

Descartes and the Cartesian Style

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Introduction

It is commonplace to credit Descartes with being the founder of modern philosophy. This is not to say that all philosophers since Descartes have agreed with him, or even that they have approached philosophy in the same way – they do not and they have not. Rather, it means that Descartes' philosophy typifies modern philosophy in its style and concerns and, beyond the domain of philosophy, recognizes Descartes for the contribution he has made to forming "a distinctively modern consciousness." In other words, Descartes' philosophy is credited as having produced the basis for what we regard as the modern person.

It is this latter contribution which interests us in Descartes within the present context. In what way did Descartes, a philosopher, provide the basis for our modern way of being? Much could be said about the many elements of Descartes' thought which have profoundly affected the practice of philosophy – one would point to his concern with epistemology, his respect for mathematics and science, his emphasis on breaking with received opinion, the priority of method, etc. Here, however, such features of Descartes' thought will only be addressed in the context of exploring Descartes' role in establishing a discernibly modern ideal for life and modern mode of engaging in activities, things, and people. In particular, we are interested in understanding how Descartes, by articulating a central feature of the modern style of being in the world, has shaped our identities and practices. In this sense, Descartes' articulation of the modern style of being in the world laid the basis for certain ways in which most of us deal with activities, people and things.

I. Descartes' Project

Descartes has been credited with initiating a philosophical and scientific movement that would make a lasting and profound contribution to our way of being in the world. Through the course of his investigation and methodology, Descartes brought formerly marginal practices for dealing and interpreting the world into the center. In forging these marginal practices into a new, unified and general style, Descartes established a new paradigm for interpreting ourselves and organizing our practices. In other words, Descartes took practices



which were already emerging in the world of the Seventeenth Century, and focused them, showing the style which unified those practices.

A complete attempt to trace the origins of Descartes' thought in the practices of the Seventeenth century would be an enormous undertaking. To illustrate the way in which Descartes reconfigured old modes of being for present purposes, however, it is enough to look at three formerly marginal practices moved to the center by Descartes: mathematical practices of axiomatization, scientific disengagement as practiced by the scientists like Galileo and Newton, and the certainty practices of Christianity.

Christian practices for seeking certainty of salvation, functioning as they did against a background understanding of man as creation, became in Descartes' hands practices by which man became responsible for himself. When Descartes declared that the first rule of his philosophic method was "never to accept anything as true that I did not know evidently to be so," he did so not because he was a skeptic, but rather because the emerging modern style required man to take responsibility for his own knowledge and situation. The method of doubt -- i.e., that I am "to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind with such clarity and distinctness that I would have no occasion to put it in doubt"--was justified by Descartes through analogizing human understanding to a building. Noting that "buildings undertaken and completed by a single architect are commonly more beautiful and better ordered than those that several architects have tried to patch up," Descartes argued that we should become our own architects, dispensing with the "old walls" inherited from teachers and past scholars, and rebuilding ourselves from the ground up.

Descartes is explicit about the way in which he tried to take the style of mathematical practices and impose it upon the whole of his practices. Descartes took the axiomatic nature of mathematics--the way in which mathematical thinking sets out in advance, in the form of axioms, the basis for understanding everything else--and generalized it as a way of approaching all knowledge. This is evident in Descartes' most famous doctrine--that of the cogito.

Many have understood Descartes claim "cogito ergo sum," "I think therefore I am," as a proof. The hidden major premise would be:

That which thinks, is.

The minor premise is "cogito":



I think.

The conclusion, indicated by the "ergo" ("thus"), is "sum":

I am.

Construed in this way, Descartes' argument is open to obvious criticism – he provides nothing to support the major premise.

But it is important to see, for our purposes especially, that Descartes is not attempting to prove the existence of the self, but rather is trying to establish the "first principle of philosophy", understood as that which is present in every act of consciousness. Thus, in the Second Meditation, following a consideration, and rejection, of several candidates for the essential nature of man, Descartes concludes:

Here I discover that thought is an attribute that really does belong to me. This alone cannot be detached from me. I am; I exist; this is certain. But for how long? For as long as I think. . . . Now, I am a true thing, and truly existing; but what kind of thing? I have said it already: a thing that thinks.

