

Lecture Four: Cogito Ergo Sum

1. Recap

Remember what Descartes is in the business of doing: he is using doubt to purify his set of beliefs. He wants to be left with the beliefs that he can be entirely certain of, to use as a new foundation for a new science.

Using the dreaming argument, and the idea of the evil deceiver we can cast doubt on almost all of our beliefs. But what do we do then? How do we build up to a new, certain system? Today we're going to see how Descartes starts that process, looking at the so-called cogito argument.

2. The Cogito Argument

Descartes has doubted almost everything. He has suspended all his beliefs about the entire world, God, his own body, mathematics, and so on.

But what his own existence? 'If I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed (p. 17).' So, his own existence that cannot be doubted!

- A) Suppose he is deceived by an evil demon. Then he MUST exist in order to BE deceived.
- B) Suppose he is dreaming. Likewise, then he MUST exist in order to be dreaming.

The evil deceiver, 'will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something.' So, '*I am, I exist* is necessarily true whenever I assert or think it.' Or, 'I think, therefore I am (Discourse 4).'

3. Objections

- (i) *Pierre Gassendi* (5th Objections, page 68)

Why not 'I walk, therefore I am'?

Descartes: It's not as certain that I am walking as it is that I am thinking – I might be dreaming that I am walking... 'I walk, therefore I am' is a valid inference. *If* I walk, then necessarily I exist. But the premise 'I walk' is not certainly true (by Descartes' lights), so neither is the conclusion.

Valid argument: conclusion follows from the premises.

Sound argument: valid and the premises are true, and so the conclusion must be true too.

Descartes is looking for a sound argument that we can be certain is sound.

Gassendi's objection reveals that Descartes is distinguishing firmly between mental acts, about which we can be certain, and everything else. But is it really true we have totally transparent access to the mental? Consider the use of unconscious/non-conscious psychological states in psychology.

- (ii) *Russell and Lichtenberg*

Georg Lichtenberg (18th century German philosopher) and Bertrand Russell (*Problems of Philosophy*, chapter 2): Is Descartes entitled to say 'I think'? How does he know that it's **he** who is doing the thinking? All he can be certain of is: that thought is occurring. So, the premise should be 'There is

thought'. In this way, the argument is no longer valid: that there is thought does not entail that I exist. So, is there an interpretation of the argument which neither begs the question nor is invalid?

(iii) *The Performative Interpretation*

Jaakko Hintikka (1962): "Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?", *Philosophical Review* 71

Some speech acts are performatives we do things with words: when I say that I promise you something, I'm not reporting on a pre-existing promise: using my words, I'm *making* a promise.

Hintikka's idea is that 'I exist' is a performative. You *show* that it is true by asserting or believing it. However, Descartes does insist in many places that the Cogito is an argument, with a premise and a conclusion.

(iv) *The Implicit Premise Objection*

The cogito relies on an implicit premise: 'I exist' only follows from 'I think' if we have the major premise: 'everything that thinks exists'.

How can Descartes be certain of this premise? What is his source of justification for this claim? Couldn't he be being deceived by the demon?

Descartes claims he uses no such major premise (reply to 2nd objections, p. 68). Instead, he relies on a 'simple intuition of the mind' which recognises that thinkers must exist.

(v) *The Use of Logic*

Throughout this process (whether he uses a major premise, or we can recognise the validity of the argument more directly). We need to presume various things about logic and how words work.

Descartes could insist that the whole Method of Doubt itself legitimately presupposes that he is not mad – that there are truths of logic and meaning which don't presuppose the existence of the outside world. If this isn't legitimate then none of the process can even get started. Even if we could reach some certain foundations, how could we build anything with them?

Similarly, Descartes can say that the entire Method of Doubt depends on its being him that doubts, thinks and so on. It's because of the personal aspect of the Method of Doubt that he is able to say 'I think' rather than 'there is thought'.

We might be worried that this amounts to an admission that Descartes's own existence is a *presupposition* of his project – not something that he really ends up proving.

Perhaps this is legitimate – it certainly at least seems like my own existence is obvious. If we are willing to grant Descartes this, then our attention is drawn to the next part of his project: where do we go from here?