

6

Cartesian Reflections on the Autonomy of the Mental

Matthew Soteriou

In a recent paper Korsgaard (2009b) articulates and defends a claim that she notes is part of a venerable philosophical tradition: that “reason is what distinguishes us from other animals, and that reason is in some special way the active dimension of mind.” Under this view, “the human mind is active in some way that the minds of the other animals are not, and ... this activity is the essence of rationality.” Korsgaard cites as examples of philosophers belonging to this tradition Kant, in his association of reason with the mind’s spontaneity, and Aristotle, in his doctrine of the active intellect, or *nous*. I think a case can also be made for regarding Descartes as belonging to this tradition.

Descartes is notorious for the way in which he downgrades the psychology of non-human animals, going so far as to deny them a mind in denying them a rational soul; and he also often places emphasis upon, and attaches significance to, active, agential aspects of the rational human mind. In the *Meditations* he alludes to the way in which the mind “uses its freedom” when engaged in the method of doubt. In the *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes states explicitly that it is our free will that allows us to withhold our assent in doubtful matters.¹ And the Fourth Meditation is largely devoted to arguing that the act of judgment involves not only the intellect but also the will.²

My principal concern in this paper, though, isn’t that of defending a particular interpretation of Descartes’ texts. The aim is simply to reflect on some remarks that Descartes makes in the *Meditations* as a springboard for a discussion of the role of agency in our conscious thinking—and in particular, the extent to which self-determination and self-governance may be involved in conscious reasoning and self-critical reflection. In fact the paper will largely be devoted to reflecting on two sentences that appear in the Synopsis of the *Meditations*, and discussing some issues that arise out them. These sentences introduce Descartes’ summary of the Second Meditation.

In the Second Meditation, the mind uses its own freedom and supposes the non-existence of all the things about whose existence it can have

even the slightest doubt; and in so doing the mind notices that it is impossible that it should not exist during this time. This exercise is also of the greatest benefit, since it enables the mind to distinguish without difficulty what belongs to itself, i.e., to an intellectual nature, from what belongs to the body.

Descartes claims here that the mind “uses its own freedom” in supposing something. The first question I shall be considering (in section 6.1) is the following. In what respect, if any, does the mind “use its own freedom” when engaged in supposition? In particular, what is the role of agency in supposing something for the sake of argument?

The specific description that Descartes offers of the mind’s aim in the Second Meditation is that of supposing the non-existence of all the things “about whose existence it can have even the slightest doubt.” Identifying the propositions one believes whose veracity there can be slightest reason to doubt is an exercise in self-critical reflection. In section 6.2 I shall be considering the extent to which agency is implicated in self-critical reflection. I shall be arguing that the capacity to engage in self-critical reflection involves the capacity to “bracket” one’s beliefs, and that the capacity to bracket one’s beliefs is related to the capacity to engage in suppositional reasoning. When one brackets a belief, and when one supposes something for the sake of argument, one imposes a constraint on one’s own reasoning *by* reasoning in recognition of that self-imposed constraint. In both cases, I shall be suggesting, the conscious reasoning one engages in is both self-conscious and self-governed. I shall then briefly touch on the relevance of this view of supposition and self-critical reflection to Descartes’ further claim that “the mind notices that it is impossible that it should not exist during this time.”

Finally, in section 6.3, I shall be saying a bit more about how I think we should conceive of the role of agency in the reasoning one engages in when one engages in self-critical reflection. In particular, I shall do so by contrasting my proposal with a view according to which the role of agency in such reasoning, and indeed, all conscious reasoning, can at best be “merely catalytic” and “indirect.”³

6.1

In what respect, if any, does the mind “use its own freedom,” as Descartes suggests, when engaged in supposition? What is the role of agency in supposing? First we need to narrow down the notion of supposition that is our concern. The phrase “*S* supposes that *p*” is sometimes used to attribute to *S* the belief or opinion that *p*, or an unacknowledged commitment to the truth of *p*; whereas the sort of supposition I want to focus on is more like an exercise of the imagination. However, we shouldn’t simply equate “supposing that *p*” with “imagining that *p*,” for to do so might invite the following

line of thought. A way of imagining that p is to imagine a situation in which p is true, and a way of imagining a situation in which p is true is by imagining (for example, visualizing) a scene in which p is true. Indeed, whenever one visualizes a scene one thereby imagines a situation in which certain propositions are true. So whenever one visualizes a scene one thereby imagines that such and such is the case; and since supposing that p is imagining that p , whenever one visualizes a scene one thereby supposes that such and such is the case.

The problem with the conclusion of this line of thought is that visualizing a scene isn't in itself sufficient for engaging in the kind of supposition that is our concern. For the notion of supposition that I want to focus on is the kind of supposition that is involved in assuming something for the sake of argument; and intuitively, visualizing something doesn't in itself amount to assuming something for the sake of argument. So what is involved in assuming something for the sake of argument? Perhaps just putting forth, or introducing, p as a premise in one's reasoning, or treating p as a premise in one's reasoning? But these descriptions can also apply to judging that p (and also to asserting that p). So what is the difference between judging that p and supposing that p ?

Judging that p involves representing p as true. Representing p as true isn't simply equivalent to entertaining in thought the proposition that p is true, for one can entertain in thought the proposition that p is true without representing p as true, as when one judges that "either p is true or it isn't." But for the same reason, entertaining in thought the proposition that p is true isn't sufficient for supposing that p , for entertaining in thought the proposition that p is true is something that one can do when one supposes for the sake of argument that "either p is true or q is true."

