

The "World" Behind the Method **—An Interpretation of Descartes' Discourse on the Method**

Xiaobing Li

School of Philosophy, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, China
1330829104@qq.com

Abstract. Descartes is the founding figure of modern thought, and all modern and contemporary thinkers after him have benefited from his ideas to varying degrees. *Discourse on the Method* is Descartes' debut work published publicly in 1637. This short book, divided into six parts and containing less than 30,000 words, is written in plain and concise language. Yet Descartes' entire philosophical system and core principles are all embodied in it. It can be regarded as a compact and proper entry point to understanding Descartes' thoughts, for themes that concerned Descartes — "the cogito", "God", "truth" and so on — all appear in this work. Taking "method", the central theme of Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*, as the thread, this paper strings together Descartes' basic viewpoints. By examining the textual structure and intellectual progression of *Discourse on the Method*, it brings to light the invisible overall structure behind Descartes' thought: the "world".

Keywords: Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, world

1. Introduction

Descartes is the founding figure of modern thought, and all modern and contemporary thinkers after him have benefited from his ideas to varying degrees. *Discourse on the Method* is Descartes' debut work published publicly in 1637. This short book, divided into six parts and containing less than 30,000 words, is written in plain and concise language. Yet Descartes' entire philosophical system and core principles are all embodied in it. It can be regarded as a compact and proper entry point to understanding Descartes' thoughts, for themes that concerned Descartes — "the cogito", "God", "truth" and so on — all appear in this work. Before the various themes discussed by Descartes (the cogito, God, external things, etc.) assume their respective positions, an invisible overall structure already exists as their general condition. They only acquire their respective meanings within this overall structure. We call this overall structure "the world" [1]. Although this overall structure is the premise for Descartes to carry out his intellectual work, it remains hidden in his writings. To grasp this structure, one must delve deep into Descartes' works and tease out its threads. An insight into this overall structure will undoubtedly help us cut through the mist of ideas and identify Descartes' fundamental philosophical stance, so that we do not get bogged down in debates over specific viewpoints and lose sight of the whole. Therefore, we may take "method", the creative theme of Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*, as the thread to connect his basic ideas, and expect to see the "world" behind it emerge as we sort through the work.

2. Writing strategy and textual structure of *Discourse on the Method*

Before delving into the specific intellectual content of *Discourse on the Method*, to ensure that our interpretation does not go astray in its general direction, we first need to understand the subjective and objective factors that influenced Descartes when he wrote and published this work, as well as the writing strategies, features, word choices, and overall structure of the work shaped by these factors.

First, objectively speaking, feudal forces such as the Church still dominated society at that time, and scholasticism prevailed in the intellectual sphere. Although Descartes published this work anonymously, he could not help but consider political and religious impacts when issuing it publicly, so many of his ideas were not fully expressed. In a letter to a friend in 1634, Descartes spoke of Galileo's persecution: "My wish is this: that I may live in peace and continue the life I have begun, and that I may adopt as my maxim the saying, 'he who hides well, lives well'" [2]. This "concealment" as a writing strategy means that when reading *Discourse on the Method*, we cannot take everything at face value. We must take into account Descartes' social situation at the time, discard the dross and select the essential, and identify his true intention hidden beneath the literal text.

Second, subjectively, Descartes titled the work *Discours...* rather than *Traité* or *Dissertation...*, as is common in academic works. He also wrote in French, which everyone could understand at the time, instead of Latin, the language commonly used by scholars. Moreover, in a letter to Mersenne in March 1637, Descartes mentioned that he named it *Discourse on the Method* instead of *Treatise on the Method* because he only intended to discuss the method rather than teach it, and he believed readers could see that this method was "more a matter of practice than of theory" [3]. It can be seen that this work is more like a conversation than a professional academic treatise, which explains Descartes' plain and accessible writing style. Furthermore, the method Descartes discusses is "more a matter of practice than of theory". "Practice" points to feasibility, and Descartes often demonstrates its feasibility through his own application of the method in daily life and in various specific branches of learning. Interestingly, Bacon, a thinker almost contemporary to Descartes, published *Novum Organum* 17 years before *Discourse on the Method*. Both thinkers attached great importance to scientific knowledge, except that one concerned himself with an "organon" and the other with "method". Compared with method, an organon has more objective and universal applicability, while method often serves specific purposes. The feasibility of a method is also closely linked to how it is possible and what purpose it serves, all of which require us to take a holistic perspective when approaching *Discourse on the Method*.

