

Cogito Ergo Sum

Descartes' dictum "I am thinking, therefore I am" looks like an argument, and many philosophers take it to express an enthymeme: Whatever is thinking exists, I am thinking, therefore I exist. But this interpretation is vulnerable to objections. Descartes writes: "When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist', he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind."¹ Further, Descartes is supposing himself in the grip of an Evil Demon capable of making him go wrong whenever he computes; but any complex argument is a computation so, if the cogito is an enthymeme, Descartes cannot rely upon it.²

Other problems arise if we construe the cogito as an immediate inference. So taken, the argument is formally invalid: what licenses the inference from cogito to sum? Descartes attempts an answer: he "learns it from experiencing in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing."³ But this response appears to take us back to an enthymeme: "It is impossible that I think without existing, I am thinking, therefore, I exist." Also, it repeats without explaining the claim that "I am thinking" entails "I am." (What, one wonders, does Descartes learn from experience in his own case that warrants the inference?) Further, in The Meditations Descartes restates the cogito (or something very much like it) in a wholly non-inferential form: "So after considering everything

very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition 'I am, I exist' is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived by my mind."⁴ Descartes himself seems unhappy with construing the cogito as an inference.

I believe "I am thinking, therefore I am" does not express an argument but rather a proposition for which Descartes cannot find an appropriate idiom. He resorts to, then abandons, the language of argument and inference as he shifts about trying to express this deeper truth. I certainly do not deny that an argument can be extracted from the language of the cogito; however I believe the "simple intuition of the mind" discovers something non-inferential that justifies the inference from cogito to sum, that explains why it is impossible that Descartes should think without existing, as well as why "I am" is necessarily true whenever he conceives it. In what follows, I will offer a non-inferential reading of "I am thinking, therefore I am."⁵ What is the deeper truth the cogito expresses?

Let's start with another question: Why does Descartes believe "I am" is indubitable whenever he conceives it? Also, why is "I am thinking" indubitable? Plainly "I am" and "I am thinking" are incorrigible for me in the sense that I cannot falsely believe them, but so arguably is "I am in violent pain now." Yet the incorrigibility of the first two propositions appears to flow from a different source. Both "I am" and "I am thinking" have the feature that if I stand in any propositional attitude (e.g, doubt, hope, fear, regret) toward them, they must

be true. Obviously this is not the case for "I am in violent pain now." Further, "I am" and "I am thinking" share the interesting feature that they must be true if I stand in a propositional attitude toward any proposition. Let's say that proposition p is super-incorrigible for S just in case "S stands in a propositional attitude toward any proposition" entails p. "I am thinking" and "I am" are both incorrigible and super-incorrigible for me (obviously if p is super-incorrigible for me, it must be incorrigible for me as well); but "I am in violent pain" is at best incorrigible for me.

But this does not yet explain the indubitability of "I am thinking" and "I am." For every necessary truth is super-incorrigible (hence incorrigible) for me, and many of these are dubitable. The response that "I am" and "I am thinking" are contingent super-incorrigible propositions is unsatisfying, for it explains nothing. Descartes believes "I am thinking" and "I am" have some feature that makes their truth especially accessible; their contingency may have something to do with that feature, but it does not reveal it.

Perhaps we can address our problem by asking yet another question: Why are "I am" and "I am thinking" incorrigible? And why are they super-incorrigible? (Their super-incorrigibility entails without explaining their incorrigibility, for it needs explaining too.) Necessary truths are incorrigible because they cannot be false, and my attentive belief that I am in pain is incorrigible because there is simply no way for me to be

mistaken. But "I am" and "I am thinking" are incorrible for a very different reason: My believing either of these propositions is sufficient to constitute the fact that satisfies its truth condition. This needs explication. What is "constitution"?

A statue is constituted by the lump of bronze out of which it is cast. What does this mean? The statue is nothing more than the lump of bronze; it is not ontologically extra, it is not yet another thing. Given the lump of bronze in that configuration, the statue must exist, and this is because the statue just is the lump of bronze in that configuration. Talk about the statue, we might say, is talk about the lump of bronze in different words. Nonetheless the statue is not identical to the lump of bronze; for one thing, the lump preceded the statue and may survive it. The lump and the statue have different identity conditions. Again, the 9th Regiment, which fought in the world war, is constituted by a particular collection of soldiers. The regiment is not something over and above that collection of soldiers. Looking at the soldiers standing at attention on the parade field is looking at the regiment. But the regiment preceded and may survive the collection of soldiers that now constitutes it, so it cannot be identical to the collection.⁶

Similarly, one fact can be constituted by another fact.⁷ Fact A is the fact that there is at least one circle on this page. Here is circle D:

Fact B is the fact that D is on this page. The fact that there is at least one circle on this page is nothing more than the fact that D is on this page. To use Parfit's phrase, fact A is not a "deep further fact"; it is not something over and above fact B. Nonetheless fact A is not identical to fact B; for if we erased D and instantaneously replaced it with another circle somewhere else on the page, B would cease to be a fact but A would not. Fact A is constituted by fact B, but it could be constituted by other facts. Now suppose that we keep D and add several other circles as well. Perhaps it would now be wrong to say that fact A is constituted by fact B. Still it would be true that fact B is sufficient to constitute fact A, for if circle D were the only circle on this page, fact B would constitute fact A.⁸

