



SIGNIFICANCE OF DOUBLE 'I' IN DESCARTES PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: Rene Descartes (1596-1650) is a popular name towards mathematical as well as philosophical truth. Descartes wants to redefine the philosophical truth with the help of same rational power that runs in mathematics. In the course of doing this, he first adopts the methodological doubt. He then applies the doubt method in all possible cases where he can doubt, and finally comes to the point that there at least one case remains indubitable which is - when he thinks (including doubts), he certainly exists. Thus, Descartes reaches a self-centred and self-critical discovery process of certainty in his philosophy; and immediate after he proposes the Latin proposition '*Cogito Ergo Sum*' (in English 'I think, therefore, I am or exist'). This paper now simply shows Descartes' narrated clear and distinct idea to acquire true knowledge. It also focuses on the nature of the proposition which he has got indubitably, and further quests: is the conclusion 'I am or exist' deducing from the premise 'I think' or is it depended on the law of non-contradiction, etc.

Key Words: *Cogito*, Doubt, Descartes, Knowledge, Self.

Introduction: Rene Descartes, the architect of Modern age of Western philosophy, commences his philosophical enquiry by asking the epistemological issues like the sources of knowledge, the origin of knowledge, the condition of knowledge, the boundary of knowledge, and others. He observes in the very beginning that there are a number of philosophers who think and ultimately believe that in general knowledge comes from the source like sensation such that man must see, hear, touch, taste and smell something before he can understand it. But Descartes did not agree with this uncritical assessment to acquire certain knowledge. As far as his definition of certainty is concerned, clearness and distinctness is the basic criteria of it. According to him, knowledge must attain this certainty via the demonstrations of mathematics. Thus, the persisting disputes of philosophy can be resolved and a new philosophical aspect might be reopened in modern time.

Descartes' Method for Acquiring Knowledge: In the very beginning, Descartes accepted the fact like other philosophers at his time that knowledge may come from sensation. But with the time passes, Descartes would understand that it is not the right way to know properly any object or anything of this universe. He then pleads that there is a scope for doubt in all cases that people say and believe. Even he starts doubting his own sense-experiences. Because he discovers that his senses often provide him some inaccurate information in regard to things which are scarcely perceptible and very distant. In this context, Descartes writes in his essay that,

Whatever I had admitted until now as most true and assured, I received either from the senses or by means of the senses: However, I have sometimes found to deceive, and it is a mark of prudence never to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived.¹

Indeed, being a mathematician, Descartes extends his enquiries to embrace the general principles of all knowledge. In doing this, he commences by subjecting everything, including doubt itself, to the experiment of doubt.

Descartes' most noteworthy essays like *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations of First Philosophy* interpret his method of doubt very uniquely. The books cite that Descartes employs the doubt method, a sort of systematic scepticism, by stating that we do not have 'a clear and distinct idea' about the reality. So he begins doubting the reality of all. Furthermore, he doubts initially the truths of Logic and mathematics due to their concerning of very abstract subjects without much practical use. Even he says that reading the book of others, it is of no use to achieve a knowledge of it. Explaining the reason, he argues that the study of philosophy only requires independent thinking based on reason, not on opinion of others. Besides, he does attack on custom or authority and then rely on his own reasoning. Thus, Descartes carries his skepticism to the extreme because his doubt was merely methodological. Though, his method of doubt is commenced as the basic method of reaching at certainty. The reason behind is that Descartes employs the doubt method in each case until he finds a certain state or foundation to acquire knowledge. After applying the method of doubt in every case, he comes to suggest that we should accept anything when it is tested and proved by reason. And later he uncovers another important thing that is doubting involves thinking. Again he says that 'to doubt' means 'to think', and, 'to think' means 'to be'. Thus, he comes to propose finally the certain proposition "*Cogito, ergo sum*" (in English 'I think, therefore, I am or exist'), which he was seeking²; and later it is known as a most popular proposition in the history of philosophy. Of course, this discovery process of certainty is self-centered and self-critical, and also it becomes the first principle in his philosophy.

Cogito, Ergo Sum (I think, therefore, I am or exist): In Descartes' philosophy, the first indubitable proposition is identified after employing the doubt method; as he can doubt everything, but cannot his own existence. We find that the *Second Meditation* contains this proposition "*Cogito, ergo sum*", the French equivalent words - *je Pense, donc je Suis*, its English form is - "I think, therefore I am or exist". Here the first 'I' knows that it thinks, the last 'I' knows that it exists, and the term 'therefore' indicates that 'I am or exist' is a conclusion deduced from 'I think' (any form of thought, including doubt). So, in order to the definition, the first 'I' is a thinking thing, and the later 'I' is an extended thing.