Finally, the full title of *Discourse on the Method* is *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences*. The original term *les sciences* is literally translated as "sciences". In the Chinese translation by Wang Taiqing published by The Commercial Press, it is rendered as "branches of learning", because Descartes used the term to refer to knowledge in various fields including mathematics, geometry, physics, history and philosophy. In the first part of *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes points out that none of these branches of knowledge rests on a solid foundation, so they are not "sciences" in the modern sense. The translation "branches of learning" has considerable rationality. But it should be clear that Descartes was not only a philosopher but also a founder of modern science. What Descartes sought to do here was precisely to find a method to apply reason in seeking truth across all branches of learning — that is, to rebuild these "branches of learning" in a scientific manner and turn them into genuine sciences. Strictly speaking, disciplines such as history and geometry are indeed part of science.

Therefore, *les sciences* can be understood as "sciences", because Descartes aimed to rebuild them scientifically, even though the meaning of "science" here differs from that in our contemporary context. For Descartes, science more broadly refers to finding a solid foundation for knowledge and building the edifice of scientific knowledge upon it.

With this understanding, we can now examine the textual structure of *Discourse on the Method*. In the preface, Descartes divides the discourse into six parts and summarizes their main content: "The first part contains various considerations concerning the sciences; the second part, the principal rules of the method which the author has sought; the third part, some rules of morality which he has derived from this method; the fourth part, the reasons by which he proves the existence of God and of the human soul — the foundations of his metaphysics; the fifth part, the order of questions in physics which he has investigated...; and the sixth part, the things he believes are required in order to make further progress in the investigation of nature than has been made hitherto, together with the reasons that led him to write" [3].

As mentioned earlier, Descartes' views on the various branches of learning in the first part will not be repeated here. After stating that all "branches of learning" lack a solid foundation, Descartes takes "the contents of his own mind" and "the great book of the world" as reliable footholds. With these footholds as the background, the scientific method Descartes discusses has its support. Then the second part begins to elaborate the four rules of the method; the third part sets out three moral maxims derived from these four rules. At the same time, these four rules are also related to the first principle of philosophy, "I think, therefore I am", in the fourth part of the discourse, from which Descartes deduces other principles concerning nature and God. The fifth part presents a series of physical truths deduced from the basic principles of the fourth part, while the sixth part explains Descartes' reasons for writing his works and is also connected with all the preceding parts.

It can be seen that the arrangement of these six parts follows a relatively clear simple logic. Therefore, although the four rules concerning "method" appear in the second part, the first part as the background, the three moral maxims in the third part derived from the four rules of the second part, and all other parts mutually support and confirm one another in content. Thus, to discuss "method", we cannot ignore the valuable content in other parts. Only by combining the specific content and viewpoints of each part can we gain clear insight.

3. The "method" in *Discourse on the Method*

3.1. The mutual support of "reason" and "the great book of the world"

At the beginning of the first part, Descartes first states that *le bon sens* (good sense) is the *la forme* (form) of human beings. *Le bon sens* is not moral conscience; it refers to a correct capacity for discrimination. This capacity for correct discrimination is not to distinguish between good and evil in a moral sense, but to distinguish between truth and falsehood. What Descartes calls "good sense", "reason" and "natural light" all refer to this capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood. The expression "form" is borrowed by Descartes from Aristotelian philosophy and scholasticism; it refers to what is necessary for a thing to be what it is. That is to say, reason — the ability to judge correctly and distinguish truth from falsehood — is essential to being human, and everyone possesses it. Equipped with "good sense" that can judge truth and falsehood, Descartes evaluates various branches of learning of his time, such as history and rhetoric, and concludes that none of them rests on a solid foundation. He resolves to abandon bookish study related to these disciplines, and states that "apart from the knowledge that can be found either within myself or in the great book of the world, I would not study any other knowledge" [3]. "Within myself" refers precisely to "good

