

## The Apprehensive

Philosophers are seen as wise people by the rest of society. They are the ones who are perceived to possess greater intellect and whose minds are recognized as the most nimble. According to Roman Reyes, a professor of philosophy from the Philippines, in a classical sense, the philosopher is, “looked upon as the man of wisdom, the philosopher did have pride of place in society as teacher and even as adviser to the king or the prince” (Reyes 49). In this example, the philosopher literally holds a position above the people. The philosopher is the one who guides the elite rulers of ancient societies. The philosopher is the one who studies and thinks about the peoples and cultures of the world. Friedrich Nietzsche, a more contemporary philosopher, says, “What a philosopher is, that is hard to learn because it cannot be taught: one must ‘know’ it, from experience...” (Nietzsche 139). He believes that to know “philosophy,” one must be privileged enough to realize its gravity. However, Descartes asserts that the mind of the philosopher is not inherently greater or more expert than the mind of the common man. By beginning to illustrate the human mind and reject everything except for himself, Descartes has radically reformed how philosophers interacted with society.

According to Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*, each person is born with a similar “good sense,” or intrinsic reason, cognition, and morality. Descartes believes that in order for any human being to become enlightened by superior knowledge, he only has

to lead his mind on a specific path. The philosopher is not specially “blessed” with greater intellectual ability. The philosopher has chosen a path, just as every other person has. Descartes believes that it is how one applies himself and his inborn reason that determines where he will go and who he will become. To Descartes, the duty of the philosopher is to offer society his own path, being careful only to present an opinion, not to force it upon others or compel the general public to accept it. In *Discourse on Method*, Descartes interprets the relationship between the philosopher and society first through his own journey as a philosopher and author, and second by defining what he presumes to be the general role of the philosopher in society. Descartes means his philosophy to be for the ultimate good of society, of the individual, and of himself. The philosopher is on an internal journey. He is reserved in his communication with society and uneasy about the publication of his own ideas. He is also cautious and aware of the dangers regarding the publication of philosophical discourse. Despite these truths, Descartes believes it is the ultimate duty of the philosopher to share his own ideas and engage in a conversation with society.

Descartes begins his *Discourse on Method* by showing his faith in the power of the mind of all men. He believes that all human beings, old and young, and abled and disabled alike, are endowed with “bon sens,” or good sense. In the first few lines of *Discourse on Method*, Descartes says,

“Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world, for everyone thinks himself to be so well endowed with it that even those who are the most difficult to please in everything else are not at all wont to desire more of it than they have.” (Descartes 1)

This “good sense” Descartes believes we all possess is the basis for his philosophy of the mind. Descartes uses the idea of inherent reason and wisdom as a way to define the responsibility of the philosopher and the role of philosophy plays in society. Our thoughts and opinions differ not because some of us possess greater minds than others, “but solely from the fact that we lead our thoughts along different paths and do not take the same things into consideration” (Descartes 1). The philosopher is on a journey to find himself and it is his job to exemplify his journey.

According to Descartes, the philosopher is on a private voyage. When recounting his experience as a philosopher, he says he was “constrained to try to guide myself on my own,” and “resolved to go so slowly and to use much circumspection...” (Descartes 10). The philosopher should be reticent, for in Descartes’ illustration of his own journey, he reports to have found pleasure in being alone. Descartes’ philosopher is cautious and aware of his surroundings.

Descartes felt it necessary that in order to understand himself and other human beings, he needed to first immerse himself in cultures different than his own and teach himself about the customs of foreign societies. “For it seemed to me that I could find much more truth in the reasonings that each person makes concerning matters that are important to him...” (Descartes 6). Descartes believed that in order to comprehend himself, he needed to first unravel other communities:

“And resolving to search for no knowledge other than what could be found within myself, or else in the great book of the world, I spent the rest of my youth traveling, seeing courts and armies, mingling with people of diverse temperaments and circumstances...” (Descartes 5-6).

