

## **Wittgenstein and Descartes on Consciousness**

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**ABSTRACT** : *The concept of consciousness has been discussed by a number of philosophers in the history of philosophy but it still needs more detailed interpretations. Philosophy has never been stable and as time passes philosophical problems arises with new directions of study. Descartes, in his Meditations, proved that his essence is thinking or consciousness and discussed the nature of mind, its relation to material body and consciousness without the body etc. Wittgenstein doesn't regard consciousness to be the essence of mind or mental phenomena. He criticizes the Cartesian theory of consciousness, which regards consciousness to be a private inner essence. The aim of this paper is to analyze and compare the views of both the philosophers about the nature of consciousness.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Consciousness, Criticism, Essence, Descartes, Wittgenstein*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

. In the history of philosophy, the problem of mind or soul is regarded as one of the vital problems, which attracted philosophers a good deal. Man as an intellectual being; always tries to inquire into his own mind. It is a bare fact that we have a mind and it is accepted by every person. Although “mind” is an ambiguous term no body would accept that he has no mind, but it does not mean that he knows the meaning of it or he is pointing out something to be his mind. The mind is perhaps the deepest mystery, the most profound paradox of all existence. Philosophers from the past up to this highly developed scientific era have also been talking about mind and a branch of philosophy has been formed in the name as “The Philosophy of Mind”. Consciousness is the vital element of the philosophy of mind. The problem of consciousness is one of the fundamental problems of humanity. Consciousness reveals the nature of man and his inherent divine nature. As D. C. Dennet observes, “The most important feature of mind, the ‘phenomenon’ that seems more than any other to be quintessentially ‘mental’ and non-physical, is consciousness. Here we will try to disclose the concept of consciousness as conceived in Descartes’ philosophy and that of Wittgenstein.

### **II. DESCARTES’ VIEWS ON CONSCIOUSNESS**

Rene Descartes, who is regarded as the father of modern philosophy, has interpreted the problem of mind and consciousness. He wanted to establish unity and certainty in philosophy and applied the method of doubt to attain a single certain truth from which all philosophical knowledge could be deduced. He doubted everything but at last found that everything could be doubted but the denier remains. The whole content of consciousness is destroyed; but consciousness itself, the doubting activity, the being of the thinker is indestructible. He had discovered consciousness as the essence of mind and the mind to be a separate entity which is distinct from the body. Descartes uses the word “thinking” to mean “being conscious” and hence ‘thought’ for him is nothing other than consciousness. It is not awareness of animals, nor a state of simple awareness. Consciousness is self sufficient. Consciousness is entirely immanent and capable of living its life independently of the body. Descartes clearly shows that only consciousness or thinking is certain. Since he is primarily conscious of his own consciousness, the knowledge of the subject is nothing else than the knowledge of consciousness. According to Descartes, consciousness or thinking is his essence for as long as he thinks, and only when he thinks, it is certain that he exists. We are aware of every thought we have. Being aware of myself would be a particular example of thinking. Therefore, if I am aware of myself I am aware of thinking. It means that in self-consciousness we are conscious of being conscious. The term “Consciousness” is equal to thought in Descartes. “By the term thought I understand all those things which, we being conscious occur in us, in so far as the consciousness of them is in us. So not only understanding, willing and imagining, but also sensing, are the same thing here as thinking (AT-VII-1, 7-8, 1X-28; HR – 1, 122).” Descartes’ definition of the term ‘thought’ is clear in his “Demonstration” in geometrical fashion where he says, “Thought is a word that covers everything that exists in us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it. Thus all the operations of will, intellect, imagination, and of the senses are thoughts.

But I have added immediately, for the purpose of excluding that which is a consequence of our thought; for example, voluntary movement, which, though indeed depend on thought as on a casual principle, is yet itself not thought.” The entity which has consciousness is the subject of consciousness. For Descartes, the mind is the subject of consciousness or thinking, for the mind is a thinking thing. When the mind is regarded as the subject of thinking or consciousness, here the thinking includes all phenomena that can be called the mental. Being the subject of consciousness the mind is distinct from the body. It is distinct as an un-extended and conscious thing. Mind or consciousness can survive after the destruction of the physical body. Hence, the mind or soul is immortal. Descartes believed that mind is having consciousness and it is diverse from the body and its nature shows that it can exist even without the body. Although mind or consciousness is different from the body, yet it is closely united with it. Mind sits in the pineal gland of the brain and acts upon the body. There is an interaction between mind and the body. Actually, Descartes left little to discuss about the human intellect and reason. What makes human beings superior than that of other creatures of the world is his thinking or reasoning or consciousness. Descartes was aware of the fact that thinking thing or the mind is the substance which is the only thing having consciousness and it can be proved by the method of doubt. Hence it is clear and distinct that the existence of the thinking mind is certain and this consciousness is the essence of mind which is very different from animal awareness.

