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Descartes

* *Dr. Henry Kodukuthiyil*

Introduction

René Descartes was born in 1596 at La Haye, Touraine in central France. He was the son of a minor nobleman and belonged to a family that had produced a number of learned men. At the age of eight he was enrolled in the Jesuit school of La Flèche in Anjou, where he spent the rest of his schooldays. Besides the usual classical studies, Descartes received instruction in mathematics and scholasticism, which attempted to use human reason to understand Christian doctrine.

Upon finishing school, he studied law at the University of Poitiers, graduating in 1616. He never practised law, however; in 1618 he entered the service of Prince Maurice of Nassau, leader of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, with the intention of following a military career. In succeeding years Descartes served in other armies, but his attention had already been attracted to the problems of mathematics and philosophy, to which he was to devote the rest of his life. One of the important influences on Descartes during this period was Dutch mathematician Isaac Beeckman, who encouraged him to pursue his studies.

On November 10, 1619 he had three consecutive dreams which convinced that his mission was to seek truth by reason and vowed to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady at Loreto In Italy. However, his military

Dr. Henry Kodukuthiyil, Tejas, Bangalore

engagements and travels did not permit him to go to Loreto immediately. But he went there in 1623. He lived for a while in Paris where he enjoyed the friendship of men like Mercenre and Cardinal de Berulle. Finding Paris life too distracting, in 1628 he retired to Holland where he remained till 1649.

In Holland, Descartes worked at his system, and by 1634 he had completed a scientific work called *Le Monde* (the world). When he heard, however, of the condemnation of Galileo for teaching the Copernican system, as did *Le Monde*, he immediately had the book suppressed. Then he left Holland for Sweden at the invitation of Queen Christina. The Swedish winter proved too harsh for Descartes and the Queen's habit of having his tuition at 5 in the morning was too much for him. He died on 11 February 1650 in Stockholm, Sweden.

Works of Descartes

Descartes' literary work is quite extensive. His writings are not restricted to philosophical works, but also comprise basic books in the fields of mathematics, biology and physics, and an extensive correspondence. His principal works on philosophy are:

1. *Discourse on the Method* (1637)
2. *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641)
3. *Principles of Philosophy* (1644)
4. *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (1701)

Descartes' Aim, Method and Criterion of Knowledge

The fundamental aim of Descartes was to attain philosophical truth by reason. Philosophy must rest on pure reason and not on tradition. He wanted to develop

a whole system of philosophy based on true propositions which were part of an organic whole, so that nothing was presupposed but each would be self-evident and certain. For Descartes knowledge begins with some self-evident innate ideas or principles and deduce other truth from them. Hence, he wanted to give philosophy a new start, desiring to reject any authority. His aim was to bring into philosophy the kind of clarity and certainty which is found in mathematics. Therefore he wanted to use the method of mathematics in philosophy.

The method of mathematics consists in the use of only two mental operations by which true knowledge can be achieved: intuition and deduction. By intuition he means our understanding of self-evident principles, such as the axioms of geometry (a straight line is the shortest distance between two points; or, things equal to the same thing are equal to each other.) They are self-evident. No rational mind can doubt them. By deduction he means orderly, logical reasoning or inference from self-evident proposition.

According to Descartes, the chief secret of method is to arrange all facts into a deductive, logical system. Descartes' goal is to build a system of philosophy based upon intuition and deduction which will remain as certain and as imperishable as geometry. What he is determined to find is a self-evident principle which will serve as the axiom or first principle for his mathematical philosophy, and which will serve as the foundation from which absolutely certain philosophy can be deduced.

In order to obtain mathematical certainty in philosophy he introduces his famous *methodic doubt*. He says that it is necessary to doubt everything and to regard as provisionally false anything of which there can be the slightest doubt. In this sense, it is universal doubt. It is

called methodic doubt, and not the doubt of the Sceptics, because he uses this doubt only as a method, to attain certain knowledge. Sceptics doubted because they said it is impossible to attain certainty.

He doubted the testimony of the senses because the senses make mistakes. As he says, "What has deceived me once may deceive me again." He doubts the opinion of others and the reality of his own body and of the external world. Even he doubts mathematical beliefs, which he regarded as model of certainty. However, while carrying out his assigned task of subjecting all our knowledge methodically to doubt, Descartes was struck by one truth of which there could be no doubt whatever. From the fact that a person is thinking (even doubting), he knows at least that he exists, because he is carrying out these activities. This is the fundamental truth of the whole of Descartes' Philosophy. "I think, therefore, I am", "*Cogito ergo sum*". By intuition he knows that he could not think if he did not exist. Descartes, however, still doubts the existence of his body. Hence, the self he arrives at is only an immaterial thinking self, thinking substance (*res cogitans*).

