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I EXIST
A STUDY OF DESCartes' COGITO CERTAINTY
AND ITS PLACE IN CARTESIAN META PHYSICS

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
Wayne Edward Alt, B.A., M.A.

* * * * * * *
The Ohio State University
1976

Reading Committee: Approved By
Professor Wallace Anderson
Professor Richard Garner (Director)
Professor Alan Hausman
Professor William Lycan

Richard Garner
Department of Philosophy
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VITA

March 3, 1945................................. Born, Newark, N.J.

1967................................. B.A., Psychology, Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, Ohio.

1969-1970................................. Teaching Assistant, Philosophy Department, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

1970................................. M.A., Philosophy, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

1970-1974................................. Teaching Associate, Philosophy Department, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

9/75-1/76................................. Undergraduate Instructor, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Columbus Technical Institute, Columbus, Ohio.

2/76-8/76................................. Undergraduate Instructor, Department of Philosophy, Ohio Dominican College, Columbus, Ohio.

9/76................................. Undergraduate Instructor, Department of Philosophy, The Ohio State University, Marion Branch Campus, Marion, Ohio.

FIELDS OF INTEREST

Mind, Belief, Language, Eastern Philosophy
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Chapter 1

DESCARTES' QUEST FOR THE FIRST PRINCIPLE OF PHILOSOPHY

1. Introduction

It is so difficult to find the beginning. Or, better, it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back.

---Ludwig Wittgenstein, On Certainty

In the present chapter I shall investigate why Descartes thought that one must "go further back" than the certainty one normally has about the existence of such items as one's own hands, and why he contended that what ordinarily goes unquestioned in the course of our everyday lives is "... in some measure doubtful. ..." To this end I have attempted to isolate and appraise some of the basic assumptions which underlie Descartes' metaphysical speculations. By so doing I hope to shed light on those considerations that drove Descartes to the conclusion that one's own existence is the only beginning for all philosophical inquiry.

2. Error and Self-Deception

A striking and ironic feature of Descartes' system of philosophy, especially of his metaphysics or first philosophy, is the predominate and exaggerated emphasis that it places on error and self-deception. For example, in the Discourse on Method...
Descartes remarks:

```
.. possibly I deceive myself, and that what I take
to be gold and diamonds is perhaps no more than
copper and glass. I know how subject to delusion
we are in whatever touches ourselves. ..
```

And in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* he says:

```
.. experience shows me that I am.. subject to
an infinitude of errors. ..
```

Here, it is interesting to note that Descartes goes so far as to
suggest that to err and deceive oneself is a defect in one's
nature.

Descartes notes that it eventually becomes evident to a
thinking being who continually falls into error that it lacks
certain "perfections." And he maintains further that a being
which "knows that it lacks certain perfections" will endeavor to
give itself those that it has the power to give itself:

```
.. for it will know that it is a greater good for
it to possess them, than not to possess them.
```

He then conjectures that it is possible, at least in principle,
to avoid all those errors that otherwise might proceed from our
being deceived since we are free to:

```
.. abstain from accepting as true and indisputable
those things of which we have not certain knowledge
and thus obviate our ever being deceived.
```

But he recognizes that freeing oneself from error and deception by
withholding judgement about those things that are not indisputable
requires an intensive period of retraining and an unusual clarity
of mental vision.
Descartes maintains that most people fail to increase their knowledge to the "highest possible point" because they never learned how to utilize their intellect completely and systematically so as to arrive at sound and confident judgements by themselves. He believes that as children most of us generally contented ourselves with the opinions of our masters who more often than not contradicted one another. He submits that few if any of us were taught at an early age how to control our appetites and emotions, and that as a result, most of us generally ruled by the passions rather than by "the natural light of reason." Given such a history, even the educated adult will frequently ignore whatever analytic skills he has acquired, and allow himself out of habit and sloth to be swayed by authority, custom, current fashion, desire, and emotion. The upshot of all this, Descartes contends, is that many of our beliefs are unfounded and frequently erroneous, and we are not as close to enlightenment as we might have been:

... had we complete use of our reason since our birth, and had we been guided by its means alone.

While he recognized that most mature adults are rigidly set in their ways, Descartes nevertheless conjectured that it is possible, with the correct effort, to free oneself from the past, and to replace precipitate judgement and its consequent errors by a system of belief that would conform to "the uniformity of a rational scheme." To make progress toward such an end however, he contended that one must first call into question all of one's
"former opinions."

Now not many of us could argue with Descartes' contention that most of us grow up uncritically accepting what is often unfounded and sometimes erroneous, and that many of us still harbor an unfortunate assortment of false and unfounded beliefs. But why did Descartes contend that in order to rectify such a situation it is necessary to call into question all of one's opinions?

To the Jesuit, Bourdin, Descartes submits that a person's entertaining a false belief should product a general uncertainty about all the rest of his beliefs. Suppose, Descartes suggests, that a person:

. . .had a basket of apples, and fearing that some of them were rotten, wanted to take those out lest they might make the rest go wrong. . .Would he not first turn the whole of the apples out of the basket and look them over one by one, and then having selected those which he saw not to be rotten, place them again in the basket and leave out the others? It is therefore in just the same way that those who have never rightly philosophized have in their mind a variety of opinions some of which they justly fear not to be true. . .They then try to separate the false from the true lest the presence of the former should produce a general uncertainty about all. Now there is no better way of doing this than to reject all at once together as uncertain or false. . ."?

Clearly, Descartes' analogy suggests that just as a rotten apple can infect any other apple with which it shares a basket, a false belief can infect any other belief with which it shares a mind. In the latter case, Descartes conjectures, the contagion spreads in virtue of the systematic interconnectedness of all of our
beliefs. It is in this light that he submits that any system
of beliefs that conforms to the uniformity of a rational scheme
must be comprised of all and only true beliefs.

3. Systematic Knowing

Socrates, though he entertained many doubts, is sometimes
said to have been a wise man because he did not believe that he
knew what he didn't. Descartes would have concurred with this
characterization of Socrates. For he holds that not only is the
man who has doubts on many matters no more:

...learned than the man who has never thought of
them; may he appears to be less learned if he has
formed wrong opinions on any particulars. 8

Indeed, this proposition:

A person who regards doubtful matters as certain and
who, as a result, forms wrong opinions on any particu-

...and make it a rule to trust only what is com-
pletely known and incapable of being doubted. 9

This rule is one by which Descartes purports to be guided in the
Meditations 10 as well as the Discourse 11 and the Principles. 12

There is no room in the system of human wisdom that
Descartes envisions for probable and hence possibly erroneous conjecture.
Science, Descartes maintains, is true and evident cognition. If there is any human wisdom, he thinks that it consists only of that which can be known with perfect evidence and certainty. But science, as Descartes conceives it, is not merely a list of evident but unrelated truths.

In the domain of science, Descartes submits, the discovery of one truth "aids" the discovery of others. He further submits that this could not be unless all the truths that can be known with perfect evidence and certainty are somehow interconnected. S.V. Keeling suggests that such a conjecture was motivated by a vision which occurred to Descartes in a dream at the age of twenty-two. Like most attempts to express a vision that is still in embryonic form, Descartes' was heavily steeped in metaphor. According to Keeling, Descartes became convinced that all the sciences are interconnected "as by a chain," and that no one of those truths can be grasped without taking in the whole encyclopedia at one and the same time. This conviction appears to have guided almost all of Descartes' later intellectual endeavors. Its theme of interconnectedness among all the truths that can be known with perfect evidence and certainty underlies all of Descartes' major scientific treatises.

In the *Rules* Descartes concludes:

...we must believe that all the sciences are so interconnected that it is much easier to study them all together than to isolate one from all the others.
In the *Discourse* and its companion works the theme of interconnectedness in the sciences finds its expression in terms of the notion of "universal mathematics."

Descartes admits that of all the subjects he had studied in his youth, he was especially delighted by mathematics:

...because of the certainty of its demonstrations and the evidence of its reasonings. ..."\(^{14}\)

Profoundly impressed by the geometric mode of writing employed by the ancient geometers, e.g. Euclid, Descartes doubtless believed that the interconnection that obtains among some of the propositions that comprise the whole of human wisdom is a deductive one. Yet he expresses astonishment over the fact that the bases of mathematics, i.e. its axioms, were so "firm and solid," but that "...no loftier edifice had been reared thereupon."\(^{15}\) This led him to conjecture that by investigating those features of the method of proof which rendered the conclusions of mathematics and geometry absolutely certain, one could effectively apply those methods to other sciences and thereby establish certainty in them as well. Descartes admirably puts this conjecture to the test in his *Optics*, and was undoubtedly encouraged by his success in the *Geometry* where he shows that geometrical propositions can be expressed in algebraic terms and proved by algebraic methods. As a result of his success in these matters, Descartes sometimes speaks as if there is only one discipline, viz. philosophy--the general study of human wisdom--, that comprehends all the truths which comprise the whole of human wisdom. This should cause us to suspect that Descartes also believed
that is was possible to express the interconnection that obtains among all the truths of philosophy’s domain in something very much like the geometric mode of writing employed by the ancients.

One method of proof employed by the ancient geometers is the method of synthesis. Synthesis makes use of:

.. a long series of definitions, postulates, axioms, theorems, and problems...16

and has the virtue of compelling even the sometimes inattentive reader to assent to the conclusion of any rigorous demonstration that can be shown to rest on axioms to which one assents. Now the persuasiveness of any synthetic demonstration of a given proposition depends in part on the order in which the propositions of that demonstration are presented. In Euclidean geometry, for example, some theorems can be employed in order to prove others. But for any theorem that can be used in the proof of another, there must be a rigorous demonstration of that theorem which ultimately rests on the axioms of the system. On the other hand, the axioms of the system cannot themselves rest on any other propositions of that system; they are the items upon which the proof of all other propositions in the system rest. Descartes therefore notes that the order of proof:

.. consists merely in putting forward those things first that should be known without the aid of what comes subsequently, and arranging all other matters so that their proof depends solely on what precedes them.17

His comment suggests that a kind of linear presentation of the propositions of a given deductive system should be followed; i.e.
definitions, postulates, and axioms are stated first, then the derivation of theorems is presented, and so on.

Now Descartes points out that the method of synthesis does not show "...the true way by which a thing was methodically discovered and derived..."¹⁸ He conjectures that synthesis could not have constituted the whole of the method of the ancient geometers since they must have had some method for establishing the axioms of their systems with apodictic certainty. But that method, viz. the method of analysis, was apparently so valuable to them that the ancients "...wished to keep it to themselves as a secret."¹⁹ Despite their efforts Descartes purports to unveil the secret method of the ancients in his Meditations. Indeed, he contends that analysis is the only method that he employed in that work. I shall return to a more detailed discussion of the method of analysis in the next section.

Synthesis is not "conveniently" applied to matters that are metaphysical, though "...it does find a place after analysis in the domain of geometry..."²⁰ Analysis, on the other hand, renders the "primary notions" of metaphysics "clear and distinct." Without analysis there can be no evident knowledge of the first principles of philosophy, and in such a case there is no guarantee that one will not accept false principles. To reconstruct the sciences on false principles, of course, is a useless endeavor since in such a case the method of synthetic proof is rendered impotent as a tool for establishing certainty in the sciences.
Now Descartes thought that synthesis could be usefully employed in the domain of metaphysics, but he was hesitant to set out the content of his Meditations by the synthetic method of proof. He maintains that even those who understand the proofs of geometry are likely to have difficulty when it comes to understanding the proofs of metaphysics. For the:

...primary notions that are the presuppositions of geometrical proofs harmonize with the use of our senses. . .21

He thinks that the only difficulty to be encountered in geometry is the "proper deduction of consequences," and even the inattentive can sometimes do that! In metaphysics however, the primary difficulty is to arrive at an understanding of its primary notions. Such notions, he thinks, are not easily grasped by those who allow themselves to be distracted by their own sensory input. One can employ synthesis in the domain of metaphysics, but he who cannot "abstract" his mind from the representations of sense and memory cannot possibly hope to understand the proofs of metaphysics. This is why Descartes was hesitant to set out the content of his Meditations by the synthetic method of proof. For in the Meditations he purports to provide his readers with a method of abstracting the mind from the senses. He was therefore convinced that a perusal of the Meditations would yield his readers a far greater profit. And it is only after some amusing histrionics and a repetitious insistence that his readers first give their utmost attention to the Meditations that he finally appends to his reply to the Paris theologians a
number of geometrical arguments which, he maintains, establish
the existence of God and the distinction between the mind and the
body.

In the Rules Descartes sometimes speaks as if the system
of wisdom that he there envisions can be presented in the geo­
métrical mode of writing. In Rule XII, for example, he claims that:

...the whole of human wisdom consists of a distinct
perception of the way in which those simple natures
combine to build up other objects.22

This suggests that there are principles that govern the ways in
which those simple natures can be combined. In fact, Descartes
maintains that common notions, for example:

...things that are the same as a third thing are
the same as one another. ...23

are "bonds for connecting together other simple natures." He
contends that some of these simple natures are primary notions which
can be known without the aid of sense and memory; here, he includes
such items as thought, existence, unity, number, God, extension,
and so on. And he maintains that when these primary notions are
clearly and distinctly known, that knowledge can be employed to
"build up" the rest of human knowledge.

Finally, the metaphors of "building up" or "rebuilding"
the "edifice of human wisdom," and the metaphor of "setting the
foundations" for science, are frequently employed by Descartes
in his philosophical writings. The frequent occurrence of these
metaphors is explained by a remark that Descartes makes to Bourdin:
Everywhere in my writings I made it clear that my procedure was like that of an Architect planning houses.24

In the Discourse, when Descartes talks about the foundations of science, he has in mind its first principles or primary notions:

.. as regards all the opinions which up to this time I had embraced, I thought I could not do better than endeavor once for all to sweep them completely away, so that they might later on be replaced, either by others which were better, or by the same, when I had made them conform to the uniformity of a rational scheme. And I firmly believed that by this means I should succeed in directing my life much better than if I had only built on old foundations, and relied on principles which I allowed myself to be in youth persuaded...25

And in the Meditations Descartes makes clear his intention to "build anew from the foundation" in order "...to establish a firm and permanent structure in the sciences."26 Clearly, if one builds on shifting sand the result is an edifice that is as unstable as its foundation since all of the parts of an edifice are interconnected. Descartes submits:

...owing to the fact that the destruction of the foundations of necessity brings with it the down-fall of the rest of the edifice, I shall only in first place attack those principles upon which all of my former opinions rested.27

To summarize, Descartes maintains that his project of setting the foundation for a firm and permanent structure in the sciences is one that requires the special methods of metaphysics or first philosophy. The method of Descartes' first philosophy is the method of analysis. By engaging in analysis Descartes purports to explicate the basic truths of metaphysics. As a system of
interrelated truths, metaphysics, the first part of the "true
philosophy," is supposed to consist of those primary notions upon
which the rest of the edifice of science can be rebuilt. The
relationship which Descartes thinks obtains between metaphysics
and the sciences which derive from it is powerfully expressed in
yet another metaphor in his preface to the Principles of Philosophy.
There, he maintains that philosophy is like a tree. It is a unified
body of knowledge consisting of a finite number of interdependent
subsystems of which metaphysics is the "root" system. Physics,
Descartes maintains, is the "trunk" of philosophy, and the special
sciences--e.g. medicine and morals--all of which eminate from the
trunk, are philosophy's branches. Finally, Descartes thinks that
the tap root which secures the tree of philosophy to the ground
of certainty is the knowledge that each man can have about himself
as a thinking existent. In chapters three and four I shall have
a good deal more to say about Descartes' claim that the certainty
someone can have about himself as a thinking thing is the first
knowledge that can be had by anyone who philosophizes in an orderly
way. For now, let us bring the present chapter to a close by
considering some of the outstanding features of Descartes' method
of metaphysical analysis.

4. The Ancient Method of Analysis

In replying to the Paris theologians Descartes maintains
that the only method he employed in his Meditations was the analytic
method. He tells these theologians that analysis contains nothing
that is of interest to the inattentive or hostile reader, and that it demands the total attention of anyone who endeavors to engage in it. But like the ancients, who apparently placed such a high value on analysis that "...they wished to keep it to themselves as an important secret," Descartes nowhere gives a description of that "method of proof." Yet from the fact that he nowhere describes analysis, it may be inferred that he expected his readers to learn about it from a close perusal of the *Meditations*. In fact, Descartes not only expected those who wished to follow his example to study the *Meditations* carefully, he required that each actually engage in analysis in order to understand the truths that are set down in that work "...as if each had himself discovered it."28 This is why Descartes, in his Preface to the Reader of the *Meditations*, advises that no one actually read that work:

...excepting those who desire to meditate seriously with me, and who can detach their minds from the affairs of sense...29

Descartes' method of analysis in the *Meditations* is meditation itself—namely, self-analysis. Of course, he recognizes that there are methods of analysis other than self-analysis—e.g., geometrical analysis. For he holds that the proofs of geometry harmonize with the use of the senses. But since a clear understanding of the truths of metaphysics requires that the mind be abstracted from the senses, those truths require a special method of proof. But even though self-analysis is distinct from geometrical analysis,
the first is "basic" to the second since it is the method of metaphysics and since metaphysics is the foundation of the other sciences. Moreover, since science, at all levels, is supposed to be free from all probable conjecture and hence possibly erroneous opinion, any knowledge which is to count as scientific must be absolutely certain and immutable. That sort of knowledge can be realized, Descartes thought, only if its foundation is comprised of principles that are immune to every conceivable doubt. This is why Descartes' metaphysical analysis begins with metaphysical doubt. He wants to see if there are any truths that are immune to those doubts.

Now Descartes' motive for engaging in systematic doubt is not merely to see whether or not there is some point at which that doubt grinds to a halt. Given that there is such a point and that it is identifiable, he also wants to see if and how it can be applied to the task of reconstructing the edifice of human wisdom. There is, of course, no question that Descartes held that metaphysical doubt defeats itself once the doubter realizes that no matter what he supposes he can't doubt that he exists. But how does he think that the certainty someone can have that he exists is related to the other truths of metaphysics?

In the First Meditation, by reflecting upon and critically analyzing some of the implications of his preanalytic system of beliefs about himself, Descartes purports to discover the freedom to doubt almost everything that had previously seemed most true and
evident to him. In the Second Meditation he maintains that even though he can doubt that he has a body, that he occupies a place in space, and so on, he can't doubt that he is a thing which thinks. For this reason he resolves to make his own mind an object of study for the remainder of the Meditations and to see:

\[\ldots\]whether I cannot still discover in myself some other things which I have not hitherto perceived.\textsuperscript{30}

By engaging in self-reflection Descartes claims to discover the notions of what a thing is, what thought is, and what truth is. He further contends that because he is aware of himself as a "thing capable of existing of itself," he understands the idea of substance. And insofar as he recalls having existed during former times and is able to recognize the number of some of his thoughts, he claims to discover the notions of duration and number. Finally, by engaging in an analysis of himself, Descartes purports to understand that he himself is finite, limited and incomplete, prone to error and imperfect, and ignorant of almost everything. He maintains that this discovery gives rise through a kind of figure-ground reversal to the notion of a being who is infinite, unlimited and complete, perfect, and ignorant of nothing. More specifically, he submits that he couldn't conceive of himself as a being who is limited by ignorance and desire unless he could conceive of a being who was not limited in these ways. Implicit in the knowledge that he himself is finite, in other words, is a knowledge of infinity:

For how would it be possible that I should know that I doubt and desire, that is to say, that something is
lacking in me, and that I am not quite perfect, unless I had within me some idea of a Being more perfect than myself, in comparison with which I should recognize the deficiencies of my own nature?31

Believing himself to have clarified the idea of God by reflecting on his own nature, Descartes devotes the remainder of Meditation Three to the project of showing that that idea represents an actual being. He thinks that he can show this by showing that his idea of God is such that he alone is not the cause of its being presented to his mind, but that only God Himself could have given him the power to present that idea to himself. In this regard Descartes maintains that there is an indubitable principle that universally applies to the effects of all causes. He formulates this principle in more than one way:

That there is nothing in the effect, that has not existed in a similar or in some higher form in the cause, is a first principle than which none clearer can be entertained. The common truth 'from nothing, nothing comes' is identical with it.32

He further submits that there is a corollary to this principle which pertains to the objective reality of ideas:

viz. that every perfection existing objectively in an idea must exist actually in something that causes that idea.33

He treats this corollary as a first principle. He then argues that the ideal of perfection represented by his idea of God is so excellent, but that he himself is so limited and imperfect, that he alone could not have caused that idea to be presented to his mind. Rather, he contends that the degree of perfection represented by his idea of God is so great that only an infinite being could
have caused it. That is, he thinks that only a being who is as perfect as the ideal represented by his idea could have caused that idea to be presented to his mind. On these grounds, he concludes that God exists.

In criticizing this argument the Paris theologians not only deny that Descartes has an idea of God, they claim that even if he did have such an idea he could have it though no such God existed. Let us look at their latter claim first. They maintain that they find within themselves a sufficient basis on which "... to erect that said idea, even though that supreme being did not exist." For just as one could add to a single degree of light or heat "fresh degrees up to infinity" so too, they think, one could "add one degree of perfection to another to infinity." They then query:

... can I not add to any degree of being that I perceive in myself any other degree that I please, and out of the whole number capable of addition construct the idea of a perfect being?

In replying to this question Descartes says:

... when you say that in ourselves there is a sufficient foundation on which to construct the idea of God, your assertion in no way conflicts with my opinion. I myself at the end of the Third Meditation have expressly said that this idea is innate in me, or alternatively that it comes to me from no other source than myself.

Here Descartes grants the Paris Theologians that the innate idea of God is a construction of the mind. The fact that the mind is the source of that idea, in other words, is not incompatible with the fact that the mind constructs it. For aside from the causal
principle upon which his argument rests, Descartes claims to be certain that he himself exists. For this reason, he contends that the idea of God can be constructed out of those materials which derive from self-reflection. But he also maintains that the capacity for constructing that idea could not have been present in him unless he were created by God. For he thinks that the degree of perfection represented by his idea of God is greater than the degree of perfection that he finds within himself. And on these grounds he concludes that he would not have the power to present the idea of God to his mind unless God Himself had given him that power.

To the objection, raised by the Paris theologians, that he has no idea of God, Descartes replies:

...those who maintain that they do not possess the idea of God, but in place of it form some image, etc., while they refuse the name concede the fact. I certainly do not think that that idea is of a nature akin to the images of material things depicted in the imagination, but that it is something that we are aware of by an apprehension, or judgement or inference of the understanding alone.  

Now Descartes maintains that a careful consideration of the skeptical arguments that he presents in Meditation One should assist one in abstracting the mind from the senses. But he thinks that the actual method of withdrawing the mind from the senses is the method of self-analysis.

Self-analysis is a case where what is being analyzed and the person carrying out the analysis are one and the same. Insofar
as it is therapeutic, one who engages in self-analysis plays the simultaneous role of patient and analyst. From a linguistic point of view, self-analysis is a speech situation where one asks oneself questions about oneself. Since the questioner, the respondent, and the person about whom the question is raised are all identical, let us say that self-analysis is intrapersonal rather than interpersonal.

In an interpersonal conversational situation, where the questioner and the respondent are distinct individuals, each can communicate with the other only by employing publicly observable signs of some sort. In our culture, for example, one can ask a question of or answer a question for someone else by saying something out loud or by writing something down. Moreover, a condition of understanding what has been said or written is that one see, hear, or otherwise perceive what has been said or written. For this reason, one cannot consistently suppose that one is engaged in conversation with another and at the same time entertain a doubt about the veracity of what one currently perceives.

