

# *Why Descartes was not a Philosopher*

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René Descartes is commonly called the Father of Modern Philosophy. Strictly speaking, Descartes was not a philosopher. What, for centuries, we have mistakenly identified as philosophy in his thinking is actually a new type of rhetoric which he had synthesized from the humanism and scholasticism of his time and from his Christian faith in God as a creator. The ancient historical roots of Cartesian thought lie in classical sophistry and poetry and in an *apocryphal* notion of philosophy as a *hidden system* of thought which can be apprehended only through a revelatory, practical exegesis of the sort claimed by an ancient poet, sophist, or magician. This apocryphal notion of philosophy originated before the advent of Christianity and was transmitted through Medieval masters of the *trivium* to Renaissance nominalists and humanists—through whom it eventually became adopted by Descartes.<sup>1</sup>

Some readers might be tempted to dismiss what I have just said. None, however, can summarily dismiss the firm and clear pronouncement made by Jacques Maritain about the nature of modern subjective idealism. In *The Peasant of the Garonne*, Maritain stated he had never “spoken more seriously” than when he challenged “with might and main” the right of subjective idealists to call themselves philosophers.<sup>2</sup>

According to Maritain, the purported philosophy of modern subjective idealists is actually secularized theology, which he considered to be a Grand

<sup>1</sup> Many of the arguments I make in this article I present in wider context in other works. For a comprehensive textual analysis of my claim that Descartes is a sophist, see Peter A. Redpath, *Cartesian Nightmare: An Introduction to Transcendental Sophistry* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands and Atlanta, Georgia: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1997). For historical support of this claim, see my work, *Wisdom's Odyssey: From Philosophy to Transcendental Sophistry* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands and Atlanta, Georgia: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 102.

Protagorean Sophistry. He was absolutely adamant in his claim that adherents to the method of reasoning practiced by subjective idealism are not philosophers: "All these men begin with thought alone, and there they remain . . . What does this mean? They impugn . . . the absolutely basic foundation of philosophic research. They are not philosophers."<sup>3</sup>

When the modern world began in the seventeenth century, a little more than a hundred years had elapsed since the Italian humanist Polidoro Vergilio (Polydore Vergil) "published a reference book about discoveries or inventions . . ."<sup>4</sup> By the time Vergilio died in 1555, his work had appeared in thirty Latin editions, "and by the early eighteenth century more than a hundred versions had accumulated in eight languages, including Russian."<sup>5</sup> The significance of these events lies in a notion of philosophy which Vergilio helped pass on to posterity from chapter sixteen of Book 1.

In this chapter Vergilio gives an apocryphal account of the origin of philosophy, first fabricated in a similar version by some Alexandrian Jews of the Diaspora.<sup>6</sup> For similarly apologetic purposes of elevating the status of their own activities, Renaissance humanists revived the notion that philosophy originated in an esoteric teaching given directly by God in seminal form to Moses, which was purportedly later transmitted in hidden form by poets and other exceptional individuals. Ernst Robert Curtius reports that this apocryphal history of philosophy was first formulated among Alexandrian, Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora as a basis for apologetics against the charge made by "educated pagans" that the Israelites were "cultureless barbarians."<sup>7</sup> Curtius writes:

If, to educated pagans, the Jews were cultureless barbarians because the Greek historians had nothing to say about them, the Alexandrian Jews undertook to refute this and other reproaches by glorifying their own tradition and, above all, by showing that it harmonized with Greek philosophy; nay more, that Greek philosophy owed its origin to the Jewish patriarchs and principally to Moses, who became, to late Judaism, "the most important figure in the entire history of religion," the "true teacher of mankind," the

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 329.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 329-331.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Published for the Bollingen Foundation by Pantheon Books, 1952), pp. 39 and 211-212.