It is certain that I doubt or think. Doubt implies a doubter; thinking implies a thinker, a thinking thing (*res cogitans*) or spiritual substance; thus he reaches what seems to him a rational, self-evident proposition. To doubt means to think, to think means to be; 'Cogito ergo sum'. "I think, therefore I am." It is the first and most certain knowledge that occurs to one who philosophizes in an orderly manner. Here is the principle we have been seeking- a certain, self-evident starting-point.

In this process of doubting, we finally reach a solid foundation, for while we are doubting we are using the

thinking process. In fact, our doubts imply the reality of our thoughts. Descartes' Cogito ergo sum in many ways the most famous principle in modern philosophy. Descartes regarded it as a primary truth of all human reason. Descartes' first axiom has significant implications. "I think, therefore I am" means that the existence of reason is more important than anything else; man's reality lies in his thinking process.

Descartes reminded that the student of philosophy and science not to base his conclusions upon the work of the ancients. Even knowing all of Aristotle will not make philosophers out of us. We must have originality and the capacity to discriminate between permanent and transitory knowledge. The power of judgment is not increased through academic studies. Principles can be memorized, but philosophy must be understood and digested.

According to Descartes, instead of accepting the traditional views, we must study the great book of the world. "We shall never become philosophers even though we should read all the reasoning of Plato and Aristotle if we cannot form a sound judgment upon any proposition."

Existence of God

We now have a fundamental principle and a criterion of true knowledge. What else can we know? It is doubtful whether anything can be certain, so long as we are confronted with the possibility of a deceiving God; we do not know as yet whether there is a God, and, if there is, that he is not a deceiver. This difficulty must be removed. Some of our ideas appear to be innate, some are our own inventions, most of them seem to have been received from without. Certain ideas we regard as effects or copies of an external world. But all this may be illusion. One

of the ideas I find in myself is the idea of God. Now, nothing can come from nothing, whatever exists must have a cause for existing; this, too, is a self-evident proposition. The principle of Descartes argument is actually the long established principle of medieval philosophy is that *ex nihilo nihil fit*: out of nothing can come nothing. Moreover, the cause must be at least as great as the effect, there must be at least as much reality in it. That which contains greater reality in itself and which is the more perfect, cannot be a consequence of, and dependent on, the less perfect. Hence, I myself cannot be the cause of the idea of God, for I am a finite, imperfect being, while the idea of God is the idea of a perfect, infinite being. It must have been placed in me by an infinite being, or God, and hence God must exist.

This proof for the existence of God is not the ontological proof of Anselm, but a causal proof, which begins with the idea of a perfect being existing in my mind. It is not argued that such a being exists merely because we have a concept of him, but, rather, that from the idea of such a being we can necessarily infer the existence of that being as the cause of the idea. The argument differs from the ontological proof in two respects: (1) its starting point is not the concept of God as a formal essence, but the actual existing idea of God in the mind of a man; (2) it proceeds by causal inference from the idea of God to God himself and not, as in the case of the ontological argument, by strict formal implication from the essence of God to his existence. But, it may be urged, the concept of infinity is a mere negative concept the denial of perfection. This cannot be so, according to Descartes, for the idea of finitude implies the idea of infinity, or of God; how could I doubt or have desires if I did not have in myself the idea of a being more perfect than myself, by comparison with whom I recognize the defects of my nature? Doubt implies a standard of truth, imperfection

a standard of perfection. Again, I could not have been the cause of my own existence; for I have an idea of perfection, and if I had created myself, I should have made myself perfect, and, moreover, I should be able to preserve myself, which is not the case. If my parents had created me, they could also preserve me, which is impossible.

Finally, it also follows from the very notion of God as a perfect being that he exists. It is not in my power to conceive a God without existence, that is, a being supremely perfect and yet devoid of an absolute perfection. This is the ontological argument used by both Anselm and Augustine. It is also unthinkable that the divine perfections, which I conceive, should have more than one cause, for if these causes were many, they would not be perfect; to be perfect there must be one cause only, one God. God must be self caused, for if he is the effect of another being, then that being is the effect of another, and so on ad infinitum: we have an infinite regress and never can reach a causal explanation of the effect with which we began. The idea of God I have received from God; it is innate. God is not only the cause, but the archetype of our existence; he has created man in his own image. We need not wonder that God in creating us should have placed this idea in us, to serve as the mark of the workman imprinted on his work. If God did not exist, we could not possibly be what we are, nor could we have an idea of God. We know more of God himself and of the human mind than we know of corporeal objects.