If we hold that judging that p involves representing p as true, a temptation may be to think that supposing that p for the sake of argument is a matter of acting as if one is representing p as true—perhaps imagining or pretending to represent p as true. However, a problem with this proposal is that it suggests that supposing that p can be a stand-alone mental act—that is, it suggests that it might be possible for one to suppose that p for the sake of argument, without doing anything else. Since judging (or asserting) that p can be a stand-alone act, it should be possible for pretending or imagining that one is judging (or asserting) that p to be a stand-alone act too. However, supposing that p for the sake of argument is not a stand-alone mental act—it is not something one can do without doing anything else. And this is relevant to why visualizing something cannot in itself be sufficient for assuming something for the sake of argument.

The idea that supposing that p is not a stand-alone act is something that is touched upon by Dummett in his chapter on assertion in *Frege: Philosophy of Language*. There Dummett considers the question of whether there is a force that attaches to the proposition that p when one supposes that p , which

is distinct from the force that attaches to the proposition that p when one asserts that p . At one point Dummett (1973) makes the following remark:

In supposition a thought is expressed but not asserted: “Suppose...” must be taken as a sign of the force (in our sense) with which a sentence is uttered. (Certainly it is not logically an imperative: I could, having said, “Think of a number,” ask “Have you done so yet?,” but it would be a joke if I asked that question having said “Suppose the witness is telling the truth.”)

(p. 309)

If “suppose the witness is telling the truth” is understood as “suppose *for the sake of argument* that the witness is telling the truth,” then there is an oddity in the question, “Have you done so yet?” As Dummett remarks, the oddity of the question wouldn’t apply if one had said “Think of a number.” And we can add, neither would the oddity apply if one had said “imagine a bowl of cherries,” or “imagine asserting that the witness is telling the truth.” This is connected, I suggest, with the idea that the latter can be, what I have been calling, stand-alone mental acts, whereas supposing that p for the sake of argument cannot.

The idea that supposing that p for the sake of argument cannot be a stand-alone mental act is also connected, I think, with Frege’s stance on supposition.⁴ Frege denies that in the case of supposing that p a force that is distinct from that of assertion attaches to the proposition that p . He holds instead that the force of assertion attaches to a sentence that has p as a constituent.⁵ On Frege’s view, in the case of supposition that p , “ p ” does not appear as a complete sentence at all, but only as a constituent in a more complex sentence—in particular, it features as the antecedent of a conditional that is asserted. So Frege does not make use of a distinct force of supposition in formalizing logic.

Gentzen later went on to do so.⁶ As Dummett notes,

[Gentzen] had the idea of formalizing inference so as to leave a place for the introduction of hypotheses in a manner analogous to that in which in everyday reasoning we say “suppose ...” We require no warrant for introducing any new hypothesis, and we reason from it with just the same rules as those governing inferences from premises which we assert outright: the point of the procedure being that from the fact that certain consequences follow from some hypothesis, we can draw a conclusion that no longer depends on that hypothesis.

(p. 309)

This looks like an improvement on Frege’s proposal. As Gentzen observed, it is closer to the modes of inference that occur in informal reasoning.⁷ For our purposes, a point that might be made against Frege’s view is that it fails

to mark adequately the distinction between (a) a part, or constituent, of a thought one judges, and (b) a step taken in reasoning. However, Dummett suggests that there does seem to be *something* right in what Frege says, and here I agree with Dummett. He writes,

Although we may, contrary to Frege's view, regard suppositions as complete sentences, still supposition is different from other linguistic acts in that it is possible only as a preparation for further acts of the same speaker: namely for a series of utterances not themselves assertions (but consequences of the supposition), which culminate in an assertion. I could not just say, "Suppose 2 has a rational square root," and then stop . . . I must go on to discharge the original supposition.

(p. 313)

The idea here, I take it, is that one can only genuinely be said to have introduced a supposition into one's reasoning if one does things that count as discharging that supposition (or starting to discharge that supposition);⁸ and furthermore, one can only discharge the supposition if it has been introduced. Frege captures this idea by holding that when one supposes that p a single force (that is, assertion) attaches to a complex hypothetical sentence that has p as a constituent. If we hold instead that when one supposes that p a distinct force attaches to the proposition that p , we should hold that the force that attaches to the proposition that p and the force that attaches to propositions one infers from p are, in a certain sense, interdependent. That is to say, the fact that the force of supposition attaches to a proposition that p depends upon the occurrence of acts that count as discharging that supposition. And furthermore, when one infers q from p , the force that attaches to one's inference that q depends upon the fact that it is made under the scope of a supposition.

This is a reflection of the idea that we do not capture adequately the attitudinative aspect of a subject's mental condition when he supposes that p if we allow that supposing that p can be a stand-alone mental act—that is, if we allow that a subject can be said to be supposing that p for the sake of argument without doing anything else. The fact that a subject has adopted a suppositional attitude toward the content that p depends upon the occurrence of acts that count as discharging the supposition. This is why we fail to capture adequately the attitudinative aspect of a subject's mental condition when he supposes that p if we say that the subject is merely pretending or imagining that he is representing p as true. When one supposes that p and infers q from p , one isn't imagining or pretending that one is representing those propositions as true; and this is connected with the fact that when one is engaged in supposition, one is engaged in *actual* reasoning, not pretend or imagined reasoning.⁹

We can capture the idea that supposing that p for the sake of argument is not a stand-alone mental act if we say that the subject who supposes that

p for the sake of argument represents p as true *by* reasoning on the assumption that p (where reasoning on the assumption that p is genuine reasoning, not pretend or imagined reasoning). Not just any old reasoning counts as reasoning on the assumption that p . When one reasons on the assumption that p one reasons with certain constraints in play—for example, one reasons on the assumption that p by drawing inferences from p and/or by introducing other propositions as premises in one's reasoning that are not inconsistent with p (unless entailed by p). Of course these constraints on one's reasoning are also in play when one introduces p as a premise in one's reasoning by *judging* that p . So what is the difference between these cases?

