
UNIT 1 RATIONALISM

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to introduce rationalism especially Descartes' rationalistic thinking. It helps the students to know the method of abstraction as well. In this unit we shall try to understand how Descartes thinking deviate from classical philosophy. Finally we see how Spinoza and Leibnitz developed rationalism which was developed by Descartes in Modern Western Philosophy. Thus by the end of this Unit one should be able:

- to have a basic understanding of rationalism;
- to differentiate it from empiricism;
- to relate it with method of abstraction;
- to understand the influence of Descartes dualistic thinking;
- to know the limitation of rationalistic thinking.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In the history of Western Philosophy, it is Rene Descartes (1596-1650) who ushers in such new lines of thought as would clearly mark the beginning of the modern era and earn him the title 'Father of Modern Western Philosophy'. He emphasise the role of the individual and his reasoning power against the background of church domination. He pronounces that it is within the power of every individual to know the truth. He highly influence on mathematics and scientific method. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in England looked at scientific method and claimed it for empiricism-a triumph of the method of observation and experimentation over reason, theories, and systems. Descartes, however, looked at scientific method and claimed it for rationalism-a triumph of mathematics, of geometry, and of reasoning by axioms and deduction; it is these which make science into knowledge into certain. His vision was of a plan for

a single, unified science in which philosophy and all the sciences would be interconnected in one systematic totality. All qualitative differences of things would be treated as quantitative differences, and mathematics would be the key to all problems of the universe. By contrast with Plato, who saw the unity of all sciences in the mystical Idea of the Good, for Descartes the unity of science was a rationalistic and mathematical unity based upon mathematical axioms. By contrast with medieval Aristotelianism, explaining change teleologically as the movement of matter toward the actualization of forms, for Descartes all change is explained mechanically, as the movement of bodies according to the laws of physics. According to Bertrand Russell Descartes was a philosopher, a mathematician, and a man of science. He used the analytic method, which supposes a problem solved, and examines the consequences of the supposition. Modern western philosophy has very largely accepted the formulation of its problems from Descartes, while not accepting his solutions.

1.2 INTUITION AND DEDUCTION

According to Descartes, knowledge must be certain and indubitable. In his Rules for the Direction of the Mind (*Regulae*), he states, “All knowledge is certain and evident cognition” which is “incapable of being doubted”. Such indubitable knowledge, he holds, can be had only through intellect or reason. He specifies two actions of the intellect through which we arrive at certain knowledge, *viz.* Intuition and deduction. Intuition, according to him, is “the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind, which proceeds solely from the light of reason”. Hence by intuition; he means the rational power of the mind to perceive clearly and distinctly. Such knowledge, according to him, is self evident, standing in no need of proof. Intuition is undoubted, immediate apprehension of a self-evident truth by reason. God imprints certain innate ideas on the mind at the time of birth. The ideas of causality, infinity, eternity, perfect Being of God and the like are innate ideas. In his view, we can also acquire certainty when the facts are “inferred from true and known principles through a continuous and uninterrupted movement of thought in which each individual proposition is clearly intuited”. This is what he calls Deduction, which attains its certainty from the intuitive certainty of the first principles and the intermediate steps. Thus Descartes applies the mathematical method to philosophy. His mathematical method consists in intuition and deduction. First principles are given by intuition. The remote conclusions are deduced from them. Intuition is prior to deduction. Deduction is necessary inference from truths known with certainty. Intuition is necessary in deduction. Though he subordinates deduction to intuition, he speaks of these as two mental operations.

According to Descartes, it is through intuition i.e. the natural light of reason, that we come to know the existence of the self or mental substance and then we gradually deduce the existence of God and the external material world. Descartes accepts the existence of all these three substances-mind, matter and God. In accordance with his definition of substance as “a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist,” he declares God as the absolute substance. However, in the restricted sense of the term ‘substance’, he claims that both mind and matter come under it because they do not depend on anything else but “concurrence of God in order to exist.” Descartes recognises Mind and Matter as relative substances, dependent upon the absolute substance, i.e., God. Mind and Matter have been created by God. But the term substance

is not applicable to Mind and Matter in the same sense in which it is applicable to God. In this context, Spinoza points out that if substance stands for complete independence, then it is contradictory to regard matter and mind as substances because they depend on God for their being.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Descartes felt that the most important question for philosophy at the outset was the basis for certainty. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.

