THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN THE PRIVATE AND THE PUBLIC: THE PHILOSOPHY OF DESCARTES' *DISCOURSE ON THE METHOD* [1]

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Abstract

Descartes, in his Discourse on Method, constructs an implicit dialectic between ***logos****,* ***ethos****, and* ***pathos****. This dialectic is finally resolved in the direction of logos or reason by Descartes' decision to publish his work and appeal to the public. It is only through the reflection in the public mirror that the opinions of a philosopher can be judged authentic, and it is in this sense that Descartes needs the public. This signals a rejection of traditional religious authority and a trust in the public's "totally pure natural reason."*

Introduction

If we wish to consider Descartes' philosophy as a system of knowledge produced by a philosopher, we should read his *Meditations on First Philosophy* and *The Principles of Philosophy*. We will get from them a coherent understanding of so-called Cartesian philosophy. However, if by 'philosophy' we mean the attitude of a philosopher regarding the public world and the situation in which he actually lives, nothing is better to read than Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*. It is from this point of view that I am going to approach Descartes and his philosophy.

Let us start with a brief overview. The *Discourse* serves as a preface to three essays on physics and mathematics, namely *Dioptrics*, *Meteorology* and *Geometry*, and it consists of six parts. Part One provides a history or a biography of the author; Part Two treats the method; Part Three discusses his morals; Part Four presents metaphysics; Part Five introduces readers to new physics, and finally, Part Six gives an appeal to the public.

A philological study showed that the texts of these six parts, which constitute the *Discourse* as published in 1637, were written in different periods from 1635 to 1636. According to Gilbert Gadoffre, Part One and Part Six were written before the other parts.[2] This fact seems to explain why Descartes wrote *Discourse on the Method;* he wrote it for the purpose of explaining to the public how he, as a philosopher, felt he should react when authorities unfairly censored scientific publication. In other words, what Descartes wrote in Part One and Part Six reveals part of his hidden polit-

ical philosophy, although he never revealed his political philosophy completely or in a systematic way.[3]

In this paper, I am going to discuss Descartes' attitude toward the public world, analysing mainly the text of Part Six of the *Discourse*.

1. Rhetorical Structure Of *Discourse on the Method*, Part Six

A dialectical construction can clearly be seen from the beginning of Part Six. The argument of this part is rhetorically structured in the sense that it involves the following triptych: *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos*, which are the essential three constitutive elements of rhetoric. The argument of this part appeals not only to a reader's *logos*, but also to the *pathos* and *ethos*. Accordingly, threefold rhetorical relationships can be observed in the very first paragraph of this part: one between *logos* and *ethos*, another between *logos* and *pathos*, and finally one between *ethos* and *pathos*.

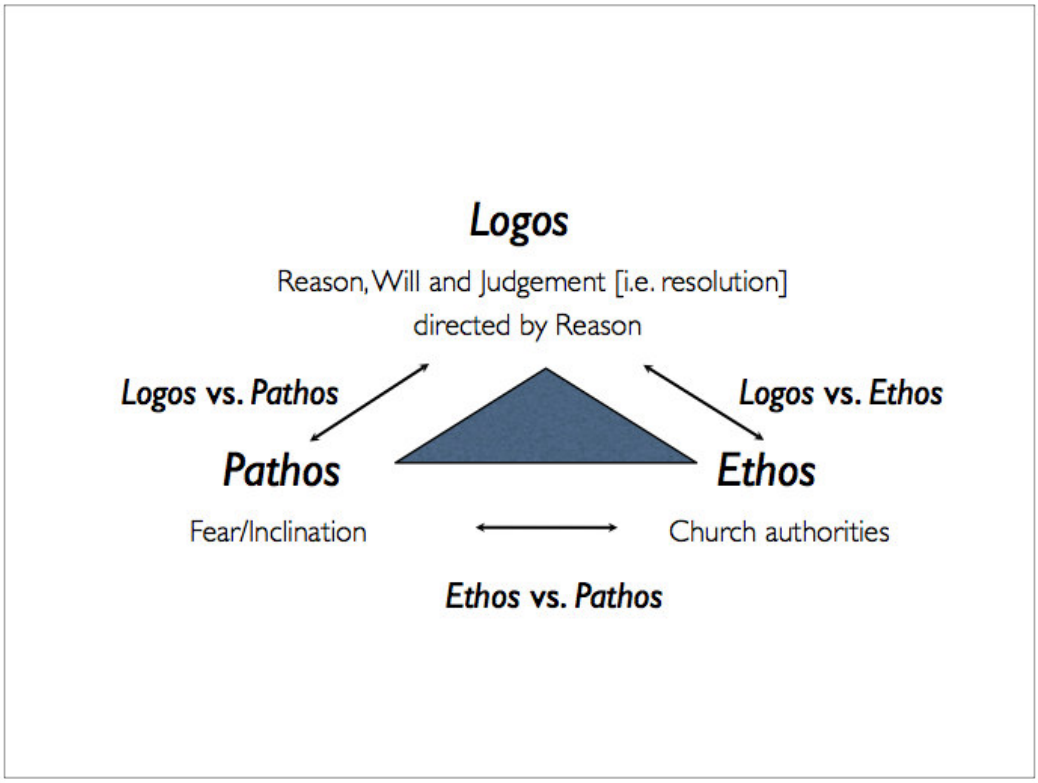
Let me begin by quoting from the first paragraph of Part Six:

