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0521821665 - Descartes' Cogito: Saved from the Great Shipwreck

Husain Sarkar

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The Prolegomena to Any Future Epistemology

In 1628, Rene Descartes received an invitation to a meeting at the home of Cardinal Bagni, papal nuncio. Descartes brought with him Father Mersenne, a Minim friar, and M. de Ville-Bressieu, a physician of Grenoble. This was no ordinary meeting. It consisted of well-known *honnets gens* of Paris. They had met to hear a famous doctor-chemist by the name of Chandoux. Chandoux was an expert on base metals who three years later was to be executed for peddling fake currency. Chandoux, charming and fluent, was denouncing the verbiage of scholastic philosophy as it was usually taught in the Schools. There was little new in what he said, for it was mostly in the vein of Francis Bacon, Pierre Gassendi, and Thomas Hobbes. Yet he wanted his system of philosophy to appear fresh and novel. Whatever Chandoux said, everyone applauded. That is, everyone save Descartes.

The founder of the oratory, and perhaps the most powerful religious thinker of the Counter-Reformation, Cardinal Berulle, observed this. He asked Descartes what he thought of Chandoux's speech that had so thrilled the audience. Descartes demurred, saying "that he could not speak in opposition to the feeling of the *savants* present."¹ But the Cardinal did not relent. At last, Descartes spoke. He began by praising Chandoux's denunciation of scholastic philosophy. But then he argued against the speaker and "that great and learned company" for

¹ Elizabeth S. Haldane, *Descartes: His Life and Times*, 108. The details of the references are given in the bibliography.

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taking *probability* as the central notion and not the notion of *truth*. If one were satisfied with something merely probable, he argued, then one could easily take false statements to be true and true statements to be false. As evidence, he asked that someone in the audience propose what he deemed to be an incontestable truth. Someone volunteered, and Descartes proceeded to show in twelve arguments, relying on the notion of probability, that the proposed statement was false.² He then asked that someone propose a statement that he took to be incontestably false. Once again, with reasoning by probability as his guide, he showed the statement to be true. He thus demonstrated that our minds can become victims of the notion of probability. The audience was duly stunned, and some openly deserted Chandoux on the spot.

The *savants* begged to know if there was a method, “some infallible means to avoid these difficulties.” Descartes replied that there was his own method. “I made the whole company recognize what power the art of right reasoning has over the minds of those who have no learning beyond the ordinary, and how much better founded, and more true and natural, my principles are than any of those which are currently received in the learned world” (CSMK, 32; AT I, 213). Such a method would be useful not only in metaphysics, but also in mechanics and medicine. Cardinal Berulle, whom the young philosopher met with privately shortly afterward, was impressed beyond words. With the full weight of his ecclesiastical authority, he urged Descartes to write and publish his views, on the ground that he, Descartes, “was responsible to God for giving to mankind what had been delivered to him.”³ Thus was born, some nine years later, *Discourse on the Method* – and with it, the history of modern philosophy.

² On October 5, 1637, Descartes wrote to Father Mersenne, complaining that Fermat had misunderstood him: “He thought that when I said that something was easy to believe, I meant that it was no more than probable; but in this he has altogether mistaken my meaning. I consider almost as false whatever is only a matter of probability; and when I say that something is easy to believe I do not mean that it is only probable, but that it is so clear and so evident that there is no need for me to stop to prove it.” (CSMK III, 74; AT I, 450–451)

³ Elizabeth S. Haldane, *Descartes: His Life and Times*, 110. Alas, the private meeting with Cardinal Berulle – Haldane undoubtedly got it from Adrien Baillet’s (1649–1706) *La Vie de Monsieur Descartes*, the first biography of Descartes – has been contested by Genevieve Rodis-Lewis in her marvelous book *Descartes: His Life and Thought*. (See R, 67–69 and 240, note 21, for further details on this episode.)

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Granting the possibility of knowledge, what kind of person can pursue and possess knowledge? Descartes thinks that only a certain kind of person can, or at any rate should, embark on the pursuit of knowledge and come to possess it. Section I of this chapter delineates the making of such an ideal knower, who should be armed with a method in his pursuit, like a traveler who ought to carry a map on his journey. Section II provides just such a rationalist method. Section III presents Descartes' famous tree of philosophy: This is Descartes' view of what the completed structure of science would look like. Finally, section IV presents the moral code a pursuer of knowledge should abide by, and I raise the question of whether Descartes is attempting, in this endeavor, to raise himself by his own bootstraps.