From the axiom of the cogito, Descartes then proceeds with a "mathematical" construction of the everything else: "long chains of reasoning, each of them simple and easy, that geometricians commonly use to attain their most difficult demonstrations, have given me an occasion for imagining that all the things that can fall within human knowledge follow one another in the same way." The project thus became one of "axiomatizing" thought in general by determining in advance the essence of everything else to be encountered.

In addition to Descartes' self-consciously mathematical approach to understanding the world, we can see explicit attempts to incorporate into philosophy practices characteristic of modern scientific investigation. The seventeenth century saw the emergence of new practices of thinking typified by Galileo. These new practices turned away from attempts to understand the world in terms of us and our place in the world, and instead replaced it with attempts to explain objects in terms of their properties and interactions with each other. This was a result of natural science's interest in discovering the properties of nature as they function independently of our valuations and concerns.

Descartes clarified that what was essential to the modernist scientific practices, discussed above, was a style of "detachment" from



the objects and events being observed. This required both that investigation would limit itself to learning the way the object was, independent of any particular perspective on it, and that the investigation would be concerned with the way the object was, independent of any particular human valuations and conceptions. In doing so, scientists abandoned the traditional classifications of different natures or essences, aiming instead at "a general science which explains all the points that can be raised concerning order and measure irrespective of the subject-matter."

The most prominent practice we have today which typifies the Cartesian style is that of the scientific method. Basically, the practices of the scientific method are as follows:

1. Describing a phenomenon or phenomena to be explained in a way acceptable to a community of observers;
2. Proposing a conceptual system capable of generating the phenomenon to be explained in a way acceptable to the community of observers (explanatory hypothesis);
3. Obtaining, from step 2, other phenomena not explicitly considered in that proposition as also describing its conditions for observation by a body of observers;
4. Observing these other phenomena obtained from step 2.¹

Such practices of investigation have great power in discerning the causal properties of objects. By breaking the object from any particular context of human activity, the object is understood in the way it is constituted in and of itself. By focusing on the causal interactions in this way, the object can be broken down into its component parts or properties.

By establishing these practices and the detached style that accompanies them, Descartes opened the possibility for analytically interpreting the world and identifying recurrences and stabilities within it. As a result, our capacity to move in the world and take action was significantly enhanced. During the Middle Ages, the world was largely mysterious to the common person. People did not have a rigorous way for talking about or recognizing, for example, a common cold. A cold to them was simply a debilitating condition of the body which afflicted them at certain times which they had to endure. Through numerous and continuous scientific investigations, we have come to recognize the mechanics of a common cold: that it is by a virus which is attacking the

¹ From: Maturana and Varela. The Tree of Knowledge, Shambhala Press, 1992. p.28



body. With this recognition, scientists were able to invent remedies to reduce the debilitating symptoms of a cold.

II. Moving the Cartesian Style to the Center

Again, the scientific method, and the Cartesian style that accompanies it, made it possible to investigate and articulate certain recurrences in the world. This, to a significant extent, brought an amount of stability, and consequently increased our capacity to move in the world. In this section, we will discuss some of what we mean when we say that the Cartesian style began to be the dominant style for dealing with the world.

The central feature of a scientific investigation is the search for the universal principles which underlie a particular phenomenon. It is by casting the discussion in terms of universals that a scientist can establish the recurrence and stability of that phenomenon. What is peculiar about the Cartesian style is the manner in which it looks for and forms these universal principles. It does so by exploring the essential or absolute properties of a phenomenon.

After Descartes, an entire discourse arose around the distinction between primary and secondary properties. (Berkeley, Spinoza and later Locke were a part of this discourse.) The main distinction was between what was sensible to the human observer – secondary qualities – and what was really inhered in an object – primary qualities. The proper subject of the new science were these primary qualities. They wanted to look at the world in and of itself, outside the context of human prejudices and perceptions. What they were left with was simply the bare physical components of the world and their interactions.

A person moving in a detached style is concerned with finding the essential qualities or properties of objects in the world. The underlying assumption behind this exploration is that what they are looking for are the true properties of an object, so that wherever a particular object or phenomenon occurs so do those properties. It is this sort of logic and motivation that is behind step 3 in the scientific method. The scientist tries to develop a universal, explanatory hypothesis that is sufficient to explain a wide range of distinct but related phenomena based on the essential properties that he has discovered.



