

## **Cartesian Ideas and Moral Commitment**

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### **Abstract**

Cartesian ideas are often referred to both as philosophical views (such as dualism and rationalism) attributed to Descartes, and as ontological grounds in his philosophical theory of knowledge. In this article both aspects are exploited to reveal how they contribute to define the moral domain in differential terms by focusing on speech and action, and how they may be used to inform our moral commitments.

**Keywords:** 1- Descartes      2- innate ideas      3- essence  
4- existence      5- moral ideas      6-action

### **1. Introduction**

The basic motivation for this paper is to provide a philosophical argument against the idea of moral over-protection built in certain power-structures. This over-protection, at times, contributes to give an ideological bent to illegitimate interventions of state. Here I am not concerned with the general polity of the country. What I am concerned with is certain cultural practices that are alarming. I am also not concerned with how the structure of the state shapes its performance.

This performance comes in varied forms and on different levels and engenders varieties of responses. But these responses have limited defense mechanism for people living in the society. As a result, one is naturally motivated to see whether there could be a way to provide at least a principled argument to oppose intellectually the intrusions of state in the context of civil society. Naturally, I am under no illusion that this intellectual means could in any way check the power of state and its abuse. However, it should reveal what people are and why they should be respected.

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Today, in the context of philosophy of ethics, what prevails in the west is various sorts of communitarian theories. This is partially due to the fact that western societies are responding more and more to multicultural mix of their populations and the underprivileged sections of the relevant communities within that population (as well as atomism and alienation within it). The objective is to bring into accord these different cultures and integrate them into the body of society by various means. To what extent this relativistic approach has proved successful or not, I am not in a position to judge. However, what could be said in our situation is the fact that the popular base of certain ideological power structures has given the state the opportunity to define itself on a singular communitarian basis and claim the source of various values which it propagates within the overall community at large in an authoritarian fashion. So even if these theories may be beneficial in the west, its ideological abuse by the state blocks their use as a defense mechanism. This has gone against the spirit of religion in ideological religious contexts.

Overall the interchange between religion and philosophy is lacking – at least, in the relevant sense. But religion and philosophy have not always been so foreign to each other. The classical texts of modern philosophers were all written in a religious context, some with direct relevance to religious matters (Locke), and others with indirect impact on them (Descartes). The religious strife of their time though cruel, still called for a philosophical response in the hope that they may be checked on a rational ground. In this way reason came to be of use in matters of faith by being embodied in various opinions on religious toleration. Today, matters of toleration are once again on the agenda. To recapture the philosophical framework which informed the religious discussion and arguments of the past may prove relevant to the present. The moral issues that are posed within a religious-based culture I am coming from are varied. Descriptively, there is a huge literature available on many of these issues. All these literature and common experience register the fact that we are faced with a crisis of toleration (in regard to religion, ethnicity, language, and etc.).

It is within this context that one hopes that Descartes, the founder of modern philosophy, and the ensuing diffusion of his ideas may contribute to latter day discussions. In what follows I

have a limited ambition. The leading thread would be to filter out his major conceptual achievements and the set of distinctions he arrives at or he draws upon to articulate his views. The ultimate pivot of the presentation will be to see what sorts of things we could have knowledge of, or rather a theory of, and in what domains we are deprived of such a knowledge and theory. In what follows the discussion will be limited to the text of *Meditations* together with his observation on language in the *Discourse*. The intention is to reveal the context-independency of his philosophical position and its susceptibility to be used in various situations.

## 2. Philosophical Distinctions of Meditations

Here, by reviewing parts of his *Meditations*, I do not intend to examine the elements of his arguments or their coherence – as a good part of literature has recently focused upon it ([6], [1], [2]). The intention is to filter out by following his conceptualization the main concepts and the way they enmesh together to give a philosophical position that is, as said in the above independent of the context and susceptible to use in various situation.

In the light of various skeptical arguments against the data of senses as a source of knowledge, Descartes adopts a methodological doubt in order to withdraw from the senses in an absolute manner. This struggle reinforces the prevalent skepticism but it is intended to defuse their conclusion. By directing his attention to the individual items of experience, he deprives them of any causal efficacy on his mind by suggesting that they could all be a part of a dream and hence illusory. By this means, Descartes restates the problem of knowledge without providing any solution.

