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META-MEDITATIONS:

Studies in Descartes

edited by
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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc.

BELMONT, CALIFORNIA

COGITO, ERGO SUM: INFERENCE OR PERFORMANCE?*

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1. *Cogito, ergo sum* as a problem. The fame (some would say the notoriety) of the adage *cogito, ergo sum* makes one expect that scholarly industry has long since exhausted whatever interest it may have historically or topically. A perusal of the relevant literature, however, fails to satisfy this expectation. After hundreds of discussions of Descartes's famed principle we still do not seem to have any way of expressing his alleged insight in terms which would be general and precise enough to enable us to judge its validity or its relevance to the consequences he claimed to draw from it. Thirty years ago Heinrich Scholz wrote that there not only remain many important questions concerning the Cartesian dictum unanswered but that there also remain important questions unasked.¹ Several illuminating papers later, the situation still seems essentially the same today.

2. *Some historical aspects of the problem.* This uncertainty of the topical significance of Descartes's dictum cannot but reflect on the discussions of its historical status. The contemporaries were not slow to point out that Descartes's principle had been strikingly anticipated by St. Augustine. Although later studies have unearthed other anticipations,² notably in Campanella and in the Schoolmen, scholars still seem to be especially impressed by Descartes's affinity with St. Augustine, in spite of his unmistakable attempts to minimize the significance of

* From *The Philosophical Review*, LXXI (1962), 3–32. Reprinted by permission of the author and *The Philosophical Review*.

¹ Heinrich Scholz, "Über das Cogito, ergo sum," *Kant-Studien*, XXXVI (1931), 126–147.

² See e.g. L. Blanchet, *Les antécédents du "Je pense, donc je suis"* (Paris, 1920); Étienne Gilson, *Études sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien (Études de philosophie médiévale, XIII)* (Paris, 1930), 2d pt., ch. ii, and the first appendix; Heinrich Scholz, "Augustinus und Descartes," *Blätter für deutsche Philosophie*, V (1932), 406–423.

Augustine's anticipation. It cannot be denied, of course, that the similarities are striking. One may wonder, however, whether they are all there is to the matter. Perhaps there are also dissimilarities between Descartes and Augustine important enough to justify or at least to explain the one's reluctance to acknowledge the extent of the other's anticipation. But we cannot tell whether there is more to Descartes's *cogito, ergo sum* than there is to St. Augustine's similar argument before we can tell exactly what there is to the *cogito* argument.

If there are important differences between Descartes and his predecessors, the question will also arise whether some of the anticipations are closer than others. For instance, Descartes could have found the principle in St. Thomas Aquinas as well as in St. Augustine. Which of the two saints comes closer to the *cogito, ergo sum*?

3. *What is the relation of cogito to sum?* What kind of topical questions does *cogito, ergo sum* give rise to? One of the most important questions is undoubtedly that of the logical form of Descartes's inference. Is it a formally valid inference? If not, what is logically wrong about it?

But there is an even more fundamental question than these. Does Descartes's dictum really express an inference? That it does is suggested by the particle *ergo*. According to Descartes, however, by saying *cogito, ergo sum* he does not logically (syllogistically) deduce *sum* from *cogito* but rather perceives intuitively ("by a simple act of mental vision") the self-evidence of *sum*.³ Similarly, Descartes occasionally says that one's own existence is intuitively obvious without bringing in *cogito* as a premise.⁴ Sometimes he intimates that his "first principle" is really the existence of his mind—and not the principle *cogito, ergo sum*, by means of which this existence is apparently deduced.⁵ Once he formulates the *cogito* principle as *ego cogitans existo* without using the word *ergo* at all.⁶

But if it is true that the Cartesian dictum does not express an inference, equally perplexing questions are bound to arise. Not only is

³ *Œuvres de Descartes*, published by C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris, 1897–1913), VII, 140; *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (London, 1931), II, 38. In the sequel, these editions will be referred to as AT and HR, respectively, with Roman numerals referring to volumes. Normally I shall not follow Haldane and Ross's translation, however; I shall make use of the existing translations (notably of those by N. Kemp Smith and by Anscombe and Geach) rather eclectically.

⁴ AT X, 368; HR I, 7.

⁵ AT IV, 444; AT VII, 12; HR I, 140.

⁶ AT VII, 481; HR II, 282.

the particle *ergo* then misplaced; the word *cogito* is likewise out of place in a sentence which only serves to call attention to the self-evidence of *sum*.

But is the word *cogito* perhaps calculated to express the fact that thought is needed for grasping that *sum* is intuitively evident? Was it perhaps an indication of the fact that intuition was not for Descartes an irrational event but an act of the thinking mind, an "intellectual intuition," as it has been aptly expressed?⁷ Even if this is part of the meaning of the word, the question will remain why Descartes wanted to stress the fact in connection with this particular insight. The same point would equally well apply to most of the other propositions of the Cartesian system; and yet Descartes does not say, for example, *cogito, ergo Deus est* in the way he says *cogito, ergo sum*.

Clearly the word *cogito* must have some further function in Descartes's sentence. Even if the sentence did not express a syllogistic inference, it expressed something sufficiently like an inference to make Descartes call his sentence a reasoning (*ratiocinium*),⁸ refer to expressing it as inferring (*inferre*),⁹ and call *sum* a conclusion (*conclusio*).¹⁰ As Martial Gueroult has trenchantly summed up the problem: "1° Descartes se refuse à considérer le *Cogito* comme un raisonnement. . . . 2° Pourquoi s'obstine-t-il alors au moins à trois reprises (*Inquisitio veritatis, Discours, Principes*) à présenter le *Cogito* sous la forme qu'il lui dénie?"¹¹

Since the word *cogito* is not dispensable and since it is not just a premise from which the conclusion *sum* is deduced, the relation of the two becomes a problem. One of the main objectives of this essay is to clear up their relation.

4. *Cogito, ergo sum as a logical inference.* But can we be sure that Descartes's dictum does not express a logical inference? In many respects it seems plausible to think that it does. Its logical form seems quite easy to define. In the sentence "I think" an individual receives an attribute; for a modern logician it is therefore of the form "*B(a)*." In the sentence "I am," or "I exist," this same individual is said to exist.

⁷ L. J. Beck, *The Method of Descartes* (Oxford, 1952), ch. iv.

⁸ AT X, 523; HR I, 324.

⁹ AT VII, 352; HR II, 207; cf. AT III, 248.

¹⁰ *Principia philosophiae* I, 9; AT VIII, 7; HR I, 222; cf. AT II, 37, and AT V, 147.

¹¹ Martial Gueroult, "Le *Cogito* et la notion 'pour penser il faut être,'" *Travaux du IX^e Congrès International de philosophie (Congrès Descartes)* (Paris, 1937; reprinted as the first appendix to Gueroult's *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*, Paris, 1953, II, 307-312). See p. 308.

How can one represent such a sentence formally? If Quine is right in claiming that "to be is to be a value of a bound variable," the formula " $(Ex)(x = a)$ " serves the purpose. And even if he is not right in general, in this particular case his claim is obviously justified: "*a* exists" and "there exists at least one individual identical with *a*" are clearly synonymous. Descartes's dictum therefore seems to be concerned with an implication of the form

$$(1) \quad B(a) \supset (Ex)(x = a).$$

Descartes perceives that he thinks; hence he obtains the premise $B(a)$. If (1) is true, he can use *modus ponens* to conclude that he exists. Those who want to interpret the *Cogito* as a logical inference may now claim that (1) is in fact true, and even logically provable; for is not

$$B(a) \supset (Ex)(x = a \ \& \ B(x))$$

a provable formula of our lower functional calculi? And does not this formula entail (1) in virtue of completely unproblematic principles? It may seem that an affirmative answer must be given to these questions, and that Descartes's argument is thus easily construed as a valid logical inference.

