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Paper #3

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**René Descartes: The certainty of a doubt**

After dealing with the philosophical practices of Plato, I realize that René Descartes in his literary work on the *Discourse on the Method* takes philosophy to a more practical level. His philosophy not only relies much less on the opinions of others, but he himself exemplifies a strategy to reaching his ultimate goal. Similar to Plato, he is able to immunize himself far from the material world that money can corrupt, but he uses a scientific reasoning that allows him to master a desire that he sets out for. He uses this arithmetic reasoning adapted from geometric proofs not to show people they are still in the dark, but instead as a guide out of it. Descartes is not only a philosopher, but also a form of artesian that he calls a Cartesian. While I am still unconvinced of his logic that god necessarily exists, his process for reaching his logic is one that many can learn from. Through the use of scientific reasoning, and most importantly the exemplification of his own practice, Descartes taps into a process of thought that might allow people to become masters of nature.

Descartes sheds light on the use of scientific reasoning, which uses this arithmetic approach to solve problems. While many other philosophers use similar logic, Descartes converts this arithmetic approach used in geometry into a process of reasoning to solve more qualitative thought. Unlike many philosophers, he is not expressing a particular moral code, but more of a moral compass. He reveals this process may not only provide us with direction, but an effective way to avoid error when drawing conclusions. This form of reasoning can benefit human kind because it provides both a starting point and an ending point, similar to that of proving a geometric property. Regardless of the outcome, a person is better off when following a logical route versus irrational decision making. Descartes gives a clear example of this methodology when he gives a metaphor of a lost traveller:

In this respect I would be imitating a traveller who, upon finding himself lost in a forest, should not wander about turning this way and that, and still less stay in one place, but should keep walking as straight as he can in one direction, never changing it for slight reasons even if mere chance made him choose it in the first place; for in this way, even if he does not go exactly where he wishes, he will at least end up in a place where he is likely to be better off than in the middle of a forest. (Descartes 32)

The purpose of a proof is to verify one’s doubt or validate one’s certainty. In the metaphor described by Descartes, he shows that despite you may be wrong in the beginning; one is still better off validating that they are wrong through finishing the proof from start to finish. The point of the proof is not to solve an actual problem, but a way to systematically justify a reason that may pertain to the overall problem. To further strengthen this form of Cartesian reasoning, Descartes’s entire pursuit of philosophy demonstrates a source of motivation and practice, which is far from entrapped by only the material world, as I will explain next.

Descartes encounters many experiences and travels including a privileged education. With this combination he uses both an open mind and systematic reasoning to convey his philosophy. The most effective part is how he practices what he preaches and acknowledges certain commonly accepted principles like scientific reasoning. I find the most respect for Descartes in his reasoning for choosing his works to be published after his death. He himself is an example of someone who chooses to master their art, and he realizes that distractions like money and proving the direct opinions of others incorrect, only constricts his progress. Unlike Plato who wastes much time conversing with his colleagues and not masters, Descartes sets out a mission for himself with a starting point, a strategy, and an end purpose. On page 47, Descartes reaffirms that it is possible to become a master of nature. While I am convinced of this ability to master a thorough understanding of everything that makes up our lives beyond the scientific level taught in school, I still question when Descartes says, “for all the purposes for which it is appropriate . . .” (Descartes 47). I question this because Descartes acknowledges that one can master anything based on two sacrifices: freedom from the influence of money, and the continual pursuit of that passion until death. But, my concern derives from what happens when someone becomes content with what they know, and then using that knowledge inappropriately or in easier words for selfish reasons. What happens when a master finds himself lost, and the desire to improve him or her self, cannot overpower the material distractions that will reverse the mentality that they initially embraced.

Evaluating this passage on page 47, I realize the insight gained from Descartes is not necessarily in his philosophical ideas, but in both his process of reasoning and the importance of finding a purpose. His Cartesian project is an example of how one may go about mastering a purpose one sets out for his or her self. He does more than just give insight, but actual inspiration. And, despite certain ideas that I feel are backed by too much assumption, his form of reasoning provides a very convincing validity to his statements. I can question his ideas, but I cannot question his reasoning for them.

Works Cited

Descartes, René. Discourse on the Method. Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stouthoff and Dugald Murdoch. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 20-56. Print.

***“I pledge my honor that I have neither received nor provided unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.”***