Integrity Journal of Arts and Humanities
Volume 6(3), pages 126-135, June 2025
Article Number: 04E28BFD4
ISSN: 2811-2407
https://doi.org/10.31248/IJAH2025.207
https://integrityresjournals.org/journal/IJAH

Opinion

An analytical reflection on Descartes' Discourse on Method: Parts IV and V

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Received 9th March 2025; Accepted 26th April 2025

ABSTRACT: This work offers a reflective and analytical engagement with parts IV and V of René Descartes' *Discourse on Methods,* a foundational philosophical treatise in the history of modern thought. Rene Descartes was an exceptional charisma of knowledge and distinctiveness that altered the history of philosophy so decisively in the 17th century by combining (however unconsciously or even unwillingly) the influences of the past into a synthesis that was striking in its originality and yet congenial to the scientific temper of the age. His ability to achieve a remarkably significance by being able to make an indelible reordering of philosophical foundation (prior philosophical edifice before him) to a formidable, irrefutable, certain, and precise nature, is quite extraordinary. Descartes, in a blinding flash, saw the need to pursue a new method for putting all the sciences, all knowledge, on a firm footing. This method made clear both how new knowledge was to be achieved and how all previous knowledge could be certain and unified. This task he was able to achieve coherently in this rich and penetrating book, "Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences," where he developed a methodology for the discovery of the truth, more specifically, a methodology that accommodates the dictates of a mathematical physics for our view of physical reality. By employing a qualitative, textual-analytical methodology, this work critically examines Descartes' arguments through close reading, interpretation, and philosophical evaluation. Thus, the thrust of this work is to concentrate on René Descartes' *Discourse on Methods* Parts IV and V.

Keywords: Methods, philosophy, reflection.

INTRODUCTION

Rene Descartes is a crucial figure in the history of philosophy, who combined (however unconsciously or even unwillingly) the influences of the past into a synthesis that was striking in its originality and yet congenial to the scientific temper of the age. In the minds of all later historians, he counts as the progenitor of the modern spirit of philosophy (Duignan, 2011). He had achieved remarkably significantly in the history of philosophy by being able to make an indelible reordering of philosophical foundation to a formidable, irrefutable, certain, and precise nature. Unlike his predecessors and contemporaries, and the philosophical system before him (namely the method of Scholasticism, which was entirely based on comparing and contrasting the views of recognised authorities), which has dominated the philosophical parlance, Descartes saw philosophy before him as shaky and uncertain because of its foundation. This is unlike the truth of mathematics, a science in which he found certainty, necessity, and precision. How could he find a basis for all knowledge so that it might have the same unity and certainty as mathematics? Then, in a blinding flash, Descartes saw the method to be pursued for putting all the sciences, all knowledge, on a firm footing. This method made clear both how new knowledge was to be achieved and how all previous knowledge could be certain and unified. This task Descartes was able to achieve coherently in this rich and penetrating book, "Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting one's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences," where he develop a methodology for the discovery of the truth, more specifically, a methodology

that accommodates the dictates of a mathematical physics for our view of physical reality (Rosenthal, 2014). Therein, Descartes sees himself as a thinking being in his popular maxim “I think, therefore I am”. He was so firm and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, “I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking” (Descartes, 1998, part 4.32).

If one wanted to put Descartes’ main ideas on the back of a postcard, one would need just two sentences: man is a thinking mind; matter is extension in motion. Everything, in Descartes’ system, is to be explained in terms of this dualism of mind and matter. Indeed, we owe to Descartes that we think of mind and matter as the two great, mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive divisions of the universe we inhabit (Kenny, 2006). Nonetheless, this work will concentrate on his Discourse on Method. Thus, the thrust of this work is to give an analytical reflection on René Descartes' Discourse on Methods, Parts 4 and 5.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF RENE DESCARTES (1596–1650)

René Descartes was a French philosopher, scientist and mathematician, a founder of the “modern age” and perhaps the most important figure in the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century in which the traditional systems of understanding based on Aristotle were challenged and, ultimately, overthrown. His conception of philosophy was all-embracing: it encompassed mathematics and the physical sciences as well as psychology and ethics, and it was based on what he claimed to be absolutely firm and reliable metaphysical foundations. His approach to the problems of knowledge, certainty, and the nature of the human mind played a major part in shaping the subsequent development of philosophy (Audi, 1999).

