

Certainty of Descartes' Cogito (Thomson, Garrett, (2000), on Descartes, Delhi: Wadsworth Cengage Learning)

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Garrett has rightly highlighted Rene Descartes' immense contribution to philosophy and science. In the very beginning of this book the author briefly discussed the context of Descartes' philosophy as well as the author is concerned, the Meditation give the metaphysical and epistemological foundation of Descartes' physics where he attempts to build on entire philosophical system with no prior assumptions. The author is of the opinion that Descartes did not intend the metaphysics to stand apart from his scientific work. Descartes also worked on the methodological and philosophical implication of this new science. As a young man Descartes was first and foremost a mathematician and based on his own mathematical experience, he also developed a practical method of investigation and general problem solving. Towards the middle of his life Descartes tried to unveil the philosophy of his project. Descartes method of doubt was a great revolutionary idea that helped liberate generations of thinkers from the confines of scholastic thought.

Keywords: *Cogito, Discourse, Doubt, Essence, Method, Meditation.*

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1. Introduction

The book under review comprises of twelve chapters apart from the Preface and Bibliography.

In preface of the book Garrett has rightly highlighted Rene Descartes' immense contributions to philosophy and science even though he had remarkably short working life, and meagre output. The author is of the high opinion that Descartes, who is known as father of Modern Philosophy, was a visionary thinker who was the first to have the idea of understanding all physical changes with a few basic laws and has changed our conception of the world through his tremendous contributions with his perhaps best known '*cogito ergo sum*'.

The author opines that Descartes did not intend the metaphysics to stand apart from his scientific work, which included important investigations into physics, mathematics, psychology, and optics. Descartes worked on the methodological and philosophical implication of this new science. As a young man, he was first and foremost a mathematician and based on his own mathematical experience, he developed a practical method of investigation and general problem solving. Towards the middle of his life he tried to unveil the philosophy of his project. His method of doubt was a revolutionary idea that helped liberate generations of thinkers from the confines of medieval Christian thought. Yet Descartes also helped make possible for science and religion coexist. He remained a catholic all his life and argued the new science was compatible with the important teachings of the church.

The author stated how Descartes remained a catholic all his life. Such thing is that, after a long period of inquisition, on June 22, 1633, Galileo was found guilty of heresy and disobedience to the church for treating Copernicus claims as a proven fact. Galileo was imprisoned. Remember that in 1600, when Descartes was four years old, the church had burned the philosopher Giordano Bruno for his heretical views. The news of Galileo's imprisonment seriously affected Descartes; he dedicated to refrain from publishing the

book he was writing. In a letter to his friend Mersenne he wrote: This has so strongly affected me that I have almost resolved to burn all my manuscript, or at least to show it no-one...

In the beginning of this book the author briefly discussed the context of Descartes' philosophy mentioning his huge contributions towards reconciling the conflict between the new science and the old religion. The whole modern period was an extraordinary drama, a huge struggle between two world views: the emerging modern science and medieval religious and scholastic thought. The external aspect of the story tells of the diminishing power of the church as a political institution. The inner story tells of the conceptual revolution which made contemporary society possible. Finally, it is the conceptual revolution which interests us most, for Descartes had a vital role in it.

The author stated some important landmarks in the slow outer political revolution. The first is the invention of the printing press. The second landmark came on October 31, 1517, when Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg. And the third landmark was the greater separation of the state from the church, especially in Northern Europe. During the medieval period the church was the most powerful and affluent institution in Europe. Not only that, Aristotle's works became the common texts for teaching philosophy, with emphasis on instruction in formalized logical arguments. On the other hand, Aquinas tried to reconcile the revelations of Christianity with the revelations of Christianity with the earthly knowledge of Aristotle and attempted to show that theological claims are consistent with the demands of reason. Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, rational thought became more independent of Christianity. Philosophy separated itself from theology. Furthermore, the Renaissance in Italy caused a huge increase in translations of classical Greek works. Society becomes familiar with Greek drama, poetry and history. There was a new confidence in the air and a new desire for learning. And by the end of the 16th century the conditions were ripe for a revolutionary change. The modern era was about to be born. Modern science and philosophy began to replace Aristotelian scholasticism. Probably the three people most important in causing these changes were Galileo, Francis Bacon and Descartes.

