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THE PHILOSOPHY OF DESCARTES

AS A

METHOD OF ASSURANCE

A thesis

presented to the faculty of
Concordia Theological Seminary

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by

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requirements for the degree

of

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THE PHILOSOPHY OF DESCARTES AS A METHOD OF ASSURANCE

Introduction

The great questions of life have made men philosophers. While the traditional task of most philosophy has been one of synthesis and clarification, it has shown a remarkably persistent interest in the problem of certainty. Perhaps that is why the individual philosopher has always been so eager to set down a "system" which is to become the be-all and end-all of metaphysics. No thinker has succeeded in accomplishing this task. We may say that the problem is one of immense difficulty since it involves innumerable corollary questions. What is the nature of man? What is the nature of his thinking processes? To what extent can he know the material world? What is his destiny? And if we want accurate answers we really ought not start with any presuppositions whatsoever. However, the very nature of thought makes certain presuppositions necessary. As a matter of fact, even the wording of our questions may imply certain presuppositions. It is this fallacy in our quest for certainty that Susanne Langer points to when she says:

Everything has become what it is; everything has a cause; every change must be to some end; the world is a thing, and must have been made by some agency, out of some natural stuff, for some reason. These are natural ways of thinking. Such implicit "ways" are not avowed by the average man, but simply followed. He is not conscious of assuming any basic principles. They are what a German would call his "Weltanschauung", his attitude of mind, rather than specific art-

icles of faith. They constitute his outlook; they are deeper than facts he may note or propositions he may moot.

But, though they are not stated, they find expressions in the FORMS OF HIS QUESTIONS. A question is really an ambiguous proposition; the answer is its determination. There can be only a certain number of alternatives that will complete its sense.¹

These few thoughts serve to emphasize the many stumbling-stones along man's search for assurance. Despite the stumbling-stones there have been many great men who have made the search. Rene Descartes was such a man, one deeply interested in certainty. He humbly announces that he "never contemplated anything higher than the reformation of my own opinions, and basing them on a foundation wholly my own."² Nonetheless, Descartes does have a system, and one he sincerely believes valid. Although it is true that many have found fault with Descartes calling his proofs for the existence of God doubtful, and his understanding of the relationship of mind and matter fallacious, he is worthy of study because of his contribution to the doctrine of certainty. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss Descartes' philosophy as a method of certainty.

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1. Susanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, pp. 1, 2.
 2. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, p. 13.

I. Status of Thought at the Time of Descartes

Coming into the world fifty years after the death of Martin Luther, Descartes was born into the titanic struggle between the old world and the new. The age of the supremacy of the Roman Church had passed. It was a period of adjustment to the new world of Protestant thought, of the emancipation of the human spirit. Three general currents of thought characterize the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries. These are the counter-Reformation with its remnants of Scholastic thought, the attitude of scepticism stemming from the Renaissance, and the development of science. Let us consider them separately.

We begin with the counter-Reformation. Oddly enough it was a general council, something long opposed by popes which most assisted in the revival of the Roman Church after the Reformation. Paul III, after much discussion, was prevailed upon by Charles V to issue a call for a general council to take place at Trent. Paul had diplomatic reasons for the decision. He wanted to prevent Charles from dealing with the problems himself. The two principal purposes of the council were to deal with doctrine and reform. The problem of the settlement of dogma arose about the time of the Religious Treaty at Augsburg in 1555. The matter of reform was a problem that reached back into the middle ages.

The reactionary party represented by Caraffa and the Jesuits triumphed over the more evangelical Catholics. Tradition was affirmed as a source of knowledge and was given equal authority with the Scriptures. Taking courage from Charles' apparent victories in the Smalcaldic wars, the council reestablished the old doctrines with scarcely any modifications.

Because of the authority of Augustine, the Thomists maintained a slight superiority over the nominalists. Thomism became the accepted standard of dogma in the Roman Catholic Church. This did not mean that other outlooks were discouraged. New ideas, with certain qualifications, were welcomed, and the scholastic traditions were allowed to continue. This was especially true in the schools of the Jesuits. Because of the revival of Scholasticism after the Council of Trent, we must examine some of the characteristics of the Scholastic movement.

Scholasticism had, on the whole, supported the pretensions of the church. But it had not been so docile a handmaiden as is commonly alleged. There were some who could not reconcile their philosophy with the established Roman dogma. Weber notes this waywardness in the Scholastic movement when he writes:

The more familiar we become with scholastic literature, the less apt we are to exaggerate the progress of free thought from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The historians who endeavor to trace all modern negations to the Reformation, ignore, or affect to ignore, the fact that in the ninth century the Catholic Scotus Erigena denied eternal punishment; that in the twelfth, the Catholic Abelard declared the teachings of the Greek philosophers to be superior to those of the Old Testament; that in the thirteenth, a great number of Catholics refused to believe in the miraculous conception and in the resurrection of Christ; that in the same century, or two hundred years before the Reformation, and at the time when the power of the Holy See was at its height, St. Thomas and Duns Scotus found themselves obliged to prove, with all the arts of logic, the need of revelation and the credibility of the Divine Word; finally that these submissive, devoted and orthodox doctors of the church combined with their Christian convictions a freedom of thought the like of which is but rarely met with in the Protestant theology of the seventeenth century.¹

1. Alfred Weber, History of Philosophy, p. 196.

Of course, Weber writes with a bias. He fails to see that while Scholastic thought often differed from the traditional dogma of the Roman Church, that it had to exercise this "free thought" such as it was, "Underground". What then of these theologians? They were bound and could advance very little before they were stopped by the church authorities. Veitch correctly observes:

Scholasticism was a body of thought remarkable for its order and symmetry, well knit and squared, solid and massive like a medieval fortress. But it was inadequate as an expression and representation of the free life that was working in literature, and even in outside nascent philosophy at the time.¹

Furthermore, Scholasticism like a house divided against itself lacked the vigor to break the bonds which held it captive. It remained for the secular thought of the Renaissance and the religious thought of the Reformation to accomplish that. This want of vigor is traceable also to the very nature of Scholasticism. Scholasticism was within the church, and yet found itself unable to accept the faith of the church. The efforts of the Scholastics were in the direction of proving their faith. But faith ceases to be faith when one much prove it. Usually, the very term faith implies the acceptance of something which is not demonstrable. When the Scholastics employed reason in the manner in which Anselm, Aquinas and Scotus employed it, one is moved to say that the religion of faith is no more. Weber, recognizing this weakness in the faith of St. Thomas, therefore pertinently observes:

In St. Thomas Scholastic philosophy shines with a light before which the most illustrious names pale. His devotion to the church and its interests, his philosophic

1. John Veitch, The Philosophy of Descartes, p. 7.

talents, which he employs in the service of Catholicism, and his faith in the perfect harmony between the dogma and philosophic truth as set forth by Aristotle, make him the most typical doctor of the church after St. Augustine and St. Anselm. But his faith, ardent though it was, did not possess the strength of an unshakable conviction; it is rather a willed faith, an energetic will constantly struggling against a thousand difficulties which reflection throws in its way.¹

This innate weakness never disappeared in Scholasticism. That is why it failed to make a mark upon secular thinking. Though its basic tenets were preserved in and through the counter-Reformation, Scholastic thought, at the time of Descartes, was all but insignificant outside the church. It must not be overlooked, however, that Scholasticism left one important legacy to the Renaissance development. Its emphasis on the power of reason left its mark on the Renaissance man. Even though, from the Scholastic point of view, Renaissance minds distorted the capacity of reason, yet the fact remains, reason with them, as with the Scholastics, was of utmost importance in ascertaining truth.

Another current of thought evident at the close of the sixteenth century, was the scepticism which survived Renaissance thought. The Renaissance was a period of transition from the medieval theological, to the modern scientific interpretation of reality. It stressed man and his place in the universe. It was a reaction against the contemporary standards of thinking and a reversion to ancient cultures in an effort to escape medievalism. Its appeal to classic civilizations had an influence on art, literature and customs. At the same time, however, the Renaissance was bred on a certain scepticism. It doubted the validity of the cultus in which people found themselves. The

1. Alfred Weber, History of Philosophy, p. 194.

French thinker, Montaigne, for instance, doubted the possibility of certain knowledge and suggested a return to nature. There was a drift away from the authority of the church which, through art and letters, influenced even the church itself. The same scepticism which pervaded the Renaissance movement infiltrated into the church itself finding root even in the lives, conduct, and attitudes of the clergy. Such an attitude, so all-pervasive left its legacy of scepticism and doubt for many years following. This attitude of mind played a dominant role in the thinking of people during the age of Descartes.

Still another current of thought which dominated the period of Descartes' activities was the rise of the new science. Initiated by Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo it readily became a habit of thought among the learned. The science of Copernicus gave the world a new outlook. It focussed attention on the law of parsimony, i.e., that the simpler explanation is the more reasonable. It gave status to the hypothesis and brought the entire experimental idea into popular esteem. This provided another road which promised certainty. Other men soon followed. Using the experimental method, Galileo was able to confirm the theory of Copernicus. It is important to distinguish two factors in this new science, as evidenced both in Copernicus and Galileo. Namely the difference between the actual employment of certain methods in the solution of the problem and the description of those methods. Northrup describes the methods of both Copernicus and Galileo thus:

First, the discovery by analysis of the basic theoretical root of the problem; second, the selection of the simplest phenomena exhibiting the factors involved in the difficulty; third, the inductive observation of these relevant factors; fourth, the projection of relevant hypotheses suggested by the relevant facts; fifth, the deduction of logical consequences from each hypothesis, thereby permitting it to be put to an experimental test; sixth, the clarification of one's initial problem in the light of verified hypothesis; and seventh, the generalization of one's solution by means of a pursuit of logical implications of the new concepts and theories with respect to other subject matter and applications.¹

Northrup is here describing the method used by these two men. It is to be noted that this method is akin, almost exactly the same as that employed by modern sciences. So we can say of the new science that it was truly scientific in that it employed methods almost equivalent to the best we know today. Now however, as we have noted, we must distinguish method from DESCRIPTION of method. Northrup has nicely analyzed the method employed by the new science. However, this descriptive material is still comparatively recent. An understanding by the scientist of Descartes' day of the method he used, why it produced good results, or failed miserably, was not to be had. So we may say of the new science, that while it achieved remarkable successes, it was still groping. The reason why it was unable to clearly see the way before it was the profound lack of analytic descriptive material which would provide clues as to scientific method and procedure.