Life history

Descartes was born on March 31, 1596, in the small town of La Haye, France, that now bears his name. He lived in a pivotal time. He was born some one hundred years after Columbus sailed to the Americas and some fifty years after Copernicus published his controversial work. Shakespeare was in his prime at this time. Descartes died in 1650, and almost forty years later, Newton published his groundbreaking work in physics (Lawhead, 2002). He was the son of a minor nobleman and belonged to a family that had produced a number of learned men. At the age of eight, he was enrolled in the Jesuit school of La Flèche in Anjou, where he remained for eight years. Besides the usual classical studies, Descartes received instruction in mathematics and in Scholastic philosophy, which attempted to use human reason to understand Christian doctrine. Roman Catholicism exerted a strong influence on Descartes throughout his life (Encarta, 2008). Feeling restless and with a family fortune to support him, he began a series of travels. He joined several armies to see the world and continue his education. On November 10, 1619, when he was twenty-three, he was shut in by the harsh winter and spent the day in intense philosophical reflection. That evening, the intellectual excitement of the day culminated in three vivid dreams. The dreams gave him a vision of his mission in life: to find the key to the mysteries of nature in a new philosophy based on mathematical reason (Lawhead, 2002).

Works

Around the 1920s, Descartes began his “Rules for the Direction of the Mind” and wrote a short treatise on metaphysics, although the former was not published during his lifetime and the latter seems to have been destroyed by him (Descartes, 1998). In 1633, he had finished Le Monde (“The World”), a book on physics that presented the world as essentially matter in motion. He was all set to publish it when, in June of that year, the Inquisition in Rome formally condemned Galileo. Galileo’s heresy was that he attacked the Aristotelian (and the Church’s) view of the world. Since Le Monde agreed with Galileo’s position, Descartes prudently sent his treatise away to a friend to avoid the temptation to publish it. (Lawhead, 2002). In 1637, Descartes published in French a “Discourse on the Method for Conducting One's Reason Well and for Searching for Truth in the Sciences”, which introduced three treatises which were to exemplify the new method: one on optics, one on geometry, and one on meteorology. The period following the publication of the “Meditations” was marked by controversy and polemics. Aristotelians, both Catholic and Protestant, were outraged; many who did not understand Descartes's teachings took him to be an atheist and a libertine. In spite of all of this clamour, Descartes hoped that his teachings would replace those of Aristotle. To this end, he published in 1644 his “Principles of Philosophy,” a four-part treatise which he hoped would supplant the Aristotelian scholastic manuals used in most universities (Descartes, 1998). At the end of the book, he immodestly concludes that once people understand his method, they will see that the universe “can hardly be intelligibly explained except in the way I have suggested” (Descartes, 1985). The last important work to be published during his lifetime was his “Passions of the Soul”, in which Descartes explored such topics as the relationship of the soul to the body, the nature of emotion, and the role of the will in controlling the emotions.

Influences on Descartes' thoughts

Rene Descartes was greatly influenced by the theme of his time, namely mathematics and Christian theology, especially

the doctrine of God by Anselm, Augustine and Aquinas. Each of the maxims of Leonardo da Vinci, which constitute the Renaissance worldview, found its place in Descartes: empiricism in the physiological researches described in the "Discourse on Method" (1637); a mechanistic interpretation of the physical world and human action in the "Principles of Philosophy" (1644) and "The Passions of the Soul(1649); and a mathematical bias that dominates the theory of method in "Rules for the Direction of the Mind" published posthumously in 1701; and the metaphysics of the "Meditations on the First Philosophy" (1641). But it is the mathematical theme that clearly predominates in Descartes' philosophy. From the past there seeped into the Cartesian synthesis doctrines about God from Anselm of Canterbury (c.1033–1109) and Thomas Aquinas, a theory of the will from Augustine, a deep sympathy with the Stoicism of the Romans, and a skeptical method taken indirectly from Pyrrhon of Elis (c. 360–c. 272 BCE) and Sextus Empiricus (Duignan, 2011). But Descartes was also a great mathematician (he invented analytic geometry) and the author of many important physical and anatomical experiments. He knew and profoundly respected the work of Galileo. Indeed, he withdrew from publication his cosmological treatise, "The World", after Galileo's condemnation by the Inquisition in 1633 (Duignan, 2011).

Descartes' influence in philosophical parlance

Descartes' thoughts and system of philosophy were indeed influential in the lives and system of thought of continental Europe. Duignan had noted that Cartesianism had dominated the intellectual life of continental Europe until the end of the 17th century. That it was a fashionable philosophy, appealing to learned gentlemen and highborn ladies alike, and it was one of the few philosophical alternatives to Scholasticism till being taught in the universities (Duignan, 2011). It was precisely for this reason it constituted a serious threat to established religious authority. In 1663, the Roman Catholic Church placed Descartes's works on the "Index Librorum Prohibitorum" ("Index of Forbidden Books"), and the University of Oxford forbade the teaching of his doctrines. Only in the liberal Dutch universities, such as those of Groningen and Utrecht, did Cartesianism make serious headway.

Certain features of Cartesian philosophy made it an important starting point for subsequent philosophical speculation. As a kind of meeting point for medieval and modern worldviews, it accepted the doctrines of Renaissance science while attempting to ground them metaphysically in medieval notions of God and the human mind. Thus, a certain dualism between God the Creator and the mechanistic world of his creation, between mind as a spiritual principle and matter as mere spatial extension, was inherent in the Cartesian position. An entire generation of Cartesians—among them Arnold Geulincx (1624–69), Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715), and Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) wrestled with the resulting problem of how interaction between two such radically different entities is possible.

DESCARTES' PHILOSOPHICAL AGENDA

Descartes' keen dissatisfaction with the state of philosophy and science in his day drove force to his philosophical explorations. He has noted this concerning the traditional philosophy "seeing that it has been cultivated for many centuries by the most excellent minds that have ever lived and that, nevertheless, there still is nothing in it about which there is not some dispute, and consequently nothing that is not doubtful" (Descartes, 1985, part 1.9,5). Descartes, like St. Augustine decided to look within for the best path to follow in his agenda, "I resolved one day to undertake studies within myself too and to use all the powers of my mind in choosing the paths I should follow" (Descartes, 1985, part 1. 11, 6). Unlike Augustine's goal, which was to find the truth that would lead to a knowledge of God and salvation of the soul, Descartes hoped to find a solid foundation for scientific knowledge. This autobiographical, individualistic approach to philosophy earned Descartes the title "Father of Modern Philosophy."

Medieval philosophers used philosophical proofs to establish their conclusions, but it was also quite common to lend authority to one's ideas by quoting the Bible, the Church Fathers, or Aristotle. Sharply deviating from tradition, Descartes very rarely quotes anyone. Instead, we have the image of a solitary thinker, hammering out for himself the truths by which he would. Thus, Descartes's work as a philosopher revolved around three goals. The first goal was to find certainty. This concern was an obsession that dominated all his philosophical thought. For Descartes, as Lawhead (2002) observes, doubts about what to believe and the conflicting opinions he found everywhere he looked were not only psychologically disturbing but weakened the foundations of all the sciences. Descartes's second goal was to fulfil the dream of a universal science. This goal required him to find a unified set of principles from which he could deduce all the answers to scientific questions.

Descartes discussed the first two goals in his theory of knowledge and addressed the third goal in his metaphysics. This last goal was that of reconciling the mechanistic view of the world found in science with human freedom and its own religious perspective. The picture of the world as a giant, deterministic physical machine threatened the uniqueness and freedom of the human soul and seemed to leave little room for God. Although Hobbes was comfortable in viewing people as simply physical mechanisms, Descartes wanted to give science its due respect while preserving spiritual realities and human freedom (Lawhead, 2002).

DESCARTES' SYSTEM AND PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD

We can say that Bacon and Descartes are the founders of modern empiricism and rationalism, respectively. Both subscribed to two pervasive tenets of the Renaissance: an enormous enthusiasm for physical science and the belief that knowledge means power—that the ultimate purpose of theoretical science is to serve the practical needs of human beings. Besides, in his "Principles", Descartes defined philosophy as "the study of wisdom" or "the perfect knowledge of all one can know," and its chief utility is "for the conduct of life" (morals), "the conservation of health" (medicine), and "the invention of all the arts" (mechanics) (Duignan, 2011, p. 92). Using the famous metaphor of the "tree," he expressed the relation of philosophy to practical endeavours: the roots are metaphysics; the trunk is physics; and the branches are morals, medicine, and mechanics. The metaphor is revealing because it indicates that for Descartes—as for Bacon and Galileo— the most important part of the tree was the trunk. In other words, Descartes busied himself with metaphysics only to provide a firm foundation for physics. Thus, the "Discourse on Method," which provides a synoptic view of the Cartesian philosophy, shows it to be not a metaphysics founded on physics (as was the case with Aristotle) but rather a physics founded on metaphysics.

From the indubitability of the self, Descartes inferred the existence of a perfect God. From the fact that a perfect being is incapable of falsification or deception, he concluded that the ideas about the physical world that God has implanted in human beings must be true. The achievement of certainty about the natural world was thus guaranteed by the perfection of God and by the "clear and distinct" ideas that are his gift.

Philosophical method

According to Mastin (2008), Descartes, in the attempt to refuse to accept the authority of previous philosophers, and even of the evidence of his senses, and to trust only that which was clearly and distinctly seen to be beyond any doubt, developed a philosophical method which is often referred to as "Methodological Skepticism" or "Cartesian Doubt" or "Hyperbolic Doubt." This was the heart of Descartes' philosophical method. Only then, as Mastin (2008) observes, did he allow himself to reconstruct knowledge (piece by piece, such that at no stage was the possibility of doubt allowed to creep back in) in order to acquire a firm foundation for genuine knowledge and to dispel any Skepticism. Accordingly, he outlined four main rules for himself in his thinking:

1. Never accept anything except clear and distinct ideas.
2. Divide each problem into as many parts are needed to solve it.
3. Order your thoughts from the simple to the complex.
4. Always check thoroughly for oversights.