An intrapersonal conversational situation, such as Cartesian self-analysis, may be thought of as a situation where one converses with oneself. Since the speaker and audience are identical in this kind of case, in order to converse with oneself one need not issue any publicly observable signs, see, hear, nor otherwise perceive oneself. For this reason, one can engage in self-analysis without presupposing the veracity of one's current sensory input.
Descartes emphasizes this point at the beginning of the Third Meditation:

I shall now close my eyes, I shall stop my ears, I shall call away all of my senses, I shall efface even from my thoughts all the images of corporeal things, or at least (for that is hardly possible) I shall esteem them as vain and false; and thus holding converse with myself and considering my own nature, I shall try little by little to reach a better knowledge of and a more familiar acquaintance with myself. 38

Self-analysis then serves at least two functions in Descartes' Meditations. On the one hand, by conversing with oneself Descartes thinks that one can abstract one's mind from one's current sensory input. On the other hand, he thinks that by analyzing one's essential nature one can explicate and establish the primary notions of metaphysics and thereby set the foundation for the derivation of the rest of human wisdom.
Chapter 1

FOOTNOTES


2 Ibid., pp. 82 & 83.

3 Ibid., p. 172.


5 Descartes, op. cit., I, p. 221.

6 Ibid., p. 88.

7 Descartes, op. cit., II, p. 182.

8 Descartes, op. cit., I, p. 3.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., pp. 148 & 178.

11 Ibid., p. 92.

12 Ibid., p. 221.

13 Ibid., p. 2.

14 Ibid., p. 85.

15 Ibid.


18. *Ibid*.


20. *Ibid*.


29. Descartes, *op. cit.*, I, p. 139.


32. Descartes, *op. cit.*, II, p. 35.


35. *Ibid*.
Ibid., p. 39.

Ibid., p. 37.

Chapter II

THE UTILITY, JUSTIFICATION, AND SCOPE OF SYSTEMATIC DOUBT

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I provided a rough overview of Descartes' conception of metaphysics and science as a system of rigorously interrelated truths. Since Descartes holds that metaphysics is the foundation of physics and the other special sciences, he thinks that the principles of the former must be known without the aid of the latter. He maintains that the primary notions of metaphysics can only be grasped by an unclouded and attentive mind, a mind which is totally free from all of its former prejudices and which is capable of clearly distinguishing the corporeal representations of sense and imagination from matters which are "purely intellectual" or "mental." Only after the mind has been sufficiently purged of its tendency to affirm the ideas of sense and imagination can it secure the Archimedean point relative to which all the truths of metaphysics can be brought sharply into focus. That point, Descartes thinks, is the cogito certainty—viz. Cogito ergo sum.

In section two of the present chapter I consider Descartes' claim that the utility which derives from systematic doubt is that it enables one to "detach" the mind from the senses and also makes
it impossible to deny the truths that are discovered as a result of engaging in that doubt. I explain these claims in terms of Descartes' remarks about human understanding. Since he assumes that there is a faculty of understanding, he is lead to claim that that faculty can be "helped or hindered" by the faculties of sense and imagination. The implication of this claim is that the faculty of understanding can function independently of the faculties of sense and memory. This accounts for Descartes' claim that the mind can be detached from the senses. Moreover, Descartes assumes that when the faculty of understanding is unaided by sense, memory, and imagination, it is capable of knowing. This accounts for his claim that the truths of metaphysics can be rendered indubitable by abstracting the mind from the senses.

Now Descartes holds that the utility which supposedly derives from systematic doubt can be realized only if one has some reason for seriously entertaining those doubts. In section three, I consider these reasons. Here, I discuss Descartes' claims that perceptual errors sometimes result from a percipient's failure to assess correctly his own spatial relation to a perceived object, and that there are no criteria by which waking consciousness can be distinguished from dreaming consciousness. Neither of these considerations is sufficient to motivate the supposition that there are no physical bodies. Rather, that supposition is based on Descartes' confessed ignorance of God's existence. For he maintains that so long as one remains ignorant of God's existence,
he cannot rule out the possibility that he is always deceived by a being who is immensely powerful and imperfect. In short, because he is ignorant of God's existence Descartes thinks that he must reckon with the possibility that there is an evil deceiver; the hypothesis that there is such a deceiver constitutes the theoretical basis for his doubt about the existence of the physical universe. Since he is ignorant of God's existence, Descartes thinks that it is possible that there is no physical world but that an evil spirit deceives him into believing that there is such a world.

In section four I consider some of the implications of Descartes' evil spirit hypothesis. Since Descartes claims that all things depend on God, I argue that he cannot be sure that his clear and distinct perceptions are true unless he is sure that God is no deceiver. On these grounds, I expose the circularity of Descartes' alleged demonstration that all clear and distinct perceptions are true. Finally, I bring the chapter to a close by considering Alan Gewirth's attempt to exculpate Descartes from the charge of circularity. Here, I show how his effort, although gallant, falls short of its goal.

2. The Utility of Doubt

By casting doubt on the trustworthiness of sense and memory, Descartes intends to overturn his preanalytic system of ordinary beliefs. He contends that metaphysical doubt is not an "active" or a practical doubt. For when one actively doubts something,
e.g. that it will rain, entertaining that doubt is sufficient for not believing that it will rain. Yet one can engage in metaphysical doubt without losing confidence in any of one's opinions. Indeed, Descartes openly admits that he will never:

\[ \ldots \text{lose the habit of deferring to them or of placing [his] confidence in them, so long as [he] considers them as they really are, i.e. opinions in some measure doubtful.} \ldots \text{and at the same time highly probably.} \ldots \]

Metaphysical doubt, in other words, is really a "slight" doubt since there is really "much more reason" to believe what we have always believed than to suppose that it is false. Nevertheless, Descartes maintains that metaphysical doubt is significant precisely because it cannot be resolved by what can be learned via the senses. Indeed, it is the significance that he attaches to metaphysical doubt that motivates him to perform the following thought experiment:

I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are naught but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity. \ldots \]

By so doing Descartes hoped to rid himself of all of his former prejudices, and thenceforward to accept nothing that is not clearly known to be true by the natural light of reason.

After initially setting out the details of his primary proof for God's existence in Meditation Three, Descartes remarks:
I see nothing in all that I have just said which by the light of nature is not manifest to anyone who desires to think attentively on the subject: but when I slightly relax my attention, my mind, finding its vision somewhat obscured and so to speak blinded by the images of sensible objects, I do not easily recollect the reason why the idea that I possess of a being more perfect than I must necessarily have been placed in me by a being which is really more perfect.

Since a clear knowledge of God is obscured by perceptual imagery, such knowledge is accessible only to those capable of detaching their minds from these modes of awareness. In his reply to the Paris theologians Descartes explains:

...since our previous ideas of what belongs to the mind have been wholly confused and mixed up with the ideas of sensible objects, and this was the first and chief reason why none of the propositions asserted of God and the soul could be understood with sufficient clearness, I thought I should perform something worth the doing if I showed how the properties or qualities of the soul are to be distinguished from those of the body.

He submits that one way by which the mind can detach itself from the affairs of the senses is to accustom itself "...to entertain doubts especially about corporeal things..." And he holds that even though the utility to be derived from actually engaging in systematic doubt:

...does not at first appear, it is at the same time very great, inasmuch as it sets out for us a very simple way by which the mind may detach itself from the senses; and finally it makes it impossible for us ever to doubt those things which we have once discovered to be true.

Now in order to understand the way in which Descartes thought that utility derived from engaging in systematic doubt, we must look
closely at Descartes' claims about the nature of human understanding.

In the *Rules* Descartes supposes that something is common to all cases of understanding which is that in virtue of which a person may be said to understand whatever he does understand. What is common to any case where someone understands something, according to Descartes, is the operation of the faculty of understanding. This faculty is supposed to operate as though it were a light in the human soul which is capable of illuminating various matters. When those matters are brought into focus, one may be said to perceive clearly and distinctly what the light reveals. But, according to Descartes, when the light of understanding is diffused by the confusing images of sense and imagination, it is not possible to perceive anything clearly and distinctly.

The faculty of understanding is said to be:

\[\text{\ldots helped or hindered by three other faculties, namely imagination, sense, and memory.}\]

This leads Descartes to suppose that that faculty can operate independently of the other three. He further conjectures that "\ldots it is the understanding alone i.e. by itself which is capable of knowing. \ldots" Moreover, when the operation of the understanding is pure and unclouded by the corporeal images of sense and imagination, Descartes refers to its operation as intuition:

By *intuition* I understand, not the fluctuating testimony of the senses, not the misleading judgement that proceeds from the blundering constructions of the imagination, but the conception which an unclouded and attentive mind gives us so readily and distinctly that we are wholly freed from doubt about that which we understand.
Intuition occupies a place of central importance in Cartesian metaphysics. All of Descartes' important metaphysical claims—e.g. that the soul exists, and that Perfection exists—are either justified by an appeal to this elusive mental operation or are supposed to derive from claims which are so justified. Moreover, Descartes claims that if an inference has few enough steps it can be "reduced" to an intuition. For deduction involves a movement or "succession of thought." For example, when demonstrating a theorem in Euclidean geometry, the understanding not only focuses on each successive step of the proof, it moves from one step to the next until it arrives at the conclusion. For this reason, the certitude of deduction is conferred "... upon it in some way by memory." For even though one might understand each of the steps of a proof, and the order of those steps, unless one can grasp how all of the steps of that proof are related to the conclusion, one cannot be said to know that the proof establishes its conclusion. Descartes thinks that an understanding of a given proof as a unified whole is a function of the faculty of intuition.

Unlike deduction, intuition is nondiscursive; it is "direct" and "instantaneous", for what is intuited "... must be grasped... at the same time and not successively." Among the kinds of things that allegedly can be understood via the operation of intuition are first principles, pure and simple essences or natures, complex or composite objects, facts, deductive relations
that obtain among facts.\textsuperscript{14} deductive relations that obtain among simple or complex propositions,\textsuperscript{15} and simple notions.\textsuperscript{16} Significantly, Descartes maintains that

\[\ldots\text{each individual can mentally have intuition of the fact that he exists, and that he thinks.}\ldots\textsuperscript{17}\]

Since the faculty of intuition is supposed to be able to operate independently of the faculties of sense and imagination, and since one can supposedly intuit one's own existence, it can be seen why Descartes thought that one could know about one's own existence even if one did not trust one's senses or one's memory. This is also why he claims that the method of "abstracting" or "detaching" the mind from the senses is to be found in the Second Meditation. For Descartes is led by a series of dialectical steps from skepticism with regard to sense and memory to the cogito certainty. And since he purports to be certain about his own existence even though he entertains a doubt about the veracity of sense and memory, he concludes that the knowledge he has of his own existence is not based on what he sees, hears, or otherwise perceives, nor on what he remembers. Rather, he thinks that that knowledge is secured by the understanding alone, i.e. by an understanding that is unaided by the representations of sense and memory. On the one hand then, Descartes purports to doubt the reality of all that he perceives and remembers. On the other hand, he maintains that he cannot doubt that he himself exists. Herein, he thinks, lies the chief utility of systematic doubt. For it is by engaging in systematic doubt that one supposedly frees
oneself from the disposition to affirm that the representations of sense and memory are real. Only after that has been accomplished, according to Descartes, is one in a position to understand the first principle of metaphysics and all the other truths of metaphysics which supposedly derive therefrom. For Descartes maintains that in reflecting on one's own nature as a thinking thing one cannot fall into error as a result of being mislead by what one sees, hears, otherwise perceives, or remembers. In short, he thinks that "the way by which the mind may detach itself from the senses" is by following the steps in a series of dialectical progressions. The series begins with skepticism about the trustworthiness of sense and memory, and it ends with what is supposed to be impossible to doubt—a viz. the cogito certainty, and all that supposedly can be known by engaging in self-analysis.

3. The Justification of Methodic Doubt

After pointing out the frequency with which he had in youth fallen into error as a result of his having entertained beliefs which he later discovered were false, Descartes forms the resolve in Meditation One to "...seriously and freely address [himself] to the upheaval of all [his] former opinions." As we saw, he compares the utility which allegedly derives from this procedure to the utility which may be derived from emptying a basket of apples. By emptying one's mind, one is able to sort through one's beliefs, reject those that are dubious, and reinstate
those that are beyond question. But the utility to be gained from engaging in systematic doubt apparently cannot be realized unless one has some reason for seriously entertaining those doubts. In this regard Descartes says:

"I have said that there was a difficulty in expelling from our belief everything that had been put there previously, partly because we need to have some reason for doubting before determining to do so; it was for this reason that I propounded the chief reasons for doubting in my first Meditation."

Unlike the apples in a basket, it would be a practical impossibility to examine each of one's opinions individually. Because of this practical limitation, the strategy of methodic doubt requires that one identify and undermine the foundation of one's preanalytic system of ordinary beliefs. Descartes maintains that all of his opinions rest on a principle about which a reasonable doubt can be entertained. And since he maintains that "...the destruction of the foundations of necessity brings with it the downfall of the rest of the edifice..." he concludes that a reasonable doubt can be entertained about all of his former opinions. But what, according to Descartes, is the principle that is the foundation of our ordinary belief system? And what reasons are there for entertaining a doubt about that principle?

Descartes contends that prior to scrutinizing his preanalytic system of beliefs, he was convinced that he was not ordinarily mislead by his senses, and that he was not always mistaken on those occasions when he made perceptual judgements. He treats the proposition that he is not always mislead by his senses as the
foundation stone of his preanalytic belief system. And he maintains
that to cast doubt on the truth of such a proposition would under­
mine all of his previous opinions since, prior to engaging in
critical metaphysics, he simply assumed that all of his beliefs
derived from what he was able to see, hear, and so on. Indeed,
in Meditation Six Descartes says that prior to conducting a rational
inquiry of his former opinions:

I persuaded myself easily that I had no idea in my
mind which had not formerly come to me through the
senses. . . . 21

And in Meditation One he says:

All that up to the present time I have accepted as
most true and certain I have learned either from
the senses or through the senses. . . . 22

Now Descartes maintains that one need not look far in
order to uncover reasons for doubting the reliability of all that
is represented to us via the modalities of sense perception.
Indeed, he submits that when he himself carefully considered these
reasons, the trust that he had always placed in his senses
was destroyed little by little. Let us therefore briefly consider
these reasons and see how one might be lead by them to entertain
a position of general skepticism with regard to the trustworthiness
of the senses.

To begin, Descartes notes that the way an object looks
to an observer varies as the relative positions of the object and
the observer vary. For example, a tower when seen from a great
distance might appear round even though the same tower when viewed
from a lesser distance looks square. Similarly, it is sometimes easy to misjudge the size of an object when one does not know how far away from it one is. But the sorts of perceptual errors that issue from distance variation are hardly sufficient to warrant a general skepticism with regard to the senses. For even though the recognition that one sometimes makes this kind of error might motivate one to suspend judgement about what is "hardly perceivable" or "very far away," Descartes submits that there are perceptible objects about which "...we cannot reasonable have any doubt." Such objects, he implies, insofar as they are not "hardly perceivable" might be said to be easily perceived; that is, an observer need not strain his senses in order to perceive them clearly. Here, Descartes seems to have in mind those objects that do not lie at the periphery of our visual field but are manifestly present and close at hand. As an example of what he has in mind, he cites his own body, the objects in contact with it, and also those in its immediate vicinity.

Now even though it would not ordinarily occur to one to doubt the reliability of what one observes when one observes these sorts of objects, and even though any such doubt can be shown to be unreasonable in the long run, Descartes nevertheless submits that considerations can be marshalled which motivate a general skepticism with regard to this class of items. For one thing, Descartes points out, there is the fact that one sometimes dreams. And insofar as there are no criteria by which waking
consciousness can be distinguished from dreaming consciousness, one cannot be absolutely sure that one is not really dreaming whenever one judges that one is awake. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes formulates the skeptical conclusion that may be drawn from this uncertainty:

\[...I\} never have believed myself to feel anything in waking moments which I cannot also sometimes believe myself to feel in sleep, and as I do not think that these things which I seem to feel in sleep proceed from objects which are outside of me, I do not see any reason why I should have this belief regarding objects which I seem to perceive while awake.\]

But even if, as Descartes encourages his readers to suppose, one is dreaming, one cannot deny that one is aware of various distinct objects. For nothing in one's field of awareness alters as a result of supposing that one is dreaming; one simply assumes that nothing one seems to see, hear, smell, etc., "proceed[s] from" any object that exists independently of one's apparent sensory encounters. Yet even though I only dream that I see my hand, etc., I still understand what it is for something to be a hand. Moreover, even if it is supposed that the hand I seem to see is no more than a figment of my imagination, Descartes thinks that it must be admitted that just as the imaginative constructions of the artist are patterned after the real features of various composite things, this hand, "whether true and real or false and fantastic," is formed from things that are more "simple and universal" than it. On these grounds, Descartes submits that even if one supposes oneself to be dreaming one is not thereby entitled to
enter a doubt about the existence of at least one class of things:

To such a class of things pertains corporeal nature in general, and its extension, the figure of extended things, their quantity, or magnitude and number, as also the place in which they are, the time which measures their duration, and so on.\(^2\)

On the one hand then, Descartes did not treat the supposition that he was dreaming as though it were sufficient to warrant the conclusion that everything represented to him via his senses is false and illusory. For he thinks that even if he is in fact dreaming, there probably exists a class of corporeal objects that can be numbered, are extended in length, breadth and depth, have determinate figures that result from a termination of this extension, occupy a certain place relative to each other, sometimes change place relative to each other, and endure through time. On the other hand however, Descartes insists that this class of objects may not be affirmed to exist with metaphysical certainty, since he submits that further reflection reveals that one may entertain a doubt about their existence if one is ignorant of the existence of a beneficent God. In this regard, Descartes contends that the proposition:

\[\ldots\text{that there is no earth, no heaven, no extended body, no magnitude, no place, and that nevertheless. }\ldots\text{ they seem to exist just exactly as [one] now see[s] them. }\ldots\]

is such that the Atheist cannot be sure that it is not so. Why did he think this?
Descartes supposes that one who is ignorant about God's existence must confess ignorance about his own origin—or as he sometimes puts it, the cause or author of his own existence. As a result of this ignorance he maintains, on the one hand, that for all he knows he has been created by a being whose power is infinite, and on the other hand, that for all he knows the author or cause of his own existence has no power at all. But how do these two possibilities lead, according to Descartes, to the conclusion that the Atheist cannot be absolutely sure that the above proportion is not true? Let's consider the latter possibility first.

Descartes assumes that the more perfect something is the more powerful it is. He also assumes that an effect can have no more perfection than its cause. On these grounds he concludes that the more probable it is that the cause of his own existence is almost impotent, the more likely it is that he is so imperfect that he always errs and deceives himself even about that which seems to him to be most certain. On the one hand then, Descartes submits that someone who is ignorant of God's existence must admit the possibility that the cause of his own existence is so imperfect that he always deceives himself.

On the other hand, even though Descartes allows that the more perfect the cause the more powerful the cause, he does not allow that the more powerful the cause the more perfect the cause. Indeed, he admits the possibility that something could be immensely
powerful and no less imperfect than powerful; this admission is what gives rise to the evil genius hypothesis. Since Descartes counts the disposition to deceive as an imperfection, and since something could be both immensely powerful and imperfect, Descartes thinks it follows that something could be so powerful that we are always deceived by it. And since the atheist cannot rule out the possibility of such a powerful deceiver, he cannot know that the proposition in question is a false one.

Thus far, Descartes' argument can be summarized as follows. Since he confesses ignorance of God's existence, he believes that he cannot rule out the following two possibilities:

i. the cause of his own existence is so powerless and imperfect that he is always deceived.

and,

ii. the cause of his own existence is so powerful and imperfect that he is always deceived.

Each alternative supposes that massive deception is possible. The latter alternative is picturesquely expressed by Descartes as the evil genius hypothesis, and is the hypothesis that he adopts for the purpose of seeing if there are any immutable truths that stand up to the possibility of massive deception. Descartes says:

I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myself to possess all these things; I shall remain
obstinately attached to this idea, and if by this means it is not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of any truth, I may at least do what is in my power i.e. suspend my judgement, and with firm purpose avoid giving credence to any false thing, or being imposed upon by this arch deceiver, however powerful and deceptive he may be.26

Now the theoretical doubt generated by the evil genius hypothesis is more comprehensive than the doubt generated by the supposition that there are no marks by which the ideas presented to the mind during sleep can be distinguished from those presented to it while awake. The latter supposition allows for the existence of the physical world; it merely supposes that there is no way to tell which of the mind's ideas represent it and which do not. But the proposition that there is no physical world is built into the hypothesis that an evil genius deceives the mind into believing that there is such a world. The doubt which rests on the evil genius hypothesis, more comprehensive than the doubt which rests on Descartes' perplexity about dreams, is the one that Descartes carries with him into the Second Meditation:

I suppose, then, that all the things that I see are false; I persuade myself that nothing has ever existed of all that my fallacious memory represents to me.27

So the evil genius can tamper, according to Descartes, with both sense and memory. But can he also tamper with our ability to reason, and with our alleged ability to intuit the truths that can be known, so the story goes, a priori? What did Descartes think were the limits of the power of this genius? What, in short, is the scope of the doubt raised by the supposition that he exists?
4. The Cogito and the Cartesian Circle

At the beginning of Meditation Three Descartes resolves to ignore his current sensory input and to make himself an object of study. Although he purports to doubt the existence of the external world, he claims to be certain that he is a "thing which thinks" since he clearly and distinctly perceives that this is so. He further remarks that he wouldn't be sure about this if anything so clearly and distinctly perceived could be false. This suggests a criterion of truth to Descartes:

...it seems to me that already I can establish as a general rule that all things which I perceive very clearly and very distinctly are true.28

But even though this rule seems unexceptional to him at first blush, further reflection leads Descartes to cast a suspicious eye on this alleged criterion of truth.

In the first place, Descartes points out that prior to engaging in critical metaphysics he used to think that "objects" such as the earth, sky, and stars were certain and manifest. After thinking about these matters more carefully however, he is no longer persuaded that the existence of these things is absolutely certain. For even though he purports to perceive clearly and distinctly that the "ideas or thoughts of these things were presented" to his mind, he maintains that his error, if he did indeed err, consisted in his having judged that there were objects conformable to or represented by those ideas. And even though he is thoroughly convinced of the truth of whatever he clearly and
distinctly perceives, i.e. whenever he clearly and distinctly perceives some idea he is compelled to judge that it represents its purported object, Descartes nevertheless admits the metaphysical possibility that his clear and distinct perceptions do not conform to any extra-ideational reality.

In the second place, Descartes recalls that whenever one of the simple propositions of geometry or arithmetic—e.g. that two and three together make five—was clearly present to his mind, he was spontaneously persuaded of its truth. On thinking these matters over however, he contends that he can entertain a very slight and metaphysical doubt even about these simple propositions. Moreover, although he has since judged that these propositions can be doubted, he maintains that they can be doubted for no other reason than that there might be a God who has endowed him with such a nature that he is mistaken even about what seemed most evident to him. On the one hand then, he thinks that even if God has given him a nature that is grossly imperfect, whenever he refocuses his attention on any of those simple propositions that he believes himself to have clearly and distinctly perceived, he spontaneously breaks out into words such as these:

Let who will deceive me, He can never cause me to be nothing while I think that I am, or some day cause it to be true to say that I have never been, it being true now to say that I am, or that two and three together make more or less than five, or any other such thing in which I see manifest contradiction. 29

On the other hand, he holds that so long as he remains ignorant of God's true nature, he can never be absolutely sure that anything
be so clearly and distinctly perceived is true. For this reason, Descartes resolves to investigate the question of God's existence, and he maintains:

\[ \text{... if I find that there is a God, I must inquire whether He may be a deceiver; for without a knowledge of these two truths I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything.}^{30} \]

Now once Descartes persuades himself that there is a God, he argues that since God is a supremely perfect being, He is liable to no error or defect. For example, he thinks that God could not desire to deceive anyone since the desire to deceive testifies to malice and feebleness. Moreover, he maintains that since the faculty he possesses for distinguishing the true from the false has been given to him by God, that faculty will not lead him into error if he uses it correctly. In other words, Descartes thinks that since he can be absolutely certain that God exists and is no deceiver, he can confidently and universally apply the criterion of truth that suggests itself to him by his alleged certainty that he is a thing which thinks. He sums up this matter to the Paris theologians as follows:

Thus you see that, after becoming aware of the existence of God, it is incumbent on us to imagine that He is a deceiver if we wish to cast doubt upon our clear and distinct perceptions; and since we cannot imagine that He is a deceiver, we must admit that all of them are true and certain.\(^{31}\)

After he satisfies himself that God is no deceiver then, Descartes thinks that he can be certain that all his clear and distinct perceptions are true. But so long as he remains ignorant
of God's existence, if he cannot be certain about anything, as he claims, how could he ever hope to establish by any rational procedure that God exists and that He is no deceiver? Indeed, doesn't Descartes reason in a circle when he alleges to demonstrate that all clear and distinct perceptions are true on the ground that God exists?

