

# Existence of Thought – Descartes' *Cogito* Argument

*This paper raises an objection and proposes a revision to Descartes' cogito argument. Through this argument, Descartes asserts the existence of thought and, therefore, of himself as a thinking entity. This assertion serves as the basis for escaping the radical skepticism he imposes upon himself. In this paper, I will argue that Descartes' original argument is guilty of begging the question, as it already assumes his existence. Moreover, a revision to the cogito, where only the existence of thought is asserted, is proposed. This revision of the cogito escapes the original objection and thus provides a stronger argument.*

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In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes begins by doubting everything he has previously come to believe to establish solid foundations upon which he can build certain knowledge. To build unquestionable knowledge, he convinces himself momentarily of radical skepticism: if we cannot be certain of any knowledge, as the evidence does not guarantee its truth, we must suspend judgement.<sup>1</sup> The claim, known as the *cogito* argument (in Latin: *cogito, ergo sum*), is that one's innate awareness necessarily entails one's existence. This is Descartes' foundational belief, from which he derives all others throughout the following meditations. Throughout this essay, I will explain Descartes' argument against skeptical doubt—the *cogito*—as well as provide an objection to it and Descartes' possible reply to

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<sup>1</sup> The structure of the skeptical argument Descartes' confronts can be summarized as follows: First premise: If we cannot be certain (beyond any doubt) of the evidence of our knowledge, we must suspend judgement.

Second premise: The evidence we have to our knowledge does not guarantee that any of it is true.  
Conclusion: Therefore, we cannot be certain of our knowledge.

this objection. Upon this discussion, I will argue how Descartes' *cogito* argument presupposes a demarcated entity (which is himself) as the one having these thoughts. By using the "I" in his argument, Descartes attaches something that is having these thoughts and claims that this something is him or is attached to him, for which Descartes has not provided a sufficient argument. Nonetheless, a revised *cogito* argument can still prove an unshakable truth: thought exists. Upon this foundational knowledge of the existence of thought, one could continue on to reach what Descartes originally, but unsoundly, attempted to conclude: his attachment to this thought and, consequently, his own existence.

During his first meditation, Descartes states that all the knowledge he has acquired has been derived from the senses or through them. However, he states how our sense of perception can sometimes be deceitful. For instance, insanity can convince us of ludicrous things; when sleeping, dreams can seem as real as waking moments; and so on. Given the unreliability of sense perception, Descartes proposes his most radical skeptical stance as that of an extremely powerful demon who is constantly deceiving him. He rules out the possibility that God could be responsible for this deception due to his omnibenevolence.

Consequently, Descartes' first proposition of his skeptical argument is that the evidence we have of our knowledge—in the previous cases, sense perception—does not guarantee that any of it is true since it has been proven to be deceptive and should thus be deemed unreliable moving forward. Reaching the preliminary conclusion that we are not certain of any of our knowledge due to the uncertainty of its evidence. Given that Descartes wishes to achieve knowledge of which he is certain

(beyond any possible doubt), he then concludes that, at this moment, he does not know anything (Descartes 12-15).

In his second meditation, Descartes challenges his previous skeptical argument. He starts from the same place of radical doubt, distrustful of everything he perceives or has perceived. At this moment, Descartes realizes that he is *thinking*, that he is having thoughts, and that he has *convinced* himself of these radical doubts. Descartes then states the conditional proposition that if he has convinced himself to doubt everything, then there must at least be something existing that is thinking these doubts. Since he has managed to do this, it is because he certainly exists. Even if there exists a demon who is constantly deceiving him, he must exist at least as the thing that this demon is deceiving. Through this argument, Descartes concludes: "I am, I exist," and it is true as long as his mind can conceive it—he has absolute certainty of this (Descartes 16-17).

