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DESCARTES' RATIONALISM AND THE CRITERION OF CERTAINTY IN KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

This work examines Rene Descartes' rationalist epistemology as a criterion for certainty of knowledge. This work is geared to address the problem of doubt or uncertainty in human knowledge. Hence, his search for epistemological certainty made him to establish the foundation of true knowledge on the rational powers of human thinking or reason alone. This work makes use the method of analysis to analyse Rene Descartes' rationalist epistemology as criterion of human knowledge based on self-evidence and a priori principles. Thus, this work establishes methodic doubt as a philosophical principle to reconstruct philosophy on a very solid foundation without error by discovering 'his thinking self' as the unquestionable truth that other truths can be known. Again, it conceives intuition and deduction as the only two reliable methods of attaining authentic knowledge of things. In addition, this work sees innate ideas as a way of driving something that is clear and distinct like existence of God. But, human reason alone as Rene Descartes postulates cannot serve as the only reliable source of true knowledge. Thus, this work postulated that reason is complemented with experience in the attainment of authentic knowledge of things in the world and beyond.

Keywords: rational, certainty, knowledge, methodic, doubt, intuition and deduction

1.1 Introduction

The development of science in the renaissance period of 14th century had enormous influence in the history of philosophy. It characterized the end of the medieval period which ushered in the modern period. Hence, the impact of the renaissance science and mathematics on Philosophy is reflected in the rationalist and empiricist traditions in the modern period. The rationalist philosophers, Rene Descartes, Benedict Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz were influenced by mathematical method but the British empiricists, John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume took on empirical method.

Rene Descartes, a French philosopher, mathematician and scientist was an important precursor in the development of modern philosophy and science in the 17th century. Born on 31st of March, 1596 in La Haye, Touraine, France”. He studied classics, science, mathematics, and metaphysics at the Jesuit College, La Fleche in 1606 and became the father of modern philosophy. He developed “a new science grounded in observation and experiment” by implementing a new system or principle of methodic doubt as the ultimate foundation of human knowledge. This work therefore is aimed to examine Rene Descartes’ rationalist epistemology as a condition of human knowledge which is based on self-evidence and a priori principles.

1.2 Conceptual Clarification of Key Terms

It is important to clarify the concepts that have to do with this study. Thus, the key terms that are associated with this study are: epistemology, knowledge, self-evident and a priori.

Etymologically, epistemology is derived from two Greek words “episteme” meaning “knowledge” and “logos” meaning “study”. So, epistemology is the study or science of knowledge. It is the branch of philosophy that studies “the nature, origin and limits of human knowledge”. In the words of Festus O. Okafor, “this is the branch of philosophy which deals with the origin and structure of knowledge, as well as the methods and validity of knowledge acquisition”⁴ In other words, epistemology examines the truth and validity of human knowledge.

Furthermore, Festus O. Okafor envisages that epistemology is classified into two: theory of knowledge and logic. Theory of knowledge is a part of epistemology that has to do with “the theoretical examination of how knowledge is acquired”. On the other hand, logic is the aspect of epistemology that deals with, “...considerations concerning truth and validity in human communication, inductive and deductive reasoning and the philosophy of language”.⁶

Hence, another term or concept that is associated with this study is knowledge. Knowledge is an ambiguous concept. The common man understanding of knowledge can be an awareness, understanding or skill. One can pin point instances of knowledge but one cannot define knowledge. Knowledge is traditionally characterized as “a justified true belief”. In this regard, three conditions are necessary for a person to claim to know a thing. First is that ‘the thing must be true’. Again, ‘the person must believe it’. Finally, ‘the belief must be justified’.

But an American philosopher Edmund Gettier challenges the tradition conception of knowledge as “a justified true belief”. He envisages that ‘it is possible that a person could believe something, that thing could be true, and he could be justified in believing it but s/he does not know it’.