Hence the double 'I' shows that there is a clear difference between a thinking thing and an extended thing. As per the explanation, one's mind is a thinking thing and he cannot even doubt its existence; but his body and the world are extended things and he can doubt their existence.³ In other words, it must be said that one can doubt there is a world of material things, but he cannot doubt that his mind exists. Here the point to be noted, it is logically possible to think away our physical existence but we cannot think away our thinking. Furthermore, the human beings i.e. the material bodies of human are in space and in time and are subject to mechanical laws; but mind is not in space nor it is subject to physical and mechanical laws.

We find that Rene was not a materialist when the question comes to the existence of the soul. In his account, the soul is a thinking thing having the attribute of thought; so no thought exists without a thing that thinks. It is the basic characteristic of the famous '*Cogito ergo sum*'. In general, there is found another principle that is the principle of interactionism. This principle says that the body affects the mind and the mind affects the body. Here Descartes' argument is that the mind is an immaterial self, so it could exist after the dissolution of the body.⁴

Though, some criticisms were made by philosophers against to his proposition and conclusion, then his answer was that he was not creating a syllogism but was rather an illustration of a simple movement of thought known as 'direct intuition' where the 'I think' indicates the 'I am' of me. Again Descartes notes some points concerning this, where the first is - 'whatever thinks must exist,' because it is a basic intuition of the mind. Two kinds of things are offered by him when he knows that he exists – first acts of thinking exist because he observes them; and second, a thinking substance. The next point is - doubt is applied to real and existing things. Finally, he gives the logic here that though it is true for the 'here and till now,' but the *Cogito* does not guarantee truths associated with the future until there is veracious God exists. In his philosophy, Descartes tries to prove that there is the existence of a non-deceiving God; He could validate the possibility of future truths as well. According to him, God cannot have the will to deceive us. As a result, a good God would not permit man to take a falsity as a truth.

However, some questions are raised by many thinkers regarding this discovery of Descartes i.e. regarding the nature of the proposition. I will try to develop those questions here in succession.

The first question is: how 'I exist' can be a necessary precondition for the possibility of doubt? To answer the question, Descartes argues that 'if a man now doubts, therefore he must exist; this makes so clear that he can no

longer have any doubts about it'.⁵ The statement actually shows that one's own existence can be deduced with absolute certainty from the certitude of the fact that he/she is doubting. From this, it may easily conclude that one's own existence is a necessary condition for his ability to doubt, and then, the existence of doubt indicates the existence of the self or an 'I' who is doing doubt. In a word, the existence of a self is actually a necessary condition for performing any types of mental activities. One thing is noted here that the conception like 'soul', 'thinking thing', 'I', and 'myself' are different expressions used to refer to one and the same non-material thing.

In another way Descartes tries to answer the said question in the *Principles* 1.7:

When it is thinking, it exists and it is a contradiction to suppose that what thinks does not exist. So the piece of knowledge 'I think, therefore I exist' - is the central and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way.⁶

The excerpt explains that if a person (even the person of untutored common sense) is thinking, then he must exist. So a very clear conception comes from the citation that any activity occurring right now (the thinking) requires an actor (a thinker) to do it at that time. The other conception is - this proposition is self-contradictory in the context when one is thinking, but he does not exist. This means – there thinking process is occurring without a thinker to perform the activity. Actually, it shows that the proposition 'I think, therefore I am' is self-justified because its falsehood cannot be supposed without contradiction. Noting, one cannot assert these things without existing or thinking; as a result, it proves that one's own existence and power of thought are presupposed in either their assertion or denial.

The next question related to the formulation of the proposition (I think, therefore I exist) itself is: is this an intuition or a deduction? Answering to the question, Descartes first cites in this way that 'I think, therefore I am' as being perceived or 'recognized' by a simple intuition; and therefore, it is a self-evident truth that does not result from deduction. Hence, the word 'therefore' in 'I think, therefore I am' does imply that 'I am' or 'I exist' is a deductive consequence resulting from the antecedent that 'I think', and accordingly, it turns up to be a deduction. Though, some citations of Descartes interpret that he wants to deny it by explaining "when one says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist', he does not deduce existence from the thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self evident by a simple intuition of the self."⁷

Actually, Descartes does not simply prescribe the proposition as a deduction in the sense of a syllogism. According to him, syllogism can do nothing but rehash what is already known; or in other words, 'it contributes nothing whatever to knowledge of the truth'.⁸ As a result, he criticizes it by saying that it makes people intellectually lazy. In his philosophy, Descartes emphasizes on human reason rather than theology. Again he opines that people's natural reasoning abilities are sufficient for discovering the truth. But if they rely on dialectic, it hinders this ability by clouding their naturally clear mental vision. So in the case of the proposition, he remarks that it does not deduce from deduction.