### **III. WITTGENSTEIN’S VIEW**

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s views on consciousness and mind are depicted in his famous work Philosophical Investigations. Actually, he has not advocated any theory of consciousness but has carefully examined the uses of words for describing mental phenomena. For him, consciousness is not the essence of mind or mental phenomena. There is nothing in common underlying mental phenomena. His concept of family resemblance can be applied to it. In case of mental phenomena we have a vast range of phenomena overlapping in various ways without having any one essence in common. We may say that we have here a "family" of items in which the members bear a "family resemblance". It is just like the members of a family who may all resemble one another, even though they have no one feature (e.g., the shape of the nose) in common. All conscious processes resemble to one another but nothing in common which is to be called consciousness.

Wittgenstein rejects the first person account of consciousness, which led to give a private ostensive definition of consciousness. He argued that if one holds that the initial application of expressions involving consciousness is to one-self, if one learns the meanings of these expressions by a private ostensive definition, then insoluble difficulties arise concerning the application of such expressions to others. Here Wittgenstein's beetle-in-box objection can be raised against privacy of conscious acts. As he says, "Suppose everyone had a box with something in it, we call it a "beetle". No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. But suppose the word "beetle" had a use in these people's language? If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language game at all; not even as a something; for the box might even be empty. No one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever is."

### **IV. WITTGENSTEIN’S CRITICISM**

Wittgenstein criticizes the Cartesian theory of consciousness, which regards consciousness to be a private inner essence. For him, the “paradox” of the Cartesian theory of consciousness is that by giving pre-eminence to the private sensation, the theory eliminates sensations (PI, 304). His "beetle-in-the-box" passage displays this self-defeating character of the Cartesian position. Wittgenstein denies the truth of a private, inner account of consciousness. But he did not want to deny the obvious truth that people have a 'private' mental life. It is in the sense that they have, for example, thoughts they do not utter and pains they do not show. He did not try to analyze away this truth in a neo-behaviorist fashion. Wittgenstein wanted to deny the possibility of giving them a private sense e.g., of giving sense to the word "pain" by just attending to one's own pain - experiences, a performance that would be private and uncheckable. He also rejects the view that such relations as that between a pain and its symptoms or a thought and the words expressing it have nothing to do with our concept of pain or thought and are just established inductively. Wittgenstein, like Hume rejects the idea that the self or subject is an entity, which is the subject of consciousness. He also denies that our relation to our mental states is one of possession or ownership. Wittgenstein attacks the idea of the self as an entity. In his reputed work *Tractatus* he says that there is no such thing as the thinking, presenting subject. If I wrote a book, 'The world as I found it', I should have there in to report my body and say which members obey my will and which do not, etc. This then would be a method of isolating the subject or rather of showing that in an important sense there is no subject: that is to say, of it alone in this book mention not be made.” (5.631/WR25)

Wittgenstein mounted one of the most effective attacks against the idea that life consists of two parts: a mental part and a physical part. On the other hand, he did not even accept behaviorism or materialism. He is not denying mental phenomena. For him, there is a significant asymmetry between first and third personal relations to the mental. When I attribute mental states to other people, I do so on the basis of behavioral criteria. But I do not discover my own mental states by considering evidence or applying criteria. I neither observe the contents of my mind, nor infer what they are. We cannot have proper knowledge of our own mental states. In Wittgenstein's concept of consciousness and mental processes we observe some elements of logical behaviourism. Wittgenstein seems to say that mental processes are of the sensory kind like sense-impressions, sensation of pain etc. he denies the non-sensory intellectual kind of mental processes. For him, many so-called psychological statements assert not only the occurrence of mental processes, but also something about overt behaviour. He maintains that there must be observable, behaviouristic "criteria" for the application of psychological concepts. If we remove the physical behaviour from an action nothing remains to be called mental or intentional. As he writes: "And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?" Wittgenstein does not find any difference between a physical movement of my arm and my intentional action of moving my arm. He wants to make clear the place of the inner in the outer. What we can utter and share and convey certainly exists and is there to be seen: what we cannot, does not and is not. Ludwig Wittgenstein's account of consciousness shows that he has not tried to advocate a theory of consciousness but carefully examined the uses of the words for describing mental process. For him, if we use these words according to their grammar no problems arise and "philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday".

We observe similarities between Descartes' concept of consciousness and that of Wittgenstein's. Wittgenstein agrees with Descartes in regarding consciousness and mind as the central feature of the world. It is because human language and actions are enormously important to our understanding of the world with which we are concerned. Both of them are of the opinion that we cannot ascribe consciousness to animal automata and to other physical things. Consciousness can be ascribed only to human beings who are capable of using language-game (P.I., Sect-418). Both Wittgenstein and Descartes maintain that we must not confuse mental processes with physical processes. For, mental processes have their own logic. Moreover, they accept that human mind makes a difference to the world. The reality of mind is established in cogito-ergo-sum and Wittgenstein accepts that mind is real though not a mental entity. He believes that mental states are logically connected with the behaviour of human beings and that is true of all mental predicates.