These then, are the primary currents of thought evident in the age of Descartes. To repeat, they were the counter-Reformation with its remnants of Scholastic thought, the sceptical attitude arising from the Renaissance and the development of the new science.

1. F. S. C. Northrup, The Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities, p. 28. See also Introduction to Reflective Thinking, Columbia Associates.

II. Descartes: Influences on the Man

It is always difficult to analyze the elements which make a man what he is. If he has written a great deal it becomes an easier matter. From the writings of Descartes it is not difficult to mark out some of the principal factors which influenced him.

We find in this sixteenth century philosopher, first of all, a strong faith in the validity of reason. This faith appears to be intimately connected with the attitude of scepticism inherited from the Renaissance, echoed in the period during which he worked, and described in the previous chapter. He had become sceptical of all forms of knowledge with the possible exception of mathematics. This same scepticism shows itself in his method, wherein he makes a positive effort to doubt everything which he had formerly accepted as truth. But amidst this general scepticism he preserves his faith in the validity of reason. He feels that here (in reason) there is the only antidote for the pretenses of thought and the fallacies natural to our thinking, which clutter our mind. His experience with various forms of learning had made him sceptical of their worth. There was left to him a profound faith in the validity of reason. Therein are two primary characteristics of Descartes' thought.

Another profound influence on Descartes was his interest in mathematics. He says:

I was especially delighted with mathematics, on account of the certitude and evidence of their reasons; but I had not as yet a precise knowledge of their true use, and thinking that they but contributed to the

mechanical arts, I was astonished that foundations so strong and sure should have no loftier super-structure reared on them.¹

This interest in mathematics arose out of the scepticism which influenced him. He saw, as he says, that in mathematics he had a solid foundation. All his doubts could not alter the simple truths of mathematical demonstration. Furthermore, mathematics provided a striking argument for his faith in the validity of reason. He felt that in mathematics, we have the purest example of the exercise of human reason. Because mathematics thus provided him with a foothold against absolute scepticism and because it demonstrated the validity of reason thus employed in such a pure form, Descartes knew that here was his clue in the quest for certainty. Burt observes, "Descartes' eagerness for certainty and for effective demonstration was the main motive behind his interest in mathematics."²

Later we will discuss the influence of science on Descartes. But while we are still on the subject of his interest in mathematics, we might add that it was through mathematics that Descartes was lead to science. As a matter of fact, his principal SCIENTIFIC achievement was the discovery of analytic geometry. This shows the importance of mathematics upon the thought of Descartes. Fuller points out the fact that mathematics played an important role in Descartes' science, "Like Leonardo and Bacon, Descartes had a vision of the novel scientific method and perceived the

1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, p. 7.

2. Edwin Burt, Types of Religious Philosophy, p. 176.

fundamental role that mathematics was to play in scientific investigation and in the formulation of scientific hypotheses."¹ Thus the importance of mathematics to Descartes' science. Later we will see the fundamental role mathematics played in the formulation of Descartes' metaphysics. So we may say that one of the chief influences on the thought of Descartes was mathematics, because it provided him with hope against scepticism, faith in the validity of reason, a ground for certainty, and the foundation for his science and his metaphysics.

Now we would like to consider another major influence on the thought of Descartes, namely the new science. Of course, Descartes was not a scientist in the modern sense of the word. But he was a scientist nevertheless. Weber points out:

Descartes not only uses inner observation; he is a learned anatomist and physiologist (so far as that was possible in the seventeenth century), and as such appreciates the value of experience. He loves to study the GREAT BOOK OF THE WORLD; and for anyone to oppose him to Bacon on this point is sheer ignorance. The most recent histories of Cartesianism justly insist that it is impossible to separate Descartes the scientist from Descartes the philosopher.²

We have said that despite the point Weber makes, Descartes is not a scientist in the modern sense. The mathematical emphasis in science was not symbolic for Descartes, but rather offered him a reliable method, the rationalistic deductive method with which to work.

Lindsay says:

Descartes lived in times that saw the beginning of modern philosophy and himself contributed as much as anyone to those beginnings. Though without the

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1. B. A. G. Fuller, History of Philosophy, p. 59.
 2. Alfred Weber, History of Philosophy, p. 245.

experimental genius of Galileo and Torricelli, he far more than Lord Bacon had an insight into the theoretical basis upon which the new discoveries rested. His great contribution to science was mathematical. He was always more concerned with general principles of method than with the detailed work of observation. His science is essentially rationalistic. Just for that reason, his scientific work is filled with the most daring prophecies which became the assumptions of nineteenth century science . . . he maintained that the universe was a mechanical system and asserted this of the nature of the human body, and the whole nature of the animals as well as the structure of the solar system. Of late years scientific thought is becoming conscious of the limitations of this ideal. It involves certain theoretical impossibilities. But the services it has rendered to modern science cannot be over-estimated.¹

Perhaps the reason why Descartes as a scientist was relatively unsuccessful was his firm belief that science arises from philosophy. He himself did not want to build upon foundations so infirm. One would think that since he felt philosophy should not be the basis for science that he would find another basis. But in this he fails as we shall see when we approach his metaphysics. He is still the rationalist. He still must start with a metaphysical principle from which all knowledge stems. He fails entirely to see the value of induction as did Bacon, the value of the hypothesis, and the value of the empirical test of the hypothesis. Just for this reason he fails to become a modern scientist. At the same time, his importance in the field of theoretical science, yes his importance to the science of his own day, cannot be denied. Northrup includes him in a list of scientists who proved themselves to be such because they went beyond the third stage of inquiry. (See page 8.)

An examination of major Western philosophers shows that they were first rate scientists before they became

1. A. D. Lindsay, Introduction to Everyman edition of Descartes, p. ix.

philosophers. Moreover the science in which they were expert was always mature, having reached the third stage of inquiry where deductively formulated theory, requiring concepts by postulation were introduced. This is true of Democritus, Plato, Aristotle, Albertus Magnus, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant and Alfred North Whitehead to include a contemporary and mention only a few.¹

So I think we can count science as it was known in the sixteenth century as one of the profound influences on Descartes. He thought it sufficiently important to give it a prominent place in his philosophy immediately following his proof for his own and God's existence.

Another influence on Descartes' philosophy was his religion.

Rene Descartes was a devout Catholic. However, he did not enjoy the favor of the entire church, as Lindsay puts it:

The publication of the DISCOURSE made Descartes famous, but it also, in spite of his previous behaviour, made him an object of suspicion to the more extreme ecclesiastics, Calvinist and Roman Catholic alike. It was particularly to allay these suspicions that he published in 1641 his MEDITATIONS . . . Their purport was to show that the new system of philosophy, in spite of its fundamental difference from Scholasticism, could produce irrefragable arguments for the most orthodox conclusions.²

Perhaps it was for this same reason that Descartes wrote at the end of his PRINCIPLES:

I submit all my opinions to the authority of the church. Lest I should presume too far, I affirm nothing, but submit all these my opinions to the authority of the church and the judgment of the more sage; I desire no one to believe anything that I've said, unless he is constrained to admit it by the force and evidence of reason.³

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1. F. S. C. Northrup, The Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities, p. 7.
 2. A. D. Lindsay, Introduction to Everyman edition of Descartes, p. x.
 3. Rene Descartes, Principles of Philosophy, p. 228.

Such a statement and many others which one finds in the dedications seem to indicate a lack of certainty on the part of Descartes in the validity of his system. This is not necessarily the case, however. He may have been protecting himself. The fact is he never denied the principles he laid down even though he often ran into difficulty. It is true that:

Descartes was not of the stuff that martyrs are made. Moreover he had a deep and sincere devotion to the church and respect for its authority. Its condemnation was enough to shake his conviction of the truth of his conclusions.¹

Descartes' fear of the hostility of the Church could not but influence his thought. This fear perhaps accounts for his almost absolute dualism of body and matter. Lindsay suggests:

Hobbes had said, "It is with the mysteries of our religion as with wholesome pills for the sick, which swallowed whole have the virtue of cure; but chewed are for the most part cast up without effect."

Descartes had never thought of chewing or in any way analysing what his spiritual doctors prescribed. He was concerned to prove that such spiritual prescriptions were necessary, and to justify that view of the world on which they are based. This was the source of Descartes' dualism. He had to find room in his system for two entirely disparate worlds. He never really gave any explanation of their connection except to say that they were both there and that their inter-communication was miraculous. The sharp separation which he maintained between them was equally harmful to both. It produced on the one hand his conception of a purely mechanical world which is the basis for modern materialism, and on the other hand the beginnings of that form of idealism which shuts the soul up within itself and tends to throw doubt upon and even deny the existence of the external world of objects. For the soul conceived of as separate from the body there can be no object but itself, or of a God separate from the world. The soul's knowledge of the world becomes a mystery which it is hard to go on believing.²

1. Lindsay, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Thus Cartesian dualism rises from his mutual interest in both science and religion and his desire to establish the validity of both. We shall deal more fully with Cartesian dualism in the conclusion of this paper for it is integral in Descartes' quest for certainty. In any case:

Descartes was a practical Catholic all of his life and he tried to develop proofs of the existence of God, an explanation of the Eucharist, of the nature of religious faith, and of the operation of divine providence, using his philosophy as a basis for a new theology.¹

What else need be said about Descartes the man? We have investigated those interests and influences which moulded his philosophy. Mathematics, science, religion! These were the three great branches of learning that Descartes tried to synthesize and clarify in his philosophy. By doing so, he hoped to lead the world from the chaos and doubt into which it had been led by Scholasticism and establish for it a structure as well grounded as a geometric axiom upon which might be erected the superstructure of a new thought.