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- 2) Do you think that philosophy can and should be modelled after the methods of mathematics? Why, or why not?

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1.3 INNATE IDEAS, FACTITIOUS IDEAS, ADVENTITIOUS IDEAS

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, we find Descartes accepting three kinds of ‘ideas’ based three different sources, viz. ‘innate’, ‘adventitious’ and ‘factitious’. While he considers ‘innate ideas’ as implanted in our understanding and ‘factitious ideas’ as creations of our imagination, he views the ‘adventitious ideas’ are as productions of sensations. The ideas imposed on the mind from without or sensations are adventitious; they are not clear and distinct. The ideas created by the mind by the conjunction of ideas are factitious; they are the ideas created by the imagination; they are also are not clear and distinct. Both are doubtful. But the innate ideas, which are neither adventitious nor factitious, are clear and distinct and implanted in the mind by God at the time of birth; they are self-evident. He distinguishes sense perception from reason on the ground that the former is liable to illusion, and hence needs to be judged by reason before being accepted as true. His only point of warning is that we should not accept reports of sense perception “without having (carefully and maturely) mentally examined them beforehand.” With the help of his mathematical method we must reject the vague and obscure light of the senses and imagination, and select the simple, clear, self-evident, and innate ideas of reason, and deduce other truths from them.

Descartes starts with the certainty of the self which is known intuitively. He deduces the existence of God from the innate idea of God. The idea of God is the idea of an infinite Being. It cannot be produced by myself, because I

am a finite being. The finite things cannot produce the idea of an infinite Being. The cause must contain at least as much reality as is contained in the effect. So God or the infinite Being is the cause of the innate idea of God. Therefore, God exists. He is perfect and truthful. We have a conviction that external things exist; so they must exist. Thus Descartes deduces the existence of God and the world from the innate ideas in the self, which are distinct, clear and self-evident.

1.4 DOUBT: METHODOLOGICAL SCEPTICISM

The object of Cartesian methodology was to apply mathematical method of philosophy with a view to obtaining certitude in knowledge. Descartes believes that the single certain truth can be systematically sought by deliberate doubt. When doubt is pushed to its farthest limit then it will reveal something which is indubitable, which is clearly perceived. Now in order to discover the indubitable intuition, let us doubt all that can be doubted. (1) Sense-testimony can be doubted. (2) Even the truths of science can be doubted. That I doubt cannot be doubted: When the doubt has done its worst it finds a fact of completely unassailable certainty. I may doubt anything but I cannot doubt that I am doubting. Whether it is a dream or a real consciousness, I must exist as a doubting or thinking being. Let there be a demon to deceive me, but then I must exist as a thinking being to be deceived. Descartes starts with universal doubt. To doubt is to think. To think is to exist. "*Cogito ergo sum.*" "I think, therefore I exist." is the one certain truth which may be taken as the foundation of philosophy. If I ceased to think, there would be no evidence of my existence. I am a thing that thinks, a substance of which the whole nature or essence consists in thinking and which needs no place or material thing for its existence.

The doubt of Descartes should not be confused with psychological doubt. Descartes' doubt is not a thing of direct feeling and experience but is a deliberate and dispassionate attitude towards human experience in general. It is not directly determined by the nature of objects. The doubt of Descartes should not be confused with scepticism. Descartes is not asserting that whatever can be doubted is false, but he is only supposing it to be false. Again, the scepticism is the finished conclusion about knowledge which professes the denial of any certain knowledge whatsoever. However, the Cartesian doubt is only a starting point to find out that which cannot be further doubted.

In Descartes' theory of knowledge, the one truth that is unshakable, safe and secure from any doubt, is that of my own existence as a conscious subject. Thus the Cartesian Cogito introduces subjectivism into modern western philosophy. Subjectivism is the view that I can know certainty only myself as conscious subject and my thoughts. It is the view that I can know with certainty only my own mind and its content. Subjectivism carries the implication that the knowledge of other minds and of material objects can be proved, if at all, only by inference from what I know with certainty, the existence of my own subjective consciousness and my thoughts or ideas. Therefore for subjectivism the knowledge of the existence of everything other than my own mind becomes questionable, problematic.

