



Flaws of the ‘cogito ergo sum’ and its consequences on Descartes’s Philosophy

Debilidades del ‘cogito ergo sum’ y sus consecuencias en la filosofía de Descartes

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ABSTRACT: As found within Descartes’s *Discourse on Method* and his *Principles of Philosophy*, we readers meet the famed *cogito* utterance, or the “I think, therefore I am”. Now, this article will commence by explicating how the *cogito ergo sum* arises in both of these Cartesian texts, and the results that follow from this key assertion of Cartesian philosophy. Next, this piece will challenge Descartes’s findings issuing from these appearances of the *cogito ergo sum*, which will help to lead readers to be able to claim that neither the “I think, therefore I am” of the *Discourse on Method* nor that of the *Principles of Philosophy* amounts to be indubitable. Lastly, to achieve such an end, this present author will employ the *Objections and Replies* to Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy*, to effectively doubt the “I think, therefore I am,” the self, or mind, or soul, its existence as a thinking thing, God and its existence, and the reality of the corporeal, as similarly found in both the *Discourse* and *Principles*.

Keywords: *History of Philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, Descartes, cogito ergo sum.*

RESUMEN: Dentro del *Discurso del método* y los *Principios de la filosofía*, los lectores nos encontramos con el famoso enunciado “pienso, luego existo”. Ahora, este artículo comenzará explicando cómo surge el *cogito ergo sum* en estos textos cartesianos, y los resultados que se derivan de esta afirmación clave de la filosofía cartesiana. Luego, este escrito desafiará los hallazgos de Descartes que tratan sobre esta aparición del *cogito ergo sum*, lo que capacitará a los lectores para aseverar que ni el “pienso, luego existo” del *Discurso del método* ni el de los *Principios de la filosofía* es indudable. Por último, para lograr tal fin, el presente autor empleará las *Objeciones y Respuestas* a las *Meditaciones Metafísicas* de Descartes para efectivamente dudar acerca del “pienso, luego existo”, el sí mismo, mente, o alma, su existencia como una cosa pensante, Dios y su existencia y la realidad de lo extenso, similarmente a cómo se encuentra tanto en el *Discurso* como en los *Principios*.

Palabras clave: *Historia de la filosofía, metafísica, epistemología, Descartes, cogito ergo sum.*



Introduction

Cogito ergo sum, “I think, therefore I am,” a claim revolutionary in philosophy’s history, which its proclaimer, Descartes, uttered in the *Discourse on Method* and *Principles of Philosophy*, aids in the construction of central claims integral to the Cartesian philosophical enterprise.¹ However, what if we can debase Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum*, and as such, reveal the damage that would do to Descartes’s view of the self, or mind, or soul, its reality as thinking, as well as God and that such a being exists, and further, the reality of the body.

The Emergence and Consequences of the *Cogito* Declaration in Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*

In good orderly fashion, Descartes opens his *Discourse on Method* by dividing his treatise into six parts.² Now, if we examine part two, or that section in which Descartes discovers “the principle rules of method,” and four in which Descartes “proves the existence of God and the human soul which are the foundations of his metaphysics,” we encounter Descartes outlining the proper unfolding of rational investigation as well as his *cogito* proclamation and the main outcomes of this declaration.³

So, turning to part two of Descartes’s *Discourse*, we readers encounter a well-known Cartesian claim, namely that we are never to embrace anything as being true when we do not possess an evident, or apparent knowledge of its truth, without any inclination of doubt.⁴ Moreover, we should note that Descartes further claims that when we cannot adequately discern something’s truth-value, we should embrace the opinion that is most probable regarding its status as true or false.⁵

These utterances are integral for us to note, since Descartes’s embrace of the *cogito ergo sum*, in part four of his *Discourse*, asserts that the “I think, therefore I am” is self-evident, beyond doubt, and thus, a true starting point and standard for judging all claims that may not be as immediately knowable as

1 Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Discourse on the Method* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1985). 127 & Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Principles of Philosophy* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1985). 195.

2 Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Discourse on the Method* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1985). 109.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 120.