Views of this general type have a long ancestry. Gassendi already claimed that *ambulo, ergo sum*, "I walk, therefore I am," is as good an inference as *cogito, ergo sum*.¹² It is obvious that on the interpretation just suggested, Gassendi will be right. The alleged provability of (1) does not depend on the attribute "*B*" at all. The gist of Descartes's argument is on the present view expressible by saying that one cannot think without existing; and if (1) is an adequate representation of the logical form of this principle, one can indeed equally well say that one cannot walk without existing.

This already makes the interpretation (1) suspect. In this reply to Gassendi, Descartes denies that *ambulo, ergo sum* is comparable with *cogito, ergo sum*.¹³ The reasons he gave are not very clear, however. A part of the burden of his remarks is perhaps that although the inferences *ambulo, ergo sum* and *cogito, ergo sum* are parallel—as being both of the form (1)—their premises are essentially different. *Ambulo* is not an indubitable premise in the way *cogito* may be claimed to be.

¹² In his objections to the *Second Meditation* (AT VII, 258-259; HR II, 137).

¹³ AT VII, 352; HR II, 207.

But even if we make this allowance, there remain plenty of difficulties. As we saw, Descartes sometimes denies that in the *cogito* argument *sum* is deduced from *cogito*. But on the view we are criticizing the argument is a deduction. The view is therefore unsatisfactory.

It is also unsatisfactory because it does not help us to understand the role of the *cogito* argument in the Cartesian system. In so far as I can see, it does not, for example, help us to appreciate the consequences Descartes wanted to draw from his first and foremost insight.

The gravest objection, however, still remains to be made. It may be shown that the provability of (1) in the usual systems of functional calculus (quantification theory) has nothing to do with the question whether thinking entails existence. An attempt to interpret Descartes's argument in terms of the provability of (1) is therefore bound to remain fruitless.

By this I mean the following: if we have a closer look at the systems of logic in which (1) can be proved, we soon discover that they are based on important *existential presuppositions*, as I have elsewhere called them.¹⁴ They make more or less tacit use of the assumption that all the singular terms with which we have to deal really refer to (designate) some actually existing individual.¹⁵ In our example this amounts to assuming that the term which replaces *a* in (1) must not be empty. But since the term in question is "I," this is just another way of saying that I exist. It turns out, therefore, that we in fact decided that the sentence "I exist" is true when we decided that the sentence "I think" is of the form $B(a)$ (for the purposes of the usual systems of functional logic).¹⁶ That we were then able to infer $(Ex)(x = a)$ from $B(a)$ is undoubtedly true, but completely beside the point.

It is possible to develop a system of logic which dispenses with the existential presuppositions.¹⁷ If in such a system we could infer "I exist" from "I think"—i.e. $(Ex)(x = a)$ from $B(a)$ —it would be

¹⁴ In "Existential Presuppositions and Existential Commitments," *Journal of Philosophy*, LVI (1959), 125-137.

¹⁵ All the singular terms (e.g. names or pronouns) which in an application may be substituted for a free individual variable are assumed to do so; and as a consequence all the free individual variables have to behave like singular terms which really possess a reference (or "bearer," vulgarly "referent").

¹⁶ Cf. Leibniz' incisive remark: "And to say *I think, therefore I am*, is not properly to prove existence by thought, since to think and to be thinking is the same thing; and to say, *I am thinking*, is already to say, *I am*" (*Nouveaux Essais*, tr. by A. G. Langley (La Salle, Ill., 1949), IV, 7, sec. 7).

¹⁷ Such a system was outlined in the paper referred to in note 14. Essentially the same system was developed independently by Hugues Leblanc and Theodore Hailperin in "Nondesignating Singular Terms," *Philosophical Review*, LXVIII (1959), 239-243.

highly relevant to the question whether thinking implies existence in Descartes's sense. But this we cannot do. The truth of a sentence of the form (1) turns entirely on existential presuppositions. If they are given up, the provability of (1) goes by the board.

My point may perhaps be illustrated by means of an example constructed for us by Shakespeare. Hamlet did think a great many things; does it follow that he existed?

5. *Descartes's temptation.* In spite of all this, there are passages in Descartes which seem to support the interpretation under criticism. I do not want to deny that it expresses *one* of the things Descartes had more or less confusedly in mind when he formulated his famous dictum. But it is important to realize that this interpretation is defective in important respects. It does not help to elucidate in any way some of Descartes's most explicit and most careful formulations. It is at best a partial interpretation.

One can see why some interpretation like the one we have been criticizing attracted Descartes. It gave him what must have seemed a very useful way of defending his own doctrines and of silencing criticism. He could always ask: How can it possibly be true of someone that he thinks unless he exists? And if you challenge the premise that he is thinking (why cannot the all-powerful *malin génie* make it appear to him that he is thinking?), Descartes could have replied that in a sense the premise is redundant. He could have resorted to some such argument as the following: If I am right in thinking that I exist, then of course I exist. If I err in thinking that I exist or if I as much as doubt whether I exist, then I must likewise exist, for no one can err or doubt without existing. In any case I must therefore exist: *ergo sum*.

This neat argument is a *petitio principii*, however, as you may perhaps see by comparing it with the following similar argument: Homer was either a Greek or a barbarian. If he was a Greek, he must have existed; for how could one be a Greek without existing? But if he was a barbarian, he likewise must have existed. Hence he must have existed in any case.

The latter argument is obviously fallacious; the celebrated Homeric question cannot be solved on paper. By the same token, the former argument is also fallacious.¹⁸

¹⁸ But maybe you are not convinced; maybe you feel that the question of Descartes's own existence is essentially different from the question of Homer's existence. If so, you are right. I have not wanted to deny that there is a difference, and an important one. All I am saying is that the reconstruction we are considering does not bring out this difference.

Did Descartes realize that it is misguided to represent his insight in the way we have been discussing? It is very difficult to tell. Certainly he never realized it fully. He seems to have realized, however, that on this interpretation the validity of his argument depends essentially on existential presuppositions. For when he tried to present his fundamental doctrines in a deductive or "geometrical" form, he tried to formulate these presuppositions in so many words by saying that "we can conceive nothing except as existent (*nisi sub ratione existentis*)" (AT VII, 166; HR II, 57). This statement is all the more remarkable since it *prima facie* contradicts what Descartes says in the *Third Meditation* about "ideas . . . considered only in themselves, and not as referred to some other thing," namely that "they cannot, strictly speaking, be false." It also contradicts the plain fact that we can think of (mentally consider) unicorns, or Prince Hamlet, without thereby committing ourselves to maintaining that they exist.

The fact also remains that Descartes resorted to the interpretation we have been criticizing mainly in his more popular writings. As Gueroult noticed, he does not resort to it in the *Meditationes*. His most explicit use of it occurs in *Recherche de la vérité*, in a dialogue whose didactic character has been particularly emphasized by Ernest Cassirer.¹⁹ Descartes's most careful formulations of the *cogito* argument, notably those in the *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, seem to presuppose a different interpretation of the argument.