> [1] But it has now been three years since I had arrived at the end of the treatise that contains all these things, and since I was beginning to review it in order to put it into the hands of a publisher, when I learned that some persons, to whom I defer and whose authority over my actions can hardly be less than that of my own reason over my thoughts, had disapproved of an opinion in physics, published a little earlier by someone else, concerning which I want to say not that I were of the same opinion, but that I had noticed nothing in it, before their censure, that I could imagine to be prejudicial either to the religion or to the state, nor, as a consequence, anything that would have prevented me from writing it, if reason had persuaded me of it, and that this made me fear that there might, all the same, be found among my opinions some one in which I had been mistaken, notwithstanding the great care that I have always taken not to accept into my beliefs any new ones for which I did not have very certain demonstrations, and not to write anything at all that could turn to the disadvantage of anyone. This has been sufficient to oblige me to change the resolution that I had had to publish my opinions. For, although the reasons for which I had earlier made the resolution were very strong, my inclination, which has always made me hate the business of writing books, made me immediately find enough other reasons to excuse myself from doing so. And these reasons, both on the one side and on the other side, are such that not only do I have some interest in stating them here, but also perhaps the public has some interest in knowing them. (Part Six, *Discourse on the Method,* p.84)[4]

The above discusses the troublesome circumstances surrounding Descartes' treatise on physics. Descartes had almost finished writing the text, which was to have been published under the title of *The World* (*Le Monde*) in 1633. He refrained from publishing it because of the Galileo affair, in which Galileo Galilei came into conflict with Catholic authorities because of his support for Copernican astronomy. The quoted paragraph is the introduction to Descartes' apology for his final de-

cision that he would try again to publicise his theses of natural philosophy. This part covers all the reasons as to why he had originally refrained from publishing *The World*, why he changed his opinion, and why he finally decided to publish some of his theses with the *Discourse*.

In the above paragraph, we see that Descartes' resolution 'to publish his opinions' conflicts with the decision of the Catholic authorities (*logos* vs. *ethos*); that his desire ('the great care') for rational thinking conflicts with his 'fear' of being mistaken (*logos* vs. *pathos*); and that the authorities' decision eventually supported his inclination 'which [had] always made [him] hate the business of writing books', and 'made [him] immediately find enough other reasons to excuse [him]self from doing so' (*ethos* vs. *pathos*).



These three-fold conflicting relations between *logos* and *ethos*, between *logos* and *pathos*, and between *ethos* and *pathos*, make a complex which will determine the dialectic in Part Six that we are going to review shortly. At the oppositional stage, it seems that *ethos* and *pathos* win over *logos*, *ethos* going together with *pathos*. We will see, however, that *logos* finally wins over *ethos* and *pathos* at the synthetic stage.

2. Three Key Moments of the Dialectical Construction of the *Discourse*, Part Six

Let us do a quick overview of Part Six. The text can be divided into three: First, from PARA 2 to the end of PARA 3; and then from PARA 4 to the end of the PARA 7, and finally from PARA 8 to the end of PARA 12. Each division corresponds to the three key moments of the dialectical development of Descartes' argument in Part Six. The three key moments are (1) appearing in the public, (2) withdrawal back into the private, and (3) authentication of the self.