DESCRIPTION OF THE BOOK

The Discourse on the Method is a philosophical and autobiographical treatise published by René Descartes in 1637. Its full name is Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences. It is best known as the source of the famous quotation "Cogito Ego Sum" (I think, therefore I am), which occurs in Part IV of the work. The Discourse on the Method is one of the most influential works in the history of modern philosophy and is important to the development of natural sciences. The book, Short (2018) asserts, was intended as an introduction to Optics, Meteorology, and Geometry, thus, written in the style of a confession. It reads as an autobiographical account—presented in the format of a "fable" and is thus didactic—which narrates Descartes journey from formal education, to "the book of the world," and finally to "studies within" himself aimed at furthering his project of developing a method for finding indubitable knowledge—knowledge which cannot be doubted. Undoubtedly, this work, in contrast to the critique often levied at Cartesian thought as wholly abstract, displays a fundamental existential concern that Descartes has with his own life. Descartes relays several crises in which uncertainty plagues him in a deeply personal way. He did this by living in the context of exposure to the opinions of various brilliant thinkers, exposure to numerous customs of different peoples, and the uncertainty of the 30 years' War (in which he fought) (Mastin 2008). In fact, he regularly expresses his frustration with forms of speculation in the Scholastic community which do not concern actual lived experience.

The narrative in this work is a demonstration of what drove Descartes to become his "own guide" in this pursuit, which he compares to a process of gaining one's maturity and exit from the tutelage of others (in fact he compares it to becoming an adult, leaving behind the appetites and teachers which govern the lives of the young). He describes practical cognitive results in the transformation of his orientation to the world, "…I felt that in practising this method my mind was little by little getting into the habit of conceiving its objects more rigorously and more distinctly …" (Descartes, 1985, part 2. 21, 12).

REFLECTION OF PART IV OF DISCOURSE ON METHOD

Part IV of Descartes' Discourse on Method begins with his thought of whether or not to talk about his meditation, which is perceived as so metaphysical and so out of the ordinary and one that may not be to everyone's liking. However, to buttress the foundation he had laid, it was impelling on him to do so. For better conspicuity of this part of the Method, I would like to look for certain themes that Descartes wanted to achieve in his discourse. This includes the Doubt and the Cogito, Having a Body and the Criterion for Certainty.

Method of Doubting (Methodic Doubt)

Descartes' exclusive devotion was the search for truth. To achieve this, he did the contrary to following opinions that one knows sometimes to be quite uncertain, by rejecting as absolutely false everything in which he could imagine the least doubt, in order to see whether, after this process, something in my beliefs remained that was entirely indubitable. This implies that everything that was previously known but which could cast a doubt is to be set aside. In other words, everything which is previously known which could be doubted should be doubted and rejected for the time being. Here, Descartes insisted that the first task in philosophy is to rid oneself of all prejudice by calling into doubt all that can be doubted. That means, to reconstruct a firm philosophical foundation, on a truth that is beyond doubting, requires at first doubting everything one previously knew that could cast a doubt. This process of doubting will continue until one comes to a truth which one finds impossible to doubt.

> *because I then desired to devote myself exclusively to the search for the truth, I thought it necessary that I do exactly the opposite, and that I reject as absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see whether, after this process, something in my beliefs remained that was entirely indubitable* (Descartes, 1998, part 4.32).

Being a rationalist, Descartes did not count on the senses as a means of acquiring true and certain knowledge. This is because he believed that our senses deceive us, and as such, nothing was exactly as they led us to imagine. As such, the senses are unreliable and cannot be trusted. When we are in a dream, for example, we perceive things with the senses, yet they are not real. What is the proof that we are not dreaming now? I cannot be sure that what I have or see is real, I cannot be sure I have a body, or hands or eyes, or legs, etc, because I could be dreaming, and when I am dreaming I seem to have things which in reality I do not have. Thus, Descartes doubts everything he used to know or believe, even his own existence and mathematical truth.

> *And finally, considering the fact that all the same thoughts we have when we are awake can also come to us when we are asleep, without any of them being true, I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams* (Descartes, 1998, part 4.32).

When he says everything that had ever entered his mind, he meant all his previous knowledge, including his educational background, morals, customs and even his existence.

Cogito

After Descartes had doubted everything he ever had in his mind, that is to say, everything was false, he realised immediately afterwards that he who was thinking was something. And when he tried to doubt that he was thinking, he found out that he was only confirming it, for to doubt involves thinking. It is therefore impossible for him to find doubt that he thinks, and since to think is to exist, it follows that he exists. Thus, his famous phrase Cogito Ergo Sum, I think, therefore I Exist", Descartes now found a truth that was so firm and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it. Thus, truth, according to him, cannot be subject to doubt and is impossible to doubt. Any attempt to doubt it only confirms it, since doubting itself is a confirmation of the fact that I am thinking, and that I exist. Even if one is dreaming, the dreaming itself confirms the fact that one exists, since one has to exist before one could dream. That I exist, therefore, is the certainty beyond the possibility of doubt.

> *And noticing that this truth—/ think, therefore I am—was so firm and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking* (Descartes, 1998, part 4.32).

