

THE CARTESIAN HUMAN BEING

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Rene Descartes is often considered as the founder or the father of modern philosophy. He has provided us with a new method or way of thinking for philosophy that broke away the thought of medieval period. He was not blind to accept anything. In his work we find freshness, new dimension of thought which is not to be found in any thinker before of him. Descartes was very much worried about the uncertain state of philosophy in his time. 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 dispute¹. However, Descartes did not claim that knowledge is not possible. But knowledge for him must be as certain as Arithmetic or Geometry. He wanted to establish philosophy on a certain ground, on a firm and solid foundation. He was surprised to find that philosophy in true sense had lost its meaning in the darkness of medieval period. He wanted to establish philosophy as certain as Mathematics. Therefore, in order to make philosophy truly scientific, he adopted an extraordinary and excellent style, which is called methodological doubt. In that process he started to doubt everything that could be doubted. The object of his methodological doubt was to apply the mathematical method of philosophy for obtaining certitude in knowledge. This will be clearer if we focus on Descartes' great work *Meditation on First Philosophy*, which contains six meditations. The first meditation subtitled "What can be called into doubt" opens with the meditation reflecting on the number of falsehoods he has believed during his life and on the subsequent faultiness of the body of knowledge he has built up from these falsehoods. Actually Descartes brought all of those things within the sphere of doubt which may produce contradictions in our thoughts but excluded all those which can't generate any contradiction when thought about. Say for example, if we consider that the earth, the heavens, the colours, figures etc are nothing but the illusions or dreams and also if we consider ourselves as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor even any sense-organ, really there do not arise any sort of contradiction in such type of

¹ Masih, Y. *A Critical History of Western Philosophy* (Greek, Medieval and Modern), Motilal Banarsi Dass Publishers, 1994. p 199.

thoughts. That means, in Descartes' philosophy we may bring the existence of natural world and also our bodily existence within the very sphere of doubt because of their contingent nature. We can think of us as without having a corporeal body and also can think the non-existence of external world but we can never think of us as without a mind because of its necessary significance. Therefore, it is clear that under the sphere of doubt we can never bring the existence of our soul or mind or the existence of mine as a thoughtful being. Thus by applying his methodical doubt, Descartes, after very long effort comes to a conclusion that the most certain thing in this world is the assertion that 'I am, I exist'; it is necessarily true in each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it.

But what is the foundation on which Descartes established this necessary truth? After doubting many things Descartes came to the conclusion that, there should be no doubt about my doubting, that means 'I doubt' cannot be doubted. Because, the activity of doubt involves the activity of thinking. To doubt is to think and to think is to exist. The activity of thinking indicates the person who thinks. I may doubt anything but I cannot doubt that I doubt. Hence, I doubt or think, therefore I exist, i.e. *cogito ergo sum* is the one certain truth on which the foundation of philosophy may stand up. Therefore, there should be no self doubting; there should be no doubting about self existence. *Cogito ergo sum* means that my consciousness is the means of revealing myself as something existing.

However, I must exist in order to doubt, or to be deceived. Descartes thus arrived at the cogito: "I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I think, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind"². From this, it can be said that "I am think, therefore I exist" is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way. Here is the relevant extract from the *Meditation II*:

"I have conceived myself that there is nothing in the world – no sky, no minds, no bodies. Does not it follow that I do not exist ?No surely I must exist since I persuaded myself of something .But there is a deceiver supremely powerful and cunning whose aim is to see that I

²Descartes, Rene. *Meditation on First Philosophy*, Trans. Donald A. Cress, Hackett publishing company, 1967.

am always deceived .But surely I exist, I am deceived. Let him deceived me all he can, he will never make it the case that I am nothing while I think that I something. So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: "I am, I exist", is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it."³

From what has been discussed so far, it may seem that by his method of doubt Descartes prove the existence of human being or more particularly the person who enquires. But this would be a wrong conception about Descartes' intention. Descartes was very much conscious about that every time I utter the word 'I' I exist, but the question for him was 'what am I'. That is, what is it to be a human being or what is the essence of being human? Descartes rejects the typical method which looks for definition, e.g. 'Rational Animal'. Because the words used in the definition would then need to be defined. He seeks simple terms that do not need to be defined, whose meaning can just be 'seen', which must be self evident truth, whose truth and falsity does not depend on any other thing. And his answer is 'cogito'.

