

Rene Descartes (1596-1650)

Descartes, a Frenchman, was born in Touraine in 1596. He came of a wealthy family. Throughout his life he remained a bachelor and his inheritance enabled him to dedicate himself to philosophical meditation. Apart from being an epoch-making philosopher, Descartes was a creative mathematician. His great fame induced Queen Christiana of Sweden. At her invitation he went to Stockholm in October, 1649 but the following year in February, 1650 he died of pneumonia.

2.01. The Method of Descartes

Descartes was very much worried by the uncertain state of philosophy in his times. He saw that philosophy was cultivated for many centuries by the best minds that had ever lived and there was yet not a single proposition in it which was not under dispute.¹ However, Descartes did not despair of knowledge, and knowledge for him, must attain a certitude equal to that of the demonstrations of Arithmetic and Geometry.² This knowledge, he thought, could be attained if we use an appropriate method of enquiry. Seeing that knowledge proper has already been attained in Arithmetic and Geometry, he was surprised to find that philosophers had not reared a lofty edifice on such a firm and solid foundation. However, it was the method and not the subject-matter so much which had enabled mathematics to attain certitude. So Descartes attempted to understand the method of mathematics which could be utilised for advancing knowledge in any subject. He called his own enquiry as 'Universal Mathematics' in Rule IV of his *Regulae*. This will be called 'meta-mathematics' today. "Such a science", according to Descartes, "should contain the primary rudiments of human reason, and its province ought to extend to the eliciting of true results in every subject".³

[Descartes has noted that deduction alone could yield *certain results* and experiential inference could not yield errorless results.⁴ But he did not see that these methods dealt with two different kinds of propositions. Further, only now we are beginning to realise that philosophy does not deal with cognitive but with non-cognitive propositions concerning self-realisation. Such distinctions would show

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1. "Discourse on the method" in *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Translated by E.S. Haldane & G.R.T. Ross (Dover Edition 1931) pp. 85-86.
 2. Rules for Directions, *Ibid.*, p. 5.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

that the criterion of mathematics cannot be applied to the understanding of philosophical problems.]

Descartes therefore was very much concerned with the enquiry into the method of philosophising. He had proposed to lay down thirtysix rules of which he mentioned thirtyone in the *Regulae*. 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

1. Never to accept anything as true unless I clearly know it as such.²

Descartes believes that errors arise from poorly comprehended experiences or from hasty, groundless and preconceived notions. The only remedy, therefore, he thinks, lies 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. Here Descartes is in favour 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 its (i) several constituent factors separately, clearly and distinctly, and when we (ii) know the order or system in which they are found.

Descartes, being himself a great mathematician, was struck by the excellence of mathematics. Therefore, in order to make philosophy truly scientific he hoped to make its method patterned on mathematics. Now in Geometry we first of all start with a few self-evident axioms and then reach the whole body of its conclusions by means of simple elaborative deduction. Now in the same way in philosophy too, he tells us, to find out "by an inductive enumeration and a critical sifting of all ideas . . . a single certain point to deduce all further truths. The first task of philosophy is *analytic*, the second *synthetic*." (Windelband, *Ibid.*, p. 390)

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

1. "Discourse on method", *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Vol. I, p. 92.
2. This he also states in rule IX of the *Regulae*.

intuition, let us doubt all that can be doubted.

(i) *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 demands 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 is 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 dreaming and the things of the present sense-experience 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; on the contrary have ample grounds for doubting.

(ii) *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 cannot 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 fact 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 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

Psychological Doubt

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This is directly felt and experienced by us as such, as in the previous example. 2. It is caused by the nature of object about which we want to know. 3. It is independent of our will. However, hard we may will, the doubt continues. |
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4. This is concerned with attitude towards total things or ultimate things.

4. It is concerned with particular things of daily life.

Again, the doubt of Descartes should not be confused with Scepticism. Descartes is not asserting that whatever can be doubted is false, but he is only supposing it to be false. Again, the scepticism is the finished conclusion about knowledge which professes the denial of any certain knowledge whatsoever. However, the Cartesian doubt is only a starting point to find out that which cannot be further doubted.¹

2.02. Cogito Ergo Sum

This *cogito ergo sum* is the first final certainty and as such we have to be careful in its interpretation as well as in deciding its 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 its certainty and then again these premises on other premises for their 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 as 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 that which constitutes the self is not known. All that we can say that the thinking this is that which doubts, imagines, senses etc. But beyond these, we cannot say that my *body* is myself or not.