Descartes' contribution consisted of "ontologizing" these scientific practices. That is to say, as a result of Descartes work, the practices and detached style appropriate for engaging in scientific investigations became the dominant way people approached the world in general. In this way, the modern scientific methods became the basis for what was essential about anything. So, for a person acting in a Cartesian style, the most essential properties of anything are those which are discoverable from a detached, or de-contextualized, perspective. Any other features of the thing, person, or situation are understood as merely subjective values attached to it or them.

Descartes took the style of research appropriate within the domain of the new sciences, and the style of thinking appropriate within axiomatic mathematics, and from them forged a general style of what we might call detachment. The style of these scientific practices, so effective at getting a clear understanding of the causal properties of physical objects and identifying recurrences was ontologized by combining it with the axiomatic (projective) style of mathematical thought. The "axioms" of knowledge and of the objects encountered in knowledge – i.e., what must be presupposed in any experience whatsoever – were formulated along the lines opened up by the practices of scientific engagement.

In other words, the style of moving within the domain of science began to emerge as the dominant style for moving within the world in general. In science and axiomatic mathematics, such as geometry, people approach situations and problems against the background of a canon of set rules and preconceptions of how things interact. They then extrapolate from the present data by applying a series of logical steps.

III. A Characterization of the Cartesian Style

The result was an understanding of the world and our place in the world in terms of the interactions of context-free elements. We can characterize this context-free perspective as having at least two dimensions:

1. The quest for certainty.
2. The interpretation that the world is fixed.

One of the background assumptions of the Cartesian approach is that there is an underlying structure behind all phenomena. There exists



universal principles which govern the movement of all physical bodies. This assumption predisposes that people moving in a detached style distrust what is immediately apparent to them and look instead for certainty; they want to find the truth behind the surface phenomenon they perceive.

The “axioms” of knowledge – what must be presupposed in any experience whatsoever – set the stage for attaining certainty. A person’s thought capacity or faculty for reasoning became the basis for anything she could be certain about. The thinking subject as the capacity to explain an objective reality with preconceived notions before ever encountering different dimensions of that reality. In this sense, a person approached situations generally as *objects* that, with an advanced plan, allowed them to *explain* aspects of the situation as an object, including those that do not fit into the preconceived plan.

Human beings become observers who can come to know the world by gathering data and generating mental concepts that represent it. So one dimension of this sort of the detachment is that a person takes on an objectivist interpretation of the world; the world – as an object – is the way it is, and the distinctive feature of human beings is that they can get to *know* it better and *explain* it, including those aspects they do not yet understand.

The other dimension of this detachment, that the world seems fixed, is a result of the emphasis on essential properties. This sort of detached investigation into what is essential is necessarily cast against some assumptions about temporality, and in particular, the temporality of whatever is under investigation. In this detached style of investigation, the notion of “essential” itself assumes a quality of fixity, of unchangingness. The “essential” will be that property, characteristic, feature, or quality that makes a certain thing what it is. As long as something is the thing it is, it will have this property, i.e. its essential property. Once it loses this essential property, it no longer is what it used to be. So an investigation into the essential properties of some thing or situation is necessarily an investigation into what does not change about that thing.

By taking up the stance of looking for essential properties in the world, a person necessarily takes the stance of looking for precisely what does not change. The Cartesian perspective then describes the world not only from a stand-point outside the valuations and concerns of human beings but, just as importantly, the stance it takes in this investigation



blinds the person to distinctions for observing and making sense of how the world changes. In this sense, the world seems fixed to them.

The important form of detachment characteristic of Cartesianism is thus not a psychological state--it doesn't mean that that we act like scientists in a conscious way in our everyday lives. Rather, it means that our interpretation of the situation is not a constitutive part of it – the way things are is constituted irrespective of our particular take on them. Precisely because in the Cartesian way of viewing the world things are best understood as being constituted independently of our subjective understanding of them, detaching ourselves from the situation is held to be a good way of figuring out what is going on. This is not to say though that people who we characterize as acting in a Cartesian style are undertaking an investigation into the essential properties of something. Rather, what this implies is that we can characterize people with a Cartesian way of being in terms of what they are able to see, that is, what distinctions they are open to using.

IV. The Christian Age as a Contrast Class to Modernity

To the extent to which we share this modern style of being, however, it is difficult to get a grip on the distinctiveness of Cartesianism. In order to facilitate self-reflection, it is helpful to have a contrast class against which we can view our own way of being, thereby beginning to displace the complacency we have in our assumptions. The natural place to look for this contrast class is the pre-Cartesian, pre-Enlightenment world. For ease of reference, I will refer to the understanding of being of this period as "the Christian age."

