

Good example of Descartes essay

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



Philosophy

Introduction

In many ancient civilizations, it was a firm belief that the sun revolves round the earth and nobody dare to doubt the belief for centuries until Nicolaus Copernicus, an astronomer of the Renaissance period doubted on this age old belief and put forward his revolutionary work stating that it is the earth that revolves round the sun. Lawhead has rightly stated that “ Doubt stimulates us to action and seeks its own elimination by means of inquiry, which is a process of finding the way to a new and more adequate belief” (p. 495). Actually, people refrain from doubting landmark and well-accepted beliefs sometimes due to fear of backlash from the society and great discomfort of withstanding a state of doubt for a long period. Thus, when French philosopher Descartes thought of implementing doubt as a method to reach at genuine answers of some unanswered questions, he was thought as a lunatic by many of his contemporaries and his works were criticized severely.

Body

Rene Descartes (1596–1650), a distinguished mathematician and philosopher of 17th century refutes to believe on all established beliefs and rather choose a striking method –method of doubt to reach at any conclusion. In his short work, *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (Meditations on First Philosophy), he employs his doubt to lead to several of his theories regarding soul, knowledge and dualism. Broughton stated that “ When Descartes refers to the method of universal doubt., he means a method that

begins with consideration of grounds for radical skeptical doubt” (p. 4). He followed an elementary strategy of defeating skepticism and doubting every existing truth at three diverse levels in his work “Meditations on First Philosophy”. These three levels are ‘Perceptual Illusion’, ‘The Dream Problem’ and the ‘Deceiving God’. The hypothesis of ‘Deceiving God’ finally led him to that conclusion that “I am I exist” in his second work on Meditations. He asserts that “I am I exist” is necessarily a truth as he gradually discovers that his own existence is evident by the fact that it is not possible at all that his existence is deceived by God and he does not exist at the same time as for getting deceived also, he must have an existence. According to Descartes, a perfect God can never deceive any man. Thus, Descartes own method of doubt led him to formulate the ‘theory of soul’ as he comes to the conclusion drawn from his own self evident existence and consciousness that there is a thinking being (soul) as well as an extended being (matter). Skirbekk and Gilje very well states that “Hence, Descartes postulates the doctrine of *res cogitans* (soul) and *res extensa* (matter) as two fundamentally different phenomena and as the only two phenomena that exist (besides God): the soul is only conscious, not extended” (p. 193). He states that soul is free as well as is rational. He even suggests that animals have only bodies, no souls and to prove this dissect some animals also. In addition to the ‘theory of soul’, the philosopher is also known for his “theory of knowledge’ and here, he again employs his method of doubt successfully. He in fact implements a revolutionary method of doubt where he doubts almost every established belief. At that time, there was a transitional period in which old philosophies face challenge by new age

philosophers and the new philosophies found it hard to gain acceptance. Since, doubting all the beliefs will be an infinite process; Descartes begins to doubt a certain set of beliefs classified in different classes or groups to see whether they met any of his pre-specified criteria. Thus, each of the groups of beliefs were examined by him first based on the sense perception as this is something that is readily believed, but may be deceptive. For example, the minute objects as seen by our naked eyes have proved wrong, when Kepler designed a microscope in 1611. Moreover, there are always chances of optical illusion and hallucinations can also have an effect on senses. He also states that it is possible that a powerful demon is controlling our perceptions and hence any belief based upon the sensory perception is always doubtful.

Descartes then cast his doubt on classes of beliefs based on the doubt of existence of a physical world and material things. He does not even spare beliefs drawn from natural sciences as according to him, these beliefs are also untrustworthy. Lastly, in his quest to doubt almost everything possible in order to find true knowledge, he doubted mathematical beliefs too.