“superman.” In the process both he and Abraham became philosophers. So we read in Eupolemius (*ca.* 150 B.C.): “Moses was the first sage and the first to teach the Jews the alphabet, which the Phoenicians took from the Jews, and the Greeks from the Phoenicians, and Moses was the first to write laws for the Jews.” This is clearly tendentious, and of a tendentiousness which does not shrink from fables and forgeries. This is even more pronounced in Artapanus. That author first tells how Abraham taught astrology to the Egyptians and Phoenicians. Then comes Moses: “The Greeks call him . . . Musaeus. This Moysos (*sic!*) was Orpheus’s teacher. As a mature man he bestowed many things of great use upon mankind. He invented ships and machines for irrigation, implements of war, and philosophy.”<sup>8</sup>

The significance of Vergilio’s transmission of a similar apocryphal interpretation of the nature and origin of philosophy is enormous for understanding both the development of modern Western culture and the general understanding of philosophy since Descartes. Vergilio’s view expressed a widespread notion which existed when the modern world first began. It was widely and quickly disseminated, across vast areas of Western Europe, mainly by rhetoricians, through assembly line printing at the very dawn of our technological age. It was “still influential in Leibniz’s lifetime,” and was accepted by the first authors of modern histories of philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

These authors were not philosophers; they were humanist rhetoricians. These works were simply a continuation of historical scholarship initiated by Petrarch which solidified a concordist notion that philosophy was a revealed, unitary *system* or *body* of truth which had been first given directly by God to Moses. They also popularized the claim that this hidden system of knowledge had been later buried in hermetic and cabalist writings, and had eventually been passed on through ancient pagan poets up to Plato and beyond.<sup>10</sup>

Also, during the course of the sixteenth century, heated debates had arisen among humanists of the *trivium*, mathematicians, and philosophers about the claim that mathematics is a science, and about the reliability of mathematical ideas and abstraction for achieving an accurate grasp of reality. Some of these debates were tied to the recent research done by Kepler, Copernicus, and others. Attacks against mathematicians became so sharp at one point at the famed Jesuit Collegio Romano that, as William Wallace reports, the distinguished Jesuit

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211-212.

<sup>9</sup> Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, p. 329.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 331-332

mathematician Father Christopher Clavius entered the dispute in the form of a “disquisition for the Society of Jesus about the way in which the mathematical disciplines could be promoted in the schools of the Society.”<sup>11</sup> Wallace says that in the late 1580s Clavius “advanced” several “prescriptions,” which included “a warning about professors of philosophy who gave an improper interpretation to passages in Aristotle and in other philosophers . . .”<sup>12</sup>

Descartes’s status as a transition figure in intellectual history must be placed within the context of actual debates which were in force among later Renaissance poets, rhetoricians, mathematicians, and philosophers. Descartes did not move the West from the skepticism of Montaigne to a new philosophy, as some thinkers have claimed. He moved the West from the predominance of one branch of Renaissance humanism to another, from the predominance of the *trivium* to the *quadrivium*. He did not generate a new philosophy, but a new rhetoric and poetry in which mathematical abstraction, rather than the poetry and rhetoric of the *trivium*, would become the tool whereby all exegesis would be measured and through which all objects of possible human cognition would be raised from a level of pre-naturally-knowable status to that of properly natural objects of human thought.<sup>13</sup>

Just as many of the Renaissance humanists had attempted to use poetry, rhetoric, and exegesis to lift from their shoulders the cultural accretions of the past to apprehend original truth, Descartes uses these same tools as handmaidens of mathematics to lift the whole of previous culture from his age. He does this by applying an exegesis of his soul through a poetically and nominalistically controlled rhetorical doubt or trained pretending to arrive at a poetical source of scientific knowing. He labels this new scientific principle an innate idea. This is not an idea hidden in and abstracted from the being of sensible things. It is what is naturally revealed to the natural, or primitive, unculturally developed, light of pure reason. Within itself pure reason holds the seeds of all science grasped in the immediacy of a single, revealed intuition.<sup>14</sup>

Descartes is certain that such an object can never be apprehended if our mental attention is disturbed and divided by the senses, emotions, or human imagination. Philosophy can never begin by looking toward the senses, and then turning away from them by means of abstraction of ideas from sense images. He thinks this method compromises reasoning from the outset. Like William of

<sup>11</sup> William A. Wallace, *Galileo and His Sources: The Heritage of the Collegio Romano in Galileo’s Science* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 136-148.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Peter Redpath, *Cartesian Nightmare*, pp. 20-22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

