

THINKING AND PERSONAL EXISTENCE

Can Descartes succeed in proving that he exists?*

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Descartes' *cogito* has been challenged in a host of ways. It has been claimed, for example, that it is unclear whether the *cogito* is inferential or performative, that it is either circular in itself or part of a circular argument, that contrary to Descartes' contention it does rely on some presuppositions, and questionable ones, at that, or that Descartes was not justified in inferring from the *cogito* the existence of a *substance* subsisting through time. All these objections have developed into elaborate debates which, in turn, have led to a better understanding of the *cogito* and of Descartes' system in general.

One criticism, however, has suffered relative neglect: it contends that if Descartes relies strictly on his methodological reasoning, with no prejudices and presuppositions whatever, he is not justified in taking the *cogito* to demonstrate *his own* existence. The most that he can prove from the *cogito*, according to this line of argument, is that some *impersonal* thinking exists. This objection was already raised—without being answered—during Descartes' time by Hyperaspistes,¹ and was later

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¹ René Descartes, *Œuvres de Descartes*, eds. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 12 vols. (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1974), vol. III, p. 404. Hereafter cited as AT followed by volume and page numbers.

repeated by Lichtenberg,² Feuerbach,³ and, more recently, by Ayer,⁴ Russell,⁵ and Kenny.⁶ In this paper I try to answer the objection along Cartesian lines. In other words, I try to show that although the criticism was never explicitly discussed by Descartes, it can be answered within his system.

The objection of Hyperaspistes, Lichtenberg, and others is as follows: Descartes begins his reflections by discovering that all his beliefs are dubitable. Hence, he refuses to rely on them. He searches for a new, indubitable truth, upon which he can base a new system. This truth is found in the *cogito* act: Descartes sees that there is one thing whose existence cannot be doubted—viz. the act of doubting itself, at least while it is being performed. On this basis Descartes concludes that he exists.

However, critics stress, the fact that the act of doubting cannot be doubted while it is being performed entails only that there is an impersonal act of doubting or thinking, and nothing else. Hence, Descartes can legitimately infer from the *cogito* only that some impersonal doubting or thinking exists, but not that *he himself* exists. Thus, Lichtenberg says, the only thing that Descartes can conclude at this stage is that there is a thinking, just as one could say "there is lightning" (see note 2). Similarly, Hyperaspistes writes: "You do not know whether it is you yourself who think, or whether the world-soul in you thinks, as the Platonists believe."⁷

² Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Sudelbücher II*, ed. W. Promies (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1971), Heft K, § 76, p. 412.

³ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, eds. C. Ascheri and E. Thies (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), p. 61.

⁴ Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed. (London: V. Gollancz, 1952), pp. 45-46.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 567.

⁶ Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of his Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 62.

⁷ See note 1. Translated by A. Kenny in his *Descartes: A Study of his Philosophy* p. 62. To be precise, Lichtenberg's and Hyperaspistes' criticisms differ slightly. Whereas Lichtenberg claims that all Descartes is entitled to infer is that there is an impersonal thinking, Hyperaspistes suggests that Descartes' thinking is part of a universal thinking. But, for the purposes of this article, which examines the legitimacy of Descartes' inferring his own existence from the *cogito*, the difference between the two objections is negligible.

It is important, of course, to distinguish this objection from another, kindred one, already mentioned above: that Descartes illegitimately infers from the *cogito* not that *he* exists, but that a *substance* subsisting through time exists. Although both objections accuse Descartes of inferring from the *cogito* something that he had no right to infer, they are independent of each other. Descartes may be justified in inferring a personal existence, but not one that subsists through time as a substance; or he may be justified in inferring that a substance exists, but not that this substance is himself; or he may be justified, or unjustified, in inferring both. However, here I shall discuss only the former criticism, viz. that Descartes cannot legitimately infer from the *cogito* that *he* exists.

Descartes could legitimately take the *cogito* to prove *his own* existence for the following reason: in the *cogito* he proves that thinking exists (AT VII 27). But he understands "thinking" in the widest sense of the term. To him, "thinking" includes doubting, understanding, affirming, willing, imagining and even having sensory perceptions (AT VII 28). Thus, Descartes thinks that he has proven in the *cogito* not only the indubitable existence of thinking, but also the indubitable existence of doubting, willing, having sensory perceptions, etc. Even if thinking is only *thought* to exist, thinking still takes place. Similarly, even if imagination is only *imagined* to exist, imagining still takes place (AT VII 29). Or, even if it only *seems* that sensory impressions are sensed, they still seem to be sensed. Therefore, the existence of all these mental activities is indubitable for Descartes, and he cannot be mistaken about having them (AT VII 29; VIII 7-8, 32-33).