Many traditional histories describe the transition to modernity rather tendentiously as a move from dogmatism to enlightenment. This is misleading both because modern thought can be every bit as dogmatic as Christian thought, and more importantly because it gives the wrongful impression that the important differences between the Christian age and modernity is in the state of mind of the people inhabiting the respective epochs. Such a description covers up the most important difference between the two ages, which is to be found in the style of the practices. This is not to say that modern practices didn't have a liberating effect--they did. But that liberation is to be found first and most significantly in the style for dealing with human beings rather than in any beliefs that were held.



The contrast between the Christian age and modernity will be sketched out in terms of their different ways of understanding the natural world and human being. This is best seen in their respective practices for dealing with these domains.

Christian Science and Modern Science

A striking difference between medieval science and modern science is the dependence of the former on inherited ideas and concepts (derived primarily from scripture and the works of Aristotle), as opposed to the experimental nature of the latter. But noting this does not yet get at the essential distinction between the way in which science was conducted in each age, if only for the reason that medieval and Aristotelian science also conducted experiments and depended on observation, and modern science, too, is dependent on the framework of concepts and theories inherited from previous generations of scientists. A better way to understand the distinction is in terms of the kind of questions which each sought to answer. Stated most generally, Christian science was concerned with the *significance* of natural phenomena, while modern science is concerned with their *causal interactions*.

That is to say, the science of the Christian age saw the behavior of physical bodies as revealing something of their essence. The presupposition was that each object has its own essence towards which it strives. The goal of science was to discover the end, or telos, towards which things were striving, and hence to learn what domains and movements were appropriate to things. For instance, four kinds of earthly bodies were identified – earth, air, fire, and water. Each body had a domain appropriate to it – for instance, earth below and fire above. Earthly bodies also had a natural motion--they move in a straight line. Thus, as experiment and observation would confirm, a rock picked up and removed from its place would, once released, moved straight downward in accordance with its nature. Fire, however, strives upwards towards its natural place, although again it does so in a straight line. In contrast to earthly bodies, celestial bodies, having a different nature, had a different natural place (the heavens) and characteristic movement (in a circle, rather than straight line).

Modern science, in contrast, seeks to understand natural phenomena as a result of the causal properties of the bodies under observation. For instance, the scientist of the Christian age would take as data the motion of different bodies, and seek to understand from that the nature or essence of the body (and thereby its place in the universe



and its significance for man). But it is this motion itself that the modern scientist seeks to understand. Put simply, where the pre-modern scientist would ask "What does a star's circular motion show us about its nature?", the modern scientist might ask "Why do stars move in a circle?" To answer such questions, one cannot begin by recognizing essential differences between bodies or realms (like heaven and earth). Instead, a uniform nature and uniform space and time must be assumed in order to focus on what it is that causes heavenly bodies and earthly bodies to behave differently.

To put it simply, the consequence is that modern science is very well suited to focusing on causal properties by bracketing questions of significance and nature or telos. At the same time, however, a pre-modern scientist might argue that modern science is incapable of encountering things in their own significance because it projects in advance a uniform essence for all the phenomena with which it is concerned.

The significance of this shift is how it increased our capacity to manipulate and control the natural world. By making the causal properties of objects the center of investigation, the framework of modern science allowed scientists to explore the mechanics behind observable phenomenon. In so doing, modern scientists were able to articulate not simply that fire moves upward, but more importantly, it identified the physical properties of a flame which cause it to move in such a way. This explanation thus increased our ability to use fire in our everyday lives. Fire came to be seen not simply as an isolated object, but as a phenomenon that has certain characteristics (such as the release of energy and the transformation of matter), which causes certain effects on its environment. Fire, then, could be used by humans in situations in which they wanted to produce that effect. Scientists were able to identify recurrences within the world. The articulation of these recurrences allowed people to coordinate their activities more effectively around them.