sense", "natural light" and "reason". Thus it is reason that judges the reliability of itself and of "the great book of the world", which involves the relationship between "reason" and "the great book of the world". Descartes takes himself as an example when talking about reading the great book of the world. In the process of traveling the world and gaining experience, he found that "... customs and practices are as varied as can be... The greatest benefit I derived from this was that, seeing many practices that, though they seem most extravagant and ridiculous to us, are yet commonly received and approved by other great nations, I learned not to believe too firmly anything of which I had been persuaded only by example and custom. And thus I gradually freed myself from many errors that can obscure our natural light" [3].

From the above statements, we can see that reading "the great book of the world" is intended to broaden one's horizons and break down prejudices that might obscure reason. But upon reflection, it is not hard to find that Descartes is not using foreign customs and practices to negate local ones; rather, he is saying that none of these conventions, customs and experiences are entirely reliable. Therefore, "reason" and "the great book of the world" are indispensable and mutually supportive: reading "the great book of the world" broadens one's horizons, making the mind aware of the unreliability of prejudices such as experience and custom, so that one does not accept these customs as inherently true; likewise, reading "the great book of the world" cannot be separated from the human mind, and the reliability of "the great book of the world" is judged by human reason. At the same time, reason — the capacity to judge correctly and distinguish truth from falsehood — is also the starting point of all inquiry.

3.2. The four rules of the method

In the second part, Descartes first uses the examples of architecture and law-making to show that works carried out by many hands are often less perfect than those built by a single hand, because "what is devised by one person is directed toward a single purpose" [3]. It is therefore necessary to build things from a single hand. Descartes' purpose, as stated in the title of the discourse, is to find scientific and certain truth. To this end, he formulates four rules.

The first of the four rules: "Never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth... to avoid hasty judgments and preconceptions..." [3]. This rule is to conduct a universal doubt. "Never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth" — the capacity for evident knowledge comes from human reason. This undoubtedly means examining all things through reason, and even that anything not examined by reason can be provisionally regarded as false. Reason gains the power of examination, and what is examined by reason as "true" can serve as a certain starting point for thought. The second rule mentions dividing the difficulties under examination into as many parts as possible according to their "possibility and necessity". The third rule sets an order for thinking about the divided parts according to "difficulty and distance". In fact, the order of thought defined by "difficulty and distance" already emerges at the same time as the parts are divided according to "possibility and necessity". Just as when cutting fabric to make clothes, the order for sewing the sleeves and collar is already conceived when the pieces are cut. The fourth rule requires comprehensive surveys and reviews as far as possible to avoid omissions, which can be seen as checking and "filling in gaps" after finishing an exam. A hidden question within these four rules is: does what is most intelligible and easiest for human beings coincide with what is most intelligible and easiest in the nature of things themselves? Let us see what Descartes says. He holds that by following these four rules, "... provided I take care not to accept anything as true that is not, and always keep to the order required for deducing one thing from another, there can be nothing too remote to be reached in the end or too well hidden to be discovered" [3]. Descartes seems fully

confident that, starting from what has been examined and confirmed as true by reason, and proceeding in the necessary order of deduction from one to another, there is nothing that cannot be known or reached. This necessary order of deduction can cover everything. Therefore, even if there arises a discrepancy between what is most intelligible to human beings and what is most intelligible to things themselves — or more fundamentally, a discrepancy between human understanding and the things themselves — it will be corrected in the process of reason weaving its own domain according to this order.

