

Some Aspects of Descartes Epistemology and Metaphysics

Ruman Debnath

Research Scholar Department of Philosophy Tripura University

Abstract:

Rene Descartes was known as the father of Modern western philosophy and he was one of the most prominent Rationalist philosophers. Descartes' method of doubt should not be confused with skepticism. He is not asserting that whatever can be doubted is false, but he is only supposing it to be false. He believed that clear and distinct perceptions were a mark of truth. Descartes' metaphysics focused on the basic structure of reality, including the mind-body relationship. He argues that the "Mind" is indivisible and "Body" is divisible. Dualism is the theory that the mental and the physical or mind and body or mind and brain are in some sense, radically different kinds of things. According to Descartes, metaphysics, which contains the principles of knowledge, such as the definition of the principal attributes of God, the immateriality of the soul, and of all the clear and simple notions that one has. Descartes argues that, cogito ergo sum (I think therefore I am) is the first and final certainty and as such we have to be careful in its interpretation as well as in deciding its position in the Cartesian philosophy.

Keywords: Rationalist, Skepticism, Epistemology, Doubt, Dualism, perception, Metaphysics, Cogito ergo sum.

INTRODUCTION

The originator and father of modern philosophy is Rene Descartes. Descartes was a creative mathematician. Whilst, on the one hand, like the thinker of the transition period, he has completely broken with previous philosophy, and once again considered all from the very beginning, he has, on the other hand, again, not merely, like Bacon, proposed a principle that is only methodological, or, like Bohm and the contemporary Italians, given expression to philosophical glances without methodic foundation, but he has, from the standpoint of entire freedom from presupposition, introduced a new, positive, materially full, philosophical principle, and then endeavored to develop it by method of continuous proof, the leading proposition of a system. The want to presupposition and the newness of its principle constitute him the originator, its inner fruitfulness the founder of modern philosophy.

Rene Descartes, was born on 31 March 1596 at La Haye in Touraine. Already in his early years, dissatisfied with the present philosophy, or rather altogether skeptical in its regard, he resolved, on completion of his studies, to bid adieu to all School Learning, and henceforward to gain knowledge only from himself and the great book of the world, from nature and the observation of man. When twenty years of age, he exchanged the life of Science for the life of the camp, serving as a volunteer first under Maurice of Orange, and of towards under Tilly.

The inclination to philosophical mathematical inquiries was too powerful in him, however, to allow him

permanently to quit these. In 1621, design now after long internal struggles, ripe within him, he left the army, passed some time in various pretty extensive travels, made a considerable story in Paris ;abandoned finally his native country in 1629, and betook Himself to Holland, in order to live there unknown and undisturbed wholly for philosophy and prosecution of his scientific projects. In Holland, though hot without many vexatious interferences on part of fanatical theologians, he live twenty year, till in 1649, in consequence of an invitation on the part of queen Christina of Sweden, he left it for Stockholm, where, however, he died the very next year, 11 February 1650.

Among Descartes works are the Discourse de la method, 1637, meditationes de prima philosophia, 1641 ; principia philosophia 1644 ; les passion de lame, 1650. The Discourse and passions were written in French, the meditations and principles in Latin. The book Le monde ou traite de la lumiere, begun in 1630, was not published by Descartes; the condemnation of Galileo by the inquisition in 1632 deterred the timid and peace - loving philosopher from completing it. It and the Traite de phomme appeared in 1644, the letters, 1657-1667 posthumous works, 1701.

the first part of true philosophy, according to Descartes, is metaphysics, which contains the principles of knowledge, such as the definition of the principal attributes of god, the immateriality of the soul, and of all the clear and simple notions that one is us. The second in physics, in which, after finding the true principles of material things, we examine, in general, how the whole universe has been formed, then, in particular, the nature of the earth and of all the bodies most generally found upon it, as air, water, fire, the loadstone and other minerals ; next the nature of plants, animal, and above all, man in order hereafter to be able to discover the other sciences that one useful to us. Thus, all philosophy is like a tree, of which metaphysics in the root, physics the trunk, and all the other sciences the branches that grow out of this trunk, which are reduced to three principal, namely, medicine, mechanics, and ethics. The science of morals is the highest and most perfect, which, presupposing on entire knowledge of the other sciences, is the last degree of wisdom. The first part of Descartes' book on the Principles of philosophy contains the metaphysics, the other three parts take up "all that is most general, in physics.

