

Descartes and the Spirit of Modernism

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Abstract

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) is the founder of modern philosophy. He is the first man of high philosophic capacity whose ideas are greatly affected by the scientific and astronomical developments of his time. He normally does not accept the intellectual foundations laid by his predecessors. He comes with a fresh air and a new sense of self-confidence which was not found earlier. There is the freshness about his work. His style is easy and it is meant for the wise and the intelligent. Descartes was a philosopher, a mathematician, and a man of science. Descartes begins by explaining the method of 'Cartesian doubt', as it has come to be called. In order to have a firm basis for his philosophy, he resolves to make himself doubt everything. He begins with scepticism and ends with resolution. This way of thinking of Descartes has really started the spirit of modernism.

Keywords: Astronomy, Confidence, Revolution, Sceptics, Intellectual, Doubt, Anxious.

Introduction

Rene Descartes is generally considered the founder of modern philosophy. He is a man of high philosophic capacity with new ideas of physics and astronomy. Even if he retains much of scholasticism, he does not normally accept foundations laid by predecessors. He makes efforts to construct a completely new philosophical edifice. This is a sign of new confidence. Bertrand Russell comments, "There is a freshness about his work that is not to be found in any eminent previous philosopher since Plato. All the intermediate philosophers were teachers with the professional superiority belonging to that avocation. Descartes writes not as a teacher, but as a discoverer and explorer, anxious to communicate what he has found" (542). Modernism is not so much a theological movement as it is a philosophical one. It springs from the ideas of Rene Descartes, who is rightly called the father of modern philosophy. Descartes believed in the objective content of divine revelation, but he had a way of presenting the reality of God to sceptics who would not accept divine revelation as an element of truth.

Review of Literature

Descartes' two most important books, so far as pure philosophy is concerned, are the *Discourse on Method* (1637) and *Meditations* (1642). In these books he explains the method of 'Cartesian Doubt' in order to have a strong foundation for his philosophy. He decides to make himself doubt everything that he can manage to doubt. This leads to knowledge. It makes mind more certain than matter. There is thus, in all philosophy derived from Descartes, a tendency to subjectivism.

Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* (1961) is a very special study of various schools of western philosophy and the individual philosophers. This history of philosophy presents philosophers as both effects and causes. They are effects of their social situations and of the politics and institutions of their time and at the same time they are the causes of beliefs and ideas which mould the future. Russell's history of philosophy presents each philosopher as an outcome of his 'milieu'. Quite appropriately, before the chapter on Descartes there are chapters on 'The Reformation and Counter Reformation' and 'The Rise of Science'.

Descartes led Modern Philosophy by redefining philosophical activity. He rejected philosophy as metaphysical and ethical enquiry highly motivated by theology. Descartes can be contrasted with a radical postmodernist thinker Michel Foucault. Descartes was profoundly influenced by reliance on the power of reason. The main characteristic of Foucault was dissatisfaction with reason. Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* records his profound insight as a postmodernist thinker.



Balabhadra Tripathy

Reader,
P.G. Department of English,
Berhampur University,
Odisha, India

Ideology (1996) by David Hawkes is a book of The New Critical Idiom series. It defines meanings and definitions of 'ideology'. It traces the development of debates from Martin Luther King and Machiavelli to the present day. In the chapter on 'Idealism', there is a deep analysis of Descartes' works and philosophy.

Discussion

Descartes is generally regarded as the "father of modern philosophy." He stands as one of the most important figures in Western intellectual history. His work in mathematics and his writings on science proved to be important for further development in "scientific method". His epoch-making approach to philosophy in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* determines the course of future philosophical ideas. The very problems with which much of modern philosophy has been primarily concerned arise only as a consequence of Descartes' thought. Descartes' philosophy must be understood in the context of his times. The Medieval thought process was in the process of disintegration. The attitude of authoritarianism that had dominated the Medieval period was shattered by the rise of the Protestant revolt and advances in the development of science. The Copernican revolution undermined the authority of the Church in directly countering the established church doctrine of a geocentric universe. The rising spirit of sciences directly challenged the Church and seemed to put science and religion in opposition. A mathematician and scientist as well as a devout Catholic, Descartes was concerned primarily with establishing certain foundations for science and philosophy, and yet also with linking the gap between the "new science" and religion. Although Descartes was a devout Catholic, this belief gave support to the Protestant affirmation of the supremacy of individual conscience. This belief was also important in the development of democracy. John Locke, a political philosopher, was influenced by Descartes' assertion that all individuals have the "natural light of reason."

Descartes begins by explaining the method of doubt. In order to have a firm basis for his philosophy, he resolves to make himself doubt everything that he can manage to doubt. Descartes reflects,

And finally, considering the fact that all the same thoughts we have when we are awake can also come to us when we are asleep, without any of them being true, I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterward I noticed that, while I wanted thus to think that everything was false, it necessarily had to be the case that I, who was thinking this, was something. And noticing that this truth—I think, therefore I am (cogito ergo sum)—was so firm and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking. (*Discourse*19)

This passage is the essence of Descartes' theory of knowledge, and contains what is most important in his philosophy. The Cartesian system presents two parallel but independent worlds, that of mind and that of matter, each of which can be studied without reference to the other. Descartes talks about the duality of body and mind as the crux of his philosophy.