6. *Existential inconsistency.* In order to understand this second interpretation of the *Cogito* we have to have a closer look at the logic of Descartes's famed argument. Descartes's formulations in the *Meditationes* and elsewhere suggest that his result may be expressed by saying that it was impossible for him to deny his existence. One way in which Descartes could have tried to (but did not) deny this would have been to say, "Descartes does not exist." As a preliminary to our study of Descartes's first-person sentence *cogito, ergo sum* we shall inquire into the character of this third-person sentence. The reasons why Descartes could not have maintained the latter will turn out to be closely related to the reasons why he asserted the former, if I am right.

What, then, are these reasons? What general characteristic of the sentence "De Gaulle does not exist" makes it awkward for De Gaulle to assert it?²⁰ I shall try to formulate this general characteristic by

¹⁹ Descartes: *Lehre, Persönlichkeit, Wirkung* (Stockholm, 1939), p. 126.

²⁰ My example is inspired by his predilection for referring to himself in the third person.

saying that it is *existentially inconsistent* for De Gaulle to assert (to utter) this sentence. The notion of existential inconsistency may be defined as follows; let p be a sentence and a a singular term (e.g. a name, a pronoun, or a definite description). We shall say that p is *existentially inconsistent for the person referred to by a to utter* if and only if the longer sentence

(2) "p; and a exists"

is inconsistent (in the ordinary sense of the word). In order to avoid our own objections we must of course require that the notion of ordinary inconsistency which is used in the definition involves no existential presuppositions. Provided that this is the case, we may write (2) more formally as

(2)' " $p \ \& \ (Ex) (x = a)$."

(As the informed reader has no doubt already noticed, we should really use quasi quotes instead of double quotes in (2) and (2)'.)

A trivial reformulation of the definition shows that the notion of existential inconsistency really formulates a general reason why certain statements are impossible to defend although the sentences by means of which they are made may be consistent and intelligible. Instead of saying that (2) is inconsistent, we could have said that p entails " a does not exist" (without the use of any existential presuppositions but otherwise in the ordinary sense of entailment). Uttering such a sentence, p , will be very awkward for the bearer of a : it means making a statement which, if true, entails that its maker does not exist.

It is important to realize that the ills of such *statements* cannot be blamed on the *sentences* by means of which they are made.²¹ In fact, the notion of existential inconsistency cannot be applied at all to sentences. As we defined the notion, it is a relation between a sentence and

²¹ It may be worth while to recall here the distinction between a sentence, an utterance, and a statement. A sentence is of course a grammatical entity that involves no reference to any particular utterer or any particular time of utterance. An utterance is an event (a speech-act) that may be specified by specifying the uttered sentence, the speaker, and the occasion on which he makes his utterance.

Utterances of declarative sentences (with *prima-facie* fact-stating intent) are typical examples of *statements*. (The term does not seem especially happy, but I shall retain it because it appears to be rather widespread.) A statement is an event (an act) occurring in some particular context. Usually it is a speech-act of a certain kind, but we shall not insist on that. For our purposes a statement may equally well be made, e.g., by writing a sentence. Any act will do which is *prima facie* designed to serve the same purposes as the act of uttering a declarative sentence with the intention of conveying bona fide information.

a singular term rather than a property of sentences. The notion of existential inconsistency, however, can often be applied to statements in a fairly natural sense. In order to specify a statement we have to specify (*inter alia*) the sentence uttered (say, *q*) and its utterer. If the latter refers to himself by means of the singular term *b* when he makes his statement, we may say that the notion applies to the statement if and only if it applies to *q* in relation to *b*.

A simple example will make the situation clear. The sentences "De Gaulle does not exist" and "Descartes does not exist" are not inconsistent or otherwise objectionable any more than the moot sentence "Homer does not exist." None of them is false for logical reasons alone. What would be (existentially) inconsistent would be the attempt of a certain man (De Gaulle, Descartes, or Homer, respectively) to use one of these sentences to make a statement. Uttered by somebody else, the sentences in question need not have anything wrong or even strange about them.

It lies close at hand to express this important feature of the notion of existential inconsistency by means of a term which has recently enjoyed wide currency. The inconsistency (absurdity) of an existentially inconsistent statement can in a sense be said to be of *performatory* (performative) character. It depends on an act or "performance," namely on a certain person's act of uttering a sentence (or of otherwise making a statement); it does not depend solely on the means used for the purpose, that is, on the sentence which is being uttered. The sentence is perfectly correct as a sentence, but the attempt of a certain man to utter it assertively is curiously pointless. If one of these days I should read in the morning paper, "There is no De Gaulle any more," I could understand what is being said. But no one who knows Charles de Gaulle could help being puzzled by these words if they were uttered by De Gaulle himself; the only way of making sense of them would be to give them a nonliteral meaning.

We can here see how the existential inconsistency of De Gaulle's fictional utterance (as well as the inconsistency of other existentially inconsistent statements) manifests itself. Normally a speaker wants his hearer to believe what he says. The whole "language-game" of fact-stating discourse is based on the assumption that this is normally the case. But nobody can make his hearer believe that he does not exist by telling him so; such an attempt is likely to have the opposite result. The pointlessness of existentially inconsistent statements is therefore due to the fact that they automatically destroy one of the major purposes which the act of uttering a declarative sentence normally has. ("Au-

tomatically" means here something like "for merely logical reasons.") This destructive effect is of course conditional on the fact that the hearer knows who the maker of the statement is, that is, that he identifies the speaker as the same man the uttered sentence is about.

In a special case a self-defeating attempt of this kind can be made without saying or writing anything or doing anything comparable. In trying to make *others* believe something I must normally do something which can be heard or seen or felt. But in trying to make *myself* believe something there is no need to say anything aloud or to write anything on paper. The performance through which existential inconsistency arises can in this case be merely an attempt to think—more accurately, an attempt to make oneself believe—that one does not exist.²²

This transition from "public" speech-acts to "private" thought-acts, however, does not affect the essential features of their logic. The reason why Descartes's attempt to *think* that he does not exist necessarily fails is for a logician exactly the same as the reason why his attempt to tell one of his contemporaries that Descartes did not exist would have been bound to fail as soon as the hearer realized who the speaker was.

7. *Existentially inconsistent sentences.* It can be seen that we are approaching Descartes's famous dictum. In order to reach it we have to take one more step. We have found that the notion of existential inconsistency is primarily applicable to statements (e.g., declarative utterances) rather than to sentences. In a sense, it may of course be defined for sentences, too, namely by making it relative to a term (name, pronoun, or definite description) occurring therein. This is in fact what we did when we first introduced the notion; we said *inter alia* that the sentence "De Gaulle does not exist" is existentially inconsistent for De Gaulle (i.e. for the person referred to by "De Gaulle") to utter. Sometimes it may even be possible to omit the specification "for . . . to utter," namely when the intended speaker can be gathered from the context.

²² This means, in effect, that Descartes arrives at his first and foremost insight by playing for a moment a double role: he appears as his own audience. It is interesting and significant that Balz, who for his own purposes represents Descartes's quest as a dialogue between "Cartesius, who voices Reason itself," and "René Descartes the Everyman," finds that they both "conspire in effecting this renowned utterance," the *cogito ergo sum*, wherefore "in some sense, its meaning is referable both to Cartesius and René Descartes." See Albert G. A. Balz, *Descartes and the Modern Mind* (New Haven, 1952), pp. 89–90.