Epistemology – Method of Doubt

Rene Descartes, the originator, put all beliefs, ideas, thoughts, and matter in doubt. He showed that all grounds or reasoning, for any Knowledge could just as well be false. Sensory experience, the primary mode of knowledge, is often erroneous and therefore must be doubted. Descartes, like Bacon, resolutely sets his face against the old authorities and, like him, emphasizes the practical character of all philosophy. "Philosophy is a perfect knowledge of all that man can know, as well for the conduct of his life as for the preservation of his health and the discovery of all the arts". Unlike the English empiricist, however, he takes mathematic as the model of his philosophical method: study logic, he tells us, practice it's rules by studying mathematics.

Descartes therefore was very much concerned with the enquiry into the method of philosophizing. He had proposed to lay down thirty-six rules of which he mentioned thirty-one in the Regular. The object of Cartesian methodology was to apply mathematical method of philosophy with a view to obtaining certitude in Knowledge. As a result of his enquiry, he laid down four broad rules for his self guidance.

1. Never to accept anything as true unless I clearly know it as such. Descartes believes that errors arise from poorly comprehended experiences or from hasty, groundless and preconceived notions. The only remedy, therefore, he thinks, like in resolute refusal to believe in what is not clearly and distinctly perceived.

2. Divide up each of the difficulties, under examination into as many parts as possible. We begin with something vague and indefinite and later on, step by step, attain clearness and distinctness.
3. Commence with the simplest objects and ascend, step by step to the more complex. The explanation must be ordered and systematic. Hence Descartes is in favor of deductive use in philosophical thinking, for he implies that later steps, should be clearly deducible from earlier ones.
4. In every case make the enumeration so complete that I might be assured that nothing was omitted. The complex thing can be understood when we know it's (i) several constituent factors separately, clearly and distinctly, and when we (ii) know the order or system in which they are found.

Now how can we find something which is sure and certain? Descartes believes that the single, certain truth can be systematically sought by deliberate doubt. When doubt is pushed to its farthest limit then it will reveal something which is indubitable, which is clearly perceived. Now in order to discover the indubitable intuition, let us doubt all that can be doubted.

Sense – testimony can be doubted. Things of our daily life like tables, chairs, etc., we know through the senses. But the senses deceive us as is clear from illusions, hallucinations etc. Now prudence that we should not rely on things which deceive us even once.

we are deceived not only by distant and minute objects but also by other things. However, some may think that it's impossible to doubt that we are seated here, in a certain place at a certain time. But similar certainty is also found in our dreams, who knows that we may be deceiving us?

Thus some sense- beliefs are more probable than others. All of them, again appear convincing, as long as they last. But, then, whether even one of them is certain, past doubt we have no grounds of believing; one of the contrary have ample grounds for doubting.

Even the truths of science can be doubted. At this stage, it might be objects that the truths of sciences like $2+2=4$ cannot be doubted, even in dreams. However, the case does not seem to be quite clear. We can not know whether any truth of knowledge is at all intended for us finite beings; whether God has not created us rather for mere opinion and error. Besides, who knows there might be no God at all. There might be a demon at once potent and malignant who tricks us to believe in falsehood.

That I doubt cannot be doubted. When the doubt has done its worst it finds a face of completely unassailable certainty. I may doubt anything but I cannot doubt that I am doubting. Whether it be a dream or a real consciousness, I must exist as a doubting or thinking being. Let there be a dream or a real consciousness, I must exist as a doubting or thinking being. Let there be a demon to deceive me, but then I must exist as a thinking being to be deceived. Hence, I doubt or think, therefore, I exist, i.e., cogito ergo sum is the one certain truth which may be taken as the foundation of philosophy.

The doubt of Descartes should not be confused with psychological doubt. For example, in darkness, when a small creature crosses our path, we may doubt whether it was a mouse or a mole. The two may be thus contrasted:

Descartes' Doubt

1. It is not a thing of direct feeling and experience but is a deliberate and dispassionate attitude towards human experience in general.
2. It is not directly determined by the nature of objects.
3. The logical doubt of Descartes is deliberate, depending on the will.

Psychological Doubt

1. This is directly felt and experienced by us such, as in the previous example.
2. It is independent of our will. However, hard we may will, the doubt continues.
3. It is caused by the nature of object about which we want to know.

Again, the doubt of Descartes should not be confused with skepticism. Descartes is not asserting that whatever can be doubted is false, but he is only supposing it to be false. Again, the skepticism is the finished conclusion about knowledge which professes the denial of any certain knowledge whatsoever.