5 Ibid., 123.



exact or incorrect.⁶ As such, let us now turn to the fourth part of Descartes's *Discourse*, where its author applies these methodological assertions to his claim that from the *cogito*, or the certainty of the self, as a thinking thing, comes the clear and distinct knowledge of God, as well as the true nature of the corporeal.

Now, as findable in the fourth part of the *Discourse*, we readers find Descartes asserting that he, by abandoning the practice of ascribing undoubtable certainty to what is questionable, when out of practical necessity, is not a standard of truth he could genuinely embrace.⁷ Instead, we find that Descartes declares:

But since I now wished to devote myself solely to the search for truth, I thought it necessary to do the very opposite and reject as if absolutely false everything which I can imagine the least doubt, in order to see if I was left believing anything that was entirely indubitable.⁸

In other words, we find Descartes resolving to subject everything to the litmus test, so to speak, of unsurety, and if anything is unsafe from such scrutinization, it must be cast aside, so that only what is genuinely true can remain.⁹ However, we readers may ask what is it that Descartes doubts in this part of the *Discourse*, and how this will lead him out of the maze of falsities, to something sure, on which he can build the foundation of his philosophy?

Well, first, we find that Descartes, for the sake of argument, casts aside sense-perception as a means to undoubtable truth, since the senses deceive, or at times, fall short of accurately describing reality.¹⁰ At the same time, Descartes even bashes the power of reason for argument's sake when he asserts:

...there are men who make mistakes in reasoning, committing logical fallacies concerning the simplest questions in geometry, and because I judged that I was as prone to error as anyone else, I rejected as unsound all the arguments that I had previously taken as demonstrative proofs.¹¹

One reason as to why Descartes denies both the exactness of reason and the accuracy of sense-perception is so that he may arrive at his first principle, or the *Discourse's cogito* proclamation.¹² That is, by declaring that even in the face of absolute doubt, because of neither the senses nor the power

6 Ibid., 120.

7 Ibid., 126-127.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 127.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.



of reason proving to be immutably unshakeable, and even in the wake of doubting waking life, and entertaining the possibility of all truth being merely a dream, Descartes cannot deny that he is the source that is thinking such uncertainties.¹³ Accordingly, to Descartes, this must mean that as a doubter he is something rather than nothing, and hence, from the power of thinking, Descartes arrives at the claim “I think, therefore I am.”¹⁴

Also, it is important to draw attention to Descartes’s assertions regarding how to better understand the link between thinking and being, for we find that to Descartes the self, or mind, or soul is more intimately knowable than the body. For, as Descartes declares:

Accordingly, this ‘I’—that is, the soul by which I am what I am—is entirely distinct from the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist.¹⁵

That is, to Descartes, we can know the mind more so than the body because of our failure to genuinely doubt the “I think,” leaving us with the foundational truth that there is a self, or mind, or soul which can use its own operations like doubting to securely know its own existence.¹⁶ However, to Descartes, this differs from the reality of the body; for, an “I am,” is noticeable only by a source of thinking, or that one can only recognize their being by being cognizant, whereas a source of thinking need not a body for its ability to know itself.¹⁷

From this initial point of “I think, therefore I am,” in part four of Descartes’s *Discourse*, Descartes then informs readers that the discovery of the *cogito ergo sum* led him to a series of reflections, in which his search for that which he truly derived from launches.¹⁸ That is, we now find Descartes establishing the existence of God from an argument involving perfection.¹⁹ Such a claim begins with Descartes admitting that he is imperfect, or at a lesser degree of perfection than what he can envision to be his cause, starting with the sheer reality of engaging in doubt, which implies a lack of perfection, or of complete and total knowledge.²⁰ Evidence of this claim is viewable when Descartes asserts:

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 127-128.

