

JUXTAPOSING DESCARTES AND WITTGENSTEIN :
THE SIMPLE THE CLEAR AND THE DISTINCT

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Historians of Renaissance and the Post-renaissance Europe recognise, almost unfailingly, the privileged position Descartes occupies in the making of modernity— at least the early part of it— which has had its impact on the European culture for at least three centuries. This recognition is often expressed in declaring Descartes to be the father of Modern Western Philosophy, Science, and Subjectivism. Whichever of these that might concern us, one seems to realize that the Cartesian interpretive categories continue to mould one's thinking even today. "Most of us are still closet Cartesians"¹ since—and despite the internal critique and the subsequent rise of Post-Modernity —we do inherit the early modernity at least in some of its broad features. Our understanding of Descartes has to be thus contextualized to the early phases of modernity.

Although no single definition or a starting point of modernity can be had, it could be provisionally defined and some broad features of it can be outlined. Modernity represents the whole arena of "ideas, principles and patterns of interpretations of diverse kinds ranging from the philosophic to the economic".² The broad features of modernity are Subjectivism, Positivism and Individualism. They are not independent of one another and together they form a world-view which a thinker of early modernity could, and as a matter of fact did, claim to be his own. As per this world-view it is the 'I', the 'Subject', against which everything else is to be projected. The immanent dialectics of the 'I' or the 'Subject' and the 'non-I' or 'everything else other than the subject' at once seeks to limit the respective domains of the 'I' and the 'non-I'. To articulate clearly such a limit thus becomes a fundamental task for philosophy and science. This is what Descartes and other philosophers and scientists of the early modernity have thought. This statement however needs a qualification since what goes into the notion of the 'non-I' or 'everything else other than the subject' is not clear. Similarly, philosophers of the early modernity have attempted a synthesis of the 'I' and the 'non-I' by introducing some kind of

transcendental Being or Principle. Descartes, by explicitly arguing for the existence of God tries to forge a synthesis between the 'I' and the 'non-I'. But usually what the philosophers of early modernity have thought and what in effect they did becomes clear through such distinctions which they and the later day philosophers have contended —the distinction between the simple and the complex, the primary and the secondary, the knowable and the unknowable, the autonomous and the heteronomous, the thinkable and the unthinkable, the sense and the non-sense. These, in one way or the other, are operational categories of Subjectivism, Positivism and Individualism and that this is so can be seen in many textual locals. For example, in Descartes the 'simple and the complex' is projected in terms of the 'clear and distinct' and in its own turn it projects positivism —(the cartesian method and his philosophy of science) and subjectivism —(*cogito* as the foundation and the limit of knowledge) on the topology of philosophy. In the domain of the social, the political, the economic and the overall culture, the 'clear and the distinct' appears as 'individual'. The 'individual' is projected as the terminus —something which is absolutely simple —of totality —i.e., family, group, state, and culture. The emerging individualism thus, places an individual at the center of all social, political and cultural reality. The totalities, of whatever kind and of whatever degree of complexity are on this view, 'constructs' and can be resolved into such 'simples'. This attitude is expressed in the writings of Grotius, Locke and many others and is 'characteristic of the modern mind'.³ From the speculative domain the subject thus enters the ethical field with its extended continuity in politics as the individual who is thought out by the Enlightenment tradition. The autonomy of this individual is a fundamental concern and the political theory from the French revolution to Marxism and from the Soviet Theorists to Habermas discuss this theme. In Wittgenstein, on the other hand, the determining notions in *TLP*, are, 'the thinkable and the unthinkable', 'saying and showing', 'the sense and the non-sense'. Of these, the Logical Positivists, in their early phase of modelling philosophical reflections on science and scientific method, appropriated the Wittgensteinean distinction between the sense and the non-sense to draw a mutual limit to science or scientific knowledge, and the realm of everything else which is 'non-science' —i.e., values. Within the textual boundaries of the *TLP* the distinction between 'the sense' and 'the non-sense', between 'saying' and 'showing' and between 'the thinkable' and 'the unthinkable', in their juxtaposition, seek to draw

the logical boundary—the limit between what can be said (the realm of the factual) and what cannot be said but shown (the realm of values, and the mystical). It thus becomes a productive effect for philosophic reason to read textual parallels of these determining notions viz., ‘the clear and the distinct’, the ‘simple’, and the ‘limit’ but at the same time not committing to any implicit foundationalism for the necessities of analysis.