A substance

Descartes noticed that while, examining with attention what he was, and seeing that he could pretend that he had no body and that there was no world nor any place where he was, there is something he could not pretend about; he could not pretend, on that account, that he did not exist at all, and that, on the contrary, from the very fact that he thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed very evidently and very certainly that he existed; whereas, on the other hand, had he simply stopped thinking even if all the rest of what I had ever imagined had been true, he would have had no reason to believe that he had existed. Thus, all Descartes was sure of was that he was a thinking being. He was not sure whether or not he had a body because it is not necessary for a thinking being to have a body. Therefore, he cannot conclude from that fact that he thinks he has a body. The only truth he knows is that he was a substance with essence or nature of which is simply to think and requires no other place or depends on material things.

> *From this I knew that I was a substance the whole essence or nature of which is simply to think, and which, in order to exist, has no need of any place nor depends on any material thing. Thus this "I," that is to say, the soul through which I am what I am, is entirely*

> *distinct from the body and is even easier to know than the body, and even if there were no body at all, it would not cease to be all that it is* (Descartes, 1998, part 4.33).

Truth and certainty

Here, Descartes was asking for the conditions of a proposition to be true and certain. Since he was able to discover one of them that he knew to be certain, he thought he ought also to know in what this certitude consisted. Thus, having noticed that there is nothing at all in this "I think, therefore I am" that assures him that he is speaking the truth, except that he sees very clearly that, in order to think, it is necessary to exist, Descartes came to judged that he could take as a general rule that the things we conceive very clearly and very distinctly are all true, but quickly acknowledged that there is merely some difficulty in properly discerning which are those that we distinctly conceive.

> *I judged that I could take as a general rule that the things we conceive very clearly and very distinctly are all true* (Descartes, 1998, part 4.33).

The source of perfection and the existence of God

Descartes has observed that doubting is a sign of imperfection, for having reflected upon the fact that he doubted, the consequence was that his being was not utterly perfect. What then could be the source of his thinking of something perfect? The answer seems closer than he thought, for he plainly knew that this had to be from some nature that was in fact more perfect. Since he had come to discover that by virtue of his doubting, he was imperfect, it therefore meant that this thought of perfection could not have come from him. It must have come from something outside of him. It was easier for him to know the origin of those thoughts of many things outside of him, such as the heavens, the earth, light, heat, and a thousand others, since reflecting on them, he noticed nothing in them that seemed to make them superior to him. Thus, he concluded that they were dependent on his nature or nothing but found their place in him because of his imperfect nature.

> *As to those thoughts I had of many other things outside me, such as the heavens, the earth, light, heat, and a thousand others, I had no trouble at all knowing where they came from, because, noticing nothing in them that seemed to me to make them superior to me, I could believe that, if they were true, they were dependencies of my nature, insofar as it had some perfection, and that, if they were not true, I obtained them from nothing, that is to say, they were in me because I had some defect* (Descartes, 1998, part 4.34).

It therefore follows that this idea must have been placed in him by a nature truly more perfect than he was, and that it even had within itself all the perfections of which Descartes could have any idea, that is to say, to explain himself in a single word, that it was God. Descartes could not find any solid explanation for this reality of perfection other than to attribute it to God. In addition, Descartes knew that there were some perfections that he did not at all possess, nor was he the only being that existed, but that of necessity there must be something else more perfect, upon which he depended, and from which he had acquired all that he had. For if he were alone and independent of everything else, so that all the small amount of perfection in which he participated in the perfect being were from him, he would have supplied all that was lacking in him and become infinite, unchanging, all-knowing and perfect like God (whose existence has been established by the preceding reasonings). But that was not the case.

> *For, had I been alone and independent of everything else, so that I had had from myself all that small amount of perfection in which I participated in the perfect being, I would have been able, for the same reason, to have from myself everything else I knew I lacked, and thus to be myself infinite, eternal, unchanging, all-knowing, all-powerful; in short, to have all the perfections I could observe to be in God* (Descartes, 1998, part 4.35).

According, following the reasoning Descartes have just gone through, in order to know the nature of God, so far as his nature was capable of doing so, he noted that he had only to consider, regarding all the things of which he found in himself some idea, whether or not it was a perfection to possess them, and he was assured that none of those that indicated any imperfection were in God, but that all others were in him. Thus, Descartes perceived that doubt, inconstancy, sadness, and such like could not be found in God, since he would have been happy to be free from them. Also, he noticed that he had ideas of many sensible and corporeal things; for although he might suppose that he was dreaming, and that all which he saw or imagined was false, he could not, nevertheless, deny that the ideas were in reality in his thoughts. But, because he had already very clearly recognized in himself that the intelligent nature is distinct from the corporeal, and as he observed that all composition is an evidence of dependency, and that a state of dependency is manifestly a state of imperfection, Descartes therefore concluded that it could not be a perfection in God to be compounded of these two natures and that consequently he was not so compounded; but that

if there were any bodies in the world, or even any intelligences, or other natures that were not wholly perfect, their existence depended on his power in such a way that they could not subsist without him for a single moment.