19 Ibid., 128.

20 Ibid., 127-128.



...reflecting upon the fact that I was doubting and that consequently my being was not wholly perfect (for I saw clearly that it is a greater perfection to know than to doubt) ...²¹

Now, Descartes then finds that his ability to notice existence outside of himself, indicates that he did not receive such a perfection from a source that can be absolutely nothing.²² Finally, that is because Descartes declares it contradictory to assent to the idea that nothing could produce an idea of something, or in this case the power to witness existing things cannot fail to derive from some origin.²³

Such an origin, Descartes then informs us, must be a supremely perfect God, for just as one cannot genuinely claim that a peak exists without first necessarily resting on a self-sufficient base, a cause less perfect, or more dependent, cannot produce a cause more perfect, or less dependent than itself.²⁴ Consequently, this Cartesian view that something better must necessarily causally precede something less than itself, and not that something less than better can give way to what is best, leads Descartes to assert that a source that he can attribute all perfections of which he lacks, such as infinitude, eternity, immutability, omniscience, and omnipotence, indeed is, or bares reality, and it is these perfections that belong to God, exclusively.²⁵

After establishing God's existence, Descartes continues to unpack how the existence of such a being is requisite for the reality of the body, although this being, God, is itself immaterial.²⁶ Now, regarding God's immateriality, Descartes sees to it that ideas addressing the corporeal, or bodily, indicate to him that material things are compositions, or a conjoining of parts.²⁷ As such, because things are amalgamations of pieces, Descartes sees that they form an order of dependence, or just as a hand can still be a hand without fingers, whereas fingers cannot be fingers if those extremities were absent of the hand, God need only itself to be, whereas all things other than God ultimately continually require God for their reality and existence.²⁸ Thus, because God is perfect and dependence an imperfection, God cannot be bodily to Descartes as found in the fourth part of his *Discourse*.²⁹

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 128.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 128-129.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 129.

29 Ibid., 128-129.



However, to Descartes, God links to existence just like when we perceive three angles as corresponding to our conception of triangularity.³⁰ In other words, Descartes concludes that God's perfection as existing corresponds to the very idea we possess of God.³¹ Thus, even though God is immaterial to Descartes, he seems to hold to the belief that God is, or exists, and is ultimately that which the body requires to subsist.³² That is because, to Descartes God as perfect, cannot be a deceiver, and what we perceive to be corporeal must be true.³³ For, although deception may display powerfulness it can never be a moral perfection, and hence, what we sense around us although at times foggy, must be true as deriving from an "all-truthful" God, and rather it is we who err because we are not infinite.³⁴ Lastly, evidence Descartes asserts to show such human finitude, in the *Discourse*, includes that since we can always conceive and perceive something as exceeding us in ability, indicates that we are not boundless in our capabilities, and thus we are not infinite.³⁵

The Emergence and Consequences of the *Cogito* Argument in Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy*

Like we found in Descartes's *Discourse*, readers of the *Principles of Philosophy* almost immediately encounter Descartes's claim that one who wishes to secure truth must, at some time doubt everything to the fullest extent feasible.³⁶ That is because, to Descartes, preconceived beliefs ultimately deriving from childhood, prevent us from real knowledge of truth, because in youth, our powers of reason, as underdeveloped, steep us too much in our perceptions.³⁷

Now, to eradicate, or eviscerate these opinions, stopping us from establishing truth, we must engage in doubting everything that admits even the slightest trace of dubitability.³⁸ Accordingly, this leads us to Descartes's second principle, as found in the first part of his *Principles*, specifically that by

30 Ibid., 129-130.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 129-130, 131.

35 Ibid., 130-131.

36 Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Principles of Philosophy* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1985). 193.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.



regulating everything doubtable to falsehood, we can more clearly know what is indeed most accurate and simple to uncover in our journey towards truth.³⁹

However, we should note that Descartes's third principle, in this first part of the *Principles*, declares that we are not to apply this doubt to ordinary life, or that our doubts should never be separate from the quest for real knowledge, so that we never fall into absolute skepticism, or the total denial of the possibility of achieving truth.⁴⁰ At the same time, Descartes does assent to the idea that if we cannot yet free ourselves from such skepticism, we are to embrace what is solely most probable.⁴¹ In other words, to Descartes, and similar to what we found in the *Discourse*, when we cannot decide between options regarding a truth, we should accept that which is the most likely of choices.⁴²

Now, arising in Descartes's seventh principle of the first section of the *Principles*, we find the emergence of the *cogito* argument when Descartes declares the following:

