

# DESCARTES' ON SKEPTICISM

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## Abstract:

In this paper I would like to explore Descartes's take on Skepticism. Descartes is undoubtedly the father of modern philosophy. Modern philosophy is characterized by its revolt against Aristotle and the Aristotelian spirit that was hovering throughout the period of medieval philosophy. Opposition to Aristotle was Descartes's major occupation. His *Meditations* attempted to introduce foundations of his own physics against those of Aristotle. So Descartes is supposed to have introduced a new physics that provides a new outlook on the world, in opposition to the Aristotelian physics that provided the outdated outlook of the world. Descartes' opposition to Aristotle is like Galileo's opposition to Ptolemy. When Descartes entered into the academic world he discovered that science had been given an empiricistic and probabilistic interpretation. This kind of interpretation led to Skepticism. He wished to give new foundations to science by opposing Skepticism.

Index Terms: Skepticism, Doubt, Pyrrho, Certainty, Knowledge, Descartes', Meditations, Mind

As Christopher Hookway points out, "Descartes' principal adversaries were various sceptics and Pyrrhonists: his aim was to provide foundations for science and religion by refuting Scepticism."<sup>1</sup> Though Descartes was the father of Modern Philosophy, he was certainly not the father of modern Skepticism. The range of modern Skepticism is limited. It has nothing to do with the practical life. Modern skeptics are quite unlike the Greek skeptics. Skepticism was used by Pyrrho for ethical ends. As we have already seen, skepticism led Pyrrho to the state of suspension of judgements. Suspension of judgements was required to have the mental state of solitude or peace. In Greek terminology it has been described as the state of *ataraxia*. Cartesian skepticism, as will be shown in this section, was wholly different from Pyrrhonian skepticism. The fundamental

difference is that skepticism is not a doctrine to which Descartes was committed. Skepticism is not a doctrine in the sense in which monism or dualism etc. are doctrines. Descartes established dualism of mind and body, and used skepticism for carrying out his project.

Consider the case of Descartes. In the Cartesian sense, a skeptic is one who doubts. To doubt the truth of a proposition means that one is not certain about its truth. To doubt is to invite the mental state of uncertainty. How to remove this mental state and to arrive at the opposite state, the state of certainty? This was Descartes's attempt. As Bernard Williams points out, referring to the Cartesian doubt, "the *Meditations* use the doubt to lead out of the doubt into knowledge and a correct conception of things...Descartes claimed that he

had taken the doubts of sceptics farther than the sceptics had taken them, and had been able to come out the other side.”<sup>2</sup>

So skepticism is used as a tool or a method to arrive at certainty. Therefore, Descartes, skepticism is described as methodical Skepticism. Skepticism is not a doctrine but a method. Any method is like an instrument that we use for a certain purpose. Once the purpose is served, the tool or instrument is kept aside. Once certainty is obtained, the method of doubt becomes defunct. We need not worry about it. Descartes’ position does not coincide even with the position of the Academic skeptic to whom Sextus Empericus refers. An Academic skeptic remains in the realm of probabilities. He never reaches the state of certainty.

Descartes’ position would become clear even from the first sentence of *Meditations*. He picked up ‘doubt’ as an instrument for obtaining a piece of information that is free from doubt. Consider the opening remarks of the first *Meditation*. “Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations.”<sup>3</sup> Descartes clearly scrutinizes the beliefs, which he had in the past; some of these beliefs later become false. So it naturally comes to

his mind that there is no guarantee that the beliefs which he had at present may not become false in future. This leads Descartes to a thought-experiment. He contemplates the possibility of doubting all the beliefs, which he holds, including those, which he has not so far rejected. This leads to the possibility of entertaining universal doubt, doubt that is not restricted only to this or that item. Being a mathematician and a physicist his idea is the discovery of the foundations on which the structure of knowledge may be erected. Descartes expects that his universal doubt would lead to those foundational truths, which he expects to be free from doubt.