Afterwards we find that at the *Principles* 1.10, Descartes pens for it by stating that some prior knowledge is required here. He explains that the certain proposition 'I think, therefore I am' needs some prior knowledge of the notions such as thought, existence and certainty.⁹ He further says that these are so simple that they require no further definition as they have the simple characteristic which indicates their perception is a matter of intuition. Indeed, it asserts that their individual simplicity and their relation as expressed in the proposition i.e. 'I think, therefore I am or I exist' that further conveys there is a deduction at work here. In this context, it must be remembered that this deduction is not required the syllogistic feature at all. Rather, it is the perception of a necessary connection from some certain proposition to another; where the connection itself is perceived by a simple, sweeping mental gaze.

We can see here that Descartes argues by calling it deduction that the hypothetical proposition 'I think, therefore I am' expresses a chain of intuitively grasped truths. In there, the antecedent 'I think' is grasped in a single mental glance as its necessary connection to 'I am or I exist' based on the intuitively known principle which is the occurrence of any activity (e.g. willing) requires the existence of an actor or thinker. It elicits a deductive chain between 'I think' and 'I am', where the chain is too short that it can be intuited in a single mental glance. Consequently, it proves that the proposition is both a deduction and an intuition, and the both are the important methods of knowing¹⁰, in Descartes' philosophy. For deduction, a certain conclusion comes from self-evident premises. And for intuition, it does not require any previous knowledge; but does require only 'the light of reason or the natural light.' In this case, Descartes' opinion is that we cannot doubt the things which the natural light causes us to believe to be true.

Now the question begs: is the *Cogito* as an argument? In answering, Descartes first says that it is not an argument that one accepts like a demonstration in geometry. To be an argument, there must be different elements in *Cogito* as well as there must be at least three propositions; wherein the two are premises and the one is conclusion. Again it needs a link between the both premises and the conclusion. Though, the *Cogito* has a link like “Whatever thinks, exists”. In this case, “Whatever thinks, exists” and “I think” are the principles or the propositions that are true, and “I exist” is the inferred proposition or what it called as a conclusion. This link of *Cogito* offers that there must be an uninterrupted movement of thought from the premises to the conclusion, a movement where each propositions is manifestly intuited. So ‘*Cogito ergo sum*’ is not a syllogistic argument which the sense required, rather it occurs to the mind, it recognizes the truth of *Sum* ‘by a simple intuition.’¹¹ As an effect, the conclusion ‘I exist’ is known immediately, without depending upon of an argument. In this circumstance, the thinker Bernard Williams argues that ‘the truth of *Cogito* presupposes the truth of *Sum*. Further, he says that it is an inference, but not a syllogistic form.’¹²

Based on this type of argument, the next question comes: is the *Cogito* as an inference? In general sense, it seems that Descartes uses “*Cogito ergo sum*” as an inference. But if we take a close look we find that some statements about the *Cogito* give an opposite impression. Whereas the statements demand that the first principle of his philosophy can be intuited as self-evident; and he manifestly negates that *Sum* is deduced by attending to *Cogito* in conjunction with a major premise, “everything that thinks exists.” So the question may get its answer by reading Descartes’ assessments thoroughly.

However, Descartes’ most valuable essay like the *Second Meditation* rightfully investigates the nature of the “I”. While “I think” in this sentence “I” is an immaterial thinking thing, i.e. ‘a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason’.¹³ On the other side, “I exist,” in this inferred proposition “I” can be known independently of any thought of bodily processes (e.g. digestion, locomotion, or the activity of sense organs).¹⁴ After knowing the definition of double ‘I’, we can easily say that the purpose of the *Cogito* is to help in attaining true knowledge which proposed in the *Synopsis* of the *Meditations*. In addition, the general principles of knowing are derived from the *Cogito*. And those principles could further be applied to other subject matter to yield the variety of metaphysical issues.

Conclusion: In concluding, we may say that Descartes’ frequently quoted Latin proposition *Cogito, ergo sum* - I think, therefore I am or exist – is accomplished by him as a most certain one to acquire true knowledge because the awareness of his own self is much more distinct and evident from any other else. And also the existence of consciousness or mind is the only certainty, and every other is dependent on this; that means, it is the highest of all. Thus, it becomes the foundation on which Descartes establishes an edifice spacious enough to comprise consideration of the principles of science and proof of the existence of God.

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