During his travel through Germany, Descartes, “remained for an entire day shut up by myself in a stove heated room, where I was completely free to converse with myself about my thoughts” (Descartes 6-7). Not only does Descartes believe that the philosopher values the direct study of other peoples by immersing himself in foreign cultures, but he figures that the philosopher appreciates introspection, or the study of oneself. “...I resolved one day to study within myself too and spend all the powers of my mind in choosing the paths that I should follow” (Descartes 6). Again for Descartes, the philosopher is one who studies peoples and cultures in order to better understand himself. The philosopher studies externally to gain a better comprehension of himself inside.

In *Discourse on Method*, Descartes not only considers the role of the philosopher in society, but he discusses his role as a philosopher and a publishing author who will undoubtedly have an effect on society. Descartes examines his own position in society. Descartes, as a philosopher, presents his own journey and illustrates the path which his “good sense” has led him on. “Thus my purpose here is not to teach the method that everyone ought to follow in order to conduct his reason well, but merely to show how I have tried to conduct my own” (Descartes 2). From the beginning of the text, Descartes makes it clear that he does not intend to hurt others with his text or compel people to accept his own values and morals. He suggests that he is putting forth this text, “merely as a story, or if you prefer, as a fable...which one will have reason not to follow, I hope that it will be useful to some without being harmful to anyone...” (Descartes 3). He is doubtful of his work, for he questions the validity of his own philosophy. Descartes was not only uncertain about his philosophy, but he was also unclear about his position and

function in society. He is attentive and even apologetic about the words and ideas which he intends to put forth to the general public.

Descartes doubts whether or not he should even publish *Discourse on Method*. He fears that the text would bring forward too many opposing views. In Part Two of *Discourse on Method*, he says, "And if I thought that there were in this writing the slightest thing by means of which one might suspect me of such folly, I would be very sorry to permit its publication" (Descartes 9). Descartes does not want to be misunderstood by the rest of society, so, he chooses his words carefully. He declares that, "My plan has never gone beyond trying to reform my own thoughts and building upon a foundation which is completely my own" (Descartes 9). He again makes it clear that his intention is not to "corrupt the youth," as Socrates allegedly did and was eventually put to death for. Descartes means to simply explicate his own odyssey and illustrate his own opinions. Descartes continues on to raise questions about the correctness of his opinions. "...but I fear that even this one here may already be too daring for many" (Descartes 9). Descartes does not want *Discourse on Method* to be a simple self-help book that people accept without inquiry. He does not want to be a teacher. Descartes would rather be a thinker.

Later, in part four of his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes again challenges the validity of his philosophy and worries how his work will be received by society. "I do not know whether I ought to tell you about the first meditations I engaged in there, for they are so metaphysical and so out of the ordinary that perhaps they will not be to everyone's liking" (Descartes 18). Descartes worries about the potential response his work will receive just as much as he worries about the text itself. He is focused on the

effect his philosophy will have on the general public. Descartes does not mean for his work to be controversial. “But because I have tried to explain the principal ones among these truths in a treatise that certain considerations prevented me from publishing, I could not make them better known than by stating here in summary form what the treatise contains” (Descartes 23). One of Descartes’ “certain considerations” preventing the publication of his true and honest opinions was the trial of Galileo in Rome in 1633 (Descartes 23).

“And I thought that it was easy to choose certain matters that, without being subjected to much controversy or obliging me to declare more of my principles than I desire, would nevertheless allow me to show quite clearly what I can or cannot do in the sciences.” (Descartes 42).

Descartes then begins to doubt his own philosophy, saying that he is unsure whether he has been successful in presenting his opinions, “and I do not at all want to prejudice the judgements of anyone in speaking for myself about my writings...” (Descartes 42). He is being cautious. He is concerned that his philosophy will have a significant impact on the public.

