
ANALYSIS OF FREEDOM AND THOUGHT IN DESCARTES' PHILOSOPHY AND ITS INFLUENCE

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ABSTRACT

The search for truth and certainty is a major preoccupation with all Western philosophy. This has its most famous attempt in the philosophy of Descartes. This paper studies Descartes' pure philosophy considered as a pure first philosophy. Descartes regards thinking as his core existence, and thinking is a freedom that I can truly grasp. Descartes is sometimes criticized for offering only a defense of the primacy of the freedom of thought in opposition to the freedom of action. This paper will show that Descartes does not oppose practical philosophy but intends to seek a meta-philosophy which supports practical philosophy, using the freedom of thinking as the foundation. In short, Descartes just wants to find a way of verifying truth prior to any political, cultural, traditional, moral, or religious factors. His influence is visible in the subsequent philosophies and philosophers who place the human beings at the center of philosophy.

Keywords: Freedom; Existence; First Philosophy

Pursuit of truth and meaning of existence

What am I? This was the first question Descartes tried to answer. Although the question is the primary and central question in Descartes' philosophical system, this question was not initially raised by him. As early as Socrates, there was the topic of knowing oneself and self-examination. The purpose of Socrates raising this theme was to warn people not to blindly worship the false gods created by power and authority, but to recognize the essence of man as soul and spirit. However, he did not fundamentally answer and prove the question of "what am I." Descartes' skeptical questioning of received knowledge (which he continued from Montaigne) allowed him to discover a free seat of thinking which has access to certainty, and can connect with existence. Descartes expressed in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* that "I am a thinking thing, that is to say, I am a thing that doubts, affirms, denies, knows little, does not know much, loves, hates, is willing, is unwilling, imagines and feels."¹ Descartes realized that when I reflect on what I am, I find that I am a thinking thing, and this thinking is my essential existence. Descartes concludes from this that I think therefore I am, that is, I think and therefore I exist.

Thinking is my core existence. I am nothing but a thinking thing; thinking that I am thinking, and that I am willing, unwilling, loving, hating, imagining, doubting. The most important of all thinking is doubt, and doubting is the reassessment of all so-called truths. Before I accept a so-called truth, I must fully doubt it. Only if I meet the standard of excluding all reasonable doubts will I accept this truth, otherwise I will not accept it as the truth. All beings, including me, are the content of my thoughts, and of course, they are also the objects of my doubts. In other words, I have a skeptical attitude toward all beings in the world. When I doubt everything, I first discover I do exist, and this proposition is indeed an unquestionable truth. Descartes believes that my existence can be proved in two ways. One is that when I think, I discover that through thinking I exist. The second is that when I think about the existence outside of me, when I perceive the existence of this external existence, I also exist at the

same time, and I am the certifier of the existence of the external things. From this, Descartes came up with the proposition, ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Most importantly, he takes this proposition as the first proposition of philosophy, from which all other truths or propositions of philosophy are derived. Therefore, my existence in the form of thinking should be the foundation of philosophy rather than ontological existence. This ground of the certainty of thinking – the clear and distinct idea – is the foundation of all true knowledge.

Mistake and Imperfection

Humans are limited rational beings, and this is reflected in human mistakes. Many thinkers searched for the root cause of human error in terms of politics, morality or religion, but Descartes searched for this reason from the perspective of philosophical thinking. If people take what they don’t know clearly as knowledge, they will inevitably be misled. Descartes called this kind of thinking error an indifferent attitude. Descartes says that “this indifferent attitude is not so much a manifestation of completeness in the will as of a defect in knowledge.”² And this attitude is like what Kant, Hegel, and others call conceit. If I act beyond or range of clear cognition, I will act blindly. Therefore, thinking as my existence is not arbitrary, but a basis for access to eternal truths. The purpose a free thinking involving doubt which leads to clarity, is the only way to search for the truth behind things. As Hegel said, the biggest misunderstanding of freedom is the will to do whatever you want.

