same thoughts while we are awake and as well as when we are asleep. Hence, he assumes that 'nothing that ever entered my mind was any more than the illusion of my dreams' (ibid. 24-25). By this rule, the fact that Rene was sitting and writing Discourse with a pen on paper itself came under the purview of doubt. Nevertheless, post this realisation, Rene intuited that even if everything can be said to be false, it was nevertheless necessary that he who was thinking all this was something. Thus, Rene accepted '*I think, therefore I exist*' as that first principle of his philosophy.

The acceptance of this principle leads Rene to find out how he learnt to think, for according to him, doubt is a sign of imperfection and it is a greater perfection to actually 'Know'. Rene attributed his thinking to some being more perfect than himself – God (ibid. 26). Thus, the foundation of all thought and reason on this planet is God. It is obvious to the reader that this idea of a God can itself be put to sufficient doubt. And yet, Rene accepts it. He does not question why God gives us thoughts in the first place and why he does not give so to animals and plants and then why he exposes thought and sense to the constant risk of falling prey to deception. But the reader nevertheless realises that the kind of doubt Rene pursues does not promise any end to the search for truth. This method, in short, never fulfils its promise. In his defence, Rene had accepted in Discourse that:

Whenever we are unable to identify the most true opinions, we should follow the most probable, and even when we do not notice any more probability in one than in another,

we should still choose some of them and think about them subsequently no longer as doubtful, in so far as they are relevant for our practical life, but as very certain and very true, because the reason that made us choose them is such. (ibid. 20)

So to cut the never ending chain of doubt, Rene assumed, for practical purposes, in his meditation, that his thoughts came from God. Thus, by showcasing the limitless nature of doubt, Rene, in my opinion, ended up exposing the merit in having assumptions and beliefs, as long as they are practical. True enlightenment, thus, lies not in constantly questioning, doubting and critiquing but in using one's reason to accept that belief or to take as un-doubtful that assumption which aids the practical life of man. This leads me to argue that Descartes was actually arguing not for enlightenment but actually against it. Indeed, the foundations of reason are mystical, or in other words, beyond reason. To investigate the roots of reason is to lose it. We do not value reason because of its solid foundations. We value reason because it is reason.

In the beginning, Rene set out to question the foundations of existing knowledge, but through his method of never-ending doubting, he actually ended up redeeming it. The truth about Rene's project, it seems to me, was that it implicitly shouted its own never-ending uselessness and called one to go back to believing and assuming, instead of peeping into the bottomless well of doubt, and living practically happy lives, like his ancestors did. And yet, while pointing out the fallacy in Rene's method and how it implicitly, perhaps even unconsciously, redeems the pre-enlightenment knowledge forms, one must realise that in the process of doubting the usefulness of Rene's methods, one ends up redeeming Rene's method. The method one uses in shedding doubts over Rene's method of never ending doubt could not have been anybody's but that of Rene himself. He is in this sense the original coloniser of the modern mind. One may doubt the foundations of his method but one's method of doubt and critique is inherently cartesian. When one tries to discredit his method but in the process ends up showcasing its merits. Rene Descartes, thereby, remains relevant as a thinker and philosopher whose methodological principles continue to provide the fundamental principles of research.

References

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