

ON THE STRENGTH AND THE WEAKNESS OF DESCARTES' "METHOD."

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IT HAS been said that no other investigator in all the past adopted a method of investigation which contained in itself the promise of more fruitful results of an ultimate nature than did Descartes' "Method." And it might be added that no investigator gave a weaker support to a sound method than he did.

His *Geometry*, *Meteoric*s and *Dioptoric*s which he thought to be specimens of truth reached by this method were in reality due to his original mind, his rejection of post futile methods. He saw that the past was a slavish submission to authority, with a few exceptions. This revealed to him the necessity of adopting a *critical* attitude towards all former methods or opinions in relation to the nature of mind or the nature of knowledge. He seemed to have seen that no advance regarding problems of ultimate nature can ever be made until a completely rational theory of the nature of knowledge is first reached. He seems to have devoted a great part of his life in preparing himself to deal with this most subtle of all problems. While his assumptions of "doubt" might now be considered as the first step in a critical attitude towards all past conclusions regarding what knowing *is* and *what it is that knows*. But it will be shown that the Descartes' mind was unable to free itself from age-long habits of thinking which involves what is now termed ego-centric predicament.

This mental collapse of a great mind after a lifelong preparation to avoid it, should give pause to the bizarre methods of philosophical investigations now taking place.

Says Descartes in this connection, "But as I desired to give my attention solely to the search after truth I thought that a procedure exactly opposite was called for and that I ought to reject as abso-

lutely false all opinions in regard to which I could suppose the least ground for doubt, in order to ascertain whether after that there remained aught in my belief that was wholly indubitable.

"Accordingly seeing that our senses sometimes deceive us and I was willing to suppose that there existed nothing really such as presented to us, and because some men err in reasoning and fall into paralogsms, even in the simplest matters of Geometry *I*, convinced that *I* was as open to error as any other, rejected as false all the reasonings I had hitherto taken for demonstrations; and finally when *I* considered the very same thoughts (presentations) which we experience when awake may be also experienced when we are asleep, while there is at that time none of them true, *I* supposed that all the objects (presentation) that ever entered into my mind when awake had in them no more truth than the illusions of my dreams."

So far, except for the confusion to thought by the use here of personal pronouns which assume a person as well as a mind at work, this procedure of Descartes may be considered as philosophically justified.

But the non-recognition of the necessity of discounting the ego, self or person, and mind understanding itself as such all through its investigation of itself, is the cause of the breakdown in Descartes' synthesis as will now be pointed out.

"But immediately upon this *I* observed," says Descartes, "that whilst *I* thus wished to think that all was false it was absolutely necessary that *I* (this is the use of the "I" as a mind body concept, as a somewhat that can confront mind) who thus thought should be somewhat and as I observed that this truth *I think hence I am* was so certain and of such evidence that no ground of doubt however extravagant could be capable of shaking it, *I* concluded that I might without scruple accept it as the first principle of the philosophy of which I was in search."

Just here is where Descartes' reasoning powers gave out. This formulation is a mere tautology—a repeating of the same meaning with words differently arranged. As such it was true, of course, a true repetition and so quite useless as a "Principle" of anything; for since it was true as a tautology, it was not true as a matter of fact. If he had employed the formulation, mind thinks, hence it exists, it would have been near the truth, but it would have still been a tautology for the very fact of asserting mind thinking involves the implication that mind exists; else the asserting would be nonsense,

and so formulated in this way it could not be made a principle of philosophy, yet there is something very valuable here and which might serve as the foundation for the building up a science of mind, with an explanation of the nature of knowledge.

The two facts which should have been developed are:

- (1) thinking in some way goes on,
- (2) and in some other way awareness of that thinking takes place.

Now when there are two facts that can be held in their bareness without any further implications whatever, a rational beginning can be made for a metaphysical science and a new world of thought be opened up. But on account of the age-long bias arising from practical ways of thinking (this is what Descartes should have brought his "doubt" to bear upon in its complete sense, and should have included the doubting of the "I") not only did Descartes not do so but there is no record heretofore of these two facts being grasped in their *bareness*, that is, without the implication of a personality or self as the experiment, with the further assumption of a *given* physical world, and yet these two latter somewhats do not arise independent of, or simultaneous with the knowledge process but are built up out of this process when it has reached a high stage of complexity, apparently. And it becomes the business of metaphysics to inquire how a self ego, or concept of personality arises out of the knowledge process.

The story of the building up or organization and development of the mental life is the most wonderful story the human mind ever can or ever will have to deal, and yet it has up till now been almost wholly neglected or distorted.