Arnauld thought that Descartes did reason in a circle, and he is the first objector to the Meditations to formulate that circularity explicitly:

The only remaining scruple I have is an uncertainty as to how a circular reasoning is to be avoided in saying: the only secure reason we have for believing that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true, is the fact that God exists.

But we can be sure that God exists, only because we clearly and evidently perceive that; therefore prior to being certain that God exists, we should be certain that whatever we clearly and evidently perceive is true.32

In other words, in order to be certain that

(1) God exists

is true, Descartes must already be certain that

(2) All clear and distinct perceptions are true

is true. But Descartes maintains that the truth of (2) rests on the truth of

(3) God is no deceiver.

Because Descartes says that (2) rests on (3), and because he thinks he can be sure that (3) is true only if he is sure that (2) is true, Arnauld argues that Descartes cannot establish (2)—his criterion of clarity and distinctness—unless he employs that very
Prior to Arnauld's formulation of the charge that Descartes reasons in a circle the Paris theologians had raised a similar objection:

Thirdly, since you are not yet certain of the aforesaid existence of God, and yet according to your statement, cannot be certain of anything or know anything clearly and distinctly unless previously you know certainly and clearly that God exists, it follows that you cannot clearly and distinctly know that you are a thinking thing, since, according to you, that knowledge depends on a clear knowledge of the existence of God, the proof of which you have not yet reached at that point where you draw the conclusion that you have a clear knowledge of what you are.32

In other words, since Descartes claims that he cannot be certain about anything unless he is certain that (3) is true, then so long as he claims to be ignorant of the truth of (3), he cannot consistently claim to be certain that

(4) I am a thing which thinks

is true. What the Paris theologians leave unsaid is that Descartes employs his alleged certainty that (4) is true in an effort to establish the truth of (3). But if Descartes can't be certain that (4) is true unless he is certain that (3) is true, then so long as he is ignorant of the truth of (3), he cannot be certain about the truth of any proposition that rests on (4). That is, Descartes reasons in a circle when he purports to raise himself by logical and metaphysically certain steps from the claim that he is a thinking thing to the claim that God exists.

In replying to Arnauld Descartes distinguishes between the certainty that attends clear and distinct perceptions as they
actually occur, i.e. occurrent clear and distinct perceptions, and the certainty that attends clear and distinct perceptions that are no longer occurrent but are nevertheless remembered, i.e. past clear and distinct perceptions. He maintains that if someone does not know that God exists, or is ignorant of His veracity, then even though he remembers having clearly and distinctly perceived some things, he cannot be sure that those past perceptions are true. Descartes makes the same point in reply to the third objection raised by the Paris theologians; and he also refers Arnauld to this passage:

Thirdly, when I said that we could know nothing with certainty unless we were first aware that God existed, I announced in express terms that I referred only to the science apprehending such conclusions as can recur in memory without attending further to the proofs which led me to make them.

Now this reply is a misleading one insofar as it suggests that there is only one place where Descartes says that he could not be certain about anything unless he is certain that God exists. In fact, Descartes makes this claim in at least four places in the Meditations, though he qualifies it in the manner suggested by the above reply in only one place. Moreover, when the Paris theologians object that Descartes cannot be certain that he is a thing that thinks, it is more than likely that they had in mind the passage from the Third Meditation that I have already cited:

... and if I find that there is a God, I must inquire whether He may be a deceiver; for without a knowledge of these two truths I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything.
But in replying to the Paris theologian's third objection Descartes refers them to a passage from the Fifth Meditation—namely:

And although for a firm grasp of this truth [viz. that there is a God] I have need of a strenuous application of mind, at present I not only feel myself to be as assured of it as of all that I hold as most certain, but I also remark that the certainty of all other things depends on it so absolutely, that without this knowledge it is impossible ever to know anything perfectly.36

Here, Descartes does indeed go on to qualify what he says in the very next paragraph by maintaining that for the duration of any period in which he clearly and distinctly perceives anything, he spontaneously persuades himself of its truth. As an example of this phenomenon, he cites his own understanding of the proposition that the sum of the internal angles of a triangle equals the sum of two right angles. On the one hand, he contends that so long as he applies his mind to the demonstration of this proposition he finds that it is impossible for him not to believe it. On the other hand, he contends that if he is ignorant of God's existence then even though he remembers having demonstrated that proposition with perfect clarity and distinctness, if he does not attend to the reasons that lead him to affirm that proposition, he finds that he is able to entertain a doubt about it since he can persuade himself that he is so imperfect that he always deceives himself. In other words, Descartes qualifies what he says in the preceding passage by maintaining, on the one hand, that he can be sure that
(5) All past clear and distinct perceptions are true only if he is sure that God is no deceiver. On the other hand, he thinks that

(6) All occurrent clear and distinct perceptions are indubitable is true, even if he is not sure that God exists. So by referring Arnauld to his reply to the third objection raised by the Paris theologians, and in that reply, by referring the Paris theologians to the passage from Meditation five cited above, Descartes implies that in the Meditations he intends to establish God's existence for the reason that he can be certain about the truth of his past clear and distinct perceptions only if he is certain that God exists. If this really was Descartes' intent, then it must be asked if he could establish (1), and on that basis establish (5) without assuming the truth of (5). And if he could, would this enable Descartes to escape from the circular reasoning detected by Arnauld and suggested by the Paris theologians?

In Rule VII Descartes notes that some demonstrations involve such a long series of transitions from grounds to conclusion that one can be sure that the conclusion is true only if he can confidently recall the whole series and its relationship to the conclusion. This appears to pose a difficulty for Descartes' alleged demonstration that God exists. For as we have seen, Descartes claims that prior to establishing (1), he cannot be sure that (5) is true. Hence, insofar as his attempt to demonstrate that there is a God requires that he recall having clearly and distinctly perceived some of the principles upon which the alleged
conclusion rests, e.g. that he is a thing which thinks, he can
never assure himself of the truth of the desired conclusion. But
this difficulty appears to be resolved by what Descartes says
further on in Rule VII. There, he claims that in some cases the
reliance of deduction on memory can, with the proper effort, be remedied:

To remedy this I would run them viz. the steps of
the deductive chain over from time to time, keeping
the imagination moving continuously in such a way that
while it is intuitively perceiving each fact it
simultaneously passes on to the next; and this I
would do until I had learned to pass from the first
to the last so quickly, that no stage in the process
was left to the care of memory, but seemed to have
the whole in intuition before me at one and the
same time.37

Given that this is so, if Descartes can grasp in a single occurring
clear and distinct perception [intuition] the requisite principles
and their relationship to the desired conclusion, could he not in
this fashion establish that God exists? Moreover, if he could
do so without assuming that (5) is true, then by showing how
(5) rests on (1), could he not establish (5) without reasoning in
a circle?

Now even if it is granted that Descartes can be certain
that (1) is true without first assuring himself that (5) is
true, and that he can show how (5) follows from (1), this would
not enable him to escape from Arnauld's charge of circularity
nor from the circle implied by the Paris theologians. For Descartes
cannot be certain that (1) is true unless he first assures himself
that:
All occurrences clear and distinct perceptions are true is true. But (7) does not follow from (6). And since his certainty that (7) is true requires that he first assure himself that (3) is true, he cannot establish (7) by deriving it from (3) without reasoning in a circle.

As we saw, toward the end of the Fifth Meditation, after distinguishing occurrence from past clear and distinct perceptions, Descartes goes on to assure himself of the truth of (5). In this regard, he submits that he can be sure that his past clear and distinct perceptions are true because he has recognized that God exists, and:

--because at the same time I have also recognized that all things depend upon Him, and He is not a deceiver, and from that have inferred that what I perceive clearly and distinctly cannot fail to be true--38

Now of course, if all things depend on God, then occurrence as well as past clear and distinct perceptions depend on Him as well. This is why Descartes must conclude that whatever he clearly and distinctly perceives—be it an occurrence or past perception—he can be certain that it is true only if he is certain that God is no deceiver. But if Descartes rests his certainty that (7) is true on his certainty that God is no deceiver, then prior to assuring himself that there is a God, he cannot consistently claim to be certain about anything. Surprisingly, Descartes unqualifiedly admits this:
And so I very clearly recognize that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends alone on the knowledge of the true God, insomuch that, before I knew Him, I could not have a perfect knowledge of any other thing. 39

Given this admission, Descartes cannot establish (7) by resting it on (3) unless he reasons in a circle.

In commenting on the circularity of the Meditations E.B. Allaire says:

What is surprising is that some still fail to see what Arnauld suspected. They fail, I think, because they are bewildered. They cannot understand how Descartes could have committed such a blunder, nor how, if he had, he could have failed to see it once Arnauld pointed it out. 40

Though Allaire explicitly refers to Willis Doney as one who cannot understand how Descartes could have reasoned in a circle, it is likely that he had Alan Gewirth in mind as well. In an article entitled "The Cartesian Circle," Gewirth, in commenting on the charge that Descartes reasons in a circle, says:

Surely it is impossible to believe that he could have committed so gross and obvious an error. 41

Oddly enough, Gewirth goes so far as to maintain that Descartes, at certain points, even brings the cogito in to question.

Descartes has thus shown that the radical "metaphysical" doubt applies to the cogito, to such an "eternal" truth as that "what has once been done cannot be undone," to all perceptions, regardless of how clear and distinct or psychologically convincing they may be. 42

But he insists that Descartes can be acquitted of the charge of having reasoned in a circle. Let us take a brief look at Gewirth's proposed escape route. As we shall see, even the most
ingenius invention cannot extricate Descartes from circular reasoning.

At the beginning of the Third Meditation, as we have seen, Descartes points out that even though he has not yet satisfied himself that there is a God who is no deceiver, whenever he clearly and distinctly perceives certain simple mathematical, geometrical, and metaphysical propositions, he is spontaneously persuaded to affirm that they are true. In the Fifth Meditation he puts this point as follows:

I am of such a nature that so long as I very clearly and distinctly perceive something I cannot refrain from believing it to be true.43

But even though Descartes affirms the truth of (6), he recognizes that it does not entail (7). This latter recognition manifests itself as Descartes' belief that so long as he remains ignorant of God's veracity he cannot be sure that he is not mistaken even about that which he believes himself to perceive with perfect clarity and distinctness. On the one hand then, for the duration of any period in which he clearly and distinctly perceives certain propositions, he is psychologically compelled to affirm them as truths. On the other hand, in some cases, when he does not clearly and distinctly perceive any such proposition, he finds that he can entertain a very slight and metaphysical doubt about the truth of his clear and distinct perceptions. Even so, he contends that there is only one consideration that can be construed as a reason sufficient to warrant metaphysical doubt about the truth
of clear and distinct perceptions. He says:

Certainly if I judged that since such matters could be doubted this would not have been so for any other reason than that it came into my mind that perhaps a God might have endowed me with such a nature that I may have been deceived even concerning things which seemed to me most manifest. 44

Metaphysical doubt, in other words, is justified by no other hypothesis than that there is an omnipotent being who is grossly imperfect and disposed to deceive. If such an hypothesis can be shown to be irrational, then it will have been shown that metaphysical doubt is irrational. The question then, is whether or not it is possible to establish the irrationality of the evil genius hypothesis. Gewirth not only thinks that this is possible, he thinks that Descartes shows that it is. Moreover, on these grounds he thinks that Descartes can be acquitted of the charge of having reasoned in a circle when he purports to establish that his clear and distinct perceptions are true. Let us take a closer look at the details of Gewirth's case.

Gewirth correctly points out that metaphysical doubt, as Descartes conceives it, should not be a frivolous or ungrounded doubt. Rather, the doubt by which Descartes purports to test the truth of all that he formerly accepted as most certain and evident is a doubt which requires grounds that are both reasonable and persuasive. In this regard he says:

...the mind, conscious of the nature of its own internal rationality, can therefore indicate that if that rationality is subjected to any attack which the mind may apprehend or perceive, that attack must itself imply or exhibit that very rationality. 45
As we have seen, the ground upon which Descartes rests his metaphorical doubt that clear and distinct perceptions are true, is the hypothesis that there exists a deceptive God who causes him to err even about that which he believes is most evident. Gewirth maintains that Descartes' only reason for accepting this hypothesis is that for all he knows it might be clear and distinct:

...however paradoxical it may appear, the rationality and cogency of the "reason" on which the doubt is based can consist only in its purported clearness and distinctness. This does not mean that the reason of the doubt is in fact clear and distinct (the refutation of it will consist in showing that it is not), but simply that its cogency and ability to function in the argument derive to it from the fact that it is thought to be at least possibly possessed of these qualities.46

In other words, prior to clearly and distinctly perceiving that

(3) God is no deceiver,

Gewirth thinks that Descartes has some reason to suppose that

(8) God is a deceiver

is clear and distinct, and hence some reason to suppose that it is true. But he argues that once Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives (3), he no longer has any reason to suppose that (8) is clear and distinct, and therefore no reason for treating (8) as though it were true. Finally, Gewirth claims that if Descartes has no reason for thinking that (8) is true, he may conclude that all clear and distinct perceptions are true without being the question.

Now Gewirth maintains that the notion of clarity and distinctness can be explained in terms of the notions of consistency
and coherence. In "The Cartesian Circle" he contends:

...clearness and distinctness, as logical qualities, mean complete consistency or coherence within and among ideas.\(^47\)

And in "The Cartesian Circle Reconsidered" he says:

Clarity and distinctness are internal qualities, in that they characterize perceptive acts and ideas in relation to one another. To put it briefly, an idea and a perceptive act are clear and distinct when the mind in perceiving the idea is aware of the idea's contents and relations. Truth, on the other hand, is an external quality, since it consists in a relation of "conformity" between an idea or thought and an extra-ideational thing or object. From this it follows not only that clearness and distinctness are not the same as truth but also that the mind can ascertain whether its perceptions are clear and distinct without ascertaining whether they are true.\(^48\)

Given this understanding of clarity and distinctness, Gewirth contends that even though Descartes could not be sure that his clear and distinct ideas "conform to" or are "similar to" any nonmental entity, he could at least be sure that those perceptions are internally consistent and coherent, i.e. that they are clear and distinct. He then implies that Descartes did indeed clearly and distinctly perceive (3):

Not until the doubt has been proved to be irrational, then, is metaphysical certainty possible. But this proof is ipso facto the clear and distinct perception of the conclusion that God exists and is veracious.\(^49\)

And he contends that the clear and distinct perception of (3) is sufficient to show that (8) cannot be clearly and distinctly perceived:

The whole purpose of Descartes' metaphysical argument is to attain a clear and distinct perception of such a content as directly contradicts, and hence refutes in its own terms, the hypothesis on which the doubt is based.\(^50\)
Here Gewirth assumes that if one of the conjuncts of a contradiction is clearly and distinctly perceived the other cannot be so perceived. In other words, he thinks that since (8) contradicts (3), and since (3), according to Gewirth, is clearly and distinctly perceived by Descartes, Descartes is entitled to conclude that (8) cannot be clearly and distinctly perceived. Finally, since Gewirth thinks that the possibility that (8) is clear and distinct is Descartes' only reason for treating it as though it were true, he concludes that by clearly and distinctly perceiving (3) Descartes successfully removes his only ground for metaphysical doubt about the truth of clear and distinct perceptions, that he is therefore entitled to conclude that all clear and distinct perceptions are true, and that such a conclusion does not beg the question. But there are at least two criticisms that can be raised against Gewirth's attempt to exculpate Descartes from the charge of having reasoned in a circle.

First, we have already considered Descartes' claim that anyone who is ignorant of God's existence must confess ignorance about the author or cause of his own existence. Descartes further claims that if someone is ignorant of his own origin, then for all he knows there is an omnipotent and imperfect being who has created him in such a fashion that he is always deceived even about that which he clearly and distinctly perceives. In other words, Descartes contends that

(a) I am ignorant of God's existence
is a reason sufficient to motivate the metaphysical supposition
that

(b) There is an omnipotent deceiver.
On the one hand then, Gewirth is correct in holding that Descartes
requires metaphysical doubt to be a doubt which has grounds. On
the other hand, he is mistaken in thinking that Descartes' reason
for supposing that there is an omnipotent deceiver is that such
an hypothesis is possibly clear and distinct. For all Descartes
knows, such an hypothesis just might be clear and distinct, but
the possibility that it is is not the reason which motivates that
hypothesis; rather, the hypothesis is motivated by Descartes'
confessed ignorance concerning God's existence and veracity.
Gewirth is correct in thinking that in order to show that (b)
is irrational Descartes needs to undermine the reason which motivates
him to suppose (b). But since that reason is Descartes' ignorance
of God's existence, Descartes can undermine it only if he can
demonstrate that God exists. Yet he cannot demonstrate that so
long as there is a reason to doubt the truth of what he clearly
and distinctly perceives. And since he cannot be certain that
all clear and distinct perceptions are true unless he is sure that
God exists, Descartes cannot validate his criterion of truth
unless he reasons in a circle.

Secondly, even if Descartes' reason for supposing that
there is an omnipotent deceiver is that he grants that such an
hypothesis is possibly clear and distinct, and even if Descartes
can contradict that reason by showing that he clearly and distinctly perceives that God is no deceiver, it would not thereby follow that Descartes falsifies his original hypothesis. Gewirth, as we have seen, assumes that the conjuncts of a contradiction cannot both be clearly and distinctly perceived. And since he holds that Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives that God is no deceiver, he concludes that Descartes cannot clearly and distinctly perceive that God is a deceiver. But even if we grant that the evil genius hypothesis cannot be clearly and distinctly perceived, just because an idea is not clear and distinct it does not follow, according to Descartes, that it does not represent something real. For example, in the Third Meditation Descartes notes that his ideas of heat and cold are so far from being clear and distinct that he cannot confidently judge whether or not these ideas represent something that is real and positive. So even if the hypothesis that there is an omnipotent deceiver is not clearly and distinctly perceived, it does not follow that there is no such deceiver. Moreover, even if Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives that God is no deceiver, it doesn't follow that there is a God who is no deceiver. For how does Descartes know that the evil genius has not tricked him by causing him to perceive clearly and distinctly that God is no deceiver? It appears that he could not know such a thing. Hence, even if he could be sure that the proposition that God is no deceiver contradicts the proposition that God is a deceiver, and even if he could be sure
that he clearly and distinctly perceives the former proposition, he could not be sure that that proposition is true, nor that the latter proposition is false. Indeed, for all Descartes knows it is possible that both God and the evil deceiver exist, and also possible that neither exist. So it appears that Descartes cannot be exculpated from the charge of circularity in the way that Gewirth proposes. In fact, it is doubtful that he can be exculpated at all.

Finally, as the Paris theologians point out, since Descartes thinks he can be sure that his clear and distinct perceptions are true only if he knows that God exists, so long as he is ignorant of God's existence he cannot know that he is a thing that thinks. There are two important implications of this ignorance. On the one hand, since Descartes purports to rest his knowledge that God exists on his knowledge that he is a thing which thinks, Descartes' alleged demonstration that God exists must be circular. On the other hand, if Descartes cannot know that he is a thing that thinks unless he knows that God exists, then since he purports to know that he exists because he knows that he is thinking, it appears that he undermines the foundation for his alleged certainty that he himself exists. Eventually, we shall see that Descartes does indeed undermine that foundation since he thinks that so long as he is constrained by the suppositions of systematic doubt he cannot be sure that any of the ideas presented to him by sense and memory represent the physical world. I have
reserved for the fourth chapter the project of showing that if someone didn't trust his senses or his memory, he could not know who he was for any purpose, and in that case, he could not be sure that he is thinking. Before doing so however, we need to take a closer look at the arguments by which Descartes persuades himself that he exists.
Chapter II

FOOTNOTES


2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 167.


5 Descartes, op. cit., p. 140.

6 Ibid., p. 27.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 7.

9 Ibid., p. 33.

10 Ibid., p. 8

11 Ibid., pp. 16, 17, and 41.

12 Ibid., p. 27.

13 Ibid., pp. 7, 20, and 40.

14 Ibid., p. 20.

15 Ibid., pp. 33 and 35. 61
16. Ibid., p. 41.
17. Ibid., p. 7.
18. Ibid., p. 140.
21. Ibid., p. 188.
22. Ibid., p. 145.
23. Ibid., p. 189.
24. Ibid., p. 146.
25. Ibid., p. 147.
27. Ibid., p. 149.
28. Ibid., p. 158.
29. Ibid., p. 159.
30. Ibid.
31. Descartes, op. cit., p. 41.
32. Ibid., p. 92.
34. Ibid., p. 38.
35. Descartes, op. cit., p. 159.
36 Ibid., p. 183.

37 Ibid., p. 19.

38 Ibid., p. 184.

39 Ibid., p. 185.


42 Ibid., p. 385.

43 Descartes, op. cit., I, p. 183.

44 Ibid., p. 158.

45 Gewirth, op. cit., p. 393.

46 Ibid., p. 391.


49 Gewirth, op. cit., p. 394.

50 Ibid., p. 393.
Chapter III

DESCARTES' COGITO CERTAINTY

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the Second Meditation Descartes raises one of the central questions of the Meditations:

Am I so dependent on body and senses that I cannot exist without these?¹

In answering this question he not only affirms that it would be possible for someone to exist without his body, he maintains that even if someone doubts that he has a body he can nevertheless be absolutely certain that he exists. This certainty, Descartes contends, is the first certainty to occur to anyone who conducts an orderly inquiry of his beliefs. In the present chapter I shall investigate the reasons which Descartes thinks entitle him to this certainty by considering three interpretations of it.

In an article entitled "The Certainty of the Cogito," Bernard Williams maintains that Descartes infers that he exists from his certainty that he is thinking, and he argues that the principle which governs that inference is a principle of presupposition. In the fifth section of the present chapter I consider some of the details of Williams' remarks about the nature of presupposition, and I discuss his claim that the inference from "I think" to "I exist" is valid since the former presupposes
the latter. These considerations give rise in section six of the present chapter to a discussion of some of the problems that are dealt with by Steven Boër and William Lycan in an article entitled "Knowing Who." Boër and Lycan argue that whenever someone knows who someone is his knowledge can always be specified in terms of the purposes that it enables him to accomplish. By making such specifications explicit it is possible to avoid some of the confusions that sometimes attend "knowing who" claims. Boër and Lycan also argue that if someone knows who a particular person is he thereby knows that that person exists. I attempt to clarify this proposal by showing that if someone's knowing who someone is can be specified in terms of a certain purpose, his knowing that that person exists can be specified in those terms as well. I then argue that Descartes' first certainty can be specified in terms of one of his central purposes in the Meditations—viz. establishing that God exists.

In an article entitled "Cogito ergo sum: Inference or Performance" Jaakko Hintikka maintains that Descartes' inference of Sum from Cogito is invalid. But he submits that another interpretation of Descartes' first certainty is embedded in the Second Meditation. Hintikka argues that if anyone ever asserts "I exist" his assertion is self-verifying, and he maintains that Descartes recognized that his own assertion of Ego existo was self-verifying. In the fourth section of this chapter I show that Hintikka's performative interpretation of Descartes' first
certainty is superfluous to a correct understanding of it.

