

2- Man, master of nature?

But as soon as I have acquired some general notions of physics, and having begun to experience them in various peculiar difficulties, I have noticed how far they can lead, and how different they are from the principles which have been used up till now. Now, I believed that I could not keep them hidden without sinning greatly against the law which obliges us to procure as much as it is in us the general good of all men; for they have shown me that it is possible to attain knowledge which is very useful to life, and that instead of the speculative philosophy taught in schools, we may find a practice by which Knowing the strength and actions of fire, water, air, stars, heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us, as distinctly as we know the various trades of our craftsmen, we We could employ in the same way for all the uses to which they are fit, and thus render us as masters and possessors of nature. This is not only to be desired for the invention of an infinity of artifices that would make it possible to enjoy without difficulty the fruits of the earth and all the conveniences that are found there, but mainly also for the health preservation, which is probably the first good and the foundation of all the other things of this life; for even the mind depends so strongly on the temperament and disposition of the organs of the body, that, if it is possible to find some means which generally makes men wiser and more skilful than they have hitherto been I think it's in medicine that we have to look for it.

Descartes, Discourse of the Method, 1637

Biography

René Descartes, born March 31, 1596 in The Hague-in-Touraine (today Descartes) and died February 11, 1650 in Stockholm, is a French mathematician, physicist and philosopher.

He is considered one of the founders of modern philosophy. He remains famous for having expressed in his Discourse on the method the cogito - "I think, therefore I am" - thus founding the system of sciences on the subject knowing in front of the world that it is represented. He has made contributions to physics, optics and is considered one of the founders of the mechanism. In mathematics, he is at the origin of analytic geometry. The cogito marks the birth of modern subjectivity.

His scientific method, set out from 1628 in the Rules for the Direction of the Mind, and later in the Discourse on Method in 1637, constantly affirmed a break with the scholasticism taught in the University. The Speech of the Method opens with a proverbial remark "Common sense is the thing of the world best shared" to insist more on the importance of using it by means of a method which preserves us, as much as to do may be error. It is inspired by the mathematical method, seeking to replace the Aristotelian syllogisms used in the middle ages since the thirteenth century.

It affirms a substantial dualism between the soul and the body, breaking with the Aristotelian tradition. He radicalizes his position by refusing to give thought to the animal, conceiving it as a "machine", that is to say, a body entirely devoid of soul.

Problematic

Can we stop being a slave to nature and become its masters? And if, we are able to do it, how to act ? Are there limits to this act? Does Descartes advocate the aggressive domination of nature?

Position of the author

Descartes affirms that man must cease to be a slave to nature, that man can render nature useful to men by improving his knowledge of nature. It is more a question of arranging cohabitation, a peaceful coexistence than domination pure and simple. And it is with the help of science can "make us masters and possessors of nature". In other words, man can seek to dominate nature, he can pretend this conquest, but this knowledge will always be imperfect.

Text comment

This desire to dominate nature also signifies Descartes desire to break with theoretical, speculative philosophy. Before him, science was contemplation of truths; it must become useful to men. Before Marx, Descartes declares that theoretical thought is sterile.

Descartes is always associated with the philosophy of technology. If Francis Bacon launched the idea of conquering nature, it is nevertheless Descartes who is seen as the first thinker of modern science, the first philosopher of the technique.

Thus, the Cartesian scientific project is complex because it rests on a powerful subjectivity, which seeks to improve its conditions of existence, but also aware of its own limits. Heidegger is therefore wrong when he attributes to Descartes the source of the concept of irrational domination of man over nature.