

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Cartesianism

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7pd5p5x2>

ISBN

978-1-3500-1280-6

Author

Van den Abbeele, Georges

Publication Date

2019

Peer reviewed

Georges Van Den Abbeele
Office of the Dean of Humanities
Humanities Gateway 4100
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697

Cartesianism

Cartesianism is a rationalist philosophy based in the work of the 17th century philosopher, René Descartes. Cartesianism proposes a deductive reasoning based on incontrovertibly "clear and distinct" ideas, and the analytic division of problems into smaller units, to be resolved in a rational progression from simplest to most complex. Inspired by the model of geometry, classic Cartesianism also draws a sharp distinction between mind and matter, viewing the latter in essentially mechanical and mathematical terms, while the former's validity is guaranteed by the existence of a benevolent God.

Descartes's intellectual trajectory was fundamentally motivated by the refutation of skepticism and concomitant search for an "unshakeable" principle of certainty that could serve as the basis from which to derive a properly scientific philosophy. Through a heuristic and hyperbolic exercise of doubt that effectively tests the limits of skepticism, Descartes locates this first principle in the ability to doubt literally everything except for the fact that one is engaged in the act of doubting. Doubting, understood as a form of thinking, or cogitation, in turn implies the existence of the agent or subjectivity doing the thinking, whence the self-evidentiary or "innate" truth of his most famous line, *cogito ergo sum*, "I think therefore I am."

Along the way to this fundamental insight, however, and then in his subsequent thinking, Descartes adumbrated various other propositions that became the hallmarks of Cartesianism as a form of rationalist idealism. The classic skeptical insistence on the unreliability of sensory perception, for example, not only contrasts with his claim for the epistemological superiority of mathematical formulas and innate ideas, but that distinction motivates a more radical separation between substance and thought, or mind and body. This dualism in turn creates its own set of new problems, including the exact nature of the relation between the two realms, that Cartesianism forever remains at pains to try to resolve (although Descartes himself comes close in his late *Passions of the Soul*). Moreover, the foundationalism of innate ideas from which the features of reality are subsequently to be explained tends to support a doctrinaire form of deductive reasoning whose failures (the attempt in Part V of the *Discourse on Method* to explain the circulation of the blood in terms of heat transfer) are as glaring as its successes (the invention of analytic geometry).

And while the reduction of perceived reality to mathematical and mechanical principles inaugurates the scientific revolution, the limitations of Cartesian rationalism were soon countered by the inductive approach of British empiricism; and then later by the Kantian critique of reason as presupposing *a priori* concepts of space and time; the Freudian notion of the unconscious which undermines the apparent autonomy of the conscious, cogitating subject; the Heideggerian overcoming of the Cartesian subject/object distinction through the ontologically prior concept of *Dasein* as Being-in-the-world; and a host of other modernist and

postmodernist rejections of rationalism. Nonetheless, strong revivals of Cartesian thinking also appear in Husserlian phenomenology, Chomskyan linguistics, and many forms of structuralism. All of these, very different approaches nonetheless reaffirm, with explicit reference to Descartes, the methodological value of abstract or universal concepts as the basis for strong forms of deductive analysis.

FURTHER READING

René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).

Jean-Luc Nancy, *Ego Sum: Corpus, Anima, Fabula*, trans Marie-Eve Morin, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

Harry Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes's Meditations* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970).

Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987).