CHAPTER II

DUALISM OF DESCARTES

(a) A Brief Introduction to Descartes's Philosophy:

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was born in an age of science. Four great men, Copernicus (1473-1543), Kepler (1571-1630), Galileo (1564-1642), and Robert Boyle (1627-1691) were in the forefront of creators of modern science. The last three of them were his contemporaries. Descartes himself was a scientist and mathematician, and it is presumed that he was influenced by their theories. In fact, the entire outlook of educated men was changed in this period of transition.

"In 1700, the mental outlook of educated men was completely modern, in 1600, it was still largely medieval."

Mainly due to science, scholasticism and monasticism crumbled to pieces and were replaced by the Age of Reason. Rationalism became the watch-word of modern Philosophy and Descartes was its chief exponent.

Descartes was not satisfied with the knowledge that he had received from books.

"We shall never become philosophers even though we should read all the reasonings of Plato and Aristotle, if we cannot form a sound judgment upon any proposition."

His conviction was that philosophy requires independent thinking based on reason. To read the philosophy of others in order to have a knowledge of it is of no use, it is only reading a history of philosophy. True study of philosophy requires one's own thinking; it is based on reason and not on opinion of others. His philosophy is therefore called rationalistic.

He did not believe even his own senses. He says,

"It is sometimes proved to me that the senses are deceptive and it is wiser not to trust entirely to anything by which we have been deceived."

He, therefore, concluded, that he should not accept anything as true unless it was tested and proved by reason. Consequently, he doubted the reality of all that he had learnt from books or his own unverified knowledge. But he could not doubt things quite apparent in his daily experience.

1. Descartes - Rules for the Direction of the mind - Rule II.
2. Meditation I.
"How can I deny that this hand and this body are mine unless I behave like those persons whose cerebella has been clouded by the black bile."

He has also excepted divine truths from his method of doubt, he remarks.

"This does not prevent us from believing matters that have been divinely revealed as being more certain than our surest knowledge."

It may be briefly indicated here that Socrates also used the method of doubt when he critically examined his sources of knowledge. Bertrand Russell comments,

"Philosophy arises from an unusually obstinate attempt to arrive at real knowledge. What passes for knowledge in ordinary life suffers from three defects: it is cock-sure, vague and self-contradictory."

The first step in philosophy, therefore, consists in not accepting anything as true without examining it critically. This extreme cautiousness presupposes what Russell calls 'philosophic doubt.'

1. Descartes - Meditation 1.
2. Descartes - Rule III.
While pursuing the lone path of scepticism, he suddenly felt that the glimmering light of reason had dawned on him and that he had made a discovery. It was as important in philosophy as the discovery of one point in heaven was for Archimedes in Astronomy. Descartes discovered his own self, and this, too, in a logical and scientific way.

He argued that doubting involves thinking. To doubt is to think and to think means to be. 'Cogito ergo sum,' which means 'I think, therefore, I am,' became his first principle in his philosophy.

Having falsified his senses and discredited all book learning, he at last found reality in self-realization. "It was not possible for him to have a complete knowledge of his soul but from its attributes which he had perceived, he could infer that it is a substance." He has no doubt about his body because it is a matter of his everyday experience which he cannot afford to deny.

He treated mind and body as two different entities. The attribute of mind is 'thinking,' that of body is 'extension'. They are diametrically opposed to each other.

The relation of mind and body is envisaged in his theory of dualism. It appears that dualism lurked in the

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1. IV as Resp VII Page 222. (From the Philosophy of Descartes by Gibson -Page 96)
very nature of Descartes. He had a belief in divine revelation on the one hand and objective analysis on the other.

Descartes has recognised only two methods of gaining knowledge, viz, intuition and deduction.

"Intuition is the undoubting conception of an unclouded and attentive mind and springs from the light of reason alone."

"Deduction is pure illation of one thing from the other and cannot be erroneous when performed by rational understanding."

Closely allied with intuition is his theory of innate ideas. About these ideas Descartes says,

"What is called a thing or a truth or a thought, it appears to me that I hold this power from no other source than my own nature." He continues, "I cannot doubt that which the natural light causes me to believe to be true, as, for example, it has shown me, that 'I am' from the fact that 'I doubt'. I possess no other faculty whereby to distinguish truth from falsehood."

1. Descartes - Rule III.
2. Descartes - Rule II.
3. Meditation - III
4. Meditation - III.
Now the question arises as to how he will have the knowledge of external things in the world and also how these objects have been formed. How have they been individualised and differentiated. It is an admitted fact that he will have to rely on his senses in order to have a knowledge of objects. He will, however, use his senses carefully and will verify their existence by scientific methods. As regards the formation of the objects in the world he posits three elements, viz., fire, earth and air out of which all concrete things have been formed. In his book, Traité de la Lumière he has stated that two factors, viz., heat and motion are responsible for the creation of all objects in the universe.

To have a sound knowledge of all matters of life, it is necessary to formulate certain rules for guidance and to follow certain methods. "There is one basis of science, says Descartes, one test and rule of truth, viz., that whatever is clearly and distinctly conceived is true." Descartes has given in his various writings a long list of principles and rules of method, in order to obtain a clear and distinct idea of anything under investigation. In some of his rules, he has stressed the need of having a knowledge of mathematics for understanding philosophy.

Not only that. It was his firm conviction that
Mathematical truths cannot be violated. He wanted to construct
a system of knowledge based on principles which, like those
of mathematics, are eternally true. These principles would
be just like beacon-lights which guide the ship of knowledge
in the dark ocean of doubt and uncertainty. He would apply
these principles in all the important subjects which he
would discuss in philosophy or in physical sciences.

Descartes was by temperament a rationalist. He
thoroughly examined each item of knowledge; and if he found
that it was not clear and distinct he discarded it as of
no value. He had a distinction in his mind between 'clear'
and 'distinct'. "I term that 'clear' which is present and
apparent to an attentive mind. -----But the distinct is
that which is so precise and different from all other
objects that it contains within itself nothing but what
is clear."¹ He also believed in the efficacy of reason
and built a super-structure of knowledge on the firm
foundation of thoroughly scrutinised and verified facts.

As he lived in an age of science, he believed
like other scientists, that every object of nature is

¹ Descartes -Philosophical Works, Vol I, Principle XLV.
governed by mechanical laws. Man's body also is like a machine and is subject to the laws of nature much in the same way as machines are. If men violate those laws of nature, they do so at their own expense. Even psychic and physiological processes are controlled by laws of nature. Human emotions, too, can be explained mechanically.

Descartes' spiritual life was based on his thorough knowledge of scriptures and his implicit faith in them. He also believed in God and His supreme powers of creation and preservation. His problem was how to reconcile his views about the mechanism of nature and the truths of his own religion. Are the laws of nature supreme or is the will of God? Descartes had to find compromises on all issues which were disputed between religion and science.

Descartes was not only a first-class mathematician, but was also interested in sciences. Within the wide range of philosophy, he included all branches of science known and studied in those days. In his letter to the translator of the Principles of Philosophy he wrote, "Thus philosophy, as a whole, is like a tree whose roots are metaphysics, whose trunk is physics, and whose branches,
which issue from this trunk, are all the other sciences."

These sciences are mainly three, namely medicine, mechanics and morals. As the fruits cannot be gathered from the roots of a tree, so the full benefit from philosophy can be obtained only by studying the various sciences. In his Principles of Philosophy also, the first part deals with metaphysics, while the remaining three parts are devoted to discussions relating to the Principles of material Things, the Visible world and the Earth. A fuller description of sciences, both physical and physiological, may be found in 'Le monde' which was published in 1944.

By reading these two parts, one can easily conclude that Descartes considered the knowledge of science absolutely necessary for the study of philosophy.

What a prophetic vision he had; Some of the great philosophers have also been great scientists, not by accident, but because they derived certain principles from science and applied them to metaphysics. To name only a few, Descartes is the pioneer, followed by Leibniz.

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1. Descartes' Philosophical Works, Vol 1, Page 211, (From His letter to Abbe Claude Picot who translated his Principles of Philosophy)
Herbert Spencer and Bertrand Russell. These intellectual giants were not only great philosophers but also great scientists. In propounding metaphysical theories, they possessed the advantage of having a scientific bent of mind. Their reasoning is clear and scientifically analytic.

