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The Impact and Residue of Cartesian Dualism: The Relevance of Cartesian Skepticism

Rene Descartes’s *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy* were ground-breaking works that introduced a new philosophical paradigm in the modern period. However, it was argued in the post-modern period that Cartesian method and skepticism were obsolete and irrelevant. Robert Kirk (2003) contended that Cartesian philosophy was “hardly taken seriously” (pp.36-37). This paper will argue that, while Cartesian philosophy was a product of its time, the ideas posited by Descartes that incited dialogue through the modern period gained renewed interest in the post-modern period. Cartesian skepticism was topical in the 17th century (Descartes, Hobbes & Arnauld, 1998, p.73). Discourse on the circular reasoning Descartes employed to prove the existence of objective reality continued in the 20th century (Odegard, 1984; Van Cleve, 1979). This paper will describe this reasoning. It will present modern and post-modern solutions to the predicament which was dubbed the “Cartesian Circle.” In general Cartesian skepticism remained of interest in the post-modern period. John McDowell (1998) contended that no real alternative had been found (p. 253). Jennifer Nagel (2005) remarked that contemporary Cartesians employed “practical scrutiny” in place of Descartes’s concept of doubt (p. 488). This paper will engage in a more thorough discussion of Cartesian skepticism. It will treat the post-modern reframing of the skeptical position by John McDowell. To begin it will provide the historical background for Cartesian philosophy and outline its basic premises.

Descartes unveiled his Philosophy in the early 17th century. *Discourse on the Method for Conducting One’s Reason Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences* was published in 1637 and *Meditations on First Philosophy in Which the Existence of God and the Distinction between the Soul and the Body are Determined* was published in 1641. The period that saw the introduction of these works was marked by the decay of medieval scientific theory and the challenge of the Reformation to the Catholic Church. Aristotelian physics was becoming antiquated by new discoveries in the sciences by Galileo, Kepler and Copernicus (Curley, 1978, p. 2). Curley (1978) described that the work Descartes had planned to publish first was neither *Method* nor *Meditations* and would have been a scientific treatise adding to this upheaval. Religious climate intervened.

Were it not for the Inquisition, the first work Descartes published would have been a critique of scholastic physics, *Le Monde*. He was at work on this in the early 1630’s, and was very near publishing when he learned that Galileo had been condemned for holding that the earth moves. The same doctrine was integral to Descartes’ own treatise (Curley, 1978, p. 3).

Thwarted in his effort to engage in the arena of pure science, Descartes published *Method*. He then addressed *Meditations* “to those most wise and distinguished men, the Deans and Doctors of the Faculty of the Sacred Theology of Paris” (Descartes, 1998, p. 47).

In *Method*, Descartes laid the ground-work for his thesis. He planned “never to accept anything as true… and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to call it in doubt” (Descartes, 1998, p. 11). This skepticism was echoed in *Meditations*:

I will not need to show that all my opinions are false, which is perhaps something I could never accomplish. But reason now persuades me that I should withhold my assent no less carefully from opinions that are not completely certain and indubitable than I would from those that are patently false. For this reason, it will suffice for the rejection of all these opinions, if I find in each of them some reason for doubt (Descartes, 1998, p. 59).

To build his system, Descartes had to loosen the hold of doubt and establish indubitable axioms from which he would deduct further conclusions. In the Second Meditation, he posited the first of these: “I am a true thing and am truly existing; but what kind of thing? I have said it already: a thinking thing” (Descartes, 1998, p. 65). Having found a foothold, Descartes proceeded in Meditation Three to prove the existence of God. He employed the argument that since he was able to think of God, God existed. He concluded “it necessarily follows that I am not alone in the world, but that something else, which is the cause of this idea, also exists” (Descartes, 1998, p. 74). The existence of God was crucial to Descartes’s thesis. He returned to this theme in Meditation Five. He maintained that “once I perceived there is a God, and also understood at the same time that everything depends on him, and that he is not a deceiver, I then concluded that everything that I clearly and distinctly perceive is necessarily true” (Descartes, 1998, p 91). Descartes closed Meditation Five with these words:

And thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of every science depends exclusively upon the knowledge of the true God…now it is possible for me to achieve full and certain knowledge about countless things, both about God and other intellectual matters, as well as about the entirety of the corporeal nature which is the object of pure mathematics (Descartes, 1998, p. 92).

Descartes was satisfied in *Meditations* that he had proved the existence of God. From this point, he believed that he had gone on to prove objective reality, quieting the skepticism that had haunted him in the First Meditation.

