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## DESCARTES'S *COGITO* REEXAMINED\*

Descartes's thought has been subjected to almost every kind of philosophical criticism—from scholastic severity and Husserl's great (though not complete) praise to the recent bombast by Ryle of the Cartesian "ghost in the machine." In addition to these extremes, a host of critics have passed their judgments on the Cartesian sins.

Most of such criticisms, though by no means all of them, have been made against either Descartes's dualism or his "rationalism." And many of them, perhaps, are justified. Nevertheless, too great a preoccupation with these seemingly obvious flaws in his argument have tended to dull an appreciation of the real Cartesian<sup>1</sup> contribution, the *cogito*. Descartes's difficulties with the mind-body problem, for example, are often the chief result of an introductory study of Cartesianism; yet the philosophic value of the *cogito* argument is, if touched upon at all, rarely grasped. Furthermore, as we shall observe, many outright misconceptions of even Descartes's meaning—let alone validity—have allowed themselves philosophic dignity only because Descartes has already been none too graciously disposed of.

The purpose of the present paper, then, is to reexamine the essential features of the *cogito* argument, to note some well-known criticisms which have been made of it, and to suggest a fairer evaluation of the Cartesian contribution.

I. The various steps of Descartes's skeptical procedure are well-known. He began by noting that all he had received for true in the past had apparently come to him through the senses; yet there were times when the senses deceived him, and "it is the part of prudence never to trust entirely to any thing by which we have at one time been deceived."<sup>2</sup> The existence of dreams as well as illusions is taken by Descartes as further evidence for distrusting the senses: in dreams one at times has experiences which seem just as real as those of the waking state.<sup>3</sup>

\* The original research for this paper was done in connection with the preparation of a dissertation, "Attacks on the Cartesian *Cogito*," submitted in partial fulfillment for the Ph.D. degree, Boston University, 1950.

<sup>1</sup> This is not to deny other similar arguments in Augustine and Campanella. Support of this statement, however, lies outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> *Med.*, IX, A, 14. All references to Descartes's writings are to the Adam and Tannery edition. Note that this attack on the senses, while addressed to Renaissance skeptics, is especially directed toward the scholastic notion of an intuition of being. See H. Schwarz, "Les Recherches de Descartes sur la connaissance du monde extérieur," *Rev. mét. mor.*, 4 (1896), 459–477, especially 468.

<sup>3</sup> Natorp shows more completely that Descartes's arguments against the senses

Thus it is possible that the particular things of which one is aware through his senses could be only illusory, and that all sensible objects, including one's body, do not in fact exist. At the same time, however, it is necessary to note that there are some objects more simple and universal which may seem to be real and existing. Among such things are corporeal nature and its extension, together with the figure, size, number, place and time of extended things.<sup>4</sup> Also mathematics, because it deals with the more simple and universal, seems to contain something that is certain and indubitable. For example, it seems most improbable that when one adds two and three or numbers the sides of a square, he could be in error.<sup>5</sup> But when one reflects on these formal disciplines, he sees that they are not absolutely certain in themselves. Suppose, for example, that the universe is governed, not by a benevolent God, but by an "evil genius";<sup>6</sup> and that, in this universe, two and three do not make five, and other seemingly formal assertions also are not true—that is, that while we perhaps cannot doubt them, they may have no application to the world of experience. Because this is at least a possibility, the truths of mathematics must be set aside as not giving certainty.

All the knowledge which Descartes has received, therefore, is subject to doubt, and is thus rejected in this search for certainty.<sup>7</sup> And because it is possible that the "simple and universal" ideas which he has could be produced by himself, it is not necessary to believe in any power external to himself: "I believe that body, extension, movement, and place are only fictions of my mind."<sup>8</sup> One further doubt remains to be tested: "Have I not also convinced myself that I did not exist?"

Descartes's use of this skeptical procedure needs careful attention. It is improbable that Descartes was not influenced by the skeptical tendencies of Renaissance thinkers.<sup>9</sup> He was very careful, however, in stating the precise difference between his use of the skeptical procedure and that of the skeptics:

Not that I was imitating the Skeptics . . . , who doubt only for the sake of doubt and affect to be always undecided: for, on the contrary, my entire

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reduce to two, from dreams and from illusions. *Descartes' Erkenntnistheorie* (Marburg, 1882), 45–52.