When one reasons on the *supposition* that p , the relevant constraints on one's reasoning are self-imposed. They are not simply constraints on one's reasoning that are imposed by facts in the world whose obtaining one acknowledges. And furthermore, when one reasons on the supposition that p one *treats* the relevant constraints on one's reasoning as self-imposed. When one reasons on the supposition that p one recognizes that the constraint of treating p as true is a constraint on one's reasoning that one has imposed on oneself. One manifests this recognition in the way in which one reasons—for example, by discharging the supposition with an outright conditional judgment or assertion.

So when one supposes that p for the sake of argument one imposes a constraint on one's reasoning *by* reasoning in recognition of it. For the subject who supposes that p for the sake of argument represents p as true by reasoning on the assumption that p , where this involves reasoning in recognition of the self-imposed constraint of treating p as true. This is related to the respect in which the introduction of a supposition into one's reasoning and the occurrence of acts that count as discharging that supposition are interdependent—that is, the idea that one can only genuinely be said to have introduced a supposition into one's reasoning if one does things that count as discharging that supposition, and one can only discharge the supposition if it has been introduced.

We are now in a position to turn to the question of the role of agency and self-determination in suppositional reasoning. When one acts in recognition of a self-imposed constraint, one treats oneself as a source of constraint over that activity. This is one way of thinking of what is going on in cases of self-determined, self-governed behavior. Metaphorically speaking, there's a sense in which the self-governing agent must simultaneously occupy the role of legislator and legislatee. That is, in order for an agent to be capable of governing himself, he must be capable of both imposing obligations on himself, as legislator, and he must be capable of recognizing and acting on those obligations, as the one being legislated to. His authority as self-governing legislator depends upon his own recognition of that authority. In fact it is necessary and sufficient for it. If he doesn't recognize the authority of his own legislations, then he cannot be self-governing, for he will have no authority over

himself, but if he does recognize the authority of his own legislations, then he has that authority, and so is self-governing. So all an agent needs to do in order to impose on himself an obligation to do something is to recognize the authority of that self-imposed obligation. In particular, all he needs to do is act in a way that manifests his recognition of that self-imposed obligation.

The self-governing agent takes himself to have authority over himself, and he manifests this stance toward himself in the way that he acts. That is to say, the self-governing agent can impose constraints on himself by simply behaving in a way that manifests his recognition of constraints that he has imposed on himself. He imposes a constraint on himself by behaving as though he has. In this way he acts “under the idea of freedom.” Acting as if one has imposed a constraint on oneself, one thereby imposes the constraint on oneself. One treats oneself as a source of constraint on oneself, and thereby governs oneself.¹⁰

The suggestion that has been made is that when one supposes that p for the sake of argument one imposes on one’s reasoning the constraint of treating p as true by reasoning in recognition of that self-imposed constraint. There is, then, a sense in which “the mind uses its own freedom” when engaged in suppositional reasoning. For the mental activity involved is self-determined, in the following respect: one treats oneself as a source of constraint over one’s own thinking, and thereby makes oneself a source of constraint over one’s own thinking.

The suggestion here is that the mental activity one engages in when supposing that p is activity that manifests an attitude toward oneself—an attitude of treating oneself as the source of that activity. The mental activity one engages in is, in this respect, *self-conscious* mental activity. When this kind of activity occurs, something imposes a constraint on itself by acting in recognition of it. The source of the constraint on the activity is that which is acting in a constrained manner. In acting in this way, that which is acting is aware of itself as imposing a constraint on its activity in so acting. So that which is acting is presented to itself, in so acting, under a reflexive mode of presentation.¹¹ The subject of the activity is presented, under reflexive guise, as that which is imposing constraints on the activity by acting in recognition of them—that which is governing the activity by performing it. In this respect, when such reasoning occurs the subject of that reasoning is presented, under reflexive guise, as locus of mental autonomy—as that which governs one’s thinking and reasoning when it is self-governed.

I have tried to identify a respect in which Descartes is right to claim that the “mind uses its own freedom” when engaged in supposition. Descartes’ more specific description of the mind’s aim in the Second Meditation is that of supposing “the non-existence of all the things about whose existence it can have even the slightest doubt.”

Identifying the propositions one believes whose veracity there can be slightest reason to doubt is an exercise in self-critical reflection. To what extent is

agency implicated in self-critical reflection? Is the kind of suppositional reasoning we have just been concerned with necessarily involved in self-critical reflection? I turn to these questions in the next section.

6.2

Self-critical reflection can potentially result in a variety of belief loss that is subject to epistemic evaluation—that is, the withdrawal of assent. Not all belief loss is subject to epistemic evaluation, and not all belief loss that is subject to epistemic evaluation need be the result of self-critical reflection.

Belief is always subject to epistemic evaluation, no matter what its causal origin, but the same is not true of belief loss. The fact that one forgets propositions one used to believe is not generally thought of as subject to epistemic evaluation.¹² So whether or not an *event* of belief loss is subject to epistemic evaluation cannot be solely determined by the epistemic status of the subject's beliefs prior to and after the belief loss. Belief loss is subject to epistemic evaluation only if it is somehow guided by the aim of avoiding error, where belief loss that is aimed at error-avoidance can either be guided by a conscious intention to avoid error, or by a sub-personal cognitive system that has that function. Belief loss that is aimed at avoiding error need not be guided by error-avoiding mechanisms alone; and we can make sense of belief loss that is *misdirected* at error avoidance.¹³ This seems to allow us to make sense of there being instances of belief loss that are subject to epistemic evaluation but which we regard as epistemically inappropriate.