Unlike Hintikka, A.J. Ayer in The Problem of Knowledge allows that Descartes' inference of Sum from Cogito is a valid one. But he argues that there was no need for Descartes to derive Sum from Cogito since he thinks that the certainty of the former can be independently established in the same way that the certainty of the latter can be established. Ayer points out that no one could deceive anyone by getting him to believe that he thinks or that he exists, and on these grounds, he argues that no one could reasonably doubt "I think" or "I exist." As we shall see Ayer's argument is fallacious. Let us now turn to a discussion of these matters.

2. Ayer's analysis of "I think, therefore I am"

Ayer rightly acknowledges Descartes' effort to put knowledge on a foundation that would be impregnable to doubt. He notes that Descartes, in searching for that foundation, allows that a demon might "...so work upon his reason that he took false statements to be self-evident truths." He treats this hypothesis as a picturesque way of stating the claim that intuitive conviction is not a logical guarantee of truth, and he says that it motivates the question whether:

...of all the propositions we think we know, there can be any that escape the demon's reach.

Ayer answers this question by denying that the demon could deceive him by getting him to believe that he thinks and that he exists
when he does not. His ground for denying this is that if anyone believes that he thinks or that he exists his belief must be true.

Like Hintikka, who holds that the sentences "I am" and 'I exist' are not logical truths Ayer contends:

...neither 'I think' nor 'I exist' is a truth of logic. 5

He maintains that "I think" and "I exist" are not necessarily true for the reason that anyone who says them might not have been thinking and might not have existed:

I am now thinking but I might easily not have been.
And the same applies to the statement that I exist.
It would be absurd for me to deny that I existed.
If I say that I do not exist, it must be false.
But it might not have been false. It is a fact that I exist, but not a necessary fact. 6

Unfortunately, Ayer fails to point out the significance of establishing that "I think" and "I exist" are contingent. He does not think that contingent propositions can be doubted in a way that necessary ones cannot:

It is not as if a statement by being necessary becomes incapable of being doubted. Every school boy knows that it is possible to be unsure about a mathematical truth.

And he holds that:

...even if they "I think" and "I exist" were truths of logic they would not for that reason be indubitable. 8

So the logic status of "I think" and "I exist"—namely, whether or not they are contingent or necessary—is, after all, deemed by Ayer to be irrelevant to the claim that it would be possible to doubt them. What then, according to Ayer, is the reason why no one
could reasonably doubt "I think" and "I exist"? Let us consider what he says about "I think."

Ayer contends:

...if I believe that I am thinking, then I must believe truely, since my believing that I am thinking is itself a process of thought. Consequently, [my underline] if I am thinking, it is indubitable that I am thinking. . .

On the one hand then, Ayer claims:

(a) If I believe that I am thinking, my belief is true.

On the other hand, he maintains that from (a) it follows that:

(b) It is indubitable that I am thinking.

In defense of (a), it appears that if any proposition is substituted for p in

(1) I believe that p

then if the result is true,

(2) I am thinking

is also true. Given that the truth of the result of substituting a proposition for p in (1) is sufficient for the truth of (1), then if (2) is substituted for p in (1), and the result is true, (2) is also true. For this reason it appears that no one could deceive anyone who is not thinking by getting him to believe that he is. For if believing something is an instance of thinking it, then if I believe that I am thinking my belief that I am must be true.

To this claim it can be objected that someone can believe something even though he is not thinking. For example, if 'believe' in (1) is interpreted dispositionally, then I may be said to believe
certain propositions even when I am sleeping. And since someone who is sleeping is not also thinking, it follows that I can believe something, e.g. that I am thinking, even though I am not thinking. Hence, even if (a) implies (b), since (a) is false it does not guarantee that (b) is true.

Ayer might respond to the above criticism by claiming that his remarks are couched in terms of the episodic sense of 'belief', not in terms of the dispositional sense. For Ayer construes believing something as an activity. But then, what would count as an episode of belief? Perhaps we could say that particular assertions count as episodes of belief. Unfortunately, it is not clear that whenever someone asserts something he thinks it. But we could say that whenever someone says something to himself he thinks it. We could then hold that whenever someone says "I am thinking" to himself he thinks that he is thinking, and in that case, of course, what he thinks must be true. This same conclusion also holds for "I exist." Unlike "I think" however, "I exist" is true whether or not someone says it to himself or to someone else. But why is it, according to Ayer, that someone who says "I exist" cannot doubt the truth of what he says?

Ayer maintains that anyone who says "I exist" cannot doubt the truth of what he says since the truth of what he says follows from his doubting it:

What makes them viz. "I think" and "I exist" indubitable is their satisfying a condition which Descartes himself does not make explicit, though his argument turns upon it. It is that their truth follows from their being
Now we may grant Ayer that no one who says "I exist" could doubt the truth of what he says. But we cannot grant him that the reason no one can doubt "I exist" is that its truth follows from its being doubted, since a doubt cannot entail a statement. To this it might be replied that what Ayer meant to say was that:

(3) I doubt that I exist

entails

(4) I exist.

But if this is what Ayer meant, he fails to explain how (4) can be validly derived from (3). As we shall see in section 5 of the present chapter, this lacuna is filled by Bernard Williams who argues that "I exist" follows from "I am thinking" since the former presupposes the latter. If Williams is right in thinking that there is a principle of presupposition which warrants the inference from "I am thinking" to "I exist," then that same principle would also warrant an inference from (3) to (4). But even if (4) is entailed by (3), it doesn't follow, as Ayer suggests, that (4) is indubitable. Moreover, even if the truth of (3) entails the truth of (4), as Ayer suggests, it doesn't follow that (4) is indubitable. Just because a proposition is true, in other words, it doesn't follow that it would be unreasonable to doubt it.
There are several other places where Ayer gets himself into difficulties similar to the ones just discussed. For example, at one point Ayer purports to show:

...that the certainty of one's own existence is not, as some philosophers have supposed, the outcome of some primary intuition, an intuition which would have the distinctive property of guaranteeing the truth of the statement on which it is directed.12

Now if any philosopher ever did suppose this it wouldn't be difficult to show why he shouldn't suppose it, but the reasons that he shouldn't suppose it are not the reasons that Ayer gives! Ayer says:

It is indeed the case that if anyone claims to know that he exists, or that he is conscious, he is bound to be right. But this is not because he is in some special state of mind which bestows this infallibility upon him. It is simply a consequence of the purely logical fact that if he is in any state whatsoever it follows that he exists. . .13

But suppose that someone claims:

(5) I know that I exist.

In that case his claim would be true. But the reason it would be true is not a consequence of the "purely logical fact" that if he makes a claim, or is in "any state whatever," it follows that he exists. Even if (5) entails (4), in other words, it doesn't follow that (5) is true. For even though the truth of (4) is a necessary condition of the truth of (5) it is not a sufficient condition of its truth. Ayer himself grasps this point when he admits that someone might not know that he exists. Perhaps this is why he shifts his ground when he sums up his alleged findings:
as we have seen, if anyone does claim to know that he exists or that he is conscious his claim must be valid, simply because its being valid is a condition of its being made.\textsuperscript{14}

Here, Ayer's point is that a necessary condition of someone's claiming (5) is that (5) is true. His point, as we shall see, is correct. But Ayer misleadingly implies that he has established it when he has in fact done no such thing.

What, then, is the reason that no one could justifiably doubt that he exists, and why would anyone's claim to know that he exists be bound to be right? The answers to these questions rest on three propositions for which I have not yet argued, and which will be established in due course.

First, in order for someone to know that he exists he needs to know who he is. This claim, it should be pointed out, is compatible with a claim that Descartes makes in reply to Caterus:

\[ \text{...according to the laws of the True logic, the question 'does a thing exist?' must never be asked unless we already understand what the thing is.}\textsuperscript{15} \]

As it stands, however, it needs to be slightly modified in order to avoid confusion. For consider a point made by Boër and Lycan in their article "Knowing Who."\textsuperscript{16} They point out that someone who was familiar with the Olympic achievements of Jean-Claude Killy, but who didn't know what Killy looked like, would know who Killy is for the purpose of placing him in the history of sport, but would not know who Killy is for the purpose of personally
introducing him to someone. Such cases, as well as other considerations, motivate Boër and Lycan to argue that if someone knows who a particular person is, his knowledge can always be specified in terms of the purposes that it enables him to accomplish. Following Boër and Lycan, let us say that in order for someone to know that he exists he needs to know who he himself is for some purpose.

Second, if one knows who a particular person is for some purpose, he thereby knows that that person exists. A version of this claim is forwarded by Hintikka in Knowledge and Belief, and the claim is argued for by Boër and Lycan in "Knowing Who." As it stands, however, this claim needs to be modified. For it appears that one could know, for example, who Sherlock Holmes is, but not know that he exists. This difficulty can be overcome, I submit, by letting the purpose parameter range over one's knowledge that a particular person exists as well as over one's knowledge of who that person is. For example, one might be said to know that Sherlock Holmes exists relative to the kind of purposes that knowledge of fictional characters would ordinarily enable one to accomplish—e.g. writing an essay about him; relative to other unrelated purposes however—e.g. introducing him to someone—one could not know that Holmes exists. In this light, let us say that if one knows who a particular person is for some purpose, he thereby knows for that same purpose that that person exists.

Finally, a necessary condition of a speaker's ability to consummate a reference to himself by employing the pronoun 'I' is that he know who he is for some purpose. In this regard, let us say that a reference to something is consummated when the object to which a
speaker intends to refer by using a linguistic expression is un-
ambiguously identified by the speaker's audience on the strength
of the speaker's use of that expression. I shall say a good deal
more about these three points in later sections of this dissertation.
For now, let us briefly consider their ramifications for:

(3) I doubt that I exist,
(4) I exist,
and
(5) I know that I exist.

Clearly, a speaker could claim to doubt that he exists by
uttering (3) only if he uses the pronoun 'I' in the standard way--
namely, to consummate a reference to himself. Moreover, a speaker
could use the pronoun 'I' in the standard way only if he knows who he
is for some purpose, he thereby knows for some purpose that he exists.
Hence, a speaker could claim to doubt that he exists (for every purpose)
by uttering (3) only if he knows that he exists for some purpose, and in
that case, his alleged doubt would be an absurd one. By the same token,
a speaker could claim that he exists by uttering (4), or claim to know
that he exists by uttering (5), only if he knows for some purpose that
he exists. In other words, if someone says either (4) or (5), he cannot
fail to know that what he says is true. I shall examine these points
more carefully in later sections of this dissertation.

Ayer's remarks indicate that he would bring the soundness
of the above argument into question by challenging one of the
implications of premise--namely, a speaker can use the pronoun 'I'
to consummate a reference to himself only if he knows who he is for
some purpose. The relevant implication of this premise is brought out by Boxer and Lycan who argue that if one knows who someone is for some purpose, one can describe that person. I shall discuss this claim in greater detail in chapter 4; for now, let us simply assume that it is so. What Ayer objects to is the claim that a speaker can use the pronoun *I* to consummate a reference to himself only if he can describe himself. He says:

> Even when it is not doing duty for a description, nor coupled with one, the demonstrative *I* may have a use.¹⁹

Let us examine Ayer's claim.

Ordinarily, a speaker's use of the pronoun *I* functions as a substitute for some description of him. Ayer's way of putting this is to say that the pronoun *I* "does duty" for a description of the speaker. Of course, sometimes the "duty" of the pronoun *I* is breached by the circumstances of its use. For example, if I write you a letter but you are unable to tell from what I've written who the letter is from, then even though I intend to identify myself in that letter by employing the pronoun *I*, I will have failed to consummate a reference to myself. But in most cases, an audience can hardly fail to know a description of the speaker—for example, when both the speaker and the audience are visibly present and are engaged in conversation with each other. But in what sorts of cases, if any, would the pronoun *I* have a legitimate use even though it is not doing duty for a description of the speaker?
Ayer asks us to imagine a case where someone who is recovering from a swoon says "I am conscious." In this kind of case he maintains that the speaker's use of 'I' is not doing duty for a description of the speaker. Rather, he says:

In the case which we envisaged, the case of a return to consciousness, it 'I' signals the presence of some experience or other. It does not, however, characterize this experience in any way.20

Now insofar as being conscious is a precondition of using any word at all, it would seem that one could just as easily signal the fact that one is conscious by saying something like "Wow!". "Pass the mustard," and so on. Presumably, by saying "Pass the mustard," one would characterize one's conscious experience as a desire for mustard. But by saying "Wow!" or "I am conscious," even though one signals the presence of some experience or other, one in no way characterizes that experience. In the case that Ayer envisages however, saying "I am conscious" presumably has a function that is different from that of merely saying something like "Wow!" And the difference, Ayer suggests, lies with the function of the pronoun 'I':

It 'I' merely points to the existence of whatever it is, in the given circumstances, that makes its own use possible.21

In other words, Ayer not only claims that saying "I am conscious" signals the presence of some conscious state, he claims that in saying this the pronoun 'I' is used by the speaker to point to, or identify, that conscious state which makes his use of the pronoun 'I' possible. To the latter claim, however, it could be objected
along Strawsonian lines that one can identify a particular conscious
state only if he can identify the person who is in that state. And
since one could identify a particular person only if one can
describe him, Ayer appears to be mistaken. If Strawson is correct,
in other words, Ayer is mistaken in thinking that there is a mere
pointing use of the pronoun 'I', i.e. a use which is not doing
duty for a description of the speaker, but which nevertheless points
to that conscious state of the speaker which makes it possible
for him to use 'I' in the way that Ayer suggests. In chapter
4, I shall argue that Strawson is indeed correct about the above
matter. Let us now turn to Hintikka's analysis of Descartes'
Cogito certainty.

3. Existential Inconsistency

In "Cogito ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?" Jaakko
Hintikka maintains that Descartes' formulations of the Cogito cer-
tainly in the Meditations and elsewhere suggest:

. . .that his result may be expressed by saying that
it was impossible for him to deny his existence.22

But to express Descartes' result like this is somewhat misleading.
For it seems that anyone could deny that he exists if he wanted to.
Indeed, Hintikka is willing enough to admit that anyone who
wanted to could say that he didn't exist. But Hintikka is con-
cerned to show that anyone's denial that he exists must be point-
less since no one could mislead anyone by saying "I don't exist."
Hintikka notes that one aspect of Descartes' skeptical
doubts in Meditation One is

... an attempt to think the contrary of what we
usually believe.23

Surely, it cannot be denied that this is an aspect of methodic
doubt. For example, in Meditation One, and in reply to Bourdin,
Descartes suggests that the procedure of denying what one formerly
accepted as true and certain is psychologically useful; it enables
one, Descartes contends, to clear one's mind of former prejudices:

... when I, in Meditation I, said that I sometimes
tried to convince myself of the opposite of the belief
that I had formerly rashly held, I immediately added
that I wished to do so in order to balance the weight
of my prejudices equally on both sides and not be
inclined towards one rather than the other.24

Despite Descartes' remarks, however, the procedure is apparently
not limited to its psychological utility. Hintikka maintains that
an important truth emerges from the attempt to convince oneself
that one doesn't exist; that is, it is logically impossible to
do so. If I tell myself, or anyone at all, that I don't exist,
the attempt, according to Hintikka, is necessarily self-defeating.

Hintikka further submits:

The reason why Descartes could not doubt his own
existence is in principle the same as the reason
why he could not hope to mislead anyone by saying
"I don't exist."25

In the present section I shall attempt to clarify Hintikka's
reasons for thinking that no one could mislead anyone by saying
"I don't exist." These reasons, as we shall see, are related
to but do not constitute the reason why no one can doubt that he exists.
Hintikka maintains that if anyone every asserted "I don't exist" his assertion would be existentially inconsistent. He defines the notion of existential inconsistency as follows:

\[ \text{let } P \text{ be a sentence and } a \text{ a singular term (e.g. a name, a pronoun, or a definite description). We shall say that } P \text{ is existentially inconsistent for the person referred to by } a \text{ to utter if and only if the longer sentence (2) } "P; and } a \text{ exists" is inconsistent in the ordinary sense of the word.} \]

He then submits that:

\[ \text{the notion of existential inconsistency really formulates a general reason why certain statements are impossible to defend although the sentences by means of which they are made may be consistent and intelligible.} \]

He further points out that an existentially inconsistent statement is impossible to defend if the utterance (with fact-stating intent) of the sentence by means of which that statement is made destroys the speaker's purpose in uttering that sentence. In this regard he maintains:

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 what are the conditions under which a speaker in issuing an existentially inconsistent statement thereby destroys the purpose of his statement? What general features of a speech situation make it impossible for a speaker to convince a listener that he (the speaker) doesn't exist?

Suppose that I assert "Alt doesn't exist" to some listener, George Bush; let's say. If Bush doesn't know that I am Alt, then
even though what I say is existentially inconsistent, he might be mislead by it. For if he believes that I am someone other than the person that I claim does not exist, it is not impossible for him to believes what I say. But suppose Bush knows that I am Alt. In that case, if he also knows that I refer to myself when I assert "Alt doesn't exist," it would be impossible for me to mislead him by what I say. For if Bush knows that I am Alt, and that I refer to myself when I say "Alt doesn't exist," he knows that the speaker and the person the speaker claims doesn't exist are one and the same. In other words, if Bush understands what I say when I say that Alt doesn't exist, he can't be mislead by what I say if he knows who I am. By the same token, Descartes' 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.29

Clearly, if a listener knows who is speaking to him, he can't doubt that that person exists. Hence, in any case where a listener knows that the speaker and the person the speaker claims doesn't exist are one and the same, the speaker's attempt to convince his listener that he doesn't exist is bound to be pointless.

Although the notion of existential inconsistency is primarily applicable to statements (declarative utterances) Hintikka allows that it may be defined for a given sentence by relativizing the notion to the referent of some singular term occurring therein. For example, the sentence 'Alt doesn't exist'
may be said to be existentially inconsistent for the person
referred to by 'Alt' to utter. In a limiting case however, i.e.
the sentence 'I don't exist', the notion of existential inconsistency
may be said to apply to the sentence simpliciter. This is so,
Hintikka maintains, since the statement:

'I don't exist' is inconsistent for whoever happens
to be speaking to utter

is a tautology. The existential inconsistency of the sentence
'I don't exist', in other words, need not be relativized to any
particular person since the pronoun 'I' refers to whoever happens
to use it to make an assertion.

Now suppose that I assert "I don't exist" to Bush. Unlike
the case where I assert "Alt doesn't exist" to him, in this case
he need not know that I am Alt in order to know that what I say
is false. Indeed, Bush might mistake me for someone other than
who I am. Yet even if he did, if I tell him that I don't exist, it
is impossible for him to mislead by what I say. What accounts
for this impossibility?

On the one hand, if Bush doesn't know that the pronoun
'I' refers to whoever uses it to make an assertion, if he doesn't
know English for example, he obviously wouldn't understand what I
say if I ever tell him that I don't exist. Clearly, in such a
case he couldn't be mislead by what I say. On the other hand,
if Bush "...appreciate[s] the logic of the first-person pronoun
'I'" then even if he doesn't know
(a) to whom that pronoun refers on a given occasion
that a speaker uses it to assert something
he cannot fail to know that
(b) the pronoun 'I' refers to whoever happens to be
speaking.

Given (b), it might be said that there is a limited sense in which
a listener will always know to whom a speaker refers whenever the
latter uses the pronoun 'I'; that is, he knows that the speaker's
reference and the speaker are one and the same. For this reason,
if Bush understands what I say when I say "I don't exist" to him,
then even if he doesn't know my name, anything about my history,
and so on, he cannot fail to know that what I have said is false.
So Hintikka is correct in thinking that a speaker cannot mislead
his audience by asserting "I don't exist." Moreover, he correctly
identifies the reason that this is so—viz. anyone who understands
what a speaker says if he says "I don't exist" knows that the
speaker refers to himself. But is this also the reason, as
Hintikka suggests, why no one can doubt that he exists?

Hintikka distinguishes between what he calls a "public"
speech-act and a "private" thought-act. In the former case,
the speaker and the audience are distinct individuals. If the
possibility of telepathy is ruled out, then in order for a speaker
to convince his audience of anything, the speaker has to do
something that the audience can either hear, see, or feel. In the
latter case however, the speaker and the audience are one and the
same person. Unlike the former case, in order for a person to
talk to himself he need not issue himself any publically observable
signs. Even so, Hintikka submits that both sorts of conversational situations are governed by the same logic; in particular, he maintains that the logic which governs the pronoun 'I' is the same in each case. That is, in either case if a speaker employs the pronoun 'I' in order to assert something, then if his audience knows how that pronoun functions, he also knows that the speaker's reference and the speaker are one and the same individual. For that reason, Hintikka maintains, no one could convince himself that he doesn't exist by asserting "I don't exist" to himself. Moreover, he contends that this explains why no one can doubt that he exists. Finally, he submits that this explanation counts as a plausible interpretation of Descartes' cogito certainty; he says:

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.30

In general it can be objected that the parallels between public speech situations and thought are not as clear cut as Hintikka would have us believe. I shall ignore most of these incongruities however, and focus instead on a public speech situation which has no analogue in thought. As we shall see this case shows that as a result of centering his explanation around the audience—in thought, the thinker listening to himself—rather than around the speaker—in thought, the thinker addressing himself—Hintikka incorrectly formulates the reason why no one can doubt that he exists. The reason that no one can doubt that
he exists is not, as Hintikka thinks, that someone who says "I don't exist" to himself knows that his use of the pronoun 'I' refers to whoever uses it to make an assertion; rather, the reason is that a speaker's ability to use the pronoun 'I' presupposes that he knows who he himself is. Let us examine these points more carefully.

As I have already noted in a public speech situation the audience need not know who the speaker is in order to know that the speaker asserts a falsehood if he ever asserts "I don't exist." For even if the audience doesn't know who the speaker is, if he understands the speaker's assertion, he knows that whoever the speaker is he has secured a reference to himself. But it is this very case which has no analogue in thought since a thinker can employ the pronoun 'I' to consummate a reference to himself only if he knows who he himself is. In other words, there is no case where a thinker, no knowing who he himself is, nevertheless asserts "I don't exist" to himself, and then in his role as audience understands, because he appreciates the logic of 'I', that the speaker's reference and the speaker are the same individual. There is no such case because no one, whether in public speech or private thought, can employ the pronoun 'I' to consummate a reference to himself unless he knows who he himself is. For this reason, a speaker's inability to doubt that he exists is not contingent, as Hintikka thinks, upon his asserting "I don't exist" to himself. Rather, if a speaker can use the pronoun 'I'
to make any assertion at all, he can be said to know who he himself is. And since someone who knows who he is also knows that he exists, he cannot doubt that he exists. Finally, since no one can doubt that he exists, it would be pointless for someone to try to persuade himself that he doesn't.

So Hintikka is correct in noting that it would be pointless for someone to try to persuade himself that he doesn't exist, but this is not the reason that no one can doubt that he exists. Rather, it would be pointless for someone to try to persuade himself that he doesn't exist because no one can doubt that he exists. Hintikka fails to see this because he fails to see that a speaker's ability to use the pronoun 'I' to assert "I don't exist" presupposes that the speaker knows who he himself is. That is, if someone doesn't know who he is, he can't use the pronoun 'I' to consummate a reference to himself. But if he does know who he is he also knows that he exists, and hence he can't doubt that he exists. In other words, if a speaker can use the pronoun 'I', it would be pointless for him to assert "I don't exist" since his ability to do that presupposes that he knows who he himself is. Hintikka's so-called performative interpretation of Descartes' cogito certainty masks this point. Once it has been unveiled however, it is not difficult to see how Hintikka's essay is superfluous to a correct understanding of Descartes' alleged first certainty.
4. **Existential Self-Verifiability**

In the previous section I tried to clarify the reasons why no one could say that he doesn't exist and thereby persuade a listener to believe what he says. In the case of the first-person assertion, "I don't exist," the assertion is bound to misfire since anyone who understood it would know that the speaker and the person the speaker claims doesn't exist are one and the same. This knowledge on the part of a listener is guaranteed by his appreciation for the logic of the first-person singular pronoun.