Descartes believed in the existence of external things, but he insisted that their real nature could be understood only by rational thinking. Things exist in the world independently of our thinking—they exist not on account of us but in spite of us. God is the creator of all things.

Descartes, being a devout Roman Catholic, and having received his education under the discipline of the Church, could not forget the scriptures. He tried to reconcile his philosophy to his religious notions, with the result that in certain places he seems to be inconsistent. Yet in spite of it we have to recognise him as a great philosopher of his age.
Descartes is usually called the 'Father of Modern Philosophy.' His influence has extended to many schools of philosophy. His conception of the immaterial nature of the mind proved to be the first stage in Idealism, while his treatment of matter was important in the development of materialistic ideas. His scepticism led to a genuine quest for truth which threw new light not only on philosophy but all branches of science. He proved to be prophetic in his faith in mathematics, because by its help revolutionary changes have taken place in speculative thinking as well as in the discoveries of science. His contention that mathematics would prove to be a better foundation for philosophy than Aristotelian Logic has been amply justified.

"What is enchanting in Descartes and what brings him alive for us is his awareness of himself, of his penetrating awareness of the workings of his thought. He creates out of his 'me' an instrument the infallibility of which depends only on the degree of awareness he has of it."

Descartes was a pioneer, both in philosophy and science, "a pioneer of the first generation who broke his back." He found little recognition in his own day, rather

he saved himself from religious persecution for his revolutionary philosophical theories by his self-imposed exile to Holland. Later generations, however, reaped the reward of his labours and researches in the fields of Philosophy and Science.

(b) Descartes' Conception of Reality:

After having discussed the common-sense view of reality as well as the philosophical conception about it, we have now to see what Descartes thought about reality as such. Thinkers like Sāṃkara and Bradley have told us that reality is eternal and free from all contradictions. Descartes has not explicitly expressed his notion about reality but he has given us a very clear and distinct idea about substances, which are real and eternal.

Descartes is an uncompromising seeker of truth. He is not satisfied with false notions or half-truths. His first law is to accept nothing as true which is not clearly recognised to be so."

To construct his conception of reality, we start with some ideas he has expressed about eternal truths in some places in his writings. In his principles of philosophy, he has mentioned some of these truths, e.g. "Nothing comes out

1. Six parts of Descartes Discourse Part II, Law I.
of nothing,' 'It is impossible that a given truth should at once be and not be,' 'A triangle has the sum of its angles equal to two right angles.' These eternal truths are certain and self-evident.

In a letter which he has written to his friend, Mercenne, under the title 'God and the Eternal Truths,' he writes that eternal truths are true and possible only because God knows them as true or possible. They are not true independently of Him. They are not antecedent to God's knowledge. It is quite obvious that they could not exist if God did not exist. God's existence is therefore, the most eternal of all possible truths. God is the author of all the eternal truths. He is the efficient cause. God is therefore the supreme reality. The validity of these truths depends on God.

To build a solid foundation of his philosophy he accepts eternal truths, particularly, mathematical truths. He wants to find the same certainty in his philosophy as he has found in these truths. He says that "in order to examine into the truth, it is necessary once in one's life to doubt of all things so far as this is possible."

1. Principles of Philosophy Part I Principle XLIX
2. Letter No. 3 Descartes to Mercenne (God and the eternal truths) Amsterdam, 27 May, 1631.
3. Descartes - Principles of Philosophy - Principle. 1
He has so much given himself to doubt that he has confessed that there is nothing of which he cannot in some measure doubt.

He employs methodic doubt in order to find out whether there is any truth which he cannot doubt. He finds this truth in the affirmation, 'Cogito ergo sum,' I think, therefore I am. If I think "I am deceived I must exist to be deceived." If I think "I am dreaming I must exist to dream."

The cogito ergo sum is certain and self-evident base truth on which Descartes proposes to found his philosophy. He says,

"I think, therefore I am" is so certain and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions brought forward by the sceptics were incapable of shaking it. I have, therefore, come to the conclusion that I could receive it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy for which I was seeking.