> *But since I had already recognized very clearly in myself that intelligent nature is distinct from corporeal nature, taking into consideration that all composition attests to dependence and that dependence is manifestly a defect, I judged from this that being composed of these two natures could not be a perfection in God and that, as a consequence, God was not thus composed, but that, if there are bodies in the world, or even intelligences, or other natures that were not at all entirely perfect, their being had to depend on God's power in such wise that they could not subsist without God for a single moment* (Descartes, 1998, part 4.36).

We can see that these arguments of Descartes are based on the idea of God as a perfect being who cannot be said to be composed of two natures at the same time: a perfect and an imperfect nature. But whatever there is not entirely perfect cannot then subsist without God for a single moment.

Other truths and the chiding of empiricism

In search for other truths, Descartes in this part chided the empiricists who based their acquisition of knowledge only from what comes from the senses; who never lift their minds above sensible things and that they are so accustomed to consider nothing except by imagining it (which is a way of thinking appropriate for material things), that everything unimaginable. As a rationalist, it was expedient to show them that an aspect of reality they are missing when they concentrate only on sense perception.

Descartes was disposed straightway to search for other truths, so, in the first place, he observed that the great certitude which by common consent is accorded to these demonstrations is founded solely upon this, that they are clearly conceived in accordance with the rules he had already laid down. In the next place, he perceived that there was nothing at all in these demonstrations which could assure me of the existence of their object. For example, supposing a triangle to be given, he distinctly perceived that its three angles were necessarily equal to two right angles, but he did not on that account perceive anything which could assure him that any triangle existed: while, on the contrary, recurring to the examination of the idea of a Perfect Being, he found that the existence of the Being was comprised in the idea in the same way that the equality of its three angles to two right angles is comprised in the idea of a triangle, or as in the idea of a sphere, the equidistance of all points on its surface from the center, or even still more clearly; and that consequently it is at least as certain that God, who is this Perfect Being, is, or exists, as any demonstration of geometry can be (Descartes, 1998).

Descartes noted that some people find difficulty in knowing this truth, and even also in knowing what their mind really is, because they never raise their thoughts above sensible objects, and are so accustomed to consider nothing except by way of imagination, such that all that is not imaginable seems to them not intelligible (Descartes, 1998). This appears to him that they who make use of their imagination to comprehend these ideas do exactly the something as if, in order to hear sounds or smell odors, they strove to avail themselves of their eyes; unless indeed that there is this difference, that the sense of sight does not afford us an inferior assurance to those of smell or hearing; in place of which, neither our imagination nor our senses can give us assurance of anything unless our understanding intervene (Descartes, 1998).

Finally, Descartes conclude that men not to be sufficiently persuaded of the existence of God and of their soul by means of the reasons as he brought forward, is to be less certain all the other things of which they think themselves perhaps more assured, such as having a body, that there are stars and an earth, and the likes. Nevertheless, once the knowledge of God and the soul has thus made us certain of this rule, it is very easy to know that the dreams we imagine while asleep ought in no way to make us doubt the truth of the thoughts we have while awake. So, Descartes cautioned us in the last paragraph never to allow ourselves to be persuaded by our imaginations or senses, but only by our reason. And that our reason must make us understand that our thoughts cannot all be true, since we are not all-perfect like God, who is all-perfect and all-truthful.

REFLECTION OF PART V OF THE DISCOURSE ON METHOD

Part V is a deduction of a chain of other truths that Descartes deduced from the first ones. Descartes remained resolute and firm, never to accept anything as true that did not appear to him clearer and more certain than the demonstrations of the geometers had hitherto seemed. Neither did he support any other principle other than the one he had just used to demonstrate the existence of God and of the soul. This Principle, Descartes has acknowledged, satisfied him within the shortest time regarding all the principal difficulties commonly treated in philosophy, but also that I have noted certain laws that God has so established in nature, and of which he has impressed in our souls such notions, that, after having reflected sufficiently on these matters, we cannot doubt that they are strictly adhered to in everything that exists or

occurs in the world. From these laws, he discovers that he has come to know many more laws than all he previously learned or even hoped to learn.

> *Moreover, in considering the consequences of these laws, it seems to me that I have discovered many truths more useful and more important than all that I had previously learned or even hoped to learn* (part. 4.41).

Earlier on, Descartes had tried to explain the principal ones among these truths in his work, “The World”, but for certain considerations, he could not publish it. So, in this part, he intends to give a summary of what was contained in the treatise, namely, the nature of material things. Like what we did in part V, we shall also look at his chapter thematically such as light, sun, stars, heavens, planets, earth, all terrestrial bodies, and finally man.

