

Postmodern Debates on Cartesian Cogito

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Abstract—*In this paper, I'll discuss the postmodern debates of Rene Descartes' doctrine of cogito especially between Michel Foucault and his student Jacques Derrida. In my exposition, I shall discuss Descartes' contributions to modern philosophy in two – fold manner; namely, the central and the marginal doctrines. At the centre of Cartesian modernity, there is cogito and the emergence of human subjectivity, reason and rationalism, truth in terms of clearness and distinctness and the existence of God. On the margins, we come across madness, deception, demon and so forth. These are the issues, which are subjected to rigorous criticism and rejection by Foucault on the one hand, and Derrida on the other. The debate tries to re-allocate the central and the marginal themes by over-emphasizing the marginal issues and under-emphasizing the central doctrines. The ambition lies in paving the way for an internal departure from Cartesian modernity to Foucauldian-Derridean postmodernity. Instead of going to a critical reading of Derrida's interpretation of the Cartesian text step by step and his debate with Foucault, the present paper hopes to provide some of the basic issues involved in Descartes and Foucauldian-Derridean attempt to decenter Cartesian subjectivity. Both Foucault and Derrida reject the norms of strict logic and rationality, which characterize Cartesian modernity but they fail to provide counter hypothesis to supplant Cartesian rationality and subjectivity. For them, reality follows diverse models, which are rich in conflicts, history is viewed from ruptures and mutations, and there is a radical negation of totalitarian thinking. This could be regarded as expanding the horizons of modernity. But in marginalizing, delimiting, disseminating and decentering the Cartesian cogito, Foucault and Derrida have shown an intense distrust of metaphysics of self. I will, however, like to point out that the rejection of certitude, rationality and truth in cogito is tantamount to the rejection of man's creative activity, his capability to transcend the given limitations and hence the realization of his potentialities.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Before I come to Descartes' philosophy, I would like to dwell little more on the question of what is the relation of postmodernity to modernity. No postmodernist will say that postmodernity is a denial of modernity. They say, it is a reconstruction, a reinterpretation, and an attempt to give a new meaning to modernity. Postmodernity could be defined as an 'attitude' or a 'mood' or a 'Movement'. Modernity could be defined as an 'ism'; i.e., 'a clear set of ideas' and a programme of action based on it. Postmodernity is not a systematic thing

where you can develop concepts and relationships, precisely that is what the postmodernists' are against. In modernity, everything is a system like 'foundationalism', 'essentialism', 'teleology', 'rationalism', 'freedom', 'logocentrism' and so on. Behind that drive there is an absolute confidence in the capacity of unaided and autonomous human reason to solve all puzzles and remove the veil of mystery from reality. Reason alone can make the objective reality under human control through science and technology.

The postmodernity, on the other hand, wants to ignore even the present, in order to make a creative leap into the future untamed by laws, norms and institutions which are dominating the modernist society. Postmodernity is certainly not anti-modern in the sense of being backward looking. It does not want to reinstate the norms of religion and tradition which modernism repudiated. Nor does it want to abide by the norms of modernity- especially the emphasis on system-prone thinking and logical rationality.

What is held to be common to the disparate thinkers of postmodernity is a belief, though it is expressed in various ways, that in the present-day intellectual climate, we are observing a general crisis of 'philosophy'. In other words, we are facing "a series of crises... in which older modes of defining, appropriating and recomposing the objects of artistic, philosophical, literary and social scientific languages are no longer credible and in which one common aspect is the dissolution of the very boundary between the language and its object".¹ Stephen White has suggested that what he calls 'postmodern problematic' consists of four interrelated phenomena: "the increasing incredulity towards metanarratives, the growing awareness of new problems wrought by societal rationalism, the explosion of new informational technologies and the emergence of new social movements".² Richard Rorty has brought the postmodern claim about knowledge, language and the world like this - the

¹ Boyne, R. & Rattansi A. (eds.) *Postmodernism and Society* (London, MacMillan, 1990), p.12.

² White, S.K., *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.4.

modernist assumption was that we had a 'glassy essence' that could be rationally perceived and interpreted through particular techniques and through which we could perceive the world but postmodernism smashes that glass.