Not all instances of belief loss aimed at avoiding error, so construed, are instances of a subject withdrawing assent from some proposition as a result of self-critical reflection. Belief revision that results from the acquisition of, and updating of, evidence need not involve anything as reflective as self-critical reflection. Self-critical reflection, as I am understanding that notion here, occurs only when a subject engages with the question of whether p with the aim of avoiding error when he already believes that p . We can regard withdrawal of assent that results from self-critical reflection as a variety of the more general notion of belief revision, and we can regard belief revision as a variety of the more general notion of belief loss.

One question that can be raised about this notion of self-critical reflection is the following: how are we to make sense of the idea of a subject being consciously engaged with the question of whether p when he already believes that p ? One might think that when one believes that p one regards the question of whether p as settled, whereas the subject who raises the question of whether p , and attempts to answer it, does not regard the question of whether p as settled.¹⁴ So as soon as one raises the question of whether p and attempts to answer it, hasn't one ceased to regard the question of whether p as settled, and so hasn't one surrendered one's belief that p ? In which case, how is self-critical reflection possible?¹⁵

Consider a related case in which one attempts to come up with a proof for a proposition that one already knows to be true (for example, an arithmetical theorem that one knows, via testimony, to be true). It doesn't seem right to say that a subject engaged in such activity is attempting to determine/find out whether p is true, for he already knows that p is true. Nonetheless, there is an important sense in which the activity the subject is engaged in is epistemic and truth-directed. The subject is engaged in actual (and not pretend or imagined) reasoning, where such reasoning is subject to epistemic evaluation. Steps taken in such reasoning may be epistemically unjustified, and indeed the conscious judgment "therefore, p " that concludes such reasoning may be epistemically unjustified, despite the fact that the subject retains his knowledge (and hence justified belief) that p throughout such reasoning.

When one attempts to come up with a proof for the truth of p when one already believes (or knows) that p one *brackets* one's belief that p . Importantly, to bracket one's belief that p is not to withdraw assent from p . The bracketing of one's belief that p is not something that is subject to epistemic evaluation and it is not something that requires epistemic grounds, whereas withdrawing assent from p (or suspending judgment over p) is subject to epistemic evaluation, and does require epistemic grounds.

When one brackets one's belief that p one does not use p as a premise in the reasoning one is engaged in. Of course the fact that a subject engages in reasoning without using p as a premise in his reasoning does not in itself entail that the subject has bracketed a belief that p . Such a subject may not believe that p , and even if he does, the truth of p may not be relevant to the reasoning he is engaged in, and even if it is, he may not realize that it is. We have a case in which a subject is bracketing his belief that p only when the fact that the subject is not using p as a premise in the reasoning he is engaged in is a constraint on that reasoning that the subject has imposed on himself, and one which the subject treats as a constraint that he has imposed on himself.

What we have here is akin to the account of supposing that p for the sake of argument outlined in the previous section. One brackets one's belief that p by reasoning in recognition of a self-imposed constraint—where the relevant constraint in this case is that of *not* using p as a premise in one's reasoning. Agency is implicated in the bracketing of one's belief in just the same way in which it is implicated in suppositional reasoning. When one brackets one's belief that p one imposes a constraint on one's reasoning by reasoning in recognition of it. The mental activity involved is self-determined, in the following respect: one treats oneself as a source of constraint over one's own thinking, and thereby makes oneself a source of constraint over one's own thinking. The mental activity one engages in is *self-conscious* mental activity. The subject of the activity is presented, under reflexive guise, as that which is governing the activity by performing it—that which is imposing constraints on the activity by acting in recognition of them. In this respect,

when such reasoning occurs the subject of that reasoning is presented, under reflexive guise, as locus of mental autonomy.

The suggestion here is that one brackets one's belief by reasoning in recognition of a self-imposed constraint; and importantly, the reasoning one thereby engages in is actual (and not pretend or imagined) reasoning—reasoning that is epistemic, that is truth-directed, and subject to epistemic evaluation, just as suppositional reasoning is. In the case of self-critical reflection, one brackets one's belief that p and attempts to rule out not- p , with the aim of avoiding error. This involves mental activity that is self-conscious and self-governed, but which is also epistemic, truth-directed, and subject to epistemic evaluation.

This leaves unspecified the conditions under which one is epistemically justified in suspending judgment over p (and hence epistemically justified in withdrawing assent from p) as a result of such self-critical reflection, and I don't propose to address that issue here. What's important for our purposes is the claim that the sort of self-critical reflection involved in searching for epistemic grounds for doubting propositions one believes to be true does involve a form a conscious reasoning very much like that involved in suppositional reasoning. It involves reasoning that is self-conscious and self-governed.

When such reasoning occurs, an aspect of oneself is presented, under reflexive guise, as locus of mental and epistemic autonomy—that is, as that which governs one's reasoning *by* reasoning, where the aim of such reasoning is to determine what to believe. When one engages in self-critical reflection there is a sense in which that aspect of oneself that is presented under reflexive guise is an aspect of oneself from which one cannot dissociate oneself. For example, when one considers the question “what am I?,” and one questions one's beliefs about what one thinks one is, it is hard to conceive of how one might dissociate oneself from that which is presented under a reflexive guise in considering that question. Indeed, this aspect of oneself will necessarily be presented under reflexive guise whenever one engages in self-critical reflection in an attempt to dissociate or distance oneself from some aspect of oneself.