Cogito Ergo Sum

This cogito ergo sum (I think therefore I am) is the first final certainty and as such we have to be careful in it's interpretation as well as in deciding it's position in the Cartesian philosophy.

First, what Descartes tried to establish is not an inference but a simple fact of primitive knowledge or a self – evident axiom. Had it been an inference , then it would be merely dependent on premises for it's certainty and then again these premises on other premises for there certainty. This would lead to infinite regress without reaching the indubitable truth. However, the certainty of the cogito is clear and distinct, and, that nothing else could be perceived or intuited with the same certainty. Cogito ergo sum means that my consciousness is the means of revealing

myself is something existing. Here is the indubitable truth of the inseparability of thought and thing. My being implied in my being conscious is the first principle both logically and psychologically. Of course the use of the term 'therefore' was unfortunate for it led to the interpretation of the cogito as an inference. However, 'therefore' primarily means a step in inference but secondarily it means a relation of necessary connection. Descartes uses the term ' therefore' in the secondary sense.

Again, ' I think therefore I am ' should not be emphasized to hold that thinking alone guarantees self—existence. The important thing is to show that it is my consciousness which carries with it the existence of myself. No other function apart from conscious function can guarantee the existence of the self. Therefore it would be wrong to say because ' I walk therefore I am ' for walking without being conscious cannot imply self—existence.

Further, in cogito I know that I am, but I don't know that I am, i.e., the content or the which constitutes the self is not known. All that we can say that the thinking this is that which doubt, imagines, senses etc. But beyond these, we can not say that my body is myself or nor.

The cogito is of value only to show that human can never be certain of anything that they believe that they know. It's important because it's Descartes' attempt to put an endpoint to skepticism by finding something that must be true.

Again, cogito is the first existential proposition which points out something actual existing, namely myself is the doubter or the thinking being

Rationalism-Mind and Body

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was the first of the modern rationalists and has been dubbed the “Father of Modern Philosophy “. Much subsequent western philosophy is a response to his writings, which are studied closely to this day.

French philosopher Rene Descartes, who wrote “I think therefore I am “,is considered the father of rationalism. He believed that eternal truths can only be discovered and tested through reason. Use rationalism in a sentence noun. Rationalism is the practice of only believing what is based on reason. An

example of rationalism is not believing in the supernatural.

In philosophy rationalism is the epistemological view that regards, “Reason as the chief source and test of knowledge “ or “ any view appearing to reason as a source of knowledge or justification.....”.Because of this , the rationalists argued that certain truths exist and that the intellect can directly grasp these truth

Deference between Rationalism and Empiricism

Rationalism is a theory based on claim that reason is the source of knowledge. Rationalists believe in intuition. It claims that individuals have innate knowledge or concepts. On the other hand Empiricism is a theory based on the claim that experience is the only source of knowledge. Empiricists do not believe in intuition. It claims that individuals have no innate knowledge. His posited relation between mind and body is called Cartesian dualism or substance dualism. He held that mind was distinct from matter, but could influence matter. On the other hand, Descartes argues that the “Mind” is indivisible because he cannot perceive himself as having any parts.

On the other hand “Body” is divisible, because he cannot think of a body except as having parts. Hence , if mind and body had the same nature, it would be a nature both with and without parts.

In the philosophy of Mind, dualism is the theory that the mental and the physical or mind and body or mind and brain are in some sense, radically different kinds of thing.

“Mind is the part of matter or of one body from the vicinity of those bodies that are in immediate contact with it, or which we regard at rest, to the vicinity of other bodies” . The physical world is explained in terms of mechanics. There is no action in the distance, all occurrences are due to pressure and impact. Hence, there must be a universal ether to account for the facts of astronomy.

Body conceived as more extension is passive and cannot move itself; we must therefore, have recourse to God as the first cause of motion in the world, “God originally created matter alone with motion and rest, and now by his concourse along preserves in the whole the same amount of motion that he then placed in this view of the prime mover was common in the time of Descartes and after . Galileo and Newton both are accepted in it.

Mind is diametrically opposed to body. The attribute of body is extension; bodies are passive; the attribute of mind is thinking; mind is active, free. The two substances are absolutely distinct; mind is absolutely without extension, and no body can think. We cannot conceive of mind or soul without thought; the soul is recognitions; I have a clear and distinct idea of myself in so far as I am only a thinking and unexpended thing.