In a frequently occurring special case such an omission is not only natural but almost inevitable. It is the case in which the speaker refers to himself by means of the first-person singular pronoun "I." This pronoun inevitably refers to whoever happens to be speaking. The specification "inconsistent for . . . to utter" therefore reduces to the tautology "inconsistent for whoever happens to be speaking to utter," and may therefore be omitted almost always. In a special case, the notion of existential inconsistency may therefore be defined for sentences *simpliciter* and not only for sentences thought of as being uttered by some particular speaker. These are the sentences which contain a first-person singular pronoun. The existential inconsistency of such a sentence will mean that its utterer cannot add "and I exist" without contradicting himself implicitly or explicitly.

There are purposes, however, for which it may be misleading to forget the specification. Forgetting it may be dangerous since it leads one to overlook the important similarities which obtain between existentially inconsistent *sentences* and existentially inconsistent *statements*. In a perfectly good sense, existentially inconsistent sentences are all right as sentences. They may be said to be consistent and sometimes even significant (e.g. when they occur as parts of more complicated sentences). According to their very definition, existentially inconsistent sentences are not so much inconsistent as such as absurd for anyone to utter. Their (existential) inconsistency is therefore of performatory character exactly in the same sense as that of the existentially inconsistent statements. The only difference between the two lies in the fact that the latter are inconsistent for some particular man to make while the former are inconsistent for anyone to utter. The inconsistency of existentially inconsistent sentences means that whoever tries to make somebody (anybody) believe them, by so doing, helps to defeat his own purpose.²³ Such an attempt may take the form of uttering the sentence assertively; or it may take the form of trying to persuade oneself of the truth of the sentence in question.

In the same way as existentially inconsistent sentences defeat themselves when they are uttered or thought of, their negations verify themselves when they are expressly uttered or otherwise professed. Such sentences may therefore be called existentially self-verifying. The simplest example of a sentence of this kind is "I am," in Descartes's Latin *ego sum, ego existo*.

²³ For this reason it might be more appropriate to call them (existentially) *self-defeating* than (existentially) *inconsistent*.

8. *Descartes's insight.* Now we have reached a point where we can express precisely the import of Descartes's insight (or at least one of its most important aspects). It seems to me that the most interesting interpretation one can give to it is to say that Descartes realized, however dimly, the existential inconsistency of the sentence "I don't exist" and therefore the existential self-verifiability of "I exist." *Cogito, ergo sum* is only one possible way of expressing this insight. Another way actually employed by Descartes is to say that the sentence *ego sum* is intuitively self-evident.

We can now understand the relation of the two parts of the *cogito, ergo sum* and appreciate the reasons why it cannot be a logical inference in the ordinary sense of the word. What is at stake in Descartes's dictum is the status (the indubitability) of the sentence "I am." (This is shown particularly clearly by the formulations of the *Second Meditation*.) Contrary appearances notwithstanding, Descartes does not demonstrate this indubitability by deducing *sum* from *cogito*. On the other hand the sentence "I am" ("I exist") is not by itself logically true, either. Descartes realizes that its indubitability results from an act of thinking, namely from an attempt to think the contrary. The function of the word *cogito* in Descartes's dictum is to refer to the thought-act through which the existential self-verifiability of "I exist" manifests itself. Hence the indubitability of this sentence is not strictly speaking perceived *by means of* thinking (in the way the indubitability of a demonstrable truth may be said to be); rather, it is indubitable *because* and *in so far as* it is actively thought of. In Descartes's argument the relation of *cogito* to *sum* is not that of a premise to a conclusion. Their relation is rather comparable with that of a *process* to its *product*. The indubitability of my own existence results from my thinking of it almost as the sound of music results from playing it or (to use Descartes's own metaphor²⁴) light in the sense of illumination (*lux*) results from the presence of a source of light (*lumen*).

The relation which the particle *ergo* serves to express in Descartes's sentence is therefore rather peculiar.²⁵ Perhaps it would have

²⁴ See his letter to Morin, dated July 13, 1638 (AT II, 209).

²⁵ Martial Gueroult has again neatly located the source of trouble by calling our attention to the peculiarities of this relation. He has realized that Descartes's dictum does not (merely) express a logical relation between thinking and existing but that it is concerned with an additional "fact" or "act" ("le fait ou l'acte," "le fait brut de l'existence donnée") which is just what is needed to show the certainty of my existence. However, his explanations leave the status of this fact or act (which cannot be an ordinary fact given to us by our senses or by

been less misleading for Descartes to say, "I am in that I think," or "By thinking I perceive my existence," than to say, "I think, therefore I am." It may be worth noting that one of our formulations was closely anticipated by St. Thomas Aquinas when he wrote: "Nullus potest cogitare se non esse cum assensu: in hoc enim quod cogitat aliquid, percipit se esse" (*De veritate*, X, 12, ad 7). The peculiarity of this relation explains Descartes's vacillation in expressing it in that he sometimes speaks of the *Cogito* as an inference and sometimes as a realization of the intuitive self-evidence of its latter half.

Similarly we may now appreciate the function of the word *cogito* in Descartes's sentence as well as his motives in employing it. It serves to express the performatory character of Descartes's insight; it refers to the "performance" (to the act of thinking) through which the sentence "I exist" may be said to verify itself. For this reason, it has a most important function in Descartes's sentence. It cannot be replaced by any arbitrary verb. The performance (act) through which the existential self-verifiability is manifested cannot be any arbitrary human activity, contrary to what Gassendi claimed. It cannot be an act of walking or an act of seeing. It cannot even be an instance of arbitrary mental activity, say of willing or of feeling. It must be just what we said it is: an attempt to think in the sense of making myself believe (an attempt to think *cum assensu*, as Aquinas put it) that I do not exist. Hence Descartes's choice of the word *cogito*. This particular word is not absolutely indispensable, however, for the act of thinking to which it refers could also be called an act of doubting; and Descartes does admit that his insight is also expressible by *dubito, ergo sum* (in *Recherche de la vérité*, AT X, 523; HR I, 324; cf. also *Principia philosophiae*, I, 7).

But did I not say that the performance through which an existentially self-verifying sentence verifies itself may also be an act uttering it? Is this not incompatible with Descartes's use of the word *cogito*? There is no incompatibility, for Descartes says exactly the same. In his second meditation on first philosophy he says in so many words that the sentence "I exist" is necessarily true "whenever I utter it or conceive it in my mind"—"quoties a me profertur, vel mente concipitur" (AT VII, 25; HR I, 150).²⁶

introspection) rather vague. Nor does Gueroult realize that the logical aspect of Descartes's insight is in principle completely dispensable. See Gueroult's *Descartes*, II, 310.

²⁶ What we have said shows that Descartes's verbs *cogitare* and *dubitare* are not, in the last analysis, the most accurate ones for describing the act through

The performatory character of Descartes's insight presupposes a characteristic feature of his famous method of doubt which has frequently been commented on in other contexts. Descartes's doubt does not consist in the giving up of all opinions, as a skeptic's doubt might. Nor is it an attempt to remove certain specific sources of mistakes from our thinking, like Francis Bacon's. It amounts to an active attempt to think the contrary of what we usually believe. For this reason Descartes could claim that in an important point this rather doctrinaire doubt of his defeats itself. A skeptic's passive doubt could never do so.