We can compare here some comments that Velleman makes about Aristotle's claim that each person seems to be his “Intellect” (sometimes translated as “Understanding”). Aristotle describes the Intellect as “that whereby the soul thinks and supposes.”¹⁶ Its activity is “reflective,” and it is that element which is “naturally to rule and guide.”¹⁷ In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he claims of the Intellect that, “Each of us would seem actually to *be* this, given that each is his authoritative and better element,” and “man is this most of all.”¹⁸ Commenting on this claim, Velleman (2000) writes,

This part of your personality constitutes your essential self in the sense that it invariably presents a reflexive aspect to your thinking: it invariably appears to you as “me” from any perspective, however self-critical or detached. That's what Aristotle means, I think, when he says that each person seems to be his understanding. You can dissociate yourself from

other springs of action within you by reflecting on them from a critical or contemplative distance. But you cannot attain a similar distance from your understanding, because it is something that you must take along, so to speak, no matter how far you retreat in seeking a perspective on yourself. You must take your understanding along, because you must continue to exercise it in adopting a perspective, where it remains identified with you as the subject of that perspective, no matter how far off it appears to you as an object... It's your inescapable self, and so its contribution to producing your behaviour is, inescapably, your contribution.

Now let us consider Descartes' claim that in supposing the non-existence of all things about whose existence it can have the slightest doubt, "the mind notices that it is impossible that it should not exist during this time." According to the account of suppositional reasoning outlined in the previous section, one makes such a supposition *by* reasoning on that assumption, and when one reasons on that assumption one thereby engages in self-conscious mental activity that presents an aspect of oneself under reflexive guise. One can of course reason on the assumption that one does not exist, but it is impossible to reason on the assumption that one does not exist without thereby engaging in mental activity that presents an aspect of oneself under reflexive guise during the time that one is engaged in such reasoning. And that which is presented under reflexive guise is presented as locus of mental autonomy—as that which governs one's thinking when it is self-governed.

Furthermore, when one engages in self-critical reflection and considers what one can have the slightest grounds to doubt, one may bracket one's belief that one exists, but when one does so, one thereby engages in self-conscious mental activity that presents an aspect of oneself under reflexive guise. In particular, one engages in self-conscious mental activity that presents an aspect of oneself, under reflexive guise, as locus of mental and epistemic autonomy. And furthermore, I have suggested, that which is thereby presented under reflexive guise is an aspect of oneself from which one cannot dissociate oneself. In that respect we might agree with Descartes that one cannot dissociate oneself from one's "intellectual nature" when engaged in such an exercise.

In the rest of the quote from the Synopsis of the *Meditations*, Descartes goes on to claim, "this exercise . . . enables the mind to distinguish without difficulty what belongs to itself, that is, to an intellectual nature, from what belongs to the body." On one reconstruction of Descartes' thinking, Descartes is alluding here to an epistemological criterion that enables the mind to distinguish what belongs to itself "from what belongs to the body." According to this interpretation, for Descartes, the application of this epistemological criterion is supposed to help protect the coherence of the notion of disembodied existence, which in turn is used as a step in an argument for substance dualism.

If we assume that, for Descartes, the application of such an epistemological criterion is supposed to help protect the coherence of the notion of disembodied existence, we should look to Descartes' conception of disembodied existence in order to get a clearer view of how the application of the epistemological criterion is to be understood. It is worth noting in this context that according to Descartes, the disembodied soul has the faculty of the intellect, but lacks the faculties of sensory perception and imagination.¹⁹ Moreover, a point that is perhaps obvious, but one which I think is worth emphasizing, is that for Descartes the disembodied soul is a disembodied *agent*. Making coherent the notion of a disembodied intellectual *agent* would require making sense of the notion of an agent capable of action but incapable of bodily action. One might then wonder whether an epistemological criterion can be applied to mark a distinction between mental action and bodily action.²⁰ Can the latter be the subject of skeptical attack in a way in which the former cannot?²¹ And if so, can this be used to make coherent the notion of such a disembodied agent?

It would take us too far afield to address these issues here, for as I mentioned at the outset, my principal concern here isn't that of offering any particular interpretation of Descartes' texts. For what remains of the paper I want to remain focused on the question of the role of agency in self-critical reflection.

At the start of the paper I cited Korsgaard's recent discussion of the claim that "reason is what distinguishes us from other animals, and that reason is in some special way the active dimension of mind." Korsgaard connects the idea that we have a distinctive, capacity for *active* reasoning with the idea that we have a form of "reflective" consciousness that allows us to engage in self-critical reflection. Some of Korsgaard's critics have objected to the idea (which they take to be part of her proposal) that our ability to reflect on our own beliefs somehow allows belief formation to be governable by such reflection. They argue that it is a mistake to think that we have "reflective control" over belief acquisition and revision. The fact that we have a reflective form of consciousness (for example, the fact that we know what we think), they object, does not thereby allow the notion of freedom to get a grip in the realm of belief, and so does not thereby provide us with a form of epistemic autonomy.²²

The view I have been outlining is similar to Korsgaard's, insofar as I too have been suggesting that there is a form of reasoning implicated in our capacity to engage in self-critical reflection that is both self-conscious and self-governed. However, central to that view is the claim that the role of mental autonomy in self-critical reflection is to be understood in terms of our capacity to *bracket* our beliefs, and not merely in our capacity to know what we believe. I have suggested that our capacity to bracket beliefs is related to our capacity to engage in suppositional reasoning, which involves reasoning in recognition of a self-imposed constraint. In the final section of

the paper I want to clarify further how I think we should conceive of the role of agency in self-critical reflection, given this emphasis on the notion of bracketing. In particular, I want to do so by contrasting my proposal with a view according to which the role of agency in such reasoning (and indeed, all conscious reasoning) can at best be “merely catalytic” and “indirect”.²³

6.3

Korsgaard connects the human capacity for self-awareness with the idea that “the human mind is active in some way that the minds of the other animals are not” (2009), which, in turn, she claims, provides us with a form of epistemic autonomy. O’Shaughnessy (2000) expresses a similar line of thought. He suggests that our capacity to know that we have thoughts, “together with the capacity to contemplate their denial as a possibility that is not in fact realized” provides us with a form of mental freedom that allows us to “transcend the condition of animal immersion”:

the animal merely has its beliefs, which are produced in it through sense, regularities in experience, desire, innate factors, etc. It does not know it has them, it has no hand in their installation, and it cannot compare them to the world. All it can do is harbour them and act upon them.