In the light of this viewpoint, Bertrand Russell gives an example thus: “there is the man who looks at a clock which is not going, though he thinks it is, and who happens to look at it at the moment when it is right, the man acquires a time belief as to the time of the day, but cannot be said to have knowledge.

There is the man who believes, truly, that the last name of the Prime Minister in 1906 began with a B, but who believes this because he thinks that Below was Prime Minister then, whereas it was Campbell Banner man”. The proof in this case is ‘inconclusive because it is based on assumption’. Thus, knowledge is ‘a justified true belief which must be based on conclusive evidence’.

On this note, Hamlyn conceived that knowing is being in the position to certify or give one’s authority or warrant of the truth of what is said to be known. In other words, one has to be sure of the truth of what one claims to know. This is so because knowledge implies certainty.

In addition, other terms that have to do with this study are self-evident and a priori. Both of them are connected together. Self-evident means something that is “clearly true and requiring no proof or explanation”. In other words, it means something that is perceived clearly and distinctly. Intuition gives a clear and distinct perception of things without recourse to reasoning. Thus, Rene Descartes saw intuition as one of the true methods of acquiring authentic knowledge of things.

On the other hand, a priori principles mean relating to or denoting reasoning or knowledge which proceeds from theoretical deduction rather than from observation or experience”. Rene Descartes conceived deduction as the relation of truths to another. Hence, he established the connection between intuition and deduction in the sense that both of them have to do with truth. Intuition perceives truth completely while deduction deals with necessary inference that the truth implies. In other words, it is used to derive other truth from one general truth that emanates from intuition. A priori justification according to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “is a type of epistemic justification that is, in some sense, independent of experience”. Thus, a priori justification is associated with self-evident truth that has some link with intuition.

Both terms such as knowledge, self-evident and a priori principle or justification have to do with truth. But, self-evident and a priori principle or justification deal with rational or theoretical judgment or inference unlike knowledge that is characterized by rational and empirical evidence or even divine revelation.

1.3 Descartes Rationalist Epistemology

Rene Descartes was the originator of 17th century of continental rationalism which credited him as the father of modern philosophy. His rationalist epistemology conceives reason as the primary basis of human knowledge unlike sense perception that is prone to error. He believed that reason is the source of true knowledge of everything in the world.

His philosophy was so much influenced by the precision of mathematics. Hence, he sought to attain the clarity and certainty of mathematics into philosophy by removing all doubts, imprecision, or uncertainty in philosophy. His search for certainty of knowledge made him to build “the system of true knowledge

upon the powers of human reason alone”. Thus, he used the system or principle of “the methodic doubt” to reconstruct philosophy on a solid foundation without error.

1.3.1 Methodic Doubt

Descartes established in his Rules in the functioning of human mind firstly to accept nothing as true which I did not clearly recognize to be so... to accept in them nothing more than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I could have no occasion to doubt it”.¹⁴ Hence, he applied a method or principle known as ‘methodic doubt’ to doubt everything. In the course of doubting everything that he discovered one basic truth which was impossible for him to doubt i.e. the fact that he was thinking. From there, he inferred his own existence – (cogito ergo sum) which means “I think, therefore I am”. This unquestionable truth became the groundwork of his philosophy. From this basic truth, other truths can be known through intuition and deduction.

1.3.2 Intuition and deduction

Descartes conceived intuition and deduction as the only two reliable means or methods of attaining authentic knowledge of things. Intuition gives a clear perception of things without recourse to reasoning. This type of knowledge is acquired in a moment of insight. *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines intuition thus:

..., in philosophy, the power of obtaining knowledge that cannot be acquired either by inference or observation, by reason or experience. As such, intuition is thought of as an original, independent source of knowledge, since it is designed to account for just those kinds of knowledge that other sources do not provide. The knowledge of necessary truths and of moral principles...¹⁵

Descartes saw intuition as “an intellectual activity or vision of such clarity that it leaves no doubt in the mind”. Intuition for him, gave people clear perception and truth about reality for example, (cogito ergo sum- I think, therefore, I am). He also conceives that intuition makes people to establish the link between one truth and another.