In 1641, four years after the publication of his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes published his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in which he opens himself up and presents the reader with a more honest and lengthy account of his philosophy. Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* were initially only published in Latin, so as to make the text inaccessible to the general public (Descartes later published the text in French). Descartes wanted to first reveal himself to the elite. If the leaders of society could not comprehend his ideas, then the general public would be lost and confused.

He feared that his ideas would be too radical and too strange to be viewed by the rest of society.

Descartes creates and shares his philosophy for the ultimate good. All throughout *Discourse on Method*, he is focused on what is best for society and illustrates his ideas so as not to harm anyone. He believes that philosophy allows all to think and engage with others. While discussing revolutionary discoveries he had made in physics, he says, "...I believed I could not keep them hidden away without sinning grievously against the law that obliges us to procure, as much as in our power, the common good of all men" (Descartes 35). Even though Descartes means well, there are evident dangers that could arise out of the publication of his ideas. For instance, if people did in fact decide to imitate Descartes' journey he presents in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, society and the state would soon cease to exist (Descartes asserts that to find the truth, one must reject all of their own habits and customs and abide by the beliefs of the state). Descartes' method would only work for the few gifted individuals of society. An incessant problem is raised in Descartes' philosophy. He is torn whether to pursue absolute enlightenment, using his method presented in *Discourse n Method* and in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, or whether he should work towards stabilizing the overall social and political landscape. Even though in Part Six of *Discourse on Method*, he expresses his desire to work for the greater good of society and to create a sort of "practical philosophy," he does not provide the reader with a way to understand how to both live successfully in society and doubt everything and evaluate everything using reason. This is a perpetual problem that arises out of Descartes' beliefs. He does however open himself up to the public, ready to receive criticism.

Descartes received many objections to this text from philosophers, Jesuits, and writers. Descartes made an effort to respond to each opposition he received, and eventually published them as *Objections and Replies*. Descartes was simply adhering to his word. In the last paragraphs of *Discourse on Method*, Descartes makes himself available to the general public:

“...but I shall be very happy if they are examined, and, in order to have more of an opportunity to do this, I am imploring all who have any objections to make against them the to take the trouble to send them to my publisher and, on being advised about them by him...and by this means...readers will judge the truth all the more easily” (Descartes 42)

In these final words of *Discourse on Method*, Descartes says that it is the job of the philosopher to communicate openly and freely with society. “For I promise...only to admit my errors very candidly, if I recognize them...” (Descartes 42). Descartes believes that the dangers to society will no longer exist if the philosopher engages with society. Descartes wanted to publish his ideas. “For these notions made me see that it is possible to arrive at knowledge that would be very useful in life and that, in place of that speculative philosophy...it is possible to find a practical philosophy...and thus render ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature.” (Descartes 35). Descartes believed that progress was good. To a certain extent he eliminates the dangers to society by offering himself to the public. He felt that philosophy was for the ultimate good of society. It is Descartes’ duty as a philosopher who is involved in and who interacts with society to recognize his faults and respond to his critics.

Descartes understands the role of the philosopher who interacts with society in a variety of ways and in different contexts. Descartes first explicates his own function in society as a philosopher and author and later defines the general duty of the philosopher. He is worried about the effect his philosophy will have on society. If everyone who reads Descartes' ideas accepts his beliefs without critique, the state and all civilized government would cease to exist. It is clear that Descartes intends his philosophy only for himself or for the philosopher, even though he does believe in the invention of a "practical philosophy" meant for the greater good of society. Not only does Descartes not mean for people to blindly accept his philosophy, but he says his ideas would be too radical for the general public to read without inquiry. Descartes does attempt to resolve this persistent dilemma by opening himself up to the general public. He wants to receive criticism and desires to reply to those who think he is too radical. The philosopher is one who thinks and communicates. If philosophy were to be kept private, it would do no good for society, but if it is published and left alone, it is not beneficial either. Philosophy takes time. Becoming a philosopher and deciding to publish philosophical discourse equivalent to making a lifetime commitment. Philosophy represents a responsibility to the good of society and an obligation to the truth.

## Works Cited

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