To sum up the content of the second part in one sentence: after reason finds a certain starting point for thought through universal doubt, it weaves truth, covers the world, and rebuilds the edifice of knowledge in accordance with order. Descartes says that reason governs thought. Yet in the process of weaving and rebuilding the edifice of knowledge, reason may still need to be corrected. Therefore, "so that I should not remain irresolute in my actions while reason obliged me to suspend my judgment" [3], he formulates three maxims for conduct.

3.3. The three moral maxims

These three moral maxims appear in the third part. Here Descartes uses the analogy of architecture again: before rebuilding an old house, in addition to preparing materials and designing plans, one needs a temporary house to live in until the old house is repaired. These three moral maxims are just like that temporary dwelling, which is why Descartes calls them a "provisional moral code".

The three moral maxims are as follows:

First: "To obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions — those commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live" [3].

Descartes then explains the first maxim in detail, pointing out that to know a person's true views, one must look at their actions rather than listen to their words. For many people do not speak their true minds, and some do not even know what their true minds are. Therefore, one must judge a person's true opinions by their actions. As for why one should choose the most moderate opinions, on the one hand, moderate opinions are the easiest to put into practice, and extremism is usually bad; on the other hand, choosing the middle path makes it easier to change course if the path is found to be wrong. What Descartes considers extreme refers to "various promises that curtail some part of our freedom" [3]. Descartes excludes from this kind of promise laws or contracts made to ensure the achievement of a legitimate purpose, which prevent fickle and inconstant people from wavering. Instead, he emphasizes that everything in the world, even human beings themselves, is constantly changing. Only by making corresponding adjustments according to changes can one continuously improve one's good sense and not act against it — this is the freedom proper to good sense.

Second: "To be as firm and decisive in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain... (the example of getting lost in a forest)... The same holds true for the conduct of life: we must often act without delay, even when we cannot tell which opinion is the truest" [3].

This requirement strongly highlights the necessity of firmness and decisiveness in action.

Third: "Always to try to master myself rather than fortune, and to change my desires rather than the order of the world. In short, to accustom myself to believing that there is nothing entirely within our power but our thoughts" [3].

This is to eliminate wishful thinking, see clearly the limits set by nature for human beings, and realize that nothing is within human control except one's own thoughts. Descartes once said, "...

authorities have great influence over my conduct, just as my own reason has dominion over my thoughts". Some people therefore argue that these three moral maxims, influenced by the social environment and religious authority, are a temporary strategy for self-preservation. But in fact, these three moral maxims and the four rules of the second part serve the same purpose: "I always had an extreme desire to learn to distinguish truth from falsehood, in order to have clear insight into my actions and proceed with confidence all my life" [3]. For Descartes to "proceed with confidence", both rules of thought and moral maxims of action are necessary. Moreover, the "freedom of good sense (reason)" and the decisiveness in action embodied in these three moral maxims are essential qualities for seeking certain truth. Descartes summarizes this virtue as generosity. Generosity also involves a kind of reason, which holds that human beings possess free will and have the resolve to use it well [4]. Therefore, when understood within the overall structure, the necessity and importance of these three moral maxims, which were obscured by the label "provisional", become prominent.

4. The "world" behind the method

The above discussion leaves several questions to be resolved:

First, among the maxims in the second part, what is the starting point of the chain of knowledge confirmed as "true" after universal doubt? And why does reason have the power of examination in universal doubt?

The starting point Descartes finds is "the cogito", the well-known *Je pense, donc je suis* (I think, therefore I am). In fact, Wang Taiqing's translation "I think, therefore I am" is more appropriate than the common rendering. The word "am" easily leads to the misinterpretation of "I am" as "I exist". "Suis" in French means "to be"; it is not merely a copula, but also a verb meaning to function, to be at work.