On the other hand, deduction for him is related to intuition in the sense that “it is all necessary inference from facts that are known with certainty”. From one general truth, other truths can be deduced. Samuel Enoch Stumpf envisages that Descartes made the connection between intuition and deduction in such a manner that both of them have to do with truth thus:

By intuition we grasp a simple truth completely and immediately, whereas by deduction we arrive at a truth by a process, a “continuous and uninterrupted action of the mind”. By tying deduction so closely with intuition, Descartes gave a new interpretation of deduction, which up to his time had been identified with a mode of reasoning called

*syllogism. Deduction, as Descartes described it, is different from a syllogism, for whereas a syllogism indicates the relationship of concepts to each other, deduction for Descartes indicates the relation of truths to each other.*¹⁶

So, intuition and deduction for Descartes work together in the unfolding of the truth that is indubitable in things. They play essential role to derive in attaining true knowledge of things in Rene Descartes' rationalist epistemology. A true proposition or knowledge for him is certain when it is perceived clearly and distinctly for example, idea of God.

1.4 Existence of God

Rene Descartes believed in the theory of innate ideas which for him is not derived from the senses or experience. He conceived that innate ideas are the inborn ideas that are clear and distinct like mathematics, God and mind's own existence. He proposed that the idea of God is innate.

In his 5th meditation, Descartes depicted an innate idea of God as a perfect being". Hence, he devised an ontological argument of existence of God as "a supremely perfect being".¹⁷ This idea of a perfect or infinite being is an innate idea that could not have been structured by human mind that is finite. So, man's idea of infinite and perfect being emanates from outside of him from a perfect being (God) that exists who put this idea in the mind of people.

In the view of Rene Descartes, this idea of infinite or perfect being is innate in man which implies that men are born with them. He envisages that existence of God as an infinite or perfect being means that God is a being who cannot deceive or be deceived. This attribute or nature of God as an infinite or perfect being is perceived clearly and distinctly in human mind as something that is true or certain. One can see that Descartes applied his rational power to prove the existence of God and at the same time, his argument of existence of God demonstrates the efficiency of his rational mind. Thus, other things in the external or physical world can be deduced from the existence of God.

1.5 External World

Descartes in his rationalist epistemology have discovered the thinking self and the existence of God. But he could not account for his body and things in the world since they have to do with sense perception that is deceptive. Descartes perceived clearly and distinctly that there are certain actions going on in him like movement, respiration, irritability e.t.c. From there, he came to know that he had a body which was not his essence. In addition, he noticed the existence of things from other bodies outside of him.¹⁸ Thus, he deduced the existence of those other things in the material or physical world are emanating from God.

Having established in his knowledge of external world that he had a body by perceiving certain actions clearly and distinctly unfolding in his life which is not his essence because his rationalist epistemology

conceived that human essence consist in his mind as a thinking self, it is important at this point to look at his mind body interaction which is central to his rationalist philosophy.

1.6 Mind and Body

Mind is opposite of the body. Descartes' rationalist theory of knowledge has established the existence of mind and body. The mind body interaction is a philosophical problem that is perennial in the history of philosophy. But, how can one account for the relationship or interaction between the mind and body since both of them operate at different terrain? Human mind operates within the rational domain unlike the body that has to do with experience. How is it that human mind controls the body in such a manner that anything man thinks in his mind has reaction in the body? In other words, how can one account for the mind body problem?

Descartes answered this question by saying that the interaction of mind and body takes place in the pineal gland in the brain.¹⁹ But, this response does not resolve the problem of mind body interaction because if there is an interaction, 'there would have to be contact'. What it means is that 'the mind would have to be extended' which is very difficult to explain in Cartesian rationalist epistemology.

