

Descartes' "Cogito Ergo Sum": The Revolution and Critique of Rationalism

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Abstract:

René Descartes' statement "Cogito Ergo Sum" ("I think, therefore I am") had a revolutionary impact on Western philosophy. By employing radical doubt, Descartes sought to rebuild human knowledge on firm, unquestionable foundations established through reason alone. The "Cogito" marked his realisation that the certainty of his existence as a thinking being could serve as a foundational truth. From this, he attempted to logically derive the existence of God and the external world. Descartes' emphasis on rationalism over empiricism initiated a paradigm shift, liberating human enquiry from religious dogma. However, his approach attracted critiques, particularly regarding the role of the "I", his introduction of God, his prioritisation of intuition over deductive logic, Cartesian dualism, and whether the "Cogito" truly establishes the existence of a thinking subject. Despite these objections, Descartes' reasoning profoundly influenced subsequent Rationalist, Empiricist, and Idealist philosophies, shaping modern epistemological discussions. This text provides an overview of Descartes' revolutionary doubt, the "Cogito" reasoning, his broader rationalist framework, and a survey of major philosophical critiques, highlighting the seminal impact of the "Cogito" on modern Western philosophy.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background on Descartes' "Cogito Ergo Sum"

Descartes' doubting of everything is merely a method of seeking truth, or rather the first step of that method. The real goal is to be free from all doubt before accepting anything as true, by subjecting it to rigorous scrutiny under the lens of doubt.¹ So when the question arises, where does this tendency to doubt everything ultimately lead? To deny one's own existence. If nothing is beyond doubt, even the existence of God requires proof, then do I exist or not? What is the proof of my existence?

So, when the question arises, where does this tendency to doubt everything ultimately lead? To deny one's own existence. If nothing is beyond doubt, even the existence of God requires proof, then do I exist or not? What is the proof of my existence?

The answer comes in the form of revolutionary reasoning—in Latin, "cogito ergo sum" meaning 'I think, therefore I am'. The very fact that I doubt, that I raise questions about everything, including my own existence, proves that I exist, that I am alive indeed. In this way, the philosopher Descartes touched the faithless, doubt-ridden, agonised mind of the 21st century, becoming a kindred spirit to our souls. Today, we have no holy cows.¹

There is no ground of unquestioned belief. We do not know the path to human liberation. The colour of truth today is not black or white, but rather grey. The scientific consciousness of the 21st century has taught us that there is no absolute, transcendent truth independent of time and space. Scientific truth is relative. What is the

ultimate truth today may become a limited truth tomorrow based on new evidence or proof.

Therefore, today we will not accept anything without sufficient evidence and proof. We will scrutinise everything—be it God or Marxism, socialism or capitalism, democracy or dictatorship. This is what Descartes wanted from humanity. ¹ Today, when at a conference of eminent scholars, a leading political leader of the country declares the trunk of Hindu god Ganesha as an example of ancient plastic surgery, or a paper is presented on the gearbox of the Pushpak Vimana, and the so-called intellectuals choose to remain silent in emulation of the elders in the Kauravas assembly, we can somewhat appreciate how difficult it must have been four hundred years ago for someone to argue for a heliocentric model of the universe instead of the biblical account of creation and the geocentric universe. However, this is not all.

¹ Another contemporary rationalist, Francis Bacon, stood for industry and technology, emphasised data collection and application, and opposed medieval superstitions. But by confining the pursuit of knowledge merely to practical purposes, he essentially opposed the pursuit of theoretical knowledge. His harsh criticism of Copernicus's heliocentric model is one example of this. On the other hand, the mathematician Descartes, by emphasising the study of pure mathematics, discovered a rigorous logical method for verifying truth and falsity. By applying this method, he constructed the conceptual philosophical argument or ontological proof for the existence of God. ¹

The empiricism of Bacon and the rationalism of Descartes had far-reaching consequences. Europe broke free from the authority of the Church and advanced in the pursuit of knowledge - philosophy and science - following experimentation, observation, and refined logic. ²

Bacon's followers Locke and Hume, and those influenced by Descartes' method, Spinoza and Leibniz, made the realm of human thought deeper and more expansive.

Leibniz discovered calculus in the world of mathematics, though independently from Newton's method. Again, to avoid the bloodshot eyes of the Church, both Spinoza and Leibniz, like Descartes, gave God a necessary place in their philosophical designs. But the revolution they brought about in the world of thought meant that the right to seek and openly acknowledge the truth was no longer solely in the hands of the Church. ² Descartes showed that an ordinary person, without any divine command, could find the truth by following a specific method.