How does this pertain to the propositions "I am thinking" and "I am"? Suppose it is a fact that I am thinking "This very mental event is a thought." (Call this fact "F.") But then it must also be a fact that I am thinking. (Call this fact "G.") F entails G, but why?⁹ Note that the fact that I am thinking is nothing more than my believing "This very mental event is a thought." Nonetheless F is not identical to fact G. For if I cease to think "This very mental event is a thought" but immediately I begin thinking that $2+2=4$, G continues to be a fact but F does not. The fact that I am thinking can be constituted by other facts, as the regiment can be constituted by other soldiers. I submit that the argument "I believe that I think, therefore I think" is valid because the fact expressed by the

conclusion is constituted by the fact expressed by the premiss.

Right now I believe that I am. Supposing that this were the only fact about me (except the facts that it constitutes), it would constitute the fact of my existence. My existing would be nothing more than my believing that I exist. But the fact that I exist is not identical to the fact that I believe that I exist. For if I cease to believe that I am and instead it becomes a fact that I hope the sun is shining, the fact of my existence would be constituted by this new fact. There are plenty of facts about me right now; nonetheless the fact that I believe that I exist is sufficient to constitute the fact that I exist. For if it were the only fact about me, it would constitute the fact of my existence. The argument "I believe I exist, therefore I am" is valid because the fact expressed by the premiss is sufficient to constitute the fact of my existence. The logical relation between "I think I exist" and "I exist" is explained by the ontological relation between the facts these propositions express.

Let's take stock of where we are. I have explained the claim that my believing "I am thinking" and my believing "I am" is, for each proposition, sufficient to constitute the fact that satisfies its truth condition. This is why it is impossible for me to falsely believe either proposition. Having explained their incorrigibility, can we explain their super-incorrigibility too? Let's say that a proposition *p* is attitude-constituted for me just in case my standing in a propositional attitude to any proposition is sufficient to constitute the fact that *p*. "I am

thinking" and "I exist" are super-incorrigible for me because they are attitude-constituted for me. Further, contingent super-incorrigibles are so because they are attitude-constituted. (It follows a fortiori that if I stand in any cognitive attitude to the propositions "I am" or "I exist" they must be true.) Ultimately, "I am" and "I think" are incorrigible because they are attitude constituted.

But not all incorrigible propositions for me are attitude constituted. Necessary truths like "1=1" are incorrigible (and super-incorrigible), but it is not the case that my regretting that I have sinned is sufficient to constitute the fact that 1=1. The fact that 1=1 is something over and above the fact that I regret my sins and even the fact that I believe that 1=1. One mark of this is that when fact X is constituted by fact Y, X can be explained by Y. The fact that the regiment is on the field is explained by the fact that the collection of soldiers that constitutes the regiment is there. But the fact that 1=1 can in no way be explained by the fact that I believe that 1=1; to the contrary, I believe that 1=1 because it is a fact. Again, "I am in pain now" is incorrigible for me; but it is not the case that my believing that I am in pain constitutes the fact that I am in pain. Indeed, the fact that I believe that I am in pain is caused by the fact that I am in pain; the direction of explanation runs counter to that of constitution.

"I am thinking" and "I exist" are special, then, because they are attitude-constituted; this explains their corrigibility

and their super-incorrigibility. It also explains why Descartes believes I have special access to their truth. For as I am acquainted with my own conscious mental states, I am acquainted with facts that are sufficient to constitute their truth. If I believe or doubt or hope or regret that I am thinking, this constitutes the fact that I am thinking. If I believe or doubt or hope or regret that I exist, this is sufficient to constitute the fact of my existence; hence the proposition "I exist" is necessarily true whenever it is conceived by my mind. And if I should go so far as to doubt that I believe or doubt or hope or regret that I exist, this is a) sufficient to constitute the fact that I exist and b) sufficient to constitute the fact that I am thinking, which is sufficient to constitute the fact that I exist. My believing an attitude-constituted proposition is sufficient to know its truth because my believing is the fact that constitutes its truth. Doubting that I believe an attitude-constituted proposition is sufficient to know its truth, for doubting that I believe it is sufficient to constitute its truth. Standing in a propositional attitude toward any proposition is sufficient to constitute the truth of an attitude-constituted proposition; hence, where p is attitude constituted, even if I doubt that I doubt that I doubt ad infinitum that p, I can never reach a stage that does not constitute its truth.

Now we can explicate the cogito. "I am thinking therefore I am" means "My thinking this very thought is sufficient to constitute the fact that I exist." This proposition is not an

argument, for there is no inference; it entails that I exist without asserting that I do. Rather it expresses a simple intuition of the mind: my existence need be nothing more than my thinking this very thought. That is what Descartes learns from experience in his own case that explains why it is impossible for him to think without existing, why cogito entails sum; it is this particular insight that justifies the general principle "Whatever thinks exists." To clearly and distinctly perceive the truth of this proposition is to know that I exist.

