It was the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) whose ideas sparked the Enlighten­ment in the seventeenth century. In his disputes with the Scho­lastics—the ruling church intelligentsia—he grew to dislike the fact that they always involved God as an explanation in their argu­ments. Descartes wanted to do away with the dogmas of the time, particularly church dogmas. Therefore, he intended to rebuild the house of knowledge on the the ground up, purely based on reason.

On a long, cold winter night in 1640, Descartes, sitting all alone in his Leiden home in The Netherlands, put quill to paper and formulated the purpose of a long-intended project: “At last I will apply myself sincerely and unreservedly to the general demolition of all of my opinions.” (Descartes 1998: 59).

In his *Discourse on Method*, published three years earlier, he had already figured out how he would go about it: “But because I then desired to devote myself exclusively to the search for the truth, I thought it necessary . . . that I reject as ab­solutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see whether, after this process, something in my beliefs remained that was entirely indubitable.” (Descartes 1998: 18).

So he was looking for a true understanding of what absolute knowledge represents. In other words, he wanted to know what he could know for certain, which there could be no doubt about.

He began by doubting his senses. Descartes concluded that our senses are not always reliable because we dream and hallucinate. Our perception is not infallible; perhaps we do not always experience the real, true world. If the authenticity of our experience could occasionally be questioned, that was enough for Descartes to dismiss it as absolutely false. That our senses can sometimes mislead us without our knowing suggests that they can mislead us all the time. And if we cannot trust information obtained through our senses, how can we con­firm the existence of an external world? Perhaps nothing physical exists at all, no sky, no earth, no bodies, and this is all an illusion, a fabrication. This led him even to doubt the mathematics he was working on because he thought that perhaps God allowed him to make mistakes, and his premises therefore might be wrong. But he could not believe that an all-goodness God was leading him astray. Maybe God did not even exist at all. That’s why he presumed that there was an extremely powerful and clever “evil genius” determined to deceive him all the time about the true nature of reality.

At one point, Descartes could no longer think of anything else from which he could de­rive certainty. At last, he had to admit that there was nothing that could not be doubted. Here are his own words: “But eventually I am forced to admit that there is nothing among the things I once believed to be true which is not permissible to doubt—and not out of frivolity or lack of thought, but for valid and considered reasons.” (Descartes 1998: 62).

In effect, he had dismissed all his thoughts from being reli­able. As a result, he doubted everything. However, the only thing he could not doubt was the fact that he did doubt. This he was completely sure of, and therefore there had to be an “I” that doubt­ed, witness his statement: “That we cannot doubt of our existence while we doubt, and that this is the first knowledge we acquire when we philosophize in order.” (Descartes 2017:14).

“I doubt, therefore I am” was Descartes’s logical conclu­sion at the end of his process of “methodological doubt” as the starting point for the foundation of the house of knowledge. But instead, for some unclear reason, he went one step further, and stated, “I think, therefore I am”. The explanation for this little bridge can be found in his posthumously published essay *The Search for Truth through Natural Light*: “That it is necessary to know what doubt is, and what thought is, before we can be fully persuaded of this reasoning—I doubt, therefore I am—or what is the same—I think, therefore I am.” (Hallam 1847: 99).

Apparently, according to Descartes, “I think, therefore I am” is completely identical to “I doubt, therefore I am”.

We already saw that Descartes, during his process of “methodological doubt”, could not for 100 percent be certain about the correctness of his every thought, except for the thought “I doubt, therefore I am”. It follows that he should not have equated “I doubt, therefore I am” with “I think, therefore I am”, or with any other statement for that matter. Yet Descartes replaced the only statement he did not doubt with another. Descartes thus went one bridge too far and should have stuck with “I doubt, therefore I am”; even better, “I doubt, therefore I exist”; or in Latin *dubito, ergo existo*.

We saw earlier that Descartes, in his Principles of Philosophy, identified “I doubt, therefore I am” as the first knowledge. It is striking that in the very same article, he also identified “I think, therefore I am” as the first knowledge: “Accordingly, the knowledge, *I* THINK, THEREFORE *I* AM, is the first and most certain that occurs to one who philosophizes orderly.” (Descartes 2017: 14).

However, only one can be the first knowledge. This is “I doubt, therefore I am”. With the first knowledge, Descartes demonstrated human existence. Any other statement, including *cogito, ergo sum* adds nothing to it.

*Descartes’s proposition—the Cogito is the first knowledge—is false!*

*Cogito, ergo sum* may well be true as such, but it’s only a derivative of the first knowledge.

What then is the relevance of the *Cogito* at all? Not much other than for instance “I philosophize, therefore I am”, or “I contemplate, therefore I am” or just another arbitrary statement. There is only one statement that reflects the first knowledge, namely, “I doubt, therefore I am” which, after all, was the very first building block of the house of knowledge, which Descartes had been diligently searching for.

So where did Descartes go wrong?

1) Descartes departed from the premise that “I think, therefore I am” is completely identical to “I doubt, therefore I am”.

2) If “I doubt, therefore I am” is the first knowledge, it follows that “I think, therefore I am” is also the first knowledge.

3) This is exactly what Descartes claimed in Part I, Article VII of his *Principles of Philosophy* (Descartes 2017: 14).

4) Both statements cannot be the first knowledge simultaneously.

5) It is surprising that Descartes did not notice the contradiction in this short article, which contains just three sentences.

6) Conclusion: Descartes departed from the wrong premise.

From the certainty that man exists, Descartes reasons in his *Meditations* that God must also exist, and then, from the contem­plation of the true God . . . to arrive at the knowledge of reality. And this completes the circle for Descartes.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) made short shrift of “I think, therefore I am”. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* he rightfully remarked that the C*ogito* pre­supposes one’s existence but does not prove it. In other words, existence is implicit in “I think” making the addition “therefore I am” superfluous. Thinking does not prove existence, it’s the other way around, existence is an indispensable condition (*conditio sine qua non*)for thinking, at least for human beings. Descartes does not say much other than “a thinking thing thinks”, which led Kierkegaard to conclude: “If the ‘I’ which is the subject of ‘cogito’means an individual human being, the proposition means nothing . . . There is no conclusion here, for the proposition is a tautology.” (Kierkegaard 2019: 281).

But neither did Descartes’s proofs of God hold up, as they *a priori* assumed a metaphysical presupposition. This warrants the following conclusion:

*Descartes’s arguments that sparked the Enlightenment were built upon quicksand.*

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