The performatory character of Descartes's insight is in fact part and parcel of the general strategy of his *reductio ad absurdum* (or perhaps rather *projectio ad absurdum*) of skepticism. This strategy is brought out very well by Richard Popkin in his important work *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*.²⁷ As Popkin writes, "Only by forcing oneself to doubt and negate to the greatest possible degree, can one appreciate the indubitable character of the cogito."

9. *The Cogito and introspection.* The attempt to see the *Cogito* as a logical inference is not the only one-sided interpretation of Descartes's insight. Sometimes it has been understood, on the contrary, as a more or less purely factual statement, as a mere *Tatsachenwahrheit*.²⁸ This interpretation is often combined with a definite view as to how this particular truth is ascertained, namely by introspection. The function of the *Cogito*, on this view, is to call our attention to something every one of us can ascertain when he "gazes within himself."

which the sentence "I don't exist" defeats itself. It is not strictly true to say that an inconsistency arises from Descartes's attempt to *think* that he does not exist or to *doubt* that he does. Somebody else may think so; why not Descartes himself? He can certainly think so in the sense of contemplating a "mere possibility." What he cannot do is to *persuade* anybody (including himself) that he does not exist; wherefore he cannot try to *profess* (to others or to himself) that he does not exist without defeating his own attempt. In fact, Descartes himself resorts to explanations of this kind when he gives his most explicit explanation of the moves which made him recognize the self-evidence of his own existence. In the passage just quoted he uses the Latin verb *proferre* and a little earlier the verb *persuadere* for the purpose. A literal-minded Cartesian might thus want to conclude as his basic truth, *ego sum professor* rather than *sum res cogitans*.

²⁷ *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (Wijsgerige Teksten en Studies IV, Van Gorcum & Co., Assen, 1960) ch. ix, especially pp. 185-187. See also Henri Gouhier, "Doute méthodique ou négation méthodique?" *Études Philosophiques*, IX (1954), 135-162.

²⁸ For the history of this view as well as for an interesting argument for its importance, see P. Schrecker, "La méthode cartésienne et la logique," *Revue philosophique*, CXXIII (1937), 336-367, especially pp. 353-354.

It is very misleading, however, to appeal to introspection in explaining the meaning of the *Cogito*, although there is likely to be a connection between the notion of introspection and the peculiarities of the Cartesian argument. We have seen that an existentially inconsistent sentence may also defeat itself through an "external" speech-act. The reason why Descartes could not doubt his own existence is in principle exactly the same as the reason why he could not hope to mislead anybody by saying "I don't exist." The one does not presuppose introspection any more than the other. What the philosophers who have spoken of introspection here are likely to have had in mind is often performativeness rather than introspectiveness.

The independence of Descartes's insight of introspection is illustrated by the fact that there is a peculiarity about certain sentences in the *second* person which is closely related to the peculiarities of Descartes's *ego sum, ego existo*. In the same way as it is self-defeating to say "I don't exist," it is usually absurd to say "You don't exist." If the latter sentence is true, it is *ipso facto* empty in that there is no one to whom it could conceivably be addressed.

What makes us connect the *Cogito* with introspection is the "spiritualization" which takes place when an "external" speech-act is replaced by a thought-act and on which we commented above. In the *Cogito* it is presupposed that a man not only can converse with his fellow men but is also able to "discourse with himself without spoken sound" in a way closely reminiscent of Plato's famous definition of thinking "as a discourse that the mind carries on with itself" (and also reminiscent of Peirce's pertinent remarks on the dialogical character of thought²⁹).

Another reason why it is natural to connect the *Cogito* with one's self-knowledge is implicit in what was said above. In order to ascertain that a statement like "De Gaulle does not exist" (supposing that it is made by De Gaulle himself) is existentially inconsistent, I have to know the speaker; I have to identify him as the selfsame man whom his statement is about. In the same way, appreciating the existential inconsistency of an utterance of the form "I don't exist" presupposes realizing that the man whom it is about is necessarily the speaker himself. Descartes's *cogito* insight therefore depends on "knowing oneself" in the same literal sense in which the insight into the self-defeating character of the statement "De Gaulle does not exist" depends

on knowing De Gaulle. Expressed in less paradoxical terms, appreciating the *cogito* argument presupposes an ability to appreciate the logic of the first-person pronoun "I." And although mastering the latter is not the same thing as the capacity for introspection, the two are likely to be connected with each other conceptually (logically). The *cogito* insight is essentially connected with one's own case in the same way introspection is, we might say.

10. *The singularity of the Cogito*. Descartes realized that his *cogito* argument deals with a particular case, namely with his own. This is in fact typical of his whole procedure; it is typical of a man who asked "What can I know?" rather than "what can men know?" Descartes denied that his argument is an enthymeme whose suppressed major premise is "Everybody who thinks, exists." He seems to have thought, nevertheless, that this general sentence is a genuine generalization of the insight expressed by his singular sentence.³⁰

The general sentence cannot be such a generalization of the *Cogito*, however; it cannot serve as a general truth from which the sentence *cogito, ergo sum* could be inferred, as Descartes seems to have thought. This is perhaps seen most readily by making explicit the existential presuppositions which are implicit in the general sentence. If they are removed, the sentence takes the form "Every actually existing individual that thinks, exists" and becomes a tautology. This tautology is useless for the purpose Descartes had in mind; it can entail "I think, therefore I exist" only in conjunction with the further premise "I exist." This further premise, however, is exactly the conclusion that Descartes ultimately wanted to draw by means of the *cogito* argument. Hence the alleged deduction becomes a *petitio principii*.

Alternatively we might try to interpret the word "everybody" which occurs in the general sentence as somehow ranging over all *thinkable* individuals rather than all *actually existing* individuals. I am sure that such a procedure is illicit unless further explanations are given. But even if it were legitimate, it would not help us to formulate a true generalization of the Cartesian sentence. For then our generalization would take the form "Every thinkable individual that thinks, exists" and become false, as witnessed by Shakespeare's meditative Prince of Denmark.

In a sense, therefore, Descartes's insight is not generalizable. This is of course due to its performatory character. Each of us can formu-

²⁹ *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1931-1958), VI, sec 338; V, sec. 421.

³⁰ See AT IX, 205-206; HR II, 127; cf. AT VII 140-141; HR II, 38.

late "for himself" a sentence in the first person singular that is true and indubitable, namely the Cartesian sentence *ego sum, ego existo*. But since its indubitability is due to a thought-act which each man has to perform himself, there cannot be any general sentence which would be indubitable in the same way without being trivial. The *cogito* insight of each of us is tied to his own case even more closely than Descartes realized.³¹

11. *The role of the Cogito in Descartes's system.* Our interpretation is supported by the fact that it enables us to appreciate the role of Descartes's first and foremost insight in his system, that is, to understand the conclusions he thought he could draw from the *Cogito*. For one thing, we can now see the reason why Descartes's insight emerges from his own descriptions as a curiously *momentary* affair. It is a consequence of the performativeness of his insight. Since the certainty of my existence results from my thinking of it in a sense not unlike that in which light results from the presence of a source of light, it is natural to assume (rightly or wrongly) that I can be really sure of my existence only as long as I actively contemplate it. A property which a proposition has *because* and *in so far as* it is actually thought of easily becomes a property which belongs to it only *as long as* it is thought of. In any case, this is what Descartes says of the certainty of his own existence. I can be sure of my existence, he says, "while" or "at the same time as" I think of it or "whenever" or "as often as" I do so.³² "Whereas I had only to cease to think for an instant," he says, "and I should then (even although all the other things I had imagined still remained true) have no grounds for believing that I can have existed in that instant" (*Discours*, Part IV; AT VI, 32-33; HR I, 101).

