

# The *Cogito* as Proof

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April 20, 2017

A major exegetical problem with the *Cogito* is that there are many versions. The version in the *Meditations*, which will mostly concern us, is the following:

“Sed mihi persuasi nihil plane esse in mundo, nullum coelum, nullam terram, nullas mentes, nulla corpora; nonne igitur etiam me non esse? Imo certe ego eram, si quid mihi persuasi.

“Mais je me suis persuadé qu’il n’y a rien du tout dans le monde, qu’il n’y avait aucun ciel, aucune terre, aucuns esprits, ni aucuns corps, ne me suis-je donc pas aussi persuadé que je n’étais point? Non certes, j’étais sans doute si je me suis persuadé, ou seulement si j’ai pensé quelque chose.

Sed est deceptor nescio quis, summe potens, summe callidus, qui de industriâ me semper fallit. Haud dubie igitur ego etiam sum, si me fallit & fallat quantum potest, nunquam tamen efficiet, ut nihil sim quamdiu me aliquid esse cogitabo. Adeo ut, omnibus satis superque pensitatis denique statuendum sit hoc pronuntiatum, *Ego sum, ego existo*, quoties a me profertur, vel mente concipitur, necessario esse verum.” (AT VII 25<sup>2-12</sup>)

Mais il y a un je ne sçay quel trompeur tres-puissant & tres-rusé, qui employe toute son industrie à me tromper tousiours. Il n’y a donc point de doute que je suis, s’il me trompe; et qu’il me trompe tant qu’il voudra il ne saurait jamais faire que je ne sois rien, tant que je penserai être quelque chose. De sorte qu’après y avoir bien pensé, et avoir soigneusement examiné toutes choses, enfin il faut conclure, et tenir pour constant que cette proposition: *Je suis, j’existe*, est nécessairement vraie, toutes les fois que je la prononce, ou que je la conçois en mon esprit.’ (AT IX/I 19)

This is the Cartesian thinker speaking, recalling his universal doubt of the last *Meditation* and realising that he did not doubt his own existence and that it is indeed impossible to do so – not only that he cannot doubt without existing,<sup>1</sup> but that he cannot even try (and therefore take it to be possible) to do so, i.e. that the thought “I do not exist” is – in a particular way – necessarily false.

The cited passage makes it clear that the indoubtability of “I exist” is given a peculiar status. Even though they are not explicitly mentioned by their canonical description, the necessary truths were subject to the general doubt evoked in the first paragraph.<sup>2</sup> This peculiar status is not exhausted by other a priori or performatively “self-verifying” claims, nor by such on which the Cartesian thinker has first person authority.

What, then, is it that distinguishes “I am” from other candidate sentences as “I am here now” (Röd 1982: 49–50), “I am in pain” or “I am making a statement” (Frankfurt 1970: 104)? The first may be false, e.g., in cases of deferred reference or context shift – which may even occur in dreams. The second is not indoubtable, but at most indoubtable when true. The third, even if it is indoubtable, cannot be the *only* indoubtable statement.<sup>3</sup> Even “This

1. As the section label in the *Principes* might suggest: “VII. Non posse a nobis dubitari, quin existamus dum dubitamus; atque hoc esse primum, quod ordine philosophando cognoscimus.” (AT VIII 6<sup>31-32</sup>) / “7. Que nous ne sçaurions douter sans estre, & que cela est la premiere connoissance certaine qu’on peut acquerir.” (AT IX/II 27) Descartes makes it clear in his replies to Hobbes and Gassendi that existential generalisation is not what he is interested in at this step of the argument (AT VII 175<sup>25-176</sup> and 352<sup>6-18</sup>, cf. also AT II 37<sup>26-38</sup>).