Eventually, it becomes clear that there are some things that should not be doubted and can withstand extreme skepticism. His thinking was very similar to that of Greek philosopher and mathematician –Plato who also had insisted that knowledge in its pure form is vital to judge the flaws of the world. Lavine in his book has explained that “ For both Plato and Descartes there is a superior level of knowledge which has reason as its source and which provides certainty. Descartes called this superior type of knowledge rational truth, the truth of clear and distinct ideas” (chapter 12). Descartes was

actually hell bent to build a mathematical philosophy so rational in nature that no one can ever doubt the same. However, it is quite surprising that Descartes choose to doubt on a simple mathematical calculation like sum of two and three equals to five, but fails to take in his account complex mathematical equations to cast a doubt.

Dualism as in philosophy of mind is necessarily the position of the mental phenomena in some respects. In Rene Descartes philosophy, there was a kind of dualism that can be called mental dualism as “ Descartes consistently distinguishes between thinking that involves both mind and matter, and thinking which involves mind alone. This dualism divides the objects of our thoughts into two kinds, just as the substantial dualism divides substances into two kinds” (Hill p. 6). Descartes in its existence in his famous work ‘ Meditation’ has denied any physical presence of the mind. He doubted all previous beliefs and while doing so, he even doubt on the existence of his own body as he may be dreaming about the same or may have an illusion about it due to some evil demon. However, while doing so he comes across this conclusion that it is undoubted that he has a mind or not as he can think, doubt, etc while body movement is solely because of the mechanical forces. He asserts that mind is not extendable and is undivided whereas body is extended and occupies a certain space. According to him, it is possible to divide body into more particles. He argues for his concept of dualism not once, but twice in his work ‘ Meditations’. Once, it was in the ‘ Second Meditation’ while giving the hypothesis of a deceiving demon and again in the ‘ Sixth Meditation’ when the God’s existence has already established and the previous hypothesis of demon is abandoned. His dualism

is now known as ‘ Cartesian Dualism’ by Anglo –American philosophy and can also be referred as mind-body dualism. According to many thinkers, dualism is perhaps the biggest contribution of Descartes in spite of the fact that Descartes was caught into a major dilemma of explaining that how soul being completely opposite to a body can influence the same and that too without coming in contact with former. His explanation of the pineal gland role in perceiving sensation, imagination and cause of bodily movements was also totally wrong not only as per the modern medical advances, but also by findings of that era. He wrongly thought the pineal gland situated within our brain is filled with animal spirits while it was discovered a century ago that a pineal gland consists of liquid. He even goes to the extent of claiming this small pineal gland as the principal seat of soul and the place which led to all formation of thoughts by human beings. Interestingly, he held the gland responsible for the bodily movements too by suggesting that motions of the pineal gland cause the animal spirits to flow from the gland and reflexes is also a cause of bodily movements.

Conclusion

Based on the aforesaid facts, it is easy to conclude that although the theories of Descartes are highly disputable, it is the method of doubt that leads to diverse theories of soul, knowledge and dualism. ‘ Meditations on First Philosophy’ by Descartes is still considered as one of the most important works done in modern philosophy and he is also touted as the first modern philosopher. Doubting each and every belief by Descartes left no room for any ambiguities. The underlying thought was clear before him that, there is a difference between truth and beliefs. Not all beliefs can be true

and the foundation of philosophy should be only on true beliefs. However, there are some conclusions also which are highly unsatisfactory like casting doubt over the existence of own body and role of pineal gland. It is notable how Descartes doubts all beliefs by means of reasoning as only then they can be testified by the five senses to reach a true conclusion.

Works Cited

- Lawhead, F. William. Cengage Advantage Books: THE VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY, Fourth Edition. United States of America: Cengage Learning, 2015. Print.
- Broughton, Janet. Descartes's Method of Doubt. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002. Print.
- Skirbekk, Gunnar, and Gilje Nils. A History of Western Thought: From Ancient Greece to the Twentieth Century. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Lavine, T. Z. THE DRAMATIC SURVEY THAT MAKES PHILOSOPHY A FORCE IN OUR LIVES, OUR WORLD, OUR VISIONS FROM SOCRATES TO SARTRE: THE PHILOSOPHIC QUEST. New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1984. Print.
- Hill, James. Descartes and the Doubting Mind. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012. Print.