Descartes solicited comments from his colleagues, circulating a manuscript of *Meditations.* Antoine Arnauld, a doctoral candidate at the University of Paris was among those who offered objections (Descartes, et al., pp. 56-57). Arnauld argued that Descartes‘s reasoning for the existence of God was circular. He wrote:

My only remaining concern is whether the author does not commit a vicious circle, when he says that we have no other basis on which to establish that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true, than that God exists. But we can be certain that God exists only because we clearly and evidently perceive this fact. Therefore, before we are certain that God exists; we ought to be certain that whatever we clearly and evidently perceive is true (Descartes, et al., p. 73).

Descartes had no firm response to Arnauld’s objection. He referred Arnauld to his reply to the second set of objections. There he had reiterated much of what he had stated in *Meditations* about God’s existence and the distinction of mind and body (Descartes, et al., p. 79 & p. 62).

Descartes initiated his program with systematic doubt. He believed that he could not trust his reasoning or perceptions. He offered the Dream Argument and the possibility of a deceiving God as proof. Arnauld took one tactic in criticizing the Cartesian argument. It was the most common objection. This paper will deal with that objection shortly in a treatment of the 20th century discussion of the Cartesian Circle. To begin in the modern period, Spinoza took another approach. According to Bolton (1985) “Spinoza objects that Descartes takes his premises to be true instead of the existence of God, itself” (p. 381). Among these premises was the notion that God was a deceiver. For Spinoza (1998), “the mind has ideas from which it perceives itself, its own body and external bodies as actually existing, and so it has an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God” (p. 168). Bolton (1985) noted that “Spinoza denies the need to overcome Cartesian doubt. He [Descartes] is holding something back when he [Descartes] concedes (nearly) unrestricted force to the skeptical reasoning” (p. 386). Spinoza’s non-Cartesian argument for the existence of God worked because Spinoza regarded God and the world as self-evident in the same manner as mathematical certainty (Bolton, 1985, p. 388). For Spinoza “some things are immediately evident. They are known, but they have not been deduced from the fact that they are known” (Bolton, 1985, p. 388). For Spinoza (1998) “as soon as anyone knows something, by that very fact, he knows that he knows” (p. 166). On the basis of this reasoning it was evident that God existed and what was evident was true.

Other modern philosophers objected to Cartesian method. John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* dismissed Cartesian skepticism. He believed the human desire to know needed to be tempered:

Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct. If we can find out those measures by which a rational creature put in that state in which man is in the world, may and ought to govern his opinions and actions depending thereon, we need not be troubled that some other things escape our knowledge (Locke, 1998, p. 271).

For Locke the study of philosophy should be practical and guided by reliance on the senses. He wrote “if anyone pretends to be so skeptical as to deny his own existence…let him for me enjoy his beloved happiness of being nothing until hunger or some other pain, convinces him of the contrary” (Locke, 1998, p.359).

 After Locke, David Hume criticized academic philosophy and Cartesian skepticism. In *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* he wrote:

These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools, where it is indeed difficult if not impossible to refute them. But as soon as they leave the shade and by the presence of real objects which actuate our passions and sentiments are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke and leave the most determined skeptic in the same condition as other mortals (Hume, 1998, p. 73).

In summary, Arnauld objected that Descartes had posited the existence of God in order to prove the existence of God. Arnauld wished for a better argument from Descartes. Spinoza objected that the existence of God required no proof. Spinoza held God to be self-evident. Locke and Hume argued from empiricist grounds. They favored common-sense approaches that focused on probability rather than certainty.

In the 20th century, James Van Cleve (1979) admitted that “the problem of the Cartesian Circle is sometimes treated as though it were merely an exercise for scholars” (p. 55). The issue was as described by Arnauld and represented symbolically as:

 *p* iff *q* and *q* iff *p*,

With *p* being “I can know (be certain that whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true”

And *q* being “I know (am certain) that God exists and is not a deceiver” (Van Cleve, 1979, p. 55).

The form of this argument is logical modus ponens and the statement p iff *q* and *q* iff *p* is true if *p* is true and *q* is true. The statement is also true if *p* is false and *q* is false. The statement is false if *p* is false and *q* is true or *p* is true and *q* is false. Given these definitions Van Cleve (1979) concluded “I can never be certain of either *p* or *q*” (p. 55). Van Cleve described several solutions for the Cartesian predicament. Once of these was the notion that God’s existence can be proved by “psychological certainty.” According to this argument, “in the beginning clear and distinct perceptions are only psychologically certain. But as soon as we have used them to prove that God exists and is no deceiver, they become metaphysically certain” (Van Cleve, 1979, p.59). Van Cleve advanced a restatement of the Cartesian argument:

(A) For all *P*, if I clearly and distinctly perceive that *P*, then I am certain that *P*.

(B) I am certain that (for all *P*, if I clearly and distinctly perceive that *P*, then *P*) (Van Cleve, 1979, p. 66).

