

THE TRINITY OF THOUGHT IN CARTESIAN RATIONALISM

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Abstract

The paper sets out to examine the key features of Rene Descartes philosophy. Of note is his set out objectives in rationalistic epistemology. He had in his mind, the aim of establishing a sound epistemological foundation for science which should in turn facilitate scientific and technological development. This commitment to an epistemological foundation according to him empowers man to have mastery of his intellectual powers as a parameter for gaining control of his environment. The outcome of his position manifested in the works philosophy long after him, especially his successors, namely, Spinoza and Leibnitz. This study is therefore the tripod examination entailed in the process of his philosophizing. The study adopts analytic method.

Keywords: Cartesian, Trinity, Rationalism, Development, Epistemology

Introduction

Cartesian rationalism has the target of showing how human consciousness comes to attain knowledge that is clear and distinct through the “method of philosophical meditations”, which Descartes himself describes as “the methodic doubt”. Philosophical meditation (methodic doubt) encapsulates within it the three dimensions of discourse, method and meditations. The Cambridge international dictionary of English and Webster’s Third International Dictionary, both define discourse as follow: “effective communication, or conversation, or critical argument” (pp. 391 & 647 respectively), which makes the issue under consideration lucid to the mind’s eye. Method refers to certain rules which act as guide(s), procedures(s), or process(s) by which we carry out research in a systematic way. Meditation, on the other hand, has been defined as “serious thought or study or the product of this” (Cambridge dictionary, 882 -3).

Elsewhere, meditation has also been defined as “a spoken or written discourse treated in contemplative manner and intended to express its author’s reflection” (Webster, 1403). This paper, therefore examine the Trinitarian Thought in Cartesian Rationalism in the light of today’s challenges and development in epistemology.

Going by the above definitions, we can proceed to state that the discourse on method and meditations deals with the subjective, mental procedure of serious study or deep reflection guided by very strict rules, on how to systematically arrive at ideas, truths or knowledge that are clear and distinct. But how is it that in this process of pure contemplation, discourse and meditations are interwoven? Serious thinking, that is to say, trained, organized, systematic and meditative thinking is a whole lot of things put together. It is a holistic system that proceeds logically, analytically and synthetically. This is why Descartes describes thinking as meditation and why Kant on his part describes thinking as the “unity of representations in one consciousness”. However, as it pertains to the logical procedure of this discourse on meditations, Descartes was faced with a dilemma. What exactly is this dilemma?

The dilemma or Problem of Method

We must note with stoic wisdom the fact expressed by T.D. Weldon that: “Descartes commenced serious study as a physicist than as a philosopher in the modern sense. It is this background that drove him the realization of certain philosophical problems from which physics can never escape” (Weldon, 1968: 4). Weldon further states that: “The central doctrine of Cartesian philosophy is that physics, under which is included the whole of what we now call natural science, must be mathematical in its method if it is to achieve true and valuable those views about God, the self, the material world, and the connection or lack of it between them” (P. 11).

As earlier stated the craze in Descartes time was science. Philosophy lay prostrate, intimidated and terrorized by the sophistry and majesty of science as was exemplified in the exactitude of physics and mathematics. It was during this period that epistemology dethroned metaphysics as heir to the throne of philosophy. Physics sought to become metaphysics, while philosophy wished to become physics. Consequently, Descartes’ interest was on how the accuracy and precision of mathematics, geometry and physics can be made the superstructure of metaphysics. He understood the rules of physics, mathematics and geometry to be clear and distinct. He then thought that if these exact principles are made the superstructure of metaphysics, we could easily arrive at epistemologically

clear and distinct ideas. Needless to mention, this clear and distinct ideas presuppose the substance theory of mind (i.e. the cogito and its 24 concepts or rules). Having established metaphysics upon the principles of science, Descartes then proceeded to outline the epistemological procedure that will lead to the desired destination of clear, distinct and indubitable truths.

The epistemological Procedure of Cartesian Meditation

Cartesian theory of knowledge enacted a complete revolution in the world of epistemology in general. Thinking for him was pure intellectual (as opposed to mystical or spiritual) meditation: in which case, the foundation of mystical/spiritual meditation (i.e. God and Spirit) must be knocked off and replaced with the more tested and reliable principles of physics, mathematics and geometry.

