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Descartes's Impact on Modern Education

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Descartes's Impact on Modern Education

The Scientific Revolution was a drastic change in the way people viewed the world and nature due to the developments made in the disciplines like Physics, Mathematics, Chemistry, etc. The revolution took place in the 17th century and was the precursor of modern science where the Greek worldview was slowly being replaced. René Descartes (1596-1650) was at the core of the revolution, a renowned philosopher whose writings about logic and reasoning heavily influenced the scientific world. Descartes is largely known for being the father of modern philosophy as he was the first of rationalists, which is a belief system where opinions and actions are based on reasoning and knowledge rather than religious faith and beliefs. Descartes also focused a lot of his writing on representing oneself and reflecting upon one's experience in the first person, giving rise to more of an individualistic worldview that was absent during his era. He introduced the idea of traveling outside your local area to gain new knowledge and perspective to learn from them and add to your educational experiences. Descartes's emphasis on traveling as part of your own educational experiences forms the basis of the modern education system.

Prior to Descartes, education in Europe was religion-centric and did not encourage individualism. Descartes was born in medieval France where education was controlled by the church and the cycle of education revolved largely around religious indoctrination. Scientific advancements were also based on the assumptions made through the interpretations of religious texts instead of rigorous examinations of ideas. People stayed confined to about 5 miles from their houses and did not explore outside of their areas at all, which was considered normal. As such, people rarely traveled to newer places to stimulate newer experiences or engage in conversation with people having different beliefs and stayed bound within their thoughts and

ideologies that they learned through religious institutions like the church. There was no emphasis on individualism as people held a strong belief in the Great Chain of Being which is the theory that God created a strict hierarchical order of all objects to ensure peace and stability in the universe. People were placed in a hierarchical order and did not explore beyond the families that they were born in and the jobs they held. This discouraged individualism and self-learning as people were rarely allowed to have an individual identity unless they were at the higher end of the Chain like the king.

Descartes popularized the idea of individualism and traveling to gain more knowledge from one's experience. Descartes focused his writings on critically thinking for oneself and rejecting any prejudice and preconceived notions one had gained through sources like religious texts where there is no experimentation to verify facts.¹ In his book *Discourse on the Method* (1637), Descartes talks about thorough examinations of all scientific beliefs and for individuals to begin with the simplest things to learn and build their own knowledge upon the established background. This also gives rise to individual learning as Descartes encourages people to separate truth from lies through their individual learning and experiences, rather than what they were taught His inclination towards individualism gave rise to the quote "I think, therefore I am."² People are inherently curious and to not critically think about the world and their surrounding would defeat the purpose of being an intellectual being. Descartes also firmly believed that people's assessment of the world is most effective when they use their own "...natural and unprejudiced judgment..." instead of taking the "...opinions of many different

¹ René Descartes, "Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences" in HONR 101(B) *FYS: The Making of the Modern Mind*, ed. Barbara Whitehead (DePauw University: Greencastle, Indiana, 2022), 37.

² Descartes, "Discourse on the Method," 40.

individuals....”³ His theory was based on the fact that all people are born with equal abilities and are capable of learning and discerning between good and bad.⁴ Since everyone has the equal ability to learn, traveling to new places and gaining new cultural experiences along with varying perspectives and opinions would help people improve their thinking and expand their knowledge.⁵ Descartes advocated for individualism and traveling to learn in a society that discouraged both.

The ideology of Descartes regarding individualism and traveling to gain knowledge is becoming more important in today’s education system. Many students have traveled tens of thousands of kilometers to seek their education in a global institute where it is easier to obtain perspectives from people who come from different cultures and upbringings. In 2019, there were around 6 million students who traveled to a new country to pursue higher education.⁶ The idea of studying abroad has not only been discussed widely but has a lot of research backing up its benefits. In their 2009 research article, “Study Abroad or Study Away: It’s Not Merely Semantics,” Larry A. Braskamp and Neal Sobania talk about the importance of students being able to understand, relate, and work with people who vastly differ from them in cultural, political, and social ways.⁷ Adapting open-mindedness and developing empathetic behavior allows us to make better decisions. The benefit of studying abroad spans across personal lives and career paths of students. Studying away and exploring one’s individual ceiling makes for a much better critical thinker than being confined within the boundaries of the same few families

³ Descartes, “Discourse on the Method,” 36.

⁴ Descartes, “Discourse on the Method,” 33.

⁵ Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, 35.

⁶ “Other Policy Relevant Indicators: Inbound Internationally Mobile Students by Continent of Origin,” accessed September 27, 2022. <http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=3804>.

⁷ Neal Sobania, and Larry A. Braskamp, “Study Abroad or Study Away: It’s Not Merely Semantics,” *Peer Review* 11, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 23–26.

and houses. A study by UC Merced, a top 100 institute according to U.S World & News Report, states that students with a study abroad experience were “twice as likely” to be employed in 12 months after graduation than their counterparts.⁸ Meeting with people with varying knowledge and emotional connection to issues and being able to hold intellectual conversations helps people remove their preconceived notions and prejudices while focusing more on the logical conclusions. It also helps the students network with professionals and other students who share the same interests around the globe, which increases their employability and helps them solve workforce conflicts better.

Descartes introduced ideas that were radical at the time but now have become the norm. The concept of studying away and focusing on individual knowledge is very common now, whether it be attending colleges in different states and countries or going for a semester abroad, the value of traveling to learn has been highlighted for a while. People are more open to the idea of leaving their homes and comfort zones in pursuit of gaining more knowledge and newer perspectives on various issues and life in general. There is also a bigger focus on individualism where the sense of self and doing research are considered more important than simply agreeing to everything that is viewed by the larger media sources. Rationalism is now at the base of most scientific discoveries, every method and thought process involved in the discovery must be laid out for people to believe in the truthfulness of the discovery, leaving no room for prejudices and religious beliefs to alter the facts. Descartes changed the way people view the world and improved the way education is to be received, he altered the modern view of the world in a very significant manner.

⁸ “What Statistics Show about Study Abroad Students | Study Abroad,” accessed September 27, 2022, <https://studyabroad.ucmerced.edu/study-abroad-statistics/statistics-study-abroad>.

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