1. Vernon J. Bourke, "Cartesianism," Dictionary of Philosophy, (Rune), p. 46.

III. The Cartesian Quest for Certainty

Descartes enters upon his philosophic speculation with an air of modesty. "After all," he says, "it may be possible that I am mistaken and it is but a little copper and glass, perhaps, that I take for gold and diamonds."¹ He asserts that he is not offering an objective answer to the problems he attempts to solve. He rather affirms his subjective approach:

My present design is not to teach the method which each ought to follow for the right conduct of his reason, but solely to describe the way in which I have sought to conduct my own . . . this tract is put forth merely as a history, or if you will, as a tale, in which, amid some examples worthy of imitation, there will be found, perhaps,² as many more which it were advisable not to follow.

We have already mentioned how Descartes tired of the studies taught in his early Jesuitical surroundings. One by one he examined the various subjects for study and "the varied courses and pursuits of mankind at large," and found scarcely one which did not appear vain and useless. He writes:

I found myself involved in doubts and errors, that I was convinced that I had advanced no further in all my attempts at learning than the discovery at every turn of my own ignorance . . . I was thus led to take the liberty of judging all men by myself, and of concluding that there was no science in existence that was of such a nature as I had previously been given to believe.³

One is reminded in this doubt of Descartes, of Bacon's categorization of all the things which may be doubted under his four idols. Each

1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, p. 5.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

stands for certain popular misconceptions or beliefs which must consciously be denied before truth can be achieved. One sees a trace of this in Descartes:

I learned to entertain too decidedly a belief in regard to nothing of the truth of which I had been persuaded merely by example and custom; and thus, I extricated myself from many errors powerful enough to darken our natural indulgence, and incapacitate us in a great measure from listening to reason.¹

Descartes wants to eliminate these errors. He tells how he always "had an earnest desire to know how to distinguish true from false." He tells us that this intense drive within him in addition to the feeling of inadequacy with which his various studies had left him, prompted him to seek other recourse.

For these reasons, as soon as my age permitted me to pass from the control of my instructors, I entirely abandoned the study of letters, and resolved not to seek any other study than myself, or of the great book of the world.²

The subjects of studies thus far had only served to teach him habits of thought and ideas which had not been proven. In fact, we have these ideas simply because we were brought up in an environment of which these ideas are a natural part. Therefore he feels we would have been much better off if we were born with our intelligence fully matured. We would thereby not be subject to the customs and folkways of thought that so color our thinking. We would not then be bound by "the chains forged by the free men of yesterday." In view of all this, Descartes makes a decision which is the starting point of his quest for certainty:

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1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, p. 9.
 2. Ibid., p. 8.

As for the opinions I had up to that time embraced, I thought I could not do better than to resolve to sweep them wholly away, that I might afterwards be in a position to admit either others more correct, or even perhaps the same when they had undergone the scrutiny of reason.¹

At another place he says:

I was thus led to infer that the ground for our opinions is far more custom than any certain knowledge . . . I could select from the crowd no one whose opinions seemed worthy of preference, and I thus found myself constrained, as it were, to use my own reason in the conduct of my life.²

In order to facilitate this method of doubt he takes a further step in desiring that all those things which are doubtful should be considered false.³ In doing this he makes a conscious effort to eliminate from his mind all extraneous material and thus insure a clear mind for the foundation which must then appear as indubitable.

He says:

I am constrained to avow that there is nothing at all that I formerly believed to be true of which it is impossible to doubt and that not through thoughtlessness or levity, but from cogent and maturely considered reasons; so that henceforward, if I desire to discover anything certain, I ought not the less refrain from consenting to those same opinions than what might be shown to be manifestly false.⁴

Thus he adopts a positive method of doubt applied to all things in the search for truth.

Descartes cautions his reader that this method of doubt should only be used in the contemplation of truth; it is dangerous to apply it to the practical problems of daily life. Nor does he want to be charged with scepticism.

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1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, p. 12.
 2. Ibid., p. 14.
 3. Rene Descartes, Principles, p. 165.
 4. Rene Descartes, Meditations, p. 83.

I made it my business in each matter to reflect particularly on what might be doubted and prove a source of error. I gradually rooted from my mind all errors which had hitherto crept into it. Not that in this I imitated the sceptics who doubt only that they may doubt, and seek nothing beyond certainty itself; for on the contrary, my design was to find ground for assurance, and I cast aside the loose clay and sand, that I might reach the rock or clay. In this it appears to me that I was successful enough.¹

With the description of his systematic efforts to doubt, Descartes begins one of the most absorbing and intriguing studies in philosophic literature. He proceeds to carry his plan into action, that is to doubt all that he has formerly thought to be true. In the first place, he found that he could doubt his sense experience:

All that I have up to this moment accepted as possessed of the highest truth and certainty, I received either from or through my sense. I observed however that these sometimes misled me; and it is the part of prudence not to place absolute confidence in that by which we have ever been deceived.²

He is further convinced of the deception of his senses by his experiences in sleep:

But I cannot forget that at other times I have been deceived in sleep by similar illusions; and attentively considering these cases, I perceive so clearly that there exist no certain marks by which the state of waking can ever be distinguished from that of sleep, that I feel greatly astonished; and in amazement, I almost persuade myself that I am now dreaming.³

However, even while dreaming may seem to invalidate sense experience, Descartes sees some possibility of retaining the validity of our sense experience, even despite the dream argument. For he says:

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1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, p. 23.
 2. Rene Descartes, Meditations, p. 80.
 3. Ibid., p. 81.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the objects which appear to us in sleep are, as it were, painted representations of real objects which could not have been formed unless in the likeness of realities; and that therefore those general objects at all events - eyes, a head, hands, and entire body - are not simply imaginary but really existent . . . For whether I am awake or dreaming, it remains true that two and three make five, and that a square has four sides; nor does it seem possible that truths so apparent can ever fall under suspicion of falsity (or incertitude).¹

So Descartes continues in his attempt to see if it is possible justly to doubt sensible experience:

As I sometimes think that others are in error respecting matters of which they believe themselves certain and to possess a perfect knowledge, how do I know that I am not also deceived every time I add together two and three, or number the sides of a square, or form some judgment still more simple, if more simple can indeed be imagined . . . I will suppose then not that Deity who is sovereignly good and the fountain of truth, but that some malignant demon who is at once potent and deceitful, has employed all of his artifice to deceive me; I will suppose that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, figures, sounds, and all external things are nothing better than illusions or dreams, by means of which this demon has laid snares on my credulity; I will consider myself as without hands, eyes, flesh and blood or any of the senses, and as falsely believing that I am possessed of these; I will continue resolutely fixed in this belief and if by this means it be not in my power to arrive at a knowledge of truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, viz., suspend judgment, and guard with settled purpose against giving my consent to what is false, and being imposed upon by the deceiver, whatever be his power and artifice.²

Up to now he has felt that mathematical truths are indubitable. But in his search for things to doubt, Descartes tells us that even mathematical demonstrations fall beneath the same arguments which he used to doubt sensible things:

We will also doubt of the other thing we have previously held to be certain, even of the demonstrations of mathematics, and of their principles which we have hitherto deemed self evident.³

1. Rene Descartes, Meditations, pp. 80-81.

2. Ibid., pp. 82-84.

3. Rene Descartes, Principles of Philosophy, p. 166.

It would seem that at this point, Descartes has reached the climax of doubt. Here he has achieved the ultimate in scepticism, for he has doubted the validity of mathematical demonstrations. (Recent use of non-Euclidean geometries especially in connection with new spatial concepts bears out what Descartes meant by the necessity for doubt.)

Descartes finally affirms that at least when we have doubted all, what remains will still be absolutely certain, for it has withstood the ultimate test.¹ Furthermore, the whole investigation, the entire experiment in the test of all experience with the sceptical attitude of mind, had yielded certain fruits. Descartes tells us something of these fruits:

Since I endeavored to discover the falsehood or certitude of the proposition I examined, not by feeble conjectures, but by clear and certain reasonings, I met with nothing so doubtful as to not yield a conclusion of adequate certainty, although this were merely the inference, that the matter in question contained nothing certain . . . In destroying such of my opinions as appeared ill-founded, I made a variety of observations and acquired an amount of experience of which I availed myself in the establishment of the more certain.²

And so Descartes, while he has gained valuable experience, and a feeling that some of his information may be valid (that is if he is not being deceived by an evil demon), he nonetheless is faced with the inevitable conclusion, that there is nothing certain, except, perhaps, that he doubts.

I supposed accordingly, that all the things which I see are false (fictitious); I believe that none of the objects which my fallacious memory represents ever

1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, p. 73.

2. Ibid., p. 24.

existed; I suppose that I possess no senses; I believe that body, figure, extension, motion and place are merely fictions of my mind. What is there then that can be esteemed true? Perhaps, this only, that there is nothing absolutely certain.¹

And so Descartes' quest for certainty ends only in the certainty of uncertainty!