The Christian Understanding of Human Beings

One can also describe a shift in the understanding of human beings occurring in the transition from the Christian age to modernity. Christians understood man as God's creation. As such, man received his place in the world, together with an identity and role, at birth. The overarching purpose of human existence was to bring oneself into



accordance with God's understanding of who one was. Thus, one important set of practices with regard to the self were practices for certainty of salvation. Confession, self-scrutiny, and self-discipline were all aimed at securing one's ultimate salvation in the kingdom of God. The most important possibility for man was to bring himself into accordance with God's idea, thus becoming a saint.

The modern concept of man, like the modern concept of natural bodies, strips him of any inherent role, identity, or purpose. The most important possibility for man in modernity, expressed most clearly in Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?", is to take responsibility for who he is, thus becoming mature. Further, Kant later named the essence of man's thinking capacity as our faculty for rationality.

Cartesian Style as Beginning to Move to the Margins

It was not so long ago that we understood ourselves in such Cartesian terms – that is, we held the Cartesian style as a clear paradigm or ideal to be emulated. In addition to having certain practices, like scientific research, which we agreed were best performed in a Cartesian style, we admired people who could conduct their lives as a whole in a Cartesian way – that is, who had a Cartesian identity.

This is best seen in the admiration once given to scientists in our culture. It was believed that an expertise in science gave men like Einstein the insight and perspective necessary to understand our world and lives as a whole. Fictional characters like Spock from Star Trek were admired for their ability to approach every domain and event in their lives with the same detachment and rationality that they would approach laboratory experiments.

That we now longer hold such a clear ideal is best seen in the way in which scientists are portrayed in contemporary films and cultures. The cold inhumanity of some government scientists in the recent movie *Outbreak*, for instance, is viewed with ambivalence – their ability to deal with the problem of an infectious disease with detachment is admired, and perhaps accepted as the correct approach. But we are still uneasy with them as characters, and may wonder whether mitigating their detachment with more human characteristics would improve them or actually make them worse.

While we may no longer have a clear sense of a Cartesian identity, however, the Cartesian "style" is still pervasive. In the work place, in personal relationships, in our education, etc., we still seek to have an



orderly picture of our practices and lives as a whole, and we feel deficient or out of control if we lack clarity about the way our lives work.

V. Effects of the Cartesian Style on Modern Consciousness

Although the Cartesian style and the practices of the scientific method have made immense improvements in our ability to move in the world, there are as well significant disadvantages inherent in that way of being. The Cartesian style of detachment, while effective in producing rigor in our understanding of natural phenomena, conceals important aspects of the conditions of being human.

Within the Cartesian style, people are seen as a particular kind of creature: minds that investigate the essential properties of the world. Implicit in this interpretation of human beings is a fundamental duality – that between the world which contains fundamental properties and the human being (the mind) who is observing it. In this view, then, people are necessarily separated and distinct from the world they live and move in. People become objective observers of the world whose primary means of relating to it is through mental representations. Such a view of human beings hides the fact that we are constantly immersed in the world, having certain concerns and pursuing activities which satisfy our concerns.

We can see this point clearly through our common interpretation of language. Within the context of the scientific investigation, language is seen simply as a vehicle where a scientist 1) represents the properties of the world and 2) reports his or her findings about the properties of the world. Basically, language, within the Cartesian tradition, is simply a means of representing the world and transferring those representations to others. As the practices and style of the scientific investigation began to dominate how people encountered the world, the particular interpretation of language became dominant as well. People saw language primarily as a means of transferring information about the world. Language is simply a body of statements that are either true or false, that can be proven or disproven.

This, however, is a very limited view of the way language actually functions in our lives. While it is true that we commonly use language to report occurrences that are happening, this is not the only role language plays, nor is it even the primary role. In language, we make commitments



to one another and coordinate our activities in order to satisfy our concerns. We, for example, make requests of others or make promises to them. It is through language that we bind ourselves as a community, shaping and building the future.

Another disadvantage to the Cartesian style is its inability to cope with change and new situations. We have already discussed above how the search for essential properties is always cast against a particular interpretation of temporality. Essential properties are the things that do not change. So, in focusing on essential properties, a person moving in a Cartesian style concentrates primarily on those things that remain the same. Such a person encounters the world in terms of fixed realities. Commonly, they develop a rigidity and closedness to change.

It is obvious, however, that the world changes and that there is an intuitive structure in which change happens. For example, during the early part of the 19th century, people mostly lived a rural lifestyle. As time progressed, however, the predominant lifestyle became more urban. The reason for this is that during the 19th century the industrial revolution grew in momentum, where innovations significantly altered the way people worked. The opportunities for people to maintain a rural lifestyle decreased, while new opportunities opened in cities. In order to satisfy their concerns for maintaining a certain kind of livelihood, more and more people flocked into urban communities.