In this paper I attempt a tracing of these determining notions in the Cartesian and the Wittgensteinian text. The reason for this constellation is the thematic continuity of the topic of the subject and the world. This continuity is, however, not straight. It marks a complete reversal of the Cartesian and the Wittgensteinian orientations to the understanding of the subject and the world. For Descartes it is the subject (*res cogitans*) which *per se* belongs to the realm of the known while the world (*res extensa*) *per se* belongs to the realm of the unknown. But for Wittgenstein, it is the subject, the ‘I’, which belongs to the realm of the unknown, whereas the world (the totality of facts) belongs to the realm of the (possibly) known. If Descartes has inaugurated the modern subjectivism by introducing the transcendental subject in the form of pure subjectivity; Wittgenstein of *TLP*, through the analogical narration of the ‘eye’ not appearing in the visual field pushes out the transcendental subject onto the boundary or the limit of the world. “The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world”. (*TLP* 5.632).

Elucidation of ‘the Clear and the Distinct’ in Descartes :

There is nothing new in the idea that there could be something ‘simple’, ‘distinct’ and ‘clear’ as opposed to what is not so. Throughout the history of philosophy these notions have been used as interpretive categories to interpret various kinds of things such as *natures, objects, ideas, elements, names, atoms*, etc. These interpretive categories— ‘simple’, ‘distinct’ and ‘clear’— form the basis of many substantive epistemologies and ontologies. Cartesian epistemology is one of the more important among them. *Rules for the Direction of Mind, Discourse on the Method, and Meditations on the First Philosophy* —the Cartesian text —offers a thorough exposition of what is clear and distinct. Its primary context is the overall Cartesian project which seeks to

define in exact and rigorous terms what we should mean by knowledge; to determine the method to be followed in its pursuit, and to determine whether there are limits beyond which we cannot hope to advance; and if there be such limits, to define them in a manner no less rigorously exact⁴.

The Cartesian investigations, as the above passage indicates, opens up at the site of the unknown. The unknown in Descartes is that which has not come under the perview of the definition of knowledge and the method of arriving at it. The 'radical new beginning' consists in searching for a rigorous definition and a rigorous method. Philosophy is thus a 'rigorous science', since it seeks to find out an 'apodeictic foundation'. Hence the Cartesian discovery of apodeictic foundations for 'the known' consists in establishing that (a) what counts as a genuine knowledge is a matter of theoretical understanding and not that of an empirical reduction (b) possibility of such genuine knowledge is consequent upon the use of an appropriate method and (c) genuine knowledge acts as 'limit' to an unacknowledged error. What Descartes wants to establish has, as is shown in the histories of philosophy and science, many consequences. Viewing knowledge as theoretical understanding is in a certain sense to recognize the primacy and the autonomy of epistemology; making knowledge consequent upon the use of method is to hold the thesis, to use the contemporary idiom, of the unity of science. In fact, Descartes does say that "there is need of a method in finding out the truth" (Regulae 4)⁵ and that "All sciences are interconnected and dependent on one another" (Regulae 10)⁶. To view knowledge as defining a 'limit' to an unacknowledged error is an explicit recognition of one of the most fertile categories which operates in philosophy as well as science. In other words, primacy of epistemology, unity of science as expounded in terms of a 'universal' method and defining the limits of the 'known' are the three major consequences of what Descartes seeks to establish. And these, precisely, have determined the modernist outlook.

The phrase 'clear and distinct' marks a logical distinction. At the end of a long passage in the *Principles* Descartes concludes

Thus, a cognition can be clear without being distinct, but can never be distinct without being also clear.⁷

The Cartesian explication of this distinction bears upon what is 'immediately experienced' and 'the judgments we pass upon it'. The 'immediately

experienced' belongs to the realm of the empirical, of complexities, of conditionalities, whereas the 'judgment' belongs to the realm of the rational, of unconditionalities, of simplicities.