The author opines that Descartes was a private, most of secretive and solitary person, who took as his motto 'he lives well who is well hidden'. In the year of 1629 Descartes wrote words that epitomize his: "I have resolved to be hidden behind the canvas in order to hear what people are going to say about it" (AT I 70) Descartes wrote in his private notebook, around the year of 1619-20:

Actors, taught not to let any embarrassment show on their faces, put on a mask. I will do the same. So far, I have been a spectator in this theater which is the world, but I am now about to mount the stage and I come for world masked. (AT X 213)

During the winter of 1619 Descartes was stationed in Ulm. On 10th November 1619 he had a series of visions or dreams, not only Descartes had a series of dreams but also these dreams did much helped in defining his life work. According to the author this event marks the beginning of his work as a public thinker. Descartes notes that on this day he had discovered 'the fundamental principles of a wonderful discovery' (AT X 373). Before November 1619, Descartes was primarily interested in mathematics however later on, his thinking was dedicated to discovering a problem solving method for all the sciences. After his dreams, during the year 1620, he started working more seriously on *The Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. Ten years had passed since his dreams, and he had not fulfilled the promise to himself of developing his method for science and philosophy. In the year of 1630 Descartes wrote to Mersenne:

You may find strange that I have not persevered with the treatises I began while in Paris. The reason is that ... I was forced to start upon a new project, more extensive than the first (AT I 137).

Meantime in the winter of 1635-36, Descartes decided to publish an introductory essay to accompany his more technical works. The full title of this essay is known as '*Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting one's reason and seeking the truth in the sciences*'. The Discourse is written as autobiographical essay around the year of 1638. Descartes started work on the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, his main work, about which he wrote to his close friend Mersenne on the 28th January 1641:

"I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six meditations contain the entire foundation for my physics. But it is not necessary to say so, if you please, because that might make it harder for those who favor Aristotle to approve them. I hope that those who read them will gradually accustom themselves to my principles and recognize the truth in them before they notice that they destroy those of Aristotle". (AT III 297)

As far as the author is concerned, the *Meditations* give the metaphysical and epistemological foundation of Descartes' physics where he attempts to build on entire philosophical system with no prior assumptions and decides to systematically doubt all that could conceivably be doubted. He discovers the one thing that he cannot doubt is his own existence. After all, he claims, something nonexistent is incapable even of the act of doubting. The author here is mainly concerned with Descartes' view of method and its rules. Garrett mentioned that Descartes' vision or dreams apparently revealed his life's mission. To escape the cold, Descartes had shut himself in a stove or a small stove heated room. During the day he doubts his beliefs. Hours of intense effort brought him to a revelation of the unity of the science, of all knowledge. Descartes realized that he had in his grasp an incredible new science to replace present confusions. These vision or dreams help us understand Descartes' motivation as a philosopher. Descartes' vision is to find a method which will enable him to explain all natural phenomena in terms of a few basic principles. After his experience, he began to seek the method which

would unveil the secrets of the universe and reveal the unity of the sciences. However Descartes' early work was scattered and was focused mainly on mathematics. In the Discourse where he reports on these experiences, Descartes writes that to develop his Method, he would have to discover certainties in philosophy.

Descartes' first book is the *Rule for the Direction of the Mind* and this contains 21 rules for the direction of the mind. The aim of the book is to provide a method to guide for the mind so that it can pass true a solid judgments on whatever it is investigating (Rule-1). For him, knowledge requires certainty. Descartes says in the second rule that, we should resolve only to believe what can be certain of. later, writing in the *Discourse* about the earlier period of his life, Descartes claims that he had succeeded in applying his method : “by strictly observing the few rules I had chosen, I became very adept at unraveling all the questions” of geometry and arithmetic.