2.1 Appearing In Public

Descartes wrote in the beginning of PARA 2 in Part Six:

> [2] I have never made much of the things that came from my mind, and, so long as I have gathered no other fruits from the method of which I make use except that I have satisfied myself concerning some difficulties that pertain to the speculative sciences, or else that I have tried to regulate my morals by means of the reasons that the method taught me, I have not at all believed myself to be obliged to write anything thereof. (p.85)

Withdrawal from a world of appearances into the private domain where a philosopher enjoys the life of the mind is the first and necessary condition of speculation, as Hannah Arendt explains in her final work *The Life of the Mind*.[5] And, that is why Descartes 'made the resolution to study within [himself]' and he also made the resolution 'to employ all the powers of [his] mind in choosing the paths that [he] should follow, [in which he] succeeded much',[6] he reports, and it was lucky for him, as he describes as follows, 'in the crowd of a great, very active people, and of one more concerned with its own affairs than curious about those of others, in the most frequented towns, to live as solitary and retired as in the most remote deserts.'[7]

What compelled and prompted Descartes to write and try to publish *The World* in 1633? He explains in the following passages of PARA 2 in Part Six:

> [2] But, as soon as I had acquired some general notions concerning physics, and, beginning to test them in various particular difficulties, I had noticed whereto they can lead, and how much they differ from the principles that one has used up until the present, I believed that I could not keep them secret without sinning gravely against the law that obliges us to procure, as much as it is within us, the common good of all men. For these notions have shown me that it is possible to arrive at knowledge that be very useful for life, and that, in place of that speculative philosophy that one teaches in the schools, one can find a practical philosophy, by means of which, knowing the force and the actions of fire, of water, of air, of the stars, of the heavens and of all the other bodies in our environment just as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans, we might be able, in the same fashion, to employ them for all the purposes to which they are appropriate, and thus to render ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature. (p.87)

Here we see the resurgence of the public ('the common good of all men').

If withdrawal from the world of appearances is the first and necessary condition of philosophical thinking, thinking would be nothing without making itself manifest in the world of appearances where people share a common sense and good. We are a being-of-the-world, and being-of-the-world presupposes the existence of others who are the recipients of appearances. The recipients of appearances are not singular, but plural. *They* enjoy the products of the speculation of philosophers. And this is true not only in the practical sense, but also in the ontological sense; although transcendence presupposes immanence, the latter does not function except through the former. In other words, identity cannot exist without difference.

Why would a reasonable philosopher publish his work? Descartes gives us two reasons: The first is 'the brevity of life'; the second, 'the lack of observations'.[8] The brevity of a philosopher's life prevents sciences from making progress. Hence, the outcomes of scientific research should proceed from generation to generation without interruption, in order that sciences progress continuously. Therefore, Descartes says:

> [3] I judged that there was hardly any better remedy against these two obstacles than to communicate faithfully to the public all the little that I had found, and to urge the good minds to try to advance further by contributing, each according to his inclination and his ability, to the observations that it would be necessary to make, and also by communicating to the public all the things that they might learn, in order that, the successors beginning where the predecessors had left off, and thus combining the lives and the labors of many, we all together were to go much further than each one individually could know how to do. (pp.87–89)

And also he adds:

> [3] I noticed, moreover, regarding observations, that, the further advanced in knowledge one is, the more necessary they are. (p.89)

His arguments are so persuasive that it is unlikely that we will ever find any 'other reasons' to cause Descartes to change his opinion about publishing his work.

2.2 Withdrawal Back Into The Private

But, soon after that, Descartes says:

> [4] But I have had, since that time, other reasons that have caused me to change my opinion, and to think that I really ought to continue to write about all the things that I would judge of some importance, [but that] I ought not to in any way to consent thereto that these writings were to be published during my lifetime, so that neither the opposition and controversies to which they would perhaps be subjected, nor even the reputation such as they could acquire

> for me, were to give me any occasion for losing the time that I have planned to employ in instructing myself. (p.91)

This is the moment of withdrawal. He withdraws into himself, saying that the opposition he anticipates from others, as well as the controversies that the publication of his work will introduce, which he shall inevitably be involved in, are awful enough for him to want to avoid publication, even though he promises to himself that he will continue to write. So, he temporarily decided not to publicise his work.