"All objects in so far as they are immediately experienced are clear"⁸ whereas "the distinct is that which is so precise and so different from all other objects...."⁹

The Cartesian explication of 'clear' marks the immediacy and the directness, a non-inferential character of perception or even of intuition but the 'objects' of such perception are ontologically complex entities and because of their complex, composite character, can not be known *per se* (composite structures are conditional upon what constitutes them). The 'distinct' on the other hand, because of its elemental character is simple and as such can be known *per se*. In the above quoted paragraph, the 'clear' and the 'distinct' operate primarily in the context of Cartesian epistemology which functions at two levels. At the level of sense-experience—the realm of what is 'immediately experienced'—the 'objects' are composite, are something which are 'in the making' (the concept of 'a composite' is open ended) and their perception is clear because of the manner in which we come to apprehend them. But at the level of science, there is no apprehension of the overall totality emerging out of the composite character, but the reading of the structure in terms of the elements which constitute it. Elements of the structure are simple and each of them known *distinctly*. Being 'clear' is thus primarily epistemological, but being 'distinct' has an ontological dimension which makes the passage from 'complex-simple' to 'clear-distinct' possible. The 'complex-simple' matrix provides a logical space for analysis to operate in general and in the Cartesian method in particular. The very idea and the practice of analysis—of resolving complexes or compounds into simples, or non-compounds—presupposes the immanence of simple and complex in that they are mutually implying. The term 'absolute simple' does not defy this intuition, it only marks the degree of simplicity. But more importantly, 'simple' and 'complex' put a logical limit to one another and thus make the notion of analysis operative. The necessity of 'complex—simple' with its continuity in 'clear-distinct' is illustrated by Descartes in his method where one finds a two directional movement from the axiomatic region of synthesis to the necessary inclusion of the analytic and vice-versa. This complementarity of the analytic and the synthetic, marks the text of Descartes' Geometry where Descartes

complements the analytic step with synthesis which maps the transition from the known (axiom) to the unknown (what is deduced from the axiom).

The immanence of 'simple-complex' provides a clue to understand Cartesian subjectivism and also his subsequent attempts to bridge the fundamental dichotomy which his subjectivist categories have allowed to emerge. Cartesian version of subjectivism introduces a fundamental division between the subject and the non-subject, the *res-cogitans* and the *res-extensa*. This form of subjectivism is based on the distinction between subjectivity and non-subjectivity and it is the most "fundamental distinction in an inquiry"¹⁰. The basic implicit dualism is primarily methodological and in Descartes this methodological character remains dominant throughout. But metaphysically, it is "subjectivity or what belongs to subjectivity —from which all other facets of reality are distinguished."¹¹ This subjectivity is consciousness and it is in this consciousness that "things show themselves or are manifest or present to us."¹² Subjectivity is conceived variously; "as an activity, as a metaphysical substance, as the things which appear, and that which allows them to appear"¹³. Descartes conceives it as something which is 'pre-given', something having a methodological primacy from which the philosophical and scientific reflections should proceed.

Accordingly, the first *Meditation* seeks to introduce the methodic doubt as a vehicle to reach the bedrock— the pure subjectivity— on which to found knowledge. The second *Meditation* determines the limit of the methodic doubt in terms of *Cogito*. Meditations three to six reflect over the proof of the existence of God; the dualism between mind and body, and other related topics. The first two Meditations establish the subjectivist thesis— the existence of *Cogito* and its independence from the corporeal reality. The third and the fifth Meditations seek to establish the existence of God. The God, the *Cogito* and the Corporeal mark the respective domains of Religion, Philosophy and Science. To the contemporary modes of thought the three together seem to be incongruous. But for Descartes, like many of his contemporaries, Religion, Philosophy, and Science are not incompatible with one another. Although science and scientific method was slowly gaining its autonomy and power to articulate one single framework of explanation, yet for Descartes' age, "science and religion were after all, simply different aspects of truth".¹⁴ Hence, "the attempt to find a common basis for religion,

