

# Descartes' cogito: inference or intuition?



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The kind of reasoning utilized by Descartes in order to arrive at his conclusion of the cogito has been questioned since its initial publication in *The Discourse on the Method*. The conjunction ' ergo' suggests the formula of an inference, that Descartes has concluded his existence from a premise. Yet, Descartes himself seems to deny the use of this kind of deductive reasoning favouring the idea that the conclusion stems from intuition. In this essay, I will seek to examine the potential issues with claiming the cogito conclusion to have been inferred and question whether the argument from intuition carries any more weight. Ultimately, I believe that once all has been considered, it has to be asserted that Descartes concludes ' I think, therefore I am' intuitively.

Before engaging in an exploration of the place of intuition and inference within the cogito reasoning, it is perhaps worth briefly and clearly summarising the question. Hatfield explains it succinctly: '...where does the conclusion get its force? Does it follow from a logical argument, that is, by deductive inference from the premise " I think", perhaps with other premises? Or is it somehow known immediately, through the mere awareness of some thoughts?' (Hatfield, G. *Descartes and the Meditations*, P. 107) Essentially, which kind of reasoning is being used here given that the formula is both claimed to be discovered intuitively and presented as an, albeit invalid or incomplete, logical inference? Markie offers a useful definition of the two key terms: ' Deduction is " the inference of something as following necessarily from some other propositions which are known with certainty" (AT X 369: CSM I 15). Intuition is the faculty by which we gain the

initial certainties that make deduction possible.' (Peter Markie. "The cogito and its importance", in the Cambridge Companion to Descartes, P. 144)

For structural ease, I would like to firstly address the possibility of the cogito as an inference and then as an intuition. Proponents of the inference interpretation might argue that some inferring is obviously occurring since Descartes has moved from one proposition to another, the addition of the conjunction 'therefore' suggesting the entailment of the conclusion from the premise. It is widely accepted that in order for the argument to be a logically valid syllogism, it would require the addition of a second premise allowing the argument to read as follows: 1) I think 2) Everything that thinks exists 3) Therefore, I exist. However, it is clear that this simplistic inference interpretation of the cogito simply will not work in accordance with Descartes' ideas. Firstly, he explicitly rejects a syllogistic approach in his Second Set of Objections: ...'he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism...' As Cottingham rightly points out, Descartes approaches the cogito purely from a personal perspective; he concludes that he is existing purely from the fact that he is thinking in a specific moment. The entailment of existence from thinking is, according to Descartes, self-evident: 'It is a contradiction to suppose that what thinks does not, at the very time when it is thinking, exist.' (Principles I 7: AT VIII 7; CSM I 195, Cited in Cottingham, J. Descartes, 1986, p. 36) It is only self-evident when it is occurring in time, however. Descartes is not making any general claims about the connection between thinking things and existing things but simply concluding his own existence from his own personal case of thinking. As Cottingham reiterates: 'most logicians are accustomed to think of validity

predominantