

What are the main characteristics of Descartes' methodology



Cartesian doubt is a method of philosophical skepticism, systematic in approach; and most notably associated with the French Philosopher, 'René Descartes'; who set-out in the seventeenth century to uncover a methodological approach for discovering the origins of our perception of actuality, or indeed the source by which our perceived "actuality" is attained. His approach was epistemological, or 'Rationalist' (as it is more commonly coined); whereby logical deduction was used as the process of reasoning for deciphering a premise/statement, so that a "certain" conclusion could be made.¹ The "enlightenment era" was conceived from this process of thought, and was an important step for promoting reason over faith, regardless of Descartes assertion to have 'proved' the existence of God as a result of such (Although this may have been a necessary gesture to ensure publication of his work, as it is believed that he was an atheist, but had to tread carefully during a period of deep religious sentiment).² The purpose of this particular essay will be to outline the main characteristics in his methodology of 'doubt', as addressed in his books of 'Meditations' c. 1641, to which the above introduction relates.

Descartes sets out with the objective of confronting the principles on which all his beliefs were based, so in-order to undertake such, he aimed to find in them any grounds for doubt; and since reasoning was that from which he was persuaded, he subsequently proposed that assent should remain withheld from all those ideas that are uncertain and indubitable;³ he states that his cause for such scepticism was due (at least in-part) to a deception that his senses had delineated unto him, and

¹ M. Wilson, *The Arguments Of The Philosophers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul plc. 1978) p. XIII-XIV.

² R. G. Brown, *Why Descartes Proof of God's Existence is Bullshit*, 2007

<<https://webhome.phy.duke.edu/~rgb/Philosophy/axioms/axioms/node42.html>> [Accessed February 26th 2019].

³ M. Wilson, *The Arguments Of The Philosophers* p. 1.

that it was 'wiser not to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived.'⁴ To provide example he gives comparison of a perceived reality with that of a perceived dream-state, whereby in both the former and latter he is enveloped in similar circumstance, i.e., placed beside the fire, whilst attired, and with paper in-hand; however, when he reflects, he acknowledges 'that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep.'⁵ Here he sets the premise for which this work is intended - by placing doubt against all that we believe to be true.

The narrative of these *Meditations* is sequential; it is a process of learning for the learned philosopher, as-well-as the readership who follow. He casts his wish from the very start to commence a new foundation, through riddance of all these opinions he had formerly accepted - to upheave and conquer through meditative means, in order to decipher the very essence of knowledge.⁶ He metaphorically analogises this through the use of a basket of apples. 'For supposing one had such a basket, and wished to rid themselves of a potential rot, in order that they may better curb the spread - how then would one begin? Well, by tipping out the entire basket of course, and thereon, picking through each apple with a skeptical eye; returning those which seem sound, whilst disregarding the remainder.'⁷ 'Once a void is created upon "turning the whole of the apples out of the basket" any fully active state would suffice to establish our existence.'⁸

Seeing as dreams are regarded by the overwhelming majority as illusionary; opposed to that of the 'real world' with its wholehearted mass-perception of "truth"; Descartes had to establish a method with which to challenge the normative approach. The irony that he applies to his work has often led to a broad range of misunderstandings - the seriousness of this piece could even be brought to question, for Descartes' test against his own belief system may have been no more than the intellectual ramblings of a drunk and/or hallucinogenic lunatic (albeit one of strong literary ability), since the pretext for his 'hypothesis' is no more than an unorthodox gut-quest into the depths of the unknown. Further irony here would also lie in the unquestionable debate that would derive had the latter joke been assured; i.e. whether or not the hallucinogenic state is indeed the true consciousness of the soul; and the opposing normative state; the fraudulent. There is of course no end to the questions that can arise from this topic, since the topic itself was conceived on the base of naught, in the same way I myself might decide to question the existence of a sheep's bosom.

Nevertheless, Descartes does provide his readership with an important message; and that is to question each and all - to be analytical with oneself; one's inner-self; for to better one's understanding of the self, is to further one's appreciation of the 'cause and effect' relationship and thus all that we think we know.

However, to combat the dilemma of a neverending tirade of thought-analysis, he created a persona through use of his imagination known as the 'Evil Genius'.

*'I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, the colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but illusions and dreams of which this evil genius has availed himself, in order to lay traps for my credulity. I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things'*⁹

⁴ R. Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, transl. by Haldane, E. S. in *'The Philosophical Works of Descartes'* (Cambridge University Press 1911) p. 7.