2. The existence of the corporeal world, the subject matter of geometry, is a mathematical fact.

3. This raises the interesting question of the alleged primacy of singular over general beliefs, a thesis Descartes relied on when arguing that he did not (syllogistically) infer “I think; therefore I am” from “whatever thinks, is” but was convinced of the truth of the former by a simple mental insight (AT VII 140<sup>12-141</sup>, IX/I 205<sup>25-206</sup>, V 147). To evaluate this claim of epistemological primacy of singular beliefs, let us consider the following example of Harrison: “If a man believes that he believes that the earth is flat, it is possible for him to believe that this is the only thing he believes. [...] But if he believes at least one thing, it is *not* possible for him to believe that this is the only thing he believes.” (Harrison 1984: 329) Someone who believes that the earth is flat and that this is his only belief has at least one false belief. The person trying to believe that the very belief he is trying to entertain is his only one faces a more difficult problem, however: he cannot ascribe the belief in question to himself. For any such self-ascription would ascribe two beliefs, that he has only one belief and that this is the one.

is a statement”, however, is less indoubtable than “I am”, for statements are ontologically dependent entities, not able to exist without someone who makes them. Nobody thus can rationally think that this is a statement without thinking that something different from this statement exists.

The peculiar status of “sum”, then, resides in its ontological inconsequentiality, i.e. the fact that it may rationally taken to be the only true existence claim.<sup>4</sup>

Recognising the epistemic irresistibility of his belief that he exists (his “sum”-intuition, as I will call it), gives the Cartesian thinker a belief of the truth of which he cannot help being convinced. This was not was Descartes was after, however: the “fundamentum inconcussum” he tries to uncover is a belief *one can claim to know* even when faced with the most witty sceptic producing the most general sceptical scenario imaginable. This paradigmatic knowledge claim is not “sum” alone – doubtable, if only per impossibile, and indeed doubted by the first person of the *Meditations* at the end of *Meditation One* – but “I think; therefore I am”.<sup>5</sup>

In what does this differ from the “sum”-intuition? In that it gives us a reason to think that the intuition we cannot help having is right. This does not mean, however, that “therefore” has the force of a conditional, a turnstile or indicates some kind of conclusion.<sup>6</sup> “Cogito” provides adequate grounds for “sum”: its truth is necessary and sufficient for recognising “sum”’s indoubtability.<sup>7</sup> With “cogito ergo sum” we not only express an intuition, but make a knowledge claim – and a peculiar one in that we cannot make it falsely.

Even this, however, will not suffice: proving the sceptic wrong by showing how to make a true knowledge claim even in the scenario the sceptic considers possible is not enough. Descartes wants to show his reader *how* to prove the sceptic wrong, provide him with a tool to prove his own existence (*not* the one of the Cartesian thinker) even when under the impression of the most general doubt imaginable. This, in my opinion, crucial step from “sum”, the belief we cannot but take to be true, through “cogito ergo sum”, which is the paradigmatic knowledge claim, to the claim that “cogito ergo sum” *is* paradigmatic in this sense is taken only at the beginning of the Third *Meditation*:

(1)

“Quid verò? Cùm circa res Arithmeticas vel Geometricas aliquid valde simplex & facile considerabam, ut quòd duo & tria simul juncta sint quinque, vel similia, nunquid saltem illa satis perspicue intuebar, ut vera esse affirmarem?”

“Mais lorsque je considérais quelque chose de fort simple et de fort facile touchant l’arithmétique et la géométrie, par exemple que deux et trois joints ensemble produisent le nombre de cinq, et autres choses semblables, ne les concevais-je pas au moins assez clairement pour assurer qu’elles étaient vraies?”

(2)

Equidem non aliam ob causam de iis dubitandum esse postea judicavi, quàm quia veniebat in mentem forte aliquem Deum talem mihi naturam indere potuisse, ut etiam circa illa deciperer, quae manifestissima viderentur.

Certes si j’ai jugé depuis qu’on pouvait douter de ces choses, ce n’a point été pour autre raison, que parce qu’il me venait en l’esprit, que peut-être quelque Dieu avait pu me donner une telle nature, que je me trompasse même touchant les choses qui me semblent les plus manifestes.

