

SUBJECT-CENTERED EPISTEME IN MODERNITY AND ITS DECONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

A subject, Aristotle tells us, is “that of which everything else is predicated, while it is itself not predicated of anything else”¹. Here, in the Aristotle’s idea of subject we have the genesis of the western conceptualization of subject. But it was Descartes who’s account of mind-body distinction led to the emergence of modern notion of subject. His dualism on one hand gave rise to idealism and on the other to materialism. And we have long list of philosophers in both the camps: Descartes, Galileo, Newton, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx etc. However much contending their views are, all of these philosophers together came to present a “subject-centered” account of epistemology, which is a hall-mark of modernity. Here in this paper, in the first part I shall unpack some of these philosophers’ notion of “subject” along with the concept of “modernity”, in order to arrive at the comprehensive understanding of “subject-centered episteme”. Following which, in the second part, I shall briefly discuss the shortcomings of such an account and its criticism in postmodernism, with special reference to Derrida’s account of deconstruction. In the third and the last section of the paper I shall present the conclusion.

KEYWORDS: Conceptualization, Philosophers, Modernity, Postmodernism

INTRODUCTION

Part-I

The pre-modern western society is characterized by the feudal system. It was in the transition from feudal society to capitalist society that we find the seeds of modernity. Parallel to this transition was the spread of intellectual movement throughout the Europe. The 1688 revolution (the Glorious Revolution) and the French Revolution of 1789 marked the pinnacle of spread of this intellectual movement. This movement was multi-dimensional: spiritual, political, social, cultural and economic. This whole process can be best summarized as follows:

“The process lasted from all mid 18th to mid 19th century, and is still spreading geographically, encompassing all cultures which adopt the urban-technological-industrial system, with its capitalist mode of production, Calvinist- individualist value system, culture, medicine, communication system, educational system and political-economic institutions are all based on human sovereignty and autonomy.”²

Modernity heralded by the transfer of authority from church to human reason. The famous Galileo-Bellarmino debate, in which Galileo appealed solely to human reason, initiated this change. Peter Berger in his book *Facing upto Modernity* (1977) put forth few essential features of modernity: abstraction, futurity, individualism, liberation and

¹ Ross, W.D. *Aristotle: Selections*, p.56

² Originally from Paulos Mar Gregorios, Forward to *Philosophy: Modern and Postmodern* By R.P.Singh. (Intellectual Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p. v.) Here it is been taken from the article “Modern and Postmodern Philosophical Quest” which appeared in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly XXVIII No 3*, p. 315 July 2001

secularism. Interestingly, if one analyzes the writings of enlightenment thinkers, s/he would realize that however contrasting the view points of these philosophers would be, they all have these features in the backdrop of their central theme. Here I shall be discussing only few of them, namely Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant and Hegel briefly.

Rene Decartes was a philosopher, a mathematician and a man of science. He did not accept the metaphysical philosophical foundations laid by his predecessors, instead attempted to formulate a philosophical system de-novo. This has not happened since Aristotle. And this is precisely the reason that, Descartes is rightly considered as the Father of Modern Philosophy. One among his various contributions to philosophy is his theory of mind and its distinction from body. Through his method of doubt he reaches to a conclusion that:

“I existed by the mere fact that I thought at all. But there is some deceiver both very powerful and very cunning who constantly uses all his wiles to deceive me. there is therefore no doubt that I exist, if he deceived me, and let him deceive me as much as he likes, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think I am something. So that, after having thought carefully about it, and having scrupulously examined everything, one must then, in conclusion, take as assured that the proposition; I am, I exist, is necessarily true...”³

His maxim “*cogito ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am) points out towards the abstraction that Berger talks about. Descartes associates activities like thinking, feeling, knowing, willing, judging, and loving etc with *Cogito*. Defining *Cogito* he says that it’s “A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions”.⁴ All these demand a higher order capacity to deal in abstraction. Further, this resulted in the *foundationalism*. And with this on one hand we have emergence of “subject-centered episteme” and on the other we have inception of “modernity”. But this Cartesian maxim received its own share of criticism. Locke represents the empiricist side of the *foundationalism*. He rejects the idea that the *Cogito* has innate ideas. According to him *Cogito*, the “I”, the Mind is *tabula rasa*. He argues that all our knowledge results from sensation and reflection. But nonetheless accepts that though we do not have the direct sensation of our soul-substance, by reflecting upon our own mind we can form an idea about it. He explains further that:

“.....the idea of corporeal substance in matter is as remote from our conceptions and apprehensions as that of the spiritual substance or spirit: therefore, from our not having any notion of the substance of spirit, we can no more conclude its non-existence than can for the same reason deny the existence of body..”⁵

However, Locke’s account also didn’t satisfy many. David Hume (1711-76), an empiricist himself came to reject both the strands of his predecessors (rationalists and empiricists) and this criticism resulted in what we call skepticism. He opines that rational cosmology, rational psychology, a science of the essence of soul are all impossible. He further argues that we do not have any idea of a simple and identical self. To explain this further he says:

“When I enter intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself, at any time, without a perception, and never can observe anything but perception....the mind is “a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed one

³ Descartes, *Discourse on Method and The Meditations*, p.96.

⁴ C, John. S, Robert & M, Dugald, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, p.19.

⁵ Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Sec 5.

another with an invincible rapidity, and are in a particular flux and movement...⁶

It is in this backdrop that Kant comes out of his dogmatic slumber and aims to reconcile the two *foundationalist* accounts. Against Rationalism, Kant argues that it is not God but the transcendental consciousness that is responsible for the unity of experience. And against Empiricism, Kant argues that mind has not to conform to objects, rather objects have to conform to mind. In this way his philosophy has double significance for the epistemology. The transcendental consciousness is the matrix, the non-perceptual source of universality and necessity in the world. He says:

“The order and regularity in the appearances, which we entitle nature, we ourselves introduce. We could never find them in appearances, had not we ourselves, or the nature of our mind, originally set them there.”⁷

Thus Kant formulates a structure of mind/subject as ‘transcendental unity of self-consciousness’, which consists of a complex matrix of ‘forms of intuition’ (space and time) and ‘forms of understanding’ (the categories). The ‘forms of intuition’ synthesize the manifold of sensibility into spatio-temporal order. But this is not enough. Objects must be connected, related, conceived, or thought. Therefore knowledge also requires a synthetic active mind that is “forms of understanding”.⁸ Further, this entire complex is unified in the transcendental apperception which relates all experience to the “thinking ego” and thereby giving experience the continuity of being ‘my experience’. The constitution of knowledge by means of categories is regarded by Kant as the activity of human mind, “...it is, after all, we ourselves who are responsible for the formation of general concepts...our ability to render the given intelligible to us...is an expression of genuine intellectual activity.”⁹

This whole epistemological quest of Kant should be seen in the backdrop of European Enlightenment. In December 1783, Kant wrote a small pamphlet entitled “Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” And the answer was:

“Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!”¹⁰

Through this Kant defines the features of modernity such as the thrust showed upon the human intellect, individuality, courage, freedom etc.

Nonetheless, Kant's contributions to the Enlightenment in general have been criticized by Hegel and some others. In the context of Kant's epistemological-situation, Hegel criticizes Kant for his attempt to investigate our cognitive capability prior to any cognition. Hegel remarks, “The requirement, then, is this: We have to know our faculty of knowledge before we have any knowledge; it is just like wanting to swim before one gets into water. The investigation of the faculty of cognition is itself cognitive, and cannot arrive at its goal but rather is the goal itself, it cannot come to itself

⁶ Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Sec 6.

⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p.147.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 130

⁹ Cassirer, H.W., *Kant's First Critique: An Appraisal of the Permanent Significance of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, p.55.

¹⁰ Kant, Immanuel. “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” (1784) retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/kant/enlightenment.htm> on 24/03/2014

because it is already there”.¹¹

Thus it is apparent that even within the modern philosophical discourses there are several contending position. Nonetheless they all contributed to the development of “subject-centered episteme”. For, all of them have an “I”, a thinking, self-caused, conscious, active, independent, individual subject in the center of the whole knowledge generating process. From Descartes to Hegel (as discussed in this paper) and in general, from Bacon to Marx all gave unprecedented significance to this “subject”. Thus what we find at the centre of the modernity, are the issues such as rationality, scientific knowledge, human subjectivity, unified world view, ideology, morality, freedom. And above all these what defines modernity are the grand narratives of *foundationalism* (*Cogito* of Descartes), *essentialism*, *teleology* (Kantian Ethics) and *logocentrism*. But gradually we find that a crisis emerged in modernity. Liberalism acquired more and more self-centric form and secular neutrality paved the way for inactiveness. Fraternity got sandwiched between equality and liberty and an alienation or estrangement began surfacing. Therefore, there remained something untouched, something ignored and these are the marginal issues of modernity. For example: irrationality, fragmentation, deception, demon, madness, fantasy sin etc. All these issues gains prominence in postmodernism. How and why, this we shall see in the following section where I shall discuss the criticism of modernity through the deconstruction of the “subject-centered episteme”.