Reflecting upon the idea of God, we perceive that he is eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, the source of all goodness and truth; the creator of all things. He is not corporeal and does not perceive by means of the senses, as we do. He has intellect and will, but not like ours;

and he does not will evil or sin, for sin is the negation of being. This is the usual theistic position with which we have become acquainted in scholasticism. Descartes agrees with Duns Scotus that we can accept reason only in so far as it does not conflict with revelation. He also holds with him that God could have arranged the world otherwise than it is; and that a thing is good because God makes it so; he does not make it so because it is good.

Existence of the External World

Another problem demanding consideration is that of the external world. We imagine that there are bodies outside of us. How can we know that they actually exist? We have feelings of pleasure and pain, appetites, and sensations, which we refer instinctively to bodily causes. But since our sensations often deceive us, and, since our desires and appetites are often misleading, we cannot prove the existence of bodies from the existence of such experiences. Yet, if God induced in us a deeply rooted conviction of the existence of an external world, when no such world existed, he could not be defended against the charge of being a deceiver. The existence in my mind of illusions of sense and even hallucinations and dreams is, however, compatible with the divine goodness, since God has endowed me with the power of intellect to dispel and correct such delusions. Thus, God is not a deceiver, but a truthful being, and our sensations must therefore, be caused by real bodies. What are bodies? Bodies exist independently of our thinking: they do not need our existence in order to exist. According to Descartes, in reality there is only one such being God, who is substance in the absolute sense. Descartes also affirms two relative substance-mind and body, which exist independently of one another, but both depend on God. The essential characteristic of a substance, which inheres in it, is

called the attribute. It is a quality without a substance cannot possibly exist. An attribute may manifest in different ways or modes. Substance and attributes can be conceived without modes, not vice versa. That is to say, substance and attribute can be conceived without modes, whereas modes cannot be conceived without substance and attributes. We cannot conceive figure without extension, nor motion except in extended space; nor imagination or will, except in a thinking thing. We can, on the other hand, conceive extension without figure or motion, and thought without imagination or sensation. The substance cannot change its attributes, but it can change its modes: the body will always be extended, but its figure need not remain the same.

What, then, is the nature of external things? What we clearly and distinctly perceive in body is the essential attribute of body. Sounds, colours, taste, smell, heat and cold are not attributes of Body: we are unable to conceive these clearly and distinctly, they are confused; what we sense is not the body's true reality. The attribute of body is extension, and nothing else; Attribute of body is extension; figure is its mode. Body and extension are identical. We can conceive body without figure but not without extension. Extension is a spatial continuum of three dimensions, length, breadth, and thickness; every body is a limited magnitude.

All the process of external world are modifications of extensions. Body conceived as extension is passive and cannot move itself; we must, therefore God as the first cause of motion in the world. He is the mover. Descartes holds that God has given the world a certain amount of motion: motion is constant. Since God is immutable, all changes in the world of bodies must follow constant rules, or laws of nature. All laws of nature are laws of motion. All differences in bodies are explained by 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.

Relation of Mind and Body

Descartes maintains that we do indeed have both minds and bodies- and that the two are not ultimately one and the same thing, but rather are radically and irreducibly different sorts of thing, which exist in an intimate union. Attribute of body is extension. The attribute of mind is thinking. Body is passive while mind is active and free. These two substances are absolutely distinct. Mind/ soul is *res cogitans*; as far as I am a thinking and unextended thing I have clear and distinct idea of myself. Therefore, I, that is, my mind, through which I am what I am, is entirely and truly separate from my body and may exist without it. I can conceive myself as entire without the faculties of imagination and perception, but I cannot conceive these without the faculties of imagination and perception, but I cannot conceive these without an intelligent substance in which they reside. Imagination and perception are distinct from myself, they are like modes are to things. Descartes includes will and also such higher emotions as are not the result of the union of mind and body in thought. According to Descartes, a thinking thing is one that doubts, understands, conceives, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines as well as feels. Thought embraces everything which we now label 'consciousness' and is not restricted to the intellectual and cognitive activities of the mind. Neither extension nor figure, nor notion pertains to the thinking thing. My knowledge about my mind precedes that of any corporal thing. I may not doubt whether there is any body in existence, while I already perceive that I think.