Lastly, we can say that which thinks is a *substance*. "It is certain that thinking cannot exist without a thing which thinks or generally that any accident or activity cannot be without a substance of which it is the activity."

1. Discourse on the method, *Ibid.*, p. 99.

2.02A. Critical Comment on Cogito Ergo Sum

Descartes was of the opinion that the permanent self or Ego can be known with certainty. Even Locke believed that one's 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. We shall find this in relation to Hume's refutation of spiritual substance and in relation to Kant's *paralogism of reason*. The contention of Kant that the transcendental subject can never be an object of knowledge is also maintained with a great deal of logical rigour by the Vedantins.

Descartes however was greatly influenced by his assumption with regard to the doctrine of 'substance' and its unchangeable attribute.¹ For this reason he concluded that there is a permanent self, since there is its unchangeable attribute of 'thinking'. Now-a-days this kind of reasoning will be called *a priorism*. Once we grant that there is a permanent substance which must have its unchanging attribute, we have to conclude that the self is a permanent substance, since we have found out its essence called 'thinking' which even the worst of doubt cannot demolish. But this is bad metaphysics. We cannot bring anything into existence by defining it. All that we are permitted to conclude is that from a given idea taken on our assumption, we can deduce another from it. This would mean that *not* that a permanent self is a *fact*, but simply from that from a certain *idea* we can deductively infer another *idea* of a permanent self. We shall find this point again with regard to the ontological proof for the existence of God. From an *a priori* idea, we can never pass to an actual fact.

The root of the trouble lies in the faulty use of the verb 'to be'. 'To be', properly speaking can be used only in conjunction with a predicate. For example, a proper proposition is, 'I am a poet', and not simply 'I am', — certainly not in conjunction with a proper name.² The verb 'to be' by itself cannot be a predicate.

Secondly, there can be no logical transition from 'I think' to 'I exist'. 'Existence' can be maintained not with regard to the subject, but regard to the predicate. When we say: 'I am a poet', it does not say with anything about my existence. It, however, points out that poets exist. Similarly, from 'I think' all that can be established is that there is thinking or that there is a state of thinking consciousness.

2.02B. Importance of the Cogito

Cogito occupies a strategic position in the philosophy of Descartes for the following reasons:

1. N.K. Smith, *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes*, pp. 328-29.
2. R. Carnap, 'The elimination of metaphysics', and M. Schilck, 'Positivism and Realism' in *Logical Positivism*, edited by A.J. Ayer, pp. 73f, 96, 98f.

(i) *Cogito* supplies its own evidence of clearness and distinctness which none of the things doubted had. This characteristics of clearness and distinctness which serves as the criterion of all other truths not deduced, but is *intuitively induced* from a single instance.¹

(ii) *Cogito*, strictly speaking, is neither a first principle nor a premise. It is simply a sufficient answer to any future agnosticism which may hinder us from attaining certain knowledge.

(iii) Again, *cogito* is the first existential proposition which points out something actual existing, namely myself as the doubter or the thinking being.

(iv) Here we come in contact with a very important quality of consciousness which will serve as the distinguishing mark of mind in relation to material bodies.

The method of Descartes is deductive-inductive analytic-synthetic. It is inductive for it is based on the discovery of a certain truth. Again, it establishes a first clear and distinct perception or intuition. It is deductive for Descartes, as all other elements of his philosophy gradually follow from this one single certain truth, i.e., *cogito*. Of course, the deduction of Descartes is not syllogistic. In Descartes' words his deduction is unilateral, proceeding from one previously established point to the next and from this to others till we reach some hitherto unknown result. "Passing little by little from one to the other, we may acquire in time a perfect knowledge of the whole of philosophy."

Descartes seems to make three assumptions in his method carried on through doubting.

(a) That there is some certain knowledge about the actual world.

This seems to be the most important assumption. It is difficult to believe the possibility of any philosophy without this assumption. Any way the certain knowledge must be such as can be believed by all and such as can never be doubted by anybody. Its 'necessity' must be self-evident.

(b) Again, 'what is clear and distinct is true' can be proved to be true.

(c) The deductive knowledge involving memory can have the same certainty as intuitive knowledge.