Having established this, Descartes then seeks to define what exactly this "I" of his argument is. He believes himself to be both a body, that is, all the things that can be seen in a corpse, and a soul, to which he attributes the faculties of sense-perception and thinking. At this point, Descartes is only certain that he thinks and that it is precisely this faculty that is inseparable from this "I". Since the soul is responsible for thought, Descartes concludes that he is, in the strict sense, only a thing that thinks—"a thinking thing" (Descartes 17-18).

Through this argument, Descartes escapes his radical skeptical doubt of a deceiving demon. He proves false the preposition of his skeptical argument, which claims that the evidence of our knowledge does not guarantee that it is true, by providing a piece of knowledge of which he is certain. In this case, Descartes is certain of the knowledge that he exists so long

as he can conceive this thought, and thus proves that the skeptical argument is unsound.

However, a possible objection that may be brought up against the *cogito* argument is that Descartes's formulation of the *cogito* presumes his existence as a limited intellectual entity. In the premises of Descartes' argument, an established "I" is embedded. This "I" already limits the things occurring (thought) to a certain point (Descartes' consciousness). By doing so, Descartes not only assumes the existence of his consciousness as this limited entity where thought takes place, but also that this entity where thought is occurring is connected to him in some way. If Descartes is starting from a place of radical doubt, then he should not be presupposing anything, not even that an "I" (himself) is connected to the events taking place (thought).

Moreover, Descartes defines the "I" as a thinking thing due to the *cogito*, but the argument itself depends on this "I" by already including it. The *cogito* argument is, in this sense, circular; the definition of one of its key parts is derived from it whilst also being embedded in it. This point can be further illustrated if the "I" in the *cogito* argument is replaced by the definition that Descartes provides after: "a thinking thing." It would go as follows: if a thinking thing thinks, then a thinking thing exists (first premise); a thinking thing is thinking (second premise); a thinking thing exists (conclusion). Here, it is clearer how Descartes' "I" presupposes that he is thinking—he embeds the aspect of thinking into the thinking thing, that is, the "I".

Therefore, the "I" of the *cogito* already entails a sort of demarcated entity, and as a result, its existence, and that this entity, where thought is taking place, is connected to Descartes. Descartes' *cogito* argument commits the logical fallacy of begging the question—the premises do not support the conclusion but

already assume it. Additionally, it results in circularity by having the attribute of thinking already embedded in the argument. The “I” is defined as a thinking thing as a way to prove thought. This results in a failure to refute the second premise of the skeptical argument—the evidence we have of our knowledge does not guarantee that any of it is true. Thus, the skeptical argument still stands, as not all the premises have been proven false.

Given the previous objection, Descartes could reply by stating that the “I” does not assume a demarcated intellectual entity (i.e., his consciousness) where thought occurs, and consequently, an attachment to this thought. Instead, it merely expresses the only thought of which at this point he is certain—his own. The “I” serves to express this internal awareness that he describes as innate (since it exists even before the reflection of it) in all people (Descartes 69). Descartes, himself, is only capable of this inward observation or innate awareness of his own thoughts and, as such, of his existence. So, Descartes could claim that he can only guarantee that it is true that a thinking thing is thinking if he is himself that thinking thing (Descartes 22). Given the fact that he is now thinking (having internal awareness of his consciousness), it would be impossible for him not to be something. The “I” reflects this internal consciousness of oneself through one’s own thoughts.

Additionally, Descartes could reply by stating how the “I” included in the *cogito* is not necessarily identical to the thinking thing, but rather that the “I” as a thinking thing is a conclusion derived from the *cogito*. As such, it is not a technical argument. Descartes could argue that it is an oversimplification to use this term interchangeably and even more to claim that the argument is circular because of it. For Descartes, defining the “I” as a thinking thing is a conclusion of the *cogito*, which expresses this

inward observation of his own consciousness. Moreover, Descartes refers to the “I” not only as a thinking thing but also as various other descriptors like mind, intellect, reason, intelligence, etc. (Descartes 18). He simply limits himself to a thinking thing, as this has been the only faculty of the mind he has been able to prove so far. For now, the “I” only refers to this something that is thinking.