St. Thierry, Descartes holds that a hidden point in the soul exists where God has directly revealed to us all we need to know. God has written on our souls by leaving His imprint through seminal ideas. To apprehend things perfectly, we simply have to attend, in an undisturbed way, to what God has written on our souls. But to arrive at this hidden point is analogous to reading Renaissance humanists to get to the revealed philosophy transmitted from Moses through the Egyptians and the cabala to the ancient Greek and Roman poets and philosophers. Like mystics approaching the Mt. Carmel of St. John of the Cross, or following an Ignatian rule in a poetic exegesis of the soul, we must engage in a natural psychic purification, a general act of abstraction, from the multiplicity of sensory distractions and cultural additions which disturb and divide the attention of our primitive, pre-cultural, natural light of pure reason. Descartes's universal methodic doubt is not a scholastic or Thomistic abstraction of intelligible content from sensory images. It is a higher abstraction, a grace-like act of restoration to original mental rectitude, supposedly derived from pure reason alone, by negative judgment from all non-mathematically-oriented ways of intellectual apprehending.<sup>15</sup>

As a good rhetorician, Descartes is certain that if he can persuade his will that an object is presented to his pure reason so clearly and distinctly that it cannot be denied, he will be accepting a truth with his whole, undivided intellect, with his mind and will as one, with nothing hidden from him. What is not hidden from his mind is undeniable to his will. To him, denial, as a judgment, is an act of the will. But what is perfectly clear to his undisturbed mind contains nothing within it which can cause his will to deny it.<sup>16</sup>

For Descartes, science is not a habit of the mind. It is the clear and distinct, unhidden, content of perfect knowledge revealed by God to pure reason in the undivided attention and enthusiasm of the whole intellect. In good poetic fashion, Descartes understands the object of science to be immediate and revealed, or inspired.

While some might find it difficult to accept that Descartes's noetic is rooted in poetry and rhetoric, Maritain observes that Descartes said he considered "the enthusiasm and inspiration of the poets" to be "a means of discovery incomparably more powerful than reason heavily armed and the logic of the philosophers."<sup>17</sup> He asserted that while the "seeds of science" which exist in human beings just as in hard stone "are educed through the reasoning of the

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22, 81-91, and 93-108.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes: Together with Some Other Essays*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), p. 24.

philosopher, they are driven out and shine forth more through the imagination of the poet."<sup>18</sup> In Latin, the text reads:

Mirum videri possit, quare graves sententiae in scriptis poetarum, magis quam philosophorum. Ratio est quod per entusiasmum et vim imaginationis scripsere: sunt in nobis semina scientiae, ut in silice, quae per rationem a philosophis educuntur, per imaginationem a poetis excutiuntur magis elucent.<sup>19</sup>

We should also note that Descartes's first work was not his *Discourse on Method*, begun in 1627, but, like St. Augustine in preparation for baptism, a short work on a subject of the *quadrivium*, music (called *Compendium musicae*), dedicated, as a sign of his love, to Isaac Beeckman in 1618.<sup>20</sup> In his "Introduction" to this work, Charles Kent remarks that, from "an aesthetic viewpoint," this is the work of "a perceptive Humanist," making in its opening section "concerning the relationship of music to the emotions and to the soul" remarks that "are typical of Humanist thought."<sup>21</sup> In this little work, Descartes shows more than a passing knowledge of musical composition and an interest in the emotional, even rhetorical and poetic, effects of music upon the human body and soul. He emphasizes that sound pleases when it is arithmetically proportioned to the senses so as to be clear and distinct rather than complicated and indistinct.<sup>22</sup>

Descartes entitled his first major work, *Discourse on Method*, as an afterthought. He had first intended to call the piece *A History of My Mind*.<sup>23</sup> The significance of this first intention becomes more telling when we recall that, during the Renaissance, history was principally the work of orators and rhetoricians. Paul Oskar Kristeller observes:

[T]he Italian humanists on the whole were neither good nor bad philosophers, but no philosophers at all. The humanistic movement did not originate in the field of philosophical studies, but it arose in that of grammatical and rhetorical studies.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192, n. 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24 and 192, and René Descartes, *Compendium of Music (Compendium musicae)*, trans. Walter Robert, with an introduction and notes by Charles Kent (Bloomington, Indiana: American Institute of Musicology, 1961), p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Kent, "Introduction," *Compendium of Music*, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> René Descartes, *Compendium of Music*, pp. 11-13 and 52-53.