This shows, incidentally, that the sole function of the word *cogito* in Descartes's dictum cannot be to call attention to the fact that his insight is obtained *by means of* thinking. For of an ordinary insight of this kind (e.g. of a demonstrative truth) we may of course continue to be sure once we have gained it.

In the same way we can perhaps see why Descartes's insight *cogito, ergo sum* suggested to him a definite view of the nature of this existing *ego*, namely that its nature consists entirely of thinking. We

³¹ As Popkin aptly observes (*op. cit.*, p. 187), "the method of doubt is the *cause* rather than the *occasion* of the acquisition of new knowledge" (my italics).

³² See, e.g., *Principia philosophiae* I, 7; I, 8; I, 49.

have seen that Descartes's insight is not comparable with one's becoming aware of the sound of music by pausing to listen to it but rather with making sure that music is to be heard by playing it oneself. Ceasing to play would not only stop one's hearing the music, in the way ceasing to listen could; it would put an end to the music itself. In the same way, it must have seemed to Descartes, his ceasing to think would not only mean ceasing to be aware of his own existence; it would put an end to the particular way in which his existence was found to manifest itself. To change the metaphor, ceasing to think would not be like closing one's eyes but like putting out the lamp. For this reason, thinking was for Descartes something that could not be disentangled from his existence; it was the very essence of his nature. We may thus surmise that the original reason why Descartes made the (illicit but natural) transition from *cogito, ergo sum* to *sum res cogitans* was exactly the same as the reason for the curious momentariness of the former which we noted above, namely the performativeness of the *cogito* insight. In any case, the two ideas were introduced by Descartes in one and the same breath. The passage we just quoted from the *Discours* continues as follows: "From this I knew that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists entirely in thinking." In the *Meditationes* Descartes is more reserved. He has already become aware of the difficulty of converting his intuitive idea of the dependence of his existence on his thinking into a genuine proof. The way in which the idea of the dependence is introduced is, nevertheless, exactly the same: "*Ego sum, ego existo*. This is certain. How long? As long as I think. For it might indeed be that if I entirely ceased to think, I should thereupon altogether cease to exist. I am not at present admitting anything which is not necessarily true; and, accurately speaking, I am therefore only a thinking thing" (AT VII, 27; HR I, 151-152).

The transition from *cogito, ergo sum* directly to *sum res cogitans* remains inexplicable as long as we interpret the *Cogito* in terms of the logical truth of (1). For then the blunt objections of Hobbes carry weight: Even if it were true that we can validly infer *ambulo ergo sum* or *video ergo sum*, there would not be the slightest temptation to take this to suggest that one's nature consists entirely of walking or of seeing in the way Descartes thought he could move from *cogito, ergo sum* to *sum res cogitans*. (Cf. AT VII, 172; HR II, 61.)

12. *Descartes and his predecessors.* It seems to me that Descartes is distinguished from most of his predecessors by his awareness of the

performatory character of his first and foremost insight.³³ In spite of all the similarities that there obtain between Descartes and St. Augustine, there are also clear-cut differences. In so far as I know, there is no indication that Augustine was ever alive to the possibility of interpreting his version of the *Cogito* as a performance rather than as an inference or as a factual observation.³⁴ As far as Augustine is concerned, it would be quite difficult to disprove a "logical" interpretation such as Gassendi and others have given of the Cartesian *cogito* argument. What he dwells on is merely the "impossibility of thinking without existing." I do not see any way in which Augustine could have denied that *ambulo, ergo sum* or *video, ergo sum* are as good inferences as *cogito, ergo sum* and that the sole difference between them lies in the different degree of certainty of their premises.

In this respect, there is an essentially new element present, however implicitly, in Descartes's formulations. This difference also shows in the conclusions which Descartes and Augustine drew from their respective insights. For instance, Augustine used his principle as a part of an argument which was designed to show that the human soul is tripartite, consisting of being, knowing, and willing. We have already seen that Descartes's insight was for him intimately connected with the notion of thinking (rather than, say, of willing or feeling): the performance through which an existentially inconsistent sentence defeats itself can be an act of thinking of it, but it cannot possibly be an act of willing or of feeling. Hence Descartes could use the performatively interpreted *cogito* insight to argue that the human soul is a *res cogitans*, but not to argue that it is essentially a willing or feeling being. In view of such differences, is it at all surprising that Descartes should have emphasized his independence of Augustine?

If there is a predecessor who comes close to Descartes, he is likelier to be St. Thomas than St. Augustine. We have already quoted a passage in Aquinas which shows much more appreciation of the performatory aspect of the *Cogito* than anything in Augustine. The agreement is not fortuitous; Aquinas' ability to appreciate the performativeness of the *Cogito* was part and parcel of his more general view that "the intellect knows itself not by its essence but by its act."³⁵ The significance of this crucial similarity between Aquinas and Descartes is not diminished by the interesting dissimilarities which

³³ The difference is marked even though Descartes himself was not fully aware in all respects of the nature of his insight.

³⁴ To some extent this may be merely an indication that the *cogito* insight was in Augustine less fully developed than it is in Descartes.

³⁵ *Summa theologiae*, I, Q.87, art. 1.

also obtain between them. For instance, it is not diminished by the fact that for Aquinas the relevant acts of intellect needed an object other than the intellect itself, whereas Descartes denies "that a thinking being needs any object other than itself in order to exercise its activity" (AT IX, 206; HR II, 128). This dissimilarity is smaller than it first appears to be. Descartes did not hold that the thinking mind could apprehend itself directly, but only by means of its activities (see his reply to Hobbes's second objection; also AT VII, 422; HR II, 241; HR II, 343), exactly as Aquinas did. I should go as far as to wonder whether there is more than a coincidence to the fact that Descartes was particularly close to Aquinas (as far as the *cogito* insight is concerned) in that work of his, in the *Meditationes*, in which the Thomistic influence on him is in many other respects most conspicuous.

13. *Summing up*. Some of the main points of our analysis of the *Cogito* may be summed up as follows: Whatever he may have thought himself, Descartes's insight is *clear* but not *distinct*,³⁶ to use his own terminology. That is to say, there are several different arguments compressed into the apparently simple formulation *cogito, ergo sum* which he does not clearly distinguish from each other.

(i) Sometimes Descartes dealt with the *Cogito* as if it were an expression of the logical truth of sentences of the form (1) or at least of the indubitable truth of a particular sentence of this form. On this interpretation the argument *cogito, ergo sum* is on the same footing with such arguments as *volo, ergo sum*. Arguments like *video, ergo sum* or *ambulo, ergo sum* can be said to be less convincing than the *Cogito* merely because their premises are not as indubitable as that of Descartes's argument. The word *cogito* may thus be replaced by any other word which refers to one of my acts of consciousness.

(ii) Descartes realized, however, that there is more to the *Cogito* than interpretation (i). He realized, albeit dimly, that it can also serve to express the existential self-verifiability of the sentence "I exist" (or the existential inconsistency of "I don't exist"). On this interpretation the peculiarity of the sentence *ego sum* is of performatory character. The verb *cogitare* now has to be interpreted rather narrowly. The word *cogito* may still be replaced by such "verbs of intellection" as *dubito* (or *profero*) but not any longer by verbs referring to arbitrary mental acts, such as *volo* or *sentio*. This interpretation, and only this

³⁶ For the relation of the two notions in Descartes, see N. Kemp Smith, *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes* (London, 1952), pp. 52 ff.

one, makes it possible to understand Descartes's rash transition from *cogito, ergo sum* to *sum res cogitans*.