(3)

4. Given the epistemic priority of singular over general beliefs mentioned in fn. 3, this is why “I am” is epistemically irresistible in a way “there is at least one thing” is not: “I am” retains its plausibility even when taken to be my only belief, while “there is at least one thing” requires a specialisation.

5. I take this to be roughly equivalent to “*Ego sum, ego existo, quoties a me profertur, vel mente concipitur, necessario esse verum.*” “Cogito ergo sum” appears in the *Discours* version of the *Cogito*: “Mais, aussitost après, je pris garde que, pendant que je voulois ainsi penser que tout estoit faux, il falloit necessairement que moy, qui le pensois, fusse quelque chose. Et remarquant que cete verité: *je pense, donc je suis*, estoit si ferme & si assurée, que toutes les plus extravagantes suppositions des Sceptiques n’estoient pas capables de l’esbranler, je jugay que ie pouvois la recevoir, sans scrupule, pour le premier principe de la Philosophie, que je cherchois.” (AT VI 32<sup>15–24</sup>)

6. This seems to me to explain why Descartes calls both “sum” and “cogito ergo sum” pieces of *intuitive* knowledge (for the latter: AT VII 122<sup>7–11</sup>, IX/I 205<sup>20–25</sup>), while at the same time *demonstrating* his own existence from the sole premiss of his thinking.

7. Again, this does not make it a premiss of some sort of formal argument. Suppose it is not doubted that there is a sole tired person, of unknown sex, in the house. Given this, “The sole person in the house is male” provides an adequate ground for “he is tired”.

Sed quoties haec praeconcepta de summâ Dei potentiâ opinio mihi occurrit, non possum non fateri, si quidem velit, facile illi esse efficeret ut errem, etiam in iis quae me puto mentis oculisquàm evidentissime intueri.

Mais toutes les fois que cette opinion ci-devant conçue de la souveraine puissance d'un Dieu se présente à ma pensée je suis contraint d'avouer qu'il lui est facile, s'il le veut, de faire en sorte que je m'abuse, même dans les choses que je crois connaître avec une évidence très grande.

(4)

Quoties verò ad ipsas res, quas valde clare percipere arbitror, me converto, tam plane ab illis persuadeor, ut sponte erumpam in has voces:

Et au contraire toutes les fois que je me tourne vers les choses que je pense concevoir fort clairement, je suis tellement persuadé par elles, que de moi-même je me laisse emporter à ces paroles:

(5)

fallat me quisquis potest, nunquam tamen efficiet ut nihil sim, quandiu me aliquid esse cogitabo; vel ut aliquando verum sit me nunquam fuisse, cùm jam verum sit me esse;

Me trompe qui pourra, si est-ce qu'il ne saurait jamais faire que je ne sois rien tandis que je penserai être quelque chose; ou que quelque jour il soit vrai que je n'aie jamais été, étant vrai maintenant que je suis,

(6)

vel forte etiam ut duo & tria simul juncta plura vel pauciora sint quàm quinque, vel similia, in quibus scilicet repugnantiam agnosco manifestam.

ou bien que deux et trois joints ensemble fassent plus ni moins que cinq, ou choses semblables, que je vois clairement ne pouvoir être d'autre façon que je les conçois.

(7)

Et certe cùm nullam occasionem habeam existimandi aliquem Deum esse deceptorem, nec quidem adhuc satis sciam utrùm sit aliquis Deus, valde tenuis &, ut ita loquar, Metaphysica dubitandi ratio est, quae tantùm ex eâ opinione dependet.

Et certes, puisque je n'ai aucune raison de croire qu'il y ait quelque Dieu qui soit trompeur, et même que je n'aie pas encore considéré celles qui prouvent qu'il y a un Dieu, la raison de douter qui dépend seulement de cette opinion, est bien légère, et pour ainsi dire métaphysique.