2.03. Criterion of Truth

Now let us try to determine that in *cogito* (*Philosophy*, Vol. XVII, No. 69, April 43, Gewirth '*Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes*') which makes it true. This something by virtue of which *cogito* becomes indubitable will serve as the criterion or touchstone of all further knowledge. Now *cogito* is true because it is clear and distinct. Hence, clearness and distinctness may be regarded as the criterion of any true knowledge.

Anything which is as clear and distinct as is *cogito* must be regarded as true. This criterion of clearness and distinctness has been regarded by Leibniz.

1. *Philosophical Works*, vol. I, pp. 7-33.

Gassendi and Hoffding as purely subjective, for psychologically what is clear and distinct to me may not be so to others. Hence, Leibnitz demanded a proof of clearness and distinctness which should be palpable, mechanical and lacking the least difficulty in its understanding. No doubt Descartes required a certain psychological discipline to perceive something clearly and distinctly but he also supplied a certain logical standard about his criterion.

Idea has usually three elements, namely (a) Perceptive act, (b) a modification of the mind, a mental content and (c) a representative of something external to the mind. Now Descartes uses clearness and distinctness primarily for the first two functions of the mind and also determines later how it is to be attained in the third case. Now he defines his criterion of clearness and distinctness thus.

"A clear perception I call that which is present and open to the attending mind, just as we say that those things are clearly seen by us which, being present to the regarding eye, move it sufficiently strongly and openly. But that perception is distinct which is not only clear but is so precise and so separated from all others that it plainly contains in itself nothing other than which is clear."

Hence to be clear an idea must be *present* to the mind, *open* to the mind and the mind also must *attend* to it. Similarly, distinct is that which is precisely determined so that it may not be confused with anything else.

Again, Descartes uses clearness and distinctness in relation to the representative functions of ideas also. Now an idea is clear when the mind includes in it that content, which is 'integral and complete' in relation to the mind's interpretation of it, and it is distinct when the content of the idea includes nothing other than this. For example, the idea of God is clear when it includes all that which goes to constitute the idea of God, and distinct when it includes nothing else.

It is true, as Prof. N.K. Smith has pointed out¹ that Descartes has not been able to lay down any logical criterion of clearness and distinctness. But it is worthy of note that Descartes illustrates his meaning with regard to mathematical propositions and points out that they follow from the 'light of reason alone'. Whereas with regard to propositions of matters of facts, he points out, that they are obtained not by natural light, but by 'a certain spontaneous inclination'.² He also notes that intuition and deduction are the only certain routes to knowledge and no other routes should be admitted.³ And inference based on experience can never be certain,⁴ according to him. Hence, Descartes was classifying propositions into two kinds, namely, propositions of mathematics which are true by definition only and factual propositions which can be proved indirectly only, through the veracity of God. If he had thought sufficiently enough on the distinction between his knowledge of self or Geometrical axiom given by *intuition* and his knowledge of matters of fact based

¹ Ibid., p. 319f.

² Meditation III.

³ Works, p. 8.

on 'confused ideas' given by 'spontaneous inclination', then he would have defined the criterion of truth more precisely.

However, Descartes, does not use the term clearness and distinctness for truth. Truth or falsity is found in judgments which are the product of intellect as well as will. This topic we shall take up later.

2.04. The existence of God

Let us try to rehabilitate the world which the doubt had destroyed. Now with the criterion of clearness and distinctness let us see which ideas are true or false. Now ideas are either innate or those derived from outside or are pure inventions. But of all the ideas there is one innate idea of Being who is 'eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, source of all goodness and truth, creator of all things and in sum having in himself all those things in which we can clearly note some perfection which is infinite, or tainted by no imperfection.' Now what can be the cause of this idea? At least the cause must be equal to the effect. I cannot be the cause for I know myself to be finite being. Hence this idea must have been caused by an equally perfect cause, namely, the infinitely perfect being called God.

The casual proof of the existence of God is based on two assumptions, namely (i) Individual consciousness knows itself to be finite, and, (ii) This consciousness of 'God' is derived only from the conception of an 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 points out that the idea of the infinite being is the most positive idea for in comparison with the fullness of the Perfect Being we realise 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 beings? 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 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 His 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 to be in actuality as well as in thought, is greater than to be in thought alone; therefore, God exists not only in thought, but in fact.' This proof makes God's existence dependent on the thought of it. God