In rejecting—and even imagining to be false—everything which we can in any way doubt, it is easy for us to suppose that there is no God and no heaven, and that there are no bodies, and even that we ourselves have no hands or feet, or indeed no body at all. But we cannot for all that suppose that we, who are having such thoughts, are nothing.⁴³

In other words, and as we found in the *Discourse*, Descartes believes that all that we can reject, even to the extent of hyperbole, can never lead us to fail to acknowledge that it is we who are expressing such doubts, and that we are indeed something rather than nothing.⁴⁴ As such, Descartes proclaims that such a hypothesis, or the “I think, therefore I am,” is the prime and most precise piece of knowledge that we can happen upon, if we resolve to engage in philosophy, orderly.⁴⁵ Lastly, let us now unpack the consequences of the *cogito* argument on Descartes's views regarding the self, or mind, or soul as thinking and knowable to itself, God, and its existence, as well as the reality of the body, as further found in the *Principles*.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Discourse on the Method* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1985). 123 & Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Principles of Philosophy* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1985). 193.

43 Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Principles of Philosophy* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1985). 194-195.

44 Ibid., 195.

45 Ibid.



So, one result of Descartes's uncovering of the *cogito*, finds itself in principle eight of the initial section of the *Principles*, in which its author asserts that from the "I think, therefore I am," we can come to reveal the distinction between a soul, or thinking thing as opposed to a body, or a corporeal thing.⁴⁶ That is because Descartes believes that if we continue to take a doubtful approach to what we are not indubitably sure of, we can never ascribe to ourselves, initially, that we are in any way beings of extension.⁴⁷ Instead, Descartes proclaims that it is thinking alone that we know ourselves to possess, in a more immediate way than the body.⁴⁸

However, what is it that Descartes means by this ability to think, or that we possess thought? Well, luckily for we readers we find that the very next principle of the beginning section of the *Principles*, principle nine, is where Descartes defines thinking. That is, let us consider the following:

By the term 'thought', I understand everything which we are aware of as happening within us, in so far as we have an awareness of it. Hence, thinking is to be identified here not merely with understanding, willing, and imagining, but also with sensory awareness.⁴⁹

In other words, and as Descartes asserts, if we begin with the *cogito* proclamation, the "I think, therefore I am," we find that we are always something rather than nothing, and that the "I" that we identify with as our own, is that source which we understand as receiving sensory perceptions as well as actively perceiving our surroundings, in a conscious way.⁵⁰ Thus, we may safely assert that Descartes one consequence of the *cogito* argument is that it enables the conditions for the possibility for us to assert that we are those selves, or minds, or souls who are not only thinking up reality, but as "I's" we also know ourselves as the possessors of our sensory perceptions.⁵¹ Finally, if we turn to proposition eleven of this first section of Descartes's *Principles*, we come to another claim about the self, or mind, or soul, namely Descartes's further analysis of how it is that we can know the mind more amply than the body⁵²

Now, in the eleventh clause of the first part of Descartes's *Principles*, we readers encounter an alternate demonstration as to how that the knowledge of our minds "...is not simply prior to and more certain than the knowledge of our body, but also more evident, we should notice something very well

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 196.



known by the natural light: nothingness possesses no attributes or qualities.”⁵³ In other words, Descartes will now show us that because what is nothing cannot possess qualities, or attributes it is wherever we do find such qualities, or attributes, that we must infer they belong to something rather than nothing for nothing can only possess nothing.⁵⁴ Moreover, as Descartes further instructs, the more qualities, or attributes an entity possesses, the clearer our knowledge of that entity can be.⁵⁵

Consequently, we can know the mind better than we do the body, because Descartes assents to the idea that we know our minds via its qualities, or attributes, in a surer way than what those qualities, or attributes refer to, outside of our minds.⁵⁶ In other words, to Descartes, the mere fact that we judge things in the outside world, external to ourselves, does not actually show that the outside world truly exists with the same exactness than the way we understand ourselves to be.⁵⁷ Instead, such an ability to engage in judging is a quality, or attribute of ourselves, and reinforces that we are.⁵⁸ For, such a power like the quality, or attribute of the mind like judging, refers us back to we ourselves as the source of such judging, as a thinking thing, and not to the same degree as anything that we determine to be outside of ourselves, including what is bodily.⁵⁹ Finally, Descartes asserts that this demonstration leads us to know our minds more intimately than the body, since it is undeniably, we, as substances, who are thinking that things outside of ourselves exists, even if we lapse in such determinations.⁶⁰ That is, as Descartes asserts:

