

POLS 588, 24 March 2005

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Why is Descartes said to be the father of modernity?

The concept of rationalism and thus modernism is the foundation stone of today's world affairs. The way our world is structured politico-strategically, -economically and -socially is based on rationalism and thus modernism, and even if reason as an end in itself is no longer an absolute paradigm, it has shaped our world in a way no other philosophy recently has.

The modernist project, the prioritizing of reason as a project for a whole culture, is the result of the prioritizing of reason by René Descartes (1596-1650), who prioritized reason for himself to a formerly unknown degree. Descartes never aimed at reforming the thought process of society, but merely planned to reform his own thoughts without imposing on others to imitate the process.

At the outset of the construction of his philosophy, Descartes noticed that works done by individuals, for example a building constructed by a single architect, are always more beautiful than works done by a larger group of people, for example a building many architects have tried to patch up over the course of time. The same logic holds true for knowledge, states Descartes, as the knowledge one gains from book learning, thus the studying of many people's opinions, cannot result in as true a knowledge as the simple reasoning by an intelligent human.

Descartes willingness to doubt everything that can be reasonably doubted, which resulted in a doubtful stance towards everything but his own existence and god, illustrates a previously unimaginable willingness to question the status quo. "I think, therefore I am", was the first principle of his philosophy and the result of his methodological scepticism. Based on his first principle, he tried to rebuild the house of knowledge, only accepting things as true that are very clearly and very distinctly so.

In which way does Descartes give birth to the age of modernity though? Basically, his resolution to dismiss all foundations laid by predecessors as theoretically false is revolutionary. His epistemology, the way of knowing due to unpreoccupied reasoning, is the beginning of a new era in science. As he tries to unravel the secrets of existence with reason and does away with a more traditional divine framework, he gives birth to the natural science; the study of the physical, nonhuman aspects of the earth and the universe.

His works lead to the development of the continental rationalism, a philosophy school based on his belief that human reason is the only source of knowledge. This development eventually resulted in the modernist project, which was first applied thoroughly in the "New World". Mental concepts such as the prioritizing of reason, the use of hypothetical-deductive science, the objectifying of our world and the idea of decontextualising have been developed by Descartes and are defining features of our existence. The marginalization of others and a critical stance towards a god, accompanying elements of the later rationalism, were not part of Descartes reasoning though, as he was a practicing Catholic and valued other cultures, often labelled barbarian or savage in his contemporary times, just as much as any other culture.