Oppositions might be useful, Descartes concedes, as much in providing better understanding as in providing more discoveries. But, he argues that '[he has] almost never found a critic of [his] opinions who were not to seem to [him] either less rigorous or less fair than [him]self', and that '[he has] also never observed that by means of the disputations that are practiced in the schools one had discovered any truth of which one had previously been ignorant'.[9]

Communication of thoughts is useful to no one, because no one can do better than oneself in applying one's thoughts to actual practice. Descartes says, 'if there is anyone who be capable of doing this, it must be rather myself than someone else, [...] because one could not conceive of a thing and make it one's own so well when one learns it from someone else as when one discovers it oneself.' Misunderstanding has happened so often, says Descartes, when communicating his thoughts even to those 'persons with very good minds, and persons who, while [he] was speaking with them about them, seemed to understand them very distinctly, nevertheless, when they have repeated them, [he has] noticed that they have almost always changed them in such a way that [he] could no longer acknowledge them as [his]'.[10]

Observations with the assistance of others could help a philosopher to make more progress in research and science. One man's mind does not suffice to make all the observations necessary to advance research. Artisans might help a philosopher make the instruments needed for observations. 'Volunteers, who, out of curiosity or desire to learn, might perhaps offer themselves to help him.' But, Descartes says, 'if there were among them some that were to serve me, again, they could not be worth the time that I would have to employ to select [those observations which are really helpful]'.[11] Hence, Descartes decided 'not at all to divulge the treatise that [he] had in [his] hands, and [...] made a resolution not to let be seen, during [his] lifetime'.[12]

Descartes himself admits that 'to be useful to no one is, strictly speaking, to be worth nothing', but, if it is true that, 'if there is any task in the world that could not be accomplished so well by anyone else as by the same one who has begun it, it is the one on which [he] is working',[13] his withdrawal into solitude would have been the necessary conclusion.

2.3 Authentication of the Self

The third moment is authentication of the self. How can a philosopher be authentic to himself? Retreat to solitude did not satisfy Descartes' desire to be authentic. He went beyond the opposition between the public and the private.

Descartes says that he has two reasons to have finally decided to publish three essays on natural philosophy:

> [8] But since then there have been yet again two other reasons that have obliged me to place here certain particular essays and to render to the public some account of my actions and of my plans. (p.101)

The first reason can be summed up, in a word, as self-concern. Descartes was so self-concerned that he could neither put up with 'doing [him]self an injustice', nor leave himself in quietude, without making an apology for having refrained from publicising his thesis. He says:

> [8] I have also never tried to hide my actions like crimes, nor have I taken many precautions to remain unknown; as much because I would have believed that I would be doing myself an injustice, as because that would have given me a certain kind of disquiet, which would, again, have been contrary to the perfect tranquility of mind that I am seeking. (p.101)

He also adds;

> [8] And, because, having always been thus indifferent in regard to the concern of being known or not being known, I have not been able to prevent myself from acquiring some sort of reputation, I have thought that I ought to do my best in order at least to prevent myself from having a bad one. (*Ibid.*)

He could not stand gaining a bad reputation. He just wanted to do himself justice as well as be treated as deserved. And the second reason, says Descartes:

> [8] seeing every day more and more the delay that the plan that I have to instruct myself is suffering because of an infinity of observations of which I have need and which it is impossible that I might make without the help of others, although I do not flatter myself so much as to hope that the public would take a great part in my interests, still, I also do not want to fail myself so much as to give those who will survive me cause someday to reproach me to the effect that I could have left them many things much better than I had done if I had not so much neglected to make them understand how they could contribute to my plans. (*Ibid.*)

It is the question of so-called accountability that Descartes poses here.

Notice the fact that for both reasons he writes not because he wants the public to have any interest in his work, but because he does not want to give any reason to posterity to blame him for a lack of accountability.

Is he selfish? Yes, because he no longer cares for others. To benefit others no longer matters here. What matters here most is the authentication of the self. Let us think of it in the following way. What is authenticity for a philosopher? In terms of the attitude of a philosopher, authenticity implies consistency between thinking and acting; in other words, consistency between being subjectively engaged in his own thinking and appearing objectively as such, as he is. It is true that a philosopher can think without expressing his thoughts to the public. Keeping silent on what he thinks can also be a right. However, to keep silent already means to act in a certain way. Is it an *authentic* attitude for a philosopher to think and to act differently — according to different principles?

Good sense or reason has authority over Descartes' thoughts, as we have seen in PARA 1, while the Catholic Church exercises authority over his actions. Thus, good sense or reason should be the principle guiding a philosopher's thinking while any public power could be the principle guiding a philosopher's actions, if we admit a philosopher's attitudes splits into two different principles. Descartes goes beyond the opposition between such different principles of good sense or reason and the authorities.

3. Rhetorical Structure and Dialectic

Now, I will go back to the rhetorical structure that I explained earlier and discuss its relation to the dialectical construction of the *Discourse*, Part Six.

First, in terms of *logos* vs. *ethos*, *logos* seemingly yielded to *ethos* in the first stage. Seemingly, I say, because although it is true that Descartes once renounced publishing *The World* in 1633 to withdraw into his private sanctum, he eventually decided to publish his opinions because of those 'two other reasons' that we have just seen.