1. Rene Descartes, Meditations, p. 85.

IV. Certainty from Uncertainty

It is typical of this uncanny Frenchman to find his certainty rooted in the idea of uncertainty. But this is, after all, no more unusual than his deliberate attack on all things considered fixed and certain by the popular mind. Descartes established this idea as a fixed and inevitable equation - by his doubting, he is assured of his own existence. Descartes says:

I had the persuasion that there was absolutely nothing in the world, that there was no sky or earth, no mind or bodies; was I not at the same moment persuaded that I did not exist? Far from it; I assuredly existed since I was persuaded. But there is I know not what being possessed of the greatest power and cunning, who is doubtless employing all his ingenuity to deceive me. Doubtless then, I exist since I am deceived; and let him deceive me as he may, he can never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I am conscious that I am something. So that it must be maintained, in fine, all things being maturely and carefully considered that this proposition I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time I conceive it in my mind.¹

We find a similar statement in the Discourse but with a better analysis of how assurance is derived from the necessity of the thinking or doubting process - the idea being that the fact of thought or doubt establishes the necessary existence of the thinker or doubter, subject and action being synonymous and mutually necessary:

I thought that I ought to reject as absolutely false, all opinions in regard to which I could suppose the least ground from doubt, in order to ascertain whether after that there remained ought in my belief that was wholly indubitable. Accordingly, seeing that

1. Rene Descartes, Meditations, p. 86.

our sense sometimes deceives us, I was willing to suppose that there existed nothing really such as they presented to us; and because some men err in their reasonings and fall into paralogisms, even on the simplest matters of geometry, I convinced that I was as open to error as anyone, rejected as false all the reasonings I had hitherto taken as demonstrations; and finally, when I considered that the very same thoughts (presentations) that had ever entered my mind when awake, had in them no more truth than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately, I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think of all as false, it was absolutely necessary that I who thus thought, should BE, somewhat; and as I observed that this truth, I think, therefore I am, was so certain and of such evidence, that no ground of doubt, however extravagant could be alleged by the skeptics capable of shaking it. I concluded that I could, without scruple, accept as the first principle of the philosophy of which I was in search.¹

Later on Descartes describes this assurance more accurately:

In the words, "I think, therefore I am", there is nothing at all which gives me assurance beyond this, that I see very clearly that in order to think it is necessary to exist; I concluded that I might take for a general rule, the principle that all things which we clearly and distinctly conceive are true, only observing however, that there is some difficulty in rightly determining the objects which we clearly conceive.²

Furthermore, we have noted in the early pages of this paper how the form of our questions and our presuppositions may influence the alternatives we allow ourselves in the analysis of some aspect of the problem of truth. We will note here that Descartes, who was a great theoretical scientist, by trying to eliminate from his mind all presuppositions (idols), is forced to find the source of assurance in his own consciousness. So he arrives at the "Cogito, ergo sum."

1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, pp. 26-27.

2. Ibid., p. 27.

His presuppositions, that the existence of matter is doubtful, etc., are of such a nature as to incline his philosophy in the direction of idealism rather than a dualism. This general tendency in his philosophy is facilitated by the "Cogito, ergo sum." In fact, it is in his exposition of the "Cogito, ergo sum" that he approaches most closely this idealistic school; and it is in this direction, he feels, that certainty lies. As a result, he is extremely interested in the nature of mind. He affirms repeatedly that we are much more certain of the existence of the mind than of the existence of the body:

And this is the best mode of discovering the nature of the mind and its distinctness from the body: for, examining what we are, while supposing as we now do, that there is nothing really existing apart from my own thought, we clearly perceive that neither extension, nor figure, nor local motion, nor anything similar that can be attributed to body, pertains to our nature, and nothing save thought alone; and consequently, that the notion we have of our mind precedes that of any corporeal thing, and is more certain, seeing we still doubt whether there is any body in existence while we already perceive that we think.¹

Since our mind is the chief thing even in the understanding of the material world, it is true that mind is more important. But even further, the perception of the material world understood by my mind, is a token itself, of the existence of my mind: this in refutation of the Lockian concept that what is in the mind was first in our senses. Perhaps we even find in this refutation of Descartes and other similar ones, a beginning of the Kantian criticism of Locke. Kant sees the ultimate nihilism of both the Lockian empiricism and Berkeley's subjective idealism and suggests that while it is true that what is in

1. Rene Descartes, Principles, p. 167.

the mind was first in the sense, still it is equally true that the mind is the necessary synthetic agency in the organization of the phenomena presented to the senses.

Even at his initial stages of inquiry into this phase of the problem (of establishing the certain and indubitable), Descartes still retains his doubts about material things. All that he has to work with is his thinking and the corollary to that, his existence. I think, therefore I am. It is perhaps even true, he reasons, that all that he needs to insure his existence IS mind. For he says:

From the very circumstances that I sought to doubt the truth of other things, it must clearly and certainly follow that I was, while on the other hand, if I had only ceased to think, although all the other objects which I had ever imagined, had been in reality existent, I would have had no reason to believe that I existed. I thence concluded that I was a substance whose essence or nature consists only in thinking and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material things, so that "I" that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body and is even more easily known than the latter, and is such, that though the latter were not, it would still continue to be all that it is.¹

But does this imply that one exists only when one thinks? Descartes says: "I am, I exist; this is certain; but how often? As often as I think, for perhaps it would even happen if I should wholly cease to think that I should at the same time wholly cease to be."² We see then, how significant the consciousness-approach is to the philosophy of Descartes. Let us observe here in connection with our main thesis, namely the study of this man's philosophy as a method of assurance, that the inevitable necessity for that assurance is grounded in the

1. Rene Descartes, Principles, p. 27.

2. Rene Descartes, Meditations, p. 88.

ego, in his personal, subjective consciousness. "What then am I? A thinking being it has been said. But what is a thinking being? It is a think that doubts, understands (conceives), affirms, denies, wills, refuses, that imagines also, and perceives."¹

This thinking object has ideas, of course, but those ideas are not synonymous with their objects. This we see from a passage in which there is perhaps a bit of the Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena: "I have observed in a number of instances, that there is a great difference between the object and the idea. Thus, for example, in my mind, I find wholly two different ideas of the sun, etc."² Of course, Descartes here is talking about an idea and an object. But since the mind (previously defined), also "perceives", its idea of an object is its perception of it. Here, then, Descartes is distinguishing between an object and our perception of it, without affirming that we can ever perceive the object in its entirety.

But the mind very often can perceive more of an object than our senses allow. In support of the ability of the mind to perceive things in which the senses misled us, Descartes asks us to think of a piece of wax. In placing the wax in proximity of the fire, every sensible perception, formerly ours, concerning the wax is changed. It has changed in regard to our sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch of it. He concludes, "I must therefore admit that I cannot even comprehend by imagination what the piece of wax is and that it

1. Rene Descartes, Meditations, p. 89.

2. Ibid., p. 99.

is the mind alone which perceives it."¹ Descartes suggests still another example:

(Speaking of people walking in the street below).
 What do I see from the window beyond hats and cloaks that might cover artificial machines whose motions might be determined by springs. But I judge that there are human beings from these appearances, and thus I comprehend, by the faculty of judgment alone which is in my mind, what I believe I say with my eyes.²

It is too bad that Descartes does not examine the source of the precepts which determine the nature of his judgments. His earnest desire to separate the mind from material things seems to make him go to an extreme to deny material things, the objects of his sense experience. It is still true that his understanding of wax in its new form as changed by warmth is still the result of experience with wax. And his judgment that those are genuine people in the streets is based on experience too, on the many times he has descended the stairs and mingled among them, indeed talked to them, shook hands with them, used his sense of smell to distinguish the fish pedlar from the aristocratic debutante. But, I don't think Descartes is as guilty of going to the extreme in denying the existence of material things as he seems to be. He is still consciously doubting. He is still interested in absolute assurance and certainty. Thus even though his judgments of the objects of sense experience are based on previous experience, it is still true that experience is not always true and valid; he may be deceived. Therefore, he must discover foundations more firm. These foundations he finds in conscious-

1. Rene Descartes, Meditations, pp. 91-92.

2. Ibid., p. 93.

ness. The emphasis is, as I've said, on his idealism. But his idealism arises only because his consciousness is harder to doubt than material things. But he is still interested in validating sense experience and the material world. For he points out that even INVALID and incorrect sense experience in its interaction with his imagination has sufficient force to establish his existential status as a real being. For he says:

But finally, what shall I say of the mind itself, that is, of myself? for as yet I do not admit that I am anything but mind. What then? I who seem to possess such a distinct impression of a piece of wax - do I not know myself? both with greater truth and certitude, and also much more clearly and distinctly? For if I judge that a piece of wax exists because I touch it, it assuredly follows, much more evidently, that I myself am or exist. For it is possible that what I see may not be wax, and that I do not possess even eyes with which to see anything; but it cannot be that when I see, or, which comes to the same thing, when I think I see, I myself who think am nothing. So likewise, if I judge that wax exists because I see it, it will still also follow that I am; and if my imagination, or any other cause whatever it may be, persuades me of the existence of wax, I will still draw the same conclusion. And what is here remarked of the piece of wax is applicable to all other things that are external to me.¹

So in the midst of doubt, Descartes locates the island of security in an assurance of his own existence. He concludes:

I find that I am insensibly reverted to the point I desired; for, since it is now manifest to me, that bodies themselves are not properly perceived by the senses nor by the faculty of the imagination, but by the intellect alone; and since they are not perceived because they are seen and touched, but only because they are understood (or rightly comprehended by thought) I readily discover that there is nothing more easily or clearly apprehended than my own mind.²

1. Rene Descartes, Meditations, p. 93.

2. Ibid., p. 94.

Descartes' first great question has been: Is there an ultimate in knowledge which guarantees itself? By carefully doubting all things, by eliminating from his thinking processes all of those things which WERE doubtful, and by drawing the one valid conclusion from the fact that he doubted, Descartes has established a principle, which, for him, satisfies the requirements of both of these questions. That principle: "Cogito, ergo sum!" We have shown how this principle leads to an emphasis on consciousness and idealistic philosophy. He now proceeds to his second big question: Is this a suitable basis for a superstructure of knowledge?

V. Superstructures: The Existence of God and Matter

Descartes has affirmed that whatever is clear in the mind is true and correct. However, he cautions us again and again to make sure that its clarity is as obvious as that of the "Cogito." In the "Cogito", there is an equation between "I think" and "I am." These two terms have the same validity as the equation that exists between two plus two and four. It is possible to form such an equation because "two plus two" is nothing more than another form of "four". So "I think" equals, implies, inheres in, "I am".

There is the same force in the ontological argument wherein the existence of God is derived from our conception of him. It is a truth, an axiom which the soul perceives prior to reflection.

There are several shades of meaning in Descartes' proofs for the existence of God. There is the purely ontological argument aspect - the proof that a God who is "a being than which a greater cannot be conceived" (Anselm) would not be such if he lacked existence. This is an argument by definition. Or as Weber points out, sometimes the emphasis in Descartes is not:

God exists because my mind conceives him; but, My reason conceives God because God exists. The true foundation of our faith in God is not our conception of him, - that would be a subjective and weak basis, - but God himself, who reveals himself to us in the innate idea of infinity.¹

I believe we can find both aspects of this proof in Descartes. Surely, the proof by definition is there, and surely the argument from our

1. Alfred Weber, History of Philosophy, p. 247.

innate conception of the infinite is there. Let us first look at the argument based on God's perfection.

