Cartesian Philosophy and the Beckettian Subject

Kim, Jungsoo
(Ewha Woman’s University)

I. The Subject and Its Place

Cartesian philosophy occupies an important place in Beckett scholarship. In this paper, mainly focusing on Samuel Beckett’s novel *Murphy*, I will discuss the significant place that Descartes holds in Beckett’s works. In the beginnings of Beckett criticism in the 1960s, discussions of Cartesian elements in Beckett’s works flourished. The first recognition of Cartesian influence appeared in a special issue of *Perspective* edited by Ruby Cohn. The issue was devoted to Beckett’s works and included articles by Ruby Cohn, Samuel Mintz, and Hugh Kenner. At this early stage, these scholars presented points which would later become the main issues in Beckett scholarship. In that issue, which focused on Beckett’s early stories, Ruby Cohn recognized the significance of the I’s in stories such as “Le Calmant,” “L’Expulsé” and “La Fin” and discussed these works, focusing on the different, yet similar, I’s in each. Samuel Mintz’s article, “Beckett’s *Murphy*: A Cartesian Novel,” as its title indicates, approached *Murphy* from the perspective of its relationship to Cartesian philosophy. Mintz’s article presented a number of significant discussion points about Beckett and Géulinxian philosophy, which were taken up by later

1) The issue is devoted to Beckett’s works and is often considered the beginning of Beckett criticism in English.
scholars. In his article "The Cartesian Centaur" Hugh Kenner embarked on a full-scale study of Beckett's works in terms of their relationship to the Cartesian idea of man. Two years later, Kenner's article appeared as a chapter in his book Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study (1961). Kenner's book exemplified the emphasis by the first generation of Beckett scholars on the significance of philosophy, most notably Cartesian philosophy, in understanding Beckett's oeuvre. Kenner introduced the notion of "the Cartesian Centaur" as a way of understanding Beckettian characters. With his observations primarily based upon his reading of Beckett's novels rather than upon his drama, Kenner argued that the main characters in Beckett's works increasingly showed the split between mind and body, which is the very foundation of Cartesian philosophy.

Cartesian philosophy revolves around concepts such as the cogito, the subject, the object, and dualism of body and mind. Descartes wrote in Discourse on Method (1637) about his rigorous examination of truth in a stove-heated room. His goal was to achieve an absolute truth that cannot be doubted. To achieve this aim, he used the process of methodic doubt. He decided that, if any of the beliefs he held had a slight chance to be doubted, he would discard, as untrue, the entire category of beliefs to which the single case belongs. Thus, he rejects any knowledge based upon authority because even experts can be wrong in their opinions. He discarded any belief based upon sensory experience because, for example, shapes and colors can be seen differently at a different distance and from different angles. The objects in his immediate surroundings cannot be trusted, either because, for example, in his dreams, he sees objects that do not exist or he cannot know for certain whether he is dreaming or awake. He also rejects knowledge that belongs purely to reasoning such as $2 + 3 = 5$ because God might have caused him to make mistakes in counting. He even thinks about the possibility that there is an evil genius constantly deceiving him. Through this methodic doubt, Descartes tried to arrive at certainty by taking doubt and skepticism as his method to reach the absolute truth that cannot be questioned. After thus doubting everything, including the existence of the entire physical universe and of his own body, he finally reached the point where he could not doubt the