In this way, he finds the first criterion of reality viz., that reality is certain and self-evident. 'Cogito ergo

1. Descartes—Meditation I.
2. A and B—Frederick Copleston—Modern Philosophy P. 100.
3. Descartes—Discourse on Method IV (cf. also Radha Krishnan—History of Philosophy Eastern and Western Vol. II. P.204, ("Cogito provides a criterion of truth.")
sum' is such a type of reality that it does not require any other thing to prove its certainty.

Reality should also be of such a nature that it does not depend on any other thing for its existence. Such a characteristic we find in God. God is independent and self-existent substance Descartes has rightly said "By substance we can understand nothing else than a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist. And, in fact, only one single substance can be understood which clearly needs nothing else, namely God."

We have an innate idea of God. We prove His existence by the conception which we have of Him in our mind. Descartes has stated the same truth in his own words, when he says, "The existence of God may be rightly demonstrated from the fact that the necessity of His existence is comprehended in the conception which we have of Him."

Descartes has also recognised the existence of matter. It is an extended substance. It is unchangeable and imperishable. It depends on God for its existence.

So, in brief, we can say that in the system of Descartes God is an absolutely independent substance. There

1. Descartes - Principles of Philosophy Principle LI
2. Principle XIV
are, however, two other substances, viz. mind which is a thinking substance and matter which has extension. These two substances have been created by God but they are independent of each other.

Now, with the description of these three substances - one independent or absolute and two relative, we can form an idea about Descartes' notion of reality. Reality for him is some thing which is self-evident. In other words it is free from all confusions and contradictions. It is eternal, unchangeable and imperishable. It does not depend on any other thing for its existence.

Here it may be pointed out that in giving us an idea of reality Descartes is consistent with his rationalistic position. As a rationalist, Descartes does not believe that worldly objects as such are real. These objects are subject to change. They may perish and are definitely destructible. Reality may pervade these objects but these objects as such are not reality. Thus he disagrees with empiricist's position that reality is given to us through experience.

With the above-mentioned notion of Descartes' reality, we proceed to study his dualistic philosophy in some detail. We have now first to examine the grounds on which he has advocated dualism.
(c) The Grounds on which Descartes Stood for Dualism:

Dualism is a philosophical doctrine which, in contrast to monism, regards material and spiritual substances as two co-existent but independent entities, for example, God and the world, matter and spirit etc. In assuming dualism between two opposite terms, the underlying idea is not so much to acknowledge their dissimilarity as to emphasise that the differences between the two are irreducible.

The philosophy of Descartes is based on the principle of dualism between mind and matter. These are two independent and separate substances. We may have thus two clear and distinct notions or ideas, the one of the substance which thinks and the other of a corporeal substance which extends, provided that we carefully separate all the attributes of thought from those of extension. These two substances are opposite in nature, as Descartes himself says, "We cannot conceive of body excepting in so far as it is divisible while the mind cannot be conceived of, excepting as indivisible, for we are not able to think of the half of a mind as we can do of the smallest of all bodies, so that we see that not only are their natures different, but even in some respects contrary to one another."

1. Descartes.
2. Descartes –Synopsis of the six following Meditations, Page. 141.
How have we to find out why he chose two independent, heterogeneous and opposite substances for solving the problem of the world. Before considering the philosophic notion about the dualistic philosophy of Descartes we should have an idea about the common-sense view of the basis of dualism.

In our daily experience we are familiar with two types of objects, viz., those which are conscious and those which are unconscious, or those which are material and those which are immaterial or spiritual. They are so antagonistic to each other that it seems to be impossible to deduce one from the other, so, the only possibility left before us is to believe in two ultimate substances.

These are some crude, common-sense notions which may be said to lie at the root of dualistic thinking. Considering Descartes' notion of dualism, we can say that it can be very well traced in Mediaeval philosophy. The germs of the dualistic philosophy of Descartes may be found in his own temperament and the traditions in which he was brought up. In the Mediaeval ages there was a clear distinction between theology and philosophy, one being the science of religion and the other the study of the problems of mind and matter, one based on unshaken faith and the other relying on reason. Descartes was a product of this
dualistic tradition, his own mental structure was formed by the influences of the teachings of Christianity and by intensive training in logic and deep study of metaphysics. Hoffding has rightly observed.

