

# THE RISE AND FALL OF CARTESIANISM

*Posted on August 1, 2021 by Nicholas Capaldi*



The one time I met Friedrich Hayek was at a lecture he gave at Stanford University in 1980. Hayek, as I remember, kept complaining about the dangers of Cartesianism. Until recently, I never understood why.

After all, Rene Descartes was one of the greatest and most influential thinkers of all time. In addition to founding analytic geometry, creating a physics that rivaled Newton for over a century, he was arguably the first modern philosopher. Specifically, he challenged the organic teleological view of Aristotle's physics and thereby undermined the Aristotelian universe of medieval Christendom. Instead, he proposed a new synthesis consisting of a mechanical world created by an Augustinian Christian God who expressed Himself in Platonic terms. In addition, his was the first expression of the Technological Project, the aim of which was to make ourselves the "Masters and possessors of nature," the transformation of the world to suit human needs.

Ancient science reflected an agricultural economy, aiming to explain and to predict the events of the physical world of nature. Wisdom consisted in (a) understanding an external structure and (b) conforming ourselves to that structure. Science (e.g., astronomy) in this frame of reference is *observational*. Modern science, reflecting as it does an industrial and technological economy, aims as well to explain and to predict, but it also aims to control the outcome of events. Wisdom consists in (a) formulating/imagining mathematical models of what is going on and (b) getting the external world to conform to our internal models. Science is *experimental*. Descartes understood that this sort of intellectual endeavor flourished best in an environment of open thought and commerce such as found in 17th-century Netherlands.

As a systematic philosopher, Descartes introduces and makes the official starting point of modern epistemology the "*I Think*" perspective, something that had been implicit in classical and medieval thought. Classical thought had always prioritized thought over action or practice. It had always presumed that we needed an independent *theory* before we can act. Prior to Descartes, skeptics had repeatedly exposed the plurality of mundane competing theories. Drawing on the Augustinian inheritance of the school he attended at La Fleche, Descartes thought he could permanently dispose of skepticism by practicing the Socratic Method on himself and drill down until he found what could not be questioned/challenged without self-contradiction. This method did not rely on any appeal to our bodily experience of the world – which might after all be an illusion. Nor did it appeal to any social framework: tradition, customary practice, which were after all historical products.

In a manner of speaking, it was Ockham's radical autonomous self (understood as "I think") but not "We Think", "I Do" or "We Do" because all of the latter were not impervious to challenge. On a subsequent occasion I shall argue that the "We Do" perspective is the basis of Anglo-American thinking (when not corrupted by Continental models such as positivism and phenomenology), and "We Do" explains such things as Hume's focus on common life and his transition to history as well as the later thought of Wittgenstein, Hayek, and Oakeshott.

Having established thereby to his own satisfaction that he existed as an "I Think", Descartes proceeded to establish the existence of God. Whereas Aristotle had identified four causes, wherein three of which (formal, final and efficient) were identical, Descartes eliminated final (teleological) causation. Nevertheless, Descartes retained the identity of formal and efficient causation. This alleged identity permitted one to argue backwards from any effect (form) to its efficient cause sight unseen. Given Cartesian physics and traditional logic, this is an unassailable proof of God's existence as creator or first efficient cause of the physical world and ultimate author of the Bible! Thus, had Descartes established the existence and validity of the Christian world-view (hereafter the "PLAN") now understood as including the transformation of the physical world.

In order to make sense of the Technological Project, the transformation of the physical world in the service of humanity, it is important that some aspect of humanity be independent of the physical world. If humans were wholly part of the physical world, then any human project could be transformed as well, thereby leaving all projects without an autonomous status. Hence, it is necessary that the subject, or at least the mind of the subject, be free and independent of the body.

Where does all of this leave us? Rather than establishing and reinforcing the moral authority of the Catholic Church, Descartes seemingly or unwittingly supported the Protestant contention that humans could have direct access to God and His PLAN without the institutional authority of the Church. In addition, Descartes bequeathed to the discipline of philosophy the endless supply of dissertations hoping to overcome the dualisms of reason and world, subject and object, freedom and necessity.