In this special sense animals may be said to be *immersed* in the world in a way thinking beings are not . . . there can in their case be no *working toward* a belief, no believing through *cogitation*, no form of *responsibility* for belief, and in consequence no kind of *mental freedom*.

. . . one of the primary uses of self-awareness in thinking creatures is in self-determination and mental freedom.

(p. 110)

One difficulty with this sort of view, one might think, is that it leaves unclear how the mere capacity to become conscious of one’s own beliefs, and their grounds, can provide one with the ability to “have a hand in their installation.” According to Korsgaard, as self-conscious subjects, we have reflective awareness of our own mental states and activities as such, and this self-conscious form of consciousness opens up what she calls “a space of reflective distance.” For she suggests, “our capacity to turn our attention onto our own mental activities is also a capacity to distance ourselves from them, and to call them into question.”²⁴ This looks similar to O’Shaughnessy’s suggestion that what allows us to ‘transcend the condition of animal immersion’, is our capacity to know that we have thoughts together with the capacity to contemplate their denial. Korsgaard then claims that this space of reflective distance ensures that “we are, or can be, active, self-directing, with respect to our beliefs.” It “presents us with the possibility and the necessity of exerting a kind of control over our beliefs.”²⁵ However, again, one might wonder how

this “space of reflective distance” is supposed to allow us to “exert control over our beliefs.” As Moran puts it, it is not as though, glancing inwards, we can simply manipulate our attitudes as so much mental furniture.²⁶ So how does agency figure in the exercise of self-critical reflection that is made possible by “the space of reflective distance?”

According to one way of regarding this issue, the role of mental agency in self-critical reflection can at best be rather limited. Here we might compare Galen Strawson’s skepticism about the extent of the role of agency over our thinking and reasoning.²⁷ Thinking about something involves the occurrence of mental acts individuated, in part, by their propositional contents, and Strawson claims that these mental acts can be mental actions only if the particular contents that individuate them are ones that the subject intends to think. However, in the case of many such mental acts it seems that the content of the mental act cannot figure in the content of one’s prior intention. Strawson has argued that no thinking of a particular thought-content is ever an action. This is because one’s thinking of the particular content can only amount to an action if the content thought is already there, “available for consideration and adoption for intentional production” in which case, “it must already have ‘just come’ at some previous time in order to be so available” (p. 235). One way of putting this point is to say that when conscious reasoning occurs, there is no *attempt* to think a thought with a given content.²⁸ In the case of the sort of thinking that occurs when one reasons, what is important is that relevant changes to one’s mind occur. Perhaps sometimes one also knows that such changes occur, but arguably the acquisition of such knowledge is itself simply a further change to one’s mind. So agency is not, after all, implicated in the thinking of the particular thoughts that occur when one reasons. Strawson does not deny that mental actions do occur, but on his view, “Mental action in thinking is restricted to the fostering of conditions hospitable to contents’ coming to mind” (p. 234).

Strawson claims that, “the role of genuine action in thought is at best indirect. It is entirely prefatory, it is essentially—merely—catalytic” (p. 231). It “is restricted to the fostering of conditions hospitable to contents’ coming to mind,” for according to Strawson, the component of agency in thinking and reasoning is restricted to that of setting the mind at a given topic, aiming or tilting the mind in a given direction, and waiting for contentful thoughts to occur—waiting “for the ‘natural causality of reason’ to operate in one” (p. 231). Once one has taken mental aim at a given topic, “the rest is a matter of ballistics, mental ballistics”—“as ballistic as the motion of the ball after it has ceased to be in contact with one’s foot” (p. 239). Strawson writes, “There is I believe no action at all in reasoning... considered independently of the preparatory, catalytic phenomena just mentioned” (p. 232).²⁹ On this view the mental events involved in conscious reasoning are not in themselves agential, rather, they can (sometimes) be the effects of something agential.

I have offered a rather different proposal as to how we should conceive of the role of mental agency in the sort of conscious reasoning that occurs when one engages in self-critical reflection. On my view the notion of bracketing one's beliefs has a key role to play. I have argued that self-critical reflection involves a capacity to bracket one's beliefs, and agency is implicated in the bracketing of one's belief in just the same way in which it is implicated in suppositional reasoning.³⁰ In both cases the mental activity involved is self-determined, in the following respect: one treats oneself as a source of constraint over one's own thinking, and thereby makes oneself a source of constraint over one's own thinking. For in both cases one imposes a constraint on one's reasoning by reasoning in recognition of it. This leads to a rather different view of how we should conceive of the extent of the role of mental agency in such reasoning.

First, we can contrast the picture I have offered of the way in which agency is implicated in suppositional reasoning and self-critical reflection, with the conception of action that Frankfurt criticizes in his paper "The Problem of Action"³¹. In that paper Frankfurt targets a view of action that holds that the "essential difference between actions and mere happenings lies in their prior causal histories," and which thereby implies that, "actions and mere happenings do not differ essentially in themselves at all" (p. 69). According to the account of action that Frankfurt objects to, actions and mere happenings are "differentiated by nothing that exists or that is going on at the time those events occur, but by something quite extrinsic to them—a difference at an earlier time among another set of events entirely . . . they locate the distinctively essential features of action exclusively in states of affairs which may be past by the time the action is supposed to occur" (p. 70).