After discussing Descartes' concept of method and its rules, the author focuses on Descartes' *The World*. The author is of the opinion that *The World* was most probably published around the year of 1633. Descartes withdrew it after the condemnation of Galileo. The work divides into four parts : the first, chapter 1-6, explains Descartes' theory of matter ; the second, consisting of chapters six to twelve, concerns cosmology; the third is Descartes' theory of light; and the fourth is the physiology treatise, man.

In this chapter the author explicates Descartes' famous method of doubt. The author holds that in search for a principle of self-evidence, Descartes resorted to a method of elimination as a first step by means of which he could discard whatever proposition failed to stand the test of self-evidence. The method was called the “Cartesian doubt” and was not the same concept as skepticism. Knowledge must be based on certainty and we gain certainty by rejecting the uncertain. In the synopsis to the *Meditations* Descartes explains:

Although the utility of a doubt so general may not be a first apparent, it is nevertheless very great, in that (such doubt) delivers us from all sorts of prejudices, and prepares for us a very easy way of accustoming our mind to detaching itself from the senses and finally, in that it brings it about that it is no longer possible that we can have any doubt about that which we afterwards discover to be true. (AT VII, 12)

To doubt does not mean thinking that our beliefs are false. Doubt means suspending judgment as to their truth, neither believing nor disbelieving. The method of doubt consists of three stages, each more radical than its predecessor. First, Descartes points out that many of his beliefs are derived from sense perception. Descartes points out that sense perception has deceived him in past. Next Descartes says how he can be certain that he is not dreaming. Lucid dreams are indistinguishable from waking experience, and in them one may believe that one is actually awake. Any given situation could be an illusion: it could be a dream only. The third and most radical stage succeeds in introducing a universal doubt about existence of external objects. It consists in the possibility of a malicious spirit. At this stage of the method, doubt is as universal and radical as it can be. Descartes was not a skeptic. For Descartes, doubt is only a means. It is not an end in itself. Doubt is a means in both philosophical and psychological way. According to Descartes:

“Once in life everything ought to be completely overturned and ought to be rebuilt from the first foundations”

The author is of the opinion that the ultimate aim of Descartes' method of doubt is simply to find certainties, propositions which can serve as a secure foundation in the reconstruction of knowledge. The certainty which Descartes, the turning point in his philosophy, has come to be known as the cogito, from the Latin *cogito ergo sum* ('I think, therefore I am'), although it doesn't occur in *Meditations* in quite this form. In the *Meditations* he says 'I am, I Exist, is necessarily true, every time I express it or conceive of it in my mind'.

In this chapter The Cogito Garrepointed out Descartes' famous notion *cogito ergo sum*. Here the author beautifully explained Descartes' notion of *Cogito*. Descartes arrives at the certain existence of *cogito* from doubt. For Descartes, I doubt therefore I am. Therefore, I cannot doubt that I am. With thoughts Descartes ends the phase of doubting and begins the journey of reconstructing knowledge. In the cogito, Descartes brings together the two ingredients in the following way. The fact that I am doubting guarantees that I exist. However, doubting is only one type of thought, and thought itself is incorrigible. Thus, I can be certain that I exist merely from the fact that I am thinking, no matter what I am thinking. Therefore, the inference 'I doubt therefore I am' can be generalized to 'I think therefore I am' or 'cogito ergo sum'. This inference usually called the 'cogito'. The cogito is very special because the premise 'I think' is indubitable.

