

Descartes' Cogito (Meditation II)

1. The “Archimedean point”

“[G]reat things are also to be hoped for if I succeed in finding just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken” (63).

The meditator’s candidate:

“This pronouncement ‘I am, I exist’ [*ego sum, ego existo*] is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind” (64).

Descartes articulated a similar point in his earlier work *Discourse on the Method*:

And observing that this truth ‘I am thinking, therefore I exist’ [*je pense, donc je suis*] was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.¹

The most famous formulation of this point comes from Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy*:

For it is a contradiction to suppose that what thinks does not, at the very time when it is thinking, exist.

Accordingly, this piece of knowledge— I am thinking, therefore I exist [*cogito, ergo sum*—is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way.²

2. The special status of cogito-type beliefs or claims

Some epistemological concepts:³

- i. *Indubitable*: A person S’s belief that p is indubitable if and only if S cannot doubt p.
- ii. *Self-verifying*: If S asserts p, then p is true.
Note also *self-refuting*: If S asserts p, then p is false.
Also *pragmatic contradiction*: presupposing p while also denying p.
- iii. *Infallible* (sometimes called incorrigible): If S believes p, then p is true.
- iv. *Evident* (sometimes called irresistible): If p is true, then S believes p.

What status do cogito-type beliefs (or assertions)—such as I think and I am—have? Can you think of other beliefs (or assertions) with this status?

3. The cogito “argument”

(a) Is it meant to be an inference? And what might it matter?

- The formulations from the *Discourse* and *Principles* suggest yes.
- The formulation in the *Meditations* suggests no. Note that the meditator is not, at least to begin, thinking about his existence, but about the evil genius deceiving him. Does that matter?
“But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think I am something.” (64)
- If ‘I exist’ is incorrigible and self-verifying, then why does Descartes need ‘I think’?
- In Descartes’ *Reply to the Second Objections*, he says:
When we observe that we are thinking beings, this is a sort of primary notion, which is not the conclusion of any syllogism; and, moreover, when somebody says: I am thinking therefore I am or exist, he is not using a syllogism to deduce his existence from his thought, but recognizing this as something self-evident, in a simple mental intuition.⁴
- Note: ‘I think’ is *evident*, and ‘I exist’ is not. Does this matter? Why?

(b) If it is an inference, does Descartes need any further premises?

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¹ Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, eds. and trans., *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Cambridge: 1988: 36

² Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, eds. and trans: 162

³ Some of these definitions are adapted from Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Humanities Press, NJ: 1978.

⁴ Haldane and Ross, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol 2, 1974. Cambridge University Press: 38.

(c) Has Descartes already built too much into ‘I think’ and ‘I am’?

- Nietzsche: “A thought comes when ‘it’ wishes, and not when ‘I’ wish” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, x17, trans. Kaufmann, Vintage: 1966).

(d) What is the point of the cogito anyway?

4. The ‘I’ and the mind: *Sum res cogitans*

(a) What is the nature of this I that exists? Perhaps the ‘I think’ is crucial because of what it reveals about the nature of the I.

- Descartes is not only concerned with existence, but the nature or essence of the thinking thing. An essential property of something is a property it cannot lack. If it exists, it has the property.

(b) The I is not a body, nor a “soul” (in an Aristotelian sense, i.e., a set of capacities for nourishment, locomotion, sensation, etc.)

(c) “What about thinking? Here I make my discovery: Thought exists; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am; I exist—this is certain...I am therefore precisely nothing but a thinking thing; that is, a mind, or intellect, or understanding, or reason” (65).

- If Descartes argument about essence is correct, he will be able to argue in both directions: I think, therefore I am; and I am, therefore I think. I am essentially a thinking thing. Would this make Descartes existence evident, i.e., if it is true, he believes it?
- Hobbes, from the *Third Objections*: “It may be that the thing that thinks is the subject to which mind, reason or intellect belong; and this subject may thus be something corporeal. The contrary is assumed, not proved.”⁵

(d) “But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses” (66).

- Don’t these latter two activities require corporeal bodies, according to Descartes? (“What about sensing? Surely, this too does not take place without a body,” (65), and “Imagining is merely the contemplating of the shape or image of a corporeal thing” (66))
- Is the meditator justified in assuming there is a unity to these various mental activities?
- Note that Descartes seems to conclude not only that ‘I think,’ and ‘I am a thinking thing,’ and ‘I am essentially a thinking thing,’ but also “Thought is the only property essential to me.” How does he reach that last conclusion?

5. The wax argument (67-8)

Descartes has learned something about his mind, but what about his body? What do we know about body, matter, non-thinking things? He considers this using the wax argument. A reconstruction:⁶

- This piece of wax tastes of honey, smells of flowers, has evident color, shape, and size; is cold and hard; makes a noise when rapped upon.
- All of these properties are subject to change, yet the same wax remains.
- So the wax itself is not any of these particular properties.
- The wax is extended, flexible, and mutable—and I can grasp that it is capable of innumerable changes of shape.
- I could grasp this through the use of my imagination only if I could actually imagine (represent in my mind by an image) all of these innumerable changes.
- I cannot do this.
- So it is not by imagination that I grasp that the wax is capable of innumerable changes.

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Hatfield, Gary C., and René Descartes. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations*. Routledge, 2003. © Routledge. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

⁵ Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, eds. and trans: 128.

⁶ Adapted, with some additions and small changes, from Hatfield, *Descartes and the Meditations*, Routledge: 2003: 130–131.

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viii. “It remains then for me to concede that I do not grasp what this wax is through the imagination; rather, I perceive it through the mind alone” (68).

(b) A metaphysical conclusion: we learned something about the nature of this particular piece of wax (or about wax in general or perhaps about material bodies in general) – its essence or nature.

(c) An epistemological conclusion: we learned it via reflection not sensation. There is an act of intellectual judgment involved even in perception (the cloaked people example).

(d) A cognitive-faculties conclusion: we learned something about our cognitive faculties and their capabilities, viz., that through the use of our intellect we can establish metaphysical conclusions.

6. Questions to think about

- Is it plausible that our own mental states are incorrigible to us, i.e., that we can't be wrong about our mental states? Might we be wrong about what we think, what we like, what we want? Isn't self-deception possible? For example, might I fool myself into thinking that I want to be a scientist because that's what my parents want for me, when I really want to be a comedian, or a singer?
- Is it plausible that our own mental states are evident to us, i.e., that if I think/want/feel *m*, then I know I think/feel, want *m*? This would suggest that there are no dark alleys or inner corners of the mind that I'm not aware of. What about unconscious thought/desire/feeling?
- What is your essence? Start with this: could you exist in a different body? This is not to ask if it could ever happen, given the world the way it is, but if it could happen in *any possible world*. What would be the *you* in that body? Would it be the consciousness, memories, etc...the mind? Is it conceivable that *you* could exist without a body? Are you essentially a mind? Are you *only* essentially a mind?

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