...<regarding all things that come into our mind, namely that we who think of them exist, even if they are false or have no existence>.⁶¹

Now, concerning the consequence of God and its existence as a result of the *cogito* argument, we may look to the fourteenth principle of the first section of Descartes’s *Principles*.⁶² So, if we turn to this fourteenth principle, we find Descartes addressing how necessary existence is a part of our concept of God.⁶³ Now, by necessary existence, we readers should note that Descartes believes that God is a

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 197.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., 196.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 197.

63 Ibid.



being who we cannot genuinely think of as not existing.⁶⁴ That is because, and as we found in the *Discourse*, God, to Descartes, is just as necessary as when we perceive something such as two right angles enclosed by three lines as being within the domain of our idea of a triangle.⁶⁵

In other words, the idea of all triangles, as three lines enclosed, ultimately equates to be one-hundred-eighty degrees which is the same angular sum that two right angles at ninety degrees each, enclosed by three lines, together, always produce.⁶⁶ As such, whether we perceive two right angles enclosed by three lines or think of one-hundred-eighty degrees, outlined by three conjoined lines, we are nevertheless envisioning what we understand to be a triangle.⁶⁷ Lastly, such an example of necessary existence, to Descartes, may also extend to our understanding of God. For, qualities, or attributes of God, such as infinity and eternity verily correspond to our idea of such a supreme being, as if God were akin to the idea of a triangle, syncing to the actual existence of two right angles, enclosed by three lines.⁶⁸

Moreover, another demonstration for God's existence that Descartes includes in the first section of his *Principles*, derives from how it is that because we can declare we possess an idea of a supremely perfect being, we can conclude that God does exist.⁶⁹ That is, if we turn to principle eighteen of the initial part of Descartes's *Principles*, we find Descartes investigating the origins of our idea of God and how that leads us back to God.⁷⁰ First, Descartes asserts that the idea of God is so great that only an entity like God could produce such an idea in us.⁷¹ One reason why Descartes believes such a notion is that only a cause at a greater degree of perfection than us can produce in us the idea of itself, and not that we, at a lesser degree of perfection than God, can place this idea, greater than ourselves, in us.⁷² Lastly, Descartes then claims that because we can never witness in our world a true example of something that possesses qualities, or attributes at a supreme level, as would God, shows that nothing external to us can place the idea of God, in us, either.⁷³

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., 197-198.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 199.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.



Next, regarding the corporeal body as a result of the *cogito* argument, we come to the second section of Descartes's *Principles*, principle one.⁷⁴ So as for this first principle of part two of Descartes's *Principles*, we readers encounter that first we must admit of the fact that our bodily sensations do not derive from our mind, for our minds cannot produce the sensation of pain in any area of our body.⁷⁵ Moreover, we may go further and claim that our minds also fail to be able to choose between the sensations that we undergo.⁷⁶ Thus, to Descartes, the fact that our minds do not absolutely overtake our body, along with the fact that God cannot deceive us in any way, leads to the assertion that corporeal reality must display truth.⁷⁷

That is because Descartes's God is perfect, and thus completely good.⁷⁸ As such, God would never establish a world that is false, rendering our perceptions of the bodily, to Descartes, to also bare validity, especially once we establish the essence, or reality of the body as amounting to being varieties of extension.⁷⁹ In other words, from the certainty of self, or the "I think, therefore I am" comes the ability to know oneself as a thinking thing, which leads to the establishment of a supremely perfect and truthful being, God, resulting in a real corporeal and extended world of "length, breadth and depth".⁸⁰ Finally, let us now consider objections to Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*, its results on the nature of the self, or mind, or soul, God and its existence, the reality of the body, and how it is that such disputes should lead us to abandon the Cartesian *cogito*, if we seek to follow Descartes's own method.