Moreover, Descartes was a dualist. He acknowledged the existence of both mind and material world. Although the body is not only separate from but opposite to the mind, through the pineal gland located in the human body, the mind exerts its influence on the body. ¹ In fact, the coexistence and conflict of opposites are part of our social, political, and daily personal lives. Who will control whom - the state or the citizen, society or the individual, religious discipline or individual likes and dislikes - these questions constantly haunts today's world.

And for the last two centuries, being engaged in the pursuit of '*the greatest happiness of the greatest number*', world has become enamored with the welfare state through utilitarianism and socialism, gradually neglecting the anguish of the individual human being. That's why Descartes' 'I' has become relevant to us again, crossing a distance of a few centuries, resonating in Tagore's words :

It is through the color of my consciousness that the meadow turned green, the ripe fruit turned red.' ³

1.2 Descartes' Revolutionary Doubt and "Cogito" Reasoning

The verb '*cogito*' means '*to think*'. Its noun form is '*Cogitatio*', meaning '*thought*'. 'Ergo' means '*therefore*'. And '*sum*' means the overall existence of something. So '*cogitatio ergo sum*' means '*I think, therefore I exist*'. A hundred years later, the famous French literary critic Antoine Leonard Thomas expanded the meaning of Descartes' famous phrase into: '*I doubt, therefore I think; therefore I am*'. The question is, to what extent is Antoine Leonard's expanded interpretation of the concise phrase consistent with the original meaning and Descartes' philosophical position? What did Descartes himself say?

In his two main works - *Meditations and Principles of Philosophy* - he clarified what he meant by 'thinking'. According to him, 'thinking' is the attribute or characteristic of the soul, the quality that distinguishes consciousness from inanimate matter. And this act of thinking includes '*understanding*', '*conceiving*', '*doubting*', '*affirming*', '*denying*', '*willing*', '*imagining*', '*sensing*' and '*desiring*'. • ¹ So, Leonard did not say anything exceptional. His expanded conclusion '*I doubt, therefore I question, therefore I am*' is based on the premise '*we cannot doubt our existence while we doubt*'. It appears that two words create confusion in the above conclusion. One - what did Descartes mean by 'thinking'? What are its characteristics? Two - who is the subject of the stated Latin phrase? 'I'? Originally there is no noun or pronoun used as the subject.

It is also clear that Descartes intended the broader or expansive sense of the word 'thinking' rather than its narrow meaning. They choose Leonard Thomas's selected 'doubt' from it. Why? Because Descartes had a special preference for the act of 'doubting'. His three main philosophical works, briefly '*Method*', '*Meditations*' and '*Principles*', all begin with 'doubt'. He emphatically states that the first step on the arduous path of seeking knowledge is to doubt everything. Not to accept any authoritative statement. To re-examine everything that humanity has believed for ages. Many things considered conventional and traditional would prove wrong in the

¹¹. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24.

light of reason upon examination. Bertrand Russell and others believed that the use of the word 'I' weakened the logical rigor. Let's see what Descartes said about this.

1.3 Critiques and Objections

Descartes' method of gradually reaching the indubitable truth from his universal doubt and skepticism is referred to in European philosophy by various names such as '*Cartesian doubt*', '*methodical doubt*', '*methodical skepticism*', '*universal doubt*' or '*hypothetical doubt*'. This way of testing the truth of one's beliefs through the fire of doubt became accepted in philosophy as a valid method. Descartes was searching for a method by which he could identify which of his many beliefs were undoubtedly true. The result of this search was '*cogito ergo sum*'. Archimedes was looking for a firm place to stand from where he could move the entire earth. ⁴ Similarly, Descartes said – '*if I can find even a tiny bit of steadfast, unwavering certainty, however small, then I too can hope for greater possibilities*'. So through '*cogito*', upon becoming certain of his own existence, he exclaimed almost like Archimedes' '*Eureka*' - look, this is the long-sought treasure, the groundwork on which the edifice of knowledge will be built.

Now we will see how Descartes became free from doubt about the existence of his mind through his '*neti-neti*' examination. ⁵ It should be clarified that his skepticism was not the '*nasti*' worship of a skeptic.

His aim was not to disbelieve and reject everything. To Descartes, this '*neti-neti*' was just a method or practice, never the 'goal'.

The God-believing Descartes wanted to return to the solid ground of faith. They did not accept authoritative statements or the prevalent 'Scholasticism' in contemporary Europe, which had one-sided biblical interpretations obstructing scientific progress.

2. Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 258.

3. Tagore, R. (1936). *Collected poems and plays*. Macmillan

4. Dijksterhuis, E. J. *The Mechanization of the World Picture: Pythagoras to Newton*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

5. Pandey, Shail. "The Concept of Neti Neti in Indian Philosophy." *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* 39, no. 1-2 (2012): 95-104.

Rather, he wanted to test the existence of all apparent truths, and even the existence of God himself, on the touchstone of reason.

In the third Meditation, Descartes arrives at an apparent nihilistic position through his '*neti-neti*' path of systematic doubt, denying the existence of everything including himself. However, he quickly rejects this extreme stance, reasoning that to doubt, he must exist - "*I doubt, therefore I am*."

To substantiate this reasoning, he introduces the theory of the '*deceptive God*' or '*evil demon*' - a malicious being assuming God's form to delude humanity. For the devout Catholic Descartes, God is benevolent, so human delusion must stem from this deceptive force, not God. Yet now Descartes has found the self-evident truth of his own existence as the starting point.

Boldly, he declares that if this 'deceptive God' tries to make him doubt his existence, it proves his existence, for to be deceived, he must exist. Descartes' method of subjecting everything to doubt to uncover truth became wildly influential in European philosophy under names like '*Cartesian doubt*' and '*universal doubt*', based on his philosophical position "*I doubt, therefore I am*."

However, this is distinct from philosophical skepticism which universally doubts the possibility of attaining truth. Descartes emphasizes separating truth from falsehood, like picking good grain from chaff. He explains this using the analogy of removing rotten apples from a basket.

Yet critics questioned if Catholic imagery like the biblical shepherd unduly influenced the supposedly pure rationalist Descartes when he asserts that the benevolent God will ultimately guide humanity to natural truths despite the '*deceptive God*'s' illusions.

The '*cogito*' reasoning has been much debated. Firstly, through it Descartes could only ascertain the existence of his own mind or soul, not of the whole world or other minds. His '*Eureka*' moment left the issue of determining each individual's existence to themselves.

Secondly, he did not claim necessary existence even for himself. He only stated that as long as he is thinking or doubting, in that moment he exists. About other times? No definitive claim.

Thirdly, the basis for accepting '*I think, therefore I am*' was not a deductive or inductive chain of reasoning from experiences. Rather, it was self-evidence and self-clarity - like recognizing a thorn's prick without need for further analysis.

Many believe the aim of '*Cartesian doubt*' was to grasp, with the 'self-evidence' logic, the importance of such innate, axiomatic propositions appearing self-evident to the mind. Descartes thought by accepting such primordial premises as self-evident starting points, their significance for pursuits like science would be understood, just as geometers accept axioms as self-evident bases.

Descartes' originality did not lie solely in philosophically studying '*cogito*' but also in granting this verb the

primordial status as the most fundamental principle for pursuing knowledge. Additionally, he influenced the recognition of clarity, specificity, and self-evidence as vital for scientific and mathematical studies. Spinoza retained this meaning, considering '*cogito*' a necessary precondition before any quest.

1.4 Deconstructing the "Cogito" Logic

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2. Critique of Cogito Theory

Descartes' '*cogito*' principle has been criticized since his lifetime and continues to be so even today. He himself provided several responses towards the end of his book, a selected portion of which is worth noting in the appendix. The criticism has been about the role of the 'I'; objections have been raised about the legitimacy of God's role in this logical framework; it has seemed like a '*deus ex machina*' device, akin to ancient Greek dramas where gods were brought in at the end to resolve an unmanageable plot. There has also been criticism about the lack of a necessary major premise or principal axiom in Descartes' conclusion, as well as his prioritizing intuition and self-evidence over deductive reasoning. Here we shall briefly discuss some notable objections and questions raised by eminent philosophers.

Research by Sir Bernard Williams, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge, reveals that the first objection to the role of 'I' in Descartes' '*cogito*' proposition was raised by his contemporary, the French philosopher and mathematician Pierre Gassendi.⁶ The objection was that the proposition suffers from circular reasoning by wrongly assuming 'I'. Perhaps we came to know about some thinking, but how can we conclude from this that the agent of this thinking is the existence of that particular person? From this example, we can undoubtedly accept only this much clearly: that at some place, at some time, a certain thought process took shape. But we cannot definitively assert the existence of a particular individual as its constituent.

The 18th-century German physicist Georg Lichtenberg raised a similar objection. He argued that Descartes' reasoning would have been more robust if instead of saying "*I think*," he had said, "*There is thinking happening*."

