

ERGO SUM
DESCARTES IN AN OBLIQUE LIGHT

ASHOK R. KELKAR

“Je suis comme un milieu entre Dieu et le néant”
(I am like a midpoint between God and nothingness.)

René Descartes, *Meditation*.

Descartes's celebrated dictum, '*Je-pense, donc je suis/Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) [depending on whether one cites from the 1637 French edition or the 1644 Latin edition of his *Discourse on Method*] is normally abbreviated to *Cogito* 'I think'. This is just what one would expect given its positioning as an important step in its author's quest for a minimalist philosophy of cognition. But the dictum has an equally interesting positioning in the Christian European quest for a minimalist philosophy of man as a being. In that context the emphasis would correctly fall on the second half, namely, therefore I am'.

Man as a being. The European noun *being* (French *être*, German *Sein*, *Dasein*, *Wesen*) has two senses, 'for anything to be' and 'anything that is' and these correspond to the Sanskrit nouns *sattā*, *bhāva*, *astitva* (all in sense 1) and *sat*, *sattva*, *bhuta* (all in sense 2). (Incidentally, these are all traceable to the same three Indo-European roots.) Looking at sense 2, which concerns us here, one notices the interesting difference between the European anthropocentric tendency to understand 'anything that is' more narrowly as 'anyone that is' and the Indian cosmocentric tendency to retain the more inclusive feel of 'what there is' as against 'what I am'. 'A being' in European parlance is typically a person, whether demonic, human, or angelic, even a member of the Holy Trinity 'A being' in Indian parlance need not be a person; that is perhaps why *sat* has to be joined to *cit* to make it possible for a person to be.

For a Christian European, the question 'who am I?' has a ring of anxiety. In the Indian tradition, *ko ham?* has only a ring of *jijñāsā* (desire to know—not idle curiosity). The Cartesian answer points to a peculiar rephrasing of the question, 'what allows me to be certain

that I am?" This rephrasing is of course as old as Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430). In saying *dubito, ergo cogito; cogito, ergo sum* (I doubt, therefore I think; I think, therefore I am), Descartes was only echoing Saint Augustine, who said; "si enim fallor, sum" (For, if I err, I am) (*Civitas dei* 11:26) and, again, "Dubito, ergo sum" (I doubt, therefore I am) (*De Trinitate* 20:21). (I am indebted to Father J. de Marneffe of De Nobili College, Pune for kindly tracking down the Augustine references.) Descartes in his turn has been echoed by a modern Algerian-French intellectual, Albert Camus (1913-1960). (Augustine was Algerian-Roman.) In his humanist rejection of Christianity and Communism in the same breath, Camus declares, "Je me revolte, donc nous sommes" (I am in revolt, therefore we are) (*L'Homme revolte* 1951, translated as *The Rebel* 1953). Christian Europe has asked itself the same anxious question at three important junctures in its history, namely—

- (i) the assimilation of the Greco-Roman classical tradition and the Semitic Christian tradition to each other
- (ii) the progressive resolution of this complex tradition into the Modern temper
- (iii) the exhaustion of the Modern temper

and arrived at three mutually echoing and yet quite distinct answers.

It will be worthwhile to examine the nature of this three-step transition; especially since it may give us a clue to the complex fate of the Catholic scientist on the brink of the Jansenist heresy that Descartes unhappily is. The three historical junctures occasion three related yet distinct philosophical gestures.

1. 'I err, therefore I am.' Man's fallibility is his one claim to being a person. Animals don't err, for animals have no freedom to err. A very Christian sentiment. (Doubt is only an aspect of human fallibility. Descartes thus "clearly saw that it was a greater perfection to know than to doubt", *Discourse*, part IV.) The error may be an error in understanding the world or an error in choosing the right course of action in dealing with the world.

2. 'I think, therefore I am.' Man's capacity to think yields his one certain cognition, that is, his only infallible cognition. A very un-Christian sentiment, possibly a case of Modern hubris. But then, a man's capacity to think also yields the only guarantee to his free

will, ensuring his freedom to err *and* his freedom to disobey. A very un-Modern sentiment, possibly a rather Christian sentiment.