⁵ R. Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, transl. by Haldane, E. S. p. 7.

⁶ R. Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, transl. by Haldane, E. S. p. 6.

⁷ L. Newman, *Descartes Epistemology*, 1997

<<https://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/archives/spr2001/entries/descartes-epistemology/>> [Accessed February 26th 2019].

⁸ S. Wagner, Descartes' Cogito: A Generative View. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 1(2), (1984), pp. 167-180. (p. 179).

⁹ Bouwsma, O. K. "Descartes' Evil Genius." *The Philosophical Review* 58(2) (1949), pp. 141-51. <DOI:10.2307/2181388> [Accessed 25th February 2019] p.141.

As one of the main characteristics of his methodology the evil genius serves as a question against the motive of our creator - paralleled to God, and challenging the assumption that god is good, and opening a new channel to suggest that perhaps, such is not the case¹⁰. This is a methodological procedure operated by the will and imagination in order to make a certain experiment.¹¹ 'The demon is an image that Descartes has generated in the absence of all external forces--as such it signifies his potency to generate representations.'¹² His thinking, then, is in line with the view that the full force of the doubt, encapsulated in the image of the evil demon, is in itself a representation generated by the mind in the absence of all external forces.¹³ If you doubt everything, or try to doubt everything, you eventually have to arrive at a point, where there is one thing at least that you can't doubt, and for Descartes that is the existence of his own mind. The reason you can't doubt your own mind is because the mind is a thinking thing, and in order to doubt your own mind you have to have a process of thinking.

Descartes method was ultimately one of constructive reasoning - for his aim was to reach certainty - the final goal, or end-game, if you will, however some would argue that 'since 'doubt' is, from the outset, a process that Descartes has initiated, (requiring for its very formulation, reference to external elements, like dressing gowns and fires)¹⁴ the certainty of "I exist" does not arise through inference from an indubitable premise, but stems directly from the thinkers performance of a particular mental act - the act of attempting to doubt his own existence.'¹⁵ The notion from the very offset could be branded as "existentially self-defeating". 'Descartes doubt is itself the factor that makes apparent the indubitability of his existence, for his attempt to represent his own non-existence through the image of the demon - exerts a causal efficacy and compels his assent to the fact he exists.'

To conclude, the methodology of doubt is commonly characterised by the famed; 'I think, therefore, I am' - known as the 'Cogito' or the "final" stage of his object. 'The cognito 'embodies a direct cognition of thought by means of itself' i.e. the residue of everything that could not be doubted. 'The Cogito' is the "ultimate" point which Descartes attains by dismissing all his memories, and thus, eliminating all mental content he has accumulated in the past, as-well-as denying himself access to the deliverance of all present external forces; therefore by isolating himself, he held the notion that any ideas of which he was still aware could only have arisen from the mind's own operations. 'The cogito indeed seems to indicate that the mind self-causes its own existence.'¹⁶

1. Bouwsma, O. K. "Descartes' Evil Genius." *The Philosophical Review* 58(2) (1949), pp. 141-51. <DOI:10.2307/2181388> [Accessed 25th February 2019].
2. Brown, R. G. *Why Descartes Proof of God's Existence is Bullshit*, 2007 <<https://webhome.phy.duke.edu/~rgb/Philosophy/axioms/axioms/node42.html>> [Accessed February 26th 2019].
3. Descartes, R. *Meditations of First Philosophy*, transl. by Haldane, E. S. in 'The Philosophical Works of Descartes' (Cambridge University Press 1911).
4. Newman, L. *Descartes Epistemology*, 1997 <<https://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/archives/spr2001/entries/descartes-epistemology/>> [Accessed February 26th 2019].
5. Wagner, S. Descartes' Cogito: A Generative View. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 1(2), (1984), pp. 167-180. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27743676>> [Accessed: 25th February 2019].
6. Wilson, M. (1978) *Descartes' The Arguments Of The Philosophers*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul plc.

¹⁰ L. Newman, *Descartes Epistemology*.

¹¹ S. Wagner, Descartes' Cogito: A Generative View. p. 174.

¹² S. Wagner, Descartes' Cogito: A Generative View. p. 176.

¹³ S. Wagner, Descartes' Cogito: A Generative View. p. 175.

¹⁴ S. Wagner, Descartes' Cogito: A Generative View. p. 174.

¹⁵ S. Wagner, Descartes' Cogito: A Generative View. p. 169.

¹⁶ S. Wagner, Descartes' Cogito: A Generative View. pp. 175-176.