In another place an attempt has been made to tell this story but the methods of investigation now in vogue prevent a hearing of any views embodying greater depths of thought.

The unconscious use of the "I" sometimes as mind and sometimes as a person or self which is able to discuss mind as if it was a substance or element foreign to this self seems to cause such confusion in the Descartes mind as to compel the falling back for support on all which his critical mind had rejected, as here shown.

"In the next place from reflecting on the circumstances that I doubted and that consequently my being was not wholly perfect (for I clearly saw it was a greater perfection to know than to doubt, I was led to inquire whence I had learned to think of something more perfect than myself, and I clearly recognized that I must hold this notion from some nature which was really more perfect."

It may be readily seen that the two conclusions reached here were quite unwarranted by his earlier method of investigation. For in the first place doubt is the great necessity of thought in investigation. Investigation would be useless if reliance wholly on authority is to be made; the very thing that Descartes had fought against in his earlier investigations.

Then again Descartes need have no reason to wonder whence he had learned to think of a somewhat more perfect than himself if he had recollected what he had been taught in early childhood, or had heard of that prelate who said, "Give me the children to train and I will have no fear that the grownups will depart much from what I taught them in childhood. They may forget the source, but the substance will be determined by the way the mind was moulded in childhood although it may be somewhat distorted at times."

". . . Accordingly," Descartes continues, "it remained that it had been placed in me by a nature which was more perfect than mine, and which even possessed within itself all the perfections of which I could form any idea, that is to say in a single word, which was God."

Here all evidence of a great mind at work seems to have entirely disappeared, with the sudden fall into habits of thinking which he had fought against in his earlier life.

It is sad to think of Descartes on the very brink of the greatest discovery that could ever be made by the human mind, namely, the discovery of itself, and then to be suddenly thrown back on such frivolous argument through the use of inapplicable terminology, apparently the result of his early training, which he appears to have forgotten.

It is not essential to postulate *mind body* or *self* to commence metaphysical investigation. What is required to bring out, is (1) what awareness reveals of this knowledge-feeling process; (2) can a rational account, by putting things together, of how a physical world and a self gets built up in the knowledge process, and (3) how it finally develops as a real world to all appearance in that highly organized psychic process which gets itself termed the human mind?

The answer is that all this can now be worked out by the intelligent mind free from bias, and the process becomes amazingly interesting and productive of some good results.

And has the mind become known to itself, appearing physical existence become the great mystery in an ultimate sense, since it

is born in the knowledge-process and what it is outside of that, no mind can ever know.

But the human mind can learn how it (physical existence) arises as an *appearance* from peculiarities of its own (minds) operations, and this, worked out, would constitute a real science of mind. But this may never be fully worked out as philosophical thought appears now to be in a state of decadence, and appearances are taken for realities.

Philosophical thought has thus reached a stage of decadence which might be comparable to science going back to appearances and maintaining that the world is flat and the sun moves around it. Behaviorism does just this.

"Things are what they seem to be, it is absurd to deny this." "We do not find consciousness (mind) and a physical world but only a physical world." There is not the remotest conception that mind is here assuming the ludicrous *attitude of denying itself*. Mind as the knowledge content maintaining that this content is physical or biological movements, but never getting down to the question as to how *this knowledge arises* or can arise from such assumptions. Thus the real philosophical question is slurred over. That all such questions are metaphysical however handled, or however crass metaphysics it may be, since they are, or should be, a part of the content of the knowledge process; never seems to dawn upon such minds.

When penetration such depth of thoughts is made the absurdity of their procedure would at once become manifest.

While the strangest part of it all is that those who have pursued physical research to its furthest limits are fast coming to the belief that it is *all mind*.

¹ "And in the same way the existence of any one of these qualities of the world only acquired significance about its fellows, if mind singles it out for recognition, *mind filters out matter from the meaningless jumble of qualities* as the prism filters out the colors of the rainbow from the chaotic pulsations of white light"

Is it too much to say that mind's search for permanence has created the world of physics?

The conclusion is that the whole of those laws of nature which have been woven into a unified scheme—mechanics, gravitation, electrodynamics and optics—have their origin not in any special mechanism of nature BUT IN THE WORKING OF THE MIND.

¹ Eddington in "Space Time and Gravitation."

"Give me matter and motion," said Descartes, "and I will construct the universe." The mind reverses this: Give me a world, a world in which there are relations—and I will construct *matter and motion*. We have found a strange foot-print on the shores of the unknown. We have devised profound theories, one after another, to account for its origin, at last we have succeeded in reconstructing the creature that made the foot-print. And lo! it is our own" (mind).