

Authority and Anonymity in Descartes' *Discourse on Method*

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René Descartes' *Discourse on Method* seems paradoxical in several ways. It was originally published anonymously, yet is rich in autobiographical detail.¹ Descartes insists both that the capacity for reason is equal in all persons, and that only a few should undertake the project of rebuilding their knowledge based on the authority of their own reason. He writes in French to appeal to a wide audience and asks readers to send objections to his publisher so that he may reply, and yet he claims that the experience he has had of past objections to his work “prevents [him] from expecting any profit from them” (Descartes 38).² These tensions are related in that they all indicate that it does not matter who the author of an argument is (or who reads and responds to an argument) because reason is universal in all, and yet that indeed it does matter because only some people are able to use their reason in a universally valid way. In the *Discourse* Descartes provides an autobiographical narrative to show he belongs to the latter group by revealing his identity, but in a way that also erases it—he depicts himself as no one in particular, a neutral subject who utilizes universal reason. One's identity as an author of arguments does not matter *after* one has taken up a position as anyone and everyone; thus, Descartes has to present his autobiography in order to show that he is not, after all, himself.

Descartes' text provides a springboard for discussing how, though many today may agree that every person has an equal capacity for reason and knowledge, it is still the case that not just anyone can be counted among those with authority as “knowers.” Arguments do not speak for themselves; someone has to speak for them, and it matters who it is that does so. Michel Foucault argues that knowledge production is bound up in a social context that determines what counts as true knowledge and who has the authority to speak about it.³ Discussing the *Discourse* can be a way to engage students

in conversations about what criteria one must fulfill (in the students' contemporary social context) in order to enter the select group of those whose arguments are worth listening to, and whether or not we still ask authors to reveal themselves to be neutral, universal subjects.

Descartes begins the *Discourse* by insisting that “the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false...is naturally equal in all men” and that “reason...exists whole and entire in each of us” (Descartes 1, 2). It should not then matter *who* is making an argument; if all possess universal reason in the same way, the validity of arguments depends on the workings of reason itself, not on characteristics of the person in whom it is embodied. Many aspects of the *Discourse* support this view of reason as universal, including its anonymous publication, which could indicate that the author's identity does not matter to the quality of the arguments.⁴ Further, Descartes argues that the reasoning of scholars is not necessarily better than that of anyone else: “book learning, at least the kind whose reasonings are merely probable and that do not have any demonstrations...does not draw nearly so close to the truth as the simple reasonings that a man of good sense can naturally make about the things he encounters” (8). He writes this text in French rather than Latin, engaging a wider audience of readers, because he hopes “that those who use only their natural reason in all its purity will judge [his] opinions better than those who believe only in old books” (43).⁵ And of course the very task of subjecting one's views to rational examination by oneself implies that one's own reason is as much an authority as that of one's teachers and other socially-recognized experts.

Yet there is a strong current running against this egalitarian trend in the *Discourse* as well. He repeatedly insists that the project of subjecting everything one believes to the test of one's own reason should not be undertaken by everyone: “the world consists almost exclusively of ... minds for whom [this activity] is not at all suitable” (9).⁶ It turns out that one does need to be a certain sort of person to use reason well, and Descartes spends a significant portion of the text showing that he is that kind of person. Recall that the *Discourse* is a kind of preface attached to three scientific essays, on optics, geometry and meteorology; instead of letting these essays stand on their own, Descartes provides a

lengthy autobiographical narrative that, among other things, operates to justify the authority of the author as someone whose arguments are worth paying attention to.⁷ Descartes paradoxically establishes his identity as no one in particular, revealing the process by which he has managed to become a neutral subject whose reason operates in a universally valid way.

As Harry Frankfurt notes, Descartes' "anonymous autobiography...serves to reveal a man but ... treats the man's identity as irrelevant" (Frankfurt 5).⁸ He claims that he does not adhere to any particular academic sect or school, having found that their mutual disagreements meant he could not find reason to prefer one group's beliefs over those of another (Descartes 10). He argues that during his travels he found there was as much diversity in the customs of people as in the views of academics, and consequently, he states, "I learned not to believe anything too firmly of which I had been persuaded only by example and custom" (6). Refusing to accept anything as true simply because it is what he has learned from scholars, teachers or his own culture, Descartes insists that he relies on a universally valid method that, like the one used in geometry, provides "certain and evident reasonings" (11). He left his native country of France and moved to Holland, where he could live an anonymous and solitary life even amongst crowds, and thereby exist without a particular identity.⁹ Insofar as he has been able to achieve the status of a neutral subject who uses universal reason, he is able to work alone, without the need of collaboration with others—if one's own reason can be universally valid, consulting with others is redundant.¹⁰