This perfection of God as contrasted with the imperfection of the human being is pointed out by Descartes:

From reflecting on the circumstances that I doubted, and consequently on the circumstance that my being was not wholly perfect (for I clearly saw that it was a greater perfection to know than to doubt), I was led to inquire, whence I had thought to think of something more perfect than myself; and I clearly recognized that I must hold this notion from some nature that was in reality more perfect . . . It but remained that it was placed in me by a nature more perfect than my own, and which even possessed within itself all the perfections of which I may form an idea; that is to say, in a single word, God!¹

Descartes gives us some picture of his idea of the perfect God:

By the name God I understand a substance infinite, (eternal, independant, immutable, all-knowing, all-powerful, and by which I myself, and every other thing that exists, if any such there be, is created. But these properties are so great and excellent, that the more attentively I consider them, the less I feel persuaded that the idea I have of them owes its origin to myself alone. And thus, it is absolutely necessary to conclude, from all that I have before said, that God exists: for though the idea of substance be in my mind owing to this, that I myself am a substance, I should not however, have the idea of an infinite substance seeing that I am a finite being, unless it were given me by some substance in reality infinite.²

I clearly perceive that there is more reality in the infinite substance than in the finite, and therefore that in some way I possess the perception of the infinite before that of the finite, that is, the perception of God before that of myself, for how could I know that I doubt, desire, or that something is wanting in me, and that I am not wholly perfect, if I possessed no idea of a being more perfect than myself, by comparison of which I know the deficiencies of my own nature?³

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1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, p. 28.
 2. Rene Descartes, Meditations, p. 104.
 3. Ibid., pp. 104-105.

Of course, out of the assumption of a perfect being Descartes concludes that this will not be a being who is subject to doubt, inconstancy, sadness and such like. This is concluded rather naively, because Descartes himself would be quite happy to be rid of such burdens.¹ Furthermore, these unfortunate circumstances which Descartes feels should not be ascribed to God are related to his own dual nature, that of mind and matter. "I therefore concluded that it could not be a perfection of God to be thus compounded of two natures."² Understanding God in this way insures his existence:

I observed that the great certitude which by common consent is accorded to the demonstrations (of geometry) is founded solely on this, that they are clearly conceived in accordance with the rules I have already laid down. In the next place I perceived that there was nothing in these demonstrations which could assure me of the existence of the object: thus, for example, supposing a triangle to be given, I clearly perceive that its three angles are equal to two right angles, but I did not on that account perceive anything which could assure me that a triangle existed; while on the contrary, recurring to the examination of the idea of a perfect being, I found that the existence of the Being was comprised in the idea in the same way that the equality of the three angles to two right angles is comprised in the idea of a triangle . . . and that consequently, it is at least as certain that God exists (who is a perfect being) as any demonstration in geometry can be.³

Descartes asks himself whether he could exist were there no God. If he did, he concludes, he would have to derive his existence from something more imperfect than God since nothing more perfect than God can be imagined. Let us suppose that he himself is the cause of

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1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, pp. 28-29.
 2. Ibid., p. 29.
 3. Ibid., pp. 29-30.

his existence. But in that case he would be conscious of no deficiencies for he would have bestowed upon himself every quality of which he had any idea and thus, as far as he was able to judge, would be perfect.¹

But perhaps the being upon whom I am dependant is not God, and I have been produced either by my parents or by some causes less perfect than Deity. This cannot be: for, as I have said, it is perfectly evident that there must at least be as much reality in the cause as in the effect; and accordingly since I am a thinking being, and possess within myself the idea of God, whatever in the end be the cause of my existence, it must of necessity be admitted that it is likewise a thinking being, and that it possesses in itself all the ideas and perfections I attribute to Deity. Then it may be inquired whether this cause owes its origin and existence to itself or to some other cause. For if it be self-existent, it follows from what I have laid down, that this cause is God; for since it possesses the perfection of self-existence, it must likewise without doubt, have the power of actually possessing every affection of which it has the idea, - in other words all the perfections I conceive to belong to God. But if it owe its existence to another being than itself, we demand again, for a similar reason, whether this second cause exists of itself or through some other, until from stage to stage, we at length arrive at an ultimate cause, which will be God.²

You will see how subtly Descartes becomes representative of the two ideas about God. That he exists because He is perfect and that He exists because of our idea of things greater than ourselves. It is very hard to separate these two ideas in Descartes. Let us say a few words now about the second Cartesian concept of God, that he reveals Himself as perfect through implanting certain ideas in us. This idea of God is a remarkable thing. It is not derived through sense experience; it is not a pure production or fiction of the mind

1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, pp. 106-107.
 2. Rene Descartes, Meditations, p. 108.

since one can neither contribute to nor detract from the conception as it stands. The only other possible source of this knowledge of God is through innate ideas. By some means God had implanted these ideas in us at creation as though the mark of the "workman impressed on his work."¹ God must have fashioned us after His own image and likeness, "and that I perceive this likeness in which is contained the idea of God."²

Descartes has not interested himself in examining all of the arguments which might be adduced in the proof of God's existence. He tells us quite clearly that what HAS concerned him was the proof which he considers most valid, that it the necessity of his existence from the fact of the capacity of the finite to conceive the infinite. He feels further that "there is no way open to man whereby proofs of more sufficient certainty can be discovered."³ Nor does he feel that even his proof is of sufficient worth to merit the immediate conversion of all men. This he feels, is not because of any inherent fallacy in the proof but because of certain unfortunate approaches to the problem in the mind of the atheist.

All that atheists commonly allege in favor of the non-existence of God arise continually from one or the other of these two things: namely, either the ascription of human affections to Deity, or the undue attribution in our own minds of so much vigour and wisdom that we essay to determine and comprehend what God both can and ought to do; hence all that is alleged by them will cause us no difficulty provided only we keep in remembrance that our minds must be considered finite while Deity is incomprehensible and infinite.⁴

So the force of Descartes' argument is this, that he could not be the way he is, he could not have the thoughts he has if God did

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1. Rene Descartes, Meditations, pp. 109-110.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, p. 67.
 4. Ibid., p. 73.

not exist. This is guaranteed by the principle that he, though finite, is able to conceive of the unchangeable, the immutable, the omniscient, the omnipotent, the infinite in such a manner as could only happen if his idea was conceived innately as derived from God himself.

The existence of God proved, and the existence of himself established, Descartes next demonstrates how the existence of God insures the existence of the material universe. This is the second superstructure. The idea of God "is the perpetual refutation of Skepticism."¹ And since God is perfect and not a malignant devil, Descartes may be sure God would not deceive him as to the existence of the corporeal world.

But after I have recognized the existence of God, and because I have at the same time, recognized the fact that all things rest upon him and that he is no deceiver, and in consequence of that I have judged that all that I conceive clearly and distinctly cannot fail to be true . . . no opposing reason can be brought against me which should ever make me call it into question; and thus I have a true and certain knowledge of it. And this same knowledge extends over all other things that I recollect having formerly demonstrated, as the truths of geometry and others like them . . . And thus I recognize clearly THAT THE CERTAINTY AND THE TRUTH OF ALL KNOWLEDGE DEPEND UPON THE KNOWLEDGE ALONE OF THE TRUE GOD: so that before I know him I could not perfectly know anything else. And now that I know him, I have the means of acquiring a perfect knowledge of an infinitude of things, not only of those which are in him, BUT ALSO OF THOSE WHICH BELONG TO CORPOREAL NATURE. . . ²

Carrying along this idea, Descartes reminds us that prior to this stage of the argument he had raised the problem of dreams. Material objects sometimes appear in our dreams with the force of

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1. Alfred Weber, History of Philosophy, p. 248.
 2. Rene Descartes, Meditations, pp. 120ff.

real objects. How are we to distinguish the real from the illusory?

How are we to establish the ontological reality of the material world?

Descartes answers it in this fashion:

Though men of the highest genius study this question as long as they please, I do not believe that they will be able to give sufficient reason to remove this doubt unless they presuppose the existence of God. For in the first place even the principle which I have already taken as a rule, viz., that all things which we clearly and distinctly perceive are true, is certain only because God is or exists and is a perfect Being, and because all that we possess is derived from Him; whence it follows that our ideas or notions, which to the extent of their clearness and distinctness are real, and proceed from God, are to that extent true . . . But if we did not know that all that we possess of the real and true proceeds from a perfect or infinite being, however clear and distinct our ideas may be, we should have no ground on that account for the assurance that they possess the perfection of being true.¹

So with the affirmation of God's existence and the existence of the material universe, Descartes has begun the superstructure of his metaphysics. He has advanced confidently, for he feels that his reason has been his guide.

In summary, we see that Descartes finds certainty in his own consciousness. His own doubts were sufficient to establish his personal existence. God and the material world are derived therefrom. However, a part of Descartes' assurance of his own existence is derived from the existence of God.

Having set up reason as a clear guide for further action, Descartes can begin dealing with science, or the laws which govern the material universe. This is his third great superstructure. In his study he is just as interested in certainty as he was in en-

1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, p. 31.

deavoring to lay the foundations for a solid metaphysics. Here, however, the going is much more difficult. He is involved with natural processes which must be investigated, concerning which hypotheses must be advanced. Such hypotheses must be tested and retested and perhaps restated in the light of new empirical data. Descartes, in other words, now turns empirical scientist, trying to ferret out nature's secrets and place upon them the same insignia of certainty that he placed upon Ontology. You will notice that the methods must become quite different because of the nature of the subject matter. Descartes' first method was one of introspection. His second method was that of faith (a faith which preserved his ethical integrity even while doubting all else). This really isn't a "method" at all, though it takes the place of one since it provides subjective certainty while the search for objective certainty still goes on. The third method we have reserved for the next chapter; that method concerns itself with the empirical approach to nature.

Here we must remember all that we have said about Descartes the mathematician and scientist. Formerly he had assumed that the starting point of science was philosophy. He found upon investigation that philosophy was far too unstable to support so lofty a superstructure as science seemed to be. So it is that Descartes having used mathematics, or at least a mathematical method in establishing his introspective examination and subjective assurance, now uses mathematics as the foundation for science. So, of Descartes

it may be said that he laid science upon a new starting point and recognized the importance of that starting point more than did either Bacon or Locke.