3. 'I revolt, therefore we are.' Man's capacity to disobey, that is, to choose what has been laid down as the wrong course of action, is his one claim to social being (A Robinson Crusoe's freedom to disobey is vacuous, as is a bee's or ant's freedom to obey.) Sheep don't revolt; they follow rather than strike out on their own. A very Modern sentiment, possibly an un-Christian sentiment. (Calling Adam's disobedience *felix culpa* is at best a left-handed compliment.)

So much for the Christian European quest, with Descartes positioned in the middle between the complex tradition and Modernity.

Now how does this account (assuming that it is a correct one) further the philosophical quest in any way? Apart, that is, from any intrinsic historical interest it may possess?

1. The three-step historical account places Descartes's vacillations in a proper perspective. (His vacillation, for example, between supporting Galileo and cowering before the Church; "a certain doctrine in physics, published by a certain individual, to which I will not say that I adhered, but only that, previously to their censure, I had observed in it nothing which I could imagine to be prejudicial either to religion or to the state". *Discourse* part VI.) The vacillations are not merely a personal frailty or oddity but an essential ambivalence at the midpoint. The account should help us to understand Descartes's thought better.

2. There is an essential link between the minimalist programme in the philosophy of cognition (no presuppositions please, either verify or reject) and the minimalist programme in the philosophy of man as a being (no presumptions about changing the world, either understand-and-adjust or stand rejected). Both of these are counsels of ambitious modesty. They do leave the Mediaeval *summa* behind only to hasten slowly to Modernity. (Incidentally, there is an interesting resemblance between the cognitive transition from the Scholastic motto, falsify or accept, to the Renaissance motto, verify or reject, and the cognitive transition within the Indian tradition from the *svatah-pramanya-vada* to the *paratah-pramanya-vada*.)

3. The account also lets us see how the mutual assimilation of the Classical and the Christian traditions was effected. Plato's white

horse of reason and dark horse of passion were reunderstood as spiritual strength (*logos* as spirit, as reason, as speech) and carnal frailty. Reason was no mere workhorse to Descartes, but a faithful guide if properly subordinated to the Church. Here he was following Saint Augustine's admonition; 'Si non potes intellegere, crede ut intelligas. Praecedit fides, sequitur intellectus.' (If you cannot understand, believe and you'll understand. Faith precedes; Intellect follows.) (*Sermones* 118:1) (Incidentally, it will be interesting to see how the assimilation of *falsafah* of *arastu* and *aflatun* to theology fared in Semitic Islam in comparison to European Christianity.)

4. Where, then, did the boldness in Descartes (strong enough to sweep away all received opinion) come from? The Augustinian point of departure led to two alternate paths—the Church-approved Thomist path and the Jansenist path. (The Dutch Catholic Cornelis Jansen's *Augustinus* was published but in 1640, condemned by papal bulls in 1643, 1653. Descartes's Dutch connection is well-known.) Jansenism influenced Descartes inspite of his early Jesuit upbringing. The Catholic heresy resembles in one important respect the more openly Protestant Calvinism—in the acceptance of predestination. Both heresies prepared the ground as Max Weber points out, for the Protestant ethic and the spirit of Capitalism. The ethic that treated all men in an individualistic and impersonal manner is of a piece with the epistemic that treated knowledge in an atomistic manner in terms of 'clear and distinct ideas' and declared that doubt and error are nothing to be ashamed of in that they paved the way to truth. The respective strenghts and limits of these two are, by hindsight, well-understood by now. They paved the way to the modern revolt. Descartes expressed the right bourgeois sentiments in constructing a four-point provisional moral code pending the replacement of the demolished intellectual house (*Discourse*, part III) and readily "perceived it to be possible to arrive at knowledge highly useful in life; and...to... render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature" (*Discourse*, part VI).

One appropriate way for an Indian to celebrate the fourth birth centenary of the father of 'modern' philosophy will no doubt be to position him against the backdrop of centuries and continents.