Given the above, postmodernity is, of its very nature, 'philosophical'. Let us take, for example, one of the key areas of postmodern discourse regarding philosophy - the notion of subjectivity. The postmoderns view modernity as having developed a particular view of this idea, beginning with (according to taste) Machiavelli, Descartes and/or Hobbes (I regard Descartes as the father of modernist subjectivity). As White has put it, "[in modernity] the individual subject is conceived of as an isolated mind and will... the modern world, says Derrida, stands under the imperative of giving a rational account of everything; or as Foucault more ominously puts it, of interrogating everything... it manifests itself finally in the twentieth century as a 'will to planetary order' [White is here citing Lyotard]"³.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was a philosopher, a mathematician and a man of science. In philosophy and mathematics, he made supreme contributions; in physics, though creditable, it was not so good as that of some of his contemporaries. In philosophy, Descartes' outlook was profoundly influenced by the discoveries made in physics and astronomy. While it is true that he retains much of scholasticism, such as the distinction between reason and sensibility, truth and falsehood, reason and faith, one and many, he does not accept the metaphysical-philosophical foundations laid by his predecessors, but attempts to formulate a philosophical system *de novo*. This had not happened since Aristotle. Descartes is therefore rightly considered as the Father of Modern Philosophy. In what follows, I shall discuss Descartes' two most important books, so far as its reference to postmodernism is concerned. These are the *Discourse on Method* (1637) and the *Meditations* (1642). In these books, Descartes has developed his method, dualism, doctrine of truth, innate ideas, and existence of God and so on.

Descartes begins with scepticism in regard to the senses because, "I have sometimes found that these senses played me false, and it is prudent never to trust entirely those who have once deceived us¹ In the process of scrutinizing the testimony of senses, Descartes arrives at the conclusion that it is prudent not to trust entirely anything that has once deceived us. Yet some sensory evidence, Descartes admits, are so strong that only a *madman* would doubt it, for example, that 'I am here seated by the fire wearing a dressing gown'. But then new doubt arises: one might be dreaming. In which case one's belief (about the fire and the dressing gown) might well be false. The upshot of the long and involved 'dreaming argument' is that any statement concerning external world may be doubted. To reinforce the dreaming argument, Descartes introduces the famous device of a malignant demon,

who has employed all his energies in deceiving him. He considers the sky, earth, colours, shapes, sounds, and all external things are not more than the delusions of dreams. He also considers himself as having no hands, no eyes. To elaborate this position, Descartes says, "Suppose therefore that all the things I see are false; I persuade myself that none of those things ever existed that my deceptive memory represents to me; I suppose I have no senses; I believe that body, figure, extension, movement and place are only fictions of my mind. What, then, shall be considered true? Perhaps only this, that there is nothing certain in the world."ⁱⁱⁱ The *First Meditation* ends on a note of apparently universal doubt.

The method of doubt has been one of the central issues of debate between Foucault and Derrida. This can be seen in Derrida's critique of Foucault in "*Cogito and the History of Madness*", and in his allusions to Foucault in his later essay "Sign, Structure and Play in the Human Science" in *Writing and Difference*.

Let us now turn to the above passage in the *First Meditation* so heatedly debated between Foucault and Derrida. The fact that senses are deceptive sometimes leads Descartes to the total denunciation of senses that of the effort to destroy all his previous beliefs in the effort to start all over again on firm ground, that is, certitude. However, as Descartes subsequently admits, the deceptive nature of sensibility is not as strong and radical as the deception interior to the mind as experienced passively either in sleep or in madness. These are the questions of the 'interiority of the mind' as opposed to the exterior - the sensible and physical doubt experience in relation to the world. In the case of the deception by the senses we know that we are being deceived. But there are certain occasions when we are deceived, we may not even know it or be able to recognise it as such, as in the case of dreams and madness. Descartes writes, "But it may be that although the senses sometimes deceive us concerning things which are hardly perceptible, or very far away, there are yet many others to be met with as to which we cannot reasonably have any doubt, although we recognise them by their means. For example, there is the fact that I am here seated by the fire, attired in a dressing gown, having this paper in my hands and other similar matters. And how could I deny that these hands and this body are mine, were it not perhaps that I compare myself to certain persons devoid of sense, whose cerebella are so troubled and clouded by the violent vapours of black bile, that they constantly assure us that they think that they are kings when they are really without covering, or who imagine that they have an earthenware head or are nothing but pumpkins or are made of glass. But they are made and I should not be any less insane were I so follow examples of so extravagant."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ On yet another occasion, Descartes says, "...what are these utterly certain matters? If things, which are ridiculous or absurd, sometimes, appear certain, even utterly certain, to people who are asleep or insane, then why should not things which are certain, appear false or doubtful? I know a man who once, falling asleep heard the clock strike four and