I. The Making of an Ideal Seeker

It is our modern liberal view that anyone, man or woman, of any station in life, can embark on studying any discipline, at any time, and at any place, and that what he or she learns will depend on how hard he or she works. There are no other restrictions. This view was not always held. Descartes, for instance, did not hold it. He thought not only that it was necessary for a person to possess certain intellectual and emotional qualities, but also that he had to undergo an initial period of preparation before he could finally embark on a strenuous philosophical inquiry.

Descartes became aware only very slowly of the problem of the ideal seeker. In *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, composed around 1628 and published posthumously, Descartes was hardly aware of the problem, even though he had said, "Where knowledge of things is concerned, only two factors need to be considered: ourselves, the knowing subjects, and the things which are the objects of knowledge" (CSM I, 39; AT X, 411). Descartes had scarcely said anything in this work about the knowing subject as an ideal inquirer. But in *Discourse on the Method*, first published anonymously in 1637, he was quite interested in that problem. That issue was shelved, or at best the solution presupposed, when he came to write the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, published in 1641. It was once again in the limelight in the unfinished dialogue *The Search for Truth*, composed, according to one authority, sometime

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during the last seven years of his life.⁴ (There is an interesting parallel in his treatment of mathematics. Descartes assumed the truthfulness of mathematical statements without question in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, but in subsequent works, such as the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he felt he could no longer make that assumption and tried, as we know, to justify even those truths.)⁵

My aim in discussing this issue is threefold. First, I want to give prominence to a historical issue that has been cast aside, if occasionally noticed. Second, I want to focus afresh on the problem of the reliability of reason. Third, and far more importantly, I hope to show that a proper understanding of the nature of the ideal seeker in Descartes will provide us with one powerful argument, among others, in defense of the central thesis of this book.

From Sextus Empiricus to Michele de Montaigne, the problem of the ideal seeker is hardly in the background. These philosophers had concerned themselves with the problems and pitfalls facing an ordinary seeker. Concerned as he was to respond to the skeptic, it is scarcely surprising that Descartes should have said much that revolved around this topic – although it *is* surprising that he never explicitly discussed the issue, by this name or any other. In what follows, I am clearly offering a reconstruction, namely, a systematic reconstruction of an answer, based on the Cartesian texts, to the question, “How is an ideal seeker made?,” as if Descartes had explicitly chosen to ask and answer that question.

An ideal seeker after truth has to pass through four stages.⁶ The first stage consists of his “original state of ignorance” (CSM II, 413; AT X,

⁴ For other conjectures see R, 196–197, note 6.

⁵ See C, 35–38. That Curley overstates the case by underplaying the method presented in *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* and overplaying the method presented in the *Discourse on the Method*, and in subsequently published works, does not detract from what he says about Descartes’ evolving view of both method and mathematics.

⁶ Since this is admittedly a reconstruction, my primary task is to invite the reader to consider not only whether Descartes clearly delineated the four states, but also his thinking that the ideal seeker passes through these states as if they were stages in a progressive order. Descartes did not explicitly develop the notion of an ideal seeker and put it to epistemic use, nor did he take a stand, for or against, on a progressive order of such states, since he did not treat this issue explicitly. However, there is some historical evidence to suggest that the proposed reconstruction is not entirely alien to Descartes’ philosophy; indeed, it might be seen to play a vital role in it. See, for example, the final chapter of this book, pages 266–267 and notes 31 and 32.

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519).⁷ Initially, everyone belongs in this group. Out of this group are sifted those desiring to be seekers after truth from the others who have no such desire; given their dispositions, the nonseekers are unsuited for the philosophical task. This constitutes the second stage. From the group of those desiring to be seekers are distinguished, on the basis of certain right qualities, potentially ideal seekers from those who are not. This is the third stage. These potentially ideal seekers have finally to undergo preparation – study and reflection – in the fourth and last stage, as a way of making them ideal seekers before actually commencing the philosophical task.