Descartes writes: "Examining attentively what I was, I saw that I could pretend that I had no body, and that there was no world or place where I was; but that I could not therefore pretend that I did not exist... On the contrary, from the very fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed very evidently and certainly that I existed... if I had only ceased from thinking, even if all the rest of what I had ever imagined had been true, I should have had no reason to believe that I had existed" [3]. "I cannot pretend that I am not" means "I cannot conceive of myself as not functioning". Therefore, there must be a functioning "I think".

Why is the proposition "I think, therefore I am" reliable? Descartes says: "I observed that there is nothing at all in the proposition 'I think, therefore I am' to assure me that I am speaking the truth, except that I see very clearly that in order to think it is necessary to be" [3]. The truth of "I think, therefore I am" lies in the fact that I clearly and distinctly perceive in thought that "in order to think, it is necessary to be". This clear and distinct perception depends on my natural light, reason and good sense. Therefore, Descartes' subsequent general rule — "whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true" — is not the idealist claim it is often taken to be. Rather, it means that whatever presents itself to my mind as clearly and distinctly understandable by my reason and good sense is true, because it has been examined by reason.

After extracting the standard of "clarity and distinctness" from the certain and reliable proposition "I think, therefore I am", Descartes immediately deduces the existence of God from the idea of God in "me", by explaining the clear and distinct relation that the imperfect "I" cannot produce the idea of a perfect God on its own. Once God exists, he in turn guarantees the reliability of the standard of clarity and distinctness — that is, the reliability of human reason. From the cogito Descartes deduces the existence of God, and then uses God's existence as the guarantee of the cogito's reliability.

Scholars contemporary to Descartes and later scholars have raised objections, arguing that there is a circle in Descartes' argument, and have debated endlessly over whether the proof of God's existence in this so-called "Cartesian circle" is valid, and whether the cogito or God holds a more fundamental position. Confining ourselves to the interior of the Cartesian circle and making various investigations cannot reveal the full picture of this closed loop; we must step outside it. In fact, "the cogito thinks the world internally and occupies a leading position in cognition, while God occupies a leading position in being. This structure was established as early as Augustine" [5]. "Using Kantian terminology, we may say that the cogito is the *ratio cognoscendi* (ground of cognition) of God, while God serves as the *ratio essendi* (ground of being) of the cogito" [6]. Descartes' adoption of this pattern of mutual support between cognitive ground and ontological ground does not mean he retreated into scholasticism. The "God" in Descartes' mouth is quite different from the personal God in the scholastic tradition — the absolute, unknowable creator who is the premise of everything. What kind of being is God in Descartes' view? Let us look at his statements in the discourse.

Now the question shifts from the initial one — what is the starting point of the chain of true knowledge and why does reason have the power of universal doubt? — to: what kind of being is God in Descartes' eyes?

Descartes states that the idea of a being more perfect than himself in his mind can only come from "a nature which was in reality more perfect than I" [3], that is, God. Why does he call God "nature"? He even specifically mentions, before discussing this perfect nature, the material, resourceful nature of things like heaven and earth, light and heat, which we usually speak of, and holds that this material, resourceful nature is imperfect. What is the difference between these two "natures"? In the fifth part, Descartes mentions "laws". He says he has discovered several laws, which "God has established in nature, and of which he has implanted such notions in our souls that, after we have reflected sufficiently on them, we cannot doubt that they are exactly observed in everything that exists or occurs in the world. And on examining further, I saw that these laws are so interconnected" [3]. Descartes then describes an entire picture of the world. In this picture, God does not need to personally create light, heaven and earth, plants, trees, sun, moon, stars, fish, birds, beasts and human beings in seven days as described in the Bible. God only needs to endow a chaotic mass of matter with laws, and this mass of matter will evolve light, the universe, the sun, moon and stars, and finally human beings on its own through the operation of the laws. Although the process described by Descartes, in which the whole world evolves according to natural laws, differs slightly from the order of God's creation in the Bible, both begin with light and end with human beings. Although natural laws are established by God, in this picture natural laws have already replaced God's direct work of creation, and are functionally almost equivalent to God. This set of interconnected natural laws, proceeding from one to another, drives the formation of the entire world.