Furthermore, Descartes also reasoned that the principles of the exact sciences were similar to those of metaphysics, which for him formed the superstructure of knowledge. The principles of the strict sciences and metaphysics are essentially rationalistic to say the least. This being so, there must be an established procedure that would allow us to arrive at the destination of these clear and distinct ideas. This procedure is simply known as the “Cartesian Methodic Doubt”. But how do we put this method into practice? We do so through “meditations”. But the question that is of interest here is: Why choose methodic doubt or methodic meditation as the procedure of his rationalism? The simple answer is to overcome doubt and bias, and also to minimize error. Man by nature is fallible, implying that we are not perfect and that we are prone to error, bias and doubt. But how do we resolve these problems? The answer to the latter question is in two dimensions.

- The first dimension is the position of the complete skeptics known as negative or Destructive Skepticism, which admonishes us to kill the patient. This dimension assumes that error, bias and doubt are manifestations of mental sickness in man and that a dead person is free of these limitations. This is another way of saying that man is not capable of attaining sure or certain knowledge of anything.
- Descartes will have nothing to do with this nihilistic method of skepticism. He prefers the second method, which though tedious will nonetheless, steadily and certainly lead to clear, distinct and sure knowledge of things. This is the way of methodic doubt or methodic meditations (Ruch, 1977: 62). Descartes methodic doubt proceeds in four states as follows:

Stage 1: The stage of Real and Universal but Methodic Doubt

Our intellectual meditation has begun in methodic pattern. This is the stage of Universal skepticism (i.e. Doubt) otherwise known as the stage of self-examination. We begin by rejecting all that we have previously accepted to be true but which now appear not to be so any longer. We purge ourselves of old prejudices and reject anything that appears to be false. We continue to do this until we stumble upon that which is “evidential” or “veridical”. Note that for Descartes, evidence or that which is veridical, does not refer to “internal or external experience as it directly manifests to the mind” (ibid. 66), rather, by this expression, Descartes simply refers to that which is beyond the possibility of doubt. That is to say, that which provides “absolute or metaphysical certitude”. Descartes reasoned that god might allow the marline genie to deceive him. This however, only helps to make Cartesian methodic doubt really universal. He showed that man has the mental capacity to overcome the machinations of the devil. Doubting becomes the way of purging ourselves of anything we are not sure of. When we doubt, we get curios and curiosity is the way to certainty. So he says: “I came to regard as false whatever merely looks like the truth” (Descartes, 1960: 42). “the first rule was to accept as true nothing that I did not know to be evidently so” (p. 50).

Stage 2: The Stage of Fundamental Truth (*cogito ergo sum*)

It is at this stage that we attain the “evidence” Descartes has been searching for. It is the stage of absolute or metaphysical certitude which is meant to indubitably affirm the existence of the thinking self. It is at this stage that we confirm that the *cogito* is the absolute or metaphysical foundation of knowledge. Note that what Descartes meant here is not that thinking (i.e. the *cogito*) which we cannot doubt or which when doubted confirms our existence and cures us of the infirmities of bias, doubt and error. The *cogito* is no other than “myself” as something real and as the indubitable ground for knowledge. Descartes was very sure that he had found that unshakeable rock bottom of knowledge which universal skepticism cannot refute. Because of the universality and indubitability of this reality and of this truth Descartes emphatically concludes thus: *cogito ergo sum* meaning I think therefore I am (p.61). E. A. Ruch put it this way ‘I doubt, if I doubt, then I think, if I think, then I must exist’. I think therefore I am (Ruch, 66).

By the above assertion, Descartes succeeded in carrying the battle against universal skepticism one step further than St. Augustine. St. Augustine had argued that universal skepticism is self-contradictory. He argued that even if we

grant the argument of the skeptics that the human mind is bias, doubt and error laden and is therefore susceptible to deceit, this in no way implies that the mind is incapable of attaining certainty, because only a being of self-consciousness can be deceived. So Augustine concludes thus; if I am deceived, then I exist or if I am deceived, then I am (*si fallor sum*).