"It is generally admitted that the mediaeval dualism lurks in Descartes' theory of soul and body. Descartes' own contribution to the theory, however, is his effort to form clear and evident conceptions."¹

Descartes has critically examined not only the distinction between these two conceptions but he has also seen clearly the difference between these two independent entities. In the words of Hoffding.

"From the mutual independence of the concepts, Descartes goes on to infer the mutual independence of the beings. His greatest merit is his clear and sharp characterisation of the difference between mental and bodily phenomena."²

This may be one of the grounds of his dualistic philosophy but it is not the only ground.

². Ibid.
A brief examination of Descartes' philosophy tells us that he has reached the two ultimate substances through the penetrating eye of human reason.

As a rationalist, he is not satisfied by the common-sense belief nor with the religious dogmas. He wants to prove the certainty of everything with the help of reason. For this he begins to doubt everything until he has found some self-evident criterion. This is evident from the following remark.

"The whole philosophy of Descartes is dominated by his pursuit of certainty. Anything which can be doubted must be doubted. Until we have found a criterion which cannot lie, even moral certainties must be treated as totally false."¹ He has doubted the validity of his senses and also the knowledge which Descartes received previously. From this process he comes to the conclusion that he can doubt everything, excepting one, i.e. the existence of the doubter.

Here he reaches a self-evident proposition. This is soul substance or mind which thinks or doubts. It is as certain a truth for him as any Mathematical truth.

¹ A Boyce Gibson -The Philosophy of Descartes, P. 74.
But he does not stop here. He takes up his sensations which are continuously coming to him. He finds in him certain faculties and activities such as the power of changing position and of local motion in general, which clearly imply the existence of a corporeal or extended substance, i.e. the body. By the impressions which he receives on his senses, he infers the existence of material objects. To prove the validity of these impressions he seeks the aid of God. His argument is that as God has no malice, He can never deceive him. So he perceives external objects also. He finds them to be real objects.

We are now in a position to say that his dualistic philosophy is based on solid grounds - on the one hand there is the knowing self and on the other hand, the material world. Another ground of his dualistic philosophy may be traced to the conflict in his own mind between faith and reason. Descartes is both a devout christian and a thorough rationalist.

As Descartes has upheld the two ultimate substances, it seems to be in the fitness of things to discuss their nature.
(d) Descartes on the Nature of Mind and Matter:

While introducing ourselves to the dualistic philosophies of Descartes, we have seen in brief, that he propounds two independent substances which are opposed in nature. They are mind and body.

Mind is a thinking substance. It has thoughts. Thoughts include all processes of thinking, such as reasoning, imagining, judging and even feeling. Thought is an attribute that belongs to mind, it cannot be separated from it. So long as a man lives, he thinks. Such activities as walking are not the attributes of the soul. They pertain to the body. Defining the soul in negative terms, Descartes says, "I am not a subtle air distributed through the limbs of my body. I am not a wind, a fire, a vapour, a breath, nor anything at all which I can imagine or conceive. I am a thing that thinks." Mind does not stop its function. "It is certain that I exist; even though I should always sleep." According to Descartes, feeling is an aspect of thinking. Properly speaking, it is what is in me called feeling and used, in this precise sense, that is no other thing than thinking. Judgment is also a form of thinking. It presupposes intellect. We can make no judgment

1. Descartes - Med. II.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Principles of Philosophy Part I Principle No. XXXIV.
about an object which we do not think about. It also presupposes the power of will. So Descartes believes in three aspects of consciousness, viz, thinking, feeling and willing.

Besides, mind being a thinking substance, has the privilege to reject as non-existing, any thing of which it has the least doubt. It is mind alone that can decide whether a thing has been clearly and distinctly perceived. Senses, as has been pointed out by Descartes, are not reliable. Therefore, the things which we perceive may not exist at all, or else if they exist, we may not correctly perceive them. Therefore, the existence of mind cannot be doubted, because all thinking with regard to the material objects is done by it. "This point" says Descartes, "is of the greatest moment, because it draws a distinction between the things which pertain to the mind and those which pertain to the body." There is thus a clear-cut distinction between mind and body. Descartes further adds, "I clearly perceive that neither extension, nor local motion, nor anything similar to that can be attributed to body, pertains to my nature as a thinking thing."