philosophy and science and therefore to harmonize the three”¹⁵ is precisely the Cartesian aim. The common basis, the synthesizing ground is a certain kind of knowledge (the clear and the distinct) alongwith a guarantee, an assurance that the ‘clear and the distinct’ has a transcendental sanction. Within the Cartesian subjectivist framework, which turns out to be a ‘prototype’ for all the future subjectivist theses, the three—religion, philosophy, and science—are synthesized by affirming the existence of God and the founding intuition which is a result of the methodic doubt—on which the mathematical and the scientific knowledge of the *res extensa*, the non-I, the corporeal, is founded. The Cartesian subjectivist standpoint is radically different from the earlier subjectivist theses in Descartes’

determination of sensation (aisthesis) and intellection (nous) as activities or characteristics of individual consciousness—that both mentation and sensation are first, essentially individual, and second, equivalent to or properties of consciousness or subjectivity¹⁶

Bringing pure subjectivity at the center and positioning other dualities—the subject and the object, the knower and the known, around it has many implications. The first and the foremost, it denies any internal relation through which such epistemic dualities are sustained. This denial is typically anti Aristotelian and anti Scholastic in that it systematically

disengages sensation from any obvious ontological and physical relation to natural or physical reality, and intellection is disengaged from any obvious access to a community of rational discourse previously provided it by the common recognition of universals¹⁷.

With this dense subjectivist thesis Descartes manages to synthesize the respective realms of religion, science and philosophy. In fact, the terminus of the methodic doubt—the pure subjectivity—besides its methodic certainty, is covered under God’s positive guarantee. The unbridgeable gap between the pure subjectivity and everything else other than the pure subjectivity is filled by introducing God, the transcendental. The criterion of ‘the clear and the distinct’ and the concept of the ‘natural light’ facilitates the introduction of the transcendental in the Cartesian text in that it seeks to establish the truth of the *cogito*, that it is indissolubly bound up with ‘transcendence’¹⁸. The fifth Meditation ends up in explicating the indissoluble bond saying

And so I very clearly recognize that the certainty and truth of

all knowledge depends alone on the knowledge of the true God, in so much that, before I know Him, I could not have a perfect knowledge of any other things¹⁹

God, the transcendental, thus guarantees the clarity and distinctness as the criteria of knowledge, of founding intuition. With this transcendental grounding of 'the clear and the distinct' in God's existence, Descartes could establish "an avenue of access for personal consciousness to formal or external reality".²⁰ The avenue, the passage from the truth of the *cogito* to the *res-extensa*, from the known (the *cogito*) to the unknown (the alleged external world) is thus for God to provide. The passage can not be guaranteed by the analysis of datum (solipsism) nor through the synthetic argument unaided by any axiomatic assumption which so far have no status in the real world.²¹ Following Boyce Gibson, we see how the subject as a clear, simple and distinct unit participates or 'aspires' to emulate the archetypal nature of God's simplicity and clarity.²²

Elucidation of 'the Clear and the Distinct' in Wittgenstein :

The philosophical atmosphere of the Cartesian text is charged with 'clarity and distinctness' of knowledge and existence. 'The clear and the distinct' thus becomes a dominant theme of the Cartesian text which epitomizes the sentiments of the modern European man. The *Tractatus*, in attempting to clear the misunderstanding about the logic of the expressible keeps this thematic continuity alive. But the focus of 'the clear and the distinct' is now shifted to the domain of Language, Thought, and Reality. Like Descartes the mode of articulation of 'the clear and the distinct' is analysis —of resolving complexes into simples and forming complexes out of such simples— but unlike Descartes, not of 'ideas' but of 'propositions', of 'what can be said'. The shift from 'ideas' to 'propositions' marks yet another 'turn' — the Fregean revolution—which brings propositions at the centerstage of philosophic inquiry. The Fregean revolution consists in displacing 'ideas' and thereby polarizing the 'psychological' and the 'logical'. The basic thrust of the Wittgensteinean text is determined by this polarity. So the new dictum is : Logic is the essence of Philosophy. The prefatory remark at the opening of the *Tractatus* on the misunderstanding of the logic of language is intended to show how the complete explication of logic of the expressible brackets the error, the illusion that is philosophy.