To sum up in one sentence: "For Descartes, God is nature, or 'the order and arrangement God has established in all creatures'. As the creator, God is the power that sets the rules of the world. For the cogito, God's existence guarantees the regularity and knowability of the world" [5].

But human beings, as creatures, differ from other things in the material world that evolve according to natural laws. The human "rational soul... cannot in any way be derived from the power of matter, but must be expressly created by God" [3]. God creates the human rational soul and engraves the natural laws in the human soul. The soul is united with the body, but the union of soul and body is not mechanical; it is closer, "the soul is joined to the body more closely and intimately" — they form a whole. In this whole, the function of the soul is the essence of being human. The soul does not depend on the body for its existence, but the two must be closely united as "one".

Therefore, rather than calling Descartes a mind-body dualist, it is more accurate to say that he holds that "mind and body are distinct but not absolutely separated" [6]. God's existence guarantees this orderly world. At the same time, God engraves the laws of this world in the human rational soul and closely unites the human soul with the body, ensuring that human beings can grasp the order and laws of the world through their own reason.

But there is no ready-made truth in the human rational soul — "the seeds of truth innate in the depths of the soul..." [3]. What the soul contains is only the seeds of truth, and "truth can only be discovered little by little in certain objects" [3]. Therefore, the pattern of mutual support between "within oneself" and "the great book of the world" in the first part is very necessary. Truth can only be searched for in "the great book of the world" by human beings using their rational capacity, like treasure hunting. In this process of searching, reason constantly revises itself according to the experience accumulated in reading "the great book of the world". Human beings, relying on their own reason, continuously accumulate experience and seek truth in the process of knowing objective objects, making reason more sound. The sounder reason becomes, the fuller the knowledge and experience of the objective world become. Descartes thus laments that he is hindered by two things: "the shortness of life, and the lack of experience" [3]. Therefore, he wants to make his method and experience public, hoping that contemporaries and later generations will work together and pass on the torch. It seems that as long as experience is sufficient and time permits, the whole of nature will be within human grasp. Human beings shuttle back and forth between their rational souls and the great book of the world, constantly collecting truth through action. The accumulation of truth gives people full confidence in their own power: once they know natural laws "perfectly... they can use them for all the purposes for which they are appropriate, and thus render themselves the masters and possessors of nature" [3].

At this point, the invisible overall structure we have been seeking — the "world" — which serves as the general condition for Descartes' various intellectual themes and endows them with their respective positions and meanings, has emerged.

5. Conclusion

This invisible overall structure — the "world" — is not equivalent to the objective, actual real world. Rather, it refers to how Descartes views the world, and can be called a worldview. This worldview has a basic presupposition: the world we inhabit is real. Unlike nihilism or some popular science fiction works that doubt the reality of our living world, Descartes uses "God" to guarantee the reality and order of all things in the world. All things evolve according to the natural laws set by God. At the same time, God engraves the concept of natural laws in the human rational soul, giving human beings the ability to know and grasp order. In short, the world is real and orderly; human beings can continuously know the world through reason, grasp the laws behind the objective world, and finally become the masters who dominate the world. As for how to use reason to know this world and seek truth, Descartes takes "the cogito" as the starting point and clear and distinct coherent progression as the method, establishing a well-structured whole of the world (this whole of the world is built by the thinking subject continuously weaving the external world into its interior, and its greatest feature is immanence). He confidently promises that as long as we keep advancing according to this method, human beings will have the bright prospect of becoming masters of nature.

This world is a self-sufficient home where we can dwell. Everything in the world is in principle understandable by reason, and truth lies within this world. The only question is whether and how we pursue it. This is the self-evident presupposition shared by modern thinkers with soaring rationality since the Enlightenment. Descartes' contribution lies in that he was the first to explore the rational

overall structure of the immanent world, delineating the working field and providing a methodological model for later philosophy.

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