



Research Paper

Rene Descartes: Journey of an Adroit Doubting Thomas

G.N.Sharma, Amreen Fatima Shaikh,

Prof.(Retd), S.B.College of Science, Aurangabad-431001,INDIA

Prof. Shubham Institute, Aurangabad-431001,INDIA

Corresponding Author: G.N.Sharma

ABSTRACT

In early centuries Science and Philosophy could hardly manage to exhibit interdependence even as a formality. Science, as it continues even today, always demanded experimental proof for drawing a concrete inference in the interest of the society. Philosophy on the other hand exerted to accommodate this approach in its attempt to provide solace to human mind. However, the metaphysical approach of philosophy failed to gain proper accreditation from Science from time to time. The major gulf which was created between these two was much owing to the overstretching of the philosophical concepts and not standing firmly to the test of validity. Majority philosophers, however, continued their attempts by seeking a shelter under the metaphysical theories overlooking the criticism levelled against them. In a way this warring spirit proved profitable because these two subjects contributed sizeably to the cultural development, although did not extend a thorough trust in each other. Later it was Philosophy in particular, to get itself pruned by admitting and subsequently discarding the stagnated excesses in some of its branches.

Rene Descartes had a fixed mission in his mind towards the unnecessary stuff. Therefore, his scientific approach could cause a profound influence on the philosophical concepts which were then in vogue (Seventeenth Century). Now we understand his rich contribution clearly. There was no intention, at any rate, to add to the existing body of knowledge but rather to rearrange or newly erect the whole outlook without losing the essence. Therefore the strongly proposed mathematical reasoning earned a recognition easily. This eventually brought in a sort of clarity to all, that handling of metaphysical problems must be carried out with scientific temperament. Obviously there would be no room left for any prejudice or preconceived notions filled with any set of beliefs or disbeliefs. Failing this, there would be a burden of our own wishful thinking and it may further lead to wrongly nurtured ego and illusion too. This paper attempts to describe the mathematical method and its implications on Descartes' metaphysics for getting a clear understanding of his exclusive method that suggests a new pathway.

KEYWORDS: *Metaphysical Enquiry, Scientific Approach, Mathematical Method.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Losing anything particularly when it has become an indispensable entity in life is a tragedy by itself. Separation even for a pertinent reason is a painful experience. Such incidents do occur at any age and the episode causes a severe and permanent blow. This would happen to one and all without exception but with varying intensity leaving behind indelible scars. Rene Descartes could hardly understand anything when he lost his mother just a few days after his birth. He was very well nurtured with utmost care by a nurse providing all the necessary services and above all the basic affection that a growing baby would need. Somehow he inherited many characteristics both on physical and mental planes which proved to be quite unusual. Eventually his upbringing and the intrinsic urge shaped his temperament quite differently. With a sheltered life and proportionate coddling Descartes grew with a tendency to suspect everything and at times it resulted into a typical flighty nature. This in a way brought in the habitual doubting nature to get culminated into a sort of mixed disposition. Fortunately it ultimately crystallized into a queer nature and beneficially could lead to an exclusive philosophical vision with a definite purpose aligned with foresight. Presenting before the world any novel idea in the field of metaphysics, in particular, requires courage and consistency. Descartes never had this virtue at least initially but steadily with his ardent desire and deep interest in mathematics, he easily managed to fix up his propositions strictly on the platform of the existing reality. With this he became wise enough to handle

most of the philosophical riddles. "Truth" was his choice saddle, when he had firmly decided to ride patiently for a longer distance than usual. Adhering to this line up he voluntarily exerted to handle the lingering metaphysical problems, applying rather vigorously the precise mathematical methods. He began doubting every parameter before acknowledging it as True. His main contention was not to accept anything in the world of metaphysics unless the claim or proposal could satisfy the scientific norms. To him without this it could be a grave mistake to assume that we are well equipped with proper knowledge.