So far as the empirical world is concerned, its knowledge depends on our senses, such senses as hearing, seeing, tasting etc. Are senses reliable? Descartes’ trouble is that senses cannot give knowledge that is free from uncertainty. Do not senses deceive us? Yes, they certainly do. As Descartes points out in the first page of the First *Meditation* itself, “...from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.”<sup>4</sup> The deception to which Descartes is referring in this context is limited. If we look at a tower from a distance, though it is actually square in shape, it appears as round. Descartes points out that there are situations in which we can get false beliefs. Our perceptual beliefs are conditioned by many factors like proper lighting, the normal power of vision, etc. It is a universal fact that the distant objects appear somewhat smaller in size

and shape than their actual size and shape. But this cannot lead us to doubt empirical judgements. Senses seem to deceive us in some circumstances, but seem to give us knowledge in other circumstances. Therefore, Descartes was in need of an argument which is more general. Dream argument was such a general argument. The better example of deception is dreaming. As Descartes writes, "How often asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events- that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire- when in fact I am lying undressed in bed."<sup>5</sup> There is no guarantee that what I am seeing, smelling, touching, hearing etc. is not part of a dream. The senses which operate when I am awake are the same which operate when I am sleeping. I see an apple on the table. It could be a real, physical apple or an apple appearing in my dream. I hear the church bell ringing. This ringing could be a part of my dream. I have tasted mangoes and apples in my dream no less than in my waking state. How can it be shown that I am not dreaming now? There is no marked difference between the waking state and the dreaming state. This situation allows the possibility of doubt concerning empirical reality. This argument casts doubt, not only on physical objects like tables and chairs, but also on my body. In my dream I am eating an apple. If the apple is not physical, how could my mouth be physical, or the process of eating, a physical process? Since the physical objects are doubted, Descartes is led to doubt such science disciplines as physics, astronomy, medicine and other similar disciplines.

Judgements concerning empirical reality are very different in nature from judgements that are arithmetical and geometrical. Certainty associated with geometrical and arithmetical judgements cannot be removed by dream argument. It makes quite good sense to say that I see a chair in the corner of this room, but I may be dreaming. But it makes no sense to say that  $2+2=4$ , but I may be dreaming. To reject mathematical judgements, the dream argument appears to be non-functional. As Descartes points out, "For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false."<sup>6</sup> So Descartes recognizes the impotency of the dream argument for conferring uncertainty on mathematical judgements. In order to cast doubt on arithmetical and geometrical judgements, Descartes first contemplates about the hypothesis of God. God, being omnipotent, could perhaps mislead me about any judgement, be it an empirical or an a priori judgement. But this would imply that God is a deceiver. According to Descartes, "God would not have allowed me to be deceived...since he is said to be supremely good."<sup>7</sup> So God could not be a reason for my doubt about a priori judgements. His goodness does not allow deception. Descartes comes to the conclusion "that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me."<sup>8</sup> So the demon becomes the grand

deceiver. If the demon can mislead me into thinking that 2 and 2 make 4, he may also mislead me into thinking about the physical objects. After the introduction of the demon argument, the dream argument becomes redundant. The demon is sufficient to mislead me into the truth of mathematical judgements as about the truth of empirical judgements. The dream argument is superior, in the sense that most of us, if not all of us, had had dreams, but very few persons, mostly psychotics, have seen Demons. Demon hypothesis is wider, but less authentic. Dream argument is restricted, but quite authentic.

It is interesting to note that some judgements remain true whether I am asleep or awake. 'Two and three added together are five' and 'A square has no more than four sides', according to Descartes, remain true in both, the waking state and also in the sleeping state. This opens the possibility of having such transparent truths, which remain true in spite of the deception by an all-powerful deceiver. Even Descartes' demon would fail to deceive me about their truth. The statement 'I doubt' is one such truth. For if I doubt that I doubt even then I doubt. Doubting is a form of thinking, like such other forms as believing, asserting, etc. Believing, asserting, etc. are species of the same genus. The genus in question is 'thinking'. The relation between 'doubting' and 'thinking' is like the relation between 'red' and 'colour'. Red is a colour. So accepting something is 'red' is accepting that it is 'coloured'. Similarly, if there occurs doubt then

there occurs thinking. So Descartes has reached the most indubitable truth, the truth of 'I think'. This truth has also led him to another truth, the truth of 'I exist'. If 'I think then I exist', because it is contradictory to say 'I think but I do not exist'. Descartes considers these two truths as clear and distinct.