<sup>4</sup> *Med.*, IX, A, 15. Note that this statement includes an object's "primary qualities"—even nature as the object of "speculative geometry."

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> This notion has been subjected to many interpretations. Hamelin's, however, is perhaps the most consistent with Descartes's intent. "Le malin génie n'est pas autre chose qu'une personnification de la violence que fait peut-être subir à l'esprit la nature, peut-être irrationnelle de l'univers." *Le Système de Descartes* (Paris, 1921), 118.

<sup>7</sup> *Med.*, IX, A, 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> See especially Schmid aus Schwarzenberg, *Rene Descartes und Seine Reform der Philosophie* (Nördlingen, 1859), 31.

purpose was only to assure myself, and to reject the shifting ground and sand in order to find the rock or the clay.<sup>10</sup>

It is necessary, at least once in one's lifetime, to set one's beliefs in doubt, said Descartes;<sup>11</sup> yet he neither recommended this procedure for all persons,<sup>12</sup> nor believed that such skepticism should be an end in itself.<sup>13</sup> "The universal doubt of Descartes," as Brunschvicg says, "is thus not practiced, as by the Skeptics or by Montaigne, for the sake of doubt itself";<sup>14</sup> and Gibson adds, "What really was remarkable was the use of scepticism to refute the sceptics."<sup>15</sup>

A second point on Descartes's use of systematic doubt concerns the criterion, if any, which he used in his procedure. It is possible to suppose that the object of Descartes's search is a clear and distinct perception of some kind; for the criterion of clearness and distinctness is so basic in his thought. There is little support for this supposition, however. First, the criterion of clear and distinct ideas is for Descartes not prior to the *cogito*, but is rather derived from it. Secondly, in the process of systematic doubt, Descartes rejected all logical, mathematical, and metaphysical principles as not being indubitable. The correct interpretation of Descartes's systematic doubt seems to be that, first, the criterion by which Descartes rejected everything as uncertain is the possibility of doubt on any grounds whatever.<sup>16</sup> And secondly, it is not some criterion which determines the indubitability of any proposition, but it is an *experience* (which point will be made more fully below). The procedure of systematic doubt is an attempt to find such an experience.

II. After rejecting everything external to himself by his procedure of doubt, Descartes next turned his attention to himself. Here he found a reality which is indubitable: "I undoubtedly existed, if I persuaded myself or only if I thought something."<sup>17</sup> Even if there is some deceiver of great power who employs all his industry to deceive Descartes, it is still necessary to conclude and to hold constantly that the proposition, "*I am, I exist*," is true every time it is conceived.<sup>18</sup> Thus, from the very act of doubting itself, a truth emerges which is itself unshakable by that act of doubt-

<sup>10</sup> *Disc.*, VI, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Princ.*, I, 1, IX, B, 25.

<sup>12</sup> *Disc.*, VI, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Recherche*, X, 513.

<sup>14</sup> Brunschvicg, *René Descartes* (Paris, 1937), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Gibson, *The Philosophy of Descartes* (London, 1932), 37.

<sup>16</sup> *Med.*: "le moindre sujet de douter que j'trouverai, suffira pour me les faire toutes rejeter." IX, A, 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

ing, *viz.*, the certainty of the doubter's existence. "*I doubt, therefore I am, or, which is the same: I think, therefore I am.*"<sup>19</sup>

An Archimedean certainty, then, is found in the existence of the doubter: the one who doubts must certainly exist. But what type of thing is this doubter? Descartes answered, "a thing which thinks."<sup>20</sup> Is this doubter more than thought? Descartes excited his imagination, but he understood that "manifestly nothing of all that which I am able to comprehend by means of the imagination appertains to that knowledge which I have of myself."<sup>21</sup> Hence, Descartes writes,

But what then am I? A thing which thinks. What is a thing which thinks? That is to say a thing which doubts, conceives, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels.<sup>22</sup>

These attributes belong to the mind, Descartes argued, because none of them can be distinguished from "*ma pensée.*"

Descartes's argument thus far involves two assertions. First, he is holding that the contents of consciousness are indubitable, and hence that they are the only valid starting point in knowledge;<sup>23</sup> and secondly, he is arguing that personality or selfhood is the whole of present consciousness.<sup>24</sup> The meaning and implication of these assertions is that the "given" for knowledge is immediate conscious experience, and that all knowledge must ultimately be rooted in that conscious experience. And further, at this point of the argument, it is necessary to correct another error: the *cogito* does not establish the substance view of the self. This must await the divine verification or validation of the criterion of clearness and distinctness (and the principle that all attributes must reside in a subject). The "given" for knowledge is present conscious experience, and this is established by the *cogito* argument; a thinking substance comes much later in Descartes's thought.