But what about the human body or, the same, what is my relation with my body? In response to this question it can be said with Descartes that, we human beings cannot be designated as 'body' because by applying the same methodic doubt (proposed by Descartes) we can say that, 'body' is not beyond doubt, there may be certain deceiver who is extremely powerful, and whose aim is to deceive us. And obviously there would be no self contradiction if we deny that there is no body, because we can think ourselves as existent being without having body. So, body is not defining character of human being or 'I'.

Here naturally one query may arise that, why it is so? Why body is not so authentic? To find out the answer of this question we must focus on Descartes' *Meditation II*. According to Descartes, we know our bodily existence through the use of senses, which however, for Descartes is unreliable. To demonstrate the limitations of the senses Descartes gives an example of wax.

According to Descartes, a piece of wax has certain characteristics, such as, shape, size, smell and so forth and our senses inform us about these characteristics.

³ *Meditations*, p. 150.

But when the wax was brought towards a flame, all its characteristics were changed completely. So, all the characteristics of a piece of wax that the senses brought to our notice are found to be accidental. However, it seems that the same wax remains, it is still the same thing, it is still the same piece of wax, even though the data of senses inform us that all of the characteristics of wax are different. But for why we say that the same wax remains. For Descartes, certainly nothing remains excepting a certain extended thing which is flexible and movable. That means extension remains unchangeable. And we get this knowledge not through general perception but through mind or the faculty of judgement which rests in my mind. Therefore, in order to grasp properly the nature of the wax, we should put aside the senses, we must use our mind. In this regard the following sentence from Meditation II must be cited:

“And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind”.

Descartes concludes that it is the mind which exists undoubtedly, because its existence does not depend on senses. There is nothing which is known distinctly, than mind. And we previously have shown that thought is the essence of mind. The mind according to Descartes is a ‘thinking thing’ and an immaterial substance.

The word thinking has been used by Descartes in a boarder sense of term. Thinking includes: understanding, doubting, affirming, denying, perceiving, imaging, willing and other acts of the intellect. The nature of the human mind is that it is a thinking thing. However, Descartes also accepts the truth that both mind and body constitute a human being. But how the two distinct things i.e. mind and body become related with one another? But Descartes could not give any satisfactory answer of this question. Descartes proposed interactionism to explain the relation between the two extreme opposite substances. However, his solution is problematic and is not accepted by most of the philosophers to come after him.

According to Descartes ‘I exist’ is beyond the region of doubt and is therefore, absolutely certain. Through the process of thinking Descartes not only proved ‘cogito’, but also proved the existence of God. In our mind there is an innate idea of Being who is eternal, omniscient, omnipotent and source of all goodness. Now the question is what or who can be the cause of this idea? We know that the cause must be at least equal to the effect. Therefore, we human beings cannot be the cause as we are finite beings. Hence, this idea must have been caused by an equally

perfect cause, namely, the infinite perfect being, called God. God can not be a deceiver so he does not allow deceiving us. Therefore, God must exist. And through this we also are able to recover the reality of external world (corporeal substance). This in turn serves to fix the certainty of everything that is, clearly and distinctly understood.

A brief inspection on the Cartesian concept of human being indicates that a human being is a thoughtful being. He or she is a composite substance with a body and mind, though mind is more authentic than body. We can think of ourselves as without having a body but we can never think of ourselves as without having a mind. Mind and body are two different entities; there is nothing between them. The Cartesian concept of human being may be summarised as follows: human being is essentially a thinking being having a body and as God creates the world; it cannot be an illusion, human being is *in* the world and not the world is in him or her.

References:

1. Masih, Y. *A Critical History of Western Philosophy* (Greek, Medieval and Modern), Motilal Banarsi das, 1994.
2. Descartes, Rene. *Meditation on First Philosophy*. trans. Donald A. Cress. Hackett publishing company, Inc. 3rd edition.
3. Willis Doney edit. *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Macmillan Publishers, 1968.