Modern science did not come to a halt with Cartesian physics and analytic geometry. Newtonian atomistic physics moving in the void of calculus took its place. Now there were only efficient causes. There were no final and no formal causes. There were no necessary connections among different kinds of causes. Hume merely spelled out the implications of Newtonian physics for delegitimizing the alleged proofs of God's existence (see Capaldi on this).

Still, we had the increasingly clear vision of an orderly Newtonian physical world and the ancillary successes of the Technological Project.

Even with a marginalized or superfluous God, God's PLAN for the physical world still seemed to be safe. It was so safe it did not seem to need miraculous intervention (Deism). Miracles were replaced by utopian visions of future techno-science. Unfortunately, those who continued to tie God's Plan to a belief in God could not agree, and they further discredited themselves by engaging in (17th-century) religious wars.

We might learn to do without God, but we sorely needed something like His plan for the social world. In the eighteenth century, some of the French *philosophes* (Helvetius, d'Alembert, Condorcet, La Mettrie, etc.) proposed the Enlightenment Project: a social science to discover the analogous structure of the social world and an analogous social technology to implement its benefits; a wholly secular plan of ideal harmony without religious warranties. This was an even greater gift to the discipline of philosophy, the opportunity to discover, articulate and implement the secular social PLAN. Liberalism, socialism, and Marxism are expressions of the Enlightenment Project. Comte was the master-planner. Needless to say, none of these secular plans has worked, and you could make the case that they made the social world worse off.

However, if there is no God who guarantees the PLAN? Why think there is any kind of PLAN? There might even be some kind of predictable order but why think the order is disposed toward human benefit? The physical scientists keep changing the description of the physical order and the alleged social scientists offer thinly veiled private agendas.

J.J. Rousseau comes to the rescue. There is no plan, nothing for reason to discover. All alleged plans are rationalizations of the status quo by its beneficiaries involving the exploitation of the victims. The most we can hope for is to recover our lost innocence, the world before the 'Fall'.

In place of an autonomous reason, we find an autonomous will that does not know avarice, shame, or guilt. The autonomous self is pure free will. This primacy of will is not only independence from the body but it is independent of a suspect and instrumental reason. We can achieve a pure social harmony simply by willing the community into existence and outlining the conditions that will sustain it.

There is a great risk in taking this path. We still have the solitary 'I' sitting in judgment on the world without the benefit of, indeed specifically disdaining, what is to be learned from history. The more brilliant you are the less likely you are to have peers and, therefore, the easier it is, in your solitary critical mind, to rise above the masses and your peers. Brilliant thinkers, however, have made disastrous choices in exercising their pure will. Heidegger will choose Nazism; Sartre will choose Stalinism. This mentality has been diagnosed and critiqued by the now largely ignored Camus in his discussion of "metaphysical rebellion" in *The Rebel*.

Where do we now stand? The only thing that seems to have been learned is the danger of the oppression of intellectuals. To be taken seriously in this intellectual milieu one needs to become radically or outrageously free. All 'plans' (traditions, cultural inheritances, even spontaneous order) are historical artifacts and forms of oppression; there is a sort of disingenuous posturing in opposing the status quo because one has become the status quo – someone has to institutionalize anti-planning.

All subsequent French, and even much German, philosophy (structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, postmodernism, etc.) are philosophies of anti-domination (of which Rawls is a watered-down version), limitless freedom, the absence of sexual taboos, a series of movements that ultimately reduce ethics and politics to the limited ideas that drive them. As [Cristaudo](#) has so succinctly pointed out, herein lies a significant degree of failure to understand how the world came to be the way it is and why it is the way it is.

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The [featured image](#) shows, "Interior of the Cunerakerk, Rhenen," by Bartholomeus van Bassen, painted in 1638.