The Cartesian style does not readily account for such changes. The contribution of the scientific method is its emphasis on essential properties of things outside the context of human concerns and activities. But it is precisely the distinctions of human concerns and the underlying temporality of concerns – the interpretation that concerns are inherited from the past, structure our present activities, and orient our speculations about the future – that allows us to make sense of changes in the world.

VI. Further Examples of the Effects of the Cartesian Style on Our Everyday Practices

We can see more clearly the effects of the Cartesian style on our lives by examining four domains of action in which we are commonly engaged:

- Emotions,



- Learning,
- Approaching Complex Situations,
- Building Relationships.

Emotions

One shape the Cartesian style takes is in the privilege we accord to emotional detachment. We believe that we are at our best when we can be "objective" about a situation by controlling our emotions and passions. Our norms for a professional dealing show this ideal of detachment; for instance, we believe that doctors shouldn't have relatives as patients, and lawyers shouldn't have relatives as clients, because their involvement in the situation will skew their ability to act appropriately and rationally in their duties. Likewise, we tend to trust an account of a neutral observer above that of someone who has a stake (emotional or otherwise) in the subject being observed. We also see this privilege in our jury system; today, having any sort of relation to the parties to a dispute (or even to their attorneys) will disqualify a juror from service. This is because we believe that a certain sort of detachment is essential to being capable of making a fair judgment in a case. But, it has not always been this way – in the origins of the English jury system, the jury consisted of members of the community who knew the parties and may even have been witnesses to the dispute.

Emotions, however, are much too important in our lives to simply ignore. The way in which we approach a situation is always determined by the emotion or mood we are in. For example, a person, if she is feeling happy, would be enthusiastic that her friends are coming over for dinner. In contrast, if she were tired she would see the same occasion as something burdensome. By de-emphasizing the relevance and the importance of the effects our emotions play on our lives, people develop the idea that they cannot take any responsibility for their emotions. Emotions are the kind of phenomena that simply happen to us as opposed to the kind of phenomena we can control. It is common for people to feel stuck in the present emotions they are in and to be content to wait until the wave of their emotion passes.

Learning

Another form in which this detached way of being gets manifested in our practices is the general approach we take to learning. This can be seen in the way that we think that learning entails following rules and procedures. Because the Cartesian style implies that a person becomes



an observer who can come to know the world by gathering data and generating mental concepts that represent it, following instructions, rules, and procedures becomes the way to learn new abilities as opposed to, for instance, learning to cultivate certain emotions as a necessary precondition for learning new abilities.

While learning the rules and principles behind a given domain might be beneficial for a beginner, when we want to develop higher competencies in certain abilities, understanding things in terms of the causal properties or the rules to be followed is not sufficient. In addition to learning the rules and procedures, a person needs to develop certain habits; a person needs to condition his or her body in a particular way. For example, a gymnast does not learn the skill of gymnastics by reading or following instructions alone. The more important aspect of cultivating the skill of gymnastics is in how the gymnast conditions her body, developing the flexibility and strength required for doing gymnastics. The same is true in other domains as well. A student, for instance, becomes successful not simply by memorizing rules and answering questions on an examination. In addition to this, the student must also cultivate certain habits in her body, such as studying for a number of hours each day, enduring long hours in lecture halls, or engaging in conversations with her peers.

The Cartesian style also ignores the emotional aspect of learning. In addition to conditioning the body to practice a certain skill, the person learning that skill needs to be able to take a particular emotional stance toward the skill she is learning. For example, she needs to be open to the guidance of her instructor. She must recognize that she is, at that point in time, not wholly competent in the skill she is learning. Consequently, she needs to prepare herself for the frustrations that always accompany learning a new skill.

So understanding the properties of things, following procedures or applying principles, or finding the right answers is not an appropriate way to learn a new skill. It might be a way to become familiar with a subject matter as a beginner, but not for cultivating the skill. Becoming a manager after being a technician, for instance, requires that a person learn by immersing himself in the situation, learning key distinctions, conditioning his body in a particular way and by cultivating the appropriate emotions.



