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## **Descartes' "I think, therefore I am"**

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If you are reading this, then you are probably looking at a screen or a piece of paper. Think to yourself: "I have some paper in my hand," "I am in front of a computer" or whatever fits.

Is your belief here *certain*? Is there *any* way that you could believe this, yet your belief be false? Is there any possibility that you are mistaken about this belief? René Descartes (1596-1650) argues you could: this belief, and almost all other beliefs, are *not* certain.

Descartes argues that there is one clear exception, however: "I think, therefore I am."<sup>[1]</sup> He claims to have discovered a belief that is *certain* and *irrefutable*. Perhaps there is no saying more famous in philosophy than this phrase, often known as the "Cogito" after its Latin phrasing, *cogito ergo sum*.<sup>[2]</sup>

This essay explores the meaning of the Cogito, its importance to Descartes, and its legacy for philosophy up to the present day.

### **1. Doubt and Skepticism**

The phrase "I think, therefore I am" first appears in *Discourse on the Method* (1637).<sup>[3]</sup> But Descartes changes the wording to "I am, I exist"<sup>[4]</sup> in his most famous (1641) work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*<sup>[5]</sup> (called the *Meditations* for short).

In the *Meditations*, Descartes reflects on the fact that he has had many false beliefs, and he sets out to address that problem, with the hope of finding a way to ensure he only has true beliefs and even that scientific research yields only truths as well.

His strategy is to doubt, or not believe, any claim that is false or *could* be false. He recognizes that his senses might be deceiving him now, since they have deceived him before; he might also be reasoning

erroneously now, since he has reasoned badly before. He thereby doubts all beliefs from his senses and from his faculty of reasoning, since those beliefs *could* be false.

Descartes then considers the most extreme reason for doubt: there *may* exist an evil demon (sometimes translated 'genius,' 'genie,' or 'spirit') who has the power to control all of his thoughts, tricking him into believing anything.<sup>[6]</sup> Descartes cannot *prove* that this demon does not exist. So he acknowledges that it's *possible* that all his beliefs about the world external to his own mind are illusions *caused* by the demon, corresponding to nothing at all, and so all his beliefs about the external world are false.

Descartes is usually thought of as considering *skepticism*, the view that we lack knowledge or justified belief.<sup>[7]</sup> Here skepticism is considered because we lack *certainty*: what we believe might be false, so our beliefs aren't knowledge. As we will see, Descartes argues that the Cogito enables him to defeat skepticism and show that we have knowledge, with certainty.

### **2. The Cogito and Certainty**

After considering the evil demon, Descartes soon discovers the Cogito. He realizes that thinking "I am, I exist," *withstands* the evil-demon test! *Even if* all the beliefs and types of beliefs that Descartes reviews are false, or could be false, at the least, *he must exist* to be deceived. Even if one doubts one's own existence, one *must* exist at that moment, since there must be something, or someone, doing the doubting. Doubting is a way of thinking, and one's existence is required to doubt or think in the first place: it is impossible to doubt and yet not exist.

So, the "I think" element in the Cogito implies the direct, immediate, certain knowledge of one's own existence. Thought requires a thinker and this is known *with certainty*, since not even the demon could deceive someone who doesn't exist. Descartes thereby found what he was looking for: *some* certain, indubitable, irrefutable knowledge.<sup>[8]</sup>

### **3. Defeating Skepticism**

Once the Cogito is discovered, Descartes argues it can serve as a foundation for how to find other truths that are certain.

Descartes proposes that the Cogito is undeniably true because it is *clear* and *distinct*. About clarity, Descartes explains, "Some perceptions are so transparent and at the same time so simple we can

never think without believing them to be true..."<sup>[9]</sup> When something is *distinct*, the mind has an unclouded vision of what is most essential about that object. These qualities become the standard against which all other beliefs can be evaluated.

Descartes argues that the clarity and distinctness rule, derived from the Cogito, can justify our beliefs about the external world. But what verifies the clarity-and-distinctness rule? God's existence, Descartes argues. By reflecting on his idea of God, he argues that God exists.<sup>[10]</sup> Descartes then argues that a truthful, good God would not allow us to be deceived when we understand objects clearly and distinctly, and so God would not allow us to routinely have false beliefs.

The Cogito then serves as the foundation for a series of claims that build upon each other. According to Descartes, his reasoning establishes that, what he originally doubted, he actually knows, with certainty.<sup>[11]</sup> He thereby defeats the skeptical concerns that he considered earlier.

#### **4. Conclusion: Knowledge without Certainty**

Descartes was impressed by the Cogito because he had found a belief that is certain and so, *when believed*, cannot be false. He thought that certainty was necessary for a belief to be known. While he argued that, fortunately, we *can* ultimately be certain of much of what we think we know,<sup>[12]</sup> most philosophers following him have denied that.