The *first stage, the original state of ignorance*. “[A]s regards reason or sense,” says Descartes, “since it is the only thing that makes us men and distinguishes us from the beasts, I am inclined to believe that it exists whole and complete in each of us” (CSM I, 112; AT VI, 2).⁸ Then it would appear that anyone, at the start, is fit for the task of philosophical inquiry; but there are hindrances. Each normal person, at birth, has the senses of taste, smell, touch, sight, and hearing fully and dominantly functioning in him; reason, at this point, plays a small and subservient role. Here commences the growth of “the first obstacle” (CSM II, 406; AT X, 508). For the senses are essentially imperfect: They often deliver false reports about the external world; our inclinations are quite corrupt, our nurses foolish; our appetites and teachers are opposed, our instincts blind. Thus, we are all in the original state of ignorance, and the problem is how to emancipate ourselves from it so that we may become fit truth seekers.

The *second stage, the stage of sifting*: There are two types of individuals – “types of minds” – who are clearly unsuited for philosophical inquiry.

First, there are those who, believing themselves cleverer than they are, cannot avoid precipitate judgements and never have the patience to direct all their

⁷ In the letter of February 27, 1637, to Mersenne, Descartes wrote, “I was afraid that weak minds might avidly embrace the doubts and scruples which I would have had to propound and afterwards be unable to follow as fully the arguments by which I would have endeavoured to remove them. Thus I would have set them on a false path and been unable to bring them back.” (CSMK, 53; AT I, 350) Scholars are not agreed on the exact date of this letter.

⁸ “[F]ew,” wrote Descartes to Mersenne on October 16, 1639, “are capable of understanding metaphysics.” (CSMK, 65; AT II, 596) It must follow that the final group of inquirers after truth would be inordinately small.

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thoughts in an orderly manner; consequently, if they once took the liberty of doubting the principles they accepted and of straying from the common path, they could never stick to the track that must be taken as a short-cut, and they would remain lost all their lives. Secondly, there are those who have enough reason or modesty to recognize that they are less capable of distinguishing the true from the false than certain others by whom they can be taught; such people should be content to follow the opinions of these others rather than seek better opinions themselves. (CSM I, 118; AT VI, 15)

In short, none of these men are “of a fairly robust intellect” (CSM II, 320; AT VII, 475).

Descartes’ fear of losing an individual in the morass of doubt was a genuine one. For him, knowledge was a guide to action, and actions were necessary to the making of a good person. Thus, ignorance and confusion could easily produce poor or evil deeds. Even a good method could produce, in someone incompetent, a bad person. This result must be avoided at all cost. For learning is of secondary importance in comparison to good deeds.

A good man is not required to have read every book or diligently mastered everything taught in the Schools. It would, indeed, be a kind of defect in his education if he had spent too much time on book-learning. Having many other things to do in the course of his life, he must judiciously measure out his time so as to reserve the better part of it for performing good actions – the actions which his own reason would have to teach him if he learned everything from it alone. (CSM II, 400; AT X, 495–496)

The moral risks are plainly too high for anyone who is incompetent to embark on the kind of enterprise Descartes has in mind.

Who, then, is fit for the philosophical task? I am attempting to search for minimal conditions or qualities that a person must possess, in Descartes’ view, in order to perform that task; anyone who possesses anything more is more than qualified. In short, I am looking for necessary conditions, jointly adding up to a sufficient condition, that would make a person an ideal seeker.

The *third stage, the stage of determining the right qualities*: The ideal seeker must be someone of at least average intelligence, who has reached the age of discretion, whose senses are in good condition, who is blessed with a modicum of insight and has common sense; this eliminates the necessity of having gone to School (and thus having

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received training in grammar and logic). Peter Ramus, whose logical system Descartes had studied, had defined such a person as a syllogistic reasoner, and not just as a reasoner. So in Ramus' view an ideal seeker would be essentially equipped with syllogistic reasoning. Not so for Descartes; he maintained that he had never presumed his own mind "to be in any way more perfect than that of the ordinary man" (CSM I; 111, AT VI, 2).⁹ Descartes would have been quite pleased with John Locke's remark that "God has not been so sparing to men to make them barely two-legged creatures, and left it to Aristotle to make them rational, i.e., those few of them that he could get so to examine the grounds of syllogisms."¹⁰

