

## DESCARTES' CONCEPTION OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

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I N reflecting upon the philosophy of Descartes, we must recollect that in the Latin language there are two words for *Mind*. *Animus* or Spirit or Infinite Mind; the infinite thinking principle of life; the rational soul. (Andrew *Latin English Lexicon*.) Our *Animus* is fixed the instant we enter this world. It is always known, though it is admitted that it is broadened by use. In the same manner our knowledge of God was and is a priori, although through development, we will know God better. We know these two things through the fact of our existence; they have nothing to do with our experience. The word *Mens* refers to our finite mind or the intellectual principle within us, and the more experience we have had, the keener in all probability, has been the development of our *mens* and the more rational will be our mode of thought.

Descartes, who was born in 1596, was a very talented man and after learning everything that was possible, he gave up his studies and resolved "no longer to seek any other science than the knowledge of myself *or* of the great book of the world." (*Discourse on Method* by Descartes, Everyman's Library, page VII.) From the translation, we hardly know whether the word *or* is to have its conjunctive or disjunctive signification; if the former meaning is intended, then the second clause is to be included in the first, and the world, the body, material and extension are a part of myself or my ego, or my thought or my mind. If the disjunctive meaning is taken, then when we get beyond, our soul will be wholly disconnected with our body and our sense perceptions; the myself (which includes my soul) is one thing, and the world is another. We should say that the latter was meant by Descartes for among other things he (XVIII) notices the illusions of the senses, the changing nature of their objects and the difficulty caused by the existence of dreams. "Each

judgment we make about individual things may be doubted; we may also doubt whether things have the separateness which they seem to have, but we cannot doubt that there is something there. "While I wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be somewhat" (26). Again Descartes says: "I, that is to say, the mind by which I am what *I am*, is wholly distinct from the body and is even more easily known than the latter, and is such that, although the latter were not, it would still continue to be all that it is, and so it may be said that Descartes comes to the conclusion that knowledge of myself does not include the knowledge of the world; the knowledge of myself is evidently one thing and the make-believe knowledge or the thinking of the world with my sense perceptions is another.

The great contribution of Descartes to the world is that he was the founder of modern Philosophy. The character of Scholasticism (Schwegler's *History of Philosophy*, page 144) is conciliation between dogma and thought, between faith and reason. When this dogma passes from the church, where it took birth, into the school and when theology becomes a science treated in universities, the interest of thought comes into play and asserts its right of reducing into intelligibility the dogma which has hitherto stood above consciousness as an external, unquestionable power. It assumed as an infallible presupposition that the creed of the Church was absolutely true. They wanted to rationalize the dogma and thorough refinements of logic and syllogisms they brought the dogma into disrepute. Luther and the Reformation were making thinkers more liberal. Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Bacon were studying the natural sciences and finally came Descartes with his sceptical philosophy (sceptical at least as far as the objects of the world are concerned) saying in effect: there is nothing true under the sun but the a priori foundations: *God is*, and *I am* are the lasting categories. "For it is highly evident that all that is true is something [truth being identical with existence.]" (*Meditations*, 121.)

He swept away the logic and the syllogisms of the Schoolmen so that he "might afterward be in a position to admit others more correct or even perhaps the same when they had undergone the scrutiny of reason. "I firmly believed that in this way I should much better succeed in the conduct of my life than if I built only upon the old foundations and leant upon principles which, in my youth, I had taken upon trust. I found that as for logic, its syllogisms and the majority of its other precepts are of avail rather in the communica-

tion of what we already know, than in the investigation of the unknown. It is "an art full of confusion and obscurity calculated to embarrass instead of a science fitted to cultivate the mind." (Meth., 12.)

The first thing Descartes did, was, as far as possible, to cut loose from the Schoolmen and be done with presuppositions; but they had only two of these: that of Thomas Aquinas which proclaimed the understanding as principle and the other that of Duns Scotus which thus proclaimed the Will. All the refinements of Logic, came from these two principles. Descartes' aphorism *Cogito, ergo sum*, has developed, seemingly, from the postulate, *I think, therefore I am* into such an inextricable maze of propositions, and these into corollaries, that it is hard to keep the run of them.

For the Scholastics, the Understanding was the theoretical and the Will the practical principle and, through either of these, faith and reason were reconciled. For Descartes, the philosophic thinking by which I know *what I am* is both theoretical and practical; the former tends to make us morbid, the latter happy; the one makes us introspective, the other *outrespective*; in the theoretical, we understand; in the practical, we perceive. If the object or world takes the first place one is inclined toward Materialism; if the *I am*, or subject or mind is primary, Idealism comes forth. If the two balance each other, we have Absolute Identity, but in this the testimony of consciousness to the ultimate duality of the subject and object in perception is rejected.

The great mass of Philosophers are, as Hamilton calls them, Hypothetical Dualists, or Cosmithetical Idealists (the *or* being conjunctive) i. e., they take the external universe, not as a real world outside of us but as a representation to our senses and are divided into those who see this representation as a representative entity present to the mind, and those who view the immediate object as only a representative modification of the mind itself. Then we might consider our dreams and somnambulism for we must be something more than unconscious when we are in that state. All of these tend toward Dualism because they perceive a two-fold conception, only this conception or Idealism holds an hypothesis instead of a reality. Lately there have been produced the Intuitionists and the Pragmatists who may be described as Idealists and Materialists of a different order.

If mind and body are absolutely separate we have Natural Dualism; mind is one thing and the external world another. In general,

people are of this stamp, because it is acknowledged, it is the natural way to live.

These two categories, *God is* and *I am*, were ingrained in me at the moment I entered this world. Does our existence ever deceive us? No, we have an irresistible, unconquerable, a priori consciousness, idea or conception that we exist and that "there is a Divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will." (Shakespeare.) He is the Deity whom Descartes calls "the fountain of truth." He allows himself to doubt everything else except God and His attributes, and his own soul or spirit, for he maintains that "our senses do not give us truth at all," for they are meant to serve us only for present, practical purposes; they are limited and we must accept the limitations; likewise our minds are limited as far as the world is concerned.

We know we exist but we must admit, as far as at present we see, that it is only by our sense impressions that we are conscious of that fact or perceive it; we also know that when we are unconscious we will still exist, although we do not perceive it. All our sense impressions teach us concerning the *I am* is a sense thought or believing in what my pure thought had already caused me to know and when I became conscious of it I thought of it through my intellect,—the part of my mind which is the every-day working instrument; hence *I am* (although I do not consciously know it) not through sense or thinking but through my mind and personality. We also have the a priori conception that this state of things with regard to our own minds will last forever, so we, though our bodies are dead, will still be conscious. How much more eminent is God who is the basis of everything? Therefore his Spirit cannot be a *nothing*, but must be a pre-eminent existence. We can depend upon our essence or pure thought, for that cannot deceive us. It follows that if we never had sense impressions, God still would have given our spirits the power to have known our own Personality. We are said to know God through analogy, but very little notice is taken of that, or very little faith placed in it, because there is such a wonderful world is no reason why a personal God made it, but it being known that God exists, we see why it should be so wonderful!

The concept *I am* appears to me in a clearer light than the concept *God is* on account of the ephemeral sense impression which I have, through my human intellect, received, concerning it. It makes me pinch myself and feel that I am alive; it causes me to hear the thunder and find shelter. Each man's body is a part of the world

of nature, but nature would be, if we had no sense impressions; thinking them however makes them *appear* real, more real to outward seeming than the fact of myself or my mind, although we know they are not so. We may be mistaken about things of this world; nothing is certain; we should take everything human with a doubt; it is relative to something else. How memory fails us. There is nothing stable or even truthful that is ephemeral, everything is in a flux. This appears to be a paradox; when above it is said that nature would be if we had no sense impressions; while here it is said to be ephemeral; the logic of it is in the word *time*. Time is *not* when this mortal puts on immortality. We can bank upon our own Spirits and the Spirit of God though I do not recognize Him under any particular form or admit any sense impressions of Him. The idea of God and of the soul have never been in the senses.