Referring to the Cartesian 'cogito ergo sum' (I think therefore I exist), Hintikka comments, "After hundreds of discussions of Descartes' famed principle we still do not seem to have any way expressing his alleged insight in terms which would be general and precise enough to enable us to judge its validity or its relevance to the consequences he claimed to draw from it."<sup>9</sup> Obviously Descartes' 'famed principle' refers to 'cogito'. In this situation what is possible on our part is simply to point out the difficulties to which Descartes has led us. The first question which comes to one's mind is whether Descartes considers 'cogito' as inference, that is, whether 'sum' has been inferentially derived from 'Cogito'? The use of 'ergo' or the English word 'therefore' suggests that 'I exist' has been syllogistically derived from 'I think'. If 'I exist' is the conclusion of the syllogistic inference then there must be a major premise, which is general. The major premise, which has not been expressed, would be something like 'everything that thinks exists'. If it is true that 'everything that thinks exists' coupled with the truth that 'I think', then it clearly follows that "I exist". But the difficulty arises with this kind of reasoning; how has Descartes arrived at the

truth of the major premise, which is general? Descartes does not accept that 'cogito' is a syllogism, that 'I exist' has been syllogistically derived from 'I think'. In his writings sometimes Descartes rejects that 'I exist' is derived syllogistically. As Bernard Williams quotes Descartes against syllogistic derivation of 'I exist' from 'I think', "when someone says "I think, therefore I am or I exist", he does not deduce his existence from his thinking by means of a syllogism... if he deduced it by means of a syllogism, he would first have had to know the major premise, "Everything that thinks is or exists.""<sup>10</sup> But how could one form general propositions without having the knowledge of particular propositions? The position to which Descartes leads us is to accept that 'I exist' is derived from 'I think', but not in a syllogistic fashion. 'I think therefore I exist' is a single proposition and not a combination of two propositions. As Bernard Williams writes "'I think therefore I am", in the misleading form of an inference, expresses in fact a single proposition, which is the exact point at which doubt is halted."<sup>11</sup> Hintikka also maintains the same. Hintikka writes, "by saying *cogito, ergo sum* he does not logically (syllogistically) deduce *sum* from *cogito* but rather perceives intuitively ("by a single act of mental vision") the self-evidence of *sum*."<sup>12</sup> Descartes' intuition perhaps functions like this. Consider the proposition 'I think but I do not exist'. This proposition is certainly self-refuting. If I do not exist how could I think? My existence is a presupposition of my thinking. My thinking in a

way becomes possible through my existence. Therefore, Descartes succeeds in deriving 'I exist' from 'I think'. This derivation cannot be called syllogistic, because the major premise is missing. According to Hintikka, "Descartes realized, however dimly, the existential inconsistency of the sentence "I don't exist" and therefore the existential self-verifiability of "I exist". *Cogito, ergo sum* is only one possible way of expressing this insight."<sup>13</sup> The same thing holds good about *Cogito*. There is inconsistency involved in saying 'I do not think'. Therefore, 'I think' becomes true by the very fact of its expression.

Gassendi's argument against 'Cogito' deserves attention. Gassendi finds nothing very remarkable about Descartes' 'Cogito' argument. Why appeal to my thinking for inferring my existence? Why the mental state of thinking? Why not a physical state, a state like the state of walking. Copying the style of 'Cogito', Gassendi points out that my 'existence' can be derived from my 'walking'. One can argue like Descartes 'I walk therefore I exist'. Descartes has argued against Gassendi that a physical state cannot be a substitute for a mental state. My existence is indubitably inferred from my thinking. No such inference is possible with a physical state. The reason is very simple: I can doubt that I am walking because sometimes 'I do not walk', yet I think I walk, as happens in a dream. There is no incoherence involved in saying I doubt that I am walking, for I may be dreaming.

