

Lessons from the Cogito

PHIL 971 Kant Seminar

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1 Descartes & the Cogito Argument

1.1 The 'Cogito' Argument¹

1. What exactly is the conclusion of the argument?
 - weak: the meditator exists
 - strong: the meditator is a thinking thing
2. How is the conclusion established?
 - inference?
 - intuition?
3. What role does the established conclusion play in Descartes's broader project?
 - foundation, system, or method?

¹ I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. 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 that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (7:25)

OBJECTIONS:

1. Does the *Cogito* argument beg the question?
 - Perhaps all Descartes is entitled to is the claim that *there is thinking going on*
2. Is the argument invalid?
 - Could we add or make explicit premises in the argument that would render it successful or is it hopeless?

RECONSTRUCTING THE ARGUMENT:

1. A thing is composed of its properties or characteristics /plus/ an underlying substance to which they belong
 2. If there is a property or characteristic, then there must be a substance to which it belongs.
 3. A thought is a property.
 4. If there is a thought, then there is a substance to which it belongs.
 5. There is a thought.
 6. ∴ There is a substance to which this thought belongs: "I".
- The reconstruction fails to account for the move from third- to first-person.

1.2 The Nature of the *I*²

- What is it that unifies the kinds of features Descartes ascribes to the self?

² what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions. (7:28)

1.3 The Wax Argument

- We know substance purely intellectually³
 1. I can grasp that this melted wax is flexible and changeable so as to be capable of innumerable changes of shape.
 2. Imagination could allow me to grasp this fact only by representing these changes by an image of each possible shape.
 3. My imagination cannot represent the innumerable shapes required.
 4. It is not the imagination that allows me to grasp this capability of the wax.
 5. But I do grasp this capability, so it must be by a faculty other than (sense or) imagination: call it the “intellect”.
- Is the self known better than any body?⁴

³ But what is meant here by “flexible” and “changeable”? Is it what I picture in my imagination: that this piece of wax is capable of changing from a round shape to a square shape, or from a square shape to a triangular shape? Not at all: for I can grasp that the wax is capable of countless changes of this kind, yet I am unable to run through this immeasurable number of changes in my imagination, from which it follows that it is not the faculty of imagination that gives me my grasp of the wax as flexible and changeable. (7:13)

⁴ Surely my awareness of my own self is not merely much truer and more certain than my awareness of the wax, but also much more distinct and evident (7:33)

2 Lessons from the Cogito

- Why is the *cogito* argument important for Descartes's project?⁵
 - Provides knowledge that is *certain*
 - Provides knowledge of one's nature⁶

⁵ Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable. (AT 7:24)

2.1 Why is certainty important?

1. Foundationalism: what is certain is a ‘first principle’ from which we derive other knowledge
2. Systematicity: what is certain is systematically connected with other knowledge
3. Methodology: what is certain reveals a method for deriving other (certain) knowledge

⁶ what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions. ... Are not all these things just as true as the fact that I exist... The fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer. (AT 7:28-9; Descartes 1984, 1:19)

2.2 Why is Self-Knowledge Important?

1. Establish the existence of a purely intellectual faculty for the acquisition of knowledge⁷
2. Establish the priority of the intellectual faculty over a sensible faculty for knowledge
3. Provide an account of the origin of central ideas/concepts necessary for metaphysical theorizing⁸

⁷ I must therefore admit that the nature of this piece of wax is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone. ... But what is this wax which is perceived by the mind alone? It is of course the same wax which I see, which I touch, which I picture in my imagination, in short the same wax which I thought it to be from the start. And yet, and here is the point, the perception I have of it is a case not of vision or touch or imagination - nor has it ever been, despite previous appearances - but of purely mental scrutiny; and this can be imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct as it is now, depending on how carefully I concentrate on what the wax consists in. (Descartes 1984, 21; AT 7:31)

⁸ Among my ideas, some appear to be innate, some to be adventitious, and others to have been invented by me. My understanding of what a thing is, what truth is, and what thought is, seems to derive simply from my own nature. [Descartes (1984), 26; AT 7:38]

References & Further Reading

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