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A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF RENE DESCARTES' DREAMS

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Abstract

This work deals on Rene Descartes' approach to change the phase of Western Philosophy through the three dreams he had on the night of 10th November, 1619. He was 23 years old when he had the three dreams on ghost, a church, and a table with a dictionary and a book of poems on the table. Dream at times poses some hydra headed thought. This research work identified some problems. How can we be sure that Descartes was in a dream and not hallucination? How are we sure that Descartes was not having health changes which can affect his dreams? Descartes finds it difficult to give adequate interpretation of his dreams. This research adopted method of analysis. Our findings are; one ought not to build his edifies of knowledge and reality from the outcome of dream. Dream at times is full of apparent illusion and need not to be trusted the way the dream appeared. This work recommenced the need for proper examination and to fetch a credible person endowed with interpretation and understanding of dream and to give a verdict judgment on it.

Keywords: Rene Descartes, Western Philosophy, Cartesian Dreams, Analytical Approach.

1.0 Introduction

I doubt if anyone can keep accurate record of the time you transits from consciousness to sleep. No one knows he is dreaming until you wake-up to realize that it was all dream. Dreams at times appear to be real. No one can tell himself i am dreaming when you are in a dream. Dream is a state of unconsciousness. Man is not responsible for the actions he take while dreaming. Dream is a mode of communication or revealed knowledge between divinity and humanity. It comes in diverse form. Hence, Godfrey Ozumba and Mike Ukah (2012: 13) noted;

> His scepticism was not the same with that of the sceptics who doubt in order to remain in doubt. Descartes scepticism was a systematic one who aimed at helping him to find an absolutely certain starting point...of knowledge.

Rene Descartes brought a paradigm shift in philosophy by expanding dreams in a philosophical dimension. He was dissatisfied with the nature of things in philosophical enquiry. He saw philosophy as founded on a clay soil which will yield a sterile fruit. He then

made up his mind to fight doggedly on how to restructure the foundation of philosophy on a rocky and assured foundation which the dreams argument is one of his high profile project to be executed.

Descartes conceived a very ambitious plan of rebuilding the whole structure of human knowledge after the pattern of mathematics. Despite his education in one of the best schools in Europe, he was said to have been embarrassed with many doubt and errors. His mission was to establish an ideal system of thought, in which the mind will move from one principle of truth to another truth in a connecting manner without having doubt on any existing principle.

Dream been an unconscious human experience which appears to be real until the point of awakening. Dream is considers to be a state of unconsciousness in which divinity reveals some hidden knowledge of either past, present or future event that may be of positive or negative effect in the life of the dreamer or someone else. However, Zhuangzi paradox (1996) noted:

> He who dreams of drinking wine may weep when morning comes; he who dreams of weeping may in the morning go off to hunt. While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. Only after he wakes does he know it was a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream….

Dream can be defined as a mental activity whereby the mind generates abstract world that appears to be real. Dream does not come in a straightforward way, sometimes it appears to be parallel to reality of things in nature. According to Owen Flanagan (2000) there are four major philosophical questions concerning dream: "How can I be sure I am not always dreaming? Can I be immoral in dream? Are dreams conscious experiences that occur during sleep? Does dreaming have an evolutionary foundation? "Rene Descartes raised an objective question that triggered skeptical approach that flows from thinking upon thinking towards reasoning upon reasoning on the reality of the existence of the external world. He asked himself: *How am I sure am not always dreaming, or even dreaming right now?*

The pertinent questions that require critical reasoning are as follows; is dreaming part and parcel of a complete cycle of sleeping? Why is it that dream only take place when man is unconscious? Can any mortal be able to calculate the time he transmigrates from been awake into sleep? Can one keep the time he enters into dreaming? Was there any prior knowledge to inform the cognitive faculty or to seek the consent of the mind before the dream engulf him? Is dream a conscious or unconscious experience? Is dream an act of man or human act? Do animals dream? Can we then say that dream is the report of the minutes of the meeting between the brain, soul and the celestial body excluding man's consciousness from active participation? One thing we have to bear in mind is that the dreamer is not in control of whatever that transpires in a dream. It comes suddenly and overwhelms someone that is sleeping. Thus, Chogyal N. Norbu comments: "In a real sense, all the visions that we see in our lifetime are like a big dream…."

