

'METHODIC DOUBT' AND COGITO ERGO SUM (I THINK, THEREFORE I AM): A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF DESCARTES' SEARCH FOR CERTAIN TRUTH/KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Descartes' methodic doubt in his search for certainty and his eventual discovery of 'cogito ergo sum' (I think, therefore I am), which he accepted as the indubitable truth and foundation of his philosophy. Rene Descartes, a systematic and ordered thinker in the modern period of philosophy, employed methodic doubt in his search for certain truth. The basic questions are: How did Descartes employ methodic doubt in his search for certain truth? How did he eventually arrive at cogito ergo sum? Is there any relationship between Descartes' methodic doubt and cogito ergo sum? What are Descartes' characteristics or determinants of truth? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Descartes' ideas? These and other allied issues are the major concern of this article. Employing analytical and critical methods of philosophical investigation, this study examines Descartes' ideas. The researcher discovered that despite the contributions of Descartes, there are problems associated with his ideas. However, the innovations and contributions of Descartes in the domain of epistemology far outweigh such problems. This article concludes that Descartes is a renowned scholar in philosophy and has played indispensable roles in the development of modern epistemology in particular, and philosophy in general.

Keywords: Truth, Doubt, Methodic, Certainty and *Cogito* (I think)

INTRODUCTION

Rene Descartes is a prominent and popular scholar in the modern period of philosophy around 17th and 18th centuries. One cannot trace or recount properly the history of philosophy in the modern era without mentioning Rene Descartes. This stems from the fact that he made enormous and notable contributions towards the development of philosophy in that period. According to Smith (2023), "Descartes has been heralded as the first modern philosopher." (para. 1) Certainly, his influence in the modern period of philosophy is overwhelming. This partly explains why he is popularly known as 'the father of modern philosophy'.

Among his major contributions in philosophy is the prominent role he played in the

epistemic dispute as well as controversy between continental rationalists and British empiricists on the questions of the origin and justification of human knowledge. Rene Descartes was the founder and leader of continental rationalism. Other notable continental rationalists are Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. In disagreement to the empiricists who uphold sense experience as the origin of human knowledge, the continental rationalists insist that genuine knowledge is attainable only by human reason. According to Stumpf (1994):

But Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz fashioned a new ideal for philosophy. Influenced by the progress and success of science and mathematics, their new program was an attempt to provide philosophy with the exactness of mathematics. They set out to formulate clear rational principles that could be organized into a system of truths from which accurate information about the world could be deduced. Their emphasis was upon the rational capacity of the human mind, which they now considered the source of truth both about man and about the world. (p.235)

The continental rationalists believe firmly in the power of the human mind as the sole instrument for the attainment of truth.

Rene Descartes took it upon himself, as his major philosophical task, to search for indubitable truth through the instrumentality of his rational capacity. The certainty he observed in mathematics influenced him so much such that he desired to establish such certainty in philosophy. Hence, he strived to attain clear, distinct, certain and indubitable knowledge that could serve as the foundation of his philosophy. He had strong as well as firm conviction that such knowledge could be attained through human reason alone, and this distinguished him as a core rationalist. In his search for certainty, he insisted on systematic and methodic thinking in order to harness properly as well as effectively the powers of his mind. This explains why Descartes is popularly known as a 'systematic' or 'methodic' thinker. Hence, he adopted the system of methodic doubt. Obviously, his methodic doubt was a form of skepticism that was aimed at establishing a solid and unquestionable foundation for knowledge. Descartes methodically doubted everything until he arrived at something that is certain, and that is the very act of doubting. In the words of Brinkhof (2024), “Although Descartes can find reason to doubt his senses, he cannot doubt the act of doubting itself—a claim that is farther reaching than it seems.” (para. 9) The fact that Descartes was doubting implied that he was thinking, hence the establishment of *cogito* (I think). Certainly, the *cogito* (I think) presupposes the existence of the thinking substance, and this gave rise to the famous *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). Hence, this article focuses on Descartes' methodic doubt and *cogito ergo sum* in the domain of his critical and systematic search for certainty. In order to do justice to the demands of this study, analytical and critical methods of philosophical investigation are employed in this study to examine Descartes' ideas. The pertinent questions that are scholarly necessary in this

study are: How did Descartes employ methodic doubt in his search for certainty? How was Descartes able to establish *cogito ergo sum*? What is the relationship between methodic doubt and *cogito ergo sum* in Cartesian philosophy? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Descartes' methodic doubt? Has Descartes *cogito ergo sum* any implication for growth and development of human knowledge? These and other related issues are the major focus of this study.

For a systematic presentation, this article is made up of five sections. The first section centers on the analyses of Descartes' methodic doubt in the search for certain truth. The second section clarifies Descartes' concept of truth. The third section focuses on the examination of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. The fourth section examines the relationship between Descartes' methodic doubt and *cogito ergo sum*, while the fifth section focuses on the evaluation as well as conclusion of the article.