He starts with an examination of geometry and algebra and upon careful consideration finds them both entirely inadequate. Then, realizing that a combination of them would be highly successful, he combines them. A study of the details of this process is not possible within the confines of this paper nor is it necessary for the purpose of this paper. Sufficient to say that Descartes establishes the existence of nature because of the existence of a perfect God and then proceeds to lay down the detailed analysis of how further study is to be carried on. This further study is summarized in Descartes' four points of method which is briefly examined and criticized in this paper in order to show how the Cartesian method of certainty applies in the physical universe.

VI. Criticism and Analysis of Descartes' Four Points

We have said that Francis Bacon did not have the insight into the place of mathematics in the future structure of scientific thought. Nevertheless, he is one of the fathers of induction. It might be interesting to compare some extracts from his Aphorisms with the four points of Descartes:

The logic now in use serves rather to give stability and to fix the errors which have their foundation in commonly received notions than to help the search after truth . . . The syllogism consists of propositions, propositions consist of words, words are symbols of notions. Therefore if the notions themselves (which is at the root of the matter) are confused and over-hastily abstracted from the facts, there can be no firmness in the super-structure. Our only hope lies in true induction . . . There are and can be only two ways of searching into and discovering truth. The one flies from the senses and the particulars to the most general axioms, and from these principles, the truth of which it takes for settled and immoveable, proceeds to judgment and to the discovery of middle axioms. And this is now in fashion. The other derives axioms from the senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms last of all. This is the true way but as yet untried . . . axioms duly and orderly formed from particulars easily discover the way to new particulars, and thus render sciences active . . . One method alone remains to us; which is simply this: we must lead men to the particulars themselves, and their series and order; while men on their side must force themselves for awhile to lay their notions aside and begin to familiarize themselves with the facts . . . The idols and false notions which are now in the possession of the human understanding . . . not only beset men's minds that truth can hardly find entrance, but even after entrance is attained, they will again in the very instauration of the sciences meet and trouble us, unless men being forewarned . . . fortify themselves . . . They are IDOLS OF THE TRIBE . . . IDOLS OF THE CAVE . . . IDOLS OF THE MARKET PLACE . . . IDOLS OF THE THEATER . . .

1. Francis Bacon, "Aphorisms," Novum Organum, quoted by Burt, The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill, p. 28.

We now would like to look at the four points of Descartes:

The first was, never to accept anything as true when I did not recognize it clearly to be so, that is to say, to clearly avoid precipitation and prejudice, and to include in my opinions nothing beyond that which should present itself so clearly and so distinctly to my mind that I might have no occasion to doubt it.

The second was, to divide each of the difficulties which I should present into as many portions as possible and as should be required for its better solution.

The third was, to conduct my thoughts in order, by beginning with the simplest objects, and those most easy to know, so as to mount little by little, as if by steps, to the most complex knowledge, and even assuming an order among these which do not naturally precede one another.

And the last was, to make everywhere enumerations so complete, and surveys so wide that I should be sure of omitting nothing.¹

Upon an initial reading of these points by Descartes, one perceives a relationship to the Aphorisms of Francis Bacon, almost one of similarity. If we remember the biographical background, however, and if we remember the application of these points to practical problems we will realize that they are diametrically opposed.

It is true that both Descartes and Bacon urge us to get all traditional concepts and notions out of our mind. In the instance of Bacon, this is accomplished by empirically designating the notions, and by putting the empirical data into the center of one's consciousness. He uses his four idols to accomplish this. Descartes, however, removes traditional beliefs by doubting, an intellectual method. Only distinct, indubitably certain notions will be admitted into our thinking. Thus far the negative portion of Descartes' method. The

1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, pp. 15-16.

positive portion (the four points) begins with the bare minimum of the rationally indubitable and moves from there step for step to the remainder of trustworthy knowledge. This method is diametrically opposed to that of Bacon, who inductively accumulates observable data. Descartes rather follows the deductive formal principle of the mathematicians. This is the opinion of Northrup.¹ For example, in his desire to begin with the simplest objects and proceed to the more complex, Descartes says:

I had little difficulty in determining with which objects to commence, for I was already persuaded that it must be with the simplest and easiest to know and considering that from all those who have hitherto sought truth in the sciences, the mathematicians alone have been able to find any demonstrations, that is, any certain or evident reasons, I did not doubt but that such must have been the rule of their investigations.²

and:

I commenced with the simplest and most general truths, and that thus each truth discovered was a rule available in the discovery of subsequent ones. Nor in this shall I perhaps appear too vain, if it be considered that, as the truth on any particular point is one, whoever apprehends that truth, knows all that on that point can be known.³

We see how close he appears to come to the inductive method of Bacon. Actually he is not inductive at all. Actually his method is always the deduction of the more complex from the simpler and more easily known. We have a glimpse of his rationalistic method when he says, "But the chief ground of my satisfaction with this method, was the assurance I had of thereby exercising my REASON in

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1. F. Northrup, The Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities, pp. 6-9.
 2. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, p. 16.
 3. Ibid., p. 17.

all matters, if not with absolute perfection, at least with the greatest attainable by me."¹ (The italics are mine.)

The cause, as I have noted, of this rationalistic, deductive interest on the part of Descartes is, of course, his own interest in mathematics. In the midst of Jesuit dogmatism and the consequent narrow and inadequate approach to things of a problematic nature, he had found his island of certainty in algebra, geometry, and the higher mathematics. He had decided that this was the foundation for a "loftier superstructure."

This view of mathematics is, after a manner, correct, for mathematics (because of its facility for symbolically representing various aspects of a scientific problem) placed a new emphasis on theoretical science. However, the value of mathematics is NOT in this, that its methods are valuable to the scientist. As we have mentioned before, the method is relative to the problem and only when this is realized and applied is a fair amount of assurance and certainty available. The method of mathematics is deductive, the method of science is inductive, the method in art, what shall we call it? . . . aesthetically intuitive?, the method in religion, that of faith. Some novel philosophers have arisen by the confusion of methods. Some philosophers color their philosophies with the method which best suits their ends instead of recognizing the legitimacy of each method in its proper place. Descartes' mistake was that of applying the mathematical or deductive method to the scientific or empirical problem. John Dewey tells us:

1. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, p. 18.

Although Descartes defined natural existence as extension, the classic tradition that only sense and imagination, among the organs of the mind refer to physical existence caused him to feel bound to offer justification for the doctrine that scientific phenomena can be stated by purely mathematical reasoning without need of recourse to experimentation. His proof for the existence of God served the purpose of justifying this application of mathematical conceptions to physics.¹

So we have noted the difference between the Baconian inductive approach and the Cartesian deductive approach, an approach which he arrived at through his interest in mathematical method.

But let us take a more careful look at Descartes' method. To start with doubt is quite legitimate even in the most modern scientific circles. Larabee points this out when in discussing doubt, he says:

A scientist doubts systematically everything that goes into his proof. He doubts his facts; he doubts his hypothesis; and he doubts whether they fit together as they do . . . he cannot prove inductively that the grip of any of his hypotheses upon the fact is absolute; since (1) no human observer is infallible; and (2) no human being's knowledge of all the relevant facts about anything, let alone, a command of all their imaginable patterns, is demonstrably complete.²

and:

The spirit of the quest, however, is that of systematic doubt. The fertility of science seems to rest on an aggressive skepticism. The questioning of everything, the suspecting of every alleged conclusion - such things are not only encouraged, but made methodical. Concentrate all the doubts on any single knowledge claim, carry them through, and the results will be devastating . . . The problem is not to find an absolute foundation for any of our beliefs, but to discover reasons for rating one above another . . . It is the essence of the scientific spirit to doubt in order to know what to believe and not for the sake of doubting. The scientist combines a perpetual suspicion of the results of

1. John Dewey, The Quest for Certainty, p. 141.
 2. H. Larabee, Reliable Knowledge, pp. 317-318.

others and his own, with an enhanced confidence in what he accepts for the time being, just because it has survived testing by his self-corrective method of systematic doubt.¹

And the Columbia Associates state: "When all has been said in favor of skepticism, it remains clear that man must act, that some acts are better than others, and that some basis of discrimination must be used."²

Even when the method of doubt has been employed with regard to a certain problem, the same method of doubt must be repeated generation after generation in order to perpetually insure one's concepts by postulation, that is, one's mental constructs, and their validity. For we never know finally and completely. New facts constantly arise. And new hypotheses and postulations must be constantly improvised to express these facts. Our amount of knowledge is constantly changing. As Prof. Whitehead points out: "Knowledge keeps no better than fish." And doubt is the method still employed to keep a perpetual check on the validity of our knowledge.

The two schools of thought - Bacon and Descartes as we have pointed out - have two different approaches to the problem of doubt. There are echoes of these two schools in contemporary thought:

Each (of the authorities on the methods of logical inquiry) maintains that at the beginning one must clear one's mind of traditional beliefs. With Bacon, this takes the form of specifying the errors of the Idols, characterizing the usual erroneous traditional beliefs. With Descartes, it takes the form of doubting all that can be doubted. Doubting is also prescribed at the initiation of inquiry by Morris Cohen and Earnest Nagel and John Dewey. With Morris Cohen and Earnest Nagel the form of doubt is more Baconian and empirical in character, since they, like Bacon, designate empirically certain traditional forms of belief which are to be

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1. H. Larabee, Reliable Knowledge, pp. 626-627.
 2. Columbia Associates, A Guide to Reflective Thinking, p. 246.

doubted. John Dewey's doubting is perhaps more Cartesian than empirical and Baconian in its form, since it takes on the positive effort to be skeptical.¹

So we see that Descartes' method of doubt has left a very real influence on modern science and philosophy.

In summary, we have noted that (and perhaps this is the major fallacy in the method of Descartes as applied to science), Descartes is rationalistic and misses the significance of the empirical approach. We have noted in Descartes' favor that his method of doubt forms one of the bases of modern science. We should not forget that Descartes' method reminded the scientist of the great tool to be had in the application of mathematics to theoretical science. Let us mention one more criticism of Descartes' method.