Approaching Complex Situations

People moving in a Cartesian style usually encounter complex situations as problems to be solved. Generally speaking, we have guiding principles which allow us to find solutions to complex situations whether they are technical (for example fixing a car), or resolving a conflict at work. On the one hand, we apply certain principles to situations of a definite sort and, on the other, we investigate to find the right answers. Thus we treat situations in a fixed manner.

In this sense, the Cartesian style for doing natural sciences is that of understanding the whole on the basis of the causal relations and preconceived principles, which is constituted independently of the situation at hand. People working in a Cartesian style tend to take up problem situations as if they were figuring out a math problem. The people notice the “essential” characteristics about the situation, apply some preconceived principle, and, in the end, arrive at a definite solution.

In cases where a definite solution cannot be found, people become frustrated and often times paralyzed. They tend to react in the same way they would when encountering a math problem to which they cannot find the right answer, constantly double-checking their calculations, verifying that they are using the correct formula, etc. In such circumstances, a person moving in a Cartesian style tends to become fixated on the problem, instead of responding to the concerns which underlie the situation.

When operating in a "Cartesian" mode, a predicate of acting in the new situation is having a theoretical grasp of the situation, understanding it in the totality of interrelations of the individual objects and actors constituting the situation. Thus, a person acting with a Cartesian style is always playing catch up – trying to master a new situation before feeling capable of operating within it.

Building Relationships

Another domain in which a Cartesian style is not appropriate is for dealing with the kinds of complexities that arise in building relationships with people. For example, if a married couple must deal with an issue, it would cause all kinds of negative consequences if one person tries to detach themselves and analyze the characteristic problems the other person has, and attempts to find a solution. A person analyzing another person in terms of their strengths and weaknesses falls into a situation of



categorizing the other person as a certain kind of person with fixed characteristics, hence limiting the possibilities for growth in the relationship.

The result may actually impair their ability to respond appropriately to the situation. This is because the style of detachment means we encounter situations as something constituted independently of us, rather than seeing ourselves as imbedded in and forming the situation from the outset.

Another way in which the Cartesian style may impair our ability to form relationships is by attempting to communicate with others through conveying information and giving information. We often think that because we gave the correct instructions, a person should have understood us. Or because we gave such an information-filled presentation, people will want to buy our product. But this is clearly not the case. People often do move effectively, even when they are not given detailed instructions.

Finally, a Cartesian style is inappropriate when articulating our narrative regarding our past experiences, competencies, or learning etc. By taking a detached perspective when articulating this kind of narrative, a person provides only a list of events in their lives, things they can now do or features that they attribute to themselves, such as that of being a good mathematician. This list closes them off to a richer articulation of their life experiences that would draw others in, in such a way as to invent the narrative with them. For instance, articulating your learning in terms of the information you now understand does not allow others to see the kinds of questions you have and areas where you can continue developing.

Conclusion

We have already noted how detachment may inhibit our ability to cope with new situations. It may hinder our ability to take decisive action, and make us unreceptive to new ways of dealing with things and new opportunities for action. But this doesn't mean we should foster a simple anti-Cartesianism. We do not want to equate the Cartesian style with inauthenticity.

Authenticity and inauthenticity are modes of being in the world. In being authentically, we understand the contingency of our practices and identities, but act resolutely in the face of this contingency. In



being inauthentically, we take as necessary the average norms and possibilities opened up by the current understanding of being--that is, we do what we do because that is what one does in the situation.

Cartesianism, as we've been explaining it, is not this sort of mode of being, but rather a style implicit in some of our practices. There could thus be authentic Cartesianism, and inauthentic Cartesianism. Cartesianism has this in common with inauthenticity – like inauthenticity, it takes certain objects and practices as fixed and necessary, because it understands things as constituted independently of our understanding of them. But one could be an authentic Cartesian by recognizing the contingency of the Cartesian style of engaging in practices. One would thus act in a detached fashion, not because that is what one does, or because the one right way of understanding things is as context-free, but because, given our purposes and the kinds of objects in the domain in question, such an approach is appropriate.

Most importantly, the sort of self-reflection that Descartes encouraged can be very liberating. A certain kind of disengagement from our lives allows us to see our practices and habits as contingent, freeing us to foster new practices. We thus need to be able to distinguish detachment from reflection, or rather see detachment as just one style of reflection. In its place, we need to foster a more engaged form of reflection.

