

Rene descartes the father of modern philosophy



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Rene Descartes is generally considered the father of modern philosophy. He was the first major figure in the philosophical movement known as rationalism, a method of understanding the world based on the use of reason as the means to attain knowledge (Palmer, 2011). Along with empiricism, which stresses the use of sense perception rather than pure reason, rationalism was one of the main intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, a cultural movement spanning the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that revolutionized the Western world (Palmer, 2011).

In tandem with men like John Locke, John Hobbes, and Voltaire, Descartes spurred society to re-examine its traditions and institutions, leading to massive social upheaval. Both the American and French Revolutions were based on Enlightenment theories, and the ways we approach science, math, philosophy, and the idea of the self were radically transformed during the period. Descartes broke away from traditional philosophy in at least two fundamental ways. The first was his rejection of substantial forms as explanatory principles in physics (Kirry, 08).

A substantial form was thought to be an immaterial principle of material organization that resulted in a particular thing of a certain kind. The main principle of substantial forms was the final cause or purpose of being that kind of thing. For example, the bird called the swallow. The substantial form of "swallowness" unites with matter so as to organize it for the sake of being a swallow kind of thing. This also means that any dispositions or faculties the swallow has by virtue of being that kind of thing is ultimately explained by the goal or final cause of being a swallow (Watson, Britannica) .

So, for instance, the goal of being a swallow is the cause of the swallow's ability to fly. Hence, on this account, a swallow flies for the sake of being a swallow. Although this might be true, it does not say anything new or useful about swallows, and so it seemed to Descartes that Scholastic philosophy and science was incapable of discovering any new or useful knowledge (Palmer, 2011). Descartes rejected the use of substantial forms and their concomitant final causes in physics precisely for this reason.

Indeed, his essay *Meteorology*, that appeared alongside the *Discourse on Method*, was intended to show that clearer and more fruitful explanations can be obtained without reference to substantial forms but only by way of deductions from the configuration and motion of parts (Watson, Britannica) . Hence, his point was to show that mechanistic principles are better suited for making progress in the physical sciences. Another reason Descartes rejected substantial forms and final causes in physics was his belief that these notions were the result of the confusion of the idea of the body with that of the mind.

In the *Sixth Replies*, Descartes uses the Scholastic conception of gravity in a stone, to make his point (Kirry, 08). On this account, a characteristic goal of being a stone was a tendency to move toward the center of the earth. This explanation implies that the stone has knowledge of this goal, of the center of the earth and of how to get there. But how can a stone know anything, since it does not think? So, it is a mistake to ascribe mental properties like knowledge to entirely physical things. This mistake should be avoided by clearly distinguishing the idea of the mind from the idea of the body.

Descartes considered himself to be the first to do this. His expulsion of the metaphysical principles of substantial forms and final causes helped clear the way for Descartes' new metaphysical principles on which his modern, mechanistic physics was based (Kirry, 08). The second fundamental point of difference Descartes had with the Scholastics was his denial of the thesis that all knowledge must come from sensation (Watson, Britannica) . The Scholastics were devoted to the Aristotelian tenet that everyone is born with a clean slate, and that all material for intellectual understanding must be provided through sensation.

Descartes, however, argued that since the senses sometimes deceive, they cannot be a reliable source for knowledge. Furthermore, the truth of propositions based on sensation is naturally probabilistic and the propositions, therefore, are doubtful premises when used in arguments. Descartes was deeply dissatisfied with such uncertain knowledge. He then replaced the uncertain premises derived from sensation with the absolute certainty of the clear and distinct ideas perceived by the mind alone (Palmer, 2011). Descartes method has led to objectivity in the way modern western cultures go about solving problems.

Any conclusion not based on verifiable information and not ascendant from rigorous logic does not belong in modern law or science. In other words, the Cartesian Method removes doubt from the equation when dealing with problems that ought not involve religious, superstitious, or quasi-scientific analysis. In theory, by removing doubt from the pursuit of justice and knowledge, more objective good is attained. Good that is not otherwise attainable if unprovable information and illogical conclusions are allowed in.

However, in practice the pursuit of law and knowledge are still heavily influenced by political realities and wealth, which are supposed to be unaccounted for in the Cartesian Method. The Method breaks down because in the modern world we often rely on second hand observation as proof. Thus if the observation is flawed in some respect, then every premise built upon it is equally flawed. Any conclusion, even if based on logic, is flawed. Therefore any legal or scientific conclusion derived from the original observation is not free from doubt, not true, and therefore not useful for the purpose which it was intended.