Therefore, there is no indubitability attached to 'I walk'. Then from 'I walk' how can one draw one's existence which may be indubitably true? But if 'I doubt I think' even then 'I think'. Therefore 'I think' is indubitably true, and from this indubitable truth follows another indubitable truth, 'I exist'. Certainly my existence is guaranteed if it is derived from 'I think' rather than derived from 'I walk'. While replying to Gassendi - type arguments Descartes writes, "I may not, for example, make the inference 'I am walking, therefore I exist'", except in so far as the awareness of walking is a thought. The inference is certain only if applied to this awareness, and not to the movement of the body which sometimes – in the case of dreams – is not occurring at all, despite the fact that I seem to myself to be walking. Hence from the fact that I think I am walking I can very well infer the existence of a mind which has this thought, but not the existence of a body that walks. And the same applies in other cases."<sup>14</sup> To some extent at least Descartes has met the Gassendi – type argument.

What sort of certainty is attached to 'I think' or 'I exist'? Their certainty is not logical, that is they are not tautologies. Neither 'I do not think' is self contradictory, nor 'I do not exist' is self-contradictory. Therefore, neither of the two propositions 'I think' and 'I exist' are analytically true. If it is maintained that these propositions are certain, then their certainty is empirical, not logical. However, they are different from other kinds of empirical propositions. These propositions,

according to Bernard Williams, "belong to a class of propositions that are true if they are asserted, conceived, etc., and not to the class of propositions that are true no matter what the facts may be."<sup>15</sup> Descartes considers that these propositions are indubitable. Indubitability does not seem to be a logical concept. Descartes is certainly not ignorant of the fact that all knowledge is not a priori, that much of our knowledge is empirical. And these two propositions 'I think' and 'I exist' can function as foundations for our empirical knowledge. Of course, this does not mean that Descartes would accept our interpretation of his views. Consider his remarks. He says, "thus each individual can mentally have intuition of the fact that he exists, and that he thinks; that the triangle is bounded by three lines only, the sphere by single superficies, and so on."<sup>16</sup> Descartes has put 'I think' in the same pigeonhole as the proposition that 'the triangle is bounded by three lines only'. If it is maintained that these propositions are diverse and belong to different pigeonholes then 'intuition' becomes a subjective category. But intuitive truths are not subjective and psychological.

Descartes' 'Cogito' exhibits the failure of the demon argument, that is, the failure of the demon to deceive me. He failed to stop me from thinking. To take further step, the futility of the dream argument has also to be established. Just as Descartes introduced demon and later diffused him, similarly in the Sixth Meditation he also rejected the dream argument. Once the demon served the purpose, he was not required.

Similarly, once the dream argument served the purpose, it was not required. In the First Meditation Descartes raised the question whether he is awake or asleep. This question was raised because he could not find any marked difference between the dreaming and the waking states. Dream appeared to him as an exact replica of waking experience. We cannot even say that a dream is a replica. If both of them completely resemble each other, then anyone of them could be a replica of the other. By the time Descartes reaches the Sixth Meditation, the dream argument has lost its charm. He introduces memory in connection with the waking experience. The presence of memory makes waking experiences coherent and gives them identity, which is different from the identity of dreams. His journey through different Meditations is terminated with the remark, in the Sixth Meditation, "the exaggerated doubts of last few days should be dismissed as laughable."<sup>17</sup> His argument certainly led to the exaggerated doubts, which required to be dismissed as laughable. In the First Meditation he was unable to distinguish between 'being asleep' and 'being awake', but now in the Sixth Meditation he accepts that there is a vast difference between the two to distinguish dream from awaking state. He finally remarks, "when I distinctly see where things come from and where and when they come to me... when I can connect my perceptions of them with the whole of the rest of my life without a break, then I am quite certain that when I encounter these things I am not asleep but awake."<sup>18</sup> What appears to Descartes now as a

laughable matter at the completion of his journey, was an extremely serious matter at the start of his journey. He provoked G.E. Moore to struggle throughout his life against the dream argument. The dream argument successfully excluded the external world from our realm of experiences, and Moore had to do hard labour to bring the external world back. Many other philosophers of this century like Wittgenstein, Malcolm, Bouwsma had given their valuable time for the dream argument.