Moreover, Descartes claims that not only the existence of mental *activities* is indubitable, but also that of mental *objects*. His argument (which afterwards exercised an important influence on the phenomenological movement) is that not only are thinking, imagining, or seeming to sense indubitable, but also *what* is thought, imagined, or seemed to be sensed. What is thought, imagined, or seemed to be sensed (which can here be grouped under the name "intentional objects"), may or may not have any counterparts in the external world. However, even if these intentional objects are only *thought* or *imagined* to exist, they are still indubitably thought or imagined and, as such, exist as intentional objects. Similarly, even if sensory impressions only *seem* to be had, it is still undeniable that they so seem. Thus, the existence of these intentional objects *qua* contents of the mind—without any commitment, at this stage, to their congruence with anything in the ex-

ternal world—is indubitable. Descartes cannot be wrong, then, in his belief that he thinks or imagines them (AT VII 28-9, 33, 34, 37, 352; VIII A 7, 32-3).

Now, some of these intentional objects which are thought, imagined, doubted, or seemed-to-be-felt are memories, worries, ambitions, and feelings. These intentional objects may differ from one person to another, and give individuals who perform the *cogito* the sense of a personal self. Thus, since the *cogito* involves not only the indubitability of mental activities, but also the indubitability of their intentional objects, and since these intentional objects can be personal, Descartes may say that in the *cogito* he knows with certainty that *he* exists. For these reasons he can legitimately express the *cogito* (which, as he remarked to Mersenne, is not deduced part by part, but grasped in a “simple intuition”—AT VII 140) as “*I think, therefore I am.*” (AT VIII A 7; my emphasis).

A few objections may be raised here. First, it may be demurred that at the stage where the *cogito* is proven Descartes does not yet take intentional objects to indubitably exist. He discusses the indubitability of the intentional objects only later, when he needs it for his wax argument and the proof of the existence of God.⁸ Therefore, since for Descartes the *cogito* stage and the stage at which the intentional objects are taken to be indubitable are distinct, he could not rely on them in the *cogito* stage to support the inference that *he* exists.

This objection takes for granted that Descartes *first* proves the indubitability of the existence of thought, and only *later* the indubitability of the existence of its content, viz. the intentional objects. This, however, does not seem to be the case. Descartes never says or implies that these two stages are distinct from each other. On the contrary, there is sufficient textual evidence that he takes both the indubitability of the existence of thought and imagination and the indubitability of the existence of their contents to be proven simultaneously. At AT VII 352, for example, he writes:

I may not, for example, make the inference ‘I am walking, therefore I exist’, except in so far as the *awareness of walking* is a thought. The inference is certain only if applied to this awareness, and not to the

⁸ The indubitability of the intentional objects is needed at these stages because without it Descartes could present neither the wax-argument, which relies on our seeming to have different sensations of the wax, nor the proof of the existence of God, which relies on the indubitability of the existence of the idea of God in our mind.

movement of the body which sometimes—in the case of dreams, is not occurring at all, despite the fact that I seem to myself to be walking. Hence from the fact that *I think I am walking* I can very well infer the existence of a mind which has this thought, but not the existence of a body that walks. And the same applies in other cases.⁹

The physical activity of walking, then, is distinguished from the awareness of it: whereas the former can be doubted, the latter cannot. Moreover, this intentional object—i.e. awareness of walking—is taken to be part and parcel of the *cogito*. At AT VIII A 7 Descartes argues in the same way as regards seeing, and at AT VIII A 9 as regards seeming to touch the earth.

At AT VII 28-9, as well, there is thought, imagination, or doubt of *something*, and not mere thought, imagination or doubt:

Is it not one and the same ‘I’ who is now doubting *almost everything*, who nonetheless understands *some things*, who affirms that this one *thing* is true, denies *everything else*, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many *things* even involuntarily, and is aware of many *things* which apparently come from the senses?...Which of all these activities is distinct from my thinking?...For even if, as I have supposed, none of the *objects of imagination* are real, the power of imagination is something which really exists, and is part of my thinking...For example, I am now seeing *light*, hearing a *noise*, feeling *heat*. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false... (My emphasis).