Challenges to Descartes's *Cogito Ergo Sum* and its Consequences on Other Cartesian Claims

Although the *cogito* argument appears in slight variation in Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, objections to this Cartesian masterpiece can also help us to debase central and akin claims found in Descartes's *Discourse on Method* as well as the *Principles of Philosophy*. That is, let us now

74 Ibid., 223.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.



consider central criticisms to Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*, its nature as thinking, God and its existence, and the reality of the body.

So, as for an initial formidable criticism of Descartes's *cogito*, as found in the objections to the *Meditations* which can be applicable to Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* of the *Discourse*, we may consider a facet of Gassendi's fifth objection. That is, let us consider:

...Since this is so, let us use the term 'mind', and let it be strictly a 'thinking thing.' ... You add that thought alone cannot be separate from you. Certainly there is no reason not to grant you this... Nonetheless I want to stop here and ask whether, in saying that thought cannot be separated from you, you mean that you can continue to think indefinitely, so long as you exist... But it will hardly convince those who do not see how you are able to think during deep sleep or indeed in the womb.⁸¹

In other words, one point of dispute that Gassendi makes against the Cartesian idea of being a thinking thing, is that how can it be that the *cogito* always remains tied to existence, even when we lack the awareness of the self-evident knowledge of the *cogito*, while we exist, as in the example of mindless slumber or infancy.⁸² As such, Descartes's idea of the *cogito ergo sum* as being an immediately knowable first principle of philosophy that is indubitable, as found in the *Discourse* and *Principles*, cannot be correct. That is because we need only refer to Gassendi's evidence above asserting that thinking is not always present in our existence, rendering the reality of thinking to fail to be an unshakeable, or a permanent first principle, or undoubtable truth of philosophy.⁸³

In other words, if thinking leads us to the reality that we are, or that we exist, then is it not the case that this implies that if we cease thinking, we cease being, or that we fail to be a thinking thing? Lastly, such evidence as provided to we readers, by Gassendi, reveals that we do, in fact, exist without the presence of thinking, or even awareness; for, when we are asleep, we are, but in a non-self-conscious, or unthinking way.⁸⁴ Likewise, when we are in the womb we are, but still, in a way void of self-awareness, or absent of all thought.⁸⁵

81 Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Objections and Replies* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1984). 184.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.



Now, as for the second major challenge to the *cogito ergo sum*, we find that the second set of objections to the *Meditations* may apply to the *Principles* when we consider the following quote as declared in the second objections to Descartes's *Meditations*:

*Thirdly, you are not yet certain of the existence of God, and you say that you are not certain of anything, and cannot know anything clearly and distinctly until you have clear and certain knowledge of the existence of God. It follows from this that you do not yet clearly and distinctly know that you are a thinking thing, since, on your own admission, that knowledge depends on the clear knowledge of an existing God; and this you have not yet proved in the passage where you draw the conclusion that you clearly know what you are.*⁸⁶

In other words, we find a powerful critique of Descartes's surety of the *cogito ergo sum*'s truth, which we may claim deals with how it is that Descartes can derive his indubitable idea of himself, as a thinking thing, that is or exists, from the truths God established, before he uses this very derivation to demonstrate God's existence.⁸⁷ That is, and in more simplistic terms, Descartes is arguing in a circle, or assuming God exists to arrive at the knowledge of his own existence which then allows him to demonstrate that God is true.⁸⁸

As such, how is it that Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* can be totally undoubtable if Descartes's order of investigation in the *Principles* begins with an embrace of doubt, or that we must "doubt everything as far as possible" to the certainty of "it is not possible to doubt that we exist while we are doubting; and this is the first thing we come to know when we philosophize in an orderly way," to the claim that without previous knowledge of God, all knowledge of anything else would be nil.⁸⁹

In other words, like Descartes's assertion in the *Meditations*, that from initial uncertainty comes certainty, and that such certainty strangely derives from a prior point of certitude, or God, we find in the *Principles*, Descartes asserting doubt of the self, to surety of the self, to the claim that without knowledge of our "author," or God, we can never possess true knowledge of anything else, which includes the *cogito*.⁹⁰ Finally, we may challenge Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" in the *Principles*, and *Discourse* alike by posing the question in these objections to the *Meditations* as to

86 Ibid., 89.

87 Bertrand, Russell. *The History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster., 1972). 566.

88 Ibid.

89 Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Principles of Philosophy* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1985). 194-195.