That is, if you know that anyone who uses the pronoun 'I' to make an assertion thereby refers to himself, then if anyone says "I don't exist" to you and you understand what he says, you know that he refers to himself, and for that reason, you know that what he says is false.

The simplest examples of the negation of the existentially inconsistent sentence 'I don't exist' are the sentences 'I am' and 'I exist'. The former sentence has more than one use. If you were to ask me, for example, "Who do you know that's working on the Cogito certainty?" it would be perfectly appropriate for me to answer you by saying "I am." Moreover, it appears that 'I am' could also be used to assert that I exist—for example, by saying "I am." Unlike 'I am' the sentence 'I exist' appears to have only one use—viz. someone could use it to assert that he exists. Since there is no duality of usage with 'I exist', since at present we are interested in first-person existence assertions
rather than answers to who-questions, and since Hintikka intends his remarks about 'I am' to apply as well to 'I exist', let us confine attention to the sentence 'I exist'.

Hintikka contends that what is at stake in Descartes' *Cogito* dictum, in English--"I think, therefore I exist"--is the indubitability of the sentence 'I exist'. But the reason that 'I exist' is indubitable is not because it is logically true. On this point both Ayer and Hintikka agree. Ayer says:

...neither 'I think' nor 'I exist' is a truth of logic.

And Hintikka maintains:

...the sentence "I am" ("I exist") is not itself logically true, either.

In arguing that when Descartes asserted "Ego sum, ego existe" his assertion was self-verifying, Hintikka holds that the sentence 'I think' in the English translation of the *Cogito* dictum:

...serves to express the performatory character of Descartes' insight; it refers to the "performance" (to the act of thinking) through which the sentence "I exist" may be said to verify itself.

The "performance" Hintikka has in mind is a two-fold one. On the one hand, there is a self-defeating attempt to convince oneself of one's own nonexistence:

...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.

On the other hand, there is a self-verifying attempt to convince
oneself of one's own existence:

In the same way as existentially inconsistent sentences e.g. the sentence 'I don't exist' defeat themselves when they are uttered...their negations verify themselves when they are expressly uttered...Such sentences may therefore be called existentially self-verifying.35

Now we have seen that the assertion "I don't exist" defeats itself since it is (i) existentially inconsistent, and since (ii) no one who understood it could be misled by it. We may therefore assume that the assertion, "I exist," verifies itself since it is (iii) existentially consistent, and since (iv) no one who understood it could fail to be convinced of its truth. In the previous section I showed that both (i) and (ii) follow from the logic of the pronoun 'I'. In the present section I show how (iii) and (iv) follow from the logic of the pronoun 'I'. I shall also argue that the existential self-verifiability of the assertion, "I exist," is irrelevant to anyone's knowing that he exists, and that Hintikka's performative assay of Descartes' Cogito certainty is superfluous to a correct understanding of Descartes' primary insight.

If I assert "I exist," how is the truth of what I say guaranteed by the logic of the pronoun 'I'? Since the pronoun 'I' refers to whoever uses it to make an assertion, I secure a reference to myself when I assert that I exist, and I thereby guarantee the truth of what I say. As Ayer has aptly noted in this regard, what makes anyone's use of the pronoun 'I' possible
is that the person to which it points, when it is used to make an assertion, exists. But Ayer also notes that if anyone ever asserts "I exist" his assertion conveys only minimal information:

But then if, in saying that I exist, I am not saying anything about a description's being satisfied, what can I be saying? Again it is tempting to answer that I am saying nothing.36

Ayer resists his temptation, but concludes that anyone who asserts "I exist" has nothing to say beyond what is implied by the fact that he has referred to himself. In other words, if anyone ever asserts "I exist" then even though his assertion is true, it bears a close resemblance to a tautology. This point bears on (iv), and hence requires further explanation.

If anyone asserts "I exist" why is it that no one who understands that assertion can fail to be convinced of its truth? It will be recalled that in the previous section we considered the fact that the ability to understand first-person assertions presupposes an appreciation for the logic of the pronoun "I", viz. that it refers to whoever uses it to make an assertion. In other words, understanding what someone says if he says "I exist" to you, requires that you understand that he refers to himself when he uses the pronoun 'I' to assert "I exist."

For this reason understanding what is asserted when someone asserts "I exist" is sufficient for knowing that what has been asserted is true of whoever asserts it. But knowing that anyone's assertion of "I exist" is true of whoever asserts it is not sufficient
for knowing who asserted it.

Hintikka correctly notices that just as the celebrated Homeric question cannot be settled on paper neither can the question of one's own existence. What he fails to see is that the self-verifying character of anyone's assertion of 'I exist' has nothing to do with the certainty anyone can have about his own existence. For if you understand what I assert to you when I assert that I exist, then even if you don't know who I am, you cannot fail to know that what was asserted is true of whoever asserted it. Moreover, your appreciation for the grammatical function of the pronoun 'I' does not ensure that you know who said "I exist" and consequently that you know of whom the statement made on that occasion is true. Though Alt asserts "I exist" to Jaakko, Jaakko might mistakently believe that someone other than Alt, Lycan for example, has asserted it. Yet even though he does not know who asserts "I exist" Jaakko cannot be mistaken in thinking that what is asserted is true of whoever asserts it. Moreover, the logic of the situation is not altered when the person who asserts "I exist" is identical with the person to whom the assertion is being made. If I tell myself that I exist, in other words, I cannot doubt that what I assert is true of whoever asserts it. But unless I know that it is I who assert "I exist," then for all I know what I have asserted is true of someone other than myself.

As a matter of fact, if anyone ever does assert "I exist" his asserting it is indeed sufficient for his knowing that he exists
since anyone who asserts "I exist" will also know that he is the one who asserts it. But if I know that it is I who asserts "I exist," I know it, not because I understand how the pronoun 'I' functions, but because I know that it is I who assert whatever I assert whenever I assert it. And even though it is sometimes possible to be mistaken about who is making a particular assertion when someone other than oneself is making it--e.g. a child watching a ventriloquist--it is inconceivable that that kind of mistake could be made in one's own case. Rather, a competent speaker of a natural language simply does not and need not ever ask himself who is saying what is being said whenever he says anything. It is for this reason that Hintikka's performative assay of the Cogito certainty is superfluous to a correct understanding of it.

The difficulty with Hintikka's performative assay of Descartes' Cogito certainty can be formulated as a dilemma. Either Descartes knew who asserted Sum in Meditation Two or he didn't. If he did not know who asserted Sum then even though he could not be mistaken in thinking that what was there asserted was true of whoever asserted it, for all he knew that assertion was true of the evil genius. On the other hand, if Descartes did know who asserted Sum in Meditation Two, then the certainty he had about his own existence was not contingent upon its being Sum that he asserted. For if I know that I myself am asserting whatever I assert whenever I assert it, then I may be said to know that I exist on these grounds alone; and in that case, the fact that I
assert "I exist" and that that assertion is self-verifying, is completely superfluous to my knowing that I exist. So either Hintikka's performative assay of Descartes' *Cogito* dictum fails to secure Descartes' first certainty, i.e. the impeccable certainty he had that he himself existed, or it is superfluous to a correct understanding of Descartes' first principle of metaphysics.

5. **Williams: Presupposition and the Cogito**

In an article entitled "The Certainty of the Cogito" Bernard Williams leaves unquestioned the assumption that in formulating the *cogito* proposition—viz. *Cogito, ergo sum*—Descartes was giving an argument. But Williams questions the legitimacy of Descartes' derivation of Sum from *Cogito*:

The truth that emerges from the *cogito* and that Descartes takes as the foundation stone of the entire system he constructs is, most assuredly, "I exist"; but can we say that there is a logical relation between this proposition and the indubitable proposition "I think" such that Descartes, having reached the point where doubt can go no further, can, in formulating the latter, legitimately infer the former? 38

He maintains that

. . . Descartes quite unequivocally places the general principle of the *cogito* in the class of maxims or common notions—of eternal truths that we can know a priori to be true and that give us no knowledge of what exists nor indeed presuppose that something exists. 39

As evidence for this claim he cites a passage from the *Principles*:

When we say that it is impossible for the same thing at the same time to be and not to be, that what has been done cannot be undone, that he who thinks cannot fail to be or exist while he thinks, and numerous other things of this sort, these are eternal truths and
But Williams denies that Descartes' inference of *Sum* from *Cogito* can be correctly formulated as an Aristotelian syllogism which makes explicit a suppressed major premise.

In English, the syllogistic interpretation of Descartes' inference can be formulated as follows:

1. Everything that thinks exists
2. I think
3. Ergo, I exist

The major difficulty with this interpretation is that it was not sanctioned by Descartes:

He who says, 'I think, hence I am, or exist', does not deduce existence from thought by a syllogism, but, by a simple act of mental vision, recognizes it as if it were a thing that is known per se. This is evident from the fact that if it were syllogistically deduced, the major premise, that everything that thinks is, or exists, would have to be known previously; but yet that has rather been learned from the experience of the individual—that unless he exists he cannot think.

Williams maintains that Descartes' reason for rejecting the syllogistic interpretation of the *Cogito* inference is that the major premise of this syllogism carries an existential presupposition. To be in a position to assert (i), and to allow it to function as the major premise in an Aristotelian syllogism, one would have to know that there exists at least one thinking thing. But, according to Descartes, that cannot be known until the conclusion of the *Cogito* proposition is known. Hence, Descartes could not allow (i) to function as the major premise in an Aristotelian syllogism; and for that reason, according to Williams, he disavows
the syllogistic interpretation of the cogito.

Williams further argues that there are other important objections to the claim that Descartes' inference from Cogito to Sum can be correctly formulated as an Aristotelian syllogism with (i) as a suppressed major premise, but he admits that Descartes would have been insensitive to these difficulties. He contends that there is something peculiar about (i), something which disqualifies it as a premise in a syllogism. In order to expose this peculiarity, Williams compares (i) with

(iv) Everything that eats breathes.

He maintains that this comparison shows that (iv) expresses a relation between properties but that (i) expresses no such relation. Yet if (i) does not express a relation between two properties, it cannot be correctly formulated as a categorical proposition, and for that reason, it cannot function as a premise in an Aristotelian syllogism.

Now if we say that qualities, e.g. intelligence, and characteristics, e.g. stinginess, constitute the properties of a things, then insofar as nothing can be a quality or a characteristic unless it is attributable to something, it follows that if anything is an attribute of something it is also one of that thing's properties. From the Fifth Meditation however, it is pretty clear that Descartes treats existence as an attribute. Indeed, Proposition I and Definition IX in his reply to the Paris theologians conclusively shows that Descartes makes the force of
the version of the Ontological proof that he presents as Proposition
I rest on treating existence as an attribute. So Descartes most
likely would have ignored the alleged difference that Williams
sees between (i) and (iv). Of course, Williams acknowledges this,
though he overstates the case a bit:

...there is no reason to assume here that Descartes
was aware of these difficulties. They all turn on
the idea that existence is not a predicate, and as
there is every indication that Descartes thought
the opposite, these difficulties would have had
no meaning for him.\(^4^2\)

Even so, he maintains that any interpretation of the cogito inference
which avoids treating 'exists' as a predicate is preferable to
one which does not. It seems to me that Williams is perfectly
correct about this, though I shall have more to say about the
matter in the concluding section of this chapter.

According to Williams, the move from "I think" to "I
exist" is valid, but not because "I think" in conjunction with
(i) entails "I exist." Rather, Williams holds that there is a
principle which validates the inference—viz. the principle of
presupposition. He further claims that the principle of presupposition
provides an interpretation of the cogito inference that is not only
plausible, it is Descartes' own understanding of that inference.
Williams explains the principle of presupposition as follows:

...when we are concerned with a proposition of the
form "f(a)," where f stands for the predicate and a for
a proper name, a pronoun, or a definite description
(leaving aside difficult cases), the proposition "f(a)"
characteristically presupposes that there exists
something corresponding to a. The relation of
presupposition appears to differ from that of implication in this way: if $p$ implies $q$ and $q$ is false, it follows that $p$ is also false, whereas if $p$ presupposes $q$ and $q$ is false, then $p$ is neither true nor false. Thus, if I say, "The man in the garden is singing," and there is no one in the garden, what I have said is neither true nor false--there is no subject of which the proposition can be right or wrong. If we are prepared to accept a relation of presupposition of this nature, it provides us with a kind of principle of inference; namely, if $p$ presupposes $q$ and $p$ is true, $q$ must also be true. For since "$p$ presupposes $q$ means "$q$ must be true for $p$ to be either true or false," it follows a fortiori that $q$ must be true for $p$ to be true; in other words, if $p$ is true, $q$ is also true. And this I take to be the principle of the cogito.43

Regarded as a principle of inference, Williams points out the following objection to the principle of presupposition. Any argument that is valid in virtue of this principle is such that its premise is known to be true or known to be false only if its conclusion is known to be true. In other words, the epistemic priority of an argument that is valid in virtue of the principle of presupposition is the reverse of the epistemic priority of most arguments. In a deductive system, for example, a proposition is not considered to be a theorem until it has been proved. In response to this criticism Williams grants that the presupposition interpretation of the cogito does indeed reverse the epistemic priority of its premise and its conclusion. But he denies that the principle of presupposition cannot therefore be usefully employed as a principle of inference, and hence, that it is not the principle of inference of the cogito. He points out, for example, that one couldn't know the truth of a statement of the form $p\&q$ if one
didn't know that p is true. Even so, he maintains that it is useful to have a principle of inference, the principle of detachment, that enables one to derive p from p&q. By the same token, he implies, it is useful to have a principle of inference that enables one to derive "I exist" from "I think" even though one who knows that the premise is true, knows it only if he knows the conclusion. Williams concludes:

I do not see that we should not also be justified in considering the relation of presupposition between "I think" and "I exist" as the basis of a principle of inference and hence of the cogito itself insofar as it is an inference—not, of course, in the sense of a syllogism with a suppressed major premise.

But there are other objections to the view that the principle of presupposition is the principle of inference of the cogito. For the principle of presupposition not only warrants the inference from "I think" to "I exist," it also warrants inferences from "I walk" to "I exist," from "I breathe" to "I exist," and in general, from any first-person singular proposition of the form "f(a)" to the proposition "I exist." Yet the generality of application of this principle appears to jar with what Descartes says. For example, to Gassendi, who objected that Descartes could have inferred that he existed from any of his actions since whatever acts also exists, Descartes replies:

When you say that I could have inferred the same conclusion from any of my other actions, you wander far from the truth, because there is none of my activities of which I am wholly certain (in the sense of having metaphysical certitude, which alone is here involved), save thinking alone. For example you have no right to make the inference: I walk, hence I
exist, except insofar as our awareness of walking is a thought; it is of this alone that the inference holds good, not of the motion of the body, which sometimes does not exist, as in dreams, when nevertheless I appear to walk. Hence from the fact that I think that I walk I can very well infer the existence of the mind which so thinks, but not that of the body which walks. So it is in all other cases. 45

In this passage Descartes seems to be committed to the position that the inference from "I walk" to "I exist" is illegitimate since "I walk" might be false. If this is Descartes' position however, it jars with the presupposition interpretation of the cogito since on that interpretation even if "I walk" is false one would nevertheless be entitled to conclude that "I exist" is true. But is this really Descartes' position?

In the passage in question Descartes is concerned with the activity of walking not with the proposition that he is engaged in such an activity. Since he thinks that he can doubt that he has a body, he can't be sure that he is engaged in any physical activity. Hence, even if he grants that whatever acts also exists, since he isn't sure that he is walking he can't conclude that he exists from the fact that he walks. On the other hand, Descartes maintains that whenever he thinks that he is walking, he is entitled to conclude that he exists since even though he isn't sure that his opinion is true, he is sure that he entertains it. Now suppose someone says "I walk" to himself, i.e. he thinks that he is walking. If he can be sure that he says something that is either true or false, by the principle of
presupposition, he is entitled to conclude that he exists. But it is not clear from the passage in question that the principle of presupposition is the principle by which Descartes infers that he exists from his thought that he is walking. There are other passages, however, which do seem to indicate that Descartes had this principle in mind when he infers that he exists.

In a letter to Reneri for Pollot Descartes says:

When someone says 'I am breathing, therefore I am' if he wants to prove he exists from the fact that there cannot be breathing without existence, he proves nothing, because he would have to prove first that it is true that he is breathing, which is impossible unless he has also proved that he exists.46

Since "I am breathing" presupposes the truth of "I exist," in other words, no one can be sure that he is breathing unless he is sure that he exists. In the same letter Descartes further remarks:

But if he wants to prove his existence from the feeling or opinion that he has that he is breathing, so that he judges that even if the opinion was untrue he could not have it if he did not exist, then his proof is sound. For in such a case the thought of breathing is present to our mind before the thought of our existing, and we cannot doubt that we have it while we have it. To say 'I am breathing, therefore I am', in this sense, is simply to say 'I am thinking, therefore I am'.47

Williams maintains that it would be a mistake to interpret this passage as follows:

... it is possible to doubt that I breathe but not possible to doubt that I think. But what I am looking for in doubting is something that I cannot doubt is true, and this is that I think. It is from
the certainty attained here that I infer that I exist.\footnote{48}

But then, how does Williams think the passage should be interpreted?

The passage shows that Descartes held that if someone opines that he breathes, then even if his opinion is false, he has no reason to doubt (cannot doubt) that he opines it. But Williams argues that the fact that someone's opinion that he breathes is sufficient for the truth of the proposition that he thinks is irrelevant to the derivation of the proposition that he exists. Rather, given the principle of presupposition, it is of little importance whether "I breathe," "I think," and so on, are true. For regardless of the truth value of these propositions each presupposes that "I exist" is true. In other words:

The important point is that he \text{[Descartes]} is able to assert that he breathe, and it is his rejection on this assertion that brings him to his conclusion.\footnote{49}

Of course, not just any assertion will do. For example, if Descartes made a third-person assertion the principle of presupposition would not entitle him to conclude that he exists. Rather, what is important is that Descartes was able to make first-person assertions. For even if Descartes were unable to satisfy himself about the truth of his first-person assertions, he would nevertheless have been entitled by the principle of presupposition to conclude that he exists. In other words, what is important is that Descartes was able to use the first-person singular pronoun to express his beliefs; in particular, he was
able to use it to say things to himself; and this is important since his ability to do so presupposes that he knows that he exists. Still, as it stands, this way of formulating the presupposition interpretation of Descartes' cogito inference is incomplete. What is needed is a way of specifying the existential proposition that is presupposed by Descartes' first-person assertions. Meeting this need, as we shall see, is no easy matter.

Williams notes that when first-person sentences of the form \( f(x) \) get used in the way that Descartes uses them—viz. in analyzing himself, what he believes, knows, and so on—those assertions tend:

\[
\ldots \text{to be used in a general and impersonal sense, and it is not of himself that a philosopher is for the most part thinking.} \]

No doubt Descartes does intend his reflections in the Meditations to have a generality of application since he sets himself up for the reader as a kind of model. The reader, in other words, is supposed to follow Descartes' course of reflection as closely as possible, but he is also supposed to try to apply to himself the alleged truths that Descartes, in the course of his inquiry, says apply to himself. This generality of application of Descartes' reflections in the Meditations can be formulated as follows:

If its true of me \([\text{Descartes}]\) its true of anyone. Hence, it would be a mistake to conclude that Descartes does not signify himself personally when he says such things as:

I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it.
Descartes is not referring to some ideal ambiguous personage here; rather, he is referring to himself. If Descartes' Meditations are "general and impersonal," they are only to the extent that Descartes thinks that the truths he there purports to unveil not only apply to himself, they apply to everyone.

Since Descartes thinks that the alleged truths he unveils in the Meditations apply to himself, let us consider, as Williams himself considers:

\[ \ldots \text{the point in these meditations at which we could say that the "I" in fact signified Descartes personally.} \]

Here, we must distinguish two points of view—viz. the point of view of the reader of the Meditations, and the point of view of its author. From the first point of view, since just about anyone who reads the Meditations has some idea who Descartes is, we may assume that the reader of the Meditations knows that Descartes signifies himself personally when he says things like, for example, *Ego existo*. But what are we, the readers, to say in regard to the second point of view, the point of view of Descartes? Williams says this:

\[ \ldots \text{the exact point at which doubt is turned back is the point at which language is emptied of all content.} \]

In other words, given the suppositions of systematic doubt, and hence that Descartes cannot be sure that he has a body, occupies a place in space, and so on, it appears that Descartes cannot identify himself by any description. But if, by engaging in systematic doubt, Descartes has eliminated the possibility of
describing himself he would not then be able to provide a
descriptive backing for the first-person singular pronoun, and
in that case, he wouldn't be able to use that pronoun to make
any first-person assertions. In short, if Descartes cannot
identify himself by any description, he wouldn't know who he
is for any purpose and hence that he thinks or that he exists.

Although Williams himself raises the above criticism, he
isn't completely sure that it applies to Descartes' assertion
that he is thinking. But in this regard he is mislead by Ayer
who thinks someone could assert "I am conscious" even if he
couldn't provide a descriptive backing for his use of the pronoun
'I'. As we saw, Ayer is unable to explain how the pronoun 'I'
would function if it isn't "doing duty for a description."
Williams is also unable to explain this, but unlike Ayer, he
rescues himself by drawing the line with "I exist":

But even if we were disposed to accept "I think"
in the case in which no satisfactory explanation of
what "I" stands for is possible, we might still be
in doubt about "I exist" or "I am" in the sense of
"I exist." For if the meaning of "exist" is to
be clear, we must be able to replace it ["I exist"] with
"There exists a..." which in turn has meaning only
if it is followed by a descriptive expression.

In a nutshell, the presupposition interpretation of
Descartes' cogito inference holds that the inference from "I
think" to "I exist" is valid since the truth of the latter is a
necessary condition of the truth of the former. It also requires
that the meaning of "I exist" be specifiable in terms of an identifying description of the person who uses the pronoun 'I' to assert "I exist." Both of these points are interdependent in a way that is expressed by the following proposition:

In order for someone to assert "I think" or "I exist," he needs to know who he himself is for some purpose. In other words, a necessary condition of a speaker's using the first-person singular pronoun 'I' to consummate a reference to himself is the speaker's ability to identify himself by issuing a description of himself.

Given the presupposition interpretation of the cogito, it appears that Descartes' first principle of philosophy rests on shaky ground. Williams puts the matter as follows:

...in itself the assertion "I exist" appears—if indeed it is only an appearance—to have no content unless we can fill the gap with a descriptive proposition as a substitute for "I." But Descartes in doubting has eliminated the possibility of giving any description at all of this kind.  

But Williams isn't exactly sure how Descartes' eliminates this possibility, and he suggests that we need to...

...apply ourselves to attaining a deeper understanding of the way in which the cogito does violence to the principle of presupposition in the use of "I."  

In chapter four I clarify the way in which Descartes' procedure in the Meditations violates the principle of presupposition. Among other things, I consider Strawson's argument in Individuals that unless it is in principle possible for a speaker who describes his state of mind to secure that description to an axis of spatio-temporal
direction—viz. a description of his "place" in the conversational situation—he could not then be sure that that description is true of him alone. Before branching into these difficult considerations however, we need to consider some other aspects of the presupposition interpretation of the cogito inference.