According to author, till now we have treated the cogito as a deductive argument from the premise 'I am thinking' to the conclusion 'I exist'. The conclusion is supposed to be certain, because the inference is valid and the premise is indubitable. However to be valid, this inference also need an additional premise, such as 'everything that thinks exists'. Here the problem is that Descartes apparently denies that the cogito is such a syllogistic inference. Another problematic question over here is that, is cogito an intuition or an inference? Descartes comments to Mersenne:

When someone says, 'I am thinking therefore I am or exist,' he does not deduce existence from thought by a syllogism, but, recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind. This is clear from the fact that if he were deducing it by means of a syllogism, he would have to have previous knowledge of the major premise 'Everything which thinks is, or exists'; yet in fact he learns it from experiencing it in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing (AT VII 140).

According to the author, the *cogito* is the turning point of Descartes' philosophy. After the *cogito*, Descartes' journey goes in directions:

1. To show that God exists in order to prove the existence of the external world. This line is imitated in Meditations 3 and 5.
2. To show the essence of mind and how it differs from that of matter in order to prove that mind is separate from body. This line is imitated in Meditations 2 and 6.

After considering Descartes' concept of *cogito* Garrett aptly elaborated Descartes' proof of the existence of the material world. Descartes' Meditation follows two pathways. First, Descartes tries to establish the existence and nature of the physical world. And second pathways is that, he reveals the nature of the mind and its separation from the body. He can appeal to the principle that everything must have cause. Also some of his ideas do not depend on his own will; these do not seem to be caused by himself. Therefore, they must be caused by something in the external world.

In this chapter Matter Garrett focused on Descartes' view regarding the essence of matter. As far as the author is concerned, Descartes' system turns on the idea that the physical universe consists only of matter and its spatio-temporal properties. For that, the whole essence of matter consists in its being extended in space. The essence of matter consists only in such properties as shape, size and motion.

In this chapter Animals and Machines Garrett pointed out Descartes' view on animals in contrast with the human beings. For author, Descartes believed that human being were fundamentally different from other animals. Human beings, he maintained have a soul that interacts with the physical body. Unfortunately, Descartes did not believe that other animals have souls. Their apparent experience of pain could be explained by mechanics.

In this chapter Living in the mechanical World Garrett intends to show Descartes' view on the distinction between consciousness and matter. Here the main question is 'Am I this body'? According to the author, the aims of Descartes is to show that the answer is no, because the mind and body are distinct entities. Mind, whose essence is to be conscious and matter, whose essence is spatial. This is known as substance dualism. Descartes formulated three arguments for his substance dualism. First, the argument from clear and distinct ideas. Second, the argument from doubt occurs in the *Discourse on the Method*, part IV, as an application of the method of doubt-

1. I cannot doubt that I (as a mind) exist
2. I can doubt that my body exists
3. Therefore, I (as a mind) am distinct from my body.

The third argument i.e., argument from divisibility is to be found in sixth Meditation.

In chapter The Passions of the Body Garrett reflected on Descartes' writing book *passion of the soul*, published on 1649. In the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes emphasizes the dependence of many mental functions on the body: imagination, feeling, sensation. His aim in his work is to give an account of the passions. Unlike earlier works by others, Descartes wants to maintain a clear distinction between the mind and the body, and not make the mistake of dividing the soul into parts.

Acknowledgment:

The book *On Descartes* is well written introduction to the thought of Descartes that give a glimpse of Descartes, both the historical circumstances of his life and times, and his philosophy. I applaud the manner in which the author has portrayed Descartes' important works with expertise. The author has dealt at length on the notion of *cogito*, the existence of God and nature of the physical world, distinction between mind and body, etc. While reviewing the book, the author's systematic presentation of the entire chapter draws my interest and attention as the manner of explication of the entire chapters is so well systematized and organized which indeed is highly commendable. The language of the book is written in a very simple manner and well communicated to the reader. The English language in the entire chapters of the book is very simple and yet very effective and this makes the book the more appreciable. To present a complex idea in a simple and lucid manner is a great commendable quality of the writer. Printing as well as cover design is of the book is also well taken care of and the publisher must be appreciated and congratulated.