90 Ibid., 197.



why Descartes equivocated in his belief as to if the correct order of rational examination, should go from surety, or God, to unsurety, or doubt, back to surety, or the *cogito ergo sum*, or instead, from unsurety, or doubt, to surety, or the *cogito ergo sum*, to what is most fundamental, or God?

From these challenges to the “I think, therefore I am,” we readers may start to doubt Descartes’s take on the nature of the *cogito*, that it is truly a thinking thing, as well as God and its existence, and concludingly the reality of the body. That is, if we first take Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am,” as a thinking thing, which is a claim also findable in the *Discourse* and the *Principles*, we may look to the third set of objections to the *Meditations*, by Hobbes, as a challenge to this Cartesian view of ourselves as thinking things, or that which Descartes states are “... mind(s), or intelligence(s), or intellect(s) or reason(s).”⁹¹

Now, to Hobbes, Descartes errs in equating himself to initially be a mind, intelligence, intellect, or rationality, for would this not equate to Descartes meaning “I am thinking, therefore I am a thought,” which we can lead us to equally claim, as Hobbes states: “I am walking, therefore I am a walk.”⁹² That is, to Hobbes, to assert that one is a thinking thing, or a mind, is verily to liken a source of thought with the actual intellectual act of thinking.⁹³ As such, Hobbes finds that Descartes cannot surely claim that he is a thinking thing, or an immaterial mind that thinks itself and thus exists, for the source by which Descartes issues himself as thinking, is the whole of himself, which is, at least partially, a corporeal being.⁹⁴

In other words, to Hobbes, because Descartes believes that we cannot conceive of qualities, or attributes of something without their source, or subject too, if we declare something such as “I think, therefore I am,” we are indeed uttering that what exists, or possesses being, derives from what is immaterial, or thinking alone, which, to Hobbes, we can only truly salvage if we admit that what exists, or possesses being, is only a concrete form of existence, or a material being itself.⁹⁵ Hence, to Hobbes, the idea of a thinking thing as strictly a mind, intelligence, intellect, or rationality mismatches the immaterial with the material, and, rather, we would be more accurate to maintain that either what

91 Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Objections and Replies* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1984). 122-123.

92 Ibid., 122.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.



is, or exists, derives from something that is, or exists, or that we should interpret “thinking” in a more mechanical, or materialistic manner.⁹⁶

Furthermore, as related to disputes with Descartes’s view of God and its existence, we may turn to the second set of objections to the *Meditations*, again, which call into question the sturdiness of Descartes’s assertion that God necessarily entails existence, just like the three angles of a triangle encompass the sum of two-right angles, as we similarly found in the *Discourse* and *Principles*.⁹⁷ In other words, let us consider the following passage of the *Meditation*’s second set of objections:

Moreover, an atheist is clearly and distinctly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles; but so far is he from supposing the existence of God that he completely denies it.⁹⁸

Now, the importance of this objection is that even if we assume the existence of God, we still can never truly compare God’s necessary existence to the idea of a triangle and the existence of a triangle, as needing to be the total of adding two right angles.⁹⁹ One way is for us to assert that our idea of a triangle matching the sum of two right angles is not the same as our idea of God. That is because, although we can formulize what appears to us in space as a triangle, we cannot do the same with God. For, a supremely perfect being, God, must be infinite, as Descartes holds to, and hence, God’s infinitude surpasses our finitude, which may allow disbelievers to assert that God is beyond our grasp entirely, negating all from ever clearly and distinctly knowing God.¹⁰⁰

Therefore, if God is beyond all limitations, we cannot grapple with God as we do with the idea of a triangle for the idea of a triangle, or a mental representation of a shape enclosed by three lines, all conforming to the formula “ $a=1/2bh$ ” is settable, or frameable whereas God is boundless. Consequently, because we conceive a triangle, as an idea, as limited, and God as infinite, the corresponding existence of each respective idea would leave us with the actual witnessing of a triangle; however, the total inadequate apprehension of God, as an infinite being, or unrestricted object of experience. Lastly, to Descartes, that is because our limited existence, as materially extended finite beings, resulting from his analysis of our bodies as being spatial, and reducible to parts, would make it absurd for us to believe that an immaterial God, as a limitless being, is a constitution of such

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid., 89-90.

