

# METHODICAL DOUBT: A CRITERION OF INDUBITABLE KNOWLEDGE

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**Introduction:** *Skepticism is a term with many nuances of meaning. In its narrower sense, it refers to the denial of the possibility of attaining truth to some particular sphere of human knowledge (i.e., mitigated skepticism). In its broader sense, it refers to the denial of the possibility of attaining truth to all spheres of human knowledge (i.e., universal skepticism). In other words, it refers to a denial of the capacity of human intellect to know anything with certainty. It may also be understood as a rational and systematic doubt or the suspension of judgment about any truth. In the present paper, I shall analyze that how far skepticism as a methodological approach proved to be a ground for epistemology in the Cartesian system. Besides this, my chief concern is to analyze how far Descartes' skeptical method (i.e., methodical doubt) proved to be successful in laying down the foundation of epistemology and ontology.*

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was utterly dissatisfied with the existing system of philosophy which was prevalent in his lifetime. He argues that although philosophy has been nurtured for thousands of years but still there is not even a single philosophical proposition which is free from dispute. However, it doesn't mean that he was disappointed with the pursuit of knowledge. Knowledge for him was a sort of certitude which could be subject to demonstration as in the case of mathematics and geometry. Such a sort of indubitable knowledge which is universally demonstrable and acceptable could be attained by following a definite method. Descartes attempted to understand the method of mathematics which could be utilized for obtaining indubitable knowledge not only in philosophy but also in any other discipline. He called his own inquiry as 'universal mathematics'. In order to make philosophy truly scientific, he seeks to base its method patterned and based on mathematical principles. In geometry, we first of all start with a few self-evident axioms and then reach the whole body of conclusions by means of simple elaborative deduction. Philosophy, in the same way, he tells us, seeks to find out knowledge proper by a methodical and systematic shifting of ideas.

Now, what could be the fundamental methodological approach by means of which we can

find something which is sure and certain? Descartes adopted the 'method of doubt' as a cornerstone to grasp clear and distinct propositions. He started making deliberate doubts on each and everything in a systematic way. He says when doubt is pushed to its farthest limit then only will it reveal something which is indubitable, something which can be perceived clearly. Descartes proposes to let everything subject to doubt for the time being. Although, he doubts everything whatever could be doubted but it does not mean that he was a skeptic. Instead, he was searching for clear and distinct propositions' which lead to the foundation of indubitable edifice of knowledge. He uses the method of doubt merely as a tool to arrive at clear and distinct propositions which could not be further subject to doubt. This, among other things, is what distinguishes him from a skeptic.

Descartes proceeds through the 'method of doubt' in a very systematic manner to reach clear and distinct propositions. He first of all rejects all previous beliefs, thoughts and misconcepts.<sup>2</sup> After this, he starts doubting on the testimony of sensory experience.<sup>3</sup> We perceive the things of our daily life like tables, chairs etc., but our senses often delude us as is clear from illusions, hallucinations etc. Now, prudence demands that we should not only rely on those things which deceive us even once. We are deceived not only by distant and minute objects but also by other things. For instance, I am sitting near the fire is also subjected to doubt because same has also happened in dreams (i.e., dreaming argument).<sup>4</sup> After this, even the truths of sciences (i.e.,  $2+2=4$ ) can be doubted. At this stage, it might be the case that truths of science cannot be doubted in dreams but still they cannot be accepted as clear and distinct propositions. There might be a demon at once potent and malignant who tricks us to believe in falsehood (i.e., demon argument)<sup>5</sup>

*That I doubt cannot be doubted*.<sup>6</sup>

I may doubt anything but I cannot doubt that I am doubting. Whether it is 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*<sup>7</sup> is the one certain truth that may be taken as the foundation of the philosophy.

Now, it is quite obvious that the first proposition (i.e., I think, therefore, I exist) is clear and distinct because it cannot be further doubted. It is true that no one can doubt over one's own doubting but *is it also true that one's doubting proves one's existence (i.e., cogito ergo sum)?* Descartes proves his own existence from thinking which means that thinking gives rise to existence (i.e., essence precedes existence).<sup>8</sup> It means that without thinking, the existence of thinker (i.e., *cogito*) is not possible. After proving the existence of '*cogito*', he shapes a great

edifice of epistemology and then ontology. But, it is difficult to claim that one's thinking could be the ground of one's own existence.

Moreover, if we take thinking as an attribute of substance (i.e., mind) even then such a claim is not acceptable. Although, thinking is an essential attribute of substance (i.e., mind) but it doesn't mean that substance depends on attributes for its existence. Substance by its definition exists that, it does not require any other thing in order to exist. It is *causa sui* or *sui generis*. On the other hand, an attribute by its definition depends on substance for its existence. Apart from substance, attributes cannot exist. Besides this, it is accepted that an attribute could prove the existence of substance but at the same time it is not easy to accept that an attribute could also be the cause of substance.

Descartes claims in his first clear and distinct proposition (ie., *cogito ergo sum*) that I exist because I am thinking. Here, thinking is an attribute of the substance 'I'. It is clear from the above proposition that one's existence depends on one's activity (i.e., thinking). However, if the above proposition is to be taken to its logical conclusion then it seems less effective in claiming indubitable knowledge which was the sole thrust of Descartes philosophical inquiry. It implies that thinking as an attribute has been considered as the cause of substance.