³ Ibid. , pp.2-3.(in brackets , mine).

counted the strike as one, one, one and one; it then seemed to him that there is something absurd about this and he shouted out – that clock must be going mad; it has struck one o'clock four times! Is there really anything so absurd or irrational that it could not come into the mind of the same one who is sleeping...?"^{iv}

The above passages occupy an important place in Foucault's reading of Descartes. Foucault claims that there is a basic imbalance in what he calls the 'economy of doubt' between dreams and madness. He says, "... dreams or illusions are surmounted within the structure of truth; but madness is inadmissible for the doubting subject."^v Foucault's reading shows that like Descartes, there is certainly a fundamental difference between sensations and madness, that the two can function independent of each other. The distinction between sensation and madness is the prerequisite to developing norms or standards in our thought. This new way of defining thought is decisive for Foucault, in so far as its normative character, established at the expense of madness, outlines the very possibility of history, as a "meaningful language that is transmitted and consummated in time."^{vi}

However, as I shall show in the course of my later discussion on Descartes, and as Derrida too has observed, Descartes' scepticism to sensibility does not amount to the determining of the notion of madness, but rather to ask questions regarding the general truth of ideas. As Derrida notes echoing Gueroult, "It is in the case of sleep, and not in that of insanity, that the *absolute totality* of ideas of sensory origin becomes suspect."^{vii} The same may be explained thus, "Derrida's claim relies not on the particular terms in which doubt is presented but on considering its function that is its economizing and totalizing character. He understands madness to be merely one term, in a constellation of terms that include dreams and *error*, necessary to interrogate the totality of ideas of sensory origin. Descartes' reference to madness is thus framed by the larger question regarding the danger of deception that the subject experiences in dreams."^{viii} It will perhaps be sufficient to consider this issue in regard to its articulation in the *Third Meditations*, when Descartes tries to identify his essence as a subject by feigning a set of conditions. He proposes to close his eyes, shut his ears, suspend his senses, efface from his thoughts all images of corporeal things and thus holding converse only with myself and considering my own nature, he tries to reach a better knowledge of himself. "But Descartes' efforts to achieve a more familiar acquaintance with himself could only take place through an interior conversation with himself, which implies the use of representation and the exchange of signs that is to say, the material and thus necessarily metaphorical character of language - at the very moment when he pretends to exclude from his thoughts all images of corporeal things. If madness cannot be excluded in Descartes, this is because in so doing Descartes would have to eliminate the very medium through which he comes to know himself, which is the language of the dialogue in which his thoughts are engaged which he can come into existence as

