

History of Philosophy B: Lecture Two

1. The *cogito*: what is it?

Cogito ergo sum is Latin for 'I think, therefore I am'. The phrase itself appears first, in French (*je pense, donc le suis*) in the Discourse. Later, we have the phrase itself in the Latin *Principles* and Latin translation of the Discourse. *It does not appear in the Meditations!* Instead, what we find is 'I think, I am' (*je pense, je suis*). The omission of the 'therefore' is of great interest, as we shall see.

The point is that even if there was an evil demon deceiving me, I must exist! To be deceived there must be *something* that exists to be so deceived.

2. The *cogito*: what does it prove?

If it goes through, the *cogito* itself proves remarkably less than one would hope. Descartes knows this. *All* it proves is that you exist, at this exact moment in time, and think. *And that's it*. It doesn't prove the existence of other people, material objects etc.

3. The *cogito*: what Descartes do with it?

First, it demonstrates global scepticism is false.

Second, Descartes thinks it helps him move out of Cartesian Scepticism. At the start of the third meditation, he argues that the *reason* that he knows he exists is that it is a rational intuition. It is something he perceives *clearly and distinctly*. But there are lots of *other* things that he perceives clearly and distinctly. He perceives the various mathematical truths and geometrical truths, clearly and distinctly. And, of course, he has clear and distinct ideas about God. At which point, he moves to demonstrating God exists, and from there the existence of the external world.

Third, Descartes thinks the *cogito* demonstrates what he is *essentially*. He is *essentially* a thinking being. Not essentially a human, or a Frenchman, or a philosopher. As we shall see in later lectures, this gets turned into his argument for the separation between the mind and the body.

4. Is the *cogito* valid?

The criticisms of Descartes' contemporaries is that it has an *invalid syllogistic form*. What it needed was an extra premise.

Major Premise: Everything that thinks, exists.

Minor Premise: I think.

Conclusion: I exist.

But, the argument goes, this extra major premise is unwarranted.

Example: John McClane thinks.

Should we *deny* that this true? Just because he doesn't exist doesn't mean we can't predicate things of him (does it?!) Certainly there's a tension here:

Example: Descartes on triangles.

Whilst Aristotelian logic dominated, it has been superseded. That would be why your logic classes (if you take them) don't deal entirely with syllogisms. Sure, it has an invalid syllogistic form. But so do lots of *valid* arguments!

5. Is the *cogito* question begging?

Some have accused the *cogito* of begging the question. In saying 'I think', we're begging the question. For me to think, one must *assume* that I exist. So the premise *assumes* that the conclusion is true.

Bertrand Russell tries to get around this by *eliminating* the use of the word 'I'. He argues that the 'I' appears only for grammatical convenience. Instead we should use 'There is thinking' which eliminates the use of the 'I'. Bonus: it's no longer question begging! Penalty: it's obviously invalid!

6. The *cogito* as a 'rational insight'

What is it if it's not an argument? In his replies to Mersenne, Descartes writes

When someone says 'I am thinking therefore I am, or I exist', he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind.

This has also been given as the reason for Descartes dropping the '*ergo*' in the *cogito*. Descartes has lots of things to say about the relationship of the *cogito* to the alleged suppressed premise that 'all thinking things exist'. For instance, he says he has to *know* that to understand the *cogito* but that doesn't demonstrate you understand the *cogito* by means of an argument.

So what is it if it's not an argument? Well, a simple rational insight. Hintikka considers it a 'performance' as opposed to an 'inference' (*Philosophical Review* 71). Does that mean we can escape Cartesian doubt?

7. The Lichtenberg Objection

There can be thunder without a thunderer, so why not thinking without a thinker?