

Cogito Ergo Sum and Tat Tvam Asi: Parallels between René Descartes and Adi Shankaracharya

Dr. Ganesh Bhat ¹

Received: 17 September 2026 / Accepted: 24 September 2026 / Published online: 28 September 2026
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Abstract

The paper undertakes a comparative philosophical study of the thought of René Descartes and Adi Shankaracharya, centring on the thematic convergence between the Cartesian dictum “Cogito, ergo sum” and the Vedāntic mahāvākya “Tat Tvam Asi”, “Aham Brahmasmi”, etc. Beginning with Descartes’ method of methodological scepticism as articulated in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the study highlights how radical doubt functions as an epistemological tool to arrive at indubitable certainty, culminating in the affirmation of the thinking self. This is placed in dialogue with the Upanishadic method of *neti, neti*, which similarly negates empirical reality but extends beyond epistemology into ontological realization. The paper further examines Descartes’ conception of the self as *res cogitans* in relation to the Vedāntic understanding of *Ātman* as pure, self-revealing consciousness, arguing that while Descartes establishes certainty at the level of reflective thought, Advaita Vedānta transcends thought itself to assert non-dual awareness.

The study also compares Descartes’ rational proofs for the existence of God with Indian approaches to ultimate reality, noting parallels with the Upanishadic conception of Brahman as infinite and self-evident, while emphasizing the Vedāntic shift from logical demonstration to direct experiential realization (*aparokṣānubhūti*). In addressing mind–body interaction, Descartes’ pineal gland hypothesis is contrasted with the Indian model of *antaḥkaraṇa*, which offers a more elaborate psychological framework integrating cognition, memory, and ego, and further situates the mind within the broader pursuit of liberation (*mokṣa*). Additionally, Descartes’ mechanistic view of nature is examined alongside the Sāṅkhya theory of *prakṛti* and the doctrine of the three *guṇas*, demonstrating how Indian philosophy accommodates both causal regularity and qualitative diversity, enriched by the metaphysical concept of *māyā*.

The paper argues that while Cartesian philosophy lays the groundwork for modern epistemology and scientific rationalism, Indian philosophical traditions develop these insights more comprehensively by integrating epistemology, metaphysics, and soteriology. Ultimately, the study concludes that Indian philosophy not only parallels

¹ Sanskrit Faculty, Jeevottama Vidyapeetha, Parthagali, Poingunin, Goa – 403702, India

✉ Dr. Ganesh Bhat, E-mail: sadyojathad@gmail.com

but significantly extends Cartesian thought by transforming the quest for certainty into a path of existential realization and non-dual awareness.

Keywords: Cogito ergo sum, Tat Tvam Asi, René Descartes, Adi Shankaracharya, Cartesian dictum, Vedāntic mahāvākya.

In *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Meditation I), René Descartes formulates the philosophical method known as methodological scepticism or hyperbolic doubt, wherein he systematically questions all beliefs that admit even the slightest uncertainty in order to discover a foundation of absolute certainty. This doubt is not an end in itself but a deliberate intellectual strategy: by rejecting the reliability of the senses, entertaining the possibility of dreaming, and even imagining a deceptive “evil demon,” Descartes suspends all prior assumptions to isolate what cannot be doubted. Through this process, he establishes the basis of epistemological foundationalism, the view that knowledge must rest on indubitable truths, which ultimately leads to the affirmation of the self as a thinking entity. Thus, Descartes transforms doubt into a constructive philosophical tool, shifting inquiry from inherited beliefs to the search for certainty grounded in reason¹.

The method of doubt articulated by René Descartes finds a striking parallel in Indian philosophical traditions, particularly within the Vedāntic mode of inquiry. The apophatic method of “neti, neti”² (not this, not this) similarly involves a systematic negation of all empirical and conceptual identifications in order to arrive at an ultimate, indubitable reality. Like Descartes, Indian philosophers begin by questioning the reliability of sensory knowledge and the apparent world; however, their project extends beyond epistemological certainty into ontological realization. While Descartes’ methodological skepticism culminates in the certainty of the thinking self (Cogito), Indian philosophy especially Advaita Vedānta as articulated by Adi Shankaracharya moves further by dissolving even the individuality of the thinker, asserting that the individual self (Ātman) is the absolute reality (Brahman), as expressed in the mahāvākya “Tat Tvam Asi”³. Moreover, Indian epistemological systems such as Nyāya develop a more elaborate theory of knowledge (pramāṇa), offering multiple validated means of knowing: perception, inference, comparison, and testimony, rather than relying solely on rational introspection. In this sense, while Descartes establishes a powerful method for grounding certainty through doubt, Indian philosophy advances further by integrating epistemology with metaphysics and soteriology, transforming inquiry not merely into a search for certainty but into a path toward experiential realization and liberation (mokṣa).