pure subjectivity."^{ix} The *Second Meditation* does the same. It rejects universal doubt and unearths at least one proposition that is immune from the diabolic doubt. For however great the demon's deceptions, 'he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think I am something.' Descartes concludes, "...I existed without doubt, by the fact that I was persuaded, or indeed by the mere fact that I thought at all. But there is some deceiver both very powerful and very cunning who constantly uses all his wills to deceive me. There is therefore, no doubt that I exist, if he deceived me; and let him receive me as much as he likes, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think, I am something. So that, after having thought carefully about it, and having scrupulously examined everything, one must then, in conclusion take as assured that the proposition: *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true, every time I express it or conceive of it in my mind."^x The method of doubt has been adopted by Descartes in order to arrive at the existence of the *cogito* and the assertion *cogito ergo sum* implies the application of mathematical method. In all the sciences like physics, astronomy; only mathematics has been able to arrive at any proofs, that is to say, certain and evident reasons. Descartes' method of doubt and his first axiom - *cogito ergo sum* - follow the mathematical method. Following mathematical method, Descartes furnishes a four-fold criterion of truth, "the first was never to accept anything as true that I did not know to be evidently so: that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitance and prejudice, and to include in my judgement nothing more than what presented itself so clearly and so distinctly to my mind that I might have no occasion to place it in doubt. The second, to divide each of the difficulties that I was examining into as many parts as might be possible and necessary in order best to solve it. The third is to conduct my thoughts in an orderly way, beginning with the simplest objects and the easier to know, in order to climb gradually, as by degree, as far as the knowledge of the most complex, and even supposing some order among those objects which do not precede each other naturally. And the last is everywhere to make such complete enumeration and such general that I would be sure to have omitted nothing."^{xi}

With this criterion of truth and the mathematical method, Descartes claims that he is able to use his reason in everything, if not perfectly, at least to the best of his ability. Derrida takes the truth of *cogito's* existence as an exercise of an impossible fiction, through a rhetoric of negation whose truth is based on the totalizing character of fiction and whose evidence relies on the power of representation to perform even its own negation, as if the verisimilitude of subjectivity did not require the substrate of language, even when attempting not to speak. As Descartes himself later admits in the *Second Meditation*, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it. It gives an indication to an implicit recognition of language in our thought and Derrida proposes to stand for that. At the centre of Descartes' *cogito*, according to Derrida, there is representation and language, which are written into and are a constitutive part of the

fabric of subjectivity. Derrida proposes the notion of *dissension* in order to “underline that in question is a self-dividing action, a cleavage and ferment interior to meaning in general.”^{xii} In other words, Derrida is suggesting that the self-dividing action of the subject is not an original act of order but rather an internal dissension within language and meaning, a differential movement within *logos* that cannot be consciously erased by pointing a foundational division between the interiority of reason and the exteriority of madness. Before I substantiate this view, I would like to go back to Descartes to elaborate his *Cogito*.

The emergence and illustration of *cogito* indicates Descartes’ acceptance of human subjectivity as the locus of truth and freedom. Descartes gives a considerable list, if everything in it belongs to the *cogito*, “A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.”^{xiii} In the context of “Objections and Replies”, Descartes says, “I could not but judge that something which I understand so clearly was true; but this is not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force, but because a great inclination in the will, and thus the spontaneity and freedom of my belief was all the greater in proportion to my lack of indifference.”^{xiv}

There are two intrinsically related features that emerge out of Descartes’ method of doubt and the doctrine of *cogito*. With the method of doubt, Descartes insists on beginning philosophy afresh; of starting from scratch by ridding the mind of all accumulated preconceptions, prejudices, blind beliefs and attitudes, however indispensable they may seem to be. Descartes begins with a systematic examination of whatever can be given by means of senses, by hitherto accepted beliefs. With the *cogito*, Descartes is developing a philosophy, which is essentially individualistic and revives the subjectivist tendencies of the Renaissance. The *Meditations* have been written in the first person and indeed the very title ‘*Meditations*’ conveys the character of the work - a private mental exercise which the reader must ‘make his own’. With the *cogito*, Descartes arrives at least at one existential truth - that something, which he calls ‘I’ exist.

Derrida challenges Foucauldian reading of Descartes’ *cogito* which is related to the logocentrism more closely than to the history of madness. Foucault’s reading of history presupposes that “reason constructs its symmetrical contrary, its other, only to exclude it in order to constitute itself, as if the ambiguities that already mark it as a traditional philosophical category did not already have a long established history since the Greeks.”^{xv} Reason, in the logocentric tradition from Heraclitus to Socrates, constructs its contradictory, such as, one and many, reality and appearance, truth and falsehood, being and becoming, and so on. But this assessment does not go for long. The contradictory status of reason as developed by Kant could not solve the antinomies of pure reason. It is Hegel’s notion of reason as a unifying agency that can overcome the contradictory state of existence. This has been the historical