<sup>23</sup> Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 127.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961), pp. 100-101.

Kristeller also asserts: “[I]f the humanists were amateurs in jurisprudence, theology, medicine, and also in philosophy, they were themselves professionals in other fields. Their domains were in the fields of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and the study of Greek and Roman authors.”<sup>25</sup>

Descartes informs us that he composed the *Discourse* as a “history” or a “fable” which he hoped would be “useful” to some and “harmful to none.”<sup>26</sup> His biographer, Adrien Baillet, indicates the presence of a *Corpus poetarum* in Descartes’s third dream. Baillet asserts that this “marks particularly and in a very distinct manner Philosophy and Wisdom joined together.”<sup>27</sup>

Descartes recognized that his approach to science was not that of the ancient philosophers. They began their reasoning from the immediate evidence of the senses. He considered such a starting point to be precisely what was wrong with the ancient method. For him, all classical philosophy was grounded upon the weak foundation of uncritical sensation.<sup>28</sup> Hence, he concluded: “[T]he other sciences, since they derive their principles from philosophy, could not have built anything solid . . .”<sup>29</sup> Descartes thought that the philosophy of the schools was something bordering upon rhetoric, or, as he says: “[P]hilosophy provides the means of speaking with probability about all things and of being held in admiration by the less learned.”<sup>30</sup>

Descartes just defined ancient rhetoric, not ancient philosophy. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates criticizes Gorgias priding himself for possessing one art by which, “without learning any other arts,” he can “prove in no way inferior to the specialists.”<sup>31</sup> In the subsequent discussion, Socrates describes the rhetorician’s activity more precisely:

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>26</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, 3rd edit., ed. and trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, Indiana and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), pp. 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> René Descartes, “Letter Preface,” *Principles of Philosophy*, in *Descartes: Discourse on Method and Other Writings*, trans. Arthur Wollaston (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1960), pp. 178-180. See also Peter A. Redpath, “Poetic Revenge and Modern Totalitarianism,” in *From Twilight to Dawn: The Cultural Vision of Jacques Maritain*, ed., Peter A. Redpath with an introduction by James V. Schall (Notre Dame, Indiana: American Maritain Association/University of Notre Dame Press), pp. 236-240.

<sup>29</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. W. D. Woodhead, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, introduction and prefatory notes, Bollingen Series 71 (New York: Bollingen Foundation, Distributed by Pantheon Books, 1966), 459B.

SOCRATES: Therefore when the rhetorician is more convincing than the doctor, the ignorant is more convincing among the ignorant than the expert. Is that our conclusion, or is it something else?

GORGIAS: That is the conclusion, in this instance.

SOCRATES: Is not the position of the rhetorician and of rhetoric the same with respect to the other arts also? It has no need to know the truth about things but merely to discover a technique of persuasion so as to appear among the ignorant to have more knowledge than the expert.

GORGIAS: But is this not a great comfort, Socrates, to be able without learning any other arts but this one to prove in no way inferior to the specialists?<sup>32</sup>

Striking is the similarity between the ancient sophist, Gorgias, and, as Descartes describes them, the philosophers of his time. Striking, too, is the similarity between Descartes and Gorgias in their quest of one easy method of knowing to become an expert in everything. To find this one, true method of science, “as soon as age permitted” Descartes “to escape the tutelage” of his teachers, he left the formal study of the *trivium*, with its literary, humanist, and nominalist content and began his re-education by pure reason alone.<sup>33</sup> Like pious Aeneas and Odysseus, he wanders. First, he travelled to learn about the book of the world. Then, one day, he began to study himself.<sup>34</sup>

As he depicts it, Descartes’s life resembles the *priscus theologus poeta* (ancient theological poet) of Renaissance humanism.<sup>35</sup> Like Odysseus besieging Troy, pious Aeneas searching for the golden fleece, or Moses, Descartes is a man who wanders, under oracular inspiration, in search of The True Method and The True Science which lies hidden in the recesses of pure reason.

As he begins Part Two of his *Discourse*, Descartes says he found himself constrained to lead himself on his search, not to follow someone else. He describes himself “like a man who walks alone and in the shadows.”<sup>36</sup> Knowingly or unknowingly, by depicting himself in this way, Descartes matched the description, given by Galileo in the *Assayer*, of the person who, unescorted by reason, wanders in labyrinth-like darkness.<sup>37</sup> Descartes maintains that he

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 459B-D

<sup>33</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Charles Trinkhaus, *In Our Own Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 712-721.