The presupposition interpretation of Descartes' cogito inference requires that Descartes was able to make first-person assertions to himself. The ability to do so, it was suggested, presupposes that the person who employs the first-person pronoun to make such an assertion knows who he himself is, and hence that he is able to describe himself. I further clarify this point in section 4 of chapter four. In order to do so a general clarification of the notion of knowing who someone is needs to be undertaken. For it is not always clear when it would be correct to say that someone knows who a particular person is. For example, if someone could not pick a particular person out on sight but did know some pertinent facts about his personal history, can he be said to know who that person is? If so, could someone also be said to know who a given fictional character, e.g. Sherlock Holmes, is? Finally, if it is correct to say that someone knows who Holmes is, would it also be correct to say that he also knows that Holmes exists? In the next section I argue for an affirmative answer to each of these questions, and in so doing, I provide a framework for a persuasive interpretation of Descartes' first principle that is consistent with his purposes in the Meditations.
God and the Cogito

In his reply to Caterus Descartes says:

...I have not only asked what is the cause of my being insofar as I am a thinking thing, but chiefly insofar as I perceive that there exists in me, among other thoughts, the idea of a being of the highest perfection. 57

In chapter two I noted that one important aspect of Cartesian analysis, which I there construed as self-analysis, is the discovery and clarification of the primary notions of metaphysics. One such notion, it will be recalled, is "the notion of what God is." This notion, according to Descartes, needs to be clarified since unless it clearly understood the existence of God cannot be established. Another way of putting this is the way that Descartes puts it to Caterus:

...according to the laws of true Logic, the question 'does a thing exist?' must never be asked unless we already understand what the thing is. ... 58

Now if the notion of what God is is supposed to be clarified through self-analysis, then since it is impossible for someone to engage in self-analysis unless he is certain that he himself exists, the clarification of the notion of what God is requires that one be certain that he himself exists. But since, according to Descartes, no one can ask whether he exists unless he knows what he is--or in this case, who he is--in order for someone to clarify the notion of what God is through self-analysis he needs to know who he himself is. In the last section we briefly considered Williams' claim that Descartes eliminates the possibility
of knowing who he is since, by engaging in systematic doubt, he eliminates the possibility of identifying himself by any description; I shall have more to say about this claim in the next chapter. For the remainder of the present chapter I shall consider whether or not it follows from the fact that a person knows who he himself is that he thereby knows that he exists.

In Knowledge and Belief Jaakko Hintikka maintains:

...if you know who does something, you ipso facto know that someone does it.59

If Hintikka is right about this, has he not provided a foundation for an interpretation of Descartes' Cogito certainty? For if knowing, for example, that you are thinking, is sufficient for knowing that you exist, then if Descartes knew that he was thinking he knew that someone was thinking. This interpretation isn't at odds with anything Descartes says, as far as I know; indeed, it is substantiated by a passage from the Discourse:

I noticed that while I was trying to think everything false, it must needs be that I who was thinking this was something.60

as well as by a passage from the Principles:

...we cannot in the same way conceive that we who doubt these things are not; for there is a contradiction in conceiving that what thinks does not at the same time as it thinks, exist.61

Perhaps Hintikka's claim counts as evidence that he abandoned his performative assay of the Cogito dictum, and reneged on his claim that the inference from 'a is thinking' to 'There is someone who is identical to a' is implicitly question begging.
Hintikka points out that systems of logic that warrant this inference warrant it only because:

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.\(^{52}\)

But such an assumption, he maintains, is really an extravagance:

Hamlet did think a great many things; does it follow that he existed?\(^{63}\)

Of course, whether or not Hintikka has reneged on this view is not really to the point. Rather, because he does appear to contradict himself about this matter, the issue at hand, viz. whether knowing who someone is is sufficient for knowing that he exists, is still open. In order to resolve this issue we need to look closer at what it is to know who someone is. To this end, it will be necessary to focus on some remarks made by Boër and Lycan in their article "Knowing Who".

Among other things, Boër and Lycan note that one cannot know who someone is simpliciter. Rather, in any case where one may be said to know who someone is, one's knowledge enables him to accomplish certain purposes or projects in terms of which that knowledge may be specified. So for example, if my knowledge of a particular person consists of my being able to cite the salient features of that person's physiognomy, then relative to the projects my knowledge enables me to complete--e.g. picking that person out in a police line up--I may be said to know who that person is. But even though my knowledge of a particular person
might enable me to accomplish some projects, it might not enable me to accomplish other unrelated projects. For example, even though I know what someone looks like, I might know next to nothing about how that person thinks, what he believes, what his interests are, and so on. And in that case there are any number of projects that could not be accomplished with regard to that person, for example, committing one’s loyalty and friendship to him. In short, though one may be said to know who someone is relative to some purposes, relative to other unrelated purposes, one might not know who that person is.

Now Boër and Lycan follow Hintikka in holding that knowing who someone is is sufficient for knowing that that person exists. They submit:

"... if you know who has the property of being N, you accordingly know that someone has that property, i.e. that N exists."

But even though they concur with Hintikka's Knowledge and Belief position on this matter, their agreement is not sufficient to establish the truth of what they say. For the issue of fictional characters still remains. That is, prima facie it would seem that one can know who a given fictional character is, but not know that that character exists.

Even if one has read a sufficient portion of the works of Arthur Conan Doyle, Boër and Lycan flatly deny that one can know who Sherlock Holmes is. The best one can do, they submit, is know who Sherlock Holmes is supposed to be. But if the
sixty-four-thousand dollar question, "Who is Sherlock Holmes?", is addressed to you, what should you do? Should you confess ignorance, insist that the question be reworded, argue that it cannot be answered since Holmes doesn't exist, or issue the question an intrinsically final answer and pick up your prize money?

Boër and Lycan's denial that one can know who Holmes is, rests in part on the claim that one's knowledge of Holmes "...appears to be independent of any teleological considerations." But surely this cannot mean that one's knowledge of Holmes will not enable one to accomplish certain purposes or projects. Anyone who has read a sufficient portion of the relevant stories would most likely be able to answer the sixty-four-thousand dollar question, write an essay about Holmes for a literature course, discuss Holmes' adventures with a friend, and so on. Yet if one may be said to know who Holmes is relative to these projects, and if Boër, Hintikka, and Lycan are to be believed, one may then be said to know that Holmes exists. Such a conclusion, I submit, is not as troublesome as it might at first appear.

In the same way that it would be a mistake to claim that one can know who Holmes is simpliciter, I think that it would also be a mistake to claim that one can know that he exists simpliciter. For just as one's knowing who a particular person is can always be specified in terms of the purposes or projects that knowledge enables one to complete, one's knowing that that person exists can be specified in those terms as well. If one is
willing to make such specifications, the problem of fictional entities dissolves. For one might then be said to know that Sherlock Holmes exists relative to the kinds of projects that knowledge of fictional characters would ordinarily enable one to complete. For example, relative to the project of discussing Holmes' adventures one might be said to know that Holmes exists, and not to know that Holmes' wife exists. But since Holmes is a fictional character, one's knowledge of him would not enable one to accomplish a wide range projects, e.g. buying him a beer, sending him a letter, establishing that he and F.H. Bradley were buddies, and so on. In other words, one could not be said to know that Holmes exists relative to accomplishing these projects, though relative to accomplishing other unrelated projects one might be said to know that Holmes exists.

Now Boër and Lycan submit that generally speaking:

...to know who someone is relative to a purpose P is (roughly) to be able to provide an intrinsically final answer to a question about that person's identity asked by one who has purpose P.5

Providing an intrinsically final answer to a who-question, i.e. an answer that conveys all the information a person would normally need to satisfy the purpose(s) motivating a who-question, might be a fairly complex matter. Yet anyone who could do so, may be said to know, relative to the purpose at hand, who the person in question is.

If knowing who someone is is always relative to some purpose or project, then Descartes' certainty in Meditation Two that
he exists, must be specifiable in terms of some purpose or project. For this reason, in order to completely explain Descartes' *cogito* certainty we must first determine the nature of the project which lead Descartes to affirm in Meditation Two that he existed. Finally, we must see if Descartes can know a description of himself that enables him to complete that project.

There can be no question that one of Descartes' projects in the *Meditations* was to show that there was a firm and permanent ground for certainty about God's existence. Descartes submits that anyone can raise himself from ignorance to certain knowledge about God since the foundation for that certainty lies within oneself. So one of Descartes' projects in the *Meditations* was to show how one might raise oneself from a knowledge of oneself to a knowledge of God. This is evidenced by what Descartes says in his dedication of the *Meditations* of the faculty of theology in Paris:

... all that which can be known of God may be made manifest by means which are not derived from anywhere but from ourselves, and from the simple consideration of the nature of our minds. Hence I thought that it was not beside my purpose to inquire how this is so, and how God may be more easily and certainly known than the things of the world.

Given that this was one of Descartes' projects in the *Meditations*, we must ask whether or not Descartes could really know a description of himself that would enable him to know God.

In reply to an objection raised by the Paris theologians Descartes warns:
our previous ideas of what belongs to the mind have been wholly confused and mixed up with the ideas of sensible objects, and this was the first and chief reason why none of the propositions asserted of God and of the soul could be understood with sufficient clearness. . ."67

He submits that the necessary prerequisites for a correct understanding of the facts of metaphysics are that one free oneself from all of one's former opinions about the mind, and that the mind itself be abstracted from the senses. To this end, he endorses the method of systematic doubt that he outlines in Meditation One. He submits that even though:

"the utility of a Doubt which is so general does not at first appear, it is at the same time very great, inasmuch as it delivers us from every kind of prejudice, and sets out for us a very simple way by which the mind may detach itself from the senses; and finally it makes it impossible for us ever to doubt those things which we have once discovered to be true."68

The method of detaching the mind from the senses is to be found in Meditation Two; that method is the method of self-analysis which I have already discussed in the previous chapter.

Since Descartes insists that metaphysical doubt is a necessary prerequisite of metaphysical certainty, the certainty he claims to have about the existence of himself in Meditation Two may not be specified in terms of any project which requires that he trust his senses. This is why he submits that Gassendi's inference from "I walk" to "I exist" is an illicit one. For one presumably knows that one is walking only because one can see, hear, or otherwise perceive oneself walking. On the other hand,
sometimes the judgements that one makes about oneself do not
rest on what one is able to perceive or remember about oneself.
In this regard Descartes maintains:

[...there is none of my activities of which I am
wholly certain (in the sense of having metaphysical
certitude, which alone is here involved), save thinking
alone.]

And he further submits that the activity of thought serves as a
foundation for metaphysical certainty about the existence of the
mind. For even if I believe what is not true, desire what does
not exist, and seem to perceive what is not really there, there
can be no reasonable doubt that it is I who so believe, desire,
and seem to perceive. If Descartes is right about this, then
anyone who follows his advice and endeavors to meditate seriously
with him could with absolute certitude answer, "Yes, I am," to
the following question:

Am I not the being who now doubts nearly every-
thing, who nevertheless understands certain things,
who affirms that one only is true, who doubts all
others, who desires to know more, is averse from
being deceived, who imagines many things, sometimes
indeed despite his will, and who perceives many like-
wise, as by the intervention of the bodily organs?

Whether or not such an answer turns out to be intrinsically final,
however, will be a function of whether or not it enables one to
raise oneself from a knowledge of oneself as a being who is
finite, limited and incomplete, prone to error and imperfect,
and ignorant of almost everything to a knowledge of a being who
is infinite, unlimited and complete, perfect, and ignorant of
nothing. If it were possible to accomplish such a project, one
could be said to know who oneself is relative to the project of knowing God.
Chapter III

FOOTNOTES


3Ibid.


5Ayer, op. cit., p. 46.

6Ibid.

7Ibid., p. 26.

8Ibid., p. 46.

9Ibid., p. 45.

10Ibid., p. 46.

11If I claim that there are fish in the pond by the woods, you might begin to question my claim after you've fished it for a while, and after a time, being an impatient sort, you might be disposed to deny it. Here, I think, it would be correct to say that you doubt the truth of my claim. I'm certain that there are fish there; I've seen them. But you've fished the pond for the past two days and haven't had any luck. If you're a good enough fisherman, if you hardly ever come home empty handed, your doubt wouldn't be wholly unreasonable. And if you have other evidence—for example, the oil
slick choking out the lilly pads, and the sewage pipe spewing out
a steady stream of effluent—your doubt looks pretty solid. Yet
even if it's a reasonable one, you could still be mistaken. Indeed,
suppose I am able to answer your questions; better yet, suppose
that I am able to show you that your denials are baseless; suppose,
for example, that I take you to a spot near the dam and within a
half an hour have a fish on the end of my line. In that case, there's
no doubt about it. Despite the effluent, my claim is indubitable.
So if a statement is true it doesn't follow that no one could
reasonably doubt it. The pond, after all, has fish in it; but it
wasn't unreasonable for you to doubt that it did.

12 Ibid., p. 51.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Rene Descartes, The Philosophical Works of Descartes, trans.
E.S. Haldane & G.R.T. Ross, Vol. II (New York: Cambridge University
16 Steven Boër and William Lycan, "Knowing Who," Philosophical
17 Jaakko Hintikka, Knowledge and Belief (Ithica and London:
18 A reference to something is consumated when the object
to which a speaker intends to refer by using a linguistic expression
is unambiguously identified by the speaker's audience. cf. J.R.
19 Ayer, op. cit., p. 50.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Hintikka, "Cogito ergo sum: Inference or Performance?"
37 P.F. Strawson makes a similar remark:

. . . though there may be a question of identifying the one who is in pain when that one is another, how can there be such a question when that one is oneself? But this query answers itself as soon as we remember that we speak primarily to others, for the information of others. In one sense, indeed, there is no question of my having to tell who it is who is in pain, when I am. In another sense, however, I may have to tell who it is, i.e. to let others know who it is.


Ibid., pp. 92, 93.

Ibid., p. 92.

Descartes, op. cit., II, p. 38.

Williams, op. cit., p. 93.

Ibid., pp. 96, 97.

Ibid., p. 97.

Descartes, op. cit., II, p. 207.


Ibid.

Williams, op. cit., p. 99.

Ibid., pp. 99, 100.

Ibid., p. 103.

Descartes, op. cit., I, p. 150.

Williams, op. cit., p. 104.

Ibid., p. 103.

Ibid., p. 106.

Ibid., p. 105.

Ibid., p. 107.

58 Ibid.

59 Hintikka, Knowledge and Belief, p. 760.


61 Ibid., p. 222.

62 Hintikka, "Cogito ergo sum: Inference or Performance?" loc. cit., p. 113.

63 Ibid.

64 Boër and Lycan, op. cit., pp. 316, 317.

65 Ibid., p. 329.


67 Descartes, op. cit., II, p. 32.

68 Descartes, op. cit., I, p. 140.

69 Descartes, op. cit., II, p. 207.

Zuikan was a Zen master who always used to address himself. "Zuikan?" he would call. And then he would answer. "Yes!" "Zuikan?" "Yes!" Of course he was living all alone in his small zendo, and of course he knew who he was, but sometimes he lost himself. And whenever he lost himself, he would address himself, "Zuikan?" "Yes!"

--Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*

1. Introduction

In section 2 of the previous chapter I briefly considered Ayer's suggestion that the first-person singular pronoun could be employed in certain special circumstances to "signal" the fact that its user is conscious. The circumstance Ayer envisages is one in which someone is recovering from a swoon; among other things, the case is supposed to show that someone could employ the pronoun 'I' even when it is not doing duty for a description. . . .¹ To Ayer's suggestion I objected, along Strawsonian lines, that no one could identify a conscious state unless he could identify the individual who is in that state:

Identifying references to 'private particulars' depend on identifying references to particulars of another type altogether, namely persons.²

In other words, if it is supposed that someone does not know who he is for any purpose, it could not be further supposed that he is
able to identify his own thoughts, and in that case, it could not be supposed that he is able to signify either to himself or someone else the fact that he is conscious by employing any word. Moreover, since a speaker's ability to use the pronoun 'I' in the standard way, viz. to consummate a reference to himself, presupposes that he knows who he is for some purpose, someone who did not know who he was for any purpose could not employ that pronoun in the way it is standardly employed by competent speakers. It is these two claims, the ways in which they are related, and their implications for Descartes' alleged first certainty, that I shall explore in the present and final chapter of this thesis.

2. Asking and Answering Who-Questions

Anyone who knows who a particular person is should be able to answer certain questions that might be raised about that individual. Generally speaking, the variety of questions that might be raised about someone range all the way from the mundane and bureaucratic--e.g. that person's name, residence, social security number, and so on--to the philosophical--e.g. Descartes' "Am I God?" By answering such questions honestly and correctly the respondent reveals some of what he knows about the person in question. We may assume that the wider the range of questions one is able to answer about a person the more one may be said to know about him.
Any speech situation where someone brings the identity of a particular person into question is invariably comprised of a questioner, Q, a respondnet, S, and the person about whom the question has been raised, N. There are as many as five types of speech situations where someone may bring the identity of a particular person into question; the distinctness of each of these situations varies as a function of the identity and diversity of Q, S, and N:

- **Situation 1.** \( Q \neq S \neq N \)
- **Situation 2.** \( [Q \neq S \land S = N] \)
- **Situation 3.** \( [Q = S \land Q = N] \)
- **Situation 4.** \( [Q = S \land \{Q \neq S \ Naval N]\} \)
- **Situation 5.** \( Q = S = N \)

The reader will do well to familiarize himself with Table I on the following page. In that table I display the various sorts of who-questions that may be raised in situations 1 through 5 above, and show the varieties of syntactically correct answers that could be given to any such question.

If the Greek letter \( \emptyset \) in the sentence schema 'Who is \( \emptyset \)?' is treated as a schematic letter for which a proper name of N, a singular demonstrative term or pronoun designating N, or a definite description of N may be substituted, the three basic syntactical varieties of who-questions may thereby be represented. For the most part, the syntax of a given who-question will be determined by the identity and diversity of Q, S, and N, by what Q already knows about N, and by whether or not N is currently on the scene. For example, where S and N are diverse individuals,
### TABLE I

**Kind of Who-Questions and Varieties of Syntactically Correct Responses**<sup>a</sup>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q/S/N</th>
<th>(Q/S)&amp;(S=N)</th>
<th>(Q/S)&amp;(Q=N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Who is A/ ('A' is a proper name of N).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Who is this/that/there/he/she? (This kind of question may be accompanied by a pointing gesture and/or a description of N).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Who is the F? ('the F' is a description of N).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Replies:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. A is B. ('B' is yet another name of N).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b. A is that one.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c. A is the G. ('the G' is another description of N).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a. This (etc.) is A.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b. This one is that one.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2c. This (etc.) is the G.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a. The F is A.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b. The F is that one</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3c. The F is the G.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Any question of the form 'Who is ø?' (or one of its cognates) receives an answer of the form 'ø is ý' (or one of its cognates). 'ø' and 'ý' are schematic letters for which an appropriate proper name, an appropriate singular demonstrative term or pronoun designating N, or an appropriate definite description of N may be substituted.*

---

<sup>a</sup>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q-S\N</th>
<th>Q-S=N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions:</td>
<td>Questions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Who is A?</td>
<td>13. Who is A?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Who is this/that/there/he/she?</td>
<td>14. Who am I/are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Who is the F?</td>
<td>15. Who is the F?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replies:</td>
<td>Replies:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10a. A is B.</td>
<td>13a. A is B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10b. A is that one.</td>
<td>13b. I am/You are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10c. A is the G.</td>
<td>13c. A is the G.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11a. This (etc.) is A.</td>
<td>14a. I am A/You are A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11b. This (etc.) is the G.</td>
<td>14b. I am who I am.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11c. This (etc.) is the G.</td>
<td>14c. I am the F/You are the F.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12a. The F is A.</td>
<td>15a. The F is A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12b. The F is that one.</td>
<td>15b. I am/You are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12c. The F is the G.</td>
<td>15c. The F is the G.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
where Q does not know N's name, but where N is on the scene, Q may raise a question of the form 'Who is Ø?' where the appropriate substitution instance for Ø is one of the third-person singular pronouns or the demonstrative 'this' or 'that'. Usually, such a question will be accompanied by a pointing gesture, or by a description of N, or both. Where S is identical to N, where Q does not know N's name, and where N is on the scene, Q may raise a question of the form 'Who is Ø?' where the appropriate substitution instance for Ø is the second-person singular pronoun. In this sort of situation, pointing may be considered to be impolite. In any of the five speech situations represented in Table I, whether or not N is on the scene, Q could always raise a question of the form 'Who is the F?' where 'the F' is an appropriate description of N. The content of Q's description of N will vary as a function of what Q already knows about N as well as what he wants to know about him. Finally, in all of these situations a condition of Q's raising a who-question wherein a singular pronoun or demonstrative term has been substituted for Ø in 'Who is Ø?' is that Q either be able to locate N in the conversational situation--e.g. by pointing N out or by describing N's position relative to his own or, where N is not on the scene, that Q be able to give some pertinent description of N--e.g. a description of certain features of N's personal history, socio-economic roles, and so on.
In response to a given who-question, S may either show Q who N is, provided that N is on the scene or that S has a photograph of the latter, or tell Q who N is by issuing Q any one of three varieties of syntactically correct replies. In a special kind of case it is conceivable that Q might answer his own who-question—e.g. when he gets a closer look at, a different perspective on, etc., the person in question. In that event, we could imagine Q saying something like "Ah! Now I see who it is." Later on in the present chapter I shall consider in greater detail some of the more important aspects of cases where one perceives who a particular person is. For the time being, it only needs to be noted that a condition S's showing Q who N is is that S perceive N in some fashion or other.

There are an indefinite number of ways that S might show Q who N is. Generally speaking, the appropriateness as an answer to a who-question of any responses whereby S shows Q who N is will be determined by the purpose underlying Q's who-question as well as the unique features of the conversational situation. So for example, one might show the police who a thief is by actually laying hands on him, by picking out the right mug from a mug book, and so on. It will be recalled that Judas showed the Roman soldiers who Christ was by kissing him on the cheek. We could also imagine a case where an amnesia victim shows himself who he is. For example, if the victim is looking through a recent yearbook, we could imagine that he matches up a picture that he sees of
himself with his own image in a mirror. In this way, it seems, the victim might begin to form a general picture of himself that enables him to jar loose other pertinent facts about himself.

Finally, in any case where S can show Q who N is and thereby answer Q's who-question, S could also accomplish the same by giving Q a pertinent description of N. Consider, for example, that Theodorus identifies Socrates for Theaetetus by saying, "...there he is, the middle one of those three coming toward us."

In the previous chapter, we saw that even if a person is able to answer questions about a particular person's physical characteristics and abilities—e.g. his hair color, dominant hand, and so on—he might know next to nothing about the other aspects of that person—e.g. what he believes, how he thinks, and so on. This point, I noted, is capitalized on by Boër and Lycan in their article "Knowing Who." Roughly speaking, Boër and Lycan submit that if a respondent's answer to a who-question enables the questioner to accomplish the purpose(s) or complete the project(s) which motivated him to raise that question, the respondent may then be said to know—relative to that purpose or project—who the person in question is. They maintain that generally speaking:

...to know who someone is relative to a purpose P is (roughly) to be able to provide an intrinsically final answer to a question about that person's identity asked by one who has purpose P.
Boër and Lycan endeavor to explicate further the notion of an intrinsically final answer as follows. They submit that one's current purpose in asking a question of the form 'Who is N?' determines a pragmatically pertinent category," e.g. famous generals, suspects (in a murder case), job applicants, and so on. Frequently, they note in passing, the relevant category derives from an interest in N's socio-economic roles—e.g. N's political affiliations, occupation, and so on. Once the relevant category has been fixed by the questioner's current purpose, knowing who someone is relative to that purpose consists in knowing an "important predicate" of the person in question which enables one to differentiate that person from every other member of the pragmatically pertinent category. For these reasons, our authors maintain that every intrinsically final answer to a who-question either amounts (deeply) to an answer of the form 'N alone is G' or it can be supplanted by an answer of that form. Regardless of whether S shows or tells Q who N is, in other words, if that answer is intrinsically final then it is "importantly parasitic" on answers of the form 'N alone is G'. If Lycan and Boër are right about this, it follows that one cannot know who someone is relative to any fixed purpose unless one knows a language and a uniquely identifying description in that language of the person in question. Moreover, if Williams is correct in holding that Descartes, by engaging in systematic doubt, eliminates the possibility of describing himself, it follows that he cannot be said to know who he himself is for any purpose
and hence that he exists. This conclusion is obviously important since Descartes construes his certainty that he exists as the Archimedean point of Cartesian self-analysis.