He maintained “not only is it the best solution for Descartes, but it also has applications to contemporary epistemology” where “there is a movement away from foundationalist theories of justification toward coherentist theories” (Van Cleve, 1979, p. 74).

Descartes was a foundationalist. His goal as such was to posit indubitable axioms from which to deduce his philosophy and all of science (Van Cleve, 1979, p. 74). The key to the foundational approach was that its claims and propositions must be justified. The coherentist position held that the test of any proposition in an epistemic system was its agreement with other propositions in the system. Coherentist theory did not require that the propositions in the system be justified, only that the propositions in the system be consistent with each other (Blackburn, 2008, p. 65). Van Cleve believed that his treatment of the Cartesian Circle addressed this epistemic question. As a result, he maintained that his discussion of “escape routes” allowed by Descartes to avoid the circle was more than academic (Van Cleve, 1979, p. 76).

In his discussion of the Cartesian Circle, Douglas Odegard (1984) offered another solution for Descartes’s predicament:

We need simply offer the argument as reasonable, not as certain. Moreover, although in claiming such knowledge, we are not claiming perfect knowledge, we are still making a controversial claim. We are claiming that there never was and never will be any good reason for doubt. Hence we are committed to claiming that what we know to be the case must be the case. This is something that many sceptics are unwilling to do (p. 171).

Odegard believed his skeptic readers would not be satisfied with this argument. He continued, “of course, it would be irrational to settle for probabilistic certainty claims if we could realistically claim more. It would be like trying to find out which horse won last year’s Kentucky Derby by examining the pre-race odds instead of reading the sports pages. But in fact nothing more is available” (Odegard, 1984, p. 171). Odegard’s analysis recalled modern arguments that used probability instead of certainty to solve the skeptic dilemma.

Ultimately Philosophical Modernity in general and Cartesian Foundationalism in particular failed. At fault was an underlying flaw in their basic structures. As James Mensch (1996) explained:

The collapse of modernity is the collapse of its attempt to supply a replacement for the ideas or forms of ancient philosophy. It is the exhaustion of its central project, which is to reestablish normativity through an appeal to subjectivity. The attempt to explain the world in terms of subjective performances undermines itself. A sign of this is that each explanation leaves something out. There is a gap in its reasoning. A kind of “then the miracle occurs”—a deus ex machine—seems to be needed to reach the required conclusions…modernity’s failure is not that of individual philosophers, not a matter of individuals having failed to get their arguments right. It is the failure of the premise they all share: that of the priority of knowing over being, that is, of the epistemological paradigm itself. (p. 41).

The solution offered in the post-modern era was to restructure the relationship between mind and world.

John McDowell accepted the challenge of reframing the mind-world relationship. “The Cartesian picture,” he believed, placed “subjectivity’s very possession of an objective environment in question” (McDowell, 1998, p. 237). According to McDowell in *Meditations* Descartes had gone on an odyssey of mind. He denied the world only to prove its existence by proving the existence of God. Descartes’s skepticism was complete and unique. Descartes concluded that “we know nothing” because “we are fallible about the external world” (McDowell, 1998, p. 239). However McDowell saw no immediate successor to the Cartesian view. He wrote:

Modern analytical philosophy has to some extent lost the Cartesian divide as a genuine risk for our conception of ourselves. But I suspect the reasons for this are at least partially superficial. It is true that we have epistemologies whose drift is not toward skepticism. But these can seem to yield a stable picture of our cognitive grasp only if the Cartesian divide is genuinely overcome; and modern fallibilist epistemologies typically do not embody any clear account of how that is to be done, but rather reflect a (perfectly intelligible) refusal to persist in a task that has become plainly hopeless to bother with. (McDowell, 1998, p. 253).

McDowell found no fit challenges to the Cartesian paradigm. He went on a quest of his own. The result was McDowell’s *Mind and World*. In *Mind and World*[[1]](#footnote-1), McDowell expressed an empirical basis for his thought. For McDowell unfettered subjectivity, even empirical subjectivity was suspect, even dangerous. In the first lecture of *Mind and World* he said:

If our freedom in empirical thinking is total, in particular if it is not constrained from outside the conceptual sphere, that can seem to threaten the very possibility that judgements of experience might be grounded in a way that relates them to a reality external to thought. And surely there must be such grounding if experience is to be a source of knowledge, and more generally, if the bearing of empirical judgements on reality is to be intelligibly in place in our picture at all. The more we play up the connection between reason and freedom, the more we risk losing our grip on how exercise of concepts can constitute warranted judgements about the world. What we wanted to conceive as exercises of concepts threaten to degenerate into moves in a self-contained game. And that deprives us of the very idea that they are exercises of concepts. Suiting empirical beliefs to the reasons for them is not a self-contained game. (McDowell, 1994, p. 5).