The ideal seeker must have a quick wit, a sharp and distinct imagination, ample and prompt memory, and the strongest ability to reason; he must be skilled at ordering his thoughts, troubled by no cares or passions, and capable of seeing clearly into his own actions; he must not be precipitate in his judgments, nor influenced by custom and example; he must allow adequate time in planning his work, and proceed confidently in this life. Only such an ideal seeker will persevere unswervingly in this task and eventually discover the truth, and having

⁹ This was no mere false modesty. It was typical of the newfound confidence in reason and the belief that reason, whole and complete, was universal in man. Descartes conducted himself accordingly. Thus, he taught his servant, Jean Gillot, and Dirk Rembrandtsz, a cobbler, mathematics; the former became director of an engineering school at Leiden. Noting his talents, Descartes hired Henry Schultzer as his manservant, so that Schultzer might assist him in his experiments. The captain of a ship on which Descartes had traveled was so impressed with Descartes' vast knowledge of meteorology that when they reached Stockholm, the captain boasted to Christina that Descartes had taught him more in three weeks than he had learned in sixty years at sea. Clearly, Descartes' theory belied his practice: Ordinary people, without any formal learning, can learn difficult and important things. Perhaps this was the net result of his Jesuit education: "The equality the Jesuits established among [the students]," he wrote, "hardly treating the highest born any differently from the most humble, was an extremely good invention" (R, 11; see also vii, 184–186).

The provisional title of *Discourse on the Method* was *Project for a universal science which might raise our nature to its highest degree of perfection. Next the Dioptric, the Meteors, where the most curious matters which the author could find to give proof of the universal science he proposes are explained in such a manner that even those who have never studied can understand them*. He suggested that an ideal seeker should be at least twenty-four years old (CSMK, 120; AT II, 347), because "the younger they are, the less liberty they have," due to the soft nature of their brains (CSMK, 190; AT III, 424), which makes them unfit for learning.

¹⁰ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Volume 2, p. 391.

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discovered it, be able to persuade others of it. Such seekers will be able to persuade “even if they speak only low Breton and have never learned rhetoric” (CSM I, 114; AT VI, 7).

There might be a conflict of propositions here. In the “Fourth Set of Replies,” Descartes had warned that the *Meditations on First Philosophy* should be studied only “by very intelligent and well-educated readers” (CSM II, 172; AT VII, 247). One might conclude that Descartes had not made up his mind whether he wanted his ideal seeker to be just intelligent, like Polyander in *The Search for Truth* (in which Polyander is to Eudoxus what the slave boy was to Socrates in *Meno*), or whether he wanted an ideal seeker who was very intelligent. Again, did Descartes want his ideal seeker to be initially without education, as Polyander was? Or did he want the ideal seeker to be someone initially with a solid education? And yet, says an excited, marveling Eudoxus, who has taken Polyander through the *cogito*, “Would you have thought that an uneducated man who had never bothered to study could reason with such precision, and be so consistent in all his arguments?”¹¹ (CSM II, 415; AT X, 522) Obviously, being well educated is not a necessary condition for being an ideal seeker. Descartes is concerned, in his “Fourth Set of Replies,” to fend off the objection that his method of doubt will engender doubt in the believers, and turn many a person away from the truths of faith. Descartes’ counter would have been that such men, if they turned away from their faith, would be precipitate in their judgment and hence would not qualify as ideal seekers.

It is not clear whether the qualities that a person possesses, such as the qualities of quick wit, prompt memory, and sharp imagination, or the qualities of being precipitate in one’s judgments and having modest reasoning abilities, are essential properties or accidental ones. If merely accidental, then those eliminated at the stage of sifting can

¹¹ Since this is of some importance later, I cite the historical root of this approach. In the Prologus of Raymond Sebond’s *Natural Theology*, written in the 1420s or early 1430s, Sebond wrote: “And there is no need that anyone should refrain from reading it or learning it from lack of other learning: it presupposes no knowledge of Grammar, Logic, nor any other deliberative art or science, nor of Physics nor of Metaphysics. . . .” (Appendix II, in Michele de Montaigne, *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, xli–xlii) Such was the man Polyander; such was the ideal seeker who could be persuaded of what Descartes was trying to persuade him.