The Cartesian philosophy presents two parallel but distinct worlds, that of mind and matter.

The mind is an immaterial substance ontologically different from the material body.

In Descartes' day, science was the source of brilliant successes. The application of mathematical methods in astronomy had resulted in great developments. Scientists seemed to demonstrate findings with more clarity. Descartes brought more reason to the belief in God by applying logical and scientific methods. He began to examine everything in the world from a sceptic's point of view. He created a procedure of argument that came to be known as 'methodic doubt'. He was examining everything from the perspective of a sceptic. At last he found something even the sceptic could not doubt. What he found is summed up in one phrase—"I think, therefore I am". Even if the entire world is an illusion, the sceptic, by the simple fact that he is pondering the illusion, must admit that he himself exists. After demonstrating the certainty of his own existence as a thinking mind, Descartes reasoned his way back to the existence of the world and to the existence of a God. David Hawkes rightly argues, "The originary, unitary, transcendent Cartesian ego thus provides an alternative standard of certainty and coherence for a world in which the traditional conception of God as the source of all truth was rapidly being diminished" (60).

Descartes' concept of man as a mind trapped in a body created a duality of mind/body in modern philosophy. Some philosophers believed, like Descartes, that the only things we can know with certainty are concepts in the mind. These are the "Rationalists". A counter movement claimed we can know things for sure only through our senses; what is in our minds, since it cannot be sensed, measured, and weighed, is basically unknowable. These are the "Empirists".

Modernity is thought as an attempt to escape history. Rene Descartes' contribution to scientific and philosophical knowledge has been undoubtedly an immense gift to the modern thought process. Two things are central for the development of modernity. First, a general distraught of the senses provokes an emphasis on thoughts and judgments and an over reliance on principles of reason. Secondly, the same kind of distrust leads to the development of technological means of improvement.

Almost everything that differentiates and distinguishes modern world from earlier centuries is attributed to science and scientific temper. The modern world, so far as mental outlook is concerned, begins in the seventeenth century. The new conceptions that science introduced greatly influenced modern philosophy. Descartes, who is known as the founder of modern philosophy, was himself one of the

creative brains of seventeenth century science. Four eminent personalities, Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton are pre-eminent in the creation of science. Copernicus belongs to the sixteenth century, but his influence was felt in seventeenth century. There have been significant developments in pure mathematics during this period, which were indispensable to the works in the physical sciences. Napier published his invention of logarithms in 1614. Co-ordinate geometry was the outcome of the work of seventeenth century mathematicians, among whom the greatest contribution was made by Descartes. The differential and integral calculus were invented independently by Newton and Leibniz. Bertrand Russell says, "In 1700 the mental outlook of educated man was completely modern; in 1600, except among a very few, it was still largely medieval" (522).

There is every reason to believe that Descartes is considered as the founder of modern way of thinking. He is the first individual of high philosophic and intellectual capacity whose outlook is highly influenced by the new developments in the field of science. He makes a significant break from the past to construct a new order based on reason. This is the sign of dawning of a new self confidence and a novel thought process. Descartes' two most important works are *Discourse on Method* (1637) and the *Meditations* (1642). In these works he goes on discussing the method of 'Cartesian Doubt'. Most philosophers think Descartes as modern as his theory of 'I think, therefore I am' makes mind more certain than matter; and my mind (for me) is more certain than the minds of others. There is thus, in all philosophy derived from Descartes, a tendency to subjectivism. That laid the foundation for the independent way of thinking and free individualism.

This philosophy of Descartes, then, leads to an individualistic thought process. Basing upon this concept he sets to work to rebuild the edifice of knowledge. The Cartesian 'I' has been inferred from the fact that 'I think, therefore I exist. If I ceased to think, there would be no evidence of my existence'.

The process of thinking is used by Descartes in a broader sense. A thing that thinks, automatically doubts, understands, criticises, conceives, affirms, denies, wills, imagines, and feels. Feeling, according to him, is a form of thinking. This way of a rise of a new kind of thinking has in fact given rise to a sense of modernity. Modernity is often characterised in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition.

Conclusion

The concept of rationalism is at the basis of modernism. It is the foundation of today's world affairs. The way of the world today is structured and motivated by rationalism. The modernist outlook, the prioritising of reason as a project for a whole culture, is the consequence of prioritising of reason by Rene Descartes. Descartes confidently declares that the human mind has something within it that we may call divine, wherein are rooted the first seeds of useful modes of thought. He insists on the separation between the ideal and material spheres. Descartes believes our inherent rational capacities determine and make practically possible our experience of the world.

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