

Descartes' Rationalism: A brief Exposition

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Abstract:

In this paper my aim is to present the foundations of human knowledge as laid by Descartes in his rationalist's framework. Sceptics from the Greek to the present times have denied the possibility of knowledge. The question of knowledge has therefore been the main problem for those who have opposed skepticism through all ages. Especially the philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have taken up the challenge of skeptics regarding the possibility of knowledge more seriously. This was the age when the foundations of human knowledge were firmly laid by philosophers like Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz in the rationalist tradition, and Locke, Berkeley, and Hume in the empiricist tradition.

Keywords: Skepticism, Cartesian Method, Certainty, Doubt, Knowledge.

We are aware of Cartesian method of doubt. It was for the sake of certainty that Descartes was led to doubt each and every item that came to his mind. Descartes's ideal was certainty, not probability. In order to achieve this ideal he converted all sorts of sciences to only one sort. He expected that all of them behave like mathematics. If all of them behave like mathematics, then the mathematical method would work, not only on mathematics but also on those sciences. Descartes ruled out the possibility of plurality of methods. If sciences are diverse in nature, then they could have diverse methods. But Descartes did not accept their diversity. For him empirical sciences were also expected to behave like mathematics, otherwise the mathematical method would not apply to them. True knowledge, which can be achieved through the mathematical method, consists in the use of intuition and deduction. He writes, "The method... contains everything that gives certainty to the rules of arithmetic."¹ Descartes wants to make all knowledge a 'universal mathematics'. He is convinced that mathematical certainty is the result of a special way of thinking. Mathematical reasoning showed him that we are able to discover what we do not know by progressing in an orderly way from what we do know.

Descartes finds that the whole edifice of knowledge rests upon the foundations of intuition and deduction. For him "these two methods are the most certain routes to knowledge, and the mind should admit no others. All the rest should be rejected as suspect of error and dangerous."² According to Descartes, intuition is an

intellectual activity or vision of clarity that leaves no doubt in the mind. The testimony of our senses and the imperfect creations of imagination lead us to confusion. By 'intuition' he means our understanding of the self-evident principles such as the axioms of geometry and non-geometrical truths such as 'I think therefore I exist'. No rational mind can doubt the self-evident principles. By 'deduction' he means orderly, logical reasoning or inference from self-evident propositions. Descartes describes deduction as the necessary inference from the propositions that are known by intuition. By intuition we grasp a simple truth completely and immediately, whereas by deduction we arrive at a truth by a process. It is a continuous and uninterrupted action of the mind. As he says, "we distinguish this mental intuition from deduction by the fact that into the conception of the latter there enters a certain movement or succession, into that of the former there does not."³ So "the first principles themselves are given by intuition alone, while, on the contrary, the remote conclusions are furnished only by deduction."⁴ For Descartes deduction indicates the relation of truths to each other. Descartes wanted to rest knowledge upon a starting-point that had absolute certainty in the individual's own mind. But this leads to a difficulty. Certainty in one's own mind implies psychologism. Universal mathematics should not suffer much from psychologism or subjectivity. How can the *objective* character of science be retained if all importance is given to a person's psychology? How can I arrive at objective scientific truths by looking into my mind? Descartes solves this difficulty by maintaining the view "that the Power of forming a good judgement and of distinguishing the true from the false, which is properly speaking what is called Good sense or Reason, is by nature equal in all men."⁵ So if I arrive at some truth intuitively, others would not fail in arriving at the same truth by looking into their mind. Because reason present in their mind is the same as that which is present in my mind. Though numerically different, our minds are qualitatively identical.

Some truths by their very nature cannot be known except through induction. But induction involves probability, not certainty. The sciences, which are wholly dependent on induction, cannot be converted into parts of universal mathematics. Induction cannot be converted into deduction, so also empirical sciences cannot become a part of universal mathematics. However, the Cartesian method has very limited scope of operation. It is not the kind of method which can be applied in all fields of knowledge. The fact that it functions well in geometry does not mean it would work well in chemistry or geography. Descartes's search for method thus suffers from the malady of reductionism. Diversity of human knowledge and methods is overlooked. Descartes goes wrong in advocating methodological monism. But it cannot be denied that this deductive method has been successful in securing foundations for human knowledge.

Descartes tried to derive one's existence from one's thinking. The next important step for Descartes was to show the epistemological priority of mind over matter, even if both of them are placed on the same ontological level. In his *Principles* he remarked, "the knowledge which we possess of our mind not only precedes that which we have of our body, but is also more evident."⁶ The epistemological priority of mind

over body becomes evident from the fact that it is the mind that searches for the body and not vice versa. In his *Discourse on Method* he remarked, “I could conceive that I had no body, and that there was no world nor place where I might be; but yet that I could not for all that conceive that I was not.”⁷ Descartes succeeds in conceiving the non-existence of the world, including his own body, but fails to conceive his own non-existence. My existence is assured even in my attempt to doubt it. Descartes’s further step on this issue is quite interesting. He says, “I knew that I was a substance the whole essence or nature of which is to think, and that for its existence there is no need of any place, nor does it depend on any material thing; so that this ‘me’, that is to say, the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from body, and is even more easy to know than is the latter; and even if body were not, the soul would not cease to be what it is.”⁸ Descartes is talking not only about substances but also about their essences. My essence consists in thinking. I am a substance that thinks. Since thoughts do not occupy any space, ‘I’ in its capacity as a thinker, has not to occupy any place in space. So also I do not depend on any material thing, because such dependence would deprive me of my status as a substance. Descartes makes the distinction between the soul and the body. He even hints at the disembodied existence of the soul.