At this moment it does indeed seem to me that it is eyes wide awake that I am looking at this paper; that this head which I move is not asleep, that it is deliberately and of set purpose that I extend my hand and perceive it; what happens in sleep does not appear so clear nor so distinct as does all this. But in thinking over this I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions, and in dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment. And my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I now dream. (HRI<sup>1</sup>, 146)

Although Descartes shows that sense experience is no guide to knowledge, he discovers in his dreams entities and operations that can solve all sorts of problems and lead to true statements. Here the sorts of doubts that proved effective to bring out the falsity of data of sense no longer apply. Still he finds a way to advance his methodological doubt to cancel their truth. For this purpose he postulates a demonic entity to deprive him from all truths. The aim of all this is to reach an Archimedean point to enable him to escape all skeptical doubts and to return to the nature of knowledge with an appropriate conceptual tools: (Archimedean Quotation + foundational statement)

Archimedes, in order that he might draw the terrestrial globe out of its place, and transport it elsewhere, demanded only that one point should be fixed and immovable; in the same way I shall have the right to conceive high hopes if I am happy enough to discover one thing only which is certain and indubitable. (HRI, 149)

The modesty implicit in the above inspiration is deceptive. Descartes is after an elemental point which could check the all-encompassing power of demon and paralyse it. To reach this point he uses his methodological doubt in most effective way by reiterating his dream argument and demon argument in combination and to the limit. After exhausting the force of these arguments, the turning point is a positive and novel statement, short and pregnant:

Am I so dependant on body and senses that I cannot exist without these? But I was persuaded that there was nothing in all the world, that there was no heaven, no earth, that there was no minds, nor any bodies: was I not likewise persuaded that I did not exist? Not at all; of a surety I myself did exist since I persuaded myself of something [or merely because I thought of something]. But there is some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, who even employs his ingenuity in deceiving me. Then without doubt I exist also if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing as long as I think that I am 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. (HRI, 150)

The argument is existential but the conclusion foundational. In many places Descartes uses expressions such as 'I am a thing which thinks', 'I doubt, therefore I am', 'I think, hence I am, or exist'. Though it seems Descartes is referring although to a thinking thing, there has been much controversy in regard to the status of the proposition. If a syllogism or a logical deduction then it is open to the intrusion of demon. Overall there has not been consensus in regard to the relation of thought and existence. Some have granted to be an "act of vision" appealing to Descartes words. What is at stake is obvious. The proposition is a package of truth and the criterion for its truth in the form of clearness and distinctness. The criterion is necessary in order to neutralize any skeptical objection. However we need not go into this technical issue<sup>2</sup>. What is important is to notice that Descartes' foundationalism leaves no room for any relativistic position.

Having established his existence, Descartes turns his attention to see what he is. His answer is abrupt. He is a being whose essence is thought. This is revealed by bringing out an exemplary operation of thought as "pure understanding". To see how this operation works, Descartes resorts to the so-called wax argument. The wax as a physical entity is subject to various changes. But the changes can be infinitely varied. To capture this variations we have to go beyond the physical data as sensory experience as registered in the imagination. The variation leaves nothing except a piece of extended thing only perceivable by the mind alone:

Let us attentively consider this, and, abstracting from all that does not belong to the wax, let us see what remains. Certainly nothing remains excepting a certain extended thing which is flexible and movable. But what is the meaning of flexible and movable? Is it not that I imagine that this piece of wax being round is capable of becoming square and of passing from square to a triangular figure? No, certainly it is not that, since I imagine it admits of an infinitude of similar changes, and nevertheless do not know how to compass the infinitude by my imagination, and consequently this conception which I have of the wax is not brought about by the faculty of imagination. What now is this extension? Is it not also unknown? For it becomes greater when the wax is melted, greater when it is boiled, and greater still when the heat increases; and I should not think even this piece that we are

considering is capable of receiving more variation in extension than I have ever imagined. We must then grant that I could not even understand through imagination what this piece of wax is, and that it is my mind alone which perceives it. (HRI, 154-155)

What is at issue is grasping the extension as such and not the particular extension of an individual piece of wax.