The famous proposition “Cogito, ergo sum”⁴ (“I think, therefore I am”), represents the first indubitable truth discovered through his method of radical doubt. After questioning the reliability of the senses, the external world, and even mathematical truths, Descartes realizes that the very act of doubting or thinking cannot be denied

¹ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation I

² Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

³ Chandogya Upanishad

⁴ René Descartes in *Discourse on the Method* (Part IV) and further elaborated in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Meditation II)

without contradiction. Even if all else is false, the fact that one is thinking necessarily implies that there must be a thinking subject. Thus, the existence of the self is established not as a physical body but as a “*res cogitans*”, a thinking substance whose essence lies in consciousness. This insight becomes the foundational certainty upon which Descartes rebuilds his entire philosophical system, shifting the ground of knowledge from the external world to the inner realm of self-awareness.

The proposition “*Cogito, ergo sum*” finds a meaningful parallel in Vedantic understanding of the self (*Ātman*) as self-revealing consciousness. Consciousness is the ever-present witness (*sākṣin*) that underlies all states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, thereby affirming that the existence of the self is undeniable⁵. While Descartes stops at establishing the self as a “thinking substance” (*res cogitans*), Advaita Vedānta moves beyond the identification of the self with thinking and asserts that true consciousness transcends all mental activities, including thought and doubt. The self is not merely “that which thinks,” but pure, non-dual awareness (*cit*) that remains even in the absence of thought, as experienced in deep sleep. This is expressed in the mahāvākya “*Ayam Atma Brahma*”⁶, which identifies the individual self with the absolute reality (Brahman). Thus, whereas Descartes’ *Cogito* establishes certainty at the level of reflective thinking, Indian philosophy advances further by distinguishing consciousness from thought itself and by culminating in a non-dual realization that transcends the subject-object division.

René Descartes presents rational proofs for the existence of God⁷, most notably the Trademark Argument and the Ontological Argument. In the Trademark Argument, Descartes observes that he possesses within his mind the idea of an infinite, perfect being (God), while he himself is finite and imperfect; therefore, such an idea cannot originate from him but must have been “placed” in him by a being that truly possesses those perfections; namely God, just as a craftsman leaves a mark or signature on his creation. In the Ontological Argument, Descartes reasons that existence is a necessary attribute of a supremely perfect being, since a being lacking existence would be less perfect; hence, just as the concept of a triangle necessarily includes three angles, the concept of God necessarily includes existence. Through these arguments, Descartes attempts to establish God not through sensory experience but through pure reason, making divine existence a logically necessary and foundational element of his philosophical system.

The idea that the notion of an infinite and perfect being must originate from a truly infinite source parallels the Upanishadic insight that the human awareness of the infinite (*ananta*) points toward an ultimate reality, Brahman is “*satyam jñānam anantam brahma*”⁸ (truth, knowledge, infinity). Similarly, the logical necessity attributed to God’s existence in Descartes’ ontological argument finds a loose comparison in Vedānta’s assertion that Brahman is *svataḥ-siddha* (self-established, self-evident), not requiring external proof. While Descartes seeks to prove God through conceptual reasoning, Vedānta argues that ultimate reality (Brahman) is not an object

⁵ Mandukya Upanishad

⁶ Mandukya Upanishad 1.2

⁷ In Meditations on First Philosophy (especially Meditations III and V)

⁸ Taittiriya Upanishad

of inference but of direct realization (aparokṣānubhūti⁹). Moreover, schools like Nyāya do offer logical proofs for God's existence (Īśvara) through inference (anumāna), as found in the Nyāya Sūtras¹⁰, yet even these are integrated into a broader epistemological system that includes perception and testimony. Thus, Indian philosophy moves beyond and says the divine not just as a conclusion of reasoning but as the very ground of being to be directly experienced and realized.

René Descartes addresses the problem arising from his mind-body dualism by explaining how two fundamentally different substances—the immaterial mind (res cogitans) and the material body (res extensa) can interact¹¹. He proposes that this interaction occurs in the pineal gland, a small structure in the brain that he regarded as the central point where the soul exerts influence over the body and receives sensory information from it. According to Descartes, bodily processes generate “animal spirits” that affect the pineal gland, thereby producing sensations, emotions, and passions in the mind; conversely, the mind can influence bodily movements by directing this gland. In this way, he attempts to explain how mental states like will, thought, and emotion can cause physical actions, and how physical stimuli can give rise to conscious experiences, thereby preserving both the distinctness and the functional unity of mind and body within human existence.

Indian texts do not posit a single anatomical point of interaction; instead, they conceive a layered inner instrument (antaḥkaraṇa); comprising manas (mind), buddhi (intellect), ahaṁkāra (ego), and citta (memory) that mediates between consciousness and the physical body. “kāmaḥ saṅkalpo vicikitsā śraddhā aśraddhā dhṛtir adhṛtir hrīr dhīr bhīr ity etat sarvaṃ mana eva,¹²” indicating that all psychological functions like desire, doubt, faith, fear, resolve are operations of the mind, thereby recognizing a complex spectrum of mental states rather than reducing them to a single locus. Similarly, the well-known dictum “mana eva manuṣyānāṃ kāraṇam bandha mokṣayoḥ¹³” (the mind alone is the cause of bondage and liberation) emphasizes that the mind not only mediates experience but determines existential condition. While Descartes attempts to explain interaction mechanistically through “animal spirits” and a physical gland, Indian philosophy advances further by presenting a functional and phenomenological model; the mind operates as a subtle interface linking the conscious self (ātman) with the body, governed by impressions (saṃskāras) and subject to discipline through practices like yoga¹⁴. Moreover, Advaita Vedānta argues that the apparent relation between mind and body is due to adhyāsa (superimposition), and that pure consciousness is ever unattached.