Descartes thus prefaces the three essays that appeared with the *Discourse* with a defense of himself as authoritative. It is not enough to present only the arguments themselves; he does not attempt complete anonymity. He instead argues that he has become *worthy* of anonymity by shedding his particular identity, and therefore has entered the select group of legitimate knowledge-producers. Descartes' text therefore shows that an author may, indeed, need to say who s/he is in order for others to listen, even if only to show that s/he is in a sense no *one* at all.

Considering these aspects of the *Discourse* could engage students in discussion on questions having to do with contemporary criteria for determining who counts as a legitimate source of authoritative arguments. One might start such a discussion by asking what it might be like to have texts published truly anonymously, without any identifying information. In an interview originally given anonymously, Foucault proposed such an experiment, “the year without names”: “For one year books will be published without the author’s name” (Foucault 1996, 302).¹¹ Besides the necessity of tying arguments to authors for the sake of intellectual property and professional advancement, would there be something problematic about textual anonymity? Would we feel the need to know who the author was, and if so, why, and what would we want to know about the author? It could then be useful to consider what these views on authorial anonymity indicate about whether one thinks authors should show they have become neutral subjects with no particular identity. Perhaps a sense of discomfort with anonymity reveals that one does think authors should provide some credentials to establish their arguments as authoritative. Sharing with students one’s own experiences as a researcher could be helpful in this regard, including what sort of information one needs to provide about oneself, and what one requires from others, to have one’s work published or accepted for presentation at conferences or in the popular media. The degree to which anonymity and subject neutrality are emphasized in one’s own field could encourage students to critically reflect on existing social criteria for who counts as an authority in knowledge production.

Finally, the *Discourse* could be used to discuss the question of whether or not it is even possible to achieve the kind of subject neutrality and universal reason that Descartes strives for. In my experience, many students agree with the basic idea that arguments should be made as if from no particular perspective at all, that knowledge production should be undertaken by objective reasoners. But when we dig deeper into asking whether something like an entirely neutral subject position is achievable, they often come to see that the issue of what it means for a knower to be objective is more complex than they may have thought before.¹² If it is not possible to achieve a kind of pure neutrality,

then it is important to consider the effects it can have if one claims to be able to do so nonetheless. By writing as if one speaks as and for anyone when one remains within a particular perspective, one contributes to the enforcement of a partial view as the rightful, universally valid one.¹³

The seeming paradoxes and the rich autobiographical elements of Descartes' *Discourse on Method* can thus serve as a way to engage students in discussion on who counts as a legitimate knower today, and whether or not we require that they tell us who they are.

¹ It even contains a plea for financial contributions to fund further research: "...if there were someone in the world whom one assuredly knows to be capable of finding the greatest things and the things as beneficial to the public as possible and whom, for this cause, other men were to exert themselves to help in every way to succeed in his plans, I do not see that they could do a thing for him except to make a donation toward the expenses of the experiments he would need..." (Descartes 41). As students are quick to point out: what kind of sense does it make to ask for money, and yet not tell people to whom they should send it? This is perhaps less puzzling when one discovers that Descartes' text did not remain anonymous for long, and, as Desmond M. Clarke explains in his biography of Descartes, many people knew he was the author of the *Discourse* and the three essays attached to it even before they were published (Clarke 140-141).

² "[I]t has rarely happened that an objection has been raised against me that I had not at all foreseen, unless it was very far removed from my subject; thus I have almost never found any critic of my opinions who did not seem to me to be either less rigorous or less unbiased than myself" (Descartes 38-39).

³ "Each society has its régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Foucault 1980, 131).

⁴ Of course, the reasons why Descartes chose to publish this text anonymously likely have much to do with his fears of Inquisitorial prosecution in the wake of Galileo's trial, which he obliquely refers to in the *Discourse* itself (34). Still, anonymous publication nevertheless supports the idea that the identity of an author does not matter to the quality of his/her arguments.