(8)

Ut autem etiam illa tollatur, quamprimum occurret occasio, examinare debeo an sit Deus, &, si sit, an possit esse deceptor; hac enim re ignoratâ, non videor de ullâ aliâ plane certus esse unquam posse."

Mais afin de la pouvoir tout à fait ôter, je dois examiner s'il y a un Dieu, sitôt que l'occasion s'en présentera; et si je trouve qu'il y en ait un, je dois aussi examiner s'il peut être trompeur: car sans la connaissance de ces deux vérités, je ne vois pas que je puisse jamais être certain d'aucune chose."

This is the passage I claim to be the *Cogito*. While having his "sum"-intuition, the first person of the *Meditations* (*A*) proves his existence. Recalling the impossibility of doubting his existence and looking back to his "sum"-intuition, the Cartesian thinker (*B*) proves "cogito ergo sum". For us, the foreknowledgeable and charitable readers (*C*), this amounts to a proof of the existence of a thinking substance. Here is a reconstruction of the argument:

A	B	C
(1)	clear and distinct beliefs are indoubtable (by me)	<i>B</i> takes "cogito ergo sum" to be indoubtable (in itself)
(2)	no other beliefs are claimed by me to be indoubtable (in itself) with more right than these	"cogito ergo sum" is not doubtable (in itself), unless <i>B</i> is fooled
(3)	the evil demon hypothesis seems coherent	<i>B</i> can at least entertain it
	I can, however, only entertain it <i>per impossibile</i>	

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|-----|--|---|--|
| (4) | I cannot help having the “sum”-intuition   | but even in that I could be fooled by an evil demon                 |  |
| (5) | I clearly and distinctly perceive that I cannot be fooled while I am having this intuition | A can indeed not be fooled while having this intuition              |  |
| (6) | I cannot even doubt the indoubtability of “sum”  | A is clearly and distinctly perceiving his inability to doubt “sum” | “sum” is in fact indoubtable (in itself), so B is right              |
| (7) |  | A uncovered a hidden contradiction in the evil demon hypothesis     | the evil demon hypothesis is not clear and distinct                  |
| (8) |  |   | B is not fooled, “cogito ergo sum” is clear and distinct (in itself) |

It is in (5) that *A* has the relevant insight that the hypothesis that he does not exist is “repugnant to reason”, i.e. contains a hidden contradiction. *B*, however, who already had the “sum”-intuition before, knows from the beginning that the only way to doubt one’s own existence, if there is one, is *per impossibile*. He detects the hidden contradiction in the evil demon hypothesis, noticing that even such a being could not make *A* *falsely* believe that he does not exist. *B* observes that any project of doubting one’s own existence fails, thereby grasping the (necessary) truth of “I think, therefore I am”. *C* observes that *B* has maximal evidence for this, for it resists his trying to assume the existence of an evil demon. If it would be false, then, this could only be due to the workings of precisely such an evil demon – a hypothesis effectively ruled out by *A*. So, *C* concludes, that it was because of his *knowledge* of “I think; therefore I am” that *B* was able to rule out the evil demon hypothesis. That’s why “I think; therefore I am” is not only knowable and true but also provides the grounds to effectively rule out scepticism.<sup>8</sup>

Meeting the sceptical challenge was not an end in itself for Descartes, but a means to prove his central metaphysical doctrines, i.e. substance dualism, the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, from their “true reasons”. How then does our reconstructed *Cogito* help him in that? In two ways: by grounding the synthetic and deductive order arising from the analytic method, from the most evident (in itself) back to its consequences, which are familiar to us, and by establishing a certain dependence of the Cartesian thinker’s existence from the fact that he is thinking.

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8. While *A*’s insight, the “sum”-intuition, is categorical, *B* becomes aware of the truth of a conditional: assuming its antecedent in a thought experiment (staging *A* as his counterpart), he notes that the conclusion is inevitable. It is only *C* who is in a position to note that *B*’s thought experiment is *doomed to fail*, thereby establishing that *B* can truly claim to know “I think; therefore I am”.

## References

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