Yet it is necessary to go further: concentrating on the fact that he is no other thing but thought,<sup>25</sup> Descartes recognized his true nature more clearly and distinctly than before. But is it not possible, Descartes questioned, that corporeal nature is still more distinctly known than the mind? He took as an example a piece of wax.<sup>26</sup> The wax is fresh from the hive, it has an odor of flowers, it has a certain color, shape, and size, it is hard and cold; and if

<sup>19</sup> *Recherche*, X, 523.

<sup>20</sup> *Med.*, IX, A, 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. *ibid.*, 27.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> *Resp.* I, IX, A, 95.

<sup>25</sup> *Med.*, IX, A, 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–26.

one taps it, it will emit a sound. But as the wax is brought toward the fire, its odor disappears, its size and shape change as it becomes warm and liquid; and no longer is a sound evoked by tapping it. Can one say that he knows the piece of wax with distinctness? "Certainly it can be nothing of all that which I have observed there by the mediation of the senses"; all that falls under the senses has changed. But one thing about the wax is known distinctly: "Certainly there remains nothing but an extended, flexible, and mutable something." Indeed, the wax's extension is its only distinctive character. But, when this extension is distinguished from the *formes exterieures* of the wax, there still remains the possibility of error in one's judgment, except that "I am not able to perceive in this way without a human mind."<sup>27</sup> For, continued Descartes,

do I not know myself, not only with much more truth and certainty, but also with more distinctness and clarity? For if I judge that the wax is or exists from the fact that I see it, certainly it follows much more clearly that I myself exist, from the fact that I see it.<sup>28</sup>

III. The problem of interpreting the *cogito* argument at this point is one which concerns its logical structure. That structure has been attacked in many ways. Gassendi began these attacks by arguing that, while it is true that Descartes establishes his existence, this fact could have been inferred from any of his activities: "You could come to the same conclusion from any other activity of yours, for from natural light it is known that whatever acts is [or exists]."<sup>29</sup> For example, one might argue that *I walk, therefore I am*. But Descartes correctly answered this criticism: it is not the walking which assures his existence, but the thought or consciousness of his walking.

When you say that I could come to the same conclusion from any other activity of mine you were very far from the truth, because I am not wholly certain of any of my activities (in the sense of having metaphysical certitude, which alone is involved here) save thinking alone. For example, there is no right to make the inference, *I walk, therefore I am*, except in so far as the consciousness of walking is a thought, concerning which alone the inference is certain, not on the motion of the body.<sup>30</sup>

The existence of any activity is insufficient to prove that one exists except as he has consciousness of that activity; and it is the consciousness, not the activity, which gives certitude.

It was also questioned by Descartes's critics whether his conclusion, *I think, therefore I am*, is not an enthymeme of which the unexpressed universal premise is "*that which thinks, is*."<sup>31</sup> Descartes, however, was very

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> *Obj.* V, VII, 259.

<sup>30</sup> *Resp.* V, VII, 352.

<sup>31</sup> See *Obj.* II, IX, A, 102; and *Obj.* V (French), IX, A, 205.



forceful in his reply that his conclusion is not one which has been drawn from a syllogism. When one says *I think, I exist*, "he does not infer his existence from his thought as by the force of some syllogism, but like a thing known by faith, he sees it by a simple inspection of the mind."<sup>32</sup> Against Gassendi, Descartes said that Gassendi believes that all conclusions must come from universals, whereas the true order of knowledge is to begin with particulars.<sup>33</sup> The *cogito* is no syllogism, nor could it be, for Descartes had previously rejected the principle of syllogism as giving metaphysical certitude.

Two further criticisms have been made against the *cogito*: first, that it is not a real proposition, and second, that it is not a real inference. There is no question but that Descartes himself did regard it both as a true proposition and a valid inference. Two spokesmen for these views are Kant and Huxley.