Though Moore does not refer to Descartes by name, his lecture on "Certainty" was completely devoted to Descartes's First Meditation. The opening lines of Moore's lecture remind one of Descartes's reference to dreaming. Moore initiates by writing "I am at present, as you can all see, in a room and not in the open air; I am standing up, and not either sitting or lying down: I have clothes on, and am not absolutely naked;"<sup>19</sup> In his lecture Moore tries to show that the assertions he made were free from doubt. He argues, the fact that he cannot prove that he is not dreaming, does not mean he does not know that he is not dreaming. At the conclusive stage of the lecture he comments, "...I cannot see my way to deny that it is logically possible that the sensory experiences I am having now should be mere dream-images... But the conjunction of my memories of the immediate past with these sensory experiences *may* be sufficient to enable me to know that I am not dreaming."<sup>20</sup> This shows that sensory experiences, alone are not sufficient to show that one is awake. But sensory experiences, coupled with memories, may enable

one to know that he is not dreaming. This is similar to the Cartesian position in the Sixth Meditation. Descartes too has summoned memory to help him in showing that he is awake. Both Bouwsma and Malcolm have attacked the Cartesian question 'Am I wake or asleep?' Both try to show that this question makes sense only in certain circumstances. Clarifying Descartes' position Bouwsma writes, "...if it is a good argument, it remains a good argument even though no man at any time has been deceived by the senses. The argument does not depend in any way upon any instance of deception."<sup>21</sup> Not an actual dream, but the possibility of a dream, is sufficient for Descartes' argument. The possibility of a dream can be explained to someone by pointing out that the object, which he sees in dreams, has no physical existence. If someone knows what it is to have a dream experience without ever having a dream, he can consider the possibility of his present experience to be a dream experience.

Bouwsma tries to show that there is incoherence in Descartes' argument. Descartes begins with the clear-cut distinction between dream experience and waking experience. Without this distinction the argument cannot proceed. At the conclusion of the argument Descartes converts even waking experience into the dream experience. This makes the argument incoherent. To expose Descartes' argument Bouwsma brings the analogy of a garden and its reflection. In his analogy "garden" stands for

waking experience and the "reflection" for the dream. The steps, which a Cartesian has taken, are the following:

- "(a). One is a garden and one is a reflection, but there is no way of knowing which is which.
- (b). There are two gardens.
- (c). There are two reflections."<sup>22</sup>

Bouwsma means to say that there is something wrong in converting a waking experience into a dreaming experience, if one has started with the distinction between the two.

Norman Malcolm considers the situation in which the question 'am I awake?' makes sense. He makes the distinction between ordinary sleep and sound sleep. Sound sleep is that state in which one is not disturbed by dreams. In such a state the question 'am I sleeping' cannot be raised. As a matter of fact this question can be raised only when I am getting up from the sleep, not fully awake, not fully sleeping. There are certain situations in which one can doubt whether one is sleeping or awake. But Descartes is committed to the philosophical position, which leads him to say what he says. It defines mind in terms of thinking. So a man has continuous thinking whether he has a sound sleep or a disturbed sleep. So Descartes' question 'Am I sleeping?' is not the result of empirical investigation of situations. It is the result of commitment to a philosophical view. Yet this commitment continues only till the Sixth Meditation. As we have pointed out that Descartes himself does not allow senses to continue deceiving him for all times. Descartes was

certainly an aspirant for having absolutely certain knowledge. In order to have such knowledge he was led to doubt. For the operation of doubt, he used the dream argument, and later the demon argument. All this was done in order to arrive at absolutely certain knowledge. Once a piece of knowledge is obtained, the dream argument becomes futile, and so also the fate of the demon argument.

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