## **V. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DESCARTES AND WITTGENSTEIN**

In spite of the similarities we have noticed there are vast differences between Descartes' concept of consciousness and Wittgenstein's analysis. The following points are noteworthy:

- [1] Wittgenstein differs from Descartes while denying mind as a spiritual substance or entity. For him, "mind or self is not a substance, as a substance it is something non-changing and simple".
- [2] Mind stands for a set of activities rather than for a mental entity. He guarantees metaphysical certainty to the existence of the world and also to that of the mind in the sense that both thought and language are part of the world.
- [3] Descartes' concept of consciousness seems to be the first-person account which led to give a private ostensive definition of consciousness. While Wittgenstein rejects such an account by his beetle-in-the-box argument. For him, consciousness is logically connected with the behaviour of human beings.
- [4] According to Descartes, consciousness or thinking is the essence or nature of human mind. But Wittgenstein maintains that mind is not the seat of mental processes and consciousness is not the innate nature of mind. For him, it is wrong to make thought an inner process in the invisible and subjective realm of the mind as distinguished from the body of man.
- [5] Wittgenstein's approach to the problem of consciousness is logical and metaphysical while Descartes' approach is epistemological and metaphysical. Descartes regards the mind as the knower, the subject of conscious activities whereas in Wittgenstein's logical behaviourism the mind, the subject "I" is only the logical agent involved in the language game.
- [6] Moreover, Descartes finds differences between mind and body. On the other hand, Wittgenstein goes against the idea that life consists of two parts: a mental part and a physical part.
- [7] For Descartes mind is inner, private and therefore, something mystical whereas for Wittgenstein there is nothing mystical about mind. It is out there in the sense that to have mind consists in taking part in a language game involving mental terms and to understand them.
- [8] We observe differences between Descartes' view and that of Wittgenstein so far as the statement "I am in pain" or "I have a pain" is concerned. According to Descartes, when I say "I am in pain" or "I have a pain" here pain is not anything beyond our mind (Principle-LXVII).

[9] For Descartes the statement 'I am in pain' means I am having a mental state which is private to me and it is a state of which I am directly conscious. Only I can know that 'I am in pain'. The statement 'I am in pain' is a report of a private mental state. This statement names a private experience which which alone can be known by the person who makes the statement. On the other hand, Wittgenstein holds that 'I am in pain' is not a state of report of a private experience. 'I am in pain' is not a statement but it is a pain behaviour. It replaces the natural expression of pain like crying, moaning etc. According to Wittgenstein, these natural expressions of pain are very much necessary for learning and understanding the meaning of the sensation word 'pain'. A child hurts himself and cries and the adult asks him whether it is paining and consoles him that after sometime it will be alright. In this way the child learn to use the sensation word pain and pain behaviour. Thus for Wittgenstein, 'I am in pain' is not a statement of report of a private mental state but it is pain behaviour. For Descartes, 'I know I am in pain' is a meaningful statement but for Wittgenstein, 'I know I am in pain' is meaningless. Wittgenstein holds that this statement 'I know I am in pain' would make sense if I can contrast this statement with 'I rather think that I am in pain' or 'I doubt that I am in pain'. Since I can never say that 'I doubt I am in pain' or 'I strongly believe I am in pain' therefore, I cannot also say that I know that I am in pain. But the statement 'I know he is in pain' is meaningful, because I can also say sometimes that 'I doubt he is in pain'.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Wittgenstein's concept of consciousness seems to be an attempt to dissolve the problem of consciousness. For him, the problem of consciousness and body arises out of conceptual confusions. If proper attention to the way in which we use mental and physical terms in ordinary language will relieve us of the vexatious problem. Here Wittgenstein's approach is therapeutic rather than constructive. He aims to exorcise philosophical confusions rather than to build new theories about ourselves. But such an approach can be appropriate or not, that is difficult to say. It is a fact that the nature of consciousness is complex but it is a genuine problem of philosophy. Human mind cannot rest idly without speculation by simply dissolving the philosophical problems as suggested by Wittgenstein. A philosopher has to enquire the mental concepts until the mystery of the mind is disclosed. It is observed that Descartes' concept of consciousness as reflective thought which forms the essence of mind played an important role in the history of the philosophy of mind. His concept of consciousness is different from other western and Indian philosophers. Thus, as a whole, all these discussions on the concept of consciousness show the contemporary relevance of Descartes not because Descartes offers the only solution to the problem of consciousness but because he opens up the issue in a fundamentally peculiar manner in as much as it draws attention of the philosophers of the contemporary world. According to William G. Lycan, "Cartesian first-person perspective dominated the philosophy of mind, as well as metaphysics and epistemology generally, from the seventeenth century through the first-half of our own."

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