DESCARTES' METHODIC DOUBT: THE SEARCH FOR CERTAIN TRUTH

The attainment of certain and indubitable truth was the major preoccupation of Descartes in his philosophy. This was due to his strong desire to establish a solid and unshakable foundation for human knowledge. Descartes articulated his methodic doubt and the eventual discovery of *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) in his very influential works, *Discourse on Method* (1637) and *Meditations on the First Philosophy* (1641). Though they were written many years ago, they are still very relevant in contemporary epistemology. In order to give an undistorted analysis as well interpretation of Descartes' idea, the discourse in this article is based on the aforementioned original works of Descartes.

Descartes employed 'methodic doubt' in his search for indubitable knowledge. Hence, he wanted the search for certain truth to be systematic and ordered, unlike some scholars who searched for truth in unsystematic manner. In his search for certainty, Descartes believes strongly that doubt is of great importance since it enables one to overcome prejudice as well as error, and at the same time enables one to discover truth. It is only doubt that enables the human mind not to be attached to the senses. This stems from Descartes' insistence that the senses are incapable of attaining truth. In *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, Descartes (1641) states:

Now, although the utility of a doubt so general may not be manifest at first sight, it is nevertheless of the greatest, since it delivers us from all prejudice, and affords the easiest path-way by which the mind may withdraw itself from the senses; and, finally, makes it impossible for us to doubt wherever we afterwards discover truth. (p.108)

Doubting was a very important instrument for Descartes in his search for certainty. He doubted in a methodic manner, and such distinguished him in the domains of

epistemology in particular, and philosophy in general. He was not doubting for the sake of doubting, but rather to establish a solid foundation for knowledge. Hence, he may not be properly and entirely be classified as a skeptic. His skepticism was for a particular purpose, and it was brought to an end when the purpose was eventually achieved. It could be said that his skepticism was motivated by his strong desire to attain certain truth. First of all, Descartes rejected all the opinions he earlier accepted. This stemmed from his conviction that such earlier accepted opinions might distract and confound him in the search for certain truth. Besides, discarding such opinions would enable him to discover and admit others that are more correct.

In order to arrive at certain knowledge, Descartes came up with four precepts that would guide his mind in such search. He articulated the four precepts in his *Discourse on Method* thus:

The *first* was never to accept anything for true which I did not clearly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitancy and prejudice, and to comprise nothing more in my judgment than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly as to exclude all ground of doubt.

The *second*, to divide each of the difficulties under examination into as many parts as possible, and as might be necessary for its adequate solution.

The *third*, to conduct my thoughts in such order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex; assigning in thought a certain order even to those objects which in their own nature do not stand in a relation of antecedence and sequence.

And the *last*, in every case to make enumerations so complete and reviews so general, that I might be assured that nothing was omitted. (Descartes, 1637:pp.51-52)

Descartes remained faithful to the above precepts, and they guided him in his methodic doubt in the search for certainty. He thus rejected any idea in which he could imagine any element of doubt. This was an indication that such idea might not be truly certain. This conviction enabled him not to accept anything as true which he did not clearly and distinctly know to be so. In the words of Descartes (1637), "... I ought to reject as absolutely 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." (p.62) It was obvious to Descartes that persistent doubt could enable him discover the indubitable truth he was searching for. Analyzing Descartes' methodic doubt, Miceli (2018) states:

His strategy is to doubt, or not believe, any claim that is false or *could*

be false. He recognizes that his senses might be deceiving him now, since they have deceived him before; he might also be reasoning erroneously now, since he has reasoned badly before. He thereby doubts all beliefs from his senses and from his faculty of reasoning, since those beliefs *could* be false. (para. 4)

Hence, Descartes subjected everything to doubt without any reservation. He doubted the existence of his body and other things. He continued in this long journey of doubt until he discovered something that he could not doubt, and that was the fact of doubting which implied that he was thinking. Hence, Descartes discovered the certainty of the *cogito* (I think). Certainly, the *cogito* (I think) presupposes the existence of the thinking substance, and this led to the eventual discovery of the famous *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), which became the foundation of his philosophy, and the basis for the reversal of all his doubts.