In the last remark, quoted in the above paragraph, Descartes distinguishes the soul from the body. I am necessarily a soul and contingently a body. My having the body is the contingent truth because I would not cease to be when my body ceases to be. Descartes clearly means that ‘I’ is ambiguous. When I say ‘I am six feet tall’, ‘I’ has one meaning which is very different from the meaning when I say ‘I am suffering from pain’. In the former case ‘I’ means the body and in the latter case ‘I’ means the mind. Since my relationship with my body is contingent the two substances, mind and body, are not necessarily connected. Just as the essence of the mind is thinking, the essence of the body is extension. Shape, size, figure etc. are different modifications of extension. For the soul or mind in this context Descartes finds no place in space, and, as it has no place in the body, it is independent of the body.

According to Descartes, the human mind is capable of having true knowledge by virtue of having clear and distinct ideas. These ideas constitute the bedrock of human knowledge, in the sense that these ideas alone give us self-evident truths in mathematics, and other sciences based on mathematics. Ideas such as $2 + 2 = 4$ are clear and distinct and so are self-evidently true. So also are the ideas of self, God, etc. ‘Cogito ergo sum’ is the paradigmatic truth having absolute clarity and distinctness.

The concepts of clarity and distinctness of ideas have their own difficulties. The difficulty is not that these concepts have been given a psychological dimension, as a matter of fact, they have been given a theological dimension. Because of the theological dimension the Cartesian argument has become circular. Consider his remark: “All the things that we very clearly and very distinctly conceive of are true, are certain only because God is or exists, and that He is a Perfect Being, and that all that is in us issues from Him.”⁹ To express

briefly the circle, clear and distinct perception depends on the existence of God. But the existence of God itself depends on the clear and distinct perception. Descartes has clear and distinct perception not only of his own existence but also of the existence of God. So God is required for clear and distinct perception, and the clear and distinct perception is required for the existence of God. This issue was raised by several critics in the Fourth Set of Objections to the *Meditations*. This 'circle' is also described as Arnauld's circle, because Arnauld was the most vocal critic of Descartes on this issue. If the theological dimension is dropped, even then the Cartesian argument is not free from difficulties. The criterion of clear and distinct perception is not logical, it is certainly psychological. But Descartes's universal mathematics should not involve any judgements that are psychologically certain. They should be logically certain. However, it can be argued that Descartes intends to have a logical criterion of clarity and distinctness. His method of analysis demands the logical concept of clear and distinct ideas. Otherwise, Descartes would be guilty of psychologism in his theory of knowledge.

We have already seen how Descartes doubted all kinds of beliefs, and how later he attempted to get rid of all doubts. By the time he reaches the Fifth Meditation he starts feeling the necessity of bringing the physical world back to its original place, and succeeds in doing so in the Sixth Meditation. At the end of the Fifth Meditation he claims that he has succeeded in knowing God and therefore he has acquired the ability to know the corporeal nature. While earlier he has identified himself only with his mind, now in the Sixth Meditation he directs his attention to the body. He now maintains, "that I have a body which is adversely affected when I feel pain, which has need of food or drink when I experience the feelings of hunger and thirst, and so on; nor can I doubt there being some truth in all this."¹⁰ Descartes does not dissolve the distinction between the mind and the body. He explains the relationship between them in terms of "as a pilot in a vessel."¹¹ He continues to think that his association with the body is temporary, as he is permanently associated only with his mind. As he says, "It is certain that this I (that is to say, my soul by which I am what I am), is entirely and absolutely distinct from my body and can exist without it."¹²

There are places when Descartes is unable to retain the rigid distinction between the thinking and unthinking substances. Bodily sensations of pain, hunger, thirst etc. have led Descartes to remark, "I am very closely united to it (body), and so to speak so intermingled with it that I seem to compose with it one whole... all these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain etc. are in truth none other than certain confused modes of thought which are produced by the union and apparent intermingling of mind and body."¹³ So Descartes accepts the intermingling of body and mind, which is the intermingling of thought with extension. How is intermingling possible? Unless there is something common to the two substances, mind and body, no intermingling is possible. But if there is something common between the two, then they are not genuine substances. They may simply be the modes of a higher substance. So Descartes has paved a way for Spinoza.

Descartes's rationalist epistemology lays down the foundations of human knowledge firmly in the self-evident and *a priori* principles. He shows that we can arrive at absolute certainty in knowledge, not only in mathematics but also in empirical sciences such as physics. Mathematics shows the way. Metaphysics follows mathematics in laying down absolute principles such as 'Cogito ergo sum'.

So far as knowledge is concerned Descartes affirms that doubt has no place in it. Skeptical doubts are to be ultimately eliminated. His Sixth Meditation decisively argues that the initial doubt of the philosopher is only methodical doubt and so there cannot be a genuine skeptical doubt regarding our knowledge derived from sense-experience as well as from reason. Knowledge is fully secure against any possible design of an Evil Genius.

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