Descartes follows this extreme dualism between mind and body so that the nature is left free for the mechanical

explanations of natural science. Mind is separated from nature with its own territory. However, this duality of mind and body puts Descartes in a difficult position. On the one hand his application of the criterion of clarity and distinction leads him to emphasize the duality of mind and body. On the other hand, he does not want to accept the conclusion that the soul is lodged in the body which it uses as an instrument. This is the conclusion that Descartes could not accept. Empirical data went against such a conclusion, leave alone the theological objection. He was aware of the interaction between soul and body and that they in some sense constitute a unity. Descartes tries to explain this problem by locating the soul and its activity in a gland in the very centre of the body. However, this localization does not solve the issue; but Descartes had no intention to deny the interaction. He tries to get out of the problem finally by saying that mind and body are incomplete substances viewed in relation to man who is unity which they for together. A clearly unsatisfactory solution to the problem.

According to Descartes, mind and body compose a substantial unity. All the sensations just mentioned are merely confused modes of consciousness, the result of this union; man is not a pure sprit, Motion in animals, and often in ourselves, occurs without the intervention of reason; the senses excited by external objects simply react to the animal spirits and the reactions are mechanical-the animal is nothing but a machine. But in man bodily motion may produce sensations. If I were merely a thinking being, if my soul were not some how intimately conjoined with my body, I should, for example, know that I am hungry, but not feel hungry. I should not have sensations and feelings which are confused modes of consciousness resulting from the intimate union of body and mind.

Just how this intimate union is to be conceived, is not made clear by Descartes and indeed, it is not possible within the framework of his dualism. Descartes warns against confounding mind and body with one another. Thought and extension are combined in man, in unity of composition but not in unity of nature: the union should not be compared with a mixture of two bodies.

Descartes suggested that the body works like a machine, that it has the material properties of extension and motion, and that it follows the laws of physics. The mind (or soul), on the other hand, was described as a nonmaterial entity that lacks extension and motion, and does not follow the laws of physics. Descartes argued that only humans have minds, and that the mind interacts with the body at the pineal gland. This form of dualism or duality proposes that the mind controls the body, but that the body can also influence the otherwise rational mind, such as when people act out of passion. Most of the previous accounts of the relationship between mind and body had been uni-directional.

Descartes suggested that the pineal gland is "the seat of the soul" for several reasons. First, the soul is unitary, and unlike many areas of the brain the pineal gland appeared to be unitary (though subsequent microscopic inspection has revealed it is formed of two hemispheres). Second, Descartes observed that the pineal gland was located near the ventricles. He believed the animal spirits of the ventricles acted through the nerves to control the body, and that the pineal gland influenced this process. Finally, Descartes incorrectly believed that only humans have pineal glands, just as, in his view, only humans have minds. This led him to the belief that animals cannot feel pain, and Descartes' practice of vivisection (the dissection of live animals) became widely used throughout Europe until the Enlightenment. Cartesian dualism set

the agenda for philosophical discussion of the mind-body problem for many years after Descartes' death. The question of how a nonmaterial mind could influence a material body, without invoking supernatural explanations, remains controversial to this day.

Psychology of the Emotions

The soul, according to Descartes, does not consist of separate souls or faculties, but is a single principle expressing itself in various ways: the same soul that feels also reasons and wills. He distinguishes between its active and passive phases, the actions and passions of the soul, as he calls them. The former are our volitions or acts of will, which depend on soul itself: I am free to will to love God, to affirm or deny propositions, to revive memories, to create pictures in the imagination, or to move my body. The latter include sensations and their copies, appetites, pain, heat, and other bodily feelings, which are referred either to external objects or to the body. The voluntary or active states are absolutely in the power of the soul only indirectly, except in those cases in which the soul is itself their cause. There are, however, other states, or "perceptions,...of which we feel the effects as in the soul itself." These are sentiments of joy, anger, and the like, which are passions in the restricted sense of the term; they are perceptions, or sentiments or emotions of the soul, which we refer particularly to it and which are caused, supported, and strengthened by certain movements of the animal spirits. The principal effect and use of such passions however, is to incite and dispose the soul to will the things for which they prepare the body: fear incites the will to flee, courage to fight, and so on. The passions have as their immediate cause the movements of the animal spirits which agitate the pineal gland, but they can sometimes be caused by the action of the soul, which wills to conceive such and

such an object; thus I may arouse feelings of courage in myself by analyzing the situation.