McDowell discussed Wittgenstein’s philosophy in his second lecture. He summarized Wittgenstein’s view with the remark “when one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* the case. So since the world is everything that is the case…there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world” (McDowell, 1994, p. 27). However, in his own work Wittgenstein distinguished between perception and existence. He maintained “the question of the reality of sense data comes first with the idea of our senses *cheating* us…we never see the red thing: we only get pictures which are more or less correct……the picture is the only thing that is real, nothing else exists” (Wittgenstein, 1993, pp.313-314). This notion of existence did not satisfy McDowell because it failed to demonstrate the independence of reality. McDowell described what he desired. He said “what we need is a constraint from outside thinking and judging…the constraint does not need to be from outside *thinkable contents*…the constraint comes from outside thinking, but not outside what is *thinkable*” (McDowell, 1994, p. 27). The need to acknowledge and negotiate this constraint was a human responsibility. According to McDowell (1994):

Ensuring that our empirical concepts and conceptions pass muster is ongoing and arduous work for the understanding. It requires patience and something like humility. There is no guarantee that the world is completely within the reach of a system of concepts and conceptions as it stands at some particular moment in its historical development. Exactly not; that is why the obligation to reflect is perpetual (p. 43).

McDowell believed that the freedom to conceptualize entailed an obligation to seek out the world. Without the world, thought was senseless. McDowell (1994) remarked “the idea of spontaneity is an idea of freedom, and that threatens to make what is meant by empirical thinking degenerate…into a frictionless spinning in a void” (p. 67). McDowell stressed this theme repeatedly and each of his six lectures echoed that the mind requiring the world. In Lecture V, he remarked, “the continuing referent of the ‘I’ in ‘I think’ is…something whose career is a substantial continuity in the objective world” (McDowell, 1994, p. 102).

McDowell throughout his first five lectures stated that meaningful thought required the world. He had yet to assure his listeners that the world existed. In his first lecture, he remarked, “in experience, one takes in, for instance sees, that things are thus and so” (McDowell, 1994, p. 9). “Of course”, continued McDowell (1994), “one can be misled into supposing that one takes in that things are thus and so when things are not thus and so” (p. 9). Doubt and anxiety about the factual existence of mind’s perceived notion of the world needed to be negotiated. McDowell promised to return to take up this topic in his last lecture.

In Lecture VI he treated the problem of skepticism:

A determined sceptic…can always insist on exploiting fallibility to give bite to the question how we know the present case is one of the non-misleading ones… If the idea is intelligible, the sceptical questions lack a kind of urgency that is essential to their troubling us, an urgency that derives from their seeming to point up an unnerving fact: that however good a subject’s cognitive position is, it cannot constitute her having a state of affairs directly manifest to her. There is no such fact. The aim here is not to answer sceptical questions, but to begin to see how it might be intelligibly respectable to ignore them, to treat them as unreal, in the way that common sense has always wanted to (McDowell, 1994, p. 113).

McDowell’s reasoning recalled the common-sense of Locke and Hume.

This paper has treated the topic of Cartesian philosophy and focused on Descartes’s skepticism. It has credited Descartes with a revolutionary impact on the philosophy of his day. The discussion has shown that early in the 17th century the Catholic Church held sway over much of what could be discussed or published without reprisal. Descartes was unable to disseminate so bold a statement as he might have been able to make a century later. John Locke and David Hume were able to publicly profess and publish ideas that Descartes could not have dared.

The Cartesian Circle plagued Descartes’s work. While academic philosophers in the latter 20th century sought to exculpate Descartes from his predicament, other post-modernists strove to frame and disseminate philosophies of their own. A paradigm shift was realized.

Notwithstanding his failings, Descartes was able to synthesize the ideas of an age explosive with possibilities. Humanism became the new standard by which to judge the relevance of philosophical endeavors. In the post-modern period, John McDowell continued in this tradition. His discursive works synthesized the ideas of his peers and his manner was common-sense. Yet he offered new insights. He attempted to allay anxiety about skeptical concerns. He stressed responsibility, freedom, receptivity and action. Regardless of criticism and despite a shift in the precise content of the arguments, the work begun by Descartes continued in the post-modern age.

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(Eds.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

1. In 1991, John McDowell delivered the John Locke Lectures at Oxford. *Mind and World* was a publication of those lectures. While McDowell edited the lectures for ease in reading, he preserved the lecture order and taken as a whole, *Mind and World* was an unfolding of McDowell’s philosophy. The style was discursive, McDowell remarked on the works and ideas of other philosophers, primarily post-modern, with some commentary on work from the modern period. He included a treatment of Descartes. *Mind and World* described the relationship subjectivity and objectivity maintained in the post-modern era. McDowell was strongly influenced by Kant. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)