Stage 3: Stage of clear and distinct ideas

The supreme criteria of truth are “clear and distinct ideas”. Having seen the postulation of Descartes on the *cogito* as the absolute foundation of knowledge, we can now proceed from here to other ideas that he considers clear and distinct. But the method of arriving at these other clear and distinct ideas must be rigorous and methodic as that of the *cogito*. Two basic things are of utmost importance at this stage:

- In addition to the *cogito*, Descartes went further to outline other substances or ideas of mind, which he considers clear and distinct. These include God, Being, soul, matter, cause, number, time, space motion etc. just as with the *cogito*, these other substances or ideas are evidently true.
- Descartes made God the second absolute foundation of knowledge. He reasoned that God is perfect and since God is perfect, he has created our minds to be perfect and to think perfect thoughts (clear and distinct ideas). Besides, he also guides our thoughts against the meddlesomeness of the evil genius. By so doing, Descartes introduced a new notion of God into philosophy. Opposed to the religious notion of God, the philosophic notion of God asserts that God is a thinking thought, a perfect consciousness, whose ultimate objective is to create perfect things. Therefore, for us to be like God, we must be very rigorous, logical and disciplined in our thoughts and actions. It is this rigour and discipline of thought and action that connects epistemology to science thereby laying the philosophical foundation for science.

Stage 4: The Stage of the Rules of Procedure

Stage 4 is the stage of self-re-examination meant to further clarify our doubt and reconfirm or reaffirm the truth we hold about things and about the world. We are by now quite aware that the path leading to the doorpost of clear and distinct ideas is methodic, meditative and rigorous. But this rigorous, meditative and methodic doubt must be guided by certain basic rules. These basic rules are four

in number. They constitute the strict and logical procedures of Descartes' rationalism, which are as follows:

- Avoid carefully precipitancy and prejudice ... pass no judgment on anything except that which showed itself so clearly and distinctly to the mind and should never have any occasion to be doubted.
- Divide each dimity into as many parts as possible.
- Conduct your mind in an orderly fashion, starting with what was simplest and easiest to know, rising little by little to the knowledge of the most complex, even supporting an order where there is no natural precedence among the objects of knowledge.
- Make so complete an enumeration of the links in an argument, and ---pass them all so thoroughly under review, that I could be sure I had missed nothing (Descartes, 50; Ruch, 67).

What Descartes has done above is to draw an epistemological plan for scientific research. The four stages of Descartes' methodic doubt simply demonstrates that science and its methods are just the pure mental procedures of the mind. He demonstrated that the rules of science are, in the first place, the very subjective procedures by which the mind functions. Thus in the first stage of his meditation, Descartes embarked upon a rigorous process of self-examination in order to clear himself of any prejudice and doubt. The second stage of meditation is the stage of self-affirmation and it is at this stage that Descartes demonstrates that the mind is the absolute foundation of all human knowledge. At the stage three, he now proceeded to affirm the existence of other fundamental truths that border on science and religion thereby showing that the mind is the ground and initiator of both the contents and the methodologies of science and religion. The fourth stage obviously deals with the rules that guides and guard the whole process of meditation and it is actually these rules that make the process of meditation methodic so that doubt is overcome and error minimized.

The critique of Descartes' Trinitarian Rationalism

No Philosophy is so ironclad not to leave some loopholes. As it pertains to Descartes' rationalism we can identify certain pitfalls which include the following:

- a. The problem of solipsism
- b. Cartesian rationalism imposes the method of the strict sciences upon philosophy.

- c. Cartesian rationalism suffers from a religious hang over
- d. Cartesian rationalism promotes the substance theory of mind.

Concerning the problem of solipsism, Descartes made thought the object of thought. He reasoned that thought is self-contained such that it contains no other thing or object but itself. This is the reason why it is stated that Descartes makes the *cogito* its own very object. Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology in philosophy, points this limitation out. Husserl argued that as it concerns physical objects, thought can only grasp the essences of things or makes abstractions from phenomena. (Gurr, 21). Husserl also argued that thought could be the object of thought, but not in the sense whereby thought is absolutely engrossed all about itself and no other thing. Within the context of Husserlian phenomenology, thought could be the object of thought when we are mentally aware that we are thinking. For instance, when we perform the act of remembrance, or when we are aware that we are lying or telling the truth, it is obvious that we are not thinking of physical objects, but rather, of pure mental processes of the mind. Therefore, the truth about thought is that thought is not a container that should entertain any content. Instead, thought reaches out to the things in the world. In same vein, thought cannot be the object of thought, because as an outward moving vector, other things in the world constitute the object of thought. It is in this sense that Husserl says that the *neosis* (subject or knower) and *neoma* (objects of the world) are simultaneously given in consciousness (Okoro, 75). It is for this reason that Husserl replaces Descartes' *cogitoergosum* with *ergocogitocogitatum* or simply the cogitations. Meaning that thought is object directed, consciousness is like a stream that flows between two poles (i.e. subject and object). Therefore, thought cannot be self-contained because it is always reaching out to the objects of the world or the objects of thought itself (90).