Kant's criticism of the Cartesian argument at this point must be viewed in the light of his general estimate of the system as a "problematic idealism."<sup>34</sup> Idealism Kant takes to be the view that declares that the existence in space of objects outside the knower is doubtful or undemonstrable. Descartes's view is problematic idealism because the *sum* is the only indubitable assertion. At this point, *viz.*, the indubitableness of the self, Kant believes that Descartes's position is correct, but that one must move beyond this assertion:

The required proof must, therefore, show that we have *experience*, and not merely imagination of outer things; and this, it would seem, cannot be achieved save by proof that even inner experience, which for Descartes is indubitable, is possible only on the assumption of outer experience.<sup>35</sup>

Kant holds that there is an "I think" which can accompany all one's representations<sup>36</sup>; but, just as the proposition "*I am simple*" must be regarded as an immediate expression of apperception, so too "what is referred to as the Cartesian inference, is really a tautology, since the *cogito (sum cogitans)* asserts my existence immediately."<sup>37</sup> It might also be noted, following Reymond, that the *cogito* argument affirming the *res cogitans* is for Kant "necessarily sophistic; drawn by an inevitable illusion, it transforms into substantial reality a simple logical function of the understanding."<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Resp.* II, IX, A, 110.

<sup>33</sup> *Obj.* V (French), IX, A, 205–206.

<sup>34</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B274–275. Kemp Smith's translation is used here, as well as his Commentary.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, B275. See Hamelin, *op. cit.*, 241, for a defense of Descartes on this point.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, B131.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, A355. In B Kant's treatment of this point is altered.

<sup>38</sup> Reymond, "Le 'Cogito,' vérification d'une hypothèse métaphysique," *Rev. mét. mor.*, 30 (1923), 554. Our interpretation of this "transformation" has been given above.

Huxley has also argued that the *cogito* is neither a valid proposition nor a true inference. The *ergo*, he writes, "has no business there," for "the 'I' is assumed in the 'I think,' which is simply another way of saying 'I am thinking.'"<sup>39</sup> Further, Huxley continues, the "I think" is not a simple proposition, but is really three: a) something called "I" exists, b) something called thought exists, and c) the thought is the result of the action of the "I."<sup>40</sup>

The best defense of Descartes on these two points has been given by Veitch. To be sure, Veitch admits, the "I think" may seem to be a mere redundancy or tautology, if one sees that "I" already means "thinking," which is one function among others of man. But, Veitch questions, "how do I know that 'I' already means 'thinking,' or that thinking is implied in 'I'? By some test or other—by some form of experience." The proposition is not analytic in character; and furthermore, Veitch argues, the predicate involved is a real one:

But I do more, for I assert definitude of being in the thinking or consciousness,—and this, though inseparable from it in reality, is at least distinguishable in thought. This constitutes a real predicate, and a very important predicate, which excludes on the one hand a mere act or state, mere "thinking" as apart from a self or me, and an absolute me or self, apart from an act of thought.<sup>41</sup>

The chief points which Descartes has attempted to establish may be summarized thus: First, it is not through some universal logical premise that the certainty of the *cogito* is known; for knowledge, Descartes held, begins with particulars. Hence the *cogito* does not presuppose the validity of logical principles or of Descartes's own criterion of truth. Secondly, however, Descartes's argument is that the experience of thinking implies the existence of the thinker; but, Descartes held, this relation of implication is not purely analytic. Thinking, to be sure, implies existence; but this implication is not known merely by analyzing thinking, as is true of an analytic statement. Rather, Descartes argued that this relation of implication is itself experienced. It is a synthetic (based on experience) *a priori* (universal and necessary) judgment.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Huxley, *Methods and Results: Essays* (New York, 1893), 177. See also Arnauld's objection, which is close to Huxley's. *Obj.* IV, IX, A, 158.

<sup>40</sup> Huxley, *op. cit.*, 177. These statements are just the reverse of the Cartesian argument: thought is indubitable and must thus be ascribed to a thinker, but the I, as substance, is known neither as to its nature (at this point in the argument) nor even that it exists.

<sup>41</sup> Veitch (tr. and ed.), *The Method, Meditations, and Philosophy of Descartes* (Washington, 1901), 23.