Besides this, it is true that Descartes through his method of doubt tries to establish not an inference but a simple fact of primitive knowledge or 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 use of the term 'therefore'<sup>9</sup> is unfortunate for it leads to the interpretation of *cogito* as an inference. Although, the term 'therefore', has two different meanings, viz., primarily, it means a step in inference but secondarily, it means a relation of necessary connection but both of these seem equally problematic. It is obvious that Descartes does not use the term 'therefore', in the sense of inference but as in the sense of necessary connection. But the sense of necessary connection is also ambiguous in nature. Necessary connection implies causation. Causation in turn involves the cause-effect relationship.<sup>10</sup> Here, in the proposition (i.e., I think, therefore, I exist), thinking acts as the cause of my existence. However, as has already been mentioned above that thinking as an activity could not be considered as the cause of my own existence.

Descartes' method of doubt here seems to appear somewhat problematic. Although, Descartes proves the existence of thinker through its attribute of thinking but it doesn't mean that thinking or doubting is the cause of its existence. If thinking is to be taken as the

cause of one's existence then it would lead to contradiction in the fundamental substance-attribute relationship.<sup>11</sup>The contradiction is that it is thinker or doubter which is the cause of every activity and not vice-versa.

If we further analyze the phrase whether essence precedes existence or existence precedes essence, it is not easy to determine which comes first. However, one thing is sure, for anything to be possible (i.e., activity, attribute etc.), existence is always presupposed. An actor must be there before any act is possible; doubter must exist before any doubting. Similarly, thinker must be present before any thinking is possible. Moreover, even the thinking of thinking is not possible if there is no existence of any thinker. Thinking cannot simply occur in the air. It must be present in some substratum or locus. Moreover, thinking as an activity always occurs within the spatio-temporal dimensions and whatever happens under space and time is not everlasting. It implies that thinking as an essential attribute of self is not essential in nature. This is because of the fact that thinking as an activity occurs within the space and time and whatever happens under space-time starts at a definite point of time.

Descartes seems to make three assumptions in his method carried on through doubting:<sup>12</sup>

1. That there is some certain knowledge about the actual world.
2. Again, 'what is clear and distinct is true' can be proved to be true.
3. That the deductive knowledge involving memory can have the same certainty as intuitive knowledge.

If we thoroughly examine the first assumption, we can conclude that he was not a skeptic at all, although, he uses the method of skepticism as a ladder to climb at the roof of epistemology. Instead, he presupposes that there is some certain knowledge which he starts tracing out. But the second assumption implies that anything which is as clear and distinct as *cogito* must be regarded as true. Hence, clearness and distinctness may be regarded as the criterion of any true knowledge. This criterion of clearness and distinctness has been regarded by Leibnitz, 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.

Not only this, Descartes has also been charged of attempting to prove God's existence by appeal to clear and distinct perceptions; whereas he tried to validate clear and distinct perceptions by appeal to God's veracity. In other words, from the criterion of clearness and

distinctness of ideas he proves the existence of the veracious God and; again, from the veracity of God he proves the ultimate truth of the criterion of clearness and distinctness. In the order of knowledge, the criterion comes first, but in the order of existence God comes first. The criterion is suggested as soon as we begin to apply method, but the method itself is based on some metaphysical assumption. The veracity of God is the ontological assumption of the methodological criterion.

Descartes' basic assumption regarding the doctrine of 'substance' and its unchangeable attribute<sup>14</sup> made him to conclude that there is a permanent self - since there is its unchangeable attribute of thinking. This kind of reasoning is 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'. But, 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 a certain idea we can deductively infer another *idea* of a permanent self.

Moreover, there can be no logical transition from 'I think' to 'I exist'. 'Existence' can be maintained not with regard to the subject but with regard to the predicate.<sup>15</sup> When we say: 'I am a doctor', it does not say anything about my existence. It however, points out that doctors exist. Similarly, from 'I think' all that can be established is that there is thinking or that there is a state of thinking consciousness.

Although, it is acceptable that I am doubting and let there be a demon to deceive me, but then 'I' must exist as a thinking being to be deceived first. In my view, Descartes treats self as an object of knowledge. However, 'I'- the ever knower- can never become an object of knowledge. There is a contradiction in ideas that 'I' which is ever knower can also be known as an object. Knower is always a knower and is not known by any source of knowledge (i.e., perception, inference, testimony etc.) The means of knowledge are applied to objects for knowing them but not for knowing the knower. If a knower is to be treated as an object of knowledge then whether there remains the difference between knower and known itself becomes problematic.

Descartes believed in the capacity of reason to know all things. From the *cogito*, he gets the criterion and from this criterion he establishes the existence and veracity of God. From the veracity of God he establishes the reality of the external world, the permanent self and knowledge. But in my opinion, reason cannot know the transcendental subject. No amount of reason, logic, language and arguments can know transcendental entities because these

entities are beyond all types of reasoning. The contention of Kant that the transcendental subject can never be an object of knowledge is also maintained with a great deal of logical rigor by the Vedantins.

### Bibliography

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3. Ibid pp. 63-65.
4. Ibid pp. 65-66.
5. Masih, Y. (1999). *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*. Motilal Bnarsidass Publishing house. Delhi, 201.
6. Ibid. 201.
7. Descartes, R. (1996). *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 68-74.
8. Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (1998). Edward Craig (ed.) London and New York, **8**: 490-92.
9. Masih, Y. (1999). *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishing house. Delhi, 202.
10. Cause-effect relationship: cause may be defined as the invariable antecedent of effect and effect in turn may be defined as the invariable consequent of cause.
11. Substance-attribute relationship is a sort of relationship in which the former exists in itself, while the latter needs the former in order to exist. Substance is absolute in its existence, while attributes are relative in existence.
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