He presents a mechanistic view of nature¹⁵, arguing that the entire physical universe operates like a vast machine governed by immutable laws of motion. Rejecting earlier teleological explanations that attributed purpose or intrinsic goals to natural phenomena, Descartes maintains that matter (res extensa) is characterized solely by extension, shape, and motion, and that all physical events can be explained through the

⁹ Aparokshanubhuti by Shankaracharya

¹⁰ Nyaya Sutra 1.1.5

¹¹ Passions of the Soul

¹² Brihadaranyakam 1.5.3

¹³ Amritabindu Upanishad

¹⁴ Yoga Sutra 1.18

¹⁵ Principles of Philosophy

interaction of particles in accordance with mathematical laws. In this framework, natural processes, whether the movement of celestial bodies, the functioning of the human body, or the behavior of physical objects, are not guided by inherent purposes but are the result of mechanical causation. Even living organisms are treated as complex automata, functioning through purely physical processes, while the realm of thought is reserved for the immaterial mind. Thus, Descartes establishes a foundational model for modern science by reducing nature to a system of predictable, law-governed mechanisms, emphasizing quantitative explanation over qualitative or purposive interpretations.

It finds an interesting parallel in Indian philosophical conceptions of Prakṛti (nature), particularly in Sāṅkhya and Vedānta. Indian thought also recognizes that the empirical world operates according to consistent principles; however, instead of reducing nature to mere mechanical motion, it explains cosmic functioning through the dynamic interplay of the three guṇas, sattva (order, clarity), rajas (activity, energy), and tamas (inertia, resistance), as elaborated in the Samkhya Karika¹⁶. This framework provides not only a causal explanation of physical processes but also accounts for qualitative diversity in nature: psychological, ethical, and cosmological. Furthermore, the Vedāntic notion of māyā¹⁷, introduces a deeper metaphysical layer; the world appears ordered and law-bound, yet it is ultimately a dependent reality, superimposed upon the non-dual Brahman. Thus, while Descartes explains nature through external, quantitative laws, Indian philosophy integrates both quantitative regularity and qualitative experience, offering a more holistic model. In fact, the Triguna theory anticipates a systems-like understanding of nature, where equilibrium and disequilibrium drive transformation an idea that resonates with modern scientific notions of dynamic systems and energy states. Therefore, Indian philosophy does not merely parallel the mechanistic view but extends it by incorporating consciousness, qualitative change, and metaphysical grounding, thereby presenting a more comprehensive and integrative vision of nature that bridges physics, psychology, and cosmology.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that while René Descartes provides a decisive starting point for modern philosophy through methodological doubt and the affirmation of the thinking self, the trajectory of Indian philosophy, especially as articulated by Adi Shankaracharya, represents a more developed and integrative philosophical vision. The comparison undertaken in this article shows that at each critical juncture epistemology, selfhood, theology, psychology, and cosmology Indian philosophy not only parallels Cartesian insights but systematically extends them.

Descartes' methodological skepticism establishes certainty through doubt, yet remains confined to the level of epistemic justification; in contrast, the Vedāntic method of negation progresses further into ontological realization, dissolving not only false knowledge but the very individuality of the knower. Similarly, the Cogito affirms the self as a thinking entity, but Indian philosophy advances beyond this by distinguishing consciousness from thought and asserting a non-dual awareness that

¹⁶ Sankhya Karika 12

¹⁷ Adhyasa Bhashya of Shankaracharya

persists even in the absence of mental activity. This movement from thinking self to pure consciousness marks a significant philosophical development.

In the domain of theology, Descartes' reliance on rational proofs for God underscores the limits of conceptual reasoning, whereas Indian systems, while not excluding logical arguments as seen in Nyāya, ultimately transcend them by positing direct realization (*aparokṣānubhūti*) as the highest means of knowing reality. The discussion on mind-body interaction further illustrates this advancement: Descartes' pineal gland hypothesis offers a localized and mechanistic explanation, whereas the Indian model of *antaḥkaraṇa* provides a multi-layered psychological framework that integrates cognition, experience, and liberation. Likewise, the mechanistic view of nature, though foundational for modern science, is expanded in Indian thought through the doctrines of *prakṛti*, *guṇas*, and *māyā*, which incorporate both causal regularity and qualitative, experiential dimensions.

Thus, as demonstrated throughout this article, Indian philosophy evolves these shared concerns into a more comprehensive system by unifying epistemology with metaphysics and soteriology. It transforms philosophical inquiry from a quest for certainty into a path of realization, where knowledge is not merely validated but lived and embodied. In this sense, the progression from Cartesian philosophy to Indian thought is not one of opposition but of philosophical maturation, where the analytical clarity of Descartes finds its culmination in the experiential depth and non-dual insight of the Indian tradition.

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