Although his upbringing made him to uncritically or habitually conform to the customs or rules of the ruling society, there was, though in the dormant stage, a string of scepticism gathering strength. This later became the base of his philosophy. One of his ethical maxims which he devotedly followed indicates this viewpoint. "To follow my thoughts wherever they might lead... In this I should be doing like the travellers who, finding themselves lost in a forest, know that they should continue to walk as straight as they can in one direction, not driving to the right or to the left...By this means, if they do not go exactly where they wish, they will at least arrive somewhere at the end, where probably they will be better off than in the middle of the forest."¹ He proved that the sceptic outlook makes one to be free from the shackles of prejudices and remain neutral in the initial stages so that doubting becomes a systematic worthy approach. This is the crux of his famous phrase *Cogito ergo sum*, a Latin version for the English equivalent, "I think therefore I am".

II. METHOD TO UNFOLD THE TRUTH

Truth, rather the ultimate one, could have been quite enigmatic to Rene Descartes. In fact, more than presenting the method to grasp it Descartes wanted to approach it step by step and that too with a scientific backing. Therefore instead of directly approving any methods he started with all the possible shades of Truth. To him clarity and distinctness are bound to be the two major aspects. This he extended further to the species 'Doubt' also. That is why to him even doubt needs to be well defined. This obviously is possible only when our perception is clear, thoughtful and free from other influences. Descartes further thinks that unless we doubt all that which can be doubted Truth may not be revealed totally. Therefore, at times even sense perception or the truths related to science can fall under the territory of doubt. This approach on extension leads us to confirm the self, i.e. 'I'. This 'I' exists because of I think or I doubt. So in other words this 'I' is self-evident. This is usually referred to *Cogito, ergo sum*. The psychological doubt on the other hand is marked as a result of direct experience. Descartes' doubt has a different dimension than usual ones, which is logical and related to 'Will'. Having understood the dictum 'I think, therefore I am', the very process of doubting directs us to catch the Truth regarding my existence with a capacity to doubt. Having analysed the efficacy of the doubting method or process, Descartes helps us in understanding the very existence of soul. Naturally this would automatically create a concrete pathway for proving the existence of God. Further to establish the existence of God, presence of 'I' is a basic requisition and therefore 'body' is compulsory. That is why 'I am' is a living soul.

The whole delineation might create an impression for an onlooker that Descartes' doubt is yet another darker shade of scepticism. But then there is a basic difference between these two. Generally a doctrine or opinion of Philosophical Sceptic shows that true knowledge of things is highly improbable or when hastily concluded it might even declare that all knowledge is uncertain. With this consistent thought it may elongate itself automatically to the realm of Agnosticism or Nihilistic outlook. 'As a philosophical doctrine, Scepticism emerged during the crisis of antique society (4th Cent.B.C.) as a reaction to the preceding philosophical systems which had tried to explain the sensual world by means of speculative reasoning and in doing so had often contradicted one another...Following the traditions of the sophists (q.v.) the first sceptics drew attention to the relativity of human knowledge and its dependence on various circumstances. Doubt as to the possibility of a generally recognised and demonstrable knowledge underlay the moral conception of antique Scepticism. The Sceptics of old preached abstention from judgements for the sake of achieving complete peace of mind (see *Ataraxia*) and thereby happiness.'²

Therefore, from the process of doubting Descartes takes us to the path of clarity. It is definitely a sort of recovery from a zone of hazy picture or confusion. Now he shows the doubting process has to recede slowly due to the entry of knowledge of Truth arising steadily and firmly. He proceeds to confirm the existence of body on the material plane which is of course agreeable to one and all. Extending further he proposes another shade of Truth which not all can easily cognize. He brings forth that as a thinking substance-referring to it as Soul. Therefore he thinks that everything within us has two parts, viz; related to the movement and the one which designs or guides the movement. This has been looked upon as a special system bearing dualistic nature. It prompts us to bear in mind that the material plane and the mental plane are two distinct planes, which we are habituated to call body and mind. They are extremely closely knitted together and therefore the overall functioning which we sort out to declare as merely a physical phenomenon is not completely true. It is a joint effort and much owing to this it becomes the prime salient feature of the modern philosophy. There is a clear confluence of materialism and idealism or we may even consider the same as a purely dualistic approach.