All these and many others may have led the ancient philosophers to wonder whether the reality of the World we find ourselves is not a dream in perpetuity. Plato and Aristotle did

some work on dream but Rene Descartes was the modern philosopher that expand and used dream to establish his project of inquiry into the nature of dream.

Thus, Mazzoni, G. A. L and Loftus, E. F. (1996: 442-462) noted:

> Those who argue that the world is not simulated must concede that the mind-at least the sleeping mind-is not itself an entirely reliable mechanism for attempting to differentiate reality from illusion.

Nevertheless, on a very memorable night of November 10, 1619, Descartes had three dreams which revealed to him the necessity to construct the system of true knowledge upon the power of human mind alone, it means giving philosophy a fresh start. Descartes decided to do away with all the previous philosophers' idea. He began his philosophical inquiry by doubting all existing thing without excluding his own existence. However, his own was not an absolute doubt or skepticism but a systematic doubt which has a purpose. His act of doubting led to the confirmation of his own existence and that of God. He then determined to discover the basis of intellectual certainty from his own human reason. Hence, (Brooke, N. M & Kenneth, B, 2008: 108) notes;

> Two unconnected incidents in Descartes' life are always mentioned in philosophy texts. One is that the insight that underlay his philosophy came to him in dreams after he had spent a winter day relaxing in a well-heated room while in the army in Bavaria. The other is that he accepted an invitation, with some reluctance, to tutor Queen Christina of Sweden in 1649. This was a big mistake, for the cold weather and early hour of his duties literally killed him.

His dream became real when he established a sound method for philosophical and scientific enquires. He desired to establish truth claims without merely presupposing such propositions to be certain or self-evident. He posited that the certainty of the existence of God should have at least the same level of certainty as the truth of mathematics. The highest point of certainty is the existence of God. In his meditations, Descartes concludes that the existence of God is more certain than that of mathematics:*"…apart from God, there is nothing else of which I am capable of thinking such that existence belongs to its essence (107).*

Conceptualization of Key Concepts

1.1 **Analysis:** Analysis is one of the philosophical method of research that seek to apply simple word or language to convey vital message for a better understanding It has to do with breaking down of ambiguous word into simple parts for easy assimilation. It is a school of thought that approach philosophical issues through linguistic method. Analytic method is a project of inquiry that draws out conspicuously the latent meaning of words for the sake of clarity.

1.2 **Dream:** The word dream comes from Proto-West Germanic word "draum", in Dutch "droom" in the mid 13th century. In English, it simply means joy, mirth or music. , A dream can be defined as a collection of images, emotions and sounds which the mind experiences while sleeping. Dream is a story that comes with images of different object created by the power of the mind.

1.3 Philosophy: The word philosophy comes from two Greek words; namely, 'philo' which means love of and 'sophia' which means wisdom. Literally put, it means "love of wisdom".

1.4 Rene Descartes: He was born on 31st March, 1596. He is one of the seventeenth Century continental rationalist's philosopher. He was also a scientist and a mathematician. A philosopher with difference in method of approach to philosophical problems, with a mission to demolish the traditional view of philosophy founded on external objects in the universe. For him, one has to know himself first before knowing the external objects out there. He brought a paradigm shift in philosophy by the use of mathematical method in solving a philosophical problem. Descartes' was crowned the father of Modern Western Philosophy. He died of cold "Pneumonia "on 11th Feb. 1650 at the age of 54.

2.1 Review on Dream

Philosophers have delved into researches on how to distinguish dreams from reality. Some scholars came up with some critics against the view of Descartes in his dream which he stated that he felt some pains when he was in front of fire while some affirmed his postulates. John Locke, an empiricist philosopher raised an objection in his argument that in dream, one cannot feel the sense of pain as described by Descartes.

