

Cartesian Theory of Mind Revisited

Contemporary Issues in **Philosophy of Mind & Cognition**



**Rene
Descartes**

- **Descartes is one of the classical founders of non-computational theories of mind.**

- **Without a proper understanding of Descartes' view on mind, it is impossible to discuss contemporary philosophy of mind.**

- **The existence of mind and its nature.**

- **How Descartes's idea of mind is non-computational.**

The Existence of Mind and its Nature.

- Williams, Hintikka, Malclom, and many others philosophers philosophical arguments will not cope with Descartes notion of mind.
- Descartes idea of mind is non-computational because the way Ryle, Quine, and other functionalists or founder of cognitive scientists defined it is completely mechanical or behavioural and to which the notion of computationally is applicable, and the

Cartesian Mind and Its Nature

- To know something implies that there is a mind, i.e., the existence of a knowing subject means that there is a mind.
- He tries to find out through his *cogito* argument that there is at least one knowing subject, i.e., his own self.

**Descartes' words,
“I will suppose then, that everything I see
is spurious. I will believe that my memory
tells me lies, and that none of the things
that it reports ever happened. I have no
sense. Body, shape, extension,
movement and place are chimeras.”**

Descartes, Rene, *The Philosophical Writing of Descartes*, Vol. II, John Cottingham,
Robert Stoothoff, Dougald Murdoch (ed. and trans.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge,
1984.

Descartes' word,

“No: if I conceived myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case, I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.”

Descartes, Rene, *The Philosophical Writing of Descartes*, Vol. II,

John Cottingham,

COGITO, ERGO SUM

I THINK, THEREFORE, I EXIST.

I am that which doubts. I am the thing that thinks.

- **'*Cogito ergo sum*' is an indubitable proposition.**
- **Doubting one's own existence presupposes one's existence.**

- **Now the questions arises:**
 - (a) What is the nature of the statement '*cogito ergo sum*'?**
 - (b) Is it a syllogistic inference like, 'whatever thinks exists; I think; therefore, I exist'?**

- **Descartes says, it is not a syllogistic inference; it is rather a self-evident truth known “by a simple intuition of the mind.”**
- **The scholars are divided among themselves as to the exact nature of the transition from ‘*cogito*’ to ‘*sum*’.**

Bernard Williams has shown, there is something unique about the '*cogito*' which cannot be replaced by any other verb, for instance, '*ambulo*'. '*Ambulo ergo sum*' is not as self evident as '*cogito ergo sum*'.

Ambulo ergo sum
I walk, therefore I exists

Hintikka argues that *cogito ergo sum* is not an inference but a performance.

For him, the relation of '*cogito*' to '*sum*' is similar to the relation of a process to its product.

The truth of 'I exist' cannot be revealed by any arbitrary human activity such as breathing, etc. but only by thinking. An attempt to think one's own non-existence amounts to persuading oneself to the belief that one does not exist.

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- For Descartes, the thought act is due to the thinking thing, which is the self.
- Thought, according to Descartes, is the essence of mind.
- Malcolm argues that in identifying thought as mind's essence Descartes employs the following principle: "X is my essence if it is the case that (a) if I am aware of X, then (necessarily) I am aware of myself and (b) if I am aware of myself then (necessarily) I am aware to X. thinking satisfies these conditions. Ergo, thinking is my essence."

Descartes's Idea of Mind is Non-Computational

- In the Cartesian scheme of mind, there is no place for computability.
- The thought act is due to the subjective thinking thing, which is the self.
- This subjective thinking thing or the self is that which “doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.”

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- All these subjective activities are non-computational because the subjective activity is not mechanical.
- The mental processes, for Descartes, are intentional and are the free acts of the thinking subject. Hence they cannot be mapped mechanically in an algorithmic system.
- Descartes' concept of 'I think' presupposes subjective experience, because it is 'I' who experience the world.
- Descartes' notion of 'I' negates the notion of computability in the mind.
- The essence of mind is thought, and the acts of thoughts are identified with acts of consciousness.
- Therefore, it follows that cognitive acts are conscious acts, but not computational acts

- **Descartes' dictum, "I think, therefore, I am" not only establishes the existence of the self which thinks and acts but also its freedom from mechanistic laws, to which the human body is subject.**
- **When Descartes makes the distinction between mind and body, he did not say that the idea of the mind is that of a ghost, although he did say that the idea of body is that of a machine.**

- Ryle in his book, *'The Concept of Mind'* says that Descartes's distinction between mind and body is a myth.
- Ryle argues, "I shall often speak of it, with deliberate abusiveness, as 'the dogma of the ghost in the machine'. I hope to prove that it is entirely false, and false not in detail but in principle."
- Again he says, Descartes's distinction between mind and body commits a category-mistake.