DESCARTES' CONCEPT OF TRUTH

The previous section of this article focuses on the examination of Descartes' methodic doubt in the search for certain truth. The term 'truth' is a re-occurring concept in Descartes' epistemology. Generally, truth is a prominent concept in epistemology, and it occupies a central position in the issue of human knowledge. The methodic doubt, as demonstrated above, was geared towards the discovery of truth. This is as a result of the fact that the search for truth was the major preoccupation of Descartes. The questions that are to be addressed in this section of the discourse are: What actually is Descartes' concept of truth? What, according to Descartes, are the determinants of truth? In response to these questions, Descartes states categorically that whatever that is clearly and distinctly conceived is true. In the words of Descartes (1637), "...I concluded that I might take, as a general rule, the principle, that all the things which we very clearly and distinctly conceive are true..." (p.63). It becomes obvious from Descartes' specification that clarity and distinctness in conception are the basic determinants of truth. Clarity as well as distinctness in one's conception convinces one that what is conceived is true. Descartes argues that whatever that is clearly conceived automatically eliminates doubt. Certainly, when truth is attained, there is no further ground or cause for doubt. Elaborating further on the determinants of truth, Descartes (1641) states thus:

And certainly this can be no other than what I have now explained: for as often as I so restrain my will within the limits of my knowledge, that it forms no judgment except regarding objects which are clearly and distinctly represented to it by the understanding, I can never be deceived; because every clear and distinct conception is doubtless something... (p.152)

However, the question that could be asked is this: How actually can clarity and

distinctness in conception be ascertained? This question becomes very necessary because it is possible that what one claims to have conceived with clarity and distinctness may not actually be true. This issue is further complicated by the possibility that what one conceived with clarity and distinctness may not be conceived as such by another person. This poses a problem to Descartes' concept of truth. In *Discourse on Method* (1637), Descartes anticipated this problem when he observed "...that there is difficulty in rightly determining the objects which we distinctly conceive. (p.63) This remains a disturbing loophole in Descartes' epistemology.

EXAMINING DESCARTES' COGITO ERGO SUM

Cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am) is the end product of Descartes' methodic doubt, and at the same time the indubitable truth Descartes had been searching for. Descartes did not see any reason to continue with his doubt after the discovery of *cogito ergo sum*. He was convinced that *cogito ergo sum* is so clearly and distinctly conceived such that it left no ground for doubt. In fact, it fulfilled Descartes' conditions for truth. It became the first principle as well as the foundation of his philosophy. In the words of Descartes (1637):

But immediately upon this I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, 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 alleged by the sceptics 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. (pp.62-63)

With *cogito ergo sum* as the strong and indubitable foundation, Descartes reversed his doubt and undertook the project of proving the existence of God, his body and other things. It ought to be noted that *cogito ergo sum* is one of the epistemological doctrines that made Descartes very popular in the domain of philosophy. It became an object of discussion for scholars who are interested in Descartes' epistemology. Analyzing Descartes' idea, Miceli (2018) states:

Even if one doubts one's own existence, one *must* exist at that moment, since there must be something, or someone, doing the doubting. Doubting is a way of thinking, and one's existence is required to doubt or think in the first place: it is impossible to doubt and yet not exist. So, the "I think" element in the Cogito implies the direct, immediate, certain knowledge of one's own existence. Thought requires a thinker and this is known *with*

certainty, since not even the demon could deceive someone who doesn't exist. (para. 7)

It ought to be noted that the *cogito* (I think) establishes the certainty of the existence of the thinking substance which is different from the extended or corporeal substance. On his own part, Newman (2023) offered a scholarly analysis of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, bringing out very clearly the different interpretations of Descartes idea. In the words of Newman (2023):

The extraordinary certainty and doubt-resistance of the *cogito* marks an Archimedean turning point in the meditator's inquiry. However, there are interpretive disputes about whether Descartes intends the *cogito* to count – at its initial introduction, prior to the arguments for God – as *fully* indubitable, and therefore as perfect knowledge. It is quite common to interpret the *cogito* as being the first item of perfect knowledge... There is no disputing that Descartes characterizes the *cogito* as the “first item of knowledge [*cognitione*]”..., and as the first “piece of knowledge [*cognitio*]” Noteworthy, however, is the Latin terminology Descartes uses in these characterizations ('*cognitio*' and its cognates).

Obviously, *cogito ergo sum* marked a turning point in Descartes philosophical pursuit. It ushered in the era of certainty. However, the question is this: Can one attain a perfectly certain truth or knowledge that has no possibility of error? This is a very controversial issue among contemporary epistemologists. Hence, it remains an object of discussion in contemporary epistemology.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DESCARTES' METHODIC DOUBT AND COGITO ERGO SUM (I THINK, THEREFORE I AM)

At this point of the discourse, it is pertinent to posit these questions: Is there any relationship between Descartes' methodic doubt and *cogito ergo sum*? Could *cogito ergo sum* be possible without Descartes' methodic doubt? What actually is the link between Descartes' methodic doubt and *cogito ergo sum*? It is obvious from the discourse in the previous sections of this article that there is a deep relationship between Descartes' methodic doubt and *cogito ergo sum*. According to Newman (2023), “Testing the *cogito* by means of methodical doubt is supposed to reveal its unshakable certainty. Hyperbolic doubt helps me appreciate that the existence of my body is subject to doubt, whereas the existence of my thinking is not.” It ought to be noted that it was actually Descartes' methodic doubt that enabled him to discover *cogito ergo sum* as the certain and unquestionable foundation for knowledge. Thus, Descartes' methodic doubt

and *cogito ergo sum* are intrinsically connected. The link between the two is very strong and cannot be broken. The methodic doubt was the necessary condition for the possibility of *cogito ergo sum*. In other words, the methodic doubt was the intellectual instrument through which *cogito ergo sum* was discovered and established as the first principle and foundation of Descartes' philosophy.