3. The Archimedean point of Cartesian self-analysis

In some speech situations it would be possible for Q to raise a question of the form "Who is the F?" even though he did not know that he himself is the F. We could imagine, for example, that Q asks "Who's this month's lottery winner?" and that S then issues Q the correct reply "You are!" Moreover, I might ask myself "Who won this week's baseball pool?" and then after checking the sports page discover that it would be correct for me to answer "I did!", or alternatively "You did!" Of course, not all cases where one asks oneself a question about oneself are cases where one does not know that one is the person in question. For example, after making a mistake one might ask oneself "Why did I do that?" In this kind of case one knowingly makes oneself an object of inquiry. Such an inquiry could be construed as a kind of self-analysis. Significantly, Cartesian meditation can be construed as self-analysis as well. Among other things, the output of that analysis is supposed to be a clarification and refinement of detail about oneself which, prior to engaging in analysis, was fuzzy, ambiguous, incomplete, hidden from view, or some combination of these.

At the early stages of the Second Meditation Descartes finds himself in quest of a "fixed and immovable" point in terms
of which his analysis of himself may proceed:

Archimedes, in order that he might draw the terrestrial
globe out of its place, and transport it elsewhere,
demanded only that one point should be fixed and
immovable; in the same way I shall have the right to
conceive high hopes if I am able to discover one thing
only which is certain and indubitable.4

His alleged discovery of this point of course emerges as his
certainty that he himself exists. But how can this certainty be
interpreted in such a way that its relationship to the rest
of Descartes' analysis of himself is not hidden from view?

Just as one could not answer a question about someone
else unless he knew—relative to some purpose—who that person is,
self-analysis is a procedure that one can engage in only if one
knows who oneself is for some purpose. Now suppose that there
is at least one identifying description of oneself that one can
always know one satisfies whenever one engages in self-analysis.
If there is such a description, one might employ it as the
"fixed point" of self-analysis. In other words, that description
could function as a description to which one could relate
all other descriptions of oneself. As we shall see, Descartes' proceud
suggests that there is a description of himself which
he allows to function as the fixed point of his self-analysis.

Since some of the questions Descartes addresses to himself
in the Meditations cannot be answered unless others are answered
first, the series of questions that Descartes asks himself about
himself sometimes follows a fixed order. For example, immediately
after concluding:

I am, I exist, is true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it.\(^5\)

Descartes remarks:

I do not yet know clearly enough what I am, I who am certain that I am...\(^6\)

This remark implies that at this point in the *Meditations* Descartes did not have an answer for the question "What am I?" although he did have an answer for the question "Who am I?" Moreover, the remark implies that to the question "Who am I?" Descartes answers "The one who is certain that I exist." This answer should not be confused with the assertion "I am who I am." That assertion may be analyzed as one's answering "I am" to the question "Who am I?" Such an answer obviously conveys no new information about the person in question. To issue it would be like pointing to something and answering "That!" to someone who pointing to the same thing had asked "What's this?" But Descartes' answer to the question "Who am I?" is not empty in this way. Rather, to that question he issues a definite description of himself---in English, 'the one who is certain that I exist.' This description, I submit, may be treated as Descartes' Archimedean point of self-analysis. As we shall see, he thinks that such a description applies to him for the same reason that he thinks he is entitled to answer "A thinking thing" to the question "What am I?" In other words, Descartes thinks he is entitled to issue one and the same answer to the questions "Who is the one who is certain that I exist?" and
"What am I?"

Descartes' effort to answer the question "What am I?" begins with a reconsideration of some of the opinions that he held about himself prior to accepting the suppositions of systematic doubt. Ironically, he dismisses the suggestion that he is a reasonable animal for no reason at all. He thinks that accepting this suggestion would require him to answer the question "What is an animal?" and "What is it to be reasonable?"; but he dismisses these questions on the grounds that providing an answer to them would be too difficult and time-consuming. Rather than involve himself in subtleties such as these, he resolves to consider only those opinions about himself which he thinks spontaneously arose from his own nature. The first of these opinions is that he had a face, had two legs, arms, and so on; in short, he believed that he had a body. With regard to bodies in general, he believed that they were extended in space, limited by a certain figure, and that no two bodies could occupy the same place at the same time. He was also of the opinion that bodies could be perceived by sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste, and that no bodies were self-movers. All these opinions seem reasonable enough, but Descartes thinks it would be unreasonable for him to affirm them at this juncture. For he thinks that an evil spirit might have tricked him into believing that he has a body and that there is a world, and he believes that he can reasonably affirm only those truths about which he can be absolutely certain. But if Descartes
is not yet sure that he has a body, on what ground does he think
the knowledge that he exists rests?

Descartes contends that his knowledge that he exists rests
on his knowledge that he is thinking:

... of a surety I myself did exist since I persuaded
myself of something or merely because I thought of
something? 7

Sometimes—e.g. in the Discourse, in his reply to the Paris
theologians, and in the Principles, he explicitly formulates this
contention as an argument—viz. I think, therefore I am. But
what evidence does Descartes provide in support of the claim that
he is thinking? He offers no evidence for it; instead, he simply
assumes that the claim requires no evidence:

... it is so evident of itself that it is I who doubts,
who understands, and who desires, that there is no
reason here to add anything to explain it. 8

And since he maintains that it is self-evident that it is he who
doubts, desires, understands, and so on, Descartes thinks he is
entitled to treat the description 'the one who is certain that I
exist' as the fixed and immovable Archimedean point of his
meditations. In other words, to the question "Who am I?" Descartes
answers "The one who is certain that I exist," and to the question
"Who is the one who is certain that I exist?" Descartes thinks that
he can issue with assurance answers like the following:

(a) The one who doubts almost everything,
(b) The one who desires to know more,
(c) The one who seems to see light,
and so on. Finally, since he maintains that a thing which doubts, desires, and so on, is a thing which thinks, Descartes holds that he is entitled to answer "A thing which thinks" to the question "What am I?" Though he does not do so, he could have expressed his alleged insight into these matters by proclaiming "I am the one who is certain that the one which thinks exists."

4. The Function of the Pronoun 'I'

In section 5 of the previous chapter I considered, but left unchallenged, the claim that Descartes rules out the possibility of knowing who he himself is by engaging in systematic doubt. Williams registers this complaint in terms of the descriptive backing that is presupposed by anyone's use of the pronoun 'I':

...the objection may be raised that in the cogito we have exactly the type of sentence in which the principle of presupposition cannot operate. For in itself the assertion "I exist" appears...to have no content unless we can fill the gap with a descriptive proposition as a substitute for "I." But Descartes in doubting has eliminated the possibility of giving any description at all of this kind.

If Williams is right about this, anyone who accepted the suppositions of systematic doubt could not consummate a reference to himself by employing the first-person singular pronoun, and for that reason, he could not treat the description 'the one who is certain that I exist' as the Archimedean point of his effort to engage in Cartesian self-analysis. It is essential to the success of Cartesian analysis therefore, that the analyst be able to specify the referent of his use of the first-person pronoun by
describing himself. Given this requirement, two central questions emerge:

(1) What general considerations can be marshalled in support of the claim that a speaker can use the first-person pronoun to consummate a reference to himself only if he is able to describe himself?

(2) How does someone who accepts the suppositions of systematic doubt eliminate the possibility of describing himself?

I shall deal with (1) in the present section, and return to (2) in section 6.

In most cases the identity of the referent of a speaker's use of the pronoun 'I' goes unquestioned by his audience. For example, where the speaker and the audience are both on the scene, if the audience can see and hear the speaker, there would be no need for the speaker to describe himself in order to identify the referent of his use of the pronoun 'I' for his audience. In this kind of case the speaker may be said to ostensively introduce himself into the conversational situation by employing the pronoun 'I'. If, as a result of this introduction, the speaker is perceived by his audience, then the audience has all the information it needs in order to identify the referent of the speaker's use of 'I'. But why should a speaker's ability to consummate a reference to himself in this manner, viz. ostensively introducing himself by employing the pronoun 'I', require that he be able to describe himself? Here, the requirement can be treated as a special case of a general requirement which attends the ostensive introduction into
a conversational situation of any object that is to be treated as the subject of discourse:

(R) No object can be ostensively introduced as the subject of discourse unless the person who introduces it can describe it.¹⁰

For suppose that a speaker were unable to describe a given object, that he couldn't say what it looked like, specify its place in relationship to other objects that he could describe, or recount anything about that object's history. Could the speaker ostensively introduce that object as the subject of discourse? Clearly not. For his being unable to describe the object in any way is tantamount to his being ignorant of its existence. But no speaker who is ignorant of the existence of a given object could ostensively introduce it into a conversational situation and treat it as the subject of discourse.

Now every case where someone consummates a reference to himself by employing the pronoun 'I' is a case where he ostensively introduces himself as the subject of discourse. Letters, wills, essays, and other printed documents immediately come to mind here. In each of these cases the author may be said to present himself to his audience non-ostensively. Cases where someone non-ostensively represents himself to his audience are obviously quite different from cases where one ostensively introduces himself. One thing which distinguishes the latter from the former is that a necessary condition of a speaker's consumating a reference to himself when he ostensively introduces himself is that his
audience has to see, hear, or otherwise sensibly discriminate the speaker. So the claim that someone can consummate a reference to himself by using 'I' only if he can describe himself cannot be exclusively motivated by (R). Rather other considerations in support of this claim must be marshalled by considering some non-ostensive uses of the pronoun 'I'.

In any case where someone non-ostensively presents himself as the subject of discourse by employing the pronoun 'I', in order to consummate a reference to himself he must provide his audience with some way of knowing who he is. For example, if I send you a letter but you have no way of telling from what I've written who it is from, then even though I intend to refer to myself when I employ the pronoun 'I' in that letter, I will have failed to consummate a reference to myself. In the case of a letter, one usually identifies oneself for the reader by signing one's name to it. Analogously, if I am talking to you from behind an opaque door and you don't recognize my voice, I might identify myself by giving you my name. But a proper name answers a who-question only if the questioner can provide some descriptive backing for that name. Ultimately, as Boër and Lycan point out, all intrinsically final answers to who-questions are importantly parasitic on replies of the form 'N alone is G'. Hence, in any case where someone non-ostensively presents himself to his audience by employing the pronoun 'I', he must be able to describe himself in a way that enables his audience to know for certain purposes
who he is. Finally, since all cases where someone consummates a reference to himself by employing the pronoun 'I' are either cases where he ostensively introduces himself to his audience or non-ostensively presents himself, no one can consummate a reference to himself by employing the pronoun 'I' unless he knows who he is for certain purposes.

5. Sense, Memory, and Knowing Who

We often say that we see who someone is, e.g. seeing who is at the door, and that we hear who someone is, e.g. hearing who is talking in the next room, and more generally, that we remember who someone is: "At first I couldn't place him, but now I remember who he is." How are perception and memory involved in knowing who someone is? In the present section I initiate an answer to this question by considering some cases where it would be correct to say that someone sees who a particular person is. Cases of hearing who someone is shall be ignored, not because they are uninteresting, but because for the purposes of the present inquiry the parallels between seeing who and hearing who are so close that an investigation of the latter would result in needless repetition. Cases of smelling who and tasting who are too trivial to warrant attention, though I shall make some limited remarks about an apparent case of feeling who—namely, feeling who is in pain.
Generally speaking, S may be said to see who N is if by seeing some characteristic feature or complex of features that are unique to N, S can identify N for certain purposes. For example, by catching sight of a certain feathered beanie from his third floor window S may be in a position to identify the person coming down the alley as the village idiot. Here, there are two sorts of speech situations in which S might be called upon to make such an identification. For both cases we may suppose that W and S are looking out the window, chatting casually, and watching the activity in the alley. In the first case, suppose that Q asks S "Who is the village idiot?" By directing Q's attention to the person coming down the alley, S might answer Q's question by saying "That's him." In the second case, suppose that Q directs S's attention to the person coming down the alley and then asks "Who is that?" Here, S might answer Q's question by saying "That's the village idiot." In either case, if S were to say "I see who is coming down the alley" his statement would be one of particular, current, empirical fact. But what entitles S to make this statement?

First, the visible feature or complex of features by which S purports to identify N must be sufficient to warrant that identification. In this regard, two conditions must be met. On the one hand, the alleged identifying feature must be a feature of N. For example, if the village idiot no longer wears a beanie, or if he no longer wears that one, or if he has always worn a fedora, S is not
entitled to his claim. Indeed, by making it, S misidentifies the person coming down the alley. On the other hand, even if S has the feature by which S purports to identify N, no one else can have it. For example, if someone else in the village wears a beanie just like the one worn by the village idiot, S is once again not entitled to his claim. This is not to say that if S makes the claim he misidentifies the person coming down the alley; that person might in fact be the village idiot. But unless S could identify that person by some other feature—his peculiar gait, for example—there is no guarantee that S correctly identifies him. In short, S is entitled to claim "I see who it is" only if the visible feature(s) by which he makes the identification are unique to the person he allegedly identifies. Second, S's eyesight must be adequate to the task of visual identification. For example, if S is helpless without his glasses, but he nevertheless claims to identify N without them, he is not entitled to his claim. Of course, S might correctly identify N, but without his glasses there is no guarantee that he has. Finally, the person being identified must be "sufficiently visible." Of course, visibility conditions will vary from one situation to the next. For example, if the person coming down the alley is five blocks away when S claims to identify him, or if the fog is like pea soup, there is no guarantee that S correctly identifies him. But if someone is springing down the alley in the mid-day sun, if he is just beneath S's window, and if S is looking in his direction,
the chances of S's seeing who he is will be greatly improved.

Given that the above conditions are met, then if S sees who N is, it follows (trivially) that S sees N. But just because S sees N it doesn't follow that he sees who N is. Consider this point in light of the following situation. Suppose that Q, upon seeing N strolling down the alley, asks S "Who is that?" If S, on the strength of Q's question, sees the person that Q has in mind, then because he sees N he should be able to uniquely describe him. Presumably, for example, S could describe what N is wearing, the direction in which he is walking, his position relative to Q and S, and so on. But it wouldn't do for S to base his answer to Q's who-question on what he sees when he sees N. For Q sees the same person that S sees. Presumably, Q could also describe what N is wearing, his position relative to Q and S, and so on. In other words, Q hasn't asked S if he sees N; his question presupposes that he sees him. What Q wants to know is whether or not S recognizes N, and recognizing someone, as we shall see, always involves remembering something about him.

Suppose that S answers "That's the village idiot" to Q's "Who is that?", but that his answer isn't sufficient to satisfy the purpose motivating Q's question. Suppose, in other words, that after being given this answer Q further queries "Who is the village idiot?" Now S's ability to answer either of Q's questions will depend on how well he knows N, and that will be a function of:
(a) the extent of his past interactions with N--e.g. the conversations he's had with him, the letters he's exchanged with him, the mutual or opposing endeavors he's engaged in with him, and so on.

and

(b) how much he's learned about him from reliable sources--e.g. friends, relatives, printed material such as books, newspaper articles, and so on.

For this reason, in order to answer Q's questions about N, S must draw on his memory about him. And if his memory about certain matters is shaky, or if his interactions with N and with reliable sources about him have been limited, then if S wants to avoid misleading Q about N, he will be unable to answer many of Q's questions about him. For example, if it is a well known fact that N is an idiot, then even though his inventory of remembered facts about N is negligible, S might be able to issue Q the pat reply. But if Q wants a more sympathetic understanding of N--e.g. how he thinks, what he believes, what he's done to deserve his title, and so on--S may be unable to comply with Q's requests. To Q's first question then--viz. "Who is that?"--S might issue a pat reply, but he couldn't answer it by describing what he sees when he sees N.

In other words, seeing who someone is not only involves seeing some feature or complex of features that are unique to N, it involves associating those features with other characteristics of the person in question which were learned about on some earlier occasion. That is, seeing who someone is always involves recognition, and the extent of one's recognition depends on the extent of one's
past interaction with the person recognized or with reliable sources of information about that person. Hence, if S's stock of remembered facts about N is empty, then even if he sees N, he won't see who N is.

Are there any cases where someone may be said to see who he himself is, and if so, is there an analogue of these kinds of cases for feeling—e.g. feeling who is in pain? As we shall see, there are cases where it is correct to say that someone sees himself. Oddly enough however, each of these cases is either a case of "indirect" seeing or a case of "nonconcurrent" seeing.

Let us begin by clarifying these two kinds of seeing.

J.L. Austin submits that seeing something involves the notion of a "line of vision," and he suggests that when someone sees something indirectly there is a "kink in the direction" of that line. Here Austin contrasts seeing a parade through a periscope with seeing it directly, and watching the door directly with seeing it in a mirror. He rules out cases of looking through binoculars, telescopes, and spectacles as cases of indirect seeing. Rather, in these cases we make use of other contrasting expressions:

--'with the naked eye' as opposed to 'with a telescope', 'with unaided vision' as opposed to 'with glasses on'.

Austin suggests that what seems to be a necessary condition of all cases where something is seen indirectly is:

. . .concurrent existence and concommitant variation as between what is perceived in the straightforward way (the sounds in the receiver, the picture and the
blips on the screen) and the candidate for what we might be prepared to describe as being perceived indirectly.15 Given this condition, looking at a photograph does not count as a case of indirect seeing. For photographs "statically record scenes from the past;" though Austin does not employ the word, we could say that they are cases of "nonconcurrent" seeing. That is, when looking at a photograph, the time at which the scene we are looking at was recorded does not coincide with the time at which we are looking at it. In this light, we could say that when someone sees himself in a photograph he sees himself nonconcurrently. On the other hand, when someone sees himself in a mirror he sees himself indirectly.

Now because of the position of a person's eyes relative to the other parts of his body, there are only a limited number of things that anyone can see directly and concurrently.16 For example, no one can see his own face or the back of his head, although someone might see the bridge of his nose, the outline of his beard, and of course, his own hands, feet, and so on. But do I see myself when I see, for example, my uniquely scared left hand? After all, someone else might see me by seeing my hand. Let us survey some cases where it is clearly correct to say that one sees oneself, and eventually work back to an answer to the first of the above questions.

When a person looks in a mirror or at a photograph that has been taken of him, more is involved than simply seeing a certain
set of arms and legs, a particular torso, a unique face, and so on. When I look in a mirror, for example, not only do I see a certain face with familiar and determinate features, I see myself. Similarly, when I look at a photograph that has been taken of me, I see "more" than a complex of bodily parts; once again, I see myself. In both of these cases, by seeing a unified complex of features I project onto that complex various characteristics of a being whose history is well known to me. That is, I project myself, so to speak, into the mirror or into the photo. This notion of projection is admittedly vague. But it is at least clear that were I unable to associate, in some sense, the image that I see on the mirror with my own personal history, I would then be in a predicament similar to that of an amnesia victim or a small child gazing at his own reflection.

Now what is unique to each of the above cases, and it seems to be unique to every case where one may be said to see himself, is that the physical features by which one recognizes oneself are seen either indirectly or nonconcurrently. This explains why no one who sees his hand directly and concurrently thereby sees himself. When I look in a mirror or at a picture that has been taken of me, I see myself in the mirror or in the photo. But when I look at my hand I don't see myself in anything; I don't see myself at all. Of course, I recognize this hand as my hand, yet I am able to do that because I know who I am; but my knowing who I am in this case is not contingent upon seeing some feature or
complex of features that are unique to my body. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, no purpose could ever be accomplished through allegedly seeing oneself by seeing one's hand or some other part of one's body. Yet as a result of seeing myself in a mirror any number of purposes could be accomplished---e.g., grooming, excercising, and so on. Likewise, an athlete watching a game film, as a result of seeing himself in action, might be able to adjust his techniques. Let us briefly return, as promised, to our feelings.

Can any sense be made of the claim that someone could feel himself by feeling, for example, a pain in his hand? In the first place, whenever someone feels a pain the pain that he feels exists at a time which coincides with the time at which he feels it. No one, in other words, could nonconcurrently feel a pain. In the second place, no distinction can be drawn between feeling a pain directly and feeling it indirectly. In this regard Austin jocularly queries:

...if you offer me a pig in a poke, might I feel the pig indirectly--through the poke?17

So an important similarity between cases of seeing oneself and alleged cases of feeling oneself appears to be lacking. For it seems that all cases where one may be said to see oneself are cases where the visible feature(s) by which one identifies oneself are either seen indirectly or nonconcurrently. Indeed, the case of feeling a pain in one's hand appears to be more like the
case of seeing one's hand. For one thing, no purpose could be accomplished in claiming to feel oneself by the pain one feels in one's hand or any other part of my body. In the second place, I feel the pain in this hand, and I am able to identify it as my pain, but like my hand, I can identify my feelings only if I already know for some purpose who I myself am.

Finally, not all cases where one knows who someone is are cases which require that one see, hear, or otherwise sensibly discriminate that person. In many cases a question about a particular person who is absent not only can be raised, the person to whom the question is addressed can sometimes provide an answer to it that satisfies the questioner. But when N is not currently on the scene, Q can raise a question about him only if he remembers something about him. Furthermore, in raising a question about N in such a situation, Q must provide S with some way of identifying N. There are three ways in which Q might accomplish this. First Q might employ a demonstrative expression which refers to some person about whom something has been said, presumably just prior to the event of Q's raising his question. Second, Q might raise a question about N by employing a proper name or a title of N. Finally, he might raise a question about N by employing a definite description of him. In the first two kinds of cases, if S himself has not introduced N into the conversational situation, he might be unable to determine who Q has in mind. For example, if Q raises a question about N by employing a proper name of him,
then if $S$ is unable to provide an appropriate descriptive backing for that name, he will be unable to answer $Q$'s question. In the latter case, $S$ might be able to identify $N$ on the basis of $Q$'s description of him. But if $S$ does not know any other description of $N$ he will be unable to issue $Q$'s question an answer which he knows is correct. The upshot of the above enumeration can be formulated as follows. In any case where $N$ is not currently on the scene, if $Q$ raises a question about $N$, then if $S$'s stock of facts about $N$ is empty he will be unable to issue $Q$'s question an answer that he knows is correct. This result may be incorporated in a more general conclusion about all cases where one may be said to know who a particular person is. For as we have seen, one may be said to see who someone is only if one remembers something about him. Hence, no one can know who someone is unless he remembers something about him.

6. Systematic Doubt and Self Description

In section 4 of the present chapter the following question emerged:

(2) How does someone who accepts the suppositions of systematic doubt eliminate the possibility of describing himself?

This question, it will be recalled, arose in response to Williams' charge that Descartes has indeed eliminated this possibility and that therefore:

... the cogito presents an illegitimate application of the principle of presupposition. ...
The purpose of the present section is to answer (2) and thereby show:

...the way in which the *cogito* does violence to the principle of presupposition in the use of 'I'.