By comparing the two interpretations we can further elucidate certain peculiarities of Descartes's thought. We shall mainly be concerned with the following two points:

(A) Descartes does not distinguish the two interpretations very clearly. We cannot always expect a clear answer to the question whether a particular instance of the *cogito* argument is for him an inference or a performance. The two types of interpretation merge into each other in his writings in a confusing manner.

(B) Nevertheless, the relation of these two possible interpretations of the Cartesian *Cogito* throws light on the meaning of the critical verb *cogitare* in the different parts of Descartes's philosophy.

14. *The ambiguity of the Cartesian Cogito.* (A) Interpretation (ii) easily gives rise to an expectation that is going to be partly disappointed. It easily leads us to expect a definite answer to the question: What was Descartes thinking of in that thought-act which to him revealed the indubitability of his own existence? Interpretation (ii) suggests that Descartes should have been thinking of *his own existence*. This agrees very well with some of Descartes's most explicit pronouncements. One of them was already quoted above (in the penultimate paragraph of section 8). In the same connection Descartes writes: "Let him [viz. Descartes's *malin génie*] deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I shall be thinking that I am something." The same point is repeated in the *Third Meditation* (AT VII, 36; HR I, 158-159).

Elsewhere, however, Descartes often uses formulations which clearly presuppose that his crucial thought-act pertains to something different from his mere existence. These formulations can be understood, it seems to me, as hybrids between the two arguments (i) and (ii). This hybridization was undoubtedly encouraged by the following (correct) observation: If the sentence "I don't exist" is existentially self-defeating, then so are a fortiori such sentences as "I think, but I don't exist" or "I doubt, but I don't exist." In other words, there are no objections in principle to saying that what is at stake in the *Cogito* is the status of these latter sentences rather than that of the sentence "I don't exist."

On this intermediate interpretation the word *cogito* has a curious double role in Descartes's dictum. On one hand, it is a part of the proposition whose status (indubitability) is at stake. On the other hand, it refers to the performance through which the indubitability of

this proposition is revealed. If we are on the right track, we may expect that this duality of functions will sometimes be betrayed by Descartes's formulations, that is, that he will sometimes use two "verbs of intellection" (such as *think, doubt, conceive*, and the like) where on interpretation (i) there should be only one. This expectation turns out to be justified: ". . . from this very circumstance that I *thought to doubt* [*je pensais à douter*] the truth of those other things, it very evidently and very certainly followed that I was . . ." (*Discours*, Part IV; my italics); ". . . but we cannot in the same way *conceive* that we who *doubt* these things are not . . ." (*Principia philosophiae* I, 7; my italics).

This duplication of verbs of intellection³⁷ shows that we still have to do with a performatory insight. Where Augustine would have said that nobody can doubt anything without existing, Descartes in effect says that one cannot think that one doubts anything without thereby demonstrating to oneself that one exists. But he does not clearly distinguish the two arguments from each other. He thinks that interpretation (ii), thus expanded, is tantamount to interpretation (i). For instance, the passage which we just quoted from the *Principia* continues as follows: ". . . for there is a contradiction in conceiving that what thinks does not, at the same time as it thinks, exist." The change may seem small, but it makes all the difference. In the first passage Descartes is saying that it is impossible for him to think that *he himself* should not exist while he doubts something. In the second passage he says that it is impossible for him to think that *anybody else* should not exist while he (the other man) doubts something. The former passage expresses a performatory insight, whereas the latter cannot do so. We have moved from the ambit of interpretation (ii) to that of interpretation (i).³⁸

15. *The ambiguity of the Cartesian cogitatio.* (B) To tell what Descartes meant by the verb *cogitare* is largely tantamount to telling

³⁷ That a verb of intellection should in Descartes serve to describe the object of another thought-act is all the more remarkable as it is virtually inconsistent with his explicit doctrines. For Descartes held that "one thought [conscious act, *cogitationem*] cannot be the object of another" (Reply to Hobbes's second objection; cf. AT VII, 422; HR II, 241).

³⁸ This is not strictly true, for the second passage is concerned with the alleged inconsistency of sentences of the form "*a* thinks that *a* does not exist while *a* doubts something," whereas interpretation (i) was concerned with the alleged inconsistency of sentences of the form "*a* does not exist while he doubts something." The difference is immaterial for our purposes, however, and was obviously neglected by Descartes.

what is meant by his dictum: *sum res cogitans*. We saw that this dictum originally was for Descartes a consequence (a fallacious, albeit natural one) of the principle *cogito, ergo sum*, which for this purpose had to be given interpretation (ii). From this it follows that the word *cogitans* has to be interpreted as referring to thinking in the ordinary sense of the word. It is not surprising, however, that Descartes should have included more in his alleged conclusion *sum res cogitans* than it would have contained on the basis of the way in which he arrived at it even if this way had amounted to a demonstration.

Descartes had to reconcile his "conclusion" that the essence of a human being consists entirely of thinking (in the ordinary sense of the word) and the obvious fact that there are genuine acts of consciousness other than those of thinking, for example those of willing, sensing, feeling, and the like. This he sought to accomplish by extending the meaning of the verb *cogitare*. He tried to interpret all the other acts of consciousness as so many modes of thinking.³⁹ In this attempt he was helped by the following two facts:

(a) The meaning of the verb *cogitare* was traditionally very wide. According to Alexandre Koyré, "it embraced not only 'thought' as it is now understood, but all mental acts and data: will, feeling, judgment, perception, and so on."⁴⁰ Because of this traditionally wide range of senses of the word Descartes was able to smuggle more content into his "result" *sum res cogitans* than the way in which he reached it would, in any case, have justified.

It is significant that nonintellectual acts of consciousness enter into the argument of the *Meditationes* at the moment when Descartes pauses to ask what a *res cogitans* really is, that is, what is meant by the *cogitatio* of a *res cogitans*:

What then am I? A thinking thing [*res cogitans*.] What is a thinking thing? It is a thing that doubts, understands, asserts, denies, wills, abstains from willing, that also has sense and imagination. These are a good many properties—if only they all belong to me. But how could they fail to? [AT VII, 28; HR I, 153].

Descartes is not here simply stating what is meant by a *res cogitans*. He is not merely formulating the conclusion of an argument; he is pro-

³⁹ Cf. N. Kemp Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 324–331.

⁴⁰ See his introduction to *Descartes, Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. by E. Anscombe and P. Geach (Edinburgh, 1954), p. xxxvii.

ceeding to interpret it.⁴¹ This is shown by the last two quoted sentences. For if willing and sensation were included in Descartes's thinking *ego* already in virtue of the argument which led him to conclude *sum res cogitans*, there would not be any point in asking whether they really belong to his nature.

(b) However, the wide range of senses of the verb *cogitare* in Descartes is not all due to external influence. There are factors in his own thinking which tend in the same direction. Among other things, the confusion between the two interpretations is operative here. Descartes can hope (as we saw) to be able to jump from *cogito, ergo sum* to *sum res cogitans* only if interpretation (ii) is presupposed. This interpretation in turn presupposes a narrowly "intellectual" meaning of the verb *cogitare* in that it cannot be replaced by any arbitrary verb which refers to some act of one's immediate consciousness. In contrast, on interpretation (i) the verb *cogitare* could be understood in this wide sense. The confusion between the two interpretations made it possible for Descartes to deal with the "conclusion" *sum res cogitans* as if it were based on a *cogito* argument in which *cogitatio* covers all one's acts of consciousness—as he strictly speaking is not justified in doing.