EVALUATION

Descartes' employment of methodic doubt in his search for certain truth, and his eventual discovery of *cogito ergo sum* as the foundation of his philosophy are among the major epistemological breakthroughs in the modern period of philosophy. Descartes seems to be the first philosopher in the modern period to have employed a methodic as well as systematic approach in the search for certainty. His ideas elicited varied reactions from different scholars. Certainly, his ideas were admired and praised by many scholars. Brinkhof (2024) observes that "...reverence for Descartes far outweighs criticism." (para. 12) Descartes contributed immensely towards the development of epistemology in the modern period of philosophy. He popularized rationalistic approach to human knowledge, and made it very fashionable in the modern period of philosophy.

Descartes' methodic doubt has a lot of epistemological implications. It enabled him to establish *cogito ergo sum* as the solid foundation for knowledge. This distinguished him as a 'core foundationalist' and 'system builder'. Hence, he demonstrated the importance of building one's knowledge on solid and indubitable foundation. Also, Descartes' methodic doubt demonstrates that the search for knowledge ought to be systematic and methodic. This enables one to eliminate error as much as possible. It could be said that errors in our knowledge of the world may be attributed to unsystematic and disordered search for knowledge. Descartes' methodic doubt brings to consciousness that doubt enables us to discover new ideas, and thus increases our knowledge of the world. It is only when one subjects what one claims to know to a systematic doubt that one is exposed to new ideas. Also, Descartes' idea demonstrates to us that every search for knowledge ought to be guided by reason, utilizing fundamentally our mental powers.

However, some scholars are not quite comfortable with Descartes' epistemological ideas, and have criticized his ideas in many ways. Such criticisms are necessitated by the problems associated with Descartes' ideas. Jim stone cited by Brinkhof (2024) argues that Descartes "... never really offers a logical justification for the connection between doubting, thinking, and existence." (para. 10) Similarly, Miceli (2018) is not comfortable with Descartes' epistemological ideas. Hence, he criticizes Descartes thus: "The problem with Descartes' standard for knowledge is that almost no belief meets it. Descartes thought he could show how our ordinary knowledge claims are ultimately based on the Cogito, but most philosophers have not been convinced by his case." (Miceli, 2018, para. 12) Certainly, Descartes' standard for knowledge is not generally

accepted by philosophers. Also, it seems to the researcher that Descartes did not justify adequately his claim that *cogito ergo sum*, which he accepted as indubitable truth, is clearly and distinctly conceived. He only identified clarity and distinctness as determinants of truth without specifying adequately how such clarity and distinctness can actually be ascertained and determined.

Furthermore, Descartes claims to have attained certainty with the discovery of *cogito ergo sum*, and further claims that it cannot be doubted based on the assumption that it is free from error. Hence, he accepted it as the strong and unshakable foundation for his philosophy. The question that should be addressed is this: Is it possible for human knowledge to be completely certain such that it excludes every possibility of error? This is a very controversial issue in contemporary epistemology. Descartes presumes that human knowledge can be completely certain once it is clearly and distinctly conceived. However, fallibilists like Charles Sanders Peirce and others argue that no idea or theory can be justified conclusively. This implies that there is always possibility of error in every idea. Such conception poses serious threat to absolute certainty in human knowledge. Obviously, there are some ideas which were accepted as true, but later discovered to be false. For instance, in the scientific world, geo-centric astronomy was accepted as true for many years until the period of Copernican revolution which enthroned helio-centric astronomy. Hence, the possibility of error in human knowledge cannot be entirely dismissed.

CONCLUSION

The discourse in this article examines Descartes' methodic doubt in his search for certainty, and his eventual discovery of *cogito ergo sum* which he accepted as indubitable truth and the foundation of his philosophy. Obviously, there are problems associated with Descartes' ideas as demonstrated in the discourse above. However, his innovations and contributions in the domain of epistemology far outweigh the problems associated with his ideas. Hence, despite such problems, Descartes is a remarkable figure in the history of philosophy. This is as a result of his remarkable contributions towards the development of epistemology in particular, and philosophy in general. His ideas boosted rationalism in the modern period of philosophy. It becomes obvious that the history of modern philosophy can never be complete without Rene Descartes.

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