On page 87 Descartes says: I cannot say that I possess any of the attributes that belong to the characteristics of body. I find none of them that can properly be said to belong to myself. As to the attributes of the soul: if I have no body it is true likewise that I am capable of neither walking nor of being nourished. Perception is another attribute of the soul but perception too is impossible without the body; besides I have frequently, during sleep, believed that I perceived objects which I afterward observed I did not in reality perceive. Thinking is another attribute of the soul and here I discover what properly belongs to myself. This alone is inseparable from me. *I am, I exist*; that is certain but how often? As often as I think. I am therefore precisely speaking only a thinking thing, that is a mind, understanding or reason. I am, however, a real thing and really existent, but what thing? The answer was a thinking thing. And I also know that nothing of all that I can embrace in imagination belongs to the knowledge which I have of myself. But what is a thinking thing? It is a thing that doubts, understands (conceives), affirms, denies, wills, refuses, that imagines, also and perceives (notice that the *I am* or Personality or Existence is not here included.) Is there nothing of all this as true as that I am? or that I am a mind? or that I myself am or exist?

Since it is now manifest to me that *bodies themselves* are not properly perceived by the senses nor by the imagination but by the intellect alone. I readily discover that there is nothing more easily or clearly apprehended than my own mind; and if the *I am* or the existence or the Personality or the mind (or is conjunctive) is the real thing that it is the basis of everything that belongs to me and

hence the groundwork of the intellect. It is the thinking that belongs to me. *I* do not belong to the thinking.

I never think outside of my thoughts and beliefs. I act upon my thoughts and beliefs and sense impressions, and it is the acting which causes the civilization of this world, but we do indeed have a more exalted role and a truer goal to which to look forward, to strive for, to realize. Since we exist there must be some machinery which is the effect of existence or of the cause. This machinery is the mind or the *I* am.

The machine (the mind in the unextended or thought world, the material in the extended or corporeal domain) holds within itself the finished product which it has been constructed to produce. That which is built up by this mechanism (i. e., civilization) whether an exquisite book harvested by the mind or an admirable piece of sculpture chiselled from a block of marble is the effect of the machine but there must have been a motive, a cause for this civilization and the original motive must have been in the mind of God. The mind has a personality, a soul, hence has the essence of reality—immortality. The ideas of the human mind have the faculty of thinking, sense perceptions, doubting, believing. The ideas of the immortal mind have the faculty of perfect intelligence and of knowing.

I not only humanly think and therefore am, but I eternally am and therefore know, and it is God that I know. He is perfect intelligence for in Him we live and have our being." (Acts 17.18)

Hamilton in his *Metaphysics* (page 548) takes it for granted that existence is the highest category or condition of thought. No thought is possible except under this category. "I cannot think that I think without thinking that I exist." It is a priori and all other thoughts, sense impressions and the civilizations of the world are produced from this law of thought.

Everything comes from the existence of God. Our minds are derived from Him and since our minds belong to the Spirit they are immortal hence these two conceptions are sure they are knowledge. They are premises which are founded upon knowledge.

But as for other conceptions although they may be clear and distinct and seem to be perfectly manifest to my senses (belief) they are not so my immortal existence (knowledge). God may change this world. He may alter the laws of the universe. He will cause my body to become dust.

The conclusion we come to from the premise: the world exists (although logical may be and probably is wrong showing that we

had a wrong premise (belief) with which to start. The conclusion we come to from the premise (God is) is sure to be correct because started with a premise which is knowledge.

It has been said that to Descartes' axiom, *I doubt* might be added, so that it would read: I think, I doubt, therefore I am. There might also be affixed the word believe. He does not doubt the innate ideas or conceptions, therefore the *I doubt* certainly should not be placed with the *I am*, but since he does doubt the sense impressions it should be referred to the *I think*—I think, I believe, I doubt, therefore I am. We act according to our sense impressions but before we act, we think, and that part of our Personality or our mind which is called the *Will* features the act. Since Descartes doubts everything concerning the external world, there is an antithesis or at least a contrast between the *I think* and the *I am*, even if the one does take place because of the other. We thus can see why the thinking means doubting (therefore believing) except as to the fundamental conceptions or innate ideas; to-wit: *God is* and *I am*; hence I know my Personality, but doubt my thinking concerning things I see which I may believe in with my sense impressions; but do not know. In fine all my pure thoughts are valid and I know them. My impure thoughts are invalid although I may believe them. My *human* mind claims only the power of thinking—cognito. My *immortal* mind requires the power of knowing—cognosco.

