



The Catholic Tradition of Classical Education

with Dr. Andrew Seeley

Lesson 7: The Jesuit Education of Rene Descartes

Outline:

Brief introduction

- 17th century scholar who engaged in philosophy, mathematics and sciences.
- He received a Jesuit education, in one of their best European schools, but eventually remarked on his disappointment in his education.
- *“I had been nourished by books since I was a child. And because I was convinced that by using them one could acquire a clear and certain knowledge of everything that was useful for life, I had a great desire to study them. But as soon as I concluded the course of studies at the end of which one is usually admitted to the ranks of the learned, I changed my mind completely. For I found myself so overcome by so many doubts and errors that I seem to have gained nothing from studying, apart for becoming more conscious of my ignorance.”* - Descartes

Descartes' summary and criticism of the classical curriculum

- Descartes acknowledges that:
 - the languages are important in understanding the classical text
 - fables animate the mind
 - memorable deeds of history help train our judgement
- Oratory is an impactful practice. Note the progression:
 - *from learning the language*
 - *to understanding the classical text*
 - *to developing a sense of literature*
 - *which all enters into the great conversation*
- All this culminates in oratory and poetry, which is the ability to express oneself and our deepest thoughts and emotions.
- Descartes stated that the role of theology is to get people to heaven, knowledge that is really reserved for angels. He also commented that moral readings that emphasize how we should live are drawn from pagans.
 - who build their rhetoric on sand
 - whom ‘you can’t really learn anything from, like how to live virtuously’
- As for philosophy, he believed there can’t be any real learning with so much disagreement. If there really is knowledge within philosophy, everyone would accept it without question.
- He thought Jesuit education was unsatisfactory for its lack of applicability. *“I had already devoted enough time to the fables, to the classical text. It’s good to learn*



about other people in the past. But that ultimately distracts you from what you should be doing now and today. The histories don't present reality as it is, they ignore a lot of details so it becomes dangerous to present that as modern day examples."

- Math is something the Jesuits could have used to train their students on how to think logically, and use reasoning to reach self-proving conclusions

How Descartes learnt on his own

- Get the right method of thought, start with looking at what we know inside of ourselves. Never to accept anything as true that I do not know clearly, to avoid prejudice and jumping to conclusions
- Take every problem, and learning is a series of problems to be solved
- Establish an order of thought, so a problem can be broken down into parts to be addressed in progression of the simplest.
 - This is the way Descartes' algebra works; very effective in problem solving.
- Establish an order of thought, so a problem can be broken down into parts to be addressed in progression of the simplest.

Seeley's critic of Descartes

- Seeley defends theology as being the culmination of all learning, the end product of other disciplines that are trying to unravel divine mysteries. This also teaches us how to live on earth the life that we want to live on heaven.
- Seeley pointed out that Descartes believes that a mathematical way of thinking should dominate all other ways of thinking, however that's not the natural way to learn.
- Natural way to learn is by taking in holes and complex things, examining every facet without losing sight of the matter as a whole. One flaw of the Cartesian way is that you only look at the parts as you go along.