The so-called conflicts between natural appetites and will are explained as oppositions between movements, which the body by its spirits, and the soul by its will tend to excite in the pineal gland at the same time. Everyone can recognize the strength or weakness of his soul by the outcome of such conflicts. But there is no soul so feeble that it cannot, if well conducted, acquire an absolute power over its passions. The power of the soul, however, is inadequate without the knowledge of truth.

Descartes enumerates six primary passions: wonder, love, hate, desire, joy, and sorrow, of which all the rest are species. They are all related to the body, their natural use being to incite the soul to consent and contribute to the actions which tend to preserve the body or to render it in some way more perfect; and in this sense joy and sorrow are the first to be employed. For the soul is directly turned from harmful things only by the feeling of pain, which produces the passion of sorrow; then follow hatred of the cause of the pain and desire to be freed from the pain.

Our good and evil depend chiefly on the inner emotions excited in the soul by itself. So long as the soul has something within it to satisfy it, all the troubles which come from without have no power to hurt it. And, in order that it may have this inner satisfaction, all that is needed is to follow virtue exactly.

Descartes attempts to apply it in detail to a large portion of our psychic life, but he does not use it to explain all our mental processes. Mind itself is a distinct entity, having the power of understanding and will. Moreover, all the "perceptions," of which Descartes speaks-sensations, appetites, emotions-are states of mind, not

motions; and some passions are purely mental, not caused by organic activities at all. The will is independent of bodily states and can of its own accord produce such states. The will is free, and the ethical ideal of the soul is to make itself free from external influences.

The Theory of Innate Ideas

Descartes distinguishes three kinds of ideas namely those that are fabricated, adventitious, or innate. Fabricated ideas are mere inventions of the mind. Accordingly, the mind can control them so that they can be examined and set aside at will and their internal content can be changed. Adventitious ideas are sensations produced by some material thing existing externally to the mind. But, unlike fabrications, adventitious ideas cannot be examined and set aside at will nor can their internal content be manipulated by the mind. For example, no matter how hard one tries, if someone is standing next to a fire, he cannot help but feel the heat as heat. He cannot set aside the sensory idea of heat by merely willing it as we can do with our idea of Santa Claus, for example. He also cannot change its internal content so as to feel something other than heat—say, cold. Finally, innate ideas are placed in the mind by God at creation. These ideas can be examined and set aside at will but their internal content cannot be manipulated. Geometrical ideas are paradigm examples of innate ideas. For example, the idea of a triangle can be examined and set aside at will, but its internal content cannot be manipulated so as to cease being the idea of a three-sided figure. Other examples of innate ideas would be metaphysical principles like "what is done cannot be undone," the idea of the mind, and the idea of God.

The aim of Descartes is to reach clear and certain knowledge, such as arises when we judge that it is

impossible for a thing to be otherwise than as we conceive it. We have such necessary knowledge in the demonstrations of mathematics, and also in philosophy, if we follow the proper method. Certainty is a property of truths which are clearly and distinctly perceived. Now, certain knowledge cannot spring from the senses, for the senses do not reveal what things are in themselves, but only how they affect us. Colours, sounds, taste, odors, do not belong to the object. What the real object is, what it is when stripped of the qualities the senses ascribe to it, we can know only by clear and distinct thinking. If we cannot derive true knowledge from sense experience, if genuine knowledge is the result of reasoning from certain basic concepts and principles, these must be inherent in the mind itself- i.e**.,** innate or a priori.The mind has its own standards or norms, which guide it in the pursuit of truth. Principles of knowledge can become explicit only in the course of experience, as the mind exercises itself in thought, but they are somehow present from the beginning. Descartes basic idea is that reason has its natural norms; how they are present; he is not sure.

By innate knowledge he means at times ideas or truths impressed upon the mind, principles which the soul finds in itself, and at other times, the native capacity of the soul to produce such knowledge in the course of human experience.

Conclusion

In the words of Jean L. Mercier, "Descartes' glory and right to be labelled as the 'father of modern philosophy', is because of his concept of the COGITO. Every good thinking must begin with the thinker himself, the truth of one's own existence as a conscious subject."

In his search for indubitable truth, Descartes laid greater emphasis on discovering a method than on a theory of

knowledge. Descartes was interested in discovering a method of truth rather than in a detailed discussion of epistemological problems. For this he has recourse to mathematics and a priori ideas. Descartes was almost a dogmatist in his belief that the reason was competent to attain certain knowledge. Though he adopted and studied scepticism, he was a realist enough to accept the existence of an external world, whose true nature could be discovered only by rational thinking. Like Parmenides, Descartes placed reason before experience and even opted for reason against experience, as is clearly the case with his anthropological dualism.

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