I believe that Descartes’ reply does refute some aspects of the objection. I think Descartes would be correct to argue that the “I” as a thinking thing does not make the *cogito* circular. If any of the other descriptors Descartes provides for the thinking thing (mind, reason, intellect, and so on) substitute the “I” in the *cogito* (as I did for the thinking thing), then the argument no longer presupposes that the “I” is thinking. Descartes refers to the “I” as a thinking thing as a way to give it a descriptor he knows to be true, not to embed the aspect of thinking into it. I believe that Descartes was simply being modest in referring to the “I” as a thinking thing and that arguing that it makes the *cogito* circular is a mere misunderstanding of his argument – the thinking thing is a conclusion of the *cogito*. The “I” as a thinking thing, then, does not make the argument circular. If anything, it only makes it stronger, as Descartes chooses to assume less.

Having said that, I still think there are some points in which the objection continues to present a serious problem to the *cogito*. I believe that Descartes’ use of the “I,” although it does not make the argument circular by being defined as a thinking thing, does overestimate what the *cogito* is able to prove. Even though Descartes’ possible reply that the “I” only refers to this self-introspective mind that thinks these particular thoughts provides a good objection, he nonetheless did not provide an argument for this but rather assumed it in his *cogito*. Given this,

it still presupposes a sort of demarcated entity where the thought is occurring and assigns it arbitrarily to himself and not to someone else or no one at all. I still think that it assumes that there is this, in some way identifiable, "I" which exists and is connected and limited to him in some way.

In other words, it does assume some form of personhood – the "I" assigns a value judgement about to whom this thought is connected. It entails a vessel in which these thoughts are occurring, but Descartes has yet to give an argument for the existence of this vessel, or why this vessel belongs to him or is him. Even if Descartes identifies the "I" as a self-introspective mind, this would nonetheless be an additional claim that would need to be proven and not assumed. Solely having thoughts does not assume this identity-like vessel that is intrinsically attached to Descartes; it merely acknowledges the existence of these thoughts, regardless of to whom, if anyone, they would be attached. He inserts a who into the argument, which, if Descartes is holding the level of skeptical doubt he claims to, would still be assuming too much at this point. It would be necessary to provide an additional argument to prove the intimate relationship between these thoughts and their generator.

Nevertheless, I believe the *cogito* can still prove something that allows Descartes to escape his radical skeptical doubt, which is that thought is occurring or that thought exists. It cannot, at this point, prove that there is a vessel (which Descartes assumes as himself) having these thoughts or to whom they are attached, that is, an "I," but it can prove the existence of thought. I would then like to propose the following revised version of the *cogito*, which grounds itself in the unarguable presence of thought, frees itself from this objection, and makes it a sound argument: "There is thought, given any contemplation, and that is undeniable."

Upon this revised version, I believe Descartes could then provide an additional argument, besides the *cogito*, for the connection between this existing thought and an agent having these thoughts, such as the argument for innate awareness he presents as a reply to the objection and throughout the treatise.

In conclusion, while Descartes' *cogito* argument presents a convincing case, it falls short of the stringent scrutiny he aimed to meet. My critique reveals that Descartes, without adequate justification, presumes an "I," a demarcated and existing entity to whom this thought is attached, thus implying some sort of limit to where this thought is occurring (which is within himself). However, Descartes' argument can be salvaged from this assumption by simply asserting the existence of thought, thereby averting the implicit claim of an "I." In doing so, Descartes could evade the presupposition of a demarcated entity, thus, furnishing a stronger argument that allows him to escape radical skeptical doubt. Furthermore, upon this foundational belief, Descartes can provide an additional argument for why he (as this "I") is attached to this thought, a topic he touches on when expressing how thought requires a sort of innate awareness or that one can only know one's own thoughts.

## Bibliography

Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Ed. & trans. by John Cottingham, Cambridge University Press, 1996.