'The materialists, like Thomas Huxley, maintain that the mind is part of the body and therefore the mechanic is but one of the wheels in the machine.' I hold with Descartes", writes Huxley, "that the human body,

like all living bodies, is a machine, whose every (physical and mental) operation will sooner or later be explained on mechanical principles.” The world, therefore, has no soul. The idealists, on the other hand, insist that the body is part of the mind. Berkeley for example, denies the existence of matter. “No Object”, he asserts, “exists outside the mind perceiving it...The table I write on, I say exists, because I see it and feel it...Their very existence (esse) depends upon their being perceived (percipi). The world therefore has no body.”³

III. ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

When man became conscious of his existence, he started exploring the phenomenal world around him to get a concrete proof for the existence of God. Various approaches were in vogue because a single approach could not satisfactorily appease his thirst for knowledge of the Supreme being supposed to be governing this world. Therefore many of the proofs which were presented with great confidence met with certain contradictions and therefore we have even today a large number of philosophical schools presenting exclusive theories. In metaphysics, God, needless to say, occupies the highest position with all virtuous values that human beings adore. God is viewed as the ultimate goal and with no dispute is regarded as Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent. However, the modern mind well equipped with scientific temper may find God merely a psychological need and beyond logic or reason. That is why he is often described as transcendental by nature and not easily cognizable to human mind. Descartes had the Ontological Argument regarding the existence of God. No doubt we have the other popular arguments supported by Philosophers, like Causal, Pragmatic, Empirical, Teleological, Moral, Error etc. to name a select few.

Ontological Argument supported by Descartes considers Perfection as the main quality. In fact this viewpoint was presented in medieval times by St. Anselm, which later on was extended by Descartes and the same criticised by Immanuel Kant. It is taken for granted that all virtuous qualities are the attributes of God's personality and therefore, Existence should be considered as one of the necessary or basic shades of his personality. In case this attribute is denied then the very term 'Perfection' loses its meaning in essence. Therefore, the imperfection in any form even with a meager percentage cannot be admitted when it comes to the description of God's characteristics and further his existence. Yet if 'Imperfection' is forced upon in some form or the other, it would mean self-contradiction. Knowing this probability of the possible deviation even though in a minor way Descartes attempted a few suitable alterations. He insisted upon the infinite existence to be granted to God. With this outlook human beings or living organism in general can be separated for being finite and the laws related to the finite beings cannot be applied to God. In other words, the limitations which we observe to the human existence will not be related at any cost to the infinite existence of God. This argument sounds to be quite cogent but there had been strong objections against it. The basic idea of God with infinite existence is presented with a strong imagination and therefore a big fallacy appears for taking this attribute for granted. It seems there is a clean passage permitted for the claim of factual existence through one's own sentiment or wishful thinking. The evidence claimed or adduced looks authoritative but also seems to be a forcefully postulated. Although much of the criticism came from Immanuel Kant whose insistence was on the Moral Argument, it was Hegel who supported Descartes' idea.

