

The ontological study of the 'being' in rationalism

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Abstract: *The very quest to know about the ontological structure of reality; to unfold the true nature of the 'being' is as old as the man learned to use his intellect. Different philosophies as well as philosophers developed various ontological positions concerning the study of the being. Rationalism as a school of modern western philosophy is one of the philosophical school which is known for its epistemology but it contributes more in the field of ontology. In rationalism, there are three main proponents and each one has its own ontological standpoint in regards to the existence of being. The ontological journey of the 'being' begins in skepticism of Descartes which culminates as Dualism, and dualism of Descartes further dubbed as uncompromising dualism by Spinoza that allows him to come up with Monism as a secure ontological position. But the standpoint of Spinoza is further challenged by Leibniz which helps him to come up with different positions as compared to his early predecessors. The aim of this paper is to thoroughly study the problem of the 'being' in special reference to rationalism, how 'reason' plays a significant role in arriving at different ontological positions? Does 'reason' is capable to justify the ontological positions achieved by the rationalist philosophers? And, focus is also to discuss the importance of 'innate idea' in achieving these different philosophical positions.*

Key Words: Rationalism, Doubt, Being, Ontology, Innate Ideas, Monism, Dualism, Pluralism.

1. INTRODUCTION:

What is being? This is the primary question that any philosopher asks. Metaphysics is the major branch of philosophy which helps us to unfold such questions concerning reality. The questions concerning knowledge and values have their basis in metaphysics. So we cannot imagine philosophy without metaphysics. There are so many metaphysical problems that gave birth to different branches of metaphysics like ontology, theology, cosmology, eschatology, etc. Among all these sub-branches of metaphysics, ontology is the most important one. Ontology is known as the 'science of being'.

In metaphysical arena, 'being' stand for 'real' (which means eternal, something which exists beyond the realm of creation and destruction). So, enquiry itself begins with this fundamental question, what is real? What is the nature of real? Is real material or spiritual? How many real are there— one, two or many? These questions have been the subject matter of discussion throughout the history of Philosophy - from ancient times down to our own days. Influenced by the culture and thought of their own times and places, different philosophers have answered these questions differently. Their answers differ, but their purpose has been the same, to know the truth, to discover what is real. Their metaphysical answers have come to us in the form of certain "isms", like Pluralism, Dualism, and Monism etc. Though these isms may not constitute the whole truth, yet they are undoubtedly efforts of noble minds full of curiosity to know.

Rationalism as a school of modern philosophy came into existence with Descartes as its founding father. As a rationalist, he was not satisfied by the common sense belief or with the religious dogmas. So he began with challenging all this. Having thus been fascinated by the mathematical method of clarity, certainty and indubitability, Descartes considered philosophy as an antithesis of those mathematical virtues; for, he saw philosophy as being founded on doubtful and shaky grounds. Determined therefore to give philosophy a firm foundation with the mathematical method as its base, he resolved to search and discover one thing which is certain and indubitable. So, Descartes aim was to get clear and distinct knowledge of each and everything. Such a certainty, if found, would be the foundation of the philosophical system upon which all other truths would be built. He thus set on this difficult task, by systematically questioning and doubting all that he used to know.

His methodology to arrive at clear and distinct knowledge of everything was different from his predecessors. Usually in the vast field of different branches of knowledge, seeker of knowledge before advancing towards knowledge presupposed either knowledge or principle as the starting point of knowledge. But Descartes did not want to make this mistake because he wanted such kind of knowledge which cannot be doubted latter. So the aim of the Descartes was to find such principles and knowledge which are as certain as mathematical proof which is indubitable. He wanted to prove the certainty of everything with the help of reason. The certainty is the only criteria Descartes followed to reach at clear and distinct knowledge of each and everything. For this, he decided to reject everything that is given to him by the authentic source and even he left all those things which were a little suspicious. He mainly used three argument to show

that everything is liable to doubted i.e. Argument from sense-perception, evil-demon and dream argument. By treating everything as doubtful he set all to begin afresh. So, the starting point of Descartes philosophy is, Method of Doubt.

In the process of doubting everything, however, Descartes realized one fact; and which was that, he, Descartes, cannot doubt the fact that he is thinking, for by doubting that he is thinking, he was actually confirming it; for thinking presupposes doubting. Act of doubting is act of thinking; thinking is the by-product of reason. And Descartes's gave his famous dictum, 'Cogito Ergo Sum' which means 'I think, therefore I am'. After proving his own existence as a thinking being, Descartes stuck with it and not in condition to take a step further anymore. However, Descartes has a strategy to avoid getting trapped at the Cogito. Until the existence of God is not established, existence of nothing can be proved. He undertakes to prove God's existence and to prove that God would not deceive us. He uses arguments to do this, he starts as there exist ideas of God in our mind, but how this idea came into existence. In his classification of the content of mind, he divided ideas into fictitious ideas, adventitious ideas, and innate ideas. Fictitious ideas are the product of human imagination since they don't refer to anything and such ideas are in themselves. Adventitious ideas are the one which is invented by me and innate ideas are the product of reason. The idea of god that resides in my consciousness is neither the product of adventitious ideas nor fictitious ideas. Rather it is an innate one. And Descartes proposed that the source of innate ideas is god himself. Consequently, it is God himself who implant the idea of his own existence in the consciousness of human beings at the time of the birth.

Once, Descartes prove the existence of God as clear and distinct knowledge, the rest proceeds easily. Since God is good, he will not act like evil demon that Descartes has imagined as a ground for Doubt. God is the sign of perfection and demon is the sign of imperfection and if God as absolutely perfect being exists, it didn't leave any scope for the existence of deceitful demon that can deceive us. Descartes now resumes the question of our knowledge of bodies and the existence of empirical world. The physical thing that exists has extension as its primary attributes. To reach at this conclusion, that extension is the attributes of anything which is physical, is discovered by reason rather than perception. If we relied on the perception as the sole source of knowledge, it misleads us and we never reach the truth.