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return to the fold by appropriately training themselves, acquiring the necessary prerequisites to be an ideal seeker. If essential, then the set of ideal seekers constitutes a natural class; genuine knowledge seekers would be born, not made. Inasmuch as Descartes maintains that reason exists in each person whole and complete, he must maintain the more realistic doctrine, as follows: All persons are capable of discovering the truth, some more than others. Those who make poor seekers are those in whom reason is clouded by a host of contingent factors over which they have little control.

“Having thus prepared our understanding to make perfect judgments about the truth, we must also learn to control our will by distinguishing good things from bad, and by observing the true difference between virtues and vices” (CSM II, 405; AT X, 506). This is putting the cart before the horse: One cannot prepare the understanding to make perfect judgments without the will; if the will is not in control, it will make poor affirmations or denials. I find it surprising how very little Descartes says about the will in the earlier portions of either the *Meditations on First Philosophy* or the *Discourse on the Method*, given its central importance in his epistemology. For one thing, it is only the will’s affirmation that introduces the question of truth or falsity into the discussion. Without the will, such questions cannot arise, and so knowledge seeking cannot proceed apace without the will. Descartes speaks of the intellectual qualities of the seeker, of the morals he should adopt while engaged in his philosophical quest, but there is virtually nothing about the will or the goodness of the will, how it should be controlled and trained, and so on, in order that it may act without error.¹²

The *fourth stage, the stage of preparation*: The potentially ideal seeker does not jump into making philosophical inquiries, not yet. He has to prepare himself. He travels and gathers experience of men and the world; he moves in the company of gifted men. (He reads books; and, as a daily routine, he engages in the study of mathematics. These clearly

¹² Why not think, one might ask, that the will is trained through enacting the analytic method of the *Meditations*? I have two reservations: First, there is *no* evidence that Descartes intended that; second, if the will – of a mature individual – is to make appropriate choices as it wades through the *Meditations*, would it not already have to possess goodness, say, if it is not to run afoul and choose erroneously? As an antidote to my reservations, see the splendid Chapter 2, “Descartes: Willful Thinking,” in Michael Losonsky, *Enlightenment and Action from Descartes to Kant: Passionate Thought*.

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go far beyond the necessary conditions for the making of an ideal seeker. Descartes did these things, but he did not make Polyander, his example of an ideal inquirer, do them.) Thus, the ideal seeker trains his mind, deepens it, makes it more powerful, so that when he finally embarks on his philosophical inquiries he will be a person whose mind is properly balanced between intellectual and emotional matters, and his will will be strong and clear. This, then, is the nature of the ideal seeker, and this is how he is made.

Polyander says, "I am a man who has never engaged in study or accustomed himself to turning his mind so far away from things that are perceivable by the senses" (CSM II, 408; AT X, 512). Epistemon, a bookish man, asserts, "I agree that it is very dangerous to proceed too far in this line of thinking" (CSM II, 408; AT X, 512). Eudoxus (playing the role of Descartes) counters thus: "I confess that it would be dangerous for someone who does not know a ford to venture across it without a guide, and many have lost their lives in doing so. But you have nothing to fear if you follow me." (CSM II, 408; AT X, 512) A strong and bold explorer can lose himself without a guide; a man of common sense and discretion can lose himself, too, without someone to guide him in his search for knowledge. Thus, even the ideal seeker needs a guide, a method.

II. The Method: The Rationalist Thread

If Descartes had been asked, "What is the aim of science?," he no doubt would have replied, quite simply, "The absolute truth." He took truth to be indefinable, but he might have granted the following distinction. There is phenomenal truth, $truth_p$, and there is rational truth, $truth_r$. When we combine $truth_p$ and $truth_r$, we get absolute truth. What, then, are these two species of truth? Descartes wanted our theories of the world to at least match our experiences and experiments. The theories should "enable us to explain all natural phenomena [i.e., the effects that we perceive by means of our senses]" (CSM I, 248; AT VIIIA, 80). Such theories are $true_p$. What cannot explain the deliverances of our sense experiences is, at a minimum, not phenomenally true, and hence not absolutely true.

Now, it is entirely possible for two theories to be $true_p$, that is, phenomenally true, without their being $true_r$, that is, rationally true.