<sup>42</sup> Those who define "synthetic" and "*a priori*" in such a way as to make the synthetic *a priori* a contradiction in terms will find this interpretation impossible. To argue the point lies beyond the scope of this paper. It may be noted, however,



A further problem remains, however, *viz.*, the question of whether the *cogito ergo sum* is an intuition or an inference. From Descartes's own writings, it is apparent that the philosopher insisted on the intuitive knowledge of this proposition:

You are less assured of the presence of objects which you see than of the truth of this proposition . . . , it is notwithstanding a proof to you of the capacity of our souls to receive from God an intuitive knowledge.<sup>43</sup>

Spinoza also interpreted the *cogito* as a unique and intuited proposition: "The proposition *ego sum* is self-evident."<sup>44</sup>

Thus the intention of Descartes is quite clear: he did hold that the *cogito* proposition is an intuited one. On the other hand, however, many historians and critics of Descartes have insisted that, despite his intentions, the *cogito* is truly a reasoning. Huet, e.g., writes: "This is false: I think therefore I am is known to us through simple awareness, not by ratiocination."<sup>45</sup> Hamelin, a modern critic, believes that the *cogito* is "the truth of an argument rather than that of a judgment"; for, in the order of knowledge, it is "a movement, a march from thought to being."<sup>46</sup> Segond also writes that "this deductive character is incontestable."<sup>47</sup> Finally, Koyré writes that "it is no longer the immediate intuition of being but the intellectual intuition of a rational relation and a rational conclusion—in order to think it is necessary to be."<sup>48</sup>

In order to judge whether or not Descartes's argument is an intuition, it is necessary to recall his view of the relation of intuition and deduction. Deduction or inference for Descartes has intuition for its ideal or goal, but they are not two absolutely separate or distinct processes.<sup>49</sup> Hence the argument as to the intuitive nature of the *cogito* proposition is really an argument as to whether the proposition is an "inferior" type of intuition, i.e., a deduction, or whether it is a true intuition. The proposition for Descartes is, it seems, a deduction which is of the nature of an intuition, i.e., it is by a continuous "inspection" of the mind that the truth of the proposition is known. It seems best, therefore, to characterize the *cogito* as an "immediate inference": by a process approaching intuition, the experience of thinking is seen to imply the existence of the thinker. (Note that

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that such definitions merely beg a question which to others is one of the most basic in philosophy.

<sup>43</sup> To Marquis de Newcastle (March or April, 1648), V, 137–138.

<sup>44</sup> Spinoza, *Principles of Descartes's Philosophy*, Prop. II.

<sup>45</sup> Huet, *Censura philosophiae cartesianae* (Paris, 1689), I, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Hamelin, *op. cit.*, 135.

<sup>47</sup> Segond, *La Sagesse cartésienne et la doctrine de la science* (Paris, 1932), 153.

<sup>48</sup> Koyré, *Essai sur l'idée de Dieu et les preuves de son existence chez Descartes* (Paris, 1922), 59.

<sup>49</sup> See the *Regulae* on this point, and also Hamelin, *op. cit.*

with these remarks, Koyré's view above is about the same as the present interpretation.)

In summary, this interpretation of the logical structure of Descartes's argument leads to the following results: First, no principle other than thought or consciousness is a sufficient basis for the *cogito*. Secondly, the *cogito* is not a syllogism, or argument using a universal premise. Thirdly, the argument is not a sophism, or purely analytic or tautologous. The relation of implication, to be sure, holds between thinking and existence; yet it is i) not a relation known merely by analyzing the concept of thinking, but ii) a relation of implication known by experiencing that relation. Fourthly, it is best to characterize the *cogito* as an immediate inference which is made, not on the basis of the law of identity (which would make it analytic), but on the basis of an experience which makes it a truly synthetic judgment.<sup>50</sup>

IV. In evaluating these criticisms of Descartes's *cogito*, it is necessary to conclude that they are based on misinterpretations of the Cartesian principles. The cause of these misinterpretations seems to lie in the fact that the experiential factor in Descartes's argument is overlooked, and also in a failure to follow systematically the procedure he undertook. Proper recognition of these factors leads to the interpretation presented here. Further, the problem of whether the *cogito* is, for Descartes, an intuition or a deduction is solved by noting the true character of Cartesian deduction.

The validity of the Cartesian argument at this point thus appears uncontested. His method of systematic doubt led him to an experience which brought this doubt to rest. This experience, the necessary existence of the doubter, must be taken as proving, first, that the existence of the thinker *is* certain; secondly, that it is only in *penser* that such necessary existence can be found; and thirdly, that the whole of consciousness is the primary datum of knowledge.

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<sup>50</sup> Reymond's article, cited above, is a defense of the *cogito* as a verification of a metaphysical hypothesis. The present interpretation is close to his.