John Dewey is the man who more than any other points out that in the initiation of inquiry is an indeterminate situation. It is in the very nature of this indeterminate situation to be questionable. That is, potentially questionable. Actually, it is merely "uncertain, unsettled and disturbed." This doubt, Dewey says, (Logic: The Theory of Inquiry) not only exists in a subjective sense but inheres in the very nature of the situation. Now, when the indeterminate situation becomes subject to inquiry, it becomes what Dewey terms, the "problematic situation." We must remember that the indeterminate situation is not a part of inquiry, but it IS an indispensable precondition. If this is the case, inquiry does not begin with doubt, nor with the collecting of facts, nor

1. F. Northrup, The Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities, p. 14.

with the projection of hypotheses, but with the problematic situation. From there Dewey proceeds to the statement of the problem and follows with other procedures completely outlines on Northrup's book. The point here is that another of Descartes' weaknesses is that he fails to realize the implications of the problematic situation. "One must begin not with facts, nor with Descartes' deductive reasoning, nor with a hypothesis, but with the problem and the problematic situation, because at the beginning of inquiry this is all that one has."¹

Of course, we don't want to underestimate Descartes, Northrup notwithstanding. In defense of Descartes (always remembering that his was an inductive method) we may say three things. First, if the world is an orderly place (as science assumes, or at least did before the advent of relativity and nuclear physics), then it would be logical to assume that one could start with the barest minimum of certain knowledge, and, using the Cartesian method, that of proceeding from simple to complex, even experimenting to increase our knowledge, we might be able to determine within a reasonable period of time, the nature of our world and perhaps even of ourselves. But we must make an exception here. If the world is NOT orderly, we would run into great difficulty following this deductive method.

To criticize Descartes, we might now say that, assuming that the world IS orderly, we haven't time to proceed in a logical manner. Problems confront us immediately and sometimes they are all out of order with the order which logical procedure might dictate. Hence, the importance of the problematical situation.

1. F. Northrup, The Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities, p. 17.

And number three, we must remember that even if the world WERE orderly and even if we HAD the time to follow out the deductive process of Descartes in the examination of our world, we still are confronted with the enormously inadequate tools both physical and mechanical which hinder our research. For example, to examine the world deductively means starting at some point and working toward another. In his metaphysics, this basic point is the existence of his own consciousness, and consequently, of himself. What would it be in the material world? We are still bound by the chains of sense experience. We have but five organs of perception, and the means for amplifying them (microscope, telescope, etc.) are comparatively recent discoveries and still very inadequate for a thorough job. Is there any observable phenomena which could serve as a starting point for a deductive scientific program? I don't think so! Of course, Descartes makes the "Cogito, ergo sum" the starting point for his metaphysics AND his science. But we have observed and will have occasion to observe again later what great difficulty he has making the leap from mind to the objective existence of matter. Such leaps would be even more plentiful in a totally deductive approach to nature.

Scientific method was still such a new phenomenon that Descartes failed to perceive it as a possibility, much less as the foundation upon which the modern world would build its civilization. As Costello points out:

Modern science began with thought, not with observation in Galileo, Descartes and Newton. The mistake of Descartes in trying to spin a theory of the universe out of his head was not that he used thought, but that he overlooked the great variety of possible alternatives and the weakness of the human mind in imagining what these alternatives were. These are the factors that make an empirical check of thinking imperative.¹

But while we make these criticisms of Descartes, we must remember that many of the difficulties in his method arose out of a desire for assurance and certainty which could only be grounded in a deductive method similar to that of the mathematicians. Had he been merely satisfied with a method for achieving certainty rather than certainty itself, he might never have embarrassed himself from the point of view of modern science. Instead, he would have studied the scientific methods of Galileo and Bacon and perhaps have arrived at a more natural and happy solution.

1. Harry Todd Costello, "The Naturalism of Frederick Woodbridge," in Krikorian's Naturalism and the Human Spirit, pp. 314-315.

VII. Criticism of Descartes' Metaphysics

Cartesian metaphysics is intimately bound up with existence. Descartes' object was to find a truth of an ontological nature which would be verifiable independent of sense experience. This places the Cartesian world into the realm of thought; it seems to have very little relation to the real material world as we know it. Because it emanates from the subjective consciousness and because truth for the human being is inextricably related to sense experience the results are unreal and theoretical for all their validity. Lindsay points out:

The resolution to ignore the probable means, the ignoring of the data of the senses, means that while we can get back to the certainty of existence in general, we can have no knowledge of the individual. For the real world is conceived of as purely mathematical and without individuality. It becomes increasingly difficult to understand not simply what is the relation between knowledge and perception, but how there is any room for the senses at all.¹

Not only does Descartes' subjectivism seem unreal, but because Cartesian certainty emanates from the subjective self-consciousness, we have not only the doubt concerning the serviceability of the sense but the apparent separation of mind or thought from material things which are the objects of sense experience. Matter in space is shut away from thought and thought is quite tightly inclosed within itself. Mind seems to thereby become incapable of comprehending any reality beside itself. Despite the subjective unity of mind and matter in self-consciousness, the separation seems absolute unless mind or

1. A. D. Lindsay, Introduction to Everyman edition of Descartes, p. xviii.

thought should become extended or matter should think. But for Descartes, the dualism is complete. This is to be taken as a criticism of Descartes.

It is true, of course, that Descartes solves the problem in his own mind. There must be something which transcends the limits of that which is self and that which is outside of self. What, he asks, is the point where the subjective consciousness passes out into the objective? The answer is the connection between the consciousness of self and the consciousness of God. It is because God IS in our minds that we are insured the ontological validity of the objects of sense experience.

An additional criticism of this dualism is voiced by Lindsay. Lindsay feels that this dualistic principle is based on the misconception that the mind knows itself more easily than it knows objects. But while the mind is a presupposition of the knowledge of objects, objects to be known are equally a presupposition of the existence of mind. So he feels that Descartes has oversimplified his reasoning in this respect.

Another important phase of Descartes' metaphysics is the "Cogito, ergo sum." The "Cogito, ergo sum" is not a proposition, but an enthymeme. It is not as though we conclude our existence from the fact that we think. This would imply the major premise that "All which thinks is." It is rather a think known of itself, by "simple intuition of the mind." The objections of Gassendi, Huxley, even Reid and Kant arise from a construing of the statement as a proposition

instead of an enthymeme. This, incidentally, that the two ideas rise simultaneously, is the guarantee of the principle. The one is inevitably contained in the other. The fact of my thinking insures the existence of me, the thinker. The fact of my doubting (even my own existence) insures the existence of me. For it is still MY doubting, MY thinking.

This is also the source of Descartes' certainty, a certainty which he is able to maintain despite the many errors of judgment and thinking which man is heir to. Because the will is of greater extension than the understanding, it sometimes gets out of bounds, so to speak. We easily carry it beyond the objects which we clearly perceive and are often deceived. These errors are not to be imputed to God since they lie inherent in our finite nature. To err is human. However, Descartes maintains the freedom of man in all his actions. Thus error becomes a defect in his manner of acting, not in his nature. But in our clear intuitions, we do not err. Thus, despite error, the grounds for certainty can still be preserved, for the clearest of Cartesian intuitions is that I exist.

There is one more thought in this connection which I should like to add. Again it has to do with Descartes' separation of thought and nature. Niebuhr points out:

Descartes, the fountain source of modern culture, manages to conceive of man purely in terms of thought, nature in terms of mechanics, and to find no organic unity between the two, thus bearing within himself both the contradictions and extravagances of modernity.¹

Out of this dualism comes the "ego" which is not materially related

1. R. Niebuhr, The Nature of Man, p. 20.

to the universe. The question arises as to how thoughts are derived in the ego, or mind. Hume says that Descartes at this point is mistaken for he overlooks the importance of sense perception. Perhaps it would be simplest to give you Niebuhr's examination of this objection verbatim:

"When I enter most intimately into what I call myself I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, pain or pleasure. I can never catch myself at any time without a perception and can never observe anything but a perception." (Hume, Treatise on Human Nature, Vol. I, Part IV, Ch. 6) This observation may be regarded as a valid criticism of Descartes' conception of the pure ego which subsists within itself without relations. The ego is always the center of relations so that it is perfectly correct to observe, "I do not catch myself without a perception." But Hume's final conclusion, "and cannot observe anything but a perception", is obviously not a logical deduction from the former observation; nor is it according to the facts. Yet even if Hume were correct in his interpretation of the empirical ego as a stream of impressions it would still be pertinent to inquire into the nature of the "I" which he implies when he says, "When I enter most intimately into what I call myself." It is the reality of the "I" as subject which challenges the validity of all purely empirical interpretations of the ego.¹

Despite Niebuhr's criticism of Hume, it remains one of Descartes' great fallacies that in trying to achieve certainty he thereby eliminates the data of sense experience. We have shown with Lindsay that this makes his world unreal and his proof excellent metaphysics but not too practical, and with Niebuhr and Hume that there REALLY IS a valid place for sense experience in our quest for certainty.

1. R. Niebuhr, The Nature of Man, p. 286.

May I add one more footnote. I think it is interesting to note that Barth in his treatment of the epistemological problem rejects the Cartesian maxim "Cogito, ergo sum" and substitutes "Cogitor, ergo sum." He holds that the knowledge of self is dependent on our knowledge of God. As a believer, man is wholly the result of the object of faith-God. Hence, being known, he is. While this I think has very valid implications for the Christian, I don't think it would satisfy Descartes' quest for certainty. In the case of Descartes' proposition, the strength of the proposition rests on the equation of the two terms. There is no such equation established between "Cogitor" and "sum", the relation being one of faith. "Cogitor, ergo sum" seems to be dominantly syllogistic. Thus it defeats the purpose of Descartes' proposition, to wit, certainty. The equation of my being with my thinking makes my being indubitable since even the thought which doubts it exists as something uniquely my own, or as me. In the case of Barth, the guarantee of my existence rests outside of me and makes the nature of my reality illocal. This footnote at least has served the purpose of turning our attention to our next problem, Descartes and his proof for God.