Contemporary theorists of knowledge tend to *deny* that knowledge requires certainty: they tend to be "fallibilists," arguing that we can *know* some claim, yet not be certain that it is true.<sup>[13]</sup> The problem with Descartes' standard for knowledge is that almost no beliefs meet it. Descartes thought he could show how our ordinary knowledge claims are ultimately based on the Cogito, but most philosophers have not been convinced by his case.

The epistemic lesson of the Cogito is that *if* certainty is a necessary requirement for knowledge, we are left with very little knowledge indeed. The challenge, however, is that if certainty is not required for knowledge, what is?<sup>[14]</sup>

#### **Notes**

<sup>[1]</sup> For a discussion of the whole of Descartes' *Meditations*, see Marc Bobro's Descartes' *Meditations* 1-3 and Descartes' *Meditations* 4-6.

<sup>[2]</sup> It should be noted that although the idea expressed in *cogito ergo sum* is usually attributed to and associated with Descartes, it was not an entirely new idea. For instance, over a 1000 years earlier, St. Augustine, in *The City of God* (Book XI, 26), wrote "ergo sum si fallor," which is often paraphrased as *fallor ergo sum*: "I make mistakes, therefore I am."

<sup>[3]</sup> Cottingham, John, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 1*. Cambridge University Press (2012) (AT VI 32: CSM I 127).

<sup>[4]</sup> It's instructive to consider why Descartes changes the wording from the *Discourse on the Method* to the *Meditations*. Unlike in the *Discourse*, Descartes employs strict tests of doubt in the *Meditations*, where even simple inferences are put in question. In other words, in setting the stage for the Cogito, the meditator is unsure that logic is reliable, and so cannot legitimately *argue* from premises to a conclusion that she exists. Another way to account for the missing *ergo* in the Cogito of the *Meditations* is to point out that Descartes seeks a *foundational* belief upon which to provide justification for other beliefs and therefore ground knowledge, and that for a belief to be properly foundational it is in no need of justification itself.

<sup>[5]</sup> Cottingham, John, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 2*. Cambridge University Press (2012) (AT VII 25: CSM II 17).

<sup>[6]</sup> The 1999 science-fiction film *The Matrix* is an update on this idea: one's beliefs may be caused by the Matrix, not the physical world, and so they are false: e.g., someone "plugged into" the Matrix *believing* she is riding a bicycle is not *actually* riding a bicycle, so that belief is false.

<sup>[7]</sup> There are different kinds of skeptics. Some skeptics are "global" skeptics, who deny that we have any knowledge at all, about anything: Descartes seems close to a global skeptic, at least before he reaches the Cogito. Other types of skepticism are more limited: e.g., someone might be a skeptic about knowledge claims about the future ("Nobody really *knows* what will happen in the future"), or a skeptic about claims to religious knowledge, or moral knowledge, or skeptics about knowledge claims based on testimony, and more.

<sup>[8]</sup> What follows from the certainty of the Cogito is the nature of Descartes himself: he must be a thing that

thinks. The Cogito does not prove that Descartes has a body or a brain, or even that other minds exist: these can all be doubted. Only thought is certain: Descartes says, “*I am, I exist*, that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I think. It might perhaps even happen that if I stopped thinking, I should at once altogether stop being.” Cottingham, John, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 2*. Cambridge University Press (2012) (AT VII 27: CSM II 18).

[9] Cottingham, John, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 2*. Cambridge University Press (2012) (AT 7, 145-6, CMS 2, 104).

[10] Descartes argues that his idea of God is such that it could only have been caused by God: Descartes couldn't have created that idea on his own or from any of his own experiences. Descartes also offers a distinct ontological argument for God's existence: see The Ontological Argument for the Existence of God by Andrew Chapman

[11] Thus, Descartes is clearly a foundationalist. See e.g. Hasan, Ali, “Foundationalist Theories of Epistemic Justification,” in E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2018 edition.

[12] Something unclear is whether each individual would have to go through the thought processes that Descartes engaged in to have knowledge, or else they lack knowledge, or whether Descartes (or anyone's, or enough people's) engaging in these meditations would contribute to everyone's having knowledge.

[13] See e.g. Unger, Peter. *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism* (Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press), Chapter III.

[14] For discussion of some challenges facing theories of knowledge that deny that certainty is necessary for knowledge, see The Gettier Problem by Andrew Chapman.

## References

St. Augustine, *The City of God* (412)

Cottingham, John, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 1*. Cambridge University Press (2012)

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