Since God is immutable, all changes in the world of bodies must follow according to constant rules, or laws of nature. All laws of nature are laws of motion. All differences in bodies are explained as different relations of the parts; solid bodies are bodies in which the parts are United and at rest; fluids are bodies in which the parts move.

The method of Descartes in reaching “Cogito ergo sum” is one of abstraction one by one he takes all that is not essential in thinking and discards them till he comes to consciousness: now in order to know consciousness one need not refer to extension. Similarly, in knowing extension one need not refer to consciousness and extension, mind and body, they are independent of one another and do not involve each others existence. As such there are two independent substances called “Mind” and “Body”.

This dualism of mind and body is important, for human beings have both body and soul. The human body like all other organic bodies is a mere machine. The moving principle of this machine is the heat in the heart. The death is due to the destruction of some important parts of the body machine. In human beings alone God by a special creation adds soul. There can be no real relation between body and soul for they

are diametrically opposed. The relation of the soul to the body is of the nature of the pilot to his machine. However this vague formulation of the mind and body relationship is very inadequate.

The confused ideas, however, are caused by external objects as is clear from his explanation of perception. In perception the material bodies effect the mental states through the human body.

- a. Firstly, the exciting body affects the sense-organs of the percipient's own body.
- b. This bodily affection moves the subtle animal spirits in the nerves. The movement of the animal spirits terminates in the pineal gland which he considers to be the seat of the soul. The soul is indivisible substance and therefore occupies the pineal gland which is the only undivided portion of the brain.
- c. Lastly, a physical impress or seal is left on the pineal gland which serves as the occasion of the origin of consciousness.

Metaphysics-Existence of God

Metaphysic is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of existence, being and the world. Arguably metaphysic is the Foundation of philosophy. Rene Descartes argued that consciousness is axiomatic, because you cannot logically deny your mind's existence at the same time as using your mind to do the denying. However, what Descartes did not make clear is that consciousness is the faculty that perceives that which exists, so it requires, and is dependent upon existence. Existence is independent of, makes possible, and is a prerequisite of consciousness. Consciousness is not responsible for creating reality; it's completely dependent upon reality.

The existence of God, is of the greatest consequence. At first it was obligatory on to renounce all certainty, and to doubt of everything, because we knew not whether error belonged not to the nature of man, whether God had not created us to err. But now we know, by reference to the innate idea and the necessary attributes of God, that he possesses veracity, and that if there were a contradiction did he deceive us or cause in us error. For even if the ability to deceive were regarded as a proof of superiority, the will to deceive would be certainly a proof of wickedness. Our reason consequently can never apprehend an object that were possible untrue, so far that is, as it's apprehended, or so far as it's clearly and distinctly known. From the true idea of God there result the principles of natural philosophy, or the theory of the duality of substance. That is substance which requires for its existence the existence of nothing. In this sense only God is substance.

The causal proof of the existence of God is based on two assumptions, namely-(i) Individual consciousness knows itself to be finite, and

This consciousness of 'God' is derived only from the conception of absolutely Perfect being of course, some may object that the infinite being may be a negative idea, i.e., that which is not finite. Now Descartes point out that the idea of the infinite being is the most positive idea for in comparison with the fullness of the perfect being we realize our finitude.

Ontological proof

No doubt Descartes also adds to this causal proof, the cosmological proof for the existence of God. He asks, what can be the cause of myself, my parents and all other finite being. This he concludes, can be proved only with the help of the idea of a perfect being who has created everything else in the world. But the most important proof of the existence of God is ontological. According to this, the most important proof of the existence of God follows from the very idea of the perfect being just as the equality of 3 angles of a triangle = 2 right angles follows from the very idea of a triangle. The most perfect being cannot be thought without at the same time thinking of Him as actually existing. Of course, the idea and the actual finite thing are not inseparable one can think of a winged horse though there may be none in reality. But

this idea of a perfect being, according to Descartes, cannot be thought apart from its existence. Descartes has

been accused of copying. Anselm's proof for the existence of God which runs thus 'consideration demonstrates the word God to mean that which must be thought as what is greatest, but in fact '. This proof makes God's existence depend on the thought of it. God's exist, because we think of a perfect idea, namely, God. Descartes points out that his proof is different from that of Anselm makes the thought of God dependent on its being. Whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to the true and unalterable nature of anything, to its essence, it's from, that may be predicated of it. Now we find, on investigating God, that existence belongs to his true and unalterable nature, and therefore, we may legitimately predicate existence of God.