For Descartes, the finite being is indefinitely bound up with the infinite. This is not simply one of the many ideas which we have. It is the idea which is essential to our existence as thinking beings. Nor is the idea of God a negative idea for Descartes, an idea arrived at through the negation of the finite.

As the concept of "darkness" implies "light," and as "broad" implies "narrow," so "finite," implies "Infinite." In that way our knowledge of God would come about through the logical deduction from the knowledge of our own limitations.

Rather, Descartes feels that the infinite is much more real for him than the finite. This knowledge of the infinite is in some sense, even prior to the notion of the finite. How else, he asks, would he be conscious of his own defects. The consciousness of a defective nature cannot give rise to the idea of infinite perfection, but rather presupposes it. If we did not have the consciousness of ourselves as finite in relation to the infinite, either we would not be cognizant of ourselves at all, or we would be conscious of ourselves as infinite. Because we are conscious of ourselves as finite, we are conscious of the infinite. Descartes' principle is that to be conscious of limit is to transcend it.

In putting his case in this way, Descartes has made the knowledge of God antecedent to his first principle, "Cogito, ergo sum." For if the knowledge of God is antecedent to the idea of self, knowledge must begin where existence begins - with God. Descartes tries to refute this argument by pointing out that he must insure his self-knowledge and his knowledge of the objects of sense experience by the knowledge that God is not deceitful but true. This of course does not satisfactorily answer the argument in a valid fashion.

However, Descartes has this point in his favor, for what Descartes is really expressing is that beneath and beyond all particular truths lies the great general truth of the unity of thought and existence.

The ultimate answer to any attack upon an aspect of truth is to demonstrate that the very possibility of arriving at truth is involved in it. To doubt this argument is to doubt reason itself, and consequently the true God. This contributes to Descartes' defense by affirming that the consciousness of self is not at first seen to rest on the consciousness of God, but that when we see what it means we realize that there it MUST rest. If this is the case, then something must be added to the consciousness of self as the first principle -- it can only be that we understand it in a sense in which the consciousness of self is synonymous with the consciousness of God. And I think this can be achieved within the realm of Cartesian philosophy.

Even however with the establishment of God as the necessary link between thought and being, between mind and matter, between ideas and the objects of sense experience, Descartes repeatedly falls back into the old dualism. And even if we allow Descartes that unity (established by God), we must ask, what kind of unity? merely generic? or is it concrete in which the particular elements are subordinated but included. These are questions for which we have no definite answers.

In considering the place of God in Cartesian philosophy, we dare not overlook the ontological argument. This has already been stated in a previous chapter. It would seem that there is no rational means of proving the existence of God. The cosmological and the teleological proofs have been examined in many textbooks on philosophy and the philosophy of religion. In some circles they are

maintained with considerable energy. In the majority of cases, however, they are discredited. So is the ontological argument.

This proof holds that the existence of God is implied in His very nature. Being the concept of a perfect being, a being than which a greater cannot be conceived, it would be nonsense to deny to such a being existence, a necessary attribute of perfection. In defining God as "real" we again must allow for his existence which is a necessary implication of or inference from reality. According to Kant it is impossible to prove the existence of God merely by definition.¹ As Mead points out:

It is quite true that the concept of a nonexistent God may be logically self-contradictory, and that we may not be able to conceive of such a Being except as existing, but there is all the difference in the world between declaring that God cannot be conceived except as existing, and declaring that because we must think of Him in terms of existence, He must therefore exist independent of our conception . . . For example, if we define a circle as a "closed plane curve, all points of which are equidistant from the center," it necessarily follows that the radii of the circle must be of equal length. It does not therefore follow that circles MUST exist independent of our conception of them.²

Or as Fuller points out, "The logical necessity of a self-consistent idea cannot be translated into the logical necessity of the existence of an object corresponding to that idea."³

Descartes' idea is perhaps a little different. Because my reason conceives Him, God exists. He exists because of my perception of infinity which could not be amidst by knowledge of my

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1. Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, pp. 331 ff.
 2. H. Mead, Types and Problems of Philosophy, p. 345.
 3. B. Fuller, A History of Philosophy, II, p. 301.

defects unless innately placed there by God. Not knowing any defect, I would either be God, or at least my own cause. But even in this argument, the ontological proof is involved.

Through the existence of God, Descartes has established the validity of himself, of the material world, of thought. Burt's remarks:

Starting with the indubitable certainty of the thinking self, and using arguments similar to some of those emphasized by Augustine and Thomas, he establishes the reality of a divine being supreme in goodness and perfection. But such a being surely would not place his creatures under the control of a basic deception that would render their clearest knowledge illusory. Hence mathematics and mathematical physics gain the certainty which Descartes demanded for them, but they gain it by becoming grounded in the theological metaphysics of Catholic tradition.¹

We see now, I think, the subtle combination of the forces in the age of Descartes which brought their influence to play upon him. He is in a sense a scholastic and yet he is the father of much of our contemporary scientific thinking. In the things of the spirit he brings the forces of rational deduction to prove the existence of God; in the things of nature, having established their existential status, he brings into play a method of doubt which is still a basis for modern research. In his metaphysics he is charming and naive, in his mathematics he is brilliant and prophetic. He is a great apostle of certainty. He showed the world more than many another man how illusive is the quest.

1. E. Burt, Types of Religious Philosophy, p. 179.

VIII. Christian Assurance and Descartes

"pepeismai"

It is quite true that the existence of God is to be believed since it is taught in the Sacred Scriptures and that, on the other hand, the Sacred Scriptures are to be believed because they come from God (for since faith is a gift of God, the same Being who bestows grace to enable us to believe other things, can likewise impart of it to enable us to believe his own existence).¹

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Descartes' interest was to establish the existence of God for the benefit of our dealing with sceptics and scoffers. It is quite probable that in this task he failed. His other work in philosophy also contributed toward a negative religious attitude, as Neve points out:

Descartes had simply wanted to reconstruct theology without breaking with established dogma. But the drift of development was toward absolute divorce. The individual in his insistence on absolute freedom of² thought emancipated himself from external authority.

It would seem then that theologically Descartes failed on every score. Of course, he is still a sufficiently important figure in philosophy and even in Christian thought to warrant a paper of this kind if only to examine in greater detail his method and his metaphysics. We do not want to under-estimate Descartes. He focussed people's attention on some very basic problems. And he contributed many ideas of vast

1. Rene Descartes, Meditations, p. 65.

2. J. Neve, History of Christian Thought, II, p. 51.

importance to the field of thought. The question now to be considered is the relation of the Assurance of Descartes to Christian Assurance.

It is the belief of the author that one must carefully distinguish methods. We have already mentioned the fact that the method of science differs radically from the method employed in the study of the arts. Even within the realm of science itself the methods will differ. Certainly, the scientist's approach to physical problems will be completely different from his approach to the problems of sociology or psychology. In some cases pure induction will be employed. In other cases the method will be deductive or introspective. In different studies the time for hypothesizing will vary, the time for gathering data will vary and the method of testing data will change.

The study of God is not a physical study. One does not gather data about God. It is true one may gather data concerning people's spiritual experiences or concerning differing ethical standards. But God is only inadequately reflected in nature or in the human psychology. As Brunner and many other theologians continually point out, in order to know God, God must reveal himself. He is a Personality and therefore can only be known by self-revelation. Now it is true that He is partially revealed in the human mind. Man DOES have an innate knowledge of God. But this is not sufficient for assurance. The method of studying God, and it can't really be called a method, is by faith. "Faith is the evidence . . . the substance."

Of course, in our study of God, we dare not forget that it is Christ who reveals God to man. Christian assurance is one of faith in Christ. Let us not confuse, however, the "assurance OF faith" with "Christian assurance", although the terms are often used in the same meaning. The "assurance of faith" is synonymous with the certainty of our salvation. This does not find any place in Descartes. Descartes is interested in the certainty of existence. That is the point of comparison with Christian assurance. The Christian is certain or assured of God's existence, but that certainty is one of faith. It is a certainty founded in satisfied need. Its assurance lies outside of ourselves. It is more like the Barthian "Cogitor, ergo sum." Existentially speaking, I only find myself and realize myself when I, being conscious of my desperate need, am drawn to God by His Holy Spirit. In a very real sense he "knows" me. It is His personally given self-knowledge which I perceive by faith which is my guarantee of His existence.

As to the general certainty which Descartes was seeking, that upon which he can found a daily practical philosophy of life. This practical philosophy of life is guaranteed by our faith in God and our knowledge of His dominating love for us. Our assurance in the world is again built upon faith. But it is a faith in something enacted beyond our sphere of control. Were it within our sphere of control it would inevitably lack certainty because it would be at once finite and subjective. But salvation being entirely God's doing makes it absolute. This is further true because salvation,

has to do with the renewal of proper relations with God, the annihilation of which was our responsibility. The offense was infinite and it required the infinite God and infinite love to vicariously substitute for infinite punishment. This fact, that it is the Offended who must through love forgive, and this fact, that the Offended through love DID forgive, is our further assurance. Any doctrine which takes salvation out of the hands of God and places it into the hands of men, that substitutes works for grace, destroys the Christian certainty of faith. Having such certainty the Christian has laid for him the foundations of the ethical life whose prime principle is self-less love. He can proceed with confidence. The existence of the material world is guaranteed for him because he knows it is the creation of God. Nor does his religion hinder the study of the physical world with whatever method can be best adapted to the particular problematic situation. So, perhaps we can agree with Barth, the practical life of the Christian is built not on the certainty of his own existence, but on the certainty of God's love.

One must hold Descartes suspect. One feels that he, a Roman Catholic, felt the same lack of assurance that the medieval scholastics found and tried to eliminate through reason, that Luther found and tried to eliminate with works. Both failed and in the end all must fail who do not understand that the world we live in is but very inadequately known. We study and we probe, we correlate observable phenomena, we apply our inductive and deductive methods

and advance our hypotheses. And in the end our modern science with all of its facts is no more than a set of mental constructs which best explain the observable phenomena at any particular time. New facts require new theories; ultimate truth is the most elusive of quests. Luther, failing in works, might have tried the method of Descartes and failed again. But he did not. He found certainty through faith in the God who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

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