Part II

When in 1979, Jean-Francois Lyotard was sent to Europe to assess the intellectual environment there, he adjudged the situation as “the crisis of narratives”. Precisely this was an appeal to meta-narratives of modernity i.e. *Cogito* (Descartes), *Dialectic of Spirit* (Hegel), *Rational Subject* (Kant), Proletariat; the working subject (Marx). As against modernity he described postmodernity as “incredulity towards meta-narratives”. He pointed out towards the bankruptcy of traditional epistemology which had no concern on developments in modern sciences, catastrophe theory, chaos theory etc. Scholars like Foucault and Derrida have also questioned the sanctity of the rational subject who is the last authority on any account and who is in-charge of interrogating everything.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), presents a systematic (while defying the system) criticism of modernity and its grand-narratives. Through his logic of difference (means both ‘to defer’ and ‘to differ’) he came to define deconstruction as revenge of language in philosophy. Here, it can be noted that the basic difference between modernity and postmodernity is a methodological one. For example modernists like Hegel and others saw history as something that is assimilated in the later, but for Derrida this relation between old and new/ancient and modern is not a simple one. He writes:

“...we must maintain two contradictory affirmations at the same time. On one hand, we affirm the existence of raptures in history, and on the other, we affirm that these raptures produce gaps or fault in which the most hidden and forgotten archives can emerge and constantly recur and work without history...”¹²

For him, no writing and no struggle is final. He, in a way, advocates a episodic way of history where writing always leads to more writing as history does lead to final struggle but to more history. This kind of criticism rests on the conviction that reality follows diverse models which are mutually exclusive and are rich in conflicts. Also it rests on the

¹¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.38

¹² Originally from, Kearney, Richard. *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester University press, 1984) pp. 112-113, Here it is been taken from the article “Modern and Postmodern Philosophical Quest” which appeared in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly XXVIII No 3*, p. 315 July 2001

rejection of the unity, totality and authority. In places of these, it establishes pluralism, discontinuity, irrationalism and fragmentations etc. Thus, post-modernity defines an attitude that is without a system, without any established logic or strict norms that, in contrast, defines modernity. Basically it questions and criticizes system-based thinking. And in doing so it brings those issues to the center of the discourse which were at the margins in the discourse of modernity. These are: irrationality, fragmentation, plurality, deception, demon, sin, murder, sexuality, madness, hospitals, infamy, fantasy, illusions, corruptions, crimes etc.

CONCLUSIONS

Part III

So far we have seen that with the transition from feudal society to capitalist society and with the advent of science we have the emergence of modernity. The hall-mark of which is the “subject-centered episteme”, in which an independent, individual, conscious subject is at the center of the whole epistemological exercise. However, as we have seen, there are various contending positions within the discourse of “subject-centered episteme”. From Descartes to Hegel (and from Bacon to Marx) all have their own distinct notion of “subject”. But with the crisis of modernity there began the deconstruction of this “subject-centered episteme” as well. Now discourses which were at the heart of the modernity started shifting towards the margins and discourses which were at the margins of the modernity started shifting towards the core in post-modernity. One can say that while in modernity foundationalism, essentialism, teleology, human subjectivity and unfathomable faith in the human reason etc are at the center, in post-modernity it is anti-foundationalism, anti-teleology, pluralism, fragmentation and irrationality etc which is at the center.

However this should not lead one to conclude that post-modernity is anti-modernity. On the contrary, modernity is its basic subject-matter. Like modernity, post-modernity-in its very-nature, philosophical. To sum it up one can say that “in marginalizing, delimiting, disseminating, and de-centering the *Central* works of modernist inscription, the postmodernist... have expanded the horizons of modernity. This is the modest claim in a way that no postmodernist will reject.”¹³

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