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Rene Descartes: a famous philosopher

1211 words

Rene Descartes was a famous French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist. He was born on 31 March, 1596 in La Haye, France and died on 11 February 1650 in Stockholm, Sweden, at the age of 53. He had good education but did not satisfied with what he learnt, so he spent many years after graduation travelling to many countries in Europe, gaining experiences about people and their life and culture. In 1628, he went to Holland and stayed until 1649. Most of his master works were written when he was in Holland. His masterpieces include Discourse on Method, Meditations on First Philosophy, the second edition of the Meditations, and The Principles of Philosophy. Descartes has been considered the father of modern Western philosophy. His philosophy expressed his belief that humans were fully capable of reason and were not dominated by Christian doctrines. For him, humans were free from God and the Church; this revolutionary concept set the trend for modernity.<sup>1</sup> Descartes' concept has tremendous impacts on the seventeenth century and the following centuries until now. This essay aims to discuss Descartes' great contribution to human beings. That is, Descartes' philosophy inspires human beings to realize their rational potential through his concepts of truth seeking, judgment making and intellect as opposed to senses.

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia contributors. "René Descartes." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 9 sep 2012. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9\\_Descartes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9_Descartes)>

Descartes' philosophical concept concerning logic contributes greatly to humans in that it explains how they attain truth and knowledge in a logical way. The concept appears in his famous work, Discourse on Method, whose full name is Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences.<sup>2</sup> The book was published in 1637. Descartes wrote the book not for scholars or philosophers, but for people in general.<sup>3</sup> In this book, he listed four truth-seeking methods that are applicable and practical even in the present world. These four methods are ; first , if a person is not sure about something, he should not consider it true because there are still some doubts in his mind about it but should consider it true only when those doubts no longer exist in his mind ; second ,when facing difficult problems,a person should deal with them by separating them into small portions ; third, try to understand the easiest and the least complicated parts first and gradually move to examine the more complicated parts ; fourth, keep every detail in record to ensure the completion of detail. Descartes was very brave in providing these new rules to humans. That is, during that time, people's beliefs and thinking process were still under great influences of the ancients and the algebra of the moderns whose methods of seeking truth were considered by Descartes as unclear and impractical: the ancients' way relied on too many figures while the algebra of the moderns was very confusing.<sup>4</sup> His four new rules can be seen as the logical thinking model for the

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia contributors. "Discourse on the Method." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 9 sep 2012. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse\\_on\\_the\\_Method](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse_on_the_Method)>

<sup>3</sup> "RENE DESCARTES (1595-1650)." Oregonstate. 10 sep 2012. <<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/philosophers/descartes.html>>

<sup>4</sup> "Rene Descartes." The online Literature Library. 11 sep 2012. <<http://www.literature.org/authors/descartes-rene/reason-discourse/chapter-05.html>>

following centuries and are still not outdated even now. They are practical in many aspects of life. In today world which is full of problems, it is difficult for humans to see the differences between what is true and what is false. Descartes' methods can become the logical tools that help them discover truth without prejudice or misconception. For example, if two countries are quarrelling about one island and each says that it is the owner of that island, how can they stop the conflict? If Descartes were here, he would tell those countries to try to seek truth by applying those four methods. When they gain truth, truth itself will become the basis for the solutions to the problem.

Descartes' another contribution to humans is his philosophy about humans' judgment making. In his book *Meditation on the Third Philosophy* and *Meditation on the Fourth Philosophy*, he expressed his strong belief that God was not to be blamed for making humans commit wrong judgment, but humans themselves were the cause of errors. For him, the judgment making is related to humans' exercise of their intellect and will: will is not easily controlled and can urge humans to do whatever they want, and intellect is limited because no one is capable of knowing anything. When a person exercises his will and allows will to dominate intellect, the result is that he makes wrong judgment.<sup>5</sup> Typically, humans and false judgments are inseparable causing the world to face many problems such as disharmony, injustice, hatred, and discrimination. Descartes' philosophy about making judgment can warn to humans that they must be greatly aware of the danger of their free will.

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<sup>5</sup> "Decartes, Rene Overview." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 12 sep 2012.  
< <http://www.iep.utm.edu/descarte/> >

Humans always allow free will to dominate them, so they often make wrong judgment.<sup>6</sup> They have to make sure that their will is under proper control and that their intellect expands so that they can be sufficiently equipped with knowledge before making any judgment. In doing so, the judgment will be legitimate and constructive and there will be no damages. For example, when a person decides to invest in a business he likes but has no knowledge about it, then it means that he lets his will drive him to spend a lot of money investing in this business; as a result, his business fails and he becomes bankrupt. If he focuses on “intellect,” he will start by doing research on the business first until he fully understands its strengths and weaknesses. Thus, he will be able to avoid making wrong judgment and will have a chance to be successful.

Last, Descartes’ contribution to humans is concerned with intellect as a rational source of knowledge. His strong belief in innate ideas was in accordance with Plato’s rational concept which states that intellect, not senses, is the right source of knowledge and humans should depend on intellect to gain knowledge of the truth. Descartes’ concept about intellect reflects Plato’s allegory of the cave in which those shadows on the wall are not real.<sup>7</sup> In addition, his concept that intellect leads humans to attain truth of the world is in contrast with the Aristotelian and Scholastic concept which is mainly based on senses as the source of knowledge. His main attack is that senses may change or may not be real, so their uncertain nature may cause misunderstanding ; therefore, humans may not be able to attain knowledge of the truth by relying on the sensation.<sup>8</sup> Descartes’ account about intellect can benefit

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<sup>6</sup> Robinson, Dave and Garrett Chris. Introducing Descartes. 1998, p.71.

<sup>7</sup> “Descartes’ Epistemology.” Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy. 13 sep 2012  
< [http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes\\_epistemology](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes_epistemology) >

<sup>8</sup> “Descartes. Rene: overview.” Internet Encyclopedia of philosophy. 13 sep 2012  
< <http://www.iep.utm.edu/descarte/> >

humans because it increases their awareness that they should not be deceived by senses of sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste as well as by sensation such as excitement, thrill, fascination or fear. These senses and feelings can actually blur their vision and this could lead to wrong implication or misinterpretation.

Descartes' legacy is unquestionable. His philosophical concepts have enlightened humans for more than 300 years. Although he belonged to the seventeenth century, his concepts have still been applicable, practical, and useful. Humans benefit a great deal from his concepts of truth-seeking methods as well as the concept of doubts, judgment making process and intellect as opposed to senses. Through Descartes, humans learn to recognize their own potential, especially their reasoning power, how to fully use and control such power. His great impacts on the world are evident, so his name is not forgotten. It is the same as his famous philosophical statement "Cogito ergo sum" which is in English "I think, therefore I am."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Wikipedia contributors. "Cogito ergo sum." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 13 sep 2012  
< [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cogito\\_ergo\\_sum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cogito_ergo_sum) >