98 Ibid., 89.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid., 88-90.



finite parts or that these finite parts can result in an infinite divinity, further reinforcing that Descartes's God is non-experienceable.¹⁰¹

Next, regarding the noticing of the reality of the body, as an extended and corporeal substance, we may challenge such a conclusion, as found in both Descartes's *Discourse* and his *Principles*, by drawing from the second set of qualms concerning Descartes's *Meditations*, once more. That is, if the noticing of bodies leads us to assert that we witness examples of dimension, allowing us to assert that things extended are corporeal things, we must state that this rests on the claim that all our perceptions of the world are clear and distinct, and that God can never be disingenuous.¹⁰² However, we find in this second set of critiques of Descartes's *Meditations* a challenge to these ideas, which we also find in the *Discourse* and *Principles*.

First, to show how that a feature of our world can be untrue, which can lead us to assert that God does "communicate to men things which are opposed to his intentions and decrees," is if we begin by considering what Descartes verily means by clear and distinct perceptions.¹⁰³ That is, if we revisit the *Principles*, momentarily, we find Descartes declaring:

I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to an attentive mind...I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all perceptions that contains within itself only what is clear.¹⁰⁴

So, an example of a perception that can only be unclear, or never present and accessible to an attentive mind, as well as indistinct, or not sharply contrasted from all other perceptions of the same sort because of its greatness of clarity, is when we perceive more than one of the same type of cocoons. That is, it is unclear as to what either cocoon is holding, a moth or a butterfly, for the actual processes interior to such cocoons are not present to our minds and are also inaccessible no matter how attentively we focus on them together or alone. Also, as being of the same variety of cocoon we cannot even declare that we have a sharper, or more distinct demarcation of one cocoon over the other, and thus we are at a loss as to which cocoon holds what. As such, our example of two of more of the same kind of cocoon shows that we can neither possess a clear nor a distinct perception of at least one variety of thing we find in the world.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid., 89-90.

103 Ibid., 90.

104 Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Principles of Philosophy* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1985). 207-208.



Now, because this opaqueness of cocoons, preventing us from asserting that clear and distinct perceptions of all things is possible because of God being without deceit, cannot add up entirely, so to speak. That is because our perceptions rely on God, to Descartes, who establishes existence, and if our perceptions of something such as a cocoon can only be unclear and indistinct, we may claim that God allows, at times, unclear and indistinct perceptions, perhaps for deception “is always employed beneficially and with wisdom.”¹⁰⁵ Finally, if God can establish perceptions that we lack truth of, because all people are unable to perceive them clearly and distinctly, we may claim that the possibility of God displaying a degree of disingenuousness, at times, is real. Accordingly, such a predicament leads us ultimately back to the possibility of hyperbolic doubt, or absolute skepticism, and not being fully certain of anything let alone the existence of a corporeal realm apart from ourselves.

Conclusion

It was the purpose of this piece to cast light on the arrival of the “I think, therefore I am,” or the *cogito ergo sum* in Descartes’s *Discourse on Method* and *Principles of Philosophy*. The reason for such an illumination was to then lead readers to consider how it is that we can deny the *cogito ergo sum*, and how that would contribute to the jeopardizing of other central Cartesian claims. These further claims that we may at least find questionable, because of the dubitability of the “I think, therefore I am,” includes Descartes’s notion that we are thinking things, God and its existence, and the essence of the bodily. Finally, it is the sincere hope of this present author that with these jabs at the Cartesian project, we may find that Descartes’s philosophy is not unimmune to doubt, rendering Descartes to ultimately stray from his own ultimate standard of proof; or, to never assent to anything that can admit even the least amount of doubt.¹⁰⁶

105 Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Objections and Replies* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1984). 90.

106 Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Discourse on the Method* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1985). 120 & Descartes, Rene. Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., trans., *Principles of Philosophy* as found in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1985). 193.



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