The existence of the self, according to Descartes, is a self evident truth, because the very attempt to doubt its existence implies its existence. "For it is a

contradiction to suppose that what thinks does not at the very time when it is thinking, exists.” Hence Descartes discovers that “I think, therefore I exist” (*Cogito ergo sum*) is an indubitable truth. Further, he also realises that it is nothing but the clearness and distinctness of the fact ‘I think’ which makes it an indubitable truth. So, he establishes the criterion of truth as ‘all things which I perceive very clearly and very distinctly are true.’ From this criterion of truth, Descartes deduces our knowledge of the existence of God. According to him, we have within us the idea of God who is a supremely perfect being and we clearly and distinctly perceive that such an idea can be implanted in us “only by something which possesses the sum of all perfections, that is, by a God who really exists.” As an all-perfect Being cannot be lacking in existence, he claims, God must exist. In his ‘*Meditations*’ and ‘*Principles*’, he goes to the length of arguing that the existence of material things follows from the existence of God, who being an All-Perfect Being, cannot be a deceiver. Consequently, in his view, there must be things existing in the external world corresponding to our clear and distinct ideas of them.

According to Descartes knowledge of external things must be by the mind, not by the senses. He takes an example a piece of wax from the honeycomb. If we put the wax near the fire, all qualities (taste, smell, colour, size, shape etc-) change, although the wax persists; therefore what appeared to the senses was not the wax itself. The wax itself is constituted by extension, flexibility, and motion, which are understood by the mind, not by the imagination. The thing that is the wax cannot itself be sensible, since it is equally involved in all the appearances of the wax to the various senses. Knowledge by the senses is confused. The perception of the wax is not a vision or touch or imagination, but an inspection of the mind. From my sensibility seeing the wax, my own existence follows with certainty, but not that of the wax. Knowledge of external things must be by the mind, not by senses.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Explain the meaning of *cogito ergo sum* in the context of Descartes’ philosophy?

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- 2) In your own words, state what you find to be the philosophical problem raised by Descartes’ example of the piece of wax?

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1.5 ATTRIBUTES AND MODES: MIND/BODY DUALISM

Descartes suggests matter as corporeal substance and mind as spiritual substance. These two are independent of each other. The fundamental property which expresses the very essence or nature of the thing is attribute. The attribute of Mind is consciousness or thought and the attribute of Matter is extension. Matter is divisible, figurable, movable quantity. The secondary properties of substance are known as modes or accidents and these modes are variable modifications of created substances. The modifications of Matter are position, figure, motion etc and the modifications of mind are feeling, volition, desire, judgement etc. Consciousness and extension, mind and body (two independent substances), are independent of one another and do not involve each other's existence. There is no real relation between body and soul for they are diametrically opposed. This is known as Cartesian dualism.

If the two substances are opposite to each other, how can there be interaction between them? My arm moves when I will that it shall move, but my will is a mental phenomenon and the motion of my arm a physical phenomenon. Why then, if mind and matter cannot interact, does my body behave as if my mind controlled it? To solve this problem Descartes introduces the Psycho-physical Interactionism. According to this theory, body and mind act upon each other in the 'Pineal gland' of the brain which is the seat of the mind. The body acts upon the mind in sensations and the mind causes movements to take place in the body through the will. So the body at sometimes affects the mind, at other times the mind directs the body. Having separated mind from matter, and assigning them two distinct domains, Descartes prepares the ground for advocating mechanical explanation of the material world. All occurrences, in his view, are due to the transference of motion from one part to another. He holds that even the functions of the human body follow from the mechanical arrangements of its various organs. Even in the absence of mind, he contends, "it would still perform all the same movements as it now does in those cases where movement is not under the control of the will, or, consequently, of the mind." The relation of the soul to the body is of the nature of the pilot to his machine.

The Cartesian dualism appeared to have two features. The first was that it made the soul wholly independent of the body, since it was never acted on by the body. The second was that it allowed the general principle: "one substance cannot act on another." There were two substances, mind and matter and they were so dissimilar that an interaction seemed inconceivable. It explained the appearance of interaction while denying its reality.