The extension is the element or the idea which is innate to the mind and characterizes the essence of any physical entity – body and matter. By discovering the extension as the essence of body we are in a position to deal with data of sense. Such ideas have a mathematical nature by being 'immutable and eternal ... [and] not invented' (*Meditation V*):

For example, when I imagine a triangle, although there may nowhere in the world be such a figure outside my thought or ever have been, there is nevertheless in this figure, a certain determinate nature, form, or essence, which is immutable and eternal, which I have not invented, and which in no wise depends on my mind, as appears from the fact that diverse properties of that triangle can be demonstrated, viz. that its three angles are equal to two right angles... which now, whether I wish it or do not wish it, I recognize very clearly as pertaining to it, although I never thought of the matter at all when I imagined a triangle for the first time, and which therefore cannot be said to have been invented by me. (HRI, 180)

Innate ideas are the ontological foundations of our knowledge of the world. They provide the condition of possibility of our universal knowledge. The constituents of the knowledge we possess.

### **3. Moral Use of Cartesian Distinctions**

Though the idea of extension is innate, extension as the essence of matter is known by our mathematical theory. Extension is the subject matter of geometry. In the case of physical substance we have access to a theory which captures the shape of all possible bodies. However in the case of mind though we know its essence to be thought, we do not enjoy a theory to inform us of everything we can think of. This is brought out by the fact that we can virtually say anything we want without being constrained by limits of our knowledge as in the case of extension where our knowledge is

limited to mathematics. Apparently thought is characterized by various faculties such as conceiving, perceiving, understanding, will etc., which do not provide any basis for a unified theory.

[We are so conscious of the liberty and indifference which exist in us, that there is nothing that we comprehend more clearly and perfectly for it would be absurd to doubt that which we individually experience and perceive as existing within ourselves, just because we do not comprehend a matter which from its nature we know to be incomprehensible." (HRI, 235)]

Not having a theory of mind and its faculties such as will, does not mean that they are not manifested in our experience. By putting language, in spite of its physical embodiment, on the side of mental, he integrates our creativity and freedom at the same time. It is creative because our thoughts are not under any physical constraint, since we can think of things which are not. And it is free in the sense that we can say or not to say what we have thought [*Discourse*]

Animals could never use speech or other signs as we do when placing our thoughts on record for the benefit of others. For we can easily understand a machine's being constituted so that it can utter words, and even emit some responses to action on it of a corporeal [bodily] kind... for instance, if it is touched in a particular part it may ask what we wish to say to it; if in another part it may exclaim that it is being hurt... but it never happens that it arranges its speech in various ways, in order to reply appropriately to everything that maybe said in its presence, as even the lowest type of man can do...

We can now exploit the philosophical distinction between essence and existence to highlight the difference between mind and matter. By dream argument we are deprived of any knowledge of existent things, their existence being subject to God's will, if we grant the solution of the dream problem to Descartes. On the other hand we have the knowledge of its essence by having access to God's intellect in the form of mathematics, its elements (innate ideas) being grounded in our mind. In the case of mind we do not enjoy any theory of thought, but its existential features are freely expressed in our use of language available to others – to understand or misunderstand by being independent of external environment. We can not explain and predict what an individual will say at a

given time, because such matters within this context would be a matter dependant on our will and choice as the existential matters in the case of matter is dependant on God's will and choice.

The argument from language-use by canceling any causal relation with the physical environment reinforces the postulation of second substance<sup>3</sup> as the seat of thought – as an activity that the body has no share in it. In the sense that we do not know how the mental is about the world, how meaning is about things, or how either mind or language is about the world. (To have a 'real world semantics' we need an account of the will). The dualism involved in this argument and the others enables one to emphasize the fact that the structure of mind can not be 'read off' from sensory input or bodily behavior. Since mind is opaque in regard to these data, common sense observation refers to it as something private in the sense that the access to its structures is limited to the substantial self. Though this is a privileged position for oneself, it is at the same time an expression of inaccessibility of other minds. This common sense impenetrability provides a cognitive barrier which allows people to think for themselves as self-governed persons.