> *I undertook in it merely to speak at length about what I conceived with respect to light; then, at the proper time, to add something about the sun and the fixed stars, because light proceeds almost entirely from them; something about the heavens, because they transmit light; about planets, comets, and the earth, because they reflect light; and, in particular, about all terrestrial bodies, because they are either colored, or transparent, or luminous; and finally, about man, because he is the observer of these things* (part. 4.42).

Matter

Descartes continued in his resolution by first asserting that he can be ignorant of everything in the world, as not clear and distinct, but what has already been said about God and the soul. With this notion in mind, he then tried to describe matter; that even in those qualities and forms about which disputes occur in the school, one can pretend to be ignorant of them. And so, the laws of nature were nothing but the infinite perfection of God. Had God created many worlds, none would these laws fail to be observed (Descartes, 1998). Descartes believes that the world was created from chaos, but as a consequence of these laws, part of this matter has to be disposed of and arranged in a certain way to become similar to our heavens. This could be one of the reasons he initially could not publish this treatise at that time, since it contradicts the teaching of his catholic faith, which believes everything was perfectly created by God.

> *After that, I showed how, as a consequence of these laws, the greater part of the matter of this chaos had to be disposed and arranged in a certain way, which made it similar to our heavens; how, at the same time, some of its parts had to compose an earth; others, planets and comets; and still others, a sun and fixed stars* (part. 4.43).

Other things he added in the former treatise, but only mention here, include a number of things touching on the substance, position, motions, and all the various qualities of these heavens and these stars. According to him, he has said enough to show that there is nothing to be observed in the things of this world which should not, or at least could not, have appeared entirely similar in those of the world he was describing.

Earth

Concerning what he described on earth in the former treatise, Descartes speaks how he expressly supported that God had not put any weight8 in the matter out of which the earth was composed, none of its parts ceased to tend precisely toward its center; how, there being water and air on its surface, the disposition of the heavens and the stars, principally of the moon, had to cause there an ebb and flow similar in all respects to what we observe in our seas, and, in addition, a certain coursing, as much of the water as of the air, from east to west, such as is also observed between the tropics; how mountains, seas, springs, and rivers could naturally be formed there, and how metals could make their way into mines there; how plants could grow naturally in the fields there, and generally how all the bodies called "mixed" or "composed" could be engendered there. From this discourse, he went further to describe the stars, of which he said, “I know of nothing else in the world that would produce light except fire” (Descartes, 1998, part 5.44). Of all the activities of the stars, the one that interests him the most is how, from the result of these activities of the stars, ashes and smoke, particularly ashes, merely by the force of its action, it produces glass. This transmutation of ashes into glass seemed to him to be as awesome as any other that occurs in nature, so he took particular pleasure in describing it.

Human beings

In this description, Descartes submitted that he did not have sufficient knowledge of them as compared to the manner he did for the rest. Therefore, he contented himself with supposing that God formed the body of a man exactly like one of ours, not with a rational soul, or anything else to serve there as a vegetative or sensitive soul, but merely kindled in the man's heart one of those fires without light just as what heats hay when it has been stored before it is dry, or which makes new wines boil when they are left to ferment after crushing. Accordingly, from the functions that

could, as a consequence, be in this body, Descartes found there precisely all those things that can be in us without our thinking about them, that is to say, that part distinct from the body of which it has been said previously that its nature is only to think. It is from this that one can say that animals lacking reason resemble us (Descartes, 1998). In order to describe how God created a rational soul and joined it to the body, Descartes used the analogy of the movement of the heart and the arteries. His description was extensively and well anatomically detailed, such that all the activities that occur within the heart were laid bare. In fact, the description Descartes offered therein seems to me to be more than what I have read in my biology textbooks. From how the blood arrives in the heart through the Vena Cava and pulmonary artery, to how the blood is forced to move from the atria into the ventricles, and finally from the ventricles through the great artery to the entire part of the body, Descartes gave a brilliant explanation. The most remarkable aspect of this explanation is how heat is generated from the heart to other parts of the body; such that without the blood, there is no heat in the heart, and likewise, the hands and feet.

> *It follows from this that if one removes the blood from some part of the body, one thereupon also removes the heat; and even if the heart were as hot as a piece of glowing iron, it would not be enough to reheat the feet and hands as much as it does, if it did not continuously send new blood to them* (part. 5.52).

In all these explanations, Descartes showed that blood is needed in the process of nutrition and the production of various humours that are in the body. Accordingly, he considers the generation of animal spirit as the most remarkable; how this seemingly very subtle wind, or rather, like a very pure and lively flame that rises continuously in great abundance from the heart to the brain, and from there goes through the nerves into the muscles, and gives movement to all the members. This movement towards the brain rather than elsewhere, Descartes accorded to the law of mechanics (Descartes, 1998).