process of the development of the notion of reason. Foucault, however, confines himself to Descartes alone. For Derrida, as opposed to Foucault, contradictions that mark the emergence of Cartesian reason are the historical expressions of determinations prefigured within reason: “It can be proposed that the classical crisis developed from and within the elementary tradition of *logos* that has no opposite but carries within itself and *says* all determined contradictions.”^{xvi} It may be said, “Derrida’s concept of reason is not a virtual category that can exclude from itself madness as its other, rather for him reason carries within itself, within its language and multiple meanings, determinations that *speak* otherwise, that double and endlessly divide its unity, so that its speech can also say its own contradictions.”^{xvii}

Derrida observes a rupture between *Discourse* and the *Meditations*. Whereas in the *Discourse*, Descartes produced the existence of the *cogito* through the fiction of the condition of his own existence that included the pretense of not having a body or any other physical reality, in the *Meditations*, Descartes defines himself as the object of a fictive agency whose total deception will certify the validity of his existence. Derrida, summarising Descartes, says, “Now, the recourse to the fiction of the evil genius will evoke, conjure up the possibility of total madness, a total derangement over which I could have no control because it is inflicted upon me - hypothetically - leaving me no responsibility for it. Total derangement is the possibility of a madness that is no longer a disorder of the body ... This time madness, insanity, will spare nothing, neither bodily nor purely intellectual perceptions.”^{xviii}

Foucault - Derrida debate on Descartes has always been circumscribed by certain difficulties. One of the major ambiguities in Derrida’s reading of Descartes is his explicit reuse of Foucault’s terminology of madness, which results in overemphasizing the role of madness, while attempting to put the above passage. The suggestion is that the fiction of the evil genius evokes the possibility of ‘total madness’ is intended as an answer to his debate with Foucault.

With the above discussion, both from Descartes and Foucault-Derrida debate on Descartes, I would like to argue that the creation of subjectivity in the Cartesian text is neither mediated by the evil genius nor it is a representation of a fiction. As stated in the context of methodology, between Cartesian subjectivity and the fiction in postmodernism there is a methodological gap. The method of doubt was a procedure adopted by Descartes to arrive at the certainty of subjectivity. But for Derrida, it is a kind of hyperbolic leap of reason that creates itself through a self-reflective dialogue. Derrida claims to have found a paradoxical element in the Cartesian hyperbolic doubt which consists in exceeding determinations while proceeding. But this is an out-come of Derrida’s deconstruction which first decentralizes the Cartesian subjectivity, then marginalizes the same and finally rejects the same. Derrida celebrates those moments such as doubt, reason, *cogito* and God when he

differs from Cartesian subjectivity and *defers* its own becoming philosophy proper.

Footnotes & Bibliography

Descartes, Rene, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. by F.E. Sutcliffe (Penguin Books, 1979), p. 96.

ii *Ibid.* p. 102.

iii *Ibid.* p. 102.

iv Michel Foucault, *Folie-et-de'raison : L'Historie de la folie a l'age classique*, quotation from Dalia Judovitz, "Descartes and Derrida : Economizing Thought", in *Continental Philosophy II* (ed) H.J. Silverman, (New York & London, Routledge, 1989) p. 44.

v Descartes, *Method and Meditations*, in "Objections and Replies", trans. Robert Stooth (Cambridge, CUP, 1988), p. 228.

vi *Ibid.* p. 44.

vii Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976) p. 51.

viii Judovitz, Dalia, "Descartes and Derrida : Economizing Thought," In *Continental Philosophy II* etc. p. 44.

ix *Ibid.*, p. 46.

x *Ibid.* p. 103.

xi *Ibid.* p. 41.

xii Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, etc. p. 38.

xiii *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Trans, John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff & Dugald Murdoch, Vol. II (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 19.

xiv *Ibid.* p. 134.

xv Judovitz, Dalia, "Descartes and Derrida", etc., p. 49.

xvi Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, etc., p. 42.

xvii Judovitz, Dalia, "Descartes and Derrida", etc., p. 49.

xviii Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, etc., p. 53.