Language disguises the thought²³ (*TLP* 4.022).

Hence, the *Tractatus*, as a critique of language seeks,

to draw a limit to thinking, or rather not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought). The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side will be simply nonsense.²⁴

The limit to the expression of thought is from within the language and not from outside. The logic of the expressible is immanent in the expressible itself. The category of limit, therefore, is not empirical but logical. The limit of the expressible is not "like a boundary between two fields on a farm its position can not be related to what lies on the other side of it."²⁵ Hence

Logic pervades the world : The limits of the world are also its limits. So we can not say in logic, 'the world has this in it, and this, but not that.'²⁶

The thinkable, according to Wittgenstein, is a totality of all genuine propositions having sense. The sense of a proposition is something definite, determinate or articulate. Within the textual parameters of *Tractatus* 'the clear' and the distinct' is now expressed in terms of the sense of a proposition which is determinate. The determinacy of the sense is thus a transcendental condition of the possibility of language. The definiteness of sense demands that there be something absolutely simple in terms of which the transcendental condition of the possibility of language is fulfilled.

The demand for simple things is the demand for the definiteness of sense²⁷

The 'simple' thus becomes a pre-condition. The 'simple' in *Tractatus* is the logical as well as the methodological necessity. Logical because it is the ultimate determining ground of sense; methodological because it makes the practice of analysis possible by putting a stop to the infinite regress.

It seems that the idea of SIMPLE is already to be found contained in that of complex and in the idea of analysis, and in such a way that we come to this idea quite apart from any examples

of simple objects— or of propositions which mention them and we realize the existence of simple object— a priori— as a logical necessity.²⁸

The reductive argument of the *Tractatus* introduces the ontology of simple objects. Simple objects which are indestructible and form the substance of the world is a logical necessity as much as the existence of cogito, of God, is for Descartes, a metaphysical necessity. Just as the Cartesian cogito and God guarantees 'the clear and the distinct', the Wittgensteinian simple objects as the ultimate constituents, in their configurations, presenting all *possible* atomic facts guarantee 'the clear and the distinct' i.e., what can be said, since the possibilities of atomic facts is a function of simple objects. 'The ultimate grid of the elementary possibilities with simple objects at its nodal points'²⁹ replaces the Cogito and the God of the Cartesian text.

This grid imposes a constraint on all factual languages : they can describe reality only in so far as they conform to it in their own underlying structure... The grid must exist and connections must be made with if language is going to work.³⁰

The two dicta, the Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum* and the Wittgensteinian *Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly, Everything that can be said can be said clearly* thus present contrasting world-views. The former, grounding 'the clear and the distinct' in the synthesis of the factual (science) and the transcendental. But the latter, presents the factual and the transcendental as total incompatibles. It is significant that Descartes does not need the category of limit within the context of values since his text operates under the positive guarantee of God.

It is customary to identify the *Tractatus* as a text in the analytical tradition. As a result, many find it difficult to make intelligible reading of many remarks of Wittgenstein's especially those which he makes at the end part of the *Tractatus*. But as some recent attempts have shown that some parallels could be drawn in the Wittgensteinian text and those of Husserl and Heidegger. Analysis and Phenomenology are thus being seen as presenting parallels. The analytical mode of interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks on *subject* (ego, self, soul), *Values*, and the world present a typical analytical problematics. The problematics is due to the *Tractatus* juxtaposition of the logic and ontology (there is a world and this world is logic). The subject, once the occupant of the centerstage of the Cartesian text is bracketed by the subsequent

developments of Science, Empiricism and Positivism by putting a limit of fact on the frame of the subject. This makes the subject oscillate between the historical centrality to the point of effacement at the hands of the Logical Positivists, the Behaviourists, and the like. But Wittgensteinian juxtaposition of logic and ontology puts a halt to this oscillating subject, since one can ask

Who is this subject who claims to be the fixed point from which all the objects underlying factual language have to be identified?³¹

The *Tractatus* does not provide for any such identification (the solipsist move), since anything that can be said (the logic) about this 'privileged subject' must be pinned down to the underlying grid (the ontology). 'The clear and the distinct' is no more reposed into the Cartesian cogito but into the logic-ontology grid. The cogito of Descartes is trapped into a dilemma.