IV. THE SAD END

Howsoever we are mentally tuned to the lofty metaphysical ideas, ultimately it is the physical plane realities that have to dawn particularly in the closing phases of life. Finally we have to understand certain phenomena with scientific temper only. As a result many of our surmised ideas of life in all phases do collapse. As long as our limbs are strong enough we can definitely afford to take on uncommon adventures and efficiently handle them. Once the body starts defeating us it is the thinking pattern which changes radically and so a sharp deviation is observed in our philosophical excursions. Descartes, by choice, remained unmarried but then had certain sentimental traps which gave him initially a short lived comfort. Later unfortunately the same proved to be a reason for a complete disaster. He voluntarily accepted the fatherhood of an illegitimate child named Francine. She was everything for him and the only reason to live happily in life. He had effortfully fabricated many dreams for his fostered daughter, regarding her upbringing. But his fate was never uniform. Francine passed away at the tender age of five to make him permanently lonesome and a desolated personality. This introduced him to a new harsh reality of life which was such a severe blow to him that he could hardly combat with the situation and ever recover.

Another episode was also unfortunately due. Never ever he had imagined that he would be introduced to Christina, the queen of Sweden. She was cent percent aristocratic by temperament and in her disposition too. She was very passionate and also remarkably learned. The only objectionable part of her personality was her dominating nature which she wantonly exhibited for selfish gains. Descartes through a French Ambassador at Stockholm got introduced to her, much because of his scholarship and so began exchanging philosophical discursive notes with her. She was so impressed by his talent that she succeeded in convincing him to go to Sweden. Apart from her physical prowess she had an iron Will which she would compromise for nothing once she made a decision. Descartes' slightly timid nature and half heartedness in expressing truth, ultimately yielded

before her desire and unusual versatility. The climatic conditions became absolutely unbearable as his routine was drastically changed to cause a complete inconvenience. It went against his health and all these conditions summoned him to embrace death!

V. CONCLUSION

It is difficult to change the course of life as one wishes when the circumstances fail to cooperate. Many times the childhood phase proves to be the real beginning of one's own fate. In case of Descartes, the beginning itself proved to be a challenging phase. Unusual upbringing put him into a closed shell which he could carve out effortfully to his advantage but somehow failed in having consistency. Travelling to various places with no guidance as such except on own Will power, at times proves to be disadvantageous. Descartes had mixed results to experience from the spectra of life which was always changing and challenging in academics as well as personal life. 'It is well to know something of the manners of foreign people in order that we may judge our own more wisely. But, if one spends too much time in travelling in foreign countries he becomes at last a stranger in his own; and when one is too cautious to know what has been done in past ages he is liable to remain ignorant of what is going on in his own time.'⁴

Descartes' idea of God met with severe criticism mainly because of his insistence on the infinite existence to be granted. Most of the religious philosophies, particularly in East, have enthusiastically displayed their idea of God's existence without any empirical or logical proof. Descartes surprisingly with a clear mathematical approach everywhere, somehow could not resist applying the Ontological viewpoint. No doubt it sounds convincing but not to all. Kant's Moral argument on the other hand expects all moral values to be given a sanction for an objective existence. Therefore he expects the world should be morally adjusted. The idea goes well on the basis of moral laws to create a moral order. If such an adjustment fails to exist, it would mean merely chaos with no moral order prevailing. Finally Kant thinks that when moral values have validity, human acts must be rewarded or punished accordingly. In view of Russell, 'He regarded the bodies of men and animals as machine: animals he regarded as automatic, governed entirely by the laws of physics, and devoid of feeling or consciousness. Men are different: they have a soul, which resides in the pineal gland. There the soul comes in contact with the 'Vital spirits', and through this contact there is interaction between soul and body. The total quantity of motion in the universe is constant, and therefore the soul cannot affect it; but it can alter the direction of motion of the vital spirits, and hence, indirectly, of other parts of the body.'⁵ It seems like many philosophers of past centuries, Descartes also felt that the highest type of life can be none other than the intellectual life. Some of the Cartesians somehow did not approve Descartes' claim that there is a mutual influence between the soul and the body. This was because both soul and body had been described as absolutely different and independent. Somehow no satisfactory answer was presented but it was safely concluded that there is definitely a difficulty for the interaction it that could be solved by the God who is already declared as Omnipotent. Therefore, the term 'Occasionalism' while discussing Descartes' philosophy became popular.

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