- **Ryle's understanding of mind, mind becomes as much mechanical as the body and is therefore non-different from the body.**
- **Descartes's argument for the mind, which is distinct from body, needs to be understood as an argument for the logical possibility of their separate existence and not for the fact that they exist independent of each other.**

- **Descartes has already proved in the *Second Meditation* the existence of a thinking being who has a clear and distinct perception of mind as a thinking, non-extended thing.**
- **This is a proof of the non-mechanical mind which is different from the body and which is subject to mechanical laws.**

- Similarly, in the *Fifth Meditation*, he has shown, that he has a clear and distinct idea of a body as extended and a non-thinking substance. This is to suggest that the mechanically existing body is ontologically distinct from the non-computational mind.
- The above distinction between mind and body supposes that there is no 'ghost' in human body or 'ghost in the machine'.

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- **Descartes did not admit the existence of ghost in the machine.**
- **Had Descartes admitted that there was a ghost in the human body, then the mind itself would become computational, and there would be no necessary distinction between mind and body?**
- **Because the ghost itself is a body. But Descartes admits the distinction between mind and body and this shows that the mind is non-computational. It is mind, which has the capacity of**

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- The Cartesian way of understanding of the concept of intelligence is anti-physicalist and anti-behaviourist and hence is anti-computational.
- The human mind is beyond the sphere of computability, because the human mind has innate ideas, which are embedded as the innate dispositions of the human mind.
- These ideas are *a priori* in the human mind and are the basic in-born

- **Following Descartes, Chomsky established that language too is an innate faculty of the human species.**
- **Language becomes the essence that defines what it is to be human.**
- **Language is purely a syntactic system, according to Chomsky, and it therefore has a logical form which is universal and innate world.**

- **Language must also have an essence; something that makes language what it is and inheres in all languages. That essence is called ‘universal grammar’.**
- **Language does not arise from anything bodily. Studying the brain and body can give us no additional insight into language.**

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- Like Chomsky, Quine also affirms that there can be no philosophical study of mind outside psychology: progress in philosophical understanding of the mind is inseparable from progress in psychology.
- Quine opposes the Cartesian dualism and therefore arrives at a behaviourist and functionalist conception of mind.
- He reduces the mental states like beliefs and other propositional attitudes to functional states.
- If both Chomsky and Quine are right about the nature of mind, then Descartes's view of

- In the *third meditation*, Descartes gives an extensive account of ideas.
- He says, “thus when I will, or am afraid, or affirm, or deny, there is always a particular thing which I take as the subject of my thought, but my thought includes something more than the likeness of that thing. Some thoughts in this category are called volitions or emotions, which others are called judgments.”

- **The ideas, for Descartes' are thus representational and intentional in character.**
- **Descartes, unlike Hobbes and Gassendi, is not a naturalist and keeps the thought content free from naturalization to which Hobbes and Gassendi are committed. For them, thoughts are mechanical processes in the brain.**

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- **What separates Descartes' dualism from contemporary functionalism and identity theories is not so much his distinction between an immaterial mind and extended material body as his notion of the human being as a unity of mind and body, with the properties not reducible to either mind or body, but dependent precisely on their 'substantial' union.**
- **Descartes holds that thinking cannot be explained mechanically. His argument that brutes cannot think is equivalent to an argument that machines cannot think.**

- **Descartes is drawing attention here is firstly, no machine could have the capacity to use linguistic and other signs to express thoughts and to give appropriate responses to meaningful speech, and secondly, machine could not have the capacity to act intelligently in all sorts of situation.**
- **The kind of automatic, rule governed computation or symbol processing that a Turing machine instantiates and that can be performed by electronic computers would not count as thinking in Descartes sense: nor would the mechanical operations of a computer or robot, no matter how ingenious or intelligent, count as rational behaviour as**

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- Pradhan clarifies that Descartes is not a reductionist as he feels that mind cannot be reduced to anything else and it must have an autonomous existence alongside the existence of the material body.
- The kind of automatic, rule-governed computation or symbol processing that a Turing machine instantiates and that can be performed by electronic computers would not count as thinking from the Cartesian point of view.
- Because Cartesian thinking is neither reducible to a narrowly understood rational capacity nor to consciousness.
- He clearly mentioned that consciousness is a

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