

Husain Sarkar  
Descartes' *Cogito*  
Saved from the Great Shipwreck  
Cambridge University Press 2003, Pp. 305  
ISBN 0-521-82166-5

In *Descartes' Cogito, Saved from the Great Shipwreck*, Husain Sarkar convincingly argues that the Cartesian *cogito* as it appears in *Meditation Two* cannot be an argument but must be understood as an intuition emerging from the process of ('extraordinary') doubt. Sarkar mentions in the Preface that only the negative part of his thesis is intended to be decisive (X). However, as the book unfolds it becomes evident that his "positive" effort, his interpretation of the *cogito* as an intuition although not decisive, is no less important. Sarkar shows how his reading of the *cogito* can account for other aspects of Descartes' writings (memory, the will, the theory of deduction) and offers this as further proof for the correctness of his interpretation.

Sarkar maintains that the *cogito* is the first principle of Descartes' philosophy, the starting point from where all the rest of knowledge is derived. Descartes' goal in the *Meditations* is to find certainty or at least become certain that there is no certainty (AT VII, 24; CSM II, 16). Sarkar calls this *the epistemic problem* (80). Using the difficult and usually neglected *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Sarkar argues that *the epistemic problem* is a perfect problem (as 'it is determinate in every respect and its terms are perfectly understood'-80) and a perfectly understood problem (as there are clear criteria for recognizing its solution; the basis from which it will be deduced is known- doubt; the two aspects above are so intertwined that we cannot change one without modifying the other- 81). The *cogito* is the unique solution to this perfectly understood problem. To show that Descartes had clear criteria for recognizing the *cogito* as the first principle, Sarkar uses his so called 'Sulmo principle'.

The Sulmo principle states that a philosophical system can be assessed only after its author's death; that only a posthumous reconstruction of a system can give us an idea of what its author had in mind, even if she may never expressed thing in this manner or spelled out a lot of details (XI, 176). Bringing together passages from the *Discourse*, *The Principles* and the *Search for Truth*, Sarkar concludes that Descartes' first principle must be: first in the way things come to be known; a clear and distinct notion; the most certain; the easiest to be acquainted with; simplest and a particular (61). Descartes discovered some of these 6 criteria before and some after the *cogito* even though all of them should have been known before the *cogito* (60); they are accepted provisionally and being in the *cogito* state vindicates their acceptance (83). The *cogito* turns out to be the first 'existential truth' (91) and the basis for the clarity and distinctness rule, the first 'epistemological truth' and the 'insignia of truth' from then on (91).

If the *cogito* were an argument, it could not fulfill its function as first principle (183). Sarkar criticizes five ways of reading the *cogito* as an argument and Jaakko Hintikka's interpretation of the *cogito* as a performance. The *cogito* was interpreted as: a fully elaborated syllogism; an enthymematic syllogism (with the general premise 'Whatever thinks, exists' missing); an argument in quantification theory or first-order logic; an argument using 'Whatever thinks, exists' not as a missing premise but as a rule

of inference; an inference, not of a syllogistic kind but involving the relation of presupposition. According to Hintikka, the *cogito* 'refers to the "performance" (to the act of thinking) through which the sentence "I exist" may be said to verify itself' (170).

While Sarkar identifies several difficulties with each of these interpretations of the *cogito*, he provides two overarching criticisms. First, had the *cogito* been intended as an argument, given the very strong presence of the evil genius in the Second Meditation, Descartes could not have claimed validity, much less soundness for it. As Sarkar points out, if the evil genius can make Descartes doubt the laws of mathematics, the same objections apply to any rules of inference we may hold at this time. Second, if the *cogito* were an argument, running it would have to rely on memory. Or, according to Descartes, memory has a bodily component; it is a certain part of the brain in which the animal spirits carve paths. Sarkar mentions Descartes' distinction between an intellectual and a sensible kind of memory (AT III, 48; CSMK 146) but goes on to contend that even intellectual memory would not be considered reliable at this time, given the sweeping nature of the process of doubt in which Descartes is engaged.

Although as a whole, Sarkar's position is very plausible and has a lot of philosophical merit, I have some reservations about several points. For instance, the two main criticisms can be shown to have no power against Hintikka's performative reading of the *cogito*; furthermore, some striking similarities appear when we compare Hintikka's view to Sarkar's own 'positive' interpretation of the *cogito*. Sarkar contends that Hintikka's position harbors a hidden argument (172) but one could reply that the argument in question is formulated only after arriving at the intuition of the *cogito*, when one reflects on and analyzes one's experience. First comes the intuition of the *cogito*, then one explains the newly gained knowledge by formulating the *cogito* as a syllogism (Sarkar, 192, 247) or by explicating self-verifiability in an argumentative form (Sarkar's Hintikka, 172).

Hintikka took the relation between the *cogito* and *sum* to be that between a process and its product. Sarkar found this analogy flawed. However, how is this so different from the following: 'This first truth, as we have seen, is elicited from performing a thought experiment: an experiment [Hintikka's context] in which the "I" [the utterer], through a thought comes to realize that in the very act of performing an experiment, devised to show that it, the "I" does not exist, it, the "I" is inevitably assured of its existence [self-verifiability]' (91)?

Even without analyzing Sarkar's other objections here, given the resemblances between the 2 positions and the vagueness of Sarkar's constructive reading of the *cogito*, it seems that the two views must share a lot of the difficulties Sarkar himself identified. (Could this be one of the reasons why Sarkar didn't offer his positive reading as decisive?)

*Descartes' Cogito, Saved from the Great Shipwreck* is a very interesting and thought-provoking book that combines a systematic presentation and critique of the main ways of reading the *cogito* as an argument with a new approach to the Cartesian writings (putting to work texts that are usually neglected, casting new light on some familiar ones). The result is, as the author intended, 'a fresh perspective' (XI).

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