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René Descartes (1596–1650)

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Mathematician and founder of modern philosophy, known for his distrust of formal rhetoric. The Cartesian method and effort to achieve philosophic certainty are often cited as a challenge to rhetoric; yet, given Descartes's frequent deployment of rhetorical strategies, it is not surprising that his system makes provision for their provisional use. Furthermore, in spite of Descartes's aspiration toward a philosophy beyond rhetoric, postmodern critics find his system an entirely rhetorical construct.

In Part One of the *Discourse on Method,* Descartes denigrates the utility of formal rhetoric for persuasion, maintaining that clear and distinct ideas suffice. His claim to construct a new philosophic system ignoring previous ones implicitly questions the usefulness of the rhetorical tradition. Proclaiming the unity of all knowledge, he advocated a single method drawing its universal validity not from the specificity of individual disciplines but from the processes of the human mind. Moreover, his adoption of a mathematical model and his aspiration to extend mathematical certainty to all domains caused him to reject the probabilities that had been accepted in rhetoric. His dualism, which assigned highest value to ideas known independently of the senses, led to a distrust of the imagination and passions.

Indeed, the traditional five parts of rhetoric are almost entirely displaced by the four rules of the *Discourse*. If only clear and distinct ideas persuade, convincing arguments are discovered by his method rather than by such technics as the commonplaces. Disposition should sequence ideas from simple to more complex, either in the "analytic" manner by which they were discovered, or in the "synthetic" one that arranges them as a sequence of axioms and definitions that makes clear how each successive proposition follows logically from the preceding one. These clear and distinct ideas should be communicated through a transparent language, with words serving as counters for ideas reduced to their simplest components.

His own practice, however, belies an impersonal speaker addressing a universal audience in a format aping geometry. As Gouhier has shown, Descartes authorizes an instrumental rhetoric necessitated by the residue of childhood prejudices, which retards the complete assurance of certainty that clear and distinct ideas should produce. Fumaroli has described how Descartes aligned himself with Guez de Balzac to reach the emerging audience of *honnetes gens* by using French instead of Latin, first-person narrative, and a style closer to baroque imagery than to the spare prose of scientific objectivity that is often considered his legacy. Rather than overwhelm his public with the force of his arguments, he modestly proposes to guide them in reenacting his philosophic quest.

Postmodern critics, however, point to the rhetoricity of the entire enterprise. Descartes's physiology, admittedly discredited today, relies not on his method as a heuristic device but on the similes that purport to be only illustrations (Cahne 96). Even his acknowledged contributions to science, like the law of refraction or analytic geometry, cannot validate his method because they were discovered by more piecemeal means (Schuster 213-16). Indeed, revisionist critics suggest that his method is more an instrument of exposition than a tool of invention. Descartes's method, thus, suffers the same fate as the scholastic syllogism, which, according to *Regulae X,* should be transferred from philosophy to rhetoric because it is capable of communicating only arguments that have been discovered by some other means. Moreover, just as the account of his development of his method in the *Discourse on Method* is largely fictional (Schuster 219), the metaphysical foundation of certainty he elaborated for his science in the cogito is paradoxical in that the impersonal subject it requires negates the empirical, autobiographical one that precedes it (Judovitz 108-9). Thus, far from being a mere adjuvant to a method that ultimately precludes it, rhetoric finds itself conterminous with his system's methodological and metaphysical core.

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