



From Homo Sapiens to Homo Cogitans

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Review Article

Submitted: 26.04.2020 | Accepted: 30.05.2020

Abstract: In this study, the philosophical and modern problems that arise in the fields of ontology and epistemology within the framework of Descartes' method are studied and investigated. There is an extensive literature on Cartesian philosophy. *Homo sapiens* refers to the type of people who can think and can collaborate and collaborate with many members. *Homo cogitans* means the kind of person who can think again but thinking here is not just thinking. We are talking about a species that thinks how it thinks and prioritizes its own thoughts and good sense. Our aim here is to study the journey of a man from *Homo sapiens* to *homo cogitans*. We investigated and analyzed the answers to many questions such as what the effects of Cartesian philosophy are today, how Descartes' methodical suspicion led us to individualism.

Keywords: *Homo sapiens*, *homo cogitans*, good sense, Cartesian philosophy, individualism, methodical doubt.

René Descartes (1596-1650), along with Francis Bacon, is considered one of the founders of modern philosophy. He took place in continental Europe and Bacon in the UK. The main reason why these two men play this role is that they are trying to establish a system.

Descartes has received an unusually good education, and also had rare mind independence; so that when he was still a student, he realized that the various authorities he worked on often made invalid arguments. He went to the army in his youth and wandered various parts of Europe without seeing any collision. In the same period, Descartes, who was fascinated by the fact that the world of practical life was full of contradictions as much as the world of books was fascinated by the question of whether there is a way to know something for us human beings, and if we can, for sure? Therefore, by putting an end to his travels, he was retired in the Netherlands, the freest country of intellectual life. During the twenty years from 1629 to 1649, he also worked in the field of science, in the Netherlands, besides giving highly original works in mathematics and philosophy. Philosophy and science were not yet separated from each other at that time, and this continued until the eighteenth century.

Descartes found the branch of mathematics known as analytical geometry. His main idea here was to measure the position of a point by its distance from the two fixed lines, that is, whenever we look at a graph, we are looking at something invented by Descartes. Indeed, these two familiar lines on a chart are known as “Cartesian axes”.

The Cartesian corresponds to the adjective derived here from the name Descartes. His most famous philosophical works are *Discourse on Method*, published in 1637 and *Meditations*, published in 1642. Descartes lived an ascetic life during his creative work years. However, at the age of fifty-three, Queen Christina persuaded him to come to Stockholm and become her private philosophy teacher, despite all his reluctance. This was a fatal mistake for Descartes. In the severe winter of Sweden, he

suffered from pneumonia and died in 1650, the second year of his illness.¹

Descartes is the philosopher who made his mark on the whole 17th-century philosophy. In fact, this whole century is called Cartesian: at least, everyone is either against Descartes or for Descartes. Descartes wanted to establish his whole philosophy based on “clear and distinct” ideas, but the method, metaphysics and physics, which constitute the three dimensions of his thought, were the subject of great discussions. One of these discussions is the relationship between theology and physics, which constitute an important aspect of his metaphysics. Some Descartes commentators state that the point that distinguishes it from ancient theologians is that its theology is a theology intended for physics and serving it, whereas, in the past, physics served for theology. Many have developed this approach to claim that Descartes is indeed Godless and that the place devoted to God in his system does not mean much more than the first flick to bring the world to the existence, as Pascal said. In contrast, Lenoble, who is among those who think Descartes needs God to be able to base his physics metaphysically, expresses this with the view that he needs to believe in God to believe in physics.²

Descartes is the initiator of the New Age Philosophy as the person who started the New Age Philosophy, where the developments that emerged with Renaissance kneaded and integrated, and who discussed and argued them for two centuries after that, and first thought about them. The pale New Age Philosophy that Descartes brought to philosophy is inexhaustible. He has been criticized by both the rationalist and empiricist tradition. In the development of philosophy from the seventeenth century to the present day, he is seen as a philosopher, who is frequently re-

¹ Bryan Magee, *Büyük Filozoflar: Platon'dan Wittgenstein'a Batı Felsefesi*, ed. Ahmet Cevizci (İstanbul: Paradigma Yayınları, 2000), 70.