To summarize the arguments, Descartes' view on dualism provides us a framework to define persons as minds in a unitary way because the definition comes forth independent of environmental factors informing divers experiences. Within this framework it is difficult to define the category of non-person usually defined on the basis of outwardly behavior or other physical traits derived from differential identities such as religion, ethnicity, and etc. Moreover, it is further an obstacle to infer people's beliefs on the same basis – a practice prevalent in the ideological contexts. Descartes' philosophical theory, contrary to the drift of philosophy and science towards an interactive view of mind and body, advances a non-interactive position. His two substances as the ontological ground for the two, provides the opportunity to give the mind an independence and a unitary structure. It is this uniformity which allows a normative framework to deal with various moral issues in a systematic and coherent fashion. For it is clear that moral principles, like any principle within Cartesian thought, are universal and not derivable from particular experiences. They are grounded in our minds thanks to the category distinction between mental and physical. This



differential ontology allows us to have various moral concepts in our minds, and to draw upon them for our moral judgments and decisions.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In the light of what was said in the above we can look at the interaction of religion and philosophy. At the interface of the two lies the question of religious belief and its sources. Descartes by considering human relation to God as an immediate relation cancels any role for human intervention of human institutions in the formation of religious belief. Such beliefs are supposed to be based on innate idea of God grounded in the mind. Moreover, as revealed by the discussions and arguments of the time on the reading and interpretation of Holy Book, the notion of “natural light of reason” came to occupy a central position. In this way the interface between religion and philosophy was ontologically filled with the notion of conscience as an entity beyond our experience and belonging to the innermost part of our souls<sup>4</sup>. The purity of conscience was considered as a guarantee of the autonomy and independence of our religious beliefs.

However, this relation could be aborted, as in my country, if for any reason religious beliefs are to be coerced on any religious or political ground. By coercion, even if effective, we do not know its impact on people’s consciences. One point of demon argument was to disable any external entity to reach and scrutinize our soul. The domain of human religious and political institutes, especially when matters of religion are defined as political, is our behavior and actions. Beliefs and meanings as their carriers are mental and should not be subject to any coercion. Their expression with the help of physical medium of language is not part of our outwardly physical behaviour. Language as the embodiment of thought, belief and meanings falls on the side of mind and not our bodies. Any intervention would jeopardize the distinction of thought and action – as respective properties of mind and body. This ontological distinction helps us to make sense of the fact that why we can never be sure of what someone thinks. In the case of religious thought and speech, any appeal to conscience by nature is an opaque matter. Erring conscience may also be granted an equal right. However, there is no necessity for the conscience to enjoy all

rights. When we pass from the domain of thought and speech to domain of behaviour and action, claiming immunity for religiously motivated behaviour is a matter which is political and subject to the purview of state and law as public institutions to deal with the domain of actions. Here a causal power is involved which is absent from thought and speech. Without them as a means of persuasion of each other, we have to remain witness to our current crisis of toleration– within which people are prepared to commit themselves to actions on the basis of misinformed ideas, actions that are matter of life and death.

### Notes

- 1- Elizabeth Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Volume 1, Cambridge University Press, 1967. Henceforth: HRI.
- 2- Gaukroger. Stephen., *Descartes an intellectual biography*, p.202: "something metaphysical' is a metaphysical criterion of clear and distinct ideas" ... "under one interpretation it is related to 'the natural light of reason' , ... something which like conscience (to which it bears many resemblances and on which it may even have been modeled), is an ultimate resort."
- 3-Gaukroger. Stephen., *Descartes an intellectual biography*, p.290: "...Descartes thinks that a number of aspects of human cognition... must be accounted for by introducing a separate mental substance."
- 4-Gaukroger. Stephen., *Descartes an intellectual biography*, p.208: "ones conscience is there to guide one when there is some ambiguity or difficulty in choice... Conscience was generally recognized as a faculty given to us by God so that we might exercise our moral judgement in accordance with His will. Similarly, the natural light of reason could be construed as a faculty given to us by God so that we might exercise our cognitive judgement in accordance with this will, recognizing as true what He has decreed to be truths."

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