1.6 AFTER DESCARTES

The rationalists maintain that there are certain fundamental principles of reality, which are innate and recognized as true by reason or intuition. Intuition is immediate apprehension by reason. All other truths are deduced from them. With the help of mathematical method we must reject the vague and obscure light of the senses and imagination, and select the simple, clear, self-evident, and innate ideas of reason, and deduce other truths from them. Followed by Descartes mathematical method Benedict De Spinoza (1632-1677) starts with

the innate idea of God or substance which is self-existent and conceived by itself, and deduces the finite minds and the finite physical objects from it. Spinoza had the vision of the unity of all things. Descartes 'dependent substance' is contradiction in terms. A substance cannot depend on anything else. As such there can be only one substance. If there were more than one substance then they would limit each other and thus would take away their self-sufficiency. This one substance, he also calls God whom he defines as a "Being absolutely infinite; that is, substance consisting in infinite attributes each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence". He calls it *causa sui* or self-creative. By describing substance as *causa sui*, Spinoza means that the reality is a self-explanatory, all-inclusive, inter-related whole, outside which nothing can lie. Therefore there is one substance which is infinite. He calls the single substances as God. Nature conceived as a whole is identical with God. Nature is known as *Natura Naturata*, i.e., sum-total of all that exist. Nature is governed by eternal laws. God and Nature are one. "All determination is negation". There can be only one Being who is wholly positive, and He must be absolutely infinite. This is known as pantheism, according to which the reality of a single impersonal God permeates and in dwells all things.

Spinoza rejected Cartesian dualism and rejected the substantiality of mind and body. The attribute of Mind and Matter, i.e., thought and extension cannot interact are two parallel attributes of the same absolute substance God. God has also an infinite number of other attributes, since He must be in every respect infinite number of other attributes, since He must be in every respect infinite; but these others are unknown to us. Spinoza believes that Mind is the expression of the infinite consciousness of God and Matter is the appearance of God's unlimited extension. God is extended as well as thinking. Substance thinking and substance extended are one and the same substance. To every mode of extension corresponds a mode of thought, in the same order or series. This parallelism excludes materialism as well as idealism, for matter cannot explain mind, nor can mind explain matter. By admitting only one substance God, Spinoza fails to explain the plurality, diversity, motion and change of the objects of the world.

Like Descartes and Spinoza, Leibniz (1646-1716) based his philosophy on the notion of substance, but he differed radically from them as regards the relation of mind and matter, and as regards the number of substances. Descartes allowed three substances, God, mind and matter; Spinoza admitted God alone. For Descartes, extension is the essence of matter; for Spinoza, both extension and thought are attributes of God. Leibniz held that extension cannot be an attribute of a substance. His reason was that extension involves plurality, and can therefore only belong to an aggregate of substances; each single substance must be unextended. He believed, consequently, in an infinite number of substances, which he called "monads". Each of these would have some of the properties of a physical point, but only when viewed abstractly; in fact, each monad is a soul. This follows naturally from the rejection of extension as an attribute of substance; the only remaining possible essential attribute seemed to be thought. Thus Leibniz was led to deny the reality of matter, and to substitute an infinite family of souls.

Every monad is a mirror of the universe, but a living mirror which generates the images of things by its own activity or develops them from inner germs, without experiencing influences from without. The monad has no windows through which anything could pass in or out, but in its action is dependent only on

God and on itself. All monads represent the same universe, but each one represents it differently, their difference consists only in the energy or degree of clearness. The clearer the representations of a monad the more active it is. Leibnitz suggests that to have clear and distinct perceptions only is the prerogative of God. He alone is pure activity; all finite beings are passive as well, that is, so far as their perceptions are not clear and distinct. No two monads can ever have any causal relation to each other; when it seems as if they had, appearances are deceptive. Leibniz held that every monad mirrors the universe, not because the universe affects it, but because God has given it a nature which spontaneously produces this result. There is a “pre-established harmony” between the changes in one monad and those in another, which produces the semblance of interaction. This is an extension of the two clocks, which strike at the same moment because each keeps perfect time.