Here I want to consider an objection, namely, that the fact that I exist is most certainly a deep further fact, obviously extra to the fact that I believe I exist. Indeed, the fact that I believe that I exist is explained by the fact that I exist: I believe that I exist because I recognize that I do. The direction of explanation runs counter to that of constitution. It is highly paradoxical to maintain that my existing is nothing more than my believing that I exist. What do I believe if the proposition "I exist" does not express a deep further fact? But if the fact that I exist is ontologically extra to the fact that I am thinking, it cannot be attitude constituted; consequently our reading of the cogito must fail.

Remember, however, that Descartes is embarked upon a program of radical doubt: he will reject as false any dubitable belief. If the fact that Descartes exists is indeed a deep further fact substantially underlying and explaining the fact that he thinks (as a substance underlies its attributes), then he has no direct

access to it. Hence his belief that he exists is intractably dubitable--perhaps there is no deep further fact--and he must reject it as false. The best Descartes could do to get to sum from cogito would be to introduce a highly dubitable metaphysical premiss like "Thought must inhere in an underlying substance," which would, in any case, turn the cogito into an enthymeme upon which he could not rely. So if the fact that he exists is extra to the fact that he thinks, Descartes can never get from cogito to sum. Descartes has no choice but to reduce the fact that he exists to an indubitable fact with which he is acquainted: this is the only way he can be certain it obtains.

Let me respond to the question: "What does the proposition 'I exist' assert if it does not express a deep further fact?" The proposition "I exist" asserts that there is something which is me. So when I believe that I exist I believe that there is something which is me. (The claim that my existing is nothing more than my believing I exist is simply the claim that there being something which is me is nothing more than my believing there is something which is me.) The proposition that there is something which is me is wholly noncommittal about the nature of that something, whether it is a substance or something reducible to other things or something that only exists because we talk about it, like the Big Dipper. The only constraint is that this something must be able to survive any particular thought. Now the fact that I am thinking is a very deep fact if I am a very deep thing; hence the fact that I exist, which it constitutes, is

itself as thick or as thin as I turn out to be. This is as it should be, for Descartes must establish by honest toil what sort of thing he is. The cogito now becomes: "There being something which is me need be nothing more than the fact that something is thinking this very thought."

Now we can simplify our account of the cogito. As we just noted, Descartes has rejected all dubitable beliefs; he is supposing there is no world, that he has no body, and so on. Consequently there is no fact left to constitute his existence except the attitude-constituted fact that he is thinking; this alone is indubitable. In the context of the program of radical doubt (which is, of course, the context in which it appears), the cogito reads simply: "My thinking this very thought constitutes the fact that I exist" (or "My existing is nothing more than my thinking this very thought"). This has an interesting consequence: "Sum res cogitans" follows directly from the cogito. For if my existing is nothing more than my thinking this very thought, then it follows immediately that I am a thing constituted by the fact of its thinking. Of course, the fact that I exist can survive this particular thought. However my existence must be constituted by new facts about my thinking; no other facts are left to constitute it. "I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks..."¹⁰

Footnotes

1. Second Replies in The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume II, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 100. This will be abbreviated "CSM II" henceforth.

2. This is worth emphasizing, for it undercuts the position of commentators who maintain that the cogito, while not a classical syllogism, is still a complex argument of a different sort. See, for example, Bernard Williams Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry, (Penguin Books, 1978), chapter 3.

3. Second Replies, CSM II 100,

4. CSM II 17.

5. Jaako Hintikka offers a non-inferential reading in "Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?" The Philosophical Review, LXXI, (1962), 3-32. According to Hintikka, the sentence "I do not exist" is self-defeating, because anyone who uses it to persuade someone, even himself, of its truth, by so doing, defeats his own purpose. For Hintikka, the cogito marks not an inference but a performance: the indubitability of "I am" results from the self-defeating nature of trying to think the contrary. For Hintikka, "I am thinking" does not express a premiss; rather "it refers to

the 'performance' (to the act of thinking) through which the sentence 'I exist' may be said to verify itself." Several commentators have criticized Hintikka's account of the cogito (see, for example, Margaret Dauler Wilson Descartes, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), ch, II.) This essay is meant to offer an alternative to Hintikka, not to add to that literature. I will note only that the fact that a statement or sentence is pragmatically self-defeating hardly entails that it is false: consider Moore's example: "It is raining and I don't believe it." Consequently, even if thinking "I do not exist" is self-defeating, as Hintikka maintains, recognizing this cannot establish the indubitability of "I am."

6. For more on constitution see this author, "Why Potentiality Matters," The Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 17, No.4 (December, 1987), pp. 815-830.

7. While I have no ontological theory of facts, it may be helpful to construe facts as states of affairs that actually obtain.

8. Of course, if B constitutes A, it follows that B is sufficient to constitute A.

9. We are inclined to say that my thinking that I am thinking entails "There exists an x such that x is a thought and my thinking that I am thinking = x" which entails "There exists an x

such that x is a thought." But note that the first conclusion really is the conclusion we are after, for it involves the claim that there is at least one thought; the inference to this was to be explained.

10.Descartes, Second Meditation, in CSM II 18.