⁵ As Elaine Limbrick puts it, Latin was at the time "the accepted language and frame of reference for all serious philosophical discourse," and by writing in the vernacular, "Descartes' aim was to make ideas accessible not only to scholars but also to an educated public of men and women" (Limbrick 75).

⁶ Descartes describes "two kinds of minds" who should not attempt to reject what they have learned and replace it with what they can build upon the foundations of their own reason: "First, there are those who, believing themselves more capable than they are, are unable to avoid being hasty in their judgments or to have enough patience to conduct all their thoughts in an orderly manner.... Second, there are those who have enough reason or modesty to judge that they are less capable of distinguishing the true from the false than certain others by whom they can be instructed; they should content themselves more with following the opinions of these others than with looking for better ones themselves" (Descartes 9).

⁷ Stephen Menn traces the *Discourse* to a historical model of intellectual autobiography that can be found in Galen and the Islamic authors Ibn al-Haitham and Ghazâlî. Menn argues that Galen uses autobiographical elements in his texts to establish his own authority, in part by showing how adherents to particular schools of thought fail to resolve their disputes due to lack of a demonstrative method and clear criterion for distinguishing the true from the false, which Galen himself claims to have. According to Menn, Galen also criticizes the arrogance of philosophers who profess to possess truth without the support of adequate demonstration, and contrasts his own humility and pure passion for truth (Menn 156-157). Descartes' *Discourse* is similar to Galen's autobiographical narratives in these respects.

⁸ "[W]hile [Descartes] writes autobiography, the story he tells is of his efforts to escape the limits of the merely personal and to find his generic identity as a rational creature" (Frankfurt 4-5).

⁹ Descartes chose to leave "all those places where [he] might have acquaintances," and to live in a place where, "in the midst of the crowd of a great and busy people who are more concerned with their own affairs than they are curious about those of others, [he has] been able...to live as solitary and as withdrawn a life as [he] could in the remotest deserts" (Descartes 17-18).

¹⁰ Descartes famously insists that all he needs from others is either grunt work or financial donations: "...if there is any task in the world that could not be accomplished so well be anyone else but the same person who began it, it is the one on which I am working. It is true that, with respect to experiments that can help here, one man alone cannot suffice to perform them all, but neither can he usefully employ hands other than his own, except those of craftsmen, or such people as he could pay and whom the hope of gain... would cause to do precisely what he ordered them to do"; alternatively, others might "make a donation toward the expenses of the experiments he would need and, for the rest, to prevent his leisure from being wasted by the importunity of anyone" (Descartes 41). He bemoans the time he would have to spend in "useless conversations" with those who would attempt to help him, because they would either need instruction or would try to share their own findings with him through communications that "are for the most part composed of so many details and superfluous ingredients that it would be very hard for [Descartes] to discern the truth in them..." (41).

¹¹ If that were to occur, Foucault says, readers might just consider the validity of the arguments themselves rather than looking for why the author makes these arguments, how they link to the author's previous works, etc.: "Why have I suggested that I remain anonymous? Out of nostalgia for the time when, being completely unknown, what I said had some chance of being heard" (Foucault 1996, 302). Anonymity is "a way of addressing more directly the possible reader, the only character here who interests me: 'Since you don't know who I am, you will not be tempted to look for the reasons for which I state what you are reading: let yourself go to the point of simply saying to yourself: this is true, this is false. That I like, that I don't. One point, that's all'" (303). Of course, this experiment has never been tried on a large scale, and Foucault's own anonymity in this interview (like Descartes' in the *Discourse*) didn't last long. Foucault claims that if one were to try a "year without names," "all the authors will wait until the next year to publish their books" (302).

¹² In the program I teach in at the University of British Columbia, Arts One, during this past year we read Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality* several months after Descartes' *Discourse*, and though when discussing Descartes students believed that those who engage in knowledge production should be objective, they also agreed with Nietzsche's critique in Treatise Three of the *Genealogy* that objectivity as lack of perspective is impossible. It can be fruitful to encourage students to critically evaluate such tensions in their own views.

¹³ There are many critiques of the claims to be using universally valid reason and achieving thereby a "god's eye view." Among them: Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987); Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), and *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). Linda M. Alcoff provides a clear and persuasive argument against speaking for others, as if one could speak from an entirely neutral position, in "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* (Winter 1991-92): 5-32.

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