1. Descartes' Philosophical Works - Synopsis of meditations, Page 140.
As regards corporeal objects, he had to proceed very cautiously, as in the first place, they have to be perceived through the senses which may prove deceptive and then, they have to be verified by intuition or the light of reason. He proceeds step by step.

"First of all, then, I perceived that I had a head, hands, feet and all other members of which this body is composed."

He cannot doubt their existence because by their proper functioning his very existence is sustained. He has, therefore, a clear knowledge of his body and its parts. He can understand the nature of his body as well as the functioning of its parts.

He then considers his surroundings. He finds a number of objects as well as the bodies of fellow-men moving about like him. He tries to understand the nature of these objects. In the first place all of them are extended in space. Besides, they have form, colour, smoothness, hardness and brightness or dullness of surface. If they are birds and animals they may produce sounds or behave in other ways like living things, if flowers they may give out smell. He perceives

1. Meditation VI.
them sometimes even without making any effort. But all these characteristics fail to give a clear idea about the nature of matter. Descartes clarifies this point.

The nature of matter or of body considered in general, does not consist in its being a thing that has hardness or weight, or colour or any other sensible property, but simply in its being a thing, that has extension in length, breadth and depth. Besides the attribute of extension, no other attribute is true of matter. Hardness will not be felt if the object perceived moves at the same speed in the direction in which the pressure of our hand is applied to perceive the hardness. It is inconceivable that if a body thus moves or changes its position it will change its nature as body also. So nature does not consist in hardness. In the same way, weight, colour, smoothness or other sensible qualities of matter may be changed, but its nature will always remain the same.

Extension and matter being coincident, there can be no void space; and all physical motions must be circular. Here Descartes maintains an important principle in Physics, viz., that all bodies, whether large or small, whether solid or liquid are solid in the sense that each contains no void.

There is no empty space between the particles. We can easily understand it with regard to solid objects. The particles of a piece of stone are so compressed that there is not space left between the particles, which explains its hardness. It is a physical phenomenon that compressed soil becomes solid in the course of ages. With regard to the liquids, he says that the particles are soft and move when the liquid is in motion so that there is no empty space in between the particles.

Descartes has a clear notion of space. A space or intrinsic place does not differ in actuality from the body that occupies it; the difference lies simply in our ordinary ways of thinking. In principle, the length, breadth and depth of or height / space is absolutely identical with the dimensions of the object - neither more nor less. To illustrate this point we may take a stone. We may remove from it all perceivable qualities, such as hardness, colour, temperature etc, but the essence of the stone as a piece of matter, lies in its extension. The same is true of space. It, too, like the body is three-dimensional.

The terms 'space' and 'place' do not signify anything other than the nature of the object. They merely

1, Principles of Philosophy Part II Principle No. X.
indicate its size, shape and position with respect to other objects in the vicinity. From this we may conclude that it is impossible for any part of matter to occupy more space at one time than at another. The quantity of a piece of matter depends not on its heaviness or solidity but simply on its extension.

Descartes does not believe in atoms in the sense that they have been called by some philosophers indivisible. According to Descartes no object howsoever small it may be is indivisible, because it has extension, and extended objects are always divisible.

The world which represents the totality of matter has unlimited extension. Objects are formed out of it on principles of motion and change. It is one and the same matter which exists throughout the universe. All the qualities that we perceive in matter are reducible to divisibility and change due to motion. All differences in form of matter depend on motion.

We can also readily derive the result that the matter of which the stars and planets are made is not different. If there were an infinity of worlds, they could not but consist of one and the same kind of matter, and
thus there cannot be a plurality of worlds but only one.

So, having discussed the nature of matter and mind we are in a better position to have a clearer knowledge of external things as well as a better understanding of the nature of soul, which we shall study in the next chapter.