⁷ That is, no matter how significant the verb '*cogito*' or thinking was, Descartes dragged in and extracted much more from it by inferring a thinker. Bertrand Russell expressed almost the same view in the first volume of his book '*History of Western Philosophy*'.² The famous German philosopher Nietzsche's argument was that in it, the agent 'I' and the action 'thinking' were already assumed, and it also seemed that the agent 'I' knew what the action was.

6. Williams, Bernard. Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry. Penguin Books, 1978.

7. Guyer, Paul, and Alan W. Wood. *Interpreting Descartes: Critical Essays*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Then what remained? In his view, it would have been better if Descartes had presented an impersonal 'It' as the agent instead of the personal pronoun 'I'.⁸ The 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard believed that the existence of the 'I' is inherent in the term '*cogito*'. Therefore, deriving 'I exist' from '*cogito*' is logically unwarranted. Kierkegaard.⁹ That is, Descartes is merely describing a concept; by using the term '*cogito*' as a premise, he is not arriving at any deductive conclusion. Logically, for the act of thinking, my existence has already been assumed; the 'proof of existence' does not follow from 'thinking'.

In 1927, Heidegger criticized Descartes' '*cogito*' for its subjectivism or individual-centric viewpoint and said that the only rational, certain conclusion about human existence could be '*humans are mortal*'. Only this statement can clearly and certainly speak about human existence. Descartes' '*cogito*' is merely an appearance of existence. Hence, instead of '*cogito ergo sum*', '*sum Moribundus*' (I am mortal) is a much more logical proof of existence.⁹

The 20th-century Scottish philosopher John Macmurray was influenced by Kant and Marx. He flatly rejected Descartes' mind-body dualism and the '*cogito*' theory, as the one-sided control of the mind over the body negates human action and experience. The primacy of subjective thinking eventually leads philosophy away from thought

and towards belief in God. Just as Descartes did in his quest for certainty about truth, he ultimately embraced a benevolent God. According to Macmurray, such theories are not philosophical thought but mere wordplay. Hence, he advocated using 'I do' instead of 'I think' to ground the 'cogito' in concrete reality.¹⁰

Cambridge Professor Bernard Williams' analysis is somewhat different. He says that from an impersonal perspective, we see two things here, and that too from the context of a third person. First, when we speak of 'cogito' or thinking, we understand the impersonal sense of 'thinking'; but when we say 'I am thinking', we understand an objective agent who is thinking. However, the problem arises when we try to be certain about the existence of an impersonal individual from the perspective of our own mind, which is not possible.¹¹

8. Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1966. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Vintage Books

9. Kierkegaard, Søren. 1992. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press.

10. John MacMurray, *The Self as Agent* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957).

11. William Doney, ed., *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 88-107.

The 17th-century British empiricist philosopher John Locke stood diametrically opposed to Descartes on the issues of mind and consciousness. According to him, humans are not born with any pre-existing consciousness but with a completely blank mind – what he termed the '*Tabula rasa*'. And knowledge is acquired solely through sense experience, not through any intuition or innate knowledge.¹³ The sceptic empiricist philosopher Hume mocked the introduction of God at the end of the 'cogito' theory to prove the existence of our consciousness, saying that resorting to God's existence to prove the existence of our consciousness is undoubtedly an unexpected self-contradiction.¹²

Bishop Berkeley was the foremost proponent of subjective Idealism or mental Idealism before Kant. Accepting Descartes' sovereignty of the mind and the implication of 'Cogito', he showed that 'Cogito' and the synthesis or dualistic relationship between mind and body are illogical. Hence, the question of the mind controlling the bodily mechanism through the pineal gland does not arise. Because we can only be certain about our own consciousness; anything beyond consciousness, such as substance or body, is untenable.¹⁴

Viewing the 'Cogito' theory solely as an axiom or postulate for epistemology is insufficient; it is also an 'existentialist' proposition in the context of modern philosophy. Descartes' main objective was to establish the existence of the mind and thinking through reason. Hence, through the statement '*I think, therefore I am*' or 'I exist', he demonstrated the clear distinction between mind and body.

3. Conclusion and Discussion

Descartes' great achievement was to free himself from the medieval scholastic thought process and the dominance of the Church. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, the Vatican and its approved priests had the first and last say in the world of knowledge pursuit. So the creation of the universe or God, the existence of the soul and the material world – the outline of knowledge pursuit was drawn by the mandates of Plato, Aristotle, the Ptolemaic geocentric universe, and Thomas Aquinas on all these subjects.

12. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), (Original work published 1739-1740).

13. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Printed by Eliz. Holt for Thomas Basset, 1689)

14. George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Dublin: Jeremy Pepyat, 1710).

Descartes – questioning everything and arguing that the existence of God must be proved by reason, not by Word of Authority – leaped over that line in one bound. After that, nothing remained the same in the European mind. The thoughts of all subsequent philosophers were not limited to purely academic questions. Epistemology became an essential part of philosophy. This was undoubtedly Descartes' achievement.

Descartes placed a priori innate knowledge higher than the experience of the objective world. The claim that mathematics is more complete than physics is an example of this. There was a debate with the empiricist school of Bacon's followers, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.

But the later proponents of his rationalist school, such as Spinoza and Leibniz, did notable work. Finally, came Immanuel Kant, who in his famous '*Critique of Pure Reason*' criticized and synthesized empiricism and rationalism, showing that both have applications and limitations in the scientific method of testing. True cognition occurs when the sensations gained from the experience of the material world are analyzed by reason.

But like the agnostic Kant, we can only perceive the appearance of things (things in themselves), never their true nature. These are the unknowable, which cannot be known. The same applies to God.

In Descartes' dualism, the existence of both mind and material world is acknowledged. Here, a comparison can be drawn with Indian *Sankhya* philosophy. Both *Sankhya* and the Cartesian system are dualistic; *Sankhya* considers the Vedas infallible, and Descartes considers the Bible infallible. However, there are fundamental differences between Descartes' philosophy and *Sankhya* on two points.¹⁵

According to Descartes, the Supreme Being, the most merciful and almighty God exists. His existence can be

proven. He has also provided the ontological proof based on the concept of God. But *Sankhya* is atheistic. The famous aphorism states - "*Due to lack of proof, God is unproven.*" In Descartes' model, the mind or soul is constantly active. Although independent, it influences the object through the pineal gland. And the material world is unchanging, operating according to mechanical laws. In *Sankhya*, the realm of *Purusha* or consciousness is an inactive witness, devoid of attributes and unchanging.

15. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, *The Sankhya Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928).

According to Sankhya philosophy Nature or the material world is active and endowed with the three qualities of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.

The world is created due to the distortion or imbalance of these three qualities of nature. However, this is not completely in line with or avoidable from the *Nyaya* philosophy. The *Nyaya* philosophy also acknowledges the material and conscious world. The God in *Nyaya* philosophy, like Descartes, is only the 'efficient cause' (*nimitta karana*) of creation. This God consciously helps the objects of the material world move in the right direction (according to Descartes). The God in *Nyaya* does not create the sky or atoms but brings about their coordination to create the world.

Both Descartes and *Nyaya* philosophy accept scriptures and authoritative statements (Vedas, Bible). However, both of them stand for the truth to be rationally established and have well-defined epistemologies. Descartes' famous proof "*I think, therefore I am*" undoubtedly revolutionized European thought. From this emerged two opposing philosophical streams – Idealism and Materialism.¹⁶

On one hand, the demand to rationally establish everything and the belief that anyone can attain true knowledge through the proper method of reasoning led to modern Materialism. The French philosopher Diderot or the later Encyclopedic school is in a sense indebted to Descartes.

On the other hand, the emphasis on the intuitive power of the mind or innate knowledge and a priori knowledge led Bishop Berkeley's subjective Idealism, where one only knows about one's own consciousness. One does not know whether a cat exists or not, but one perceives a set of qualities called '*catness*', nothing more. 'The grass is green only in my consciousness!' Neither God nor the material world can be known.

A step further from this position leads to the agnostic Kant, who considered the pursuit of metaphysics unrealistic, unnecessary, and mere fancy.¹⁷ However, it should be noted that Spinoza and Leibniz, who were direct followers of Cartesian logic, were objective Idealists. Their God or Supreme Being objectively exists – the nature of the universe is its manifestation. Bertrand Russell considered Leibniz the founder of symbolic logic. Later, Hegel developed an advanced form of objective Idealism or the philosophy that views the world as the projection of a supreme consciousness, where every object is in one sense 'yes' and in another sense 'no'.

The atheistic philosopher Karl Marx, who propounded the dialectical relationship between matter and consciousness, is also in a sense indebted to Descartes' dualism and rationalism. Ironically, over the centuries, the priests saw the seeds of atheism in the apparent theistic rationalism of Descartes' philosophy.

16. Surendranath Dasgupta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1957).

17. George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (London: Printed for A. Churchill, 1710).

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