According to the accounts of suppositional reasoning and self-critical reflection I have been recommending, agency is implicated in the conscious mental events that constitute a subject's suppositional reasoning and self-critical reflection in so far as such events manifest the subject's recognition of a self-imposed constraint. For example, when a subject supposes that *p* for the sake of argument, the constraint of treating *p* as true is a constraint that the subject imposes on himself *by* reasoning in recognition of it. The constraint he imposes on himself is *sustained* by the occurrence of conscious mental events that manifest his recognition of that self-imposed constraint. So the agency that is implicated in such reasoning does not simply reside in its prior causal history—that is, in the fact that some appropriate, temporally prior, intention or belief/desire pair initiated it.

For this reason, the picture that I am suggesting of the way in which agency is implicated in suppositional reasoning and self-critical reflection can also be contrasted with Strawson's characterization of the role of agency in thinking and reasoning. Strawson's view suggests that the conscious mental events involved in suppositional reasoning, and the sort of reasoning that occurs when one engages in self-critical reflection, can in principle

lack appropriate, agential, causal antecedents and thereby lack any aspect of agency whatsoever. In contrast, I have argued that in the cases of suppositional reasoning and self-critical reflection, the conscious reasoning one engages in manifests an attitude toward oneself—an attitude of treating oneself as the source of that activity. Acting as if one has imposed a constraint on oneself, one thereby imposes the constraint on oneself. One treats oneself as a source of constraint on oneself, and thereby governs oneself. So the forms of reasoning involved in suppositional reasoning and self-critical reflection—the forms of reasoning that allow us to ‘transcend the condition of animal immersion’—are necessarily self-conscious and self-governed.³²

Notes

1. For discussion of the role of the mind’s freedom in the Method of Doubt see *Principles of Philosophy* Pt. I: 6, and 39.
2. In *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes also claims, “the supreme perfection of man” is that he acts freely, and in the Fourth Meditation Descartes writes, “it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God.”
3. Strawson 2003.
4. See Frege 1906, 1918, and 1923.
5. An issue that is also relevant to Frege’s view of supposition, which I don’t discuss, is the suggestion that he commits to the view that one can make inferences only from *true* premises, and hence not from a mere hypothesis. On this issue, see Anscombe 1959. For a diagnosis of Frege’s commitment to this claim, different from that offered by Anscombe, see Dummett 1973; and for skepticism about the claim that Frege should be interpreted as committing to this view, see Stoothoff 1963.
6. See also the system developed by Fitch (1952), discussed by Green (2000).
7. Gentzen 1969, p. 78.
8. One can of course express one’s intention to suppose that *p* without discharging that supposition, and one can also issue an invitation to others to engage in that supposition, but an expression of an intention to suppose that *p* isn’t in itself sufficient for supposing that *p*, and neither is the issuing of such an invitation. It might be held that in the case of a speech act, an utterance of ‘suppose that *p*’ can be regarded as having the force of supposition, whether or not one successfully begins to discharge that supposition, as long as the utterance is understood as carrying the normative requirement that one should attempt to discharge it. One might argue that in the case of thought, where this doesn’t involve any overt speech acts, the decision to suppose that *p* brings with it a similar normative commitment. For example, in deciding to suppose that *p* one commits oneself to discharging that supposition. However, deciding to suppose that *p* isn’t equivalent to supposing that *p*; and once a decision to suppose that *p* has been made, I suggest, one doesn’t genuinely start supposing that *p* until one begins to discharge that supposition. It is thought, and not speech acts, that I am principally concerned with here.
9. Compare Anscombe’s remark: “Aristotle rightly says that a conclusion is reached in just the same way in a ‘demonstrative’ and a ‘dialectical’ syllogism: if you say ‘suppose *p*, and suppose *q*, then *r*’; or if, being given ‘*p*’, you say: ‘suppose *q*, then *r*’; you are just as much inferring, and essentially in the same way, as if you are given ‘*p*’ and ‘*q*’ as true and say ‘therefore *r*.’” (1959, p. 116).

10. These remarks on the notion of self-governance obviously ignore a number of important and substantive questions—for example, the question of the constraints that the *truly* self-governing should impose on himself when determining which constraints to impose on himself.
11. For a discussion of the notion of a “reflexive mode of presentation” that has influenced my thinking here, see Velleman 2006.
12. Compare Harman 1984, 1986 and 1995. See also Williamson 2000, p. 219.
13. Compare Velleman’s discussion, in “On the Aim of Belief,” of what makes an “acceptance” a belief (in Velleman 2000, pp. 252–4).
14. Compare the discussions of Levi 1980 in Adler 2002, Ch. 11, and in Roorda 1997.
15. Compare Adler 2002 on, what Adler calls, the “blindness problem”: “The normal workings of belief is to ‘blind’ us to what might be described from the outside as clues to the contrary . . . The ‘blindness’ problem is deep because to solve it we cannot just attempt to remove the blinders, since they are a facet of the good workings of belief” (p. 286).
16. *De Anima* III.4, 429a, in Aristotle 1984.
17. *NE* X.7, 1177a, in Aristotle 1984.
18. *NE* X.7, 1177b, in Aristotle 1984.
19. In the Sixth Meditation the faculty of the intellect is distinguished from the faculties of sensory perception and imagination. There Descartes claims that the faculty of the intellect can exist without the latter two faculties, but these latter two faculties cannot exist without the faculty of intellect. See also *Principles of Philosophy* Pt. II: 3 and the letter to Gibieuf, 19 January 1642 (in Descartes 1985), where Descartes is explicit that the faculties of sensory perception and imagination belong to the soul only in so far as it is joined to the body.
20. For a brief discussion of this idea, see Soteriou 2009.
21. It seems clear that in the First Meditation, in attempting to undermine by skeptical argument the putative knowledge we acquire via the senses, Descartes takes himself to be undermining the knowledge we have of our own bodily actions: “I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately and I know what I am doing... Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars—that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hands—are not true.” So one relevant consideration here is whether skeptical arguments that target the putative knowledge we acquire via the senses can be used to undermine our putative knowledge of our own bodily actions, in a way in which they cannot be used to undermine our putative knowledge of our own mental actions.
22. For this line of objection to Korsgaard see Owens 2000.
23. Strawson 2003.
24. Korsgaard 1996, p. 93.
25. Korsgaard 2009b. See also Korsgaard 2009a, pp. 115–16.
26. See Moran 1999 and 2001.
27. Strawson 2003.
28. Compare here Travis 2008: “Both thinking and saying represent something as so. Saying relies on means for representing to others. Thinking—representing to oneself—does not . . . So saying needs vehicles—incarnations of visible, audible, forms, recognizably doing what they do. Representing to myself works otherwise. One *chooses* what to say; not what to think. I judge *just* where I can judge no other. It need not be made recognizable to me what I am judging for me to do so . . . Judging needs no vehicles in *such* roles. Does it need vehicles at all?” (p. 4).

