Course: Philosophy 1000-022

Professor: Alexander Izrailevsky, Ph.D.

Student: Ka Lai Chan

Date: April 16th, 2012

Eportfolio: http://winifrey.yolasite.com/

Rene Descartes
“I think, therefore I am”.

Content

Cover Page --- P.1

Content --- P.2

Introduction, Biography --- P.3-4

Thesis, Sense, Cogito ergo sum --- P.4-5

Thinking (thinking, two “me”s in me, Priori, Posteriori) --- P.5-7

Structure of knowledge, Coherence Theory of Truth, Conclusion --- P.7

Reference --- P.8

I think, therefore I am.

“I think, therefore I am”, is a very famous quote from Rene Descartes. In this paper, I am going to discuss about what is the essence of the philosophy of Rene Descartes.

 Let me briefly introduce some information about Rene Descartes’s biography. Rene Descartes was born in Touraine, France, on March 31st, 1956. Although he was a French man, he spent most of his life in the Dutch republic. In 1616, he received his baccalaureate and licentiate degrees in Law. Aside from his Law degrees, Descartes also spent time studying philosophy, theology, and medicine.

He was a "jack of all trades", making major contributions to the areas of anatomy, cognitive science, optics, law, mathematics and philosophy. Underlying his methodology is the belief that all science is based on mathematics. This is manifested in his unification of ancient geometry and his new algebra based on the Cartesian coordinate system. But the most important contribution Descartes made was his philosophical writings. Descartes, who was convinced that science and mathematics could be used to explain everything in nature. He was the Father of Modern Philosophy and the Father of Analytical Geometry because of his contributions to these topics. He was the first to describe the physical universe in terms of matter and motion, seeing the universe as a giant mathematically designed engine.  Descartes wrote a lot of good and important books, for instance, Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences, Meditations on First Philosophy, and Principles of Philosophy.

The thesis statement of this paper is the essence of the philosophy of Rene Descartes is about “Thinking” critically.

We may know that two apples and two apples makes four apples, but Descartes believes that mathematics transcends the senses, contributing to an overall mathematical order to the universe that is independent of senses.

Senses were at the center of his Meditations on First Philosophy, a work in which Descartes explores the concepts of self, God and mind. Descartes sets out to doubt the evidence of his senses: he notes that everything he believes “has been acquired from the senses or by means of the senses” but has learned that his senses sometimes deceive him (Descartes1,18 P.145). He begins by shaking our belief in the senses; if they are all an illusion created by a malicious deceiver, what can we trust? What can I know 100%, without any doubts? His answer is that we can doubt, and that the deceiver cannot cause us to doubt our own existence.

Initially, Descartes arrives at only a single principle: thought exists. Thought cannot be separated from me, therefore, I exist. “I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is a certain.” (Descartes, II, P.79). Thus, the famous "cogito ergo sum" (in Latin), when stated in English, it means “I am thinking, therefore I exist” or more commonly as “I think, therefore I am.” However, the “I” is not a physical "I", it is an immaterial mind that is identified by "I". “I am, I exist, is necessarily true every time that I pronounce it, or conceive it in my mind” (Descartes 2,24 P. 105). The very act of thinking demonstrates existence. Therefore, Descartes concluded, “if he doubted, then something or someone must be doing the doubting, therefore the very fact that he doubted proved his existence” (C.G Prado, P.67). "The simple meaning of the phrase is that if one is skeptical of existence, that is in and of itself proof that he does exist. I will explain more below.

“To be means to think”, Rene Descartes said. Descartes believes that thinking is the most essential thing in all activities. Descartes concludes that he can be certain that he exists because he thinks. But in what form? He perceives his body through the use of the senses; however, these have previously been unreliable. “I am something real and really existing, but what thing am I? A thing, which thinks”(Descartes 2, 26, I P.152). So Descartes determines that the only indubitable knowledge is that he is a thinking thing. Thinking is what he does, and his power must come from his essence. Descartes defines "thought" (cogitatio) as "what happens in me such that I am immediately conscious of it, insofar as I am conscious of it".

Thinking is thus every activity of a person of which he is immediately conscious. The human mind is more important than the physical activity. “I think, so I am”. For example, I think I have to sleep, so I sleep; I think I need to eat something, so I eat. The key point is our ultimate activity is thinking.

In Rene Descartes’s philosophy, he believes that there are two “me”s in me. One is an actor while another one is a thinker, which represents critical thinking. The thinker will be thinking about thinking. It means a double thinking. One important message from Descartes is a critical thinker in me is more important than an actor in me. In other words, the culture of observation or the culture of evaluation is more important than an action. For instance, I love to watch, instead of being watched. “And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment”, “ And similarly solely by the faculty of judgment which rests in my mind, I comprehend that which I believed I saw with my eyes.” (Descartes, II P.81).

Rene Descartes has further talked more about the two “me” in me. He thinks one me is a bodily I, it is a male, it is aggressive, in space, reversible, and engineering; in contrast, another me is an intellectual I, which is a female. It is passive, in time, irreversible, and memory.

As thinking is so important, when is the best moment for us to think properly? The answer is the period between putting our heads on pillow and falling asleep, it allows us to have meditation and intellectual assessment under the calm situation. Life is your soul.

Rene Descartes clearly constructed the structure of thinking. He believes our thinking consists of two levels: One is “a priori”, which means before experience; another level is “a posteriori”, which means after experience.

“A priori” is the fundamental logical structure of thinking. Just imagine a computer as an example, when we buy a computer, it has nothing except the basic software installed. The computer at this moment is like “a priori”; after somebody buys it and uses it, it has the buy’s information, such as the websites that he browsed. At this stage, the computer becomes “a posteriori”.

There are two levels of knowledge. The first level is a gift from god. God installs it into the minds of every newborn baby, which we say it is a logical structure of knowledge. For instance, the common sense of smaller and bigger; up and down; left and right; present and absent. This level of knowledge is taught by god. It is a gift of god.

Another important philosophy of Rene Descartes is the Coherence Theory of Truth. He thinks every physical proof is imperfect, challenging, and has failure. He believes only Axiom can be 100% proved, which means by the method of Deduction, “from this to this”. For example, how can we prove 4+4=8? We can use the deduction method to make a strong proof.

4+4=8

(2+2)+(2+2)=8

((1+1)+(1+1))+((1+1)+(1+1))=8

1+0=1

0+0=0

In conclusion, all the above are the most imperative concepts of Rene Descartes’s philosophy. And most of them are basically about thinking – critical thinking. Therefore, I really believe that the essence of the philosophy of Descartes is about thinking.

**Reference**

Baird, Forrest E.; Walter Kaufmann (2008). *From Plato to Derrida*. Upper Saddle C.G. Prado, Starting with Descartes (2009)

Descartes, René (1644). *The Principles of Philosophy (IX)*.

Descartes, Rene. Meditations on First Philosophy. Laurence J. Lafleur, trans.,

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9\_Descartes

<http://renedescartes.com/>

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Rene Descartes: Overview Par.22

Macmillan/Library of Liberal Arts, 1951 (1989); also Haldane and Rose, 1969.

River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, [ISBN](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Standard_Book_Number) [0-13-158591-6](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special%3ABookSources/0-13-158591-6)

René Descartes. ["Letter of the Author to the French Translator of the Principles of Philosophy serving for a preface"](http://www.classicallibrary.org/descartes/principles/preface.htm). Retrieved December 2011.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Rene Descartes

["Ten books: Chosen by Raj Persuade"](http://bjp.rcpsych.org/cgi/content/full/181/3/258). The [British Journal of Psychiatry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Journal_of_Psychiatry).