If the subject is part of the world the doctrine is self-refuting; and if he is not part of the world, the doctrine is empty.³²

If the subject is part of the world, the boundary or the limit which it seeks to draw between itself and the world can not be drawn. "As a thing among other things, the subject is not *sui generis*".³³ But the Cartesian subject is supposed to be *sui generis* in the field of total consciousness. To this the Wittgensteinian rejoinder is that no subject appears in the field of consciousness. The analogy of eye not appearing in the visual field is brought in to show that the Cartesian subject can not retain its *sui generis* character and 'the clear and the distinct' title if it is identified with "the matter-of-fact-consciousness". But on the other hand, if the subject is not identified with the world, that if it is conceived only as *sui generis*, then it can only be "postulated as the focal point behind the field of consciousness"³⁴. The analogy of the 'geometrical eye', becomes prominent. The geometrical eye, (the subject) is not revealed by introspective intuition (the Cartesian procedure) and it "can not serve as an identifiable reference point" as the Cartesian text wants it to be. In either case, the 'limit', 'the boundary' can not be drawn.

But does it mean that 'the clear and the distinct' is gone out of focus? 'The limit', 'the boundary' can not be drawn following the solipsist route. Wittgenstein's attempt to detach the subject from 'the one and the only world' (the one and the only grid of all the possibilities)

is identified as his critique of solipsism which articulates the category of 'limit' in the frame of the psychological. Hence, 'the limit' i.e. 'the clear and the distinct' becomes personal or private. But the language is limited in an "impersonal" way. To articulate this impersonal limit is the task of the *Tractatus*. As a first step then, the Cartesian *cogito* is reconstituted.

There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas.³⁵

This reconstitution is the exact opposite of the Cartesian *cogito* whose essence lies in 'thinking' and 'entertaining ideas'. But the Wittgensteinian reconstitution, which is really Kantian, exposes the Cartesian confusion between "the unity of apperception and the perception of Unitary Subject".³⁶ Had there been such unitary object, it would have become a nameable item in the world. Hence

The subject does not belong to the world : rather it is a limit of the world³⁷

The non-physical, non-psychological subject is 'metaphysical' and is a 'limit' of the world. That the subject in its metaphysical, transcendental, philosophical appearance acts as the limit is the most difficult but fascinating theme in the Wittgensteinian text. It is difficult because it escapes the demands of the analytical philosophy viz. precise articulation in language. But the point of the *Tractatus* is that "no language can possibly mention the point of view from which it can be understood"³⁸ This is the unifying theme of the text which views the self, the death, and the tautologies as limiting cases. They are 'the clear and the distinct' but 'unthinkable' in the sense not being the part of the world (the thinkable), as the eye is not the part of the visual field. The metaphor of an eye not being the part of the visual field not only problematize the old time epistemology but in a wider context it establishes the *paradox* of the modern, "Science was everything we could logically know of the world, but it could not include ourselves".³⁹ 'The clear and the distinct' of the Cartesian text pertains to the 'matter-of-fact consciousness' about facts which are. But 'the clear and the distinct' of the Wittgensteinian text belongs the 'that—consciousness', pertaining to 'that the facts are'. 'The traditional metaphysics answers the question of "what", but not the question of "that"'.⁴⁰ That something *is*, is not an experience : does not belong to the content of the world.⁴¹ *That something is*, is a source of metaphysical wonder. 'The

clear and the distinct' of the Wittgensteinian text is situated in this metaphysical wonder.

NOTES

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40. *The Double Awareness* p. 106.
41. *Loc cit.*