29. Strawson's view is criticized by Buckareff 2005, and discussed in Mele 2009. Compare also Dorsch's (2009) notion of the 'mediated' agency involved in certain varieties of thinking: we "trigger" some process (epistemic or merely causal) with some goal in mind, but recognize, and instrumentally rely on, the capacity of such a process to lead, *by itself*, to the desired outcome. For a rather different view of the role of agency in reasoning, see Gibbons 2009.
30. O'Shaughnessy seems to acknowledge the significance to our "mental freedom" of our ability to bracket our beliefs and engage in suppositional reasoning, although he doesn't put this in quite the terms I do. He writes, "cogitation entertains propositions under the heading 'not yet to be used', or 'may be rejected', it 'puts them on ice for the time being', whereas the 'practical immersion' of animals only entertains propositions as 'to be used here and now';" and "Transcending the condition of 'animal immersion' is achieved through the linguistically assisted capacity to think in the modalities of the possible and the hypothetical, which is an exercise of the imaginative power" (2000, p. 110).
31. Reprinted in Frankfurt 1988.
32. Many thanks to Tom Crowther, Guy Longworth, and Lucy O'Brien for their comments on earlier drafts. For very helpful discussion of these issues, thanks also to Steve Butterfill, Bill Brewer, Quassim Cassam, Naomi Eilan, Christoph Hoerl, Hemdat Lerman, and Johannes Roessler.

References

- Adler, J. (2002), *Belief's Own Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1959), *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*. St. Augustine's Press: Indiana.
- Aristotle (1984), *The Complete Works of Aristotle; Revised Oxford Translation*. J. Barnes, ed., Bollingen Series, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Buckareff, A. (2005), "How (not) to think about Mental Action," *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action*, 1741–5918, vol. 8, no. 1, 2005: 83–9.
- Descartes, R., (1985), *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volumes I–III, (Translated by Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch; Vol. III edited by Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch and Kenny). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dorsch, F. (2009), "Judging and the Scope of Mental Agency," in O'Brien and Soteriou, eds, *Mental Actions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dummett, M. (1973), *Frege: The Philosophy of Language*. London: Duckworth.
- Fitch, F. B. (1952), *Symbolic Logic*. New York: Ronald Press.
- Frege, G. (1906), "On the Foundations of Geometry; Second Series," in, B. McGuinness, trans M. Black, *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).
- Frege, G. (1918), "Negation," in, B. McGuinness, trans M. Black, *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).
- Frege, G. (1923), "Compound Thoughts," in, B. McGuinness, trans by M. Black, *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).
- Frankfurt, H. (1988), *The Importance of What We Care About*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gentzen, G. (1969), *The Collected Papers of Gerhard Gentzen*, ed. M. E. Szabo, Amsterdam.
- Gibbons, J. (2009), "Reason in Action," in O'Brien and Soteriou, eds, *Mental Actions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Green, M. (2000), "The Status of Supposition," *Nous* 34:3: 376–99.
- Harman, G. (1984), "Positive versus Negative Undermining in Belief Revision," *Nous*, 18: 39–49.
- Harman, G. (1986), *Change in View: Principles of Reasoning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Harman, G. (1995), "Rationality," in E. E. Smith and D. N. Osherson, eds. *Thinking: Invitation to Cognitive Science*, vol. 3. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Also in his *Rationality, Meaning and Mind* (1999), Oxford University Press.
- Korsgaard, C. (1996), *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Korsgaard, C. (2009a), *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Korsgaard, C. (2009b), "The Activity of Reason," Presidential Address of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, 2008. Forthcoming in *The Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 83, no.2, November 2009.
- Levi, I. (1980), *The Enterprise of Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Mele, A. (2009), "Mental Action: A Case Study," in O'Brien and Soteriou, eds, *Mental Actions*. Oxford University Press.
- Moran, R. (1999), "The Authority of Self-Consciousness," *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 26, nos 1 and 2: 179–200.
- Moran, R. (2001), *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Owens, D. (2000), *Reason without Freedom*. London: Routledge.
- O'Shaughnessy, B. (2000), *Consciousness and the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roorda, J. (1997), "Fallibilism, Ambivalence and Belief," *The Journal of Philosophy* 94: 126–55.
- Soteriou, M. (2009), "Mental Agency, Conscious Thinking, and Phenomenal Character," in O'Brien and Soteriou, eds, *Mental Actions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stoothoff, R. (1963), "Note on a Doctrine of Frege," *Mind*, vol. 72, no. 287: 406–8.
- Strawson, G. (2003), "Mental Ballistics or the Involuntariness of Spontaneity," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 103: 227–56.
- Travis, C. (2008), "Thinking About Thinking." Inaugural Lecture at King's College London, (online at <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/content/1/c6/04/33/24/ThinkThink4-4.pdf>).
- Velleman, J. D. (2000), *The Possibility of Practical Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Velleman, J. D. (2006), *Self to Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williamson, T. (2000), *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.