Even though Rene Descartes tried in his philosophy to resolve the mind body problem, the problem of mind body interaction is still a perennial problem in the history of philosophy. Other philosophers have attempted in their different capacities to tackle this problem but no philosopher has succeeded in resolving this problem up to till present moment.

1.7 Evaluation

Rene Descartes had contributed so much in the quest for true knowledge by placing human knowledge on a very solid foundation which cannot be doubted or countered by the criticism of the skeptics. He used the principle of methodic doubt to reconstruct the philosophical venture with indubitable truth that is derived from the clarity of mathematics. But, there are certain objections in his philosophy.

Rene Descartes was not a thorough going rationalist in the sense that his philosophy was filled with inconsistencies. He deviated in some ways from his rationalist theory. Having established in his philosophy to accept something as true only what is clearly and distinctly perceived by the mind, he applied this maxim through his method known as "methodic doubt" to discover the basic truths such as his thinking self and existence of God. But, he contradicted himself by resorting back to sense perception in the explanation of his body and things in the world. His rationalist theory of knowledge detested sense perception as a reliable means of attaining true knowledge.

But, his theory cannot negate the role of experience in the acquisition of human knowledge. Human reason is complemented by experience in attaining an authentic knowledge of things. Plato's refutation of sensory knowledge seems not to portray the true nature of things in the physical world. It seems like a

fable talking about the transient world and the world of forms. The things in physical world of human experience cannot be the shadow of real state of things in the world of form. Hence, Aristotle conceives that there is no knowledge in the mind which does not come from the senses. The empiricists share the line of thought of Aristotle by envisioning that all knowledge is derived from experience.

Contrary to the view of rationalist philosophers, John Locke rejected innate knowledge and upheld that all knowledge is derived from sense perception. For him, the primary object of human knowledge is ideas which are derived from the object of human experience. Experience furnishes us with two sources of ideas namely, sensation and reflection. Through the senses, man is acquainted with the knowledge of things in their external environment. Reflection impresses ideas on the human mind. David Hume envisages that human knowledge is derived from the sensory impressions that are made upon us by physical things.²¹

The rationalists' search for epistemological certainty is complemented with experience. Unlike the rationalists that rely so much on the clarity or precision of mathematics as the basis for epistemological certainty, the empiricists like John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume situate their philosophy on experimental method. Both mathematical and experimental methods play indispensable role in the development of the modern science.

It is evident that the rationalist and empiricist traditions created a problem of knowledge in the sense that they adopted extreme positions in the foundation of human knowledge. Contrary to the rationalist's postulation that reason is the only source of human knowledge, the empiricists conceive that true knowledge can only be acquired by experience. Immanuel Kant resolved this problem by upholding that true knowledge is partly acquired from experience and reason.²² His philosophical synthesis of rationalism and empiricism contributed so much towards the growth of human knowledge.

One can observe that the rationalists' theory of knowledge is channeled towards metaphysics unlike the empiricists' theory that is motivated by empirical science. Although metaphysics and science differ in their orientation, both of them cannot do without each other. Science and metaphysics share a symbiotic relationship in the sense that metaphysics lays the foundation of modern science. Metaphysics can be in form of a theory on which the practice of science is based.²³ Even though empirical science emphasizes so much on practice or practical, practice cannot work without theory. The pragmatic theory of knowledge is scientific in its approach which deals with usefulness or workability of theory in practice.

1.8 Conclusion

This work has examined Rene Descartes' rationalist theory as a condition of human knowledge based on self-evidence and a priori principles. His rationalist theory militates against sense perception as a source of true knowledge. Thus, he saw intuition and deduction as the only two reliable methods of

attaining truth and authentic knowledge of things in this material or physical world and beyond. On the other hand, theory cannot negate the role of sense experience in the acquisition of human knowledge. It is evident that human reason is complemented by experience in attaining an authentic knowledge of things in this material or physical world and beyond.

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