In section 3 of the present chapter I maintained that Descartes' quest for the Archimedean point of self-analysis could plausibly be construed as a search for a description of himself to which all the other descriptions of himself which allegedly emerge from his analysis could be related. I further maintained that Descartes' alleged discovery of this point could be construed as his having answered with assurance "The one who is certain that I exist" to the question "Who am I?" Since the referent of his use of the first-person pronoun in this description and the individual who allegedly answers to that description are supposed to be one and the same, by identifying the former it appears that Descartes could identify the latter. If Descartes can provide a descriptive backing for his use of the first-person pronoun, in other words, he can relate the descriptions which comprise that backing to his Archimedean point. But since Descartes is actively engaged in systematic doubt in the Second Meditation, the class of descriptions that he can be sure apply to him cannot include any that are based on what he perceives or remembers about himself. Given the restrictions of systematic doubt, can Descartes provide a descriptive backing for his use of the first-person pronoun? It might be suggested that he could do so in terms of a set of descriptions
of the following sort:

(a) The one who doubts almost everything,
(b) The one who desires to know more,
(c) The one who seems to see light,

and so on. For Descartes claims that it is self-evident that these descriptions apply to him:

...it is so evident of itself that it is I who doubts, who understands, and who desires, that there is no reason here to add anything to explain it. And I have certainly the power of imagining likewise; for although it may happen (as I formerly supposed) that none of the things which I imagine are true, nevertheless this power of imagining does not cease to be really in use, and it forms part of my thought. Finally, I am the same who feels, that is to say, who perceives certain things, as by the organs of sense, since in truth, I see light, I hear noise, I feel heat. But it will be said that these phenomena are false and that I am dreaming. Let it be so; still it is at least certain that it seems to me that I see light, that I hear noise, and that I feel heat.18

Let us examine this suggestion more closely.

Each of the descriptions, (a) through (c), falls into a class of descriptions that P.F. Strawson has called "logically individuating descriptions." Logically individuating descriptions are descriptions which begin with phrases such as 'the only. . .', 'the first. . .', 'the one. . .', and so on. By employing this kind of description a speaker explicitly proclaims that it applies to a unique particular.19 Thus, a logically individuating description can fail to apply in either of two ways. On the one hand, it can fail to apply if there is no item which answers to the description; on the other hand, it fails to apply if more than one
item answers to it. For example, the description 'the only Cartesian with three legs' would not apply if there were no tripod Cartesian or if there were more than one.

Some logically individuating descriptions are also descriptions that Strawson calls "pure individuating descriptions." A logically individuating description counts as a pure individuating description if it does not incorporate any proper names, dates, or demonstratives that relate the alleged particular which is supposed to satisfy that description to any particular in the class of particulars that bear a unique spatio-temporal relation to each other and which constitute the single unified system of reference within which competent language users conduct the business of identifying and reidentifying particulars. For example, the description 'the only Cartesian with three legs' as well as the descriptions, (a) through (c), are pure individuating descriptions.

Now unless an item which allegedly fits a pure individuating description can be placed within our commonly accepted framework of spatio-temporally related particulars, it must be assumed that that description is empty. Suppose, for example, that someone were to claim that the description 'the only Cartesian with three legs' applied to someone, but that he was unable to specify, even approximately, the historical setting of the person who allegedly answers to that description or to relate the alleged person to something which could be so specified. In such a case, Strawson points out, there would be no evidence for thinking that that
description applied to anyone. For if no one could say anything about the history of an alleged person, what other evidence could be given for thinking that he existed? But Descartes surely recognized that so long as he continued to doubt the existence of his body he could not identify himself by placing himself in a given space-time region. Yet for just that reason there is no evidence for thinking that anyone satisfies (a) through (c). So it appears that Descartes' claim that someone answers to the descriptions, (a) through (c), is on a par with the claim that someone whose place in history is unknown answers to the description 'the only Cartesian with three legs'. In other words, (a) through (c), and hence Descartes cogito certainty, and his Archimedean point of self-analysis appear to amount to empty veritage.

But suppose it were objected that even though Descartes fails to offer his readers any evidence for thinking that (a) through (c) apply to someone, he could be sure, and anyone else who engages in Cartesian analysis could be sure, that (a) through (c) apply to someone. Yet even if this supposition is granted, Descartes cannot be sure that these descriptions apply to anyone. For a logically individuating description also fails to apply if more than one item fits that description; yet Descartes cannot be sure that only one individual entertains the doubts that he describes in the First Meditation. Might not more than one being—the evil genius, for example, doubt that someone satisfies the
descriptions that Descartes gives of his body, position in space, and so on, and might he not desire to know more about these things? Moreover, Descartes could not be certain that an exhaustive description of what he seems to perceive "as by the intervention of the bodily organs" applies to one and only one percipient. For suppose it were claimed that Descartes could give an exhaustive description of his current perceptual field. Such a supposition would, of course, be jejune since one's perceptual field is in continuous flux, but let us grant it anyway. For even if it is granted, there is no logical guarantee that such a description would have uniqueness of application. For so long as Descartes doubts that he has a body which bears a unique spatio-temporal relationship to the items which constitute our unified frame of reference, for all he knows there are an indefinitely large number of percipients whose perceptual fields are qualitatively indistinguishable from the perceptual field which Descartes alleges is "his." So Descartes cannot be sure that descriptions such as (a) through (c), no matter how extensively these descriptions were filled out, apply to a unique being. For he has no way of ruling out the possibility that different subjects of states of consciousness are in qualitatively indistinguishable states of consciousness.

Strawson argues that persons can identify their conscious states since persons have bodies, and for that reason it is in principle possible for someone who describes one of his conscious states to secure that description to an axis of spatio-temporal
direction, viz. his unique place in a unified system of physical particulars. In this regard he suggests that there is a class of "private particulars" or "particular states of consciousness" to which belong such items as sensations, feelings, thoughts, sense-data, and so on.\textsuperscript{22} Although identifying references to private particulars depend on identifying references to persons, Strawson points out that in identifying the former, an identifying reference to a particular person is not always made explicit. For example, someone who is writhe on the ground might say (i) "This pain is terrible," or a doctor who induces a pain in a patient might ask (ii) "How severe was that pain?" In each of these cases no explicit reference is made to the person who is suffering the pain, but Strawson points out, an implicit reference to that person has been made. This is evidenced by the fact that (i) and (ii) can be paraphrased as (i') "The pain I am suffering is terrible," and (ii') "How severe was the pain you just suffered?" Unlike these kinds of cases, no implicit reference to a particular person is involved when identifying references are made to public particulars. Although (iii) "That tree is a Catalpa" could be paraphrased as (iii') "The tree that you (I) see is a Catalpa" a reference to a particular person is not implicit in (iii) since it could be said by anyone to anyone in the appropriate setting with no change in its identificatory force. On the other hand:
In order for an experience description to be given currency, someone or other who gave it currency, should also have been able to give an independent identification of the sufferer of the experience.\textsuperscript{24}

In other words:

Identifying references to 'private particulars' depend on identifying references to particulars of another type altogether, namely persons.\textsuperscript{25}

It is for this reason, I submit, that Descartes could not consistently claim to identify his own thoughts or conscious states. For by accepting the suppositions of systematic doubt he exhausts the resources that are essential to his knowing who anyone, including himself, is for any purpose.

In section 5 of the present chapter we saw that all cases where $S$ may be said to see who $N$ is are cases where:

1. $S$ sees some feature or complex of features that are unique to $N$; and

2. $S$ is able to associate the features he sees with characteristics that he remembers about $N$ on the basis of his past interactions with $N$ or reliable sources of information about $N$.

We also saw that in any case where $N$ is not currently on the scene:

3. $Q$ can raise a question about $N$ only if he remembers something about him---e.g. a passing reference that has been made to $N$, $N$'s name or title, or a definite description of $N$; and

4. $S$ can issue an answer which he knows is correct to a question that has been raised about $N$ only if he remembers something about $N$.

But Descartes, or anyone else who accepts the suppositions of systematic doubt, must be called out on each of the above counts since he supposes that everything that is represented to him by
sense and memory is false and illusory:

I suppose, then, that all things I see are false; I persuade myself that nothing has ever existed of all that my fallacious memory represents to me. I consider that I possess no senses; I imagine that body, figure, extension, movement and place are but the fictions of my mind. 26

Someone who supposes that nothing that he sees is the way that he sees it, and that nothing he remembers happened in the way that he remembers it, cannot consistently suppose that he sees or remembers who anyone is. In short, anyone who accepts the suppositions of systematic doubt cannot consistently suppose that he knows who anyone is for any purpose. And for that reason, he could not suppose that he asks himself questions about himself, or that he issues himself correct answers to those questions. In other words, by accepting the suppositions of systematic doubt Descartes rules out the possibility of self-analysis.

7. Summary

This dissertation began with an attempt to explain why Descartes believed that what ordinarily goes unquestioned in our everyday lives is in some measure doubtful. I have tried to show that Descartes' belief is partially explained by his awareness that in the past he deceived himself even about that which seemed most evident to him. But that awareness is merely the psychological spark which ignites the philosophical fuel that is provided by his concept of knowledge. On the one hand, Descartes maintains that the wise man is he who has nurtured the capacity to suspend
judgement about anything that can be reasonably doubted. On the other hand, Descartes believes that the whole of human wisdom is a single system which is constituted by a finite and ordered set of interrelated subsystems. He thinks that these systems are ordered in the sense that some of the truths which comprise some of those constituting systems can be known only if certain truths of other encompassing systems are known. Descartes treats metaphysics as the base system or foundation of human wisdom, and he holds that unless the first principles of metaphysics are known with apodictic certainty there can be no certain knowledge in any of the sciences.

The keystone of our "ordinary" system of beliefs is the assumption that we are not always mislead by our senses and deceived by our memory. Someone who construes science as the long arm of common sense is bound by this assumption. But according to Descartes this assumption is one which cannot be taken for granted in the absence of further reflection. For even though the assumption is one that is essential to the progress of science, Descartes thinks that powerful and maturely considered doubts can be raised against it, and for that reason, he concludes that it requires a metaphysical justification. Let us recapitulate the reasons which Descartes thinks motivate those doubts, and reconsider the utility which he thinks derives from engaging in those doubts. We will then be in a position to review the dialectic by which Descartes purports to derive the principles upon which his alleged justification
of the above assumption rests.

Descartes notes that perceptual errors about the shape and size of an object sometimes occur when the object in question is hardly perceptible or very far away. But these errors are not sufficient to warrant a general skepticism with regard to the senses. Moreover, even though he claims that there are no criteria by which waking consciousness can be distinguished from dreaming consciousness, he submits that this alleged lack of criteria is not sufficient to warrant a doubt about the existence of the physical world. What is sufficient to warrant that doubt, according to Descartes, is ignorance about the existence of a beneficent God. For he maintains that insofar as one is ignorant about the existence of such a God he cannot rule out the possibility that there is a powerful and deceitful being who causes him to believe that there is a world even though there is none. Because Descartes himself feigns ignorance about God's existence, he supposes that he is always mislead by his senses and his memory.

The utility which allegedly derives from accepting this supposition is that it enables one to detach his mind from the affairs of sense, and makes it impossible to deny any proposition that is subsequently discovered to be true. Descartes maintains that the truths of metaphysics cannot be grasped by a mind which is blinded by the images of sensible objects. Rather, those truths are only accessible to an understanding which is pure and unclouded by these images; indeed, he submits that once the mind clearly and
distinctly perceives certain propositions, it is no longer possible for it to deny that they are true.

The first certainty to emerge from Descartes' program of doubt is the certainty he has that he himself exists. This certainty subsequently becomes the focal point of Descartes' analysis in the Meditations. For since Descartes contends that he can be certain about his own existence despite the fact that he supposes that he is always mislead by his senses and his memory, he maintains that by reflecting on his own nature he cannot fall into error as a result of being mislead by what he sees, hears, otherwise perceives or remembers. Given the certainty that he exists, in other words, Descartes' method in the Meditations is the method of self-analysis. And by engaging in self-analysis he purports to discover and clarify the notions of what thought and truth are, what a thing is, and what number, duration, and substance are. Finally, by reflecting on the fact that he himself is finite and limited, Descartes maintains that the idea of God presents itself to his mind with great clarity and distinctness. Given this idea, his next project is to show that it represents something real. This is the point where my criticism of Descartes' Meditations begins.

Descartes maintains that the reality represented to him by his idea of God is infinite, but since he himself is finite, and since something—not even the reality represented by an idea—cannot be created out of nothing, he concludes that God exists. Once Descartes has persuaded himself that there is a God, he further
argues that since God is a supremely perfect being, He is liable to no error or defect and is therefore no deceiver. On these grounds, he concludes that whatever he clearly and distinctly perceives is true. The problem with this argument is that it is circular. For in order to be certain that God exists Descartes must first assure himself that all his clear and distinct perceptions are true. Yet he maintains that he can be sure of that only if he is sure that God is no deceiver. And since he can be sure that God exists and is no deceiver only if he clearly and distinctly perceives that this is so, Descartes cannot validate his criterion of clarity and distinctness unless he employs that very criterion. Moreover, since this criterion is suggested to him by his alleged certainty that he is a thing which thinks, so long as he remains ignorant of God's existence he cannot be sure that he is a thing which thinks. And since this certainty is the one upon which he bases his certainty that he himself exists, by accepting the suppositions of systematic doubt, Descartes undermines the foundation upon which he rests the certainty that he exists. What is the relationship that Descartes thought obtained between his certainty that he is thinking and the certainty that he exists, and how does he undermine the foundation of the latter?

In chapter three, I consider the claim championed by Hintikka and by Boër and Lycan that if you know who someone is you know that that person exists. The difficulty with this claim is that it appears that one can know who a given fictional character
is but not know that he exists. Yet this difficulty is only an apparent one since it would be a mistake to claim that one can know that someone exists simpliciter. Rather, one's claim to know that someone exists can always be specified in terms of the purposes and projects that his knowledge enables him to complete. For example, one might be said to know that Sherlock Holmes exists relative to the kinds of purposes that knowledge of fictional characters would enable one to complete, but relative to other unrelated purposes one might be said not to know that Holmes exists. Given that claims to know that someone exists can always be specified in this manner, I argue that Descartes' claim to know that he himself exists can be specified in terms of his purposes in the Meditations. And since one of Descartes' central purposes in that work is to show how a knowledge of God can be derived from a knowledge of one's own nature, I conclude that the certainty Descartes claims to have about his own existence can be specified in terms of his purpose of knowing God.

Now Descartes claims that he can be certain that he exists because he can be certain that he is thinking. In The Problem of Knowledge A.J. Ayer recognizes that Descartes sometimes formulates his first certainty as an inference. He submits that the inference from "I think" to "I exist" is a valid one, but argues that there was no need for Descartes to derive sum fromCogito since he thinks that the certainty of the former can be independently established in the same way that the certainty of the latter can be established.
Ayer points out that no one could deceive anyone by getting him
to believe that he thinks and that he exists. But on these grounds
he fallaciously concludes that no one could reasonably doubt "I
think" or "I exist." He argues that what makes "I think" and
"I exist" indubitable is that the truth of each follows from their
being doubted by the person who expresses them. Ayer is correct
in maintaining that these two statements are indubitable, and that
anyone who says "I think" or "I exist" says the truth. But
even if the truth of "I doubt that I exist" entails the truth "I
exist," it doesn't follow that a reasonable doubt cannot be
entertained about the latter. Ayer runs into similar difficulties
with the statements "I know that I exist" and "I exist." If
anyone made either of these statements he would of course know
that he exists, but the reason he would know it is not because
the truth of the latter entails the truth of the former.
Rather, anyone who made either of these statements would know
that they are true since a necessary condition of a speaker's
ability to consummate a reference to himself by employing the
pronoun 'I' is that he knows who he himself is for some purpose.

Like Ayer, Hintikka recognizes that Descartes sometimes
formulates the cogito certainty as an inference. Unlike Ayer,
he claims that the inference is invalid. Yet Hintikka claims that
another interpretation can be given to Descartes' cogito certainty--
namely, anyone's denial that he exists must be pointless since
no one could mislead anyone by saying "I don't exist." He argues
that if anyone asserts "I don't exist" to a listener, and if the listener understands the assertion, then he knows that the speaker's reference and the speaker are one and the same. For this reason, the listener cannot fail to know that the speaker's assertion is false. By the same token, Hintikka claims that the reason why no one can doubt that he himself exists is that if he asserts "I don't exist" to himself he knows that the speaker's reference and the speaker are one and the same. But this is not the reason why no one can doubt that he exists. If I assert "I don't exist" to you, you might know that what I assert is false even if you don't know who I am for any purpose. But I cannot assert "I don't exist" to myself unless I know who I am for some purpose since a speaker can employ the pronoun 'I' to consummate a reference to himself only if he knows who he is for some purpose. So there is no case where a thinker, not knowing who he himself is for any purpose, nevertheless asserts "I don't exist" to himself, and then in his role as audience understands, because he appreciates the logic of 'I', that the speaker's reference and the speaker are one and the same. What this shows is that a speaker's inability to doubt that he exists is not contingent, as Hintikka thinks, upon his asserting "I don't exist" to himself. Rather, if a speaker can use the pronoun 'I' to make any assertion, either to himself or to someone else, he can be said to know who he himself is for some purpose and hence he cannot doubt that he exists.
Hintikka further maintains that if anyone asserts "I exist" his assertion is self-verifying since no one who understood it could fail to be convinced of its truth. Hence, if I assert "I exist" to myself, my asserting it is sufficient for my knowing that I exist. He explains this phenomenon by noting that anyone who uses the pronoun 'I' to make an assertion refers to himself. But the logic of the pronoun 'I' is not sufficient to explain this phenomenon. For unless I knew that it is I who assert "I exist," I would not know of whom that assertion is true. So in order for Hintikka's explanation to be complete he needs to appeal to a nonlogical principle. That is, someone who asserts anything, to himself or to anyone else, knows that he asserts it whenever he asserts it. But this principle explains why someone's asserting anything is sufficient for his knowing that he exists. Hence, the fact that "I exist" is self-verifying is superfluous to a correct understanding of Descartes' first certainty.

Like Ayer, Williams maintains that Descartes' first certainty can be expressed as an inference, but he denies that the inference can be expressed as an Aristotelian syllogism with a suppressed major premise. Rather, he submits that the inference from "I think" to "I exist" is valid in virtue of a principle of language—viz. the principle of presupposition. Roughly, the presupposition interpretation of the cogito inference holds that the move from "I think" to "I exist" is valid since the truth of the latter is a necessary condition of the truth of the former. Williams requires
that the meaning of "I exist" must be specifiable in terms of an
identifying description of the person who asserts it. Generally
speaking, in any case where someone uses the pronoun 'I' to con­
sumate a reference to himself, his ability to do so presupposes
that he knows who he is for some purpose and hence that he can
issue an identifying description of himself. Williams brings into
question Descartes' ability to describe himself on the ground that
Descartes exhausts his resources for providing such a description
by accepting the suppositions of systematic doubt. For this
reason, Williams submits that Descartes' cogito inference represents
an illegitimate application of the principle of presupposition.
But Williams fails to explain the way in which Descartes' inference
represents an illegitimate application of this principle since he
fails to show how someone who accepts the suppositions of systematic
doubt, rules out the possibility of describing himself.

In the final chapter I begin by outlining Boër and Lycan's
proposal that claims to know who someone is can always be specified
in terms of the purposes or projects that one's knowledge enables
him to complete. I also discuss the five kinds of speech situations
in which who-questions can be raised and answered, and I pay particular
attention to situations where the questioner, the person in question,
and the person to whom the question is addressed are all identical.
This is the speech situation of self-analysis of which Cartesian
self-analysis is a special case. With regard to it, I show that
much of Descartes' procedure in the Second Meditation can be construed
as an attempt to secure the Archimedean point of his alleged
analysis of himself, and I suggest that that point can be
represented by the description 'the one who is certain that I
exist'. I then argue that no one could apply this description to
himself unless he could specify the referent of his use in that
description of the pronoun 'I'. Here, it appeared that Descartes
could provide a descriptive backing for his use of the first-
person pronoun by identifying himself as the one who has certain
thoughts. But I argue, along Strawsonian lines, that it would be
impossible for someone to identify his own thoughts unless he
knew who he was for some purpose. In this regard, I show that no
one could know who anyone is for any purpose unless he remembers
something about him. And since Descartes supposes that nothing
he remembers happened in the way that he remembers, I conclude
that Descartes could not consistently claim to know who he himself
is for any purpose and hence that he could not claim to identify
his own thoughts. Finally, I point out that if someone didn't
know who he was for any purpose, he couldn't engage in self-analysis.

Descartes claims that he can be certain that he is not always
mislead by his senses and by his memory since he believes that he
has been given these faculties by a beneficent God. He argues
that if God had not given him the means to identify and correct the
errors that sometimes result from his use of these faculties, but
had instead allowed him to be systematically mislead by them, then
He would have to answer to the charge of deceit. But God, Descartes
believes himself to have demonstrated, is no deceiver. Yet it is just this argument which must be called into question. For it rests on Descartes' certainty that he exists, which in turn rests on his certainty that he is thinking. Yet it would be impossible for anyone to identify his thoughts unless he knew who he was for some purpose, and since knowing who anyone is for any purpose requires that one remember something about that person, by accepting the suppositions of systematic doubt, Descartes annihilates the possibility of knowing who he is for any purpose—even the purpose of knowing God.
Chapter IV

FOOTNOTES


5 Ibid., p. 150.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 153.


10 Two objections might be raised against (R). First, it seems that someone could accidentally point to an object that he didn't know existed. But accidently pointing to an object is a different matter from ostensively introducing it as a subject of discourse. Second, it is sometimes possible to point to a property of an object even though the property can't be adequately described—e.g. the color of a pear. But a property of an object should not be confused with the object of which it is a property. Moreover, in most cases one's ability to point to the former is contingent on one's ability to point to the latter.

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In some cases, if Q raises a who-question that is based on what he is able to see about N, an answer that is based on some other sense modality might be intrinsically final. For example, a detective might want to match a photograph with a voice recording. But a who-question that Q bases on what he is able to perceive about N via a particular sense modality cannot be answered by a response that is based on what S is able to perceive about N via the same sense modality.

Bill Lycan maintains that an amnesia victim might, as a result of looking at his hand, see who he himself is for some purpose. I do not understand the case that he constructs since I do not understand the notion of "amnesia." Just what is it that an amnesia victim is not supposed to know?


When someone sees something directly and concurrently let us say that he is looking straight at the object in question, and that the object seen exists at a time which coincides with the time at which it is seen. Most cases of seeing are cases of this kind, and do not need to be specified as such. For the most part I shall ignore such specifications in what follows, but I shall specify atypical cases as nonconcurrent or indirect if the context does not make it clear that such a case is under consideration.

According to Strawson:

. . .historical occurrences, material objects, people, and their shadows are all particulars; whereas qualities and properties, numbers and species are not.


In general, Strawson's remarks suggest that if an individual counts as a particular, it has a unique spatio-temporal position, or it can be identified by reference to an individual which has one. I shall say more about one variety of the latter sort of particular shortly.
The system is unified since (i) at any time, each element of the system bears a unique spatial relation to every other element, and since (ii) some elements of the system at any given time are elements of the system at other times.

Strawson distinguishes between identifying references and identification. A speaker makes an identifying reference when he uses a proper name, a pronoun, or a definite description to refer to a particular. He identifies that particular when someone, "on the strength" of his identifying reference, identifies the particular to which he refers.

The items Strawson covers by the terms 'private particular' or 'private experience' appear to be roughly equivalent to the items covered by Descartes' use of the work cogitatio. The class of items designated by the term 'private particular' should be distinguished from the class covered by the term 'P-predicate' since even though the ascription of a P-predicate implies "...the possession of consciousness on the part of that to which they are ascribed," he allows that predicates such as 'going for a walk' and 'coiling a rope' count a P-predicates.

If a class of particulars, A, are identifiability dependent on a class of particulars, B, then A-particulars are such that it is possible to identify them only if it is possible to identify B-particulars, and B-particulars can be identified without making references to particulars of other types.

Strawson, op. cit., p. 23.


Descartes, op. cit., I, p. 149.
the mole tunneling out a gnarled grovel
gnaws beyond the earthen mask to see
THE SUN
ignites even the day of the mole
who is blinded in but not by
THE LIGHT
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Ibid., Vol. 2.