Critical comments

Ontological proof is based on the assumption that 'existence' is a predicate or a quality like colour, taste, weight etc. Unfortunately, fictional entities do not form a class distinguishable from other objects by virtue of their having 'non existence'. For instance, chimeras and gold mountains do not form a class of non-existence. A non-existent mango has all those qualities which an existent mango has. A non-existent God no wise differs from an existent God. "A hundred red thalers do not contain the least coin more than hundred possible thalers.

The content of both must be one and the same, otherwise the concept would not truly represent the actual coin. Hence, the question is not whether God exists or not. The real problem would be, 'Is God love personal or responsive to

human prayers?' "If God could be shown to be love or 'personal', then his actuality follows from this. If I could show that there is a yellow, fragrant mango on the table, then its existence automatically follows from this.

One thing is certain that concepts are not things. 'If wishes were things' beggars would ride cars and, certainly nobody would suffer from any want. Unfortunately, from no amount of thinking insanely we can produce an actual thing. At most from a concept we can deduce another concept as a result of entailment. Descartes himself points out that properties of a triangle follow from its definition. But we know that a proposition of mathematics is independent of any actual state of affairs. Here, as a result of deduction we can proceed from one proposition to another. But these propositions do not become empirical propositions as a result of deduction. Similarly, we can proceed from a perfect idea to another idea of 'an existent perfect Being'. But the idea of an existent Being is an idea and not an actuality

The ontological proof is based on self-contradictory terms, viz., 'necessary Being'. If God is 'necessary' then it can be expressed in analytic propositions only, as in logic and mathematics. But as noted earlier, such propositions do not deal with actual state of affairs. Again if, if God is an existing Being, then He can be given by experience only, as Kant had pointed out long ago. But we know that an empirical proposition, no matter how many times verified, can be probably only. The predicate of any synthetic proposition can be denied without involving us in self-contradiction. So if there is a loving God, then its existence can always be

questioned. So he can't be conceived to be necessary. Thus, any 'Being' is probable, so the concept of a 'necessary Being' is self-contradictory.

Kant's criticism of the ontological argument is unanswerable and at the present time its validity is accepted by a majority of philosophers. But the idealist had tried to rehabilitate this argument on the basis of their doctrine of inseparability of 'Knowledge and being'. However, in the present context, the ideality

of the idea of a perfect Being and the existence of such a Being can do longer be maintained.

CONCLUSION

Rene Descartes is often credited with being the “Father of Modern Philosophy”. This title is justified due both to his break with the traditional Scholastic-Aristotelian philosophy prevalent at his time and to his development and promotion of the new, mechanistic sciences. His fundamental break with scholastic philosophy was twofold. First, Descartes thought that the scholastics method was prone to doubt given their reliance on sensation as the source for all knowledge. Second, he wanted to replace their final causal model of scientific explanation with the more modern, mechanistic model.

Descartes was greatly influenced by his assumption with regard to the doctrine of substance and its unchangeable attribute. Descartes was the opinion that the permanent self or Ego can be known with certainty. Even Locke believed that one self can be known by intuition. However Hume and Kant reject the contention of Descartes. They hold that the permanent self can never be known empirically.

This dualism mind and body is important, for human beings have both body and soul. The human body like all other organic bodies is a mere machine. The moving principle of this machine is the heart in the heart. The death is due to the destruction of some important part of the body machine. In human beings alone God by a special creation adds soul. There can be no real relation between body and soul for they are diametrically opposed.

Here Descartes take up the idea of God for analysis. He argues that except for the idea of God all other ideas could be fictitious or my invention. Following the traditional definition of substance that which subsists independently of everything else – he affirms that god is an existent substance possessing all positive qualities in the fullest degree of reality. God is infinitely perfect beings and he possesses the positive qualities of goodness, knowledge, power, duration to the perfect digresses. With the basic formulation Descartes advances the first proof for God existence.

In conclusion, hence, even though there have been many arguments in support and against mind and body problem, at best, this study can only see the interaction of the two distinct substances as probable. The fact is that if the reductionist position of scientists is accepted, that means only the physical corporeal things such as the brain, body etc. It also means that the so called thinking activities, as observed by Descartes are solely carried out by the brain. As the scientists would hold, if the brain dies, the entire thought system stops working; as a result, the brain there for is self.

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