Here, again, then, intentional objects are taken for granted when the *cogito* is performed. It may be objected that this passage does not prove the point, since it discusses intentional objects in relation to the unity of the different mental activities of the “I”, and not in relation to the *cogito* itself. However, although Descartes does not *prove* the *cogito* in this passage, he does discuss it, and while doing so he mentions the intentional objects that we have when we perform it.

A second objection, along Humean lines, may be that each time the *cogito* is performed the existence of only certain aspects of the “I” are experienced and proven (namely only some memories, some worries,

⁹ My emphasis. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations follow *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

some ambitions, etc.). But these discrete aspects are not integrated into one continuous identity which would normally be called an "I". In other words, it is unclear whether the different memories, worries and ambitions involved in different *cogito* performances would be parts of the same "I".

But this criticism again refers to the question whether Descartes can legitimately infer from the *cogito* the existence of a *substance* subsisting through time, and not whether he can legitimately infer from the *cogito* the existence of personal thinking. As already pointed out above, these two issues are independent of each other. Even if Descartes does not succeed in proving the existence of a substance, but only that of isolated, momentary, acts of thinking, known with certainty only while the *cogito* is actually performed, he can still take the thinking in each one of them to be personal.¹⁰ Of course, if he does succeed in proving the existence of a substance, then he can take the substance to be personal. Descartes, then, can succeed in proving personal existence irrespective of his success in proving the existence of a substance.

A third objection may concede that if all our mental activities had intentional objects, and if all intentional objects were personal, then all *cogito* performances, as shown above, would also be personal. But, in fact, some mental activities (e.g. anxiety) do not have specific intentional objects,¹¹ and some intentional objects (e.g. blue, loud) are not personal.¹² Thus, not all *cogito* performances are personal, too. In other words, since *cogito* performances are based on mental activities, and since only some mental activities have personal intentional objects, only some of the *cogito* performances can be personal.

The objection is correct, of course, in maintaining that not *every* mental activity is personal. But this does not have to prevent Descartes from concluding in the *cogito* that there is a personal self, for he is still free to use in the *cogito* mental activities which *do* have personal

¹⁰ This, in fact, was also Husserl's view of the nature of the phenomenological ego in his first edition of *Logische Untersuchungen* (Halle, Germany: Niemeyer Verlag, 1900-1901), vol. II, p. 342. He changed his mind, however, by the time he published the second, revised edition of the *Logische Untersuchungen* in 1913 (see vol. I,1, p. 361).

¹¹ See, e.g. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1960), p. 251.

¹² For example, all the intentional objects discussed by Husserl in his *Logische Untersuchungen* (see note 19) are not personal at all.

intentional objects. Again, then, Descartes can take the *cogito* to prove that *he* exists.

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EL LENGUAJE EN LA TEORÍA DE LA ABSTRACCIÓN DE HUME: PUNTO CRÍTICO

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En este artículo intentaré demostrar que, con respecto a la teoría de la abstracción de Hume y la de Husserl, se trata de un retroceso en tanto que, en consecuencia, hace a la abstracción (en el sentido en que ambos filósofos la conciben) depender del lenguaje que no es, como, según afirman que Berkeley y Hume fundan su nominalismo en la identificación entre ideas e imagen y que no es dicho lenguaje que Hume quite la abstracción de sí mismo de sus propios pensamientos, al reducir no sólo la extensión metafísica de los universales, sino incluso la hipótesis psicológica debida a Locke, presuponiendo necesariamente la existencia y posibilidad de representaciones especiales y genéricas.

Nuestro primer propósito será necesario contestar dos preguntas a saber: ¿el cómo es, según Hume, la función de los palabras en el proceso de conceptualización de los ideas generales? y ¿el por qué, como consecuencia, puede tal función ser lenguaje?

Al (a) pregunta por Berkeley la posibilidad (y a través la existencia) de las ideas abstractas y consideradas como expresiones de tipo verbal, cabe de que los términos generales significan ideas particulares. En primer lugar la pregunta psicológica acerca de cómo una idea particular puede dar lugar a la representación (o percepción) de los términos que los de calidad y cantidad de una propiedad y la pregunta epistemológica de cómo se puede extraer el cómo en los juicios generales si el punto de partida de los mismos son ideas particulares que surgen de