On the second objection, Descartes had the task of rehabilitating metaphysics so that it can become an indispensable foundation of science. To accomplish this task, he had to do an epistemological surgery (67). He thought that the principles on which mathematic, physics, and geometry are established are clear and distinct. He also saw that mathematics, physics, geometry and metaphysics all operate on the rules of reason. He then proceeded to anchor metaphysics and epistemology on the methods of the strict sciences. This Cartesian attitude, according to Larry Azar, ended up enthroning the methods of sciences upon metaphysics and epistemology. The implication of this, Azar asserts, is that "the Cartesian method long before Hume appeared on the scene, had accomplished the ambition of the apologists of science to abolish Metaphysics" (1981: 14-20).

Third, Cartesian mediation, rigorous as it is, commits a leap in argument (i.e. the non-sequitur fallacy). At the point where Descartes had established that the *cogito* is the absolute foundation of knowledge, he went on to postulate God as the second foundation of knowledge. Descartes now withdrew the autonomy that he had initially given to the *cogito*. However, it has been adequately demonstrated that the emphasis on God in Cartesian rationalism is rather political in the sense that Descartes wanted to please the Pope and the religious community of his time.

Fourth, Cartesian Trinitarian Rationalism propagates the substance theory of mind, which maintains that ideas are innate to the mind. Thus the doctrine of innate ideas presupposes that ideas are like substances in the mind and that our conceptions of the world are largely determined by our inner orientation as constituted by these substances. At any rate, these innate ideas are supposed to be prenatal and they manifest themselves as the individual continues to mature. Besides, critics of Descartes' rationalism argue that the substance theory of mind and its doctrine of innateness of ideas create certain misconceptions about the mind which are as follows: It creates the impression that ideas are prenatal. Secondly, it creates the impression that God imputes ideas into our minds and speaks to us from time to time. Thirdly, it also creates the impression that our minds are self-contained of certain properties and that these properties are the same in every human individual (79).

If truly we were endowed with innate ideas, we would have no need to struggle to learn anything. We will just mature into stages of life and begin to do things without prior knowledge of them; we would have no need for society and the institutions therein to help to mould and shape us. We would have no need for schools and teachers etc. Animals have innate instinctive abilities and for this reason they do not struggle (as humans do) to learn, teach, or comply with norms. This is not to say however, that John Locke's argument that the human mind is *tabula rasa* is completely true (Lock, 87). As Immanuel Kant argued, what we have is an "inner power" not innate ideas" (Kant, 45). This inner power is an unfathomable ability that lies dormant and needs to be activated. The interesting thing about this inner ability is that it can be directed to any dimension or function we want it to assume. For instance, psychologists have proven that the mind of the infant is elastic enough to adapt to any kind of training given to it. If it is possible for an infant to be brought up by animals (say elephants, monkeys or chimps), it will surprise us that we will simply see what bodily appears as a human being but is behaviorally animalistic. The infant will simply adapt to the behavioral pattern of the animal kind under which it grew up (96).

On a final note, if per chance humans are endowed with the power of inner ideas, think just as with animals, we will be highly regimented, that psychologically and biologically determined. However, for the fact that infants both by parents of a particular ethnicity or race can be raised by people who belong entirely different ethnicity or race, deflates the theory of innate ideas.

Conclusion

Descartes did not set out upon his rationalistic epistemology all for fun. He had basic aim in mind, which is that of establishing a sound epistemological foundation for science which should in turn facilitate scientific and technological development. This commitment to an epistemological foundation that empowers man to have mastery of his intellectual powers as a parameter for gaining control of his environment was sustained by Descartes successors, namely, Spinoza and Leibnitz.

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