Pure Philosophy

It is generally believed that Descartes’ thinking means that since thinking is my existence, once I stop thinking, I also cease to exist. But Descartes said that “thought means everything in our minds that is directly conscious of us. Hence all volitional, intellectual, imaginative and sensory activities are thoughts”.³ I can doubt everything, but I cannot change them. Thinking is prior to ethical issues or political issues. Descartes is attempting to create a pure philosophical theoretical system. The

second meaning or characteristic of Cartesian thinking is that thinking only refers to the wisdom about truth and falsehood, but does not include wisdom about good and evil, life, and other aspects. Descartes limited his concept of thinking within the scope of true and false, emphasizing that this kind of thinking is an epistemological question about whether and how things exist, or a question about truth and falsehood. This is prior to moral or political thinking which Plato developed. From this point of view, Descartes tried to separate his thinking from moral thinking and political thinking, and his real intention was to seek purely philosophical thinking and use it as a foundation for specific thinking such as morality and politics. Therefore, pure philosophy is first philosophy. This first or pure philosophy would be distinct from concrete legal philosophy, moral philosophy, political philosophy, and religious philosophy. The freedom of thought would also be different than concrete legal freedoms, political freedoms, and freedom of belief. In this way, pure philosophy transcends concrete philosophy and provides the latter with a foundation. Any specific philosophy, would be inseparable from the general philosophy of thought; any specific freedom must be based on the premise and guarantee of freedom of thought. Pure philosophy and specific philosophy are like the relationship between the superstructure and the economic base, and the relationship between the general outline of thought and the divisions of thoughts. Therefore, the reason why the philosophical edifice that Descartes wanted to build did not succeed. But the underlying impetus of his philosophical system is still relevant today.

Influence

It is generally believed that the greatest contribution of Descartes in history is his rationalism. But the influence of Descartes in modern philosophy is multi-faceted. The primary influence should be Hume, because Hume discovered the difference between “is” and “should”, which is the existence of moral reason. Second, modern existentialist theory is a direct result of the Cartesian philosophy of thinking. It not only develops the theory of the relationship between existence and thinking, but also

incorporates factors such as conscience, 'the other,' and the community into develops from the autonomous individual towards a community. The third is the natural law theory of modern contract theory. No matter whether Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, or Rousseau, they all assumed a state of nature, and they all believed that natural rights and natural laws existed before laws, governments, and states. Only the free human being can realize the natural rights and laws of nature that are unique to human beings. And only when all freely agree to create a covenant and form a government, to implement it, can human civilization come into being. The fourth is the influence on German classical philosophy. Kant, Fichte, or Hegel, all begin with the self, and they all believe that people are truly free beings only when they recognize universal laws and consciously obey them. Kant was also deeply influenced by Descartes, who divided reason into theoretical reason and practical reason. Practical reason is based upon freedom, and man is free only when he knows and consciously follows universal laws. Therefore, Kant believed that human beings are essentially free rational beings and developed Descartes' freedom of thinking into freedom of conscience and duty.

Conclusion

Through the above analysis, Descartes' philosophy can be considered as a pure philosophy, and becomes a first philosophy for other various philosophies. Descartes regards thinking as his core existence, and this thinking is a freedom that I can truly grasp. It is prior to ethics or issues of politics and religious belief. He distinguishes his philosophy of thinking from other classical philosophies, but he does not deny the value of those specific philosophies, nor the significance of morality, politics, or belief. He does not deny the ultimate meaning of morality to human beings and believes that conscience is the essence of human beings that differentiates them from all other things, and if conscience is lost, then this person is not a real human being. When dealing with the Cartesian ideology, a dialectical attitude should be adopted, not only to see the purity of his philosophy of thinking, but also to see the connection

between it and other specific philosophical theories. In order to remove all kinds of prejudice or mediation of Descartes' thought, especially those who think that Descartes only emphasizes the freedom of thought and opposes the freedom of action, it is necessary to understand Descartes thought within its wider purpose. Therefore, Descartes does not oppose specific practical philosophy, but intends to seek a meta-philosophy to ground practical philosophy, taking the freedom of thinking as the mother of all specific philosophies. In short, Descartes wants to find a possibility for the verification of truth prior to any political, cultural, traditional, moral, religious and other humanistic obligations. One which can act to correct the distortions that politics, culture, tradition, morality, religion, have created. Cartesian philosophy is an affirmation of free and critical thinking in a pure sense, and provides a general guide for how to approach received knowledge.

ENDNOTES

¹ Descartes, R. *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Translated by Pang Jingren. Beijing, CHN: The Commercial Press, 1986), 33.

² Ibid, 64.

³ Descartes, R. *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences* (Translated by Wang Taiqing. Beijing, CHN: The Commercial Press, 2000), 84.

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