² Tülin Bumin, *Tartışılan Modernlik: Descartes ve Spinoza* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2010), 34; İlyas Altuner, *Descartes Felsefesine Giriş* (İstanbul: Hiperlink Yayınları, 2019), 83.

ferred to, who is reckoned with him, and who has a share in creations in philosophy, even if they are against him. “Every movement that took its first move from Descartes has been productive” as philosophy continues.³ In this context, Kant presented a radicalized version of Descartes’ Cartesianism, while Hegel presented a kind of variation of Kant’s idealism.

It can be argued in Descartes’ philosophy that he constitutes the subject-centered understanding presented in the subject’s human centralism. The philosophy in which the subject is taken to the center is the philosophy based on the acceptance that the mental content determines the object, which means the acquisition of information with the ideas in the mind of the subject. Descartes acknowledged that cogito also includes “innate ideas”. However, this does not mean that he denies the senses. In the last instance, the person who will say the word becomes the person who understands.

Because of that Descartes has many influences on our modern world like democracy, individualism, rationalism, self-seeking, and mind and matter dualism, and so on.

Descartes believes that all individuals possess the “natural light of reason,” the belief that everyone has the capacity for the discovery of truth, undermined Roman Catholic authoritarianism. Although Descartes was a devout Catholic, this belief gave support to the Protestant affirmation of the supremacy of individual conscience. This belief was also instrumental in the development of democracy. John Locke, a political philosopher whose influence on Thomas Jefferson was considerable, was influenced by Descartes’ assertion that all individuals have the “natural light of reason”.

Descartes believes that the world is essentially rational and comprehensible: For the next two and a half centuries, philosophers build systems of thought which they are confident are

³ Attila Erdemli, “Aydınlanma Filozofu Olarak Descartes,” *Felsefe Arkivi* 27 (1990), 105.

close to absolute truth. This belief also results in a pervasive optimism regarding the progress of science. The universe is thought to conform to scientific laws. Through the understanding of these laws, nature can be subjected to the control of man.

Descartes' analysis of personal experience as an approach to philosophy: The first-person narrative that Descartes' employs in his philosophical writings is indicative of a new approach to philosophy. After Descartes, the analysis of one's own experience is a standard approach in philosophical writings.

Descartes' famous declaration "I think, therefore I am" raises questions about the nature of personality and personal identity. What is the self, the "I" that Descartes establishes as the foundation of knowledge? Descartes' metaphysical dualism that the universe is composed of both mind and matter is so much a part of our intellectual heritage that those not trained in philosophy consider it common sense. Nevertheless, this "Cartesian dualism" poses difficulties which have concerned philosophers, scientists, and psychologists throughout the modern period.

Descartes' quest for certainty determines the direction of much subsequent philosophy. Questions concerning epistemology and methodology take on unprecedented importance.⁴

With Descartes, human-made the transition from *Homo sapiens* to *homo cogitans*. Before explaining this, we must grasp Descartes' famous declaration, "I think so I am". Descartes explains this in his Discourse on Method:

I am in doubt as to the propriety of making my first meditations in the place above mentioned matter of discourse; for these are so metaphysical, and so uncommon, as not, perhaps, to be acceptable to every one. And yet, that it may be determined whether the foundations that I have laid are sufficiently secure, I find myself in a measure constrained to advert to them. I had long before remarked

⁴ Alex Lans, "Descartes' Influence in Shaping the Modern World-View," https://www.academia.edu/30328864/Descartes_Meditations.pdf, Accessed: May 9, 2020.