3.1 Understanding Cartesian Dream

The concept of Descartes' dream comes in form of argument to dispute the tenaciously held belief that the senses can provide trusted and certain reality of knowledge of things in existence. Prior to this era, knowledge gotten from the sense perception is been accused of apparent illusion. It comes in form of debate to disprove the fact that knowledge from the senses are not to be trusted.

The truth is that while dreaming, no one recognizes he is in a dream. One may be in a dream and will see himself inside another dream. At the point of consciousness the person will discover that it was just a dream he is not aware of before embarking on it.

3.2 The Dream Argument

The dream argument happens to be one of the vital issues in Descartes project of skeptical hypotheses. Descartes in his Meditations on First Philosophy, liken our idea of this world to that of a dream experience. For in dream, everything appears to be real. At the time we wake up, we find out that all our activities were not as real as we presumed it to be. What if the life we experience, our daily endeavor, the external world we virtualize, were to be a long dream. Since in dream, human being believes his action to be real until the time he wakes up into consciousness.

There are no sufficient grounds to differentiate dream experience from awaken experience. For instance, as i sit down on a chair with a study book in front of me. Just as much evidence exists to indicate that my act of sitting and reading is real, as there is evidence to demonstrate the opposite. All that happens in dream appears real until we wake up from sleep and regain consciousness. Descartes concedes that we live in a world that can create such ideas as the dream.

3.3 The Evil Genius

As the senses deceives us at time, by presenting an illusion to make fool of man to belief as clear evident truth. In a similar way, our ideas can create things that doesn't exist and present them to be real and for humans to believe. Hence, (Prado, G. C. 2009: 55):

> At this juncture it is important to your understanding of Descartes in particular, and of philosophy in general, that you stop and think about Descartes' evil-spirit ploy. If you find yourself having reservations about the idea, even if you are not sure why, you are beginning to appreciate the nature of the Cartesian exercise and you are also beginning to develop philosophical instincts.

Our experience and thought might be compelled by an evil demon, a genius so clever and powerful in an act of deception. It is possible for it to create an artificial world, compel and propel us to believe the world to be real. Psychologist made us to understand that all human beings have some element of madness in us which we exhibit some percent of it on daily bases. It could be the driving force of our mind, to subject the self in believing that such a genius exists with powerful attributes greater and more powerful than man, infinite in nature.

What we must not fail to understand is that man possess a finite nature, with fallible senses and reasons that can err. The error we observe in our reasoning faculty and sensory experiences are embedded in man's nature. Error is just a lack of some qualities, knowledge or understanding we ought to have, but they are lacking in cognitive composition of man. Thus, (Prado, G. C. 2009:55) averred:

> The evil-spirit hypothesis does raise questions. What escapes many who read Descartes for the first time is what I will describe as the object-oriented nature of the evil-spirit hypothesis. By object-oriented I mean that the dream hypothesis is about the objects of thought, not about thought itself.

4.1 **The three consequential dreams**

On a very memorable night of November 10, 1619, Descartes had three dreams which revealed to him the necessity to construct a system of true knowledge upon the power of human mind alone. On this, (Prado, G. C, 2009: 52) wrote:

> Most of us have had the experience of waking from a vivid dream and being surprised by the sudden dissolution of one range of experiences and the onset of another. Descartes proposal does not strike us as bizarre as it might, and he is, of course, counting on precisely that reaction. His main point does seem fair enough:

In the first dream narrative, Descartes saw himself taking a walk down to an unknown street. Suddenly, terrifying ghosts appeared in front of him. He wanted to run away but all his effort was abortive because he was griped with fear and had weakness on the right side of his body as he laid down. He tried to make some advancement with his left side through distorted means but he was ashamed of walking on such position. All his attempt to stand upright did not yield any result. Suddenly, a strong whirlwind spins him up to three times which moved

him sideways when was bouncing on his left foot. After that scenario, he stopped and tried to muster courage to advance, but his body position could not allow him to continue because each step he takes, he sees himself falling.

