**Nietzsche on Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am”**

There is a difference between thinking as a means to fulfill a desire such as for food and the thinking of philosophy which is a quest for the very meaning and value of thinking and of human being. There is no courage required to think of the human individual as a natural object in a world of natural objects. But to cease to think of the self as a thing defined in the world and to begin to think of the self as in process of defining itself through a new way of being, that is, through thinking and choosing, through creating, requires courage.

The courage of Descartes in pursuing the methodic doubt led him to the discovery of the self as not a thing, not an object, in the world, to the discovery of the self as subject: but Nietzsche believes Descartes misinterpreted and simplified his complexity by the notion of an intuitive certainty about the rational self. Nietzsche writes:

When I analyze the process that is expressed in the sentence, ‘I think,’ I find a whole series of daring assertions, the argumentative proof of which would be difficult, perhaps impossible: for instance, that it is I who think, that there must necessarily be something that thinks, that thinking is an activity and operation on the part of a being who is thought of as a cause, that there is ‘ego,’ and finally, that it is already determined what is to be designated by thinking, that I know what thinking is. For if I had not already decided within myself what it is, by what standard could I determine whether that which is just happening is not perhaps ‘willing’ or ‘feeling’? In short, the assertion ‘I think’ assumes that I compare my state at the present moment with other states of myself which I know, in order to determine what it is; on account of this retrospective connection with further ‘knowledge,’ it has, at any rate, no immediate certainty for me.” – in place of the ‘immediate certainty’ in which people may believe in the special case, the philosopher thus finds a series of questions presented to him: “From whence did I get the notion of thinking: Why do I believe in cause and effect? What gives me the right to speak of an ego, and even of an ego as cause, and finally of an ego as cause of thought?” He who ventures to answer . . . these questions at once by an appeal to a sort of intuitive perception, like the person who says, “I think and know this, at least, is true, actual, and certain – will encounter a smile and two notes of interrogation in a philosopher nowadays. (Beyond Good and Evil, 16, in Philosophy Of Nietzsche, Modern Library, pp. 397-398.)

Are we strong enough, healthy enough, to listen to the objections that Nietzsche raises against accepting ‘I think, therefore I am?’ Are we ready to admit that the human person is not primarily rational? Would we even let ourselves consider that our actions are not done primarily for rational motives?

Nietzsche is not afraid to raise such questions. Philosophers have traditionally said that philosophy begins in wonder about the world and about man. Aristotle wrote in the beginning of his metaphysics that all men naturally desire to know. All men delight in knowledge for its own sake. Man is the rational animal, and his basic purpose in life is to live the rational life. But his basic purpose in life is to live the rational life. But Nietzsche challenges this: “Who is it that puts questions to us here: What really is this ‘will to truth’ in us? What about the value of this will? Granted that we want the truth: why not rather untruth? Why not rather uncertainty? Could the will to truth originate from the will to untruth: could the will to truth arise out of the will to deception? ( See Beyond Good and Evil, 6, Modern Library, Philosophy Of Nietzsche, p. 386)

Our immediate answer to Nietzsche is No, our desire for truth does not come from a desire for falsehood. For example, people would claim that they accept belief in God only because it is true that God is real.

But Nietzsche challenges us and asks us whether it might not be that we say that it is true that God exists because we desire to deceive ourselves. People might be saying that God exists only because they need God to give meaning to their lives. Just as people can do an outwardly generous deed for a selfish motive, so also people may live according to an apparent truth precisely because of their will to deceive themselves.