What are the major limitations of rationalistic thinking? Rationalism rejects all knowledge derived from the senses of experience (*posteriori*), and condemns it as illusory. But we actually perceive the things around us clearly and distinctly, and so they cannot be treated as unreal. Our life presupposes the existence of external things which produce clear and distinct ideas, and to which we react successfully. We cannot spin out philosophy by mere reason without experience. Philosophical knowledge is not like mathematical knowledge. Mathematical knowledge is abstract; it deals with abstractions and deduction from them. The knowledge that is deduced from them is not concrete. But philosophy does not deal with abstractions or imaginary entities: it deals with real entities. It seeks to give a rational concept of the realities as whole by rational reflection of the facts of experience. So it cannot condemn experience as illusory. The facts are given by experience, organized by sciences and finally harmonized with one another, and reduced to a system by philosophy by rational reflection. Philosophy cannot do without reason; nor can it do without experience. It is criticism of life and experience. The doctrine of innate ideas advocated by Descartes is not tenable. Locke severely criticized Descartes’ doctrine of innate ideas. Hume opposed Descartes’ rationalism with a more powerful empiricism. Hume rejected the Descartes’ Cogito proof, proofs of God and metaphysical dualism.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Had Descartes succeeded in explaining the interaction between Mind and Body? Discuss.

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2) What was Spinoza’s concept of substance? Compare it with that of Descartes.

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

Rene Descartes (1596-1650), who is the father of modern western philosophy and rationalist philosopher, follows a method of abstraction which is evident from his fundamental contention that ‘reason’ is the source of clear and distinct knowledge, and ‘sensibility’ is a faculty of confused knowledge. Descartes rationalism goes from concrete things to something highly abstract and he rejects the objects given by means of senses. Descartes sees that one firm and immovable truth, *cogito ergo sum*, ‘I think, therefore, I am’ that even the most extravagant skepticism cannot touch. This is the highest possible abstraction. Following the method of abstraction, Descartes proceeds to analyze the nature of material substance by separating it from mental substance. So there is no meeting ground between mind and matter, both are diametrically opposed to each other. This is generally known as Cartesian dualism which constitutes the basis for the development of European philosophical thought in terms of two opposed trends-idealism and materialism. Descartes himself could not furnish any satisfactory solution to this problem. We have to go beyond dualism and search for its solution. Spinoza’s (1632-1677) attempt to solve Cartesian dualism by admitting only one substance God by abstraction fails to explain the plurality, diversity, motion and change of the objects of the world. Leibnitz (1646-1716) was a pluralist, for according to him, each monad meets the requirement of substance. But once it has been established that there are numerous substances-windowless monads- in the universe, it becomes impossible to establish, the unity of the world.

1.8 KEY WORDS

- Metaphysics** : the philosophical inquiry into the nature of ultimate reality. In contemporary usage, the term includes the analysis of fundamental philosophical principles.
- Epistemology** : (theory of knowledge): The branch of philosophy which studies the sources, validity, and limits of knowledge, it inquires into perception, meaning, and truth.
- Deduction** : Orderly, logical reasoning from one or more statements (premises) which are assumed, to a conclusion which follows necessarily.
- Intuition** : Direct and immediate knowledge, as in the case of our comprehension of self-evident truths, such as the axioms of geometry.
- Idealism** : Any metaphysical theory which holds that reality is mental, spiritual, or has the nature of mind, thought, or consciousness.
- Materialism** : Any monistic metaphysical theory which holds that ultimate reality is matter and that all seemingly nonmaterial things such as minds and thoughts are reducible to the motions of particles of matter.

- Rationalism** : the view that appeals to reason, not the senses, as the source of knowledge. In its most extreme form, rationalism insists that all knowledge is derived from reason.
- Empiricism** : the view that all human knowledge derived from the sense.
- Dualism** : Any view which holds that two equal but opposed ultimate, irreducible principles are required for the explanation of reality. Good and evil, mind and matter are dualism.
- Abstract** : defined as a part of whole, one-sided, simple or undeveloped. Abstract is the product of the mind alone. In abstraction, things, events and phenomena are conceived separately, independently and mutually isolated. At the level of conceptualization, in abstraction, things, events and phenomena are conceived separately, independently and mutually isolated.
- Concrete**: It is many-sided, complex or a developed whole. Concrete is understood as the sensuously perceived multiformity of individual objects, events and processes are seen as mutually interrelated, interdependent and in appropriate circumstances pass into one another.

1.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCE

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