

LECTURE NOTES XII

We have noted that scepticism is a major challenge to the fulfillment of Descartes' aims because it denies the possibility of attaining true knowledge. He presents his 'method of doubt' also called 'methodical doubt' or 'Cartesian doubt'. The primary elements in his method are:

- To question *ALL* his beliefs without taking *ANYTHING* for granted
- The re-examination of beliefs is to be undertaken by examining the *SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE* not the individual beliefs
- If any source of knowledge is not absolutely reliable and there is a slightest possibility of doubt, then he is to 'suspend belief' in anything acquired by its means. Note that this means not to accept such beliefs as true, not to positively prove that they are false

Descartes applies his method by offering the strongest possible arguments on behalf of scepticism. Three such arguments are presented and are reviewed by Blackburn in the section on 'The Evil Demon' (pp. 18-9):

- Sense perception, as a source of knowledge, is not reliable because it can sometimes be deceptive therefore we should not accept anything from this source as true. This establishes doubts about beliefs about the external world and even its existence. (Cf. the early passages in Nagel).
- Another argument is what is called the 'argument from dreams'. In our experience of dreams everything *seems* real and there is no criterion of distinction between dreams and 'real' experience-therefore, all such experience including our experience of our own body could be an unreal colossal dream (cf. Nagel).
- He finally presents the 'evil demon' argument where he notes the possibility that such a powerful demon is manipulating his mind, raising doubt about even rational concepts and knowledge. (Blackburn nicely explains this argument in pp. 26-7 using the case of the mad scientist).

The sceptical outcome is that one's beliefs about the external world, knowledge of one's

own body (first person experience) and even conceptual and rational knowledge are all doubtful and cannot be accepted as true. Descartes' method is often described as 'hyperbolic (extreme) doubt' but it must be recognized that it pertains to a *method* to test all his beliefs and is *not* meant to be a *realistic* doubt all our common beliefs.

Having followed the sceptical arguments to their ultimate aim, Descartes claims that even if they are successful, there is still a fundamental truth that cannot be doubted-'Cogito, ergo sum': 'I think, therefore I am'. (Often referred to as 'the *cogito*'). The Cogito is a necessary truth, must be true, that cannot be doubted even in the face of the most powerful sceptical arguments. Descartes thus finally defeated scepticism, his first challenge, by showing that there is a *truth that cannot be doubted*.

He then turns to examine this 'I' whose existence cannot be doubted and claims it cannot be a person as we normally use the pronoun to signify the speaker. The existence of one's body is still doubtful on basis of the sceptical arguments but the existence of the 'I' cannot be doubted. It is a non-material, non-physical entity whose essence is thought. It is a non-material thing, whose essential nature is thinking-a thinking substance. It is the mind and this proves the distinction between the soul and the body which is physical, an extended substance which exists in space and time.

Descartes claim here is that this 'I' whose existence has been proven is distinct from the physical body whose existence is still doubtful. Therefore it is distinct, not separate, from the body. And that is how he claims to demonstrate that the materialist conception that there are no non-material entities or beings is false and cannot be sustained. Materialism, his second major challenge, is also thus defeated.