<sup>36</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>37</sup> Galileo Galilei, *The Assayer in The Scientific Background of Modern Philosophy*, ed.



“resolved to go slowly and to use so much circumspection in all things that, if” he “never advanced but slightly,” he “would at least avoid falling.”<sup>38</sup>

Descartes gives two reasons for caution and circumspection: (1) his own reason might have placed some of his opinions in him, and (2) until he had formulated an outline of his work, and had arrived at the true method of discovering true knowledge, he was susceptible to imprudent action, of discarding valuable information mixed together with worthless material. He proceeds carefully to read his jumbled thoughts. But none of the available intellectual tools were suitable to his deconstructionist, exegetical quest. He thought true philosophy did not yet exist. At best, he could consider the philosophy of his own time as an inferior rhetoric.

Like Ockham, Descartes loves simple explanations. He applies Ockham’s principle of economy to his thought, a “plurality is not to be posited without necessity.”<sup>39</sup> Hence, he puts Ockham’s razor to use to help him deconstruct cultural accretions to his mind, and, thereby, to arrive at a scientific object in no way hidden to pure reason.

In Augustinian-like fashion, and like the ancient Israelites, Descartes uses Ockham’s razor to deconstruct the thought of his predecessors and transcend them.<sup>40</sup> He combines the mathematics and logic of his predecessors, purified of their faults. And he unites the seminal ideas of the *quadrivium* and the *trivium* to devise a new tool for arriving at a universal science. Someone given to oracular dreaming might easily interpret such a synthesis to embrace a *Corpus poetarum*.

Descartes thought that he had hit upon The Method by which nothing would be “so far distant that one cannot finally reach nor so hidden that one cannot discover.”<sup>41</sup> But he had not yet discovered the one, true science. Hence, he could not yet philosophically confirm the truth of his method. The only way rationally to establish his plan’s worth was to use the ultimate criteria of any poetic super-hero, oracles in the form of dreams, visions, and inspirations. Only the blinding light of evidence (the unhidden) absorbed with his whole mind in the totality of pure emotion and will (pure psychic music) could be Descartes’s criterion of truth.

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Michael R. Matthews (Indianapolis, Indiana and Cambridge Massachusetts: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1989), pp. 56-57.

<sup>38</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>39</sup> Armand A. Maurer, *Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 281-285, and 339.

<sup>40</sup> See St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. with an introduction by D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis, Indiana and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958), p. 65.

<sup>41</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, p. 11.

Since Descartes had removed the intelligible content of physical things as principles of scientific intelligibility, he thought he would have an easy job unifying the sciences. If science only considers the content of human thought, human thought must be the universal principle of all science. During the Middle Ages, Aquinas had diversified sciences on the basis of the diversity of habits through which the diverse forms and existences of things were apprehended.<sup>42</sup> Moderate nominalists of the Renaissance, while largely rejecting the form of a physical thing as the source of scientific intelligibility, retained the notion that science was achieved through habits of the soul. After the nominalists rejected physical forms as primary sources of scientific human knowing, it became increasingly difficult for thinkers to explain the unity of science in relation to habits of the soul. Since Descartes no longer had any forms of things to worry about in science, only bad habits of thought could stand in the way of his discovery of true science and the establishment of true scientific unity. And Descartes was not worried about the right way to get rid of these bad habits so as not to confuse them with true knowledge given to us prior to bad habituation. He already knew which of them with which to begin, "It was with the simplest and easiest to know."<sup>43</sup>

A simple nominalistic procedure to follow. Get rid of false science by discarding from the mind, by an act of *remotio* (removal), all mental contents not simple and easy to understand. Even though he had not yet acquired science, Descartes says he already knew what was simplest and easiest to know. How did he know this? He does not tell us. But Father Clavius, other Jesuits, and Galileo had already told him the answer.<sup>44</sup> "[C]onsidering that of all those who have already searched for truth in the sciences, only the mathematicians were able to find demonstrations, that is, certain and evident reasons," he says he "did not doubt that it was with these same starting points that they had conducted their examinations."<sup>45</sup>

In a poetic and rhetorical way, in short, Descartes purports rationally to establish what Galileo had already maintained in the *Assayer*, that only one

<sup>42</sup> See Armand A. Maurer, "The Unity of a Science: St. Thomas and the Nominalists." Vol. 2, *St. Thomas Aquinas 1274-1974: Commemorative Studies*, ed.-in-chief Armand A. Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), pp. 269-291.