Second, in terms of *pathos* vs. *ethos*, *ethos* supported *pathos* at the first stage. As Descartes admitted, the authorities' disapproval of Galileo's opinion made him fearful.

Third, in terms of *logos* vs. *pathos*, he wrote that 'although the reasons for which [he] had earlier made the resolution were very strong, [his] inclination, which has always made [him] hate the business of writing books, made [him] immediately find enough other reasons to excuse

[him]self from doing so', his feeling of fear as well as inclination won against his former resolution. *Pathos* won against *logos* in the first stage.

To sum up, *logos* seemingly yielded to *ethos, pathos* eventually won against *logos,* and then *ethos* assisted *pathos* at the first stage of simple opposition between each opposing term. Dialectic moves on, however. At the stage of synthesis, that is, after the key moment of authentication of the self, *logos* surmounts the challenge of *ethos* and *pathos*. For both reasons of self-concern and accountability, Descartes finally decides to publicise his theses.

However, remember that *logos,* which was primarily assigned on the side of the public at the moment of appearing in the public, has been shifted there from the private since the moment of withdrawal, remaining so even at the moment of authentication. Although *logos* wins over *ethos* and *pathos* in the end, it is not because Descartes' reason persuades him to benefit the public, but because he wants to be authentic to himself as a philosopher.

Notwithstanding this fact, however, he needs the public. Why? At the last moment, Descartes tries to appeal to the public, in order to let the public 'judge [his] opinions', whether his opinions are right or wrong. To conclude, it is only through the reflection in the public mirror that the opinions of a philosopher can be judged authentic, and it is in this sense that Descartes needs the public.

Conclusion

Authentication of the self is achieved when the rule of the authorities is replaced with Descartes' own morals, drawn from the method explained in Part Three.

Part Three is the most recent entry in Descartes' *Discourse*. Now I quote from Part Three a passage regarding the first rule of this philosopher's so-called *morals for provision*.

> [2] beginning from then on to count my opinions as nothing, because I wanted to submit them all to examination, I was assured that I could not do better than to follow those of the most sensible. And, although there may perhaps be people among the Persians or the Chinese just as sensible as among ourselves, it seemed to me that the most useful thing was to regulate myself in accordance with whom I would have to live; and that, in order to know which their opinions truly were, I ought to take note rather of that which they practiced than of that which they said. (p.41)

So Descartes submitted his opinions to the French public, who were supposed to be so sensible as to be endowed with good sense or reason. That is why he wrote in Part Six as follows:

> [11] And, if I am writing in French, which is the language of my country, rather than in Latin, which is the language of my teachers, it is because I am hoping that those who make use only of their totally pure natural reason will better judge my opinions than those who believe only in the ancient books. (p.105)

Thus, Descartes rejected the rule of the Catholic authorities over scientific activities, and replaced it with his own morals drawn from the method. He did so in order to reflect himself on the mirror of the French public who were able to judge a philosopher's opinions, 'mak[ing] use only of their totally pure natural reason' that was supposed to be equally, 'the best distributed thing in the world.'[14]

[1]**ENDNOTES**

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[2] Gilbert Gadoffre, *Sur la chronologie du Discours de la Méthode*, Revue d'histoire de la philosophie et d'histoire de la civilisation, Lille, March 1943.

[3] On this subject, see Pierre Guenancia, *Descartes et l'ordre politique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1983.

[4] I quote from the following edition: René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode/Discourse on the Method*, A Bilingual Edition with an Interpretive Essay, Edited, translated, and introduced by George Heffernan, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1994. The number between parentheses [n] indicates that I quote the passage(s) from PARA-n.

[5] Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, One-volume edition. A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego-New York-London, 1971. Part 1, Chapters 7 and 9. Cf. p.47 & p.75.

[6] *Discourse on the Method*, Part One, PARA 15. p.25.

[7] *Op.cit*., Part Three, PARA 7. p.49.

[8] *Discourse on the Method*, Part Six, PARA 2. p.87.

[9] *Discourse on the Method*, Part Six, PARA 5. p.95.

[10] *Op.cit.*, Part Six, PARA 5, p.95..

[11] *Op.cit.*, Part Six, PARA 7. p.99.

[12] *Op.cit.*, Part Six, PARA 8, pp.99-101.

[13] *Discourse on the Method*, Part Six, PARA 7, p.99.

[14] *Discourse on the Method,* Part One, PARA 1, p.15.