Descartes, to state it in a little different form, is a doubter as to his sense impressions but he knows his God and his own Personality. The two latter conceptions are his bed-rock of Truth. They and the external world are the contraries of each other, but a middle term (man) is there, partaking of the qualities of both; that is the mind of man or his intellect, connects his spirit (through God) with his body and the external world. The impressions are, as to his senses, extended and material; the conceptions are, as to his intellect, unextended and spiritual. They cannot meet and it is not intended that they should. It has generally been said that Descartes believed in an external world, and, by this expression, it has often been assumed that he was a Natural Dualist; if so, nothing is farther from the truth. On page 134 of Descartes' *Meditations* (Every Man's Library) he says: "It must be concluded that corporeal objects exist." He would be a Natural Realist unless he qualifies this sentence, but he does take all the strength out of this statement by the following words: "Nevertheless they are not perhaps exactly such as we *perceive* by the *senses*, for their comprehension by the senses

is, in many instances, very obscure and confused, but it is at least necessary to admit that all which I clearly and distinctly conceive as in them, that is generally speaking, all that is comprehended in the object of speculative geometry really exists, external to me." What is such an object of speculative geometry? On page 225 he tells us "the only clear and distinct notions standing are those figures, magnitudes and motions and of rules according to which these things can be diversified by each other which rules are the principles of geometry and mechanics. I judge that all the knowledge man can have of nature must of necessity be drawn from this source because all the other notions we have of sensible things, as confused and obscure, can be of no avail in affording us the knowledge of anything out of ourselves, but must serve rather to impede it." Hence such an object of speculative geometry seems to be the figures, magnitudes and motions of the principles of geometry and mechanics. On page XXI, "I at least know with certainty that such external realities may exist in as far as they constitute the object of pure mathematics, since, regarding them in this aspect, I can conceive them clearly and distinctly. (Notice that the translation does not read *do exist* but *may exist*.) Hence we must agree with Hamilton that Descartes was a Hypothetical Dualist and hold that to his consciousness the immediate object (that tree) is only a representative modification of the mind itself. (Hamilton's *Metaphysics*, page 202.) In other words the figure or form of that tree which I see (or the external object) is only a representative modification of the mind itself, hence can that tree be called an object (true object) of the external world, since the reality that I see is not a real tree, but a modification of the mind? That is, it is the mind that is the reality and not the tree which I see only with my sense impression, which senses will leave me when I depart from this earth. These figures are only the abstract ideas or views of bodies and not the bodies themselves.

Mind plays a two-fold part: the immortal essence compelling me to know God and myself or the *I am*, and the mortal sense teaching me to believe (not know) in the external world and the laws of the universe. How about the laws of thought? Whatever is, is nothing can both be and not be. Everything either is or is not. They are wrongly called the laws of thought. They are more than that; they are the conditions of existence. They belong to the vital principle. How about the mathematical concepts, the axioms and the laws of motion? God made this universe with certain laws; he can



change these laws when it so pleases Him, but until He does, two plus two equals four. But these laws to our sense impressions (we do not know them with our Personality) are but beliefs and belief goes as high as our consciousness. Knowledge transports us to Super-consciousness and begets the a priori existence. What is this Super-consciousness? My immortal mind, or the *I am*, or Reality or existence or Truth or Cause or any of the vital categories. The laws of the universe can hardly be called vital categories, unless it is remembered that God can change them when he so desires; even now gravitation is but a supposition or hypothesis.

Mind is the thinking principle of man, therefore mind must be the existence or substance in which the thinking is contained, hence we must analyze mind. In *Descartes on Method*, page 73, it is said: "Our minds must be considered finite, while Deity is incomprehensible and infinite." While this is true it is a bald statement and should have been modified by the word *human* making it read: "Our human minds must be considered finite." In all other parts of the book it is regarded, aye, insisted upon that the mind is the chief part of the being of man; that it is what keeps him in touch with God; that it is the potential link for his immortal existence, Personality, the *I am*, which here is limited to a mortal life, but them—Immortality. "I apprehend nothing so far as I am conscious as belonging to my essence except that I am a thinking being (72) a thing, an *I am*, a mind, possessing in itself the faculty of thinking. "Since nothing besides thinking belongs to the essence of the mind, it follows that nothing else does in truth belong to it." My disposition may have been given to me by my parents but they did not make me as far as I am a thinking being" (109). They did not give the "*I am* or my mind which is what I now consider to be myself" to me. "I (that is my mind by which I am what I am) is entirely and truly distinct from my body and may exist without it" (133). And Descartes sums up the whole on page 77 by saying: "It follows that the body may without difficulty perish, but that the mind is, in its own nature, immortal," which gives a very different interpretation (in the translation) to his first statement that "our minds must be considered finite." Our minds are at present human, imperfect, limited, but they have vast possibilities of growth and are the inchoate forms of what our immortal minds shall be. "Mind does not follow from the destruction of the body." (See page one.)