<sup>43</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, pp. 130-133. See also William A. Wallace, "Reinterpreting Galileo on the Basis of His Latin Manuscripts," in *Reinterpreting Galileo*, ed. William A. Wallace, Vol. 15, *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, gen. ed. Jude P. Dougherty (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press), pp. 14-16, and *Galileo and His Sources*, pp. 136-141, 147-149, 206-207, 260, 280, 288, 298, 335, 341, and 348.

<sup>45</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, p. 11.

level of abstraction is the means the human mind uses to reach objective reality, the abstract level of mathematical ideas. To state the same thing more poetically, for Descartes, psychic music is constituted by mathematical ideas alone. Since this is so, Descartes's method is a rhetorical technique which claims to establish four things: (1) the human intellect contains no habits of science; (2) we apprehend the unity of science in an unmediated intellectual vision of the seeds of science; (3) when we grasp these seeds through one and the same level of intellectual abstraction, we achieve knowledge; (4) abstraction now consists in viewing all things through one and the same level of mental vision, not withdrawing an intelligible content from physical things.

By removing the natures of physical things from the content of philosophical and scientific knowledge, all Descartes had left of science and philosophy was (1) a largely disembodied logic reflecting upon poetic ideas, and (2) rules for directing his mind to discover innate ideas and for conducting his reasoning once he apprehended these ideas. With these tools in mind, he thought that everything in science would be simple and easy. Science would no longer be hidden. It would be clear and distinct.<sup>46</sup>

Descartes had already applied his method to algebra and had achieved wondrous results. Given this initial success, he promised himself "to apply the method just as profitably to the problems of the other sciences."<sup>47</sup>

Accordingly, having been appointed by God for an epic journey, comparable to the siege of Troy and the rescue of Helen of Sparta, Descartes had to secure adequate shelter for himself during the course of his psychic wanderings. He had to prepare his soul with a provisional moral code for whatever dangers it might meet along the way. After morally arming his soul for his epic, metaphysical journey, in the tradition of *pious* Aeneas and Odysseus, Descartes set out in pursuit of his intellectual golden fleece. As he says:

And in all the following nine years I did nothing but wander here and there about the world, trying to be more a spectator than an actor in all the comedies that were being played out there; and reflecting particularly in each matter on what might render it suspect and give us occasion for error, I meanwhile rooted out from my mind all the errors that had been able to creep in undetected.<sup>48</sup>

He adds, "these nine years slipped away before" he "had as yet taken any stand regarding the difficulties commonly debated by learned men, or had begun to

<sup>46</sup> Peter Redpath, *Cartesian Nightmare*, pp. 39-41.

<sup>47</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, pp. 13-18.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

seek the foundations of any philosophy that was more certain than the commonly accepted one.”<sup>49</sup> After considering the “example of many excellent minds, which having already had this plan, appeared to” him “not to have succeeded,” he began “to conjure thoughts of so many difficulties that perhaps” he might not have “dared even to try” to seek the principles of his philosophy if he had not become aware “that some people had already passed the rumor around that” he “had already succeeded.”<sup>50</sup>

Reflecting upon his situation, Descartes says:

. . . it is exactly eight years since this desire made me resolve to take my leave of all those places where I could have acquaintances, and to retire here, in a country where the long duration of the war has established such well-ordered discipline that the armies quartered there seem to be there solely for the purpose of guaranteeing the enjoyment of the fruits of peace with even greater security, and where among the crowds of a great and very busy people and more concerned with their own affairs than curious about the affairs others, I have been able to live as solitary and as retired a life as I could in the remotest deserts—but without lacking any of the amenities that are to be found in the most populous cities.<sup>51</sup>

Like a psychic Simeon Stylites, Descartes “thought it necessary to try by every means to make” himself “worthy of the reputation bestowed upon” him.”<sup>52</sup> So, in the solitude of his thoughts, he began to meditate.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*