

Difficulties of rene descartes cogito



The most important contribution of René Descartes in the history of Philosophy is his cogito. In the same way, however, the cogito has also been the most critical problem of his philosophy. This essay will focus more on the difficulties of the cogito.

But first, on the side of the cogito: one importance of the cogito is that it is the byproduct of the Method, which is another contribution of Descartes not only in modern philosophy, but also in the field of science. The origination of the cogito from the Methodic Doubt is quite anticipated: all prior knowledge and truths must be erased, unless they are indubitable. In other words, all knowledge and opinions are subjected to examination, whether they can survive the test of doubt. Descartes, having found the fact (or act) of his doubting indubitable, hence maintains the fact that his existence enables his doubting (or thinking) as a clear and distinct idea, and thus the conclusion: Cogito, ergo sum: I think, therefore I am. We understand therefore that the cogito is a product of deduction or inference. However, as I have said, the cogito is quite anticipated. This is because the rules of his Method lay down an algorithm that has a quite predictable result, as if laying down a theoretical step-by-step means to prove something that is already true. The cogito is also considered a product of intuition and not of deduction. However, as far as methods of analysis are concerned, Descartes's Method and cogito are valid.

Moreover, insofar as the solipsistic argument, the cogito is a rather fair argument. By this, I mean that the cogito is a solipsistic truth, or a belief in the self as only reality or basis of reality. When Descartes has proposed that all knowledge and opinions must be cleared off the mind (or must be brought

into doubt), there is still in Descartes the belief that the only thing he can be sure of is that he exists. He cannot deny the fact that he exists, even if the very idea of his being is most accessible via experience (hence, this he must doubt also). Thus if Descartes denies his being in the first place, his cogito will never materialize as a basis for truth. But since Descartes adopts a solipsistic view, he is safe from committing contradiction. To put simply: insofar as the I is concerned (the I, which thinks and doubts), the I exists.

Nevertheless, Descartes' paradox, which is the cogito itself, is not an absolute oxymoron. By the cogito being a paradox, I mean the self-contradictory problem of the cogito; that is, the problem of which came first: the cogito or the sum. Using the Method of Doubt, the cogito seems to go before the sum, since it is the act of doubting/thinking that came before the conclusion for the act of existence. But in the context of Descartes, it is implied that thinking is actually in the context of being. Now the strength of the cogito argument is that it is a closed argument, relying only on the idea that existence constitutes thinking and thinking reflects existence.

It is in these strengths of the cogito, however, that it is also problematic. First is on the solipsistic view. The very problem of the cogito here is the question of reality outside the I. Since Descartes uses himself and only himself in his basis for truth, anything outside himself can be doubtful or false, and thus cannot be a basis for truth. Only the thinking I, thus the human person, can prove and claim one's existence. Thus, the other for the thinking I is doubtful, insofar as the I is concerned. The problem is that Descartes is as if denying the existence of animals, plants and other things, since these things do not and cannot think. Moreover, after proving that he is

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a thinking thing, the next question that arises is: now how do we establish an edifice of knowledge? Descartes takes emphasis on putting a foundation for knowledge by first using the Method, but forgets how to formulate the next set of algorithm once the Method has been applied. The problem of the solipsistic argument of the cogito is that nothing more exists outside the self's being a thinking thing. It only proves the existence of oneself insofar as the thinking I is concerned, and does not prove the idea and the existence of other things other than the self. Besides, other I's can think of me a mere fiction.

In the problem of the solipsistic argument of the cogito, however, the idea of a Perfect Being other than the thinking self exists. Descartes said that since he is cogito (thinking/doubting thing), he is therefore an imperfect being. But since he is imperfect, he has an idea of a perfect thing, which can come only from a Perfect Being, which is God. Nevertheless, nothing more exists outside the thinking self aside from the self itself and God.

Now the second weakness of the cogito is in its contradictory problem. Although the cogito (cogito-sum relationship) is a closed argument (like Spinoza's freedom-necessity concept); one cannot ignore to question the validity of its argument. In this argument, whether the cogito conditions the sum or the sum conditions the cogito, the idea of existence is still in danger, because it is subject to doubt. The sum (I am) only works for the thinking I, but existence alone cannot prove thinking. Thus what seemed to be a safe closed argument is not free of loopholes at all, because existence in general is not enough to prove thought. Nevertheless, the cogito is concerned for the existence of one's being a *res cogitans* or thinking thing only.

Moreover, that material objects exist because of God is another argument that branched out from the cogito. After concluding that the Supreme Being cannot deceive, Descartes proceeds to concluding that material objects thus also exist. However, this only results to another circular argument: cogito presupposes God, which tells the res cogitans that its ideas come from external objects; but then it is from these external objects that the cogito must doubt first before it realizes that it is a res cogitans, then assume the existence of a Perfect Being.

Generally, we find Descartes's Method of Doubt and cogito weak. The main premise that we cannot distinguish reality from dream is not even strong enough to be a basis for truth. Although Descartes' skepticism is optimistic at finding a certain knowledge that we can know of, still it is rather destructive of the foundation of knowledge that is the objective of his skepticism in the first place. The problem is that Descartes proposes arguments for why everything can be subjected to doubt, such as the dream argument, the deceiving God argument, and the evil demon argument. It is difficult to follow Descartes's advice because it is more difficult to prove a negation than proving otherwise (in the case of Descartes proving the negation of knowledge to prove the opposite), since if we convince ourselves with these arguments of Descartes, then we must act and think as if we are experiencing illusions and hallucinations all the time. This is of course difficult for us. In fact one example where we can prove Descartes could probably be right all along that an evil demon is deceiving us (e. g., when something defies the laws of physics) is when we experience a Criss Angel trick.

Perhaps we can say that the main problem of Descartes's philosophy is both its extreme rationalist and non-rationalist approach. Descartes's philosophy is rationalist because it proclaims reason as the only valid criterion for certain knowledge and thus truth. It is non-rationalist, however, in the sense that it somehow forgets other valid functions of the human mind or reason: that is reason as the faculty of man's sentient soul, can, aside from thinking and doubting, imagine, sense and feel.