Thought is all the modifications of the mind or thinking subject, but the thought of the object does not make us have a knowledge

of the object. The mind knows itself, and the object is thought of or perceived by the intellect which comprises our sense perceptions of it (the object); this thought or sense perception is *not* knowledge if only for the reason that it is doubtful; the human mind (being limited) can never bring the object above sense perception (which is never infallible). The consequence is that all our senses can give us is an hypothesis concerning the perception of the object on which to build our thought. If the human mind were unlimited, we could get at the truth of the matter. This mind will hereafter become unhampered, unlimited. We know the mind even now, but we also know that it is limited. *Knowledge* is not given by *perception* or *imagination*, but *only* by the *mind*. God and personality do not need the sense perceptions, the outer world does. The human mind requests the power of thinking—cognito. My immortal mind demands the power of knowing—cognosco.

Locke tells us that when we are born our minds are like a blank piece of paper upon which our experience is written, for we had no innate ideas to start with and no knowledge. But where did this blank piece of paper come from? It must have started somewhere and somehow. From wood, originally, you may say; burn this wood and what is left? Only a charred piece of carbon; break up this carbon and it becomes ashes; blow these ashes away and it is dissipated into carbonic acid gas; it is finally taken up by infinity and goes back to its cause. This Cause was something and we call that something—not a representative entity of that wood; not even a representative modification of it but it has gone into its original conception—God. We still believe in the Conservation of energy for the original energy was God.

“By the term thought,” says Descartes, “I comprehend all that is in us, so that we are immediately conscious of it. Thus all the operations of the will, intellect, imagination and senses are thoughts. “But the above are rather to be classed as cognitions or impure thoughts. Pure thought is the innate knowledge we each individually possess of God and of our own minds, and has nothing to do with our impure thoughts as commonly understood or with our sense impressions.

Mind, in its practical sense, can be defined as the neutral principle and out of it flow the thought which is the passive power or that which thinks, while will is the active principal or that which accomplishes what the sense impressions order. It is the sense impressions which make us doubt, and believe, rather than know. The

instincts of an animal are often nearer truth than the senses of man. We often trust the sense direction of a horse rather than our own erratic trend. We anticipate that a dog will often find his home through his natural impulses.

Our mind is probably always active even during sleep, hence it is a solecism (at least in a metaphysical sense) to say *I do not think*. We always think; we may think it is not so, but we always think a something. "I don't believe so" may be correct for believing or doubting belongs to the cognitive powers and sometimes these are at rest. One does not doubt that he thinks but he does doubt that he believes what he is thinking about. The expression *I think, I doubt*, is therefore the proper expression for this cognition or impure thought because it is referred to the sense impressions which always doubts or believes and never knows.

If we know a thing, all doubt has been removed; we have advanced beyond belief; we have come out into the full panoply of knowledge. We are never doubtful about anything that we know. Reality is not in the element, but in the being or power that gave us the element. Reality is not in the intellect but in the being or power that gave us the intellect. Reality is in God for He is Cause of the element and the intellect. Reality is in our Personality for we are Spirit and hence immortal.

Cartesianism is the philosophy best suited to those who belong to the school of Socrates, Plato, Kant, Cudworth, Paley, and Leibnitz, who know God as the source of all virtue and the Mind as the Power of God which leads us to Him and who considers that in the words of Sir Thomas Moore:

"This world is all a fleeting show,  
For man's illusion given; . . .  
The smiles of joy, the tears of woe  
Deceitful shine, deceitful flow,  
There's nothing true but Heaven."