that, in relation to practice, it is sometimes necessary, to adopt, as if above doubt, opinions which we discern to be highly uncertain, as has been already said; but as I then desired to give my attention solely to the search after truth, I thought that a procedure exactly the opposite was called for, and that I ought to reject as absolutely false all opinions in regard to which I could suppose the least ground for doubt, in order to ascertain whether after that there remained aught in my belief that was wholly indubitable. Accordingly, seeing that our senses sometimes deceive us, I was willing to suppose that there existed nothing really such as they presented to us; and because some men err in reasoning, and fall into paralogisms, even on the simplest matters of Geometry, I, convinced that I was as open to error as any other, rejected as false all the reasonings I had hitherto taken for demonstrations; and finally, when I considered that the very same thoughts (presentations) which we experience when awake may also be experienced when we are asleep, while there is at that time not one of them true, I supposed that all the objects (presentations) that had ever entered into my mind when awake, had in them no more truth than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately upon this I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be somewhat; and as I observed that this truth, I think, hence I am, was so certain and of such evidence, that no ground of doubt, however extravagant, could be alleged by the Sceptics capable of shaking it, I concluded that I might, without scruple, accept it as the first principle of the Philosophy of which I was in search.⁵

With this passage, we can see that human turned from *Homo sapiens* (this merely refers to the place of the human species on the scale of species) to *homo cogitans* which is, an entity that thinks about even thinking because the first foundation of human's existence was its ability to think.

⁵ René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, trans. John Veitch (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing, 1903), 34-5.

Homo cogitans is a living being with its sense. Descartes says in his book *Discourse on Method*:

Good Sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed; for every one thinks himself so abundantly provided with it, that those even who are the most difficult to satisfy in everything else, do not usually desire a larger measure of this quality than they already possess. And in this it is not likely that all are mistaken: the conviction is rather to be held as testifying that the power of judging aright and of distinguishing Truth from Error, which is properly what is called Good Sense or Reason, is by nature equal in all men...⁶

The subjective mind of Descartes, which forms the basis of certain knowledge, differs from the understanding of logos in the Ancient period. It means that the return of the intellectual mind, which is the object of the nature of something, to the instrumental mind in the context of the relation of the mind with the object, has been put forward by his bringing the cogito to the stage of philosophy. It should also be noted that the cogito only proves that the philosopher's existence exists, otherwise he has no claim to say what it is.⁷

If I make a general summary, I can say that Descartes has established modernity and individualism as a system- knowingly or unknowingly-. As seen in the post-Descartes philosophy, the problem of what the nature of reason is and this problem has been further explored with German idealists and English empiricism, and it has become an adventure of knowing together with the question of how the human knows, how much he knows, in other words, what is the source of information, what is the criterion of the limits and accuracy of information. This transformation in philosophy has initiated a thought prioritizing epistemology in the face of ontology. Nietzsche, who is one of those who oppose this thought, argues that human is not a subject in

6 Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, 1.

7 Şahabettin Yalçın, *Modern Felsefede Benlik* (İstanbul: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Yayinevi, 2010).

historical and cultural context, but a product of cultural and historical formation. With the understanding that the real problem is existence, Heidegger, on the other hand, defends the contrary of Descartes' suggestion -*cogitans* as an entity different from the field of existence- and throws the *cogitans* right into the field of existence. In this sense, philosophy corresponds to the ontological problem area as opposed to Descartes reducing the mind to epistemology. The reason why he advocates a concept of *cogitans* living in *extensa* arises from the fact that putting the human consciousness apart from the outside world thinks that both the outside world and the *cogitans* cannot be correctly defined. Finally, it should be noted that in the second half of the twentieth century, the critique of the subjective reason was primarily criticized by Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, Derrida, and the mind was evaluated in a political, social and economic context, and the subject and object were reinterpreted.⁸

In my humble opinion, the fact that Descartes put himself on the premise of being, that is, put man, made so much individualism and self-centeredness that man thought everything was made for him. Animals, plants, nature, all became human servants. At the same time, he praised rationality so much that in time rationalism became a religion. Individualism and rationality brought together the necessity of all religious duties to be subjective.

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⁸ Çiğdem Yıldızdöken, "Şüpheden Kartezyen Düşünceye Giden Yol," *Mavi Atlas* 5, no. 1 (2017), 65-6.

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