As he makes effort to escape, he looked sideways and saw a college whose door was open. He entered the apartment perhaps thinking to get remedy and secured of what he was passing through. Descartes then sighted the college's church got excited to go in and pray. Suddenly, he noticed he passed across a man he knew very well without greeting him. As he intend to turn back to exchange pleasantry with the man, the violent wind which blown against the church pushed him back and prevented him from meeting the man. Eventually, he saw himself at the middle of the college's courtyard. He had a voice of another man who called his name and said to him. "Would you be kind enough to carry something to one of our friends?" Descartes asked what is it am to carry? He got no answer from the voice, but he imagined that to be a melon brought from a foreign country. As Descartes walk with the people he mate, he find out that those people walk firmly with their feet as they walk in group while himself dragged himself as he walk together with them. The whirlwind gradually stopped and Descartes woke up and realize it was a dream. He then imagined the torture he passed through in that dream and said who knows whether a bad genie is out to torment him. He knelt down immediately in prayer against the manifestation of the dad dream in his life. After the long prayers, he began to reflect on the effect of the dream for two hours before he slept back. Thus, (Prado, G. C, 2009) commented:

> The point of this interpretation is that we are no better off when awake than when dreaming when it comes to determining with exactness that the perceptions we have faithfully represent their causes. This is not so much a matter of perceptual error as it is of radical doubts that the world in itself actually is as we perceive it (p. 53).

With no delay he entered into the second dream in which he heard sharp explosive sound which he imagines to be a thunder, fear griped him and he felt some coals fell from his fireplace.

After a little while, he slept back. Within a short period he went into the third dream. He saw a book on top of a table. When he opened the book, he realized it was a dictionary. Beside the same table he saw a poetry anthology book, he opened and scan through some pages and his eyes captured a write-up in Latin "Quod vitae sectaboriter?" meaning (which path in life will I choose?). At that juncture, an unknown man manifest in his presence and presented a poem to him. The poem began with "*Est et non*" which means (what is and is not). The unknown man says it is an excellent work. Descartes replied him, "I know it is in this book of poems." Nevertheless, Descartes grab the anthology book to fine the poem, but he did not see the poem in that book. However, he opened the dictionary and find out that some pages are missing. As he engages on discussion with the unknown man, both the books and the man got missing. (Rene, D. 1981: p. 15.) noted:

> *Since in all other matter I am accustomed to distinguishing existence from essence, I easily persuade myself that the essence of God can be separated from his existence; thus God can be thought of as existing. Be that as it may, it still becomes obvious to a very*

> *diligently attentive person that the existence of God can no more be separated from his essence than the essence of a triangle can be separated from the fact that the its three internal angles equal to right angle, or the idea of valley can be separate from the idea of a mountain. So it is no less repugnant to think of God (this, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is as lacking some perfection), than it is to think of a mountain lacking or valley*

When he woke, he was greatly disturbed by the three terrifying dreams, He was in dilemma where those dreams came from. He eventually resolved that it must have come from heaven. Another challenge that placed him in a state of curiosity was to give a correct interpretation of the dreams.

5.0 Conclusion

Descartes' philosophical dreams has been felt throughout the World. His argument on dream constitutes a model point in the history of thought. For he gathered previous unconnected thought and gave it a new impetus and direction to subsequent inquiries. He set men thinking in different directions and to express their views on dreams. His logical argument was controversial and criticized, ranging from the atomistic views of David Hume, the Logical analysis, and to the criticism of Sartre and Immanuel Kant. The great protagonists of clear and distinct idea led many historians of philosophy to different viewpoints and even opposed the interpretations of his doctrine. What if the dream was not originally generated by Descartes but a malicious being that possesses his reasoning faculty in order to deceive him?

Nevertheless, one of the greatest characteristics of his philosophy is the close alliance between philosophical reflection and sciences. Descartes' pre-occupation with clear and distinct idea, fortified by his use of comparative simple language, and his formulation of specific rules for the treatment of modern philosophical problems, helped him to achieve his vision and mission.

Philosophy has recorded tremendous growth since Descartes dream argument was established. Modern man have not stopped the quest to seek proper interpretation and understanding of dreams. So, as it has been said that the history of philosophy consists of footnote to Plato. On a similar note, modern philosophy came from the radical move by Rene Descartes to emancipate philosophy from the authority of the Church and to use reason to proof the existence of God and the external World.

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