The essence of these explanation (especially as he detailed it in “The World”) was to show how the body (such a great machine), having been made by the hands of God, is incomparably better ordered and has within itself movements far more wondrous than any of those that can be invented by men. Descartes demonstrated that machines, no matter their actions, were never true men. First, he showed that there cannot be any machine, no matter how it can imitate our actions as far as this is practically feasible, that can fittingly respond and react to a situation as even the dullest men can do. Second, he noted that although they might perform many tasks very well or perhaps better than any of us, such machines would inevitably fail in other tasks; by this means, one would discover that they were acting not through knowledge but only through the disposition of their organs (Descartes, 1998). Thus, by this, Descartes was able to demonstrate the difference between man and beast.

> *For it is rather remarkable that there are no men so dull and so stupid (excluding not even the insane), that they are incapable of arranging various words together and of composing from them a discourse by means of which they might make their thoughts understood, and that, on the other hand, there is no other animal at all, however perfect and pedigreed it may be, that does the like* (part. 5.57).

This reason has attested not merely to the fact that beasts have less reason than men but that they have none at all. Finally, Descartes’ move further is derived in no way from the potentiality of matter, but expressly created, and that it is joined and united to the body, not lodged in there like a pilot in his ship. This close unity to the body leads to function, feelings and appetite like our own. This is what constitutes a true man. Thus, when one understands how the soul of a beast is different from ours, then one understands much better the arguments which prove that our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body, and consequently that it is not subject to die with it. Then, since we do not see any other causes at all for its destruction, we are naturally led to judge from this that it is immortal.

Analytical reflection

René Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method,* parts IV and V, is indeed his foundational philosophical insights and the revolutionary framework that characterises his epistemological and metaphysical approach. It effectively traces the contours of his reasoning, from methodological skepticism to the affirmation of self, God, and the mechanistic nature of the material world, offering a critical lens through which to assess the enduring value of Cartesian thought.

At the heart of Descartes’ method, as highlighted above, is the process of systematic doubt. This methodological skepticism is not meant to lead to nihilism, but rather to strip away uncertainty in order to arrive at an indubitable truth. The reflection emphasises the philosophical rigour with which Descartes rejects the reliability of the senses and inherited knowledge. This leads him to the fundamental affirmation of existence through thinking—cogito, ergo sum. The clarity with which the document articulates this moment captures Descartes’ genius: he finds certainty not in what he perceives but in the act of perception itself.

It can also be seen how Descartes’ movement from this internal certainty leads him to the metaphysical claim of

God's existence. Descartes argues that the idea of a perfect being must originate from a source outside the imperfect self. This move, while controversial in modern readings, the conclusion is pivotal for Descartes, as it secures the reliability of clear and distinct perceptions—guaranteed by the non-deceptive nature of God.

Furthermore, in his dualism, Descartes views the mind and body as two distinct substances, with the former defined by thought and the latter by extension. This sets the stage for Cartesian physics and Descartes' mechanistic view of the natural world, particularly explored in Part V. Here, Descartes attempts to describe biological processes in mechanical terms, especially his description of the human body and its functions as akin to those of a machine. Nevertheless, Descartes believes that reason and language set humans apart from animals, reinforcing the rational soul's uniqueness.

One cannot but see Descartes as a thinker deeply concerned not only with intellectual certainty but also with existential clarity. The tone and structure of Discourse on the Method, are confessional and autobiographical, echoing the introspective style of thinkers like Augustine. Descartes' journey into the self, his rejection of scholastic authority, and his desire to construct a new, indubitable system of knowledge form a narrative of philosophical self-discovery that the document captures with clarity and thoughtfulness.

However, one cannot shy away from the limitations surrounding Descartes' system. There is a tension between Descartes' mechanistic universe and his desire to safeguard the soul's freedom and immortality. There is also the difficulties of mind-body interaction and the seeming incompatibility between Descartes' spiritual aspirations and the deterministic implications of his physics. The dialogue between determinism and human freedom is mutually exclusive. These observations reflect a mature engagement with the complexities and contradictions within Descartes' thought.

CONCLUSION

The whole of this work presents to me like Augustine's confessions. Descartes, for me, is not just a philosopher but a scientist, a mathematician and a theologian. The harmonization of these three areas in order to lay a solid foundation for Philosophy that is irrefutable, concrete and certain; prove of the existence of God; the origin of material world and other elements, the movement of the soul in analogy to the circulation of blood, the nature of the soul and its immortality, shows the master work of a genius. It is no doubt the minds of all later historians count him as the progenitor of the modern spirit of philosophy, for his ability to combine the influences of the past into a synthesis that was striking in its originality and yet congenial to the scientific temper of the age is so remarkable. However, with the level of scientific development in our time, one can hardly see coherence in some of the propositions of Descartes, especially concerning the evolution of matter and the activity of the soul, in which case we see the human body as an automatic product of the physical laws of nature. Having this in mind deprives man of his intrinsic freedom. Some of his inconsistent assumptions in "The World" could probably be the reason he was not bold enough to publish it at that time. How much more now that science has laid bare almost every truth of man's biology and the science of the world? Nevertheless, Descartes is an ever-influential genius in the history of time. His thoughts and ideas are still timely in any philosophical discourse.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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