This explains Descartes's apparent inconsistency in using the verb *cogitare*. It is interesting to note that some of the critics (e.g. Anscombe and Geach; see *op. cit.*, p. xlvii) who have most strongly stressed the wide extent of this verb in Descartes have nevertheless been forced to say that in the *cogito* argument the verb is used in a rather narrow sense to refer to what we nowadays call thinking. This may seem paradoxical in view of the fact that the broad interpretation is applied in the first place to the sentence *sum res cogitans* to which Descartes moved directly from the *cogito* argument. In our view, this prima-facie paradox disappears if we realize the ambiguity of the *cogito* argument.

The close connection between this argument and the notion of *cogitatio* in Descartes is amply demonstrated by his formulations. In our last quotation Descartes was left asking whether doubt, understanding, will, sense, imagination, and the like belong to his nature. He reformulates this question successively as follows: ". . . how can any of these things be less true than my existence? Is any of these some-

⁴¹ A little earlier Descartes had written: "I am, then, a real thing . . . What thing? I have said it, a thinking thing. And *what more* am I?" (my italics; AT VII, 27; HR I, 152).

thing distinct from my thinking [*cogitatione*]? Can any of them be called a separate thing from myself?" Only such things could belong to Descartes's nature as were as certain as his existence. Why? The reason is seen from the context of the quotation. Descartes had already pronounced his *Cogito*; he had already ascertained the indubitability of his existence. He held that nothing he did not have to know in order to ascertain this could, in the objective order of things, constitute a necessary condition of his existence.⁴² Such things could not belong to his essence, for "nothing without which a thing can still exist is comprised in its essence."⁴³ Hence nothing could belong to his essence or nature that he could not be sure of already at the present stage of his argument, that is, nothing that he could not ascertain in the same way and at the same time as he ascertained his own existence. For this reason, nothing that belonged to his nature could be "less true than his existence."

What this requirement amounts to is that everything that Descartes was willing to accept as a part of his nature (even in the sense of being a mere mode of his basic nature of thinking) had to be shown to belong to him by means of the *cogito* argument in the same way in which he "demonstrated" that thinking belonged to him by "deducing" *sum res cogitans* from *cogito, ergo sum*. A mental activity was for Descartes a part of his nature if and only if the corresponding verb could function as the premise of a variant of the *cogito* argument. For instance, the sense in which apparent sensation can be said to belong to his nature (as a mode of thinking) is for Descartes exactly the same as the sense in which he could infer *sentio, ergo sum*. The former is explained by Descartes as follows:

Finally, it is I who have sensations, or who perceive corporeal objects as it were by the senses. Thus, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. These things are false [it may be said], for I am asleep; but at least I seem to see, to hear, to be warmed. This cannot be false; and this is what is properly called my sensation; further, sensation, precisely so regarded, is nothing but thinking [*cogitare*] [AT VII, 29; HR I, 153].

The latter is explained in a strikingly similar way:

Suppose I say *I see* or *I am walking, therefore I exist*. If I take this to refer to vision or walking as corporeal action, the conclusion is not absolutely

⁴² This part of his doctrine was criticized by Arnauld and others. In the preface to the *Meditationes* and in his replies to objections Descartes sought to defend himself. The question whether he succeeded is not relevant here.

⁴³ AT VII, 219; HR II, 97.

certain; for, as often happens during sleep, I may think I am seeing though I do not open my eyes, or think that I am walking although I do not change my place; and it may even be that I have no body. But if I take it to refer to the actual sensation or awareness [*sensu sive conscientia*] of seeing or walking, then it is quite certain; for in that case it has regard to the mind, and it is the mind alone that has sense or thought [*sentit sive cogitat*] of itself seeing or walking [*Principia* I, 9; cf. Descartes's similar reply to Gassendi's objections to the *Cogito*].

In short, the reason why sensation belonged to Descartes's nature was for him exactly the same as the reason why he could argue *sentio, ergo sum*. For him, doubting, willing, and seeing were modes of his basic nature of thinking exactly in the same sense in which the arguments *dubito ergo sum, volo ergo sum, and video ergo sum* were variants or "modes" of the argument *cogito ergo sum*.

Why, then, is one of these arguments a privileged one? If Descartes could argue *volo, ergo sum* and *sentio, ergo sum* as well as *cogito, ergo sum*, why did he refuse to infer that his nature consists of "Wille und Vorstellung," claiming as he did that it consists entirely of thinking? The answer is again implicit in the ambiguity of the *cogito* argument. Such parallel arguments as *volo, ergo sum* presuppose interpretation (i). Now there was more to the Cartesian *Cogito* than this interpretation; Descartes was also aware of the "performatory" interpretation (ii). It is the latter interpretation that gives the verb *cogitare* a privileged position vis-à-vis such verbs as *velle* or *videre*. Descartes could replace the word *cogito* by other words in the *cogito, ergo sum*; but he could not replace the performance which for him revealed the indubitability of any such sentence. This performance could be described only by a "verb of intellection" like *cogitare*. For this reason, the verb *cogitare* was for Descartes a privileged one; for this reason nothing could for him belong to his nature that was "something distinct from his thinking."

This special role of the verb *cogitare* seems to me difficult to explain otherwise. If I am right, the conspicuous privileges of this verb in Descartes therefore constitute one more piece of evidence to show that he was aware of interpretation (ii).

There is a further point worth making here. We have already pointed out that the verb *cogitare* is not the most accurate one for the purpose of describing the performance which for Descartes revealed the certainty of his existence (see note 26). This inaccuracy led Descartes to assimilate the peculiarities of the existentially self-defeating sentence "I do not exist" to the peculiarities of such sentences as "I

doubt everything" or "I am not thinking anything." There is an important difference here, however. The latter sentences are not instances of existential inconsistency. They are instances of certain related notions; they are literally impossible to believe or to think in a sense in which "I do not exist" is not. I have studied the peculiarities of some such sentences elsewhere (in *Knowledge and Belief, An Introduction to the Logic of the Two Notions*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1962). In many respects, their properties are analogous to those of existentially self-defeating sentences.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ I am indebted to Professors Norman Malcolm and G. H. von Wright for several useful suggestions in connection with the present essay.

THE PRINCIPLES OF PHILOSOPHY*

René Descartes



Part I, Sec. 10.

That there are notions so clear in themselves that they are rendered obscure when defined after the manner of the schools, and that they are not acquired by study, but are born with us.

I shall not explain here several other terms which I have already used and which I intend to use again below; for I do not believe that, among those who will read my writings, there can be any so dull of wit that they cannot understand all by themselves what these terms signify. But I have observed that Philosophers . . . , when trying to explain, by *the rules of their logic*, matters which are . . . manifest in themselves, have done nothing more than render them obscure; and when I have said that this proposition, I THINK, THEREFORE I AM, is the first and most certain one encountered by anyone who conducts his thinking in an orderly manner, I have not, however, said that it was not necessary to know beforehand what thinking, certainty and existence are, and that in order to think one must be, and other such similar matters; but because these notions are so simple that, by themselves, they do not make us aware of anything that exists, I have not deemed it necessary to give an account of them here.

* Translated by Jack Murray. Originally published in 1647.