Substances are known through their attributes. It is the attributes of substance that make it exist. For instance, according to Rene Descartes, the mind has 'thinking' as its attributes, as we cannot conceive it otherwise. That is the attributes by which it distinguished itself from other things. Similarly the attributes of body is extension. Everything material is extended. Mind and body are therefore, two kinds of substance, each of which is distinctly different, and can exist independent of each other. There is not even any close resemblance between these two different things, both mind and body possesses entirely opposite attributes as their essential qualities. One is thinking being and another is unthinking being, one is immaterial and another is material, one is un-extended and another is extended and one doesn't exist in space and time and another exist in space and time. Descartes arrived at this conclusion not out of experience but understanding, which is the outcome of using reason as the only authentic source of knowledge.

This sharp division between mental and physical has come to be known as Cartesian dualism. Once such a distinction is drawn, at whatever level, the problem of re-relating mental to physical immediately arises. Logically speaking, there cannot be any interaction. How then can mental events have anything to do with physical ones and vice-versa, since the one occurs in space and the other is non-extended thought with no physical properties whatsoever? Un-extended mind cannot cause changes in the extended mind and unconscious body cannot cause changes in the conscious mind. But this is contrary to our experience. We find that there exists an intimate union between the mental and the physical. It became absolutely necessary to establish the link between the mental and the physical to explain the harmony that exists because of two different substances. For this, Descartes proposed that the conception of the pineal gland and both mental and physical being interact here. But the problem can't be solved because pineal gland is also either the part of the body or mind, so the question remains how an immaterial, un-extended mind interacts with the material, extended substance. It may be true that, Descartes is wrong about the kind of entities that interact. Yet interactionism cannot be denied altogether. Interaction is also correct in showing that there is a kind of dualism between mind and body. Here, it may also be said that Descartes, in the history of western philosophy, is the first to give us a clear-cut notion of a dualistic universe.

The Cartesian dualism is one of the most controversial theories in the whole history of Western philosophy. First he himself separated mental and physical, and then Descartes himself as well as subsequent philosophers find it difficult to reconcile to explain their unity. Descartes dualism may also be appreciated on the grounds that it has created metaphysical problems for his successors in the line. Different thinkers have come up with different explanations, but none could provide a satisfying solution to the separation of the world into two independent domains. The first one to try to provide solution to Descartes uncompromising Dualism is Nicholas Malebranche. He has the point that a simple theory of interactionism could not solve this problem; he propounded a theory known as Occasionalism. This theory of Malebranche states that mental and physical don't interact but every time mental and physical come in contact with each other, it is an 'occasion' created by God. For example, I will to raise my arm; God causes it. Next to occasionalism is the double aspect theory of Spinoza. Spinoza by assuming only one substance, viz. God demonstrated that thought and extensions are its two attributes instead of two independent substances as accepted by Descartes. Thus in true sense

there is only one substance, if there is a substance consisting in infinite attributes then this would exclude the possibility of there being any substance other than God. Since there is nothing over and above God, so all is God and everything follows from God. Therefore, according to Spinoza, God instead of transcendent is immanent in the world. Everything that exists around us is the fabrication of single being i.e. God. Unlike Descartes, Spinoza developed monism, and reduced all multiplicity into single substance. And there is no problem about the interaction of mental and physical. For, they are not two different beings but rather merely two attributes of one and the same thing. Both mental and physical aspects of being exist parallel to each other; this is why Spinoza's response to Descartes' problem of interactionism is famously known as parallelism as well as double aspect theory. All the perceived multiplicity is merely attributes and there is only one real being i.e. God.

Leibniz also begins his philosophy by attacking Spinoza and states that how it is possible for a substance to possess contradictory attributes at the one and the same time. A substance cannot be both material as well as immaterial, conscious as well as unconscious at the same time. By following this logic he concludes that substance is neither one nor two but many and each is as real as the single substance of Spinoza, named it as Monads. Leibniz in his strong dissatisfaction with Spinoza sought the solution in his well-known theory of pre-established harmony. That monads compose the body, but the apparent harmony between them is a balance pre-established from the beginning by the perfection of the Divine creation. By accepting 'reason' as the source of knowledge, subsequent thinkers try to provide the answers to this problem of being created by Descartes in their own way.

2. CONCLUSION:

By taking 'reason' as the tool of inquiry to look at the 'being', Descartes having initiated the idea that there are two independent realities; he seems to forget his own dualistic creed, when he makes the two substances dependent on God. He has now plunged back into the theological ditch from which it may not be easy for him to climb back to his purely metaphysical suppositions. This is the only reason, Spinoza comes up with this solution that in a logical sense God is the only substance and duality that appears to Descartes is merely an attribute. But this claim of Spinoza is unacceptable to Leibniz. Leibniz begins with attacking Spinoza's monistic viewpoint and questions that how a single being can possess contradictory attributes and by introducing pluralism, he also accepts that all the content of consciousness is innate. Innate ideas also play an important role in the development of the problem of being from dualism to monism, to pluralism. If we look at the source and methodology of these philosophical positions regarding being, they all are equally acceptable as well as liable to doubt. The problem of being as raised by Rationalism as a philosophical position, on the whole, appears to be of great importance to the history of philosophy in general and to that of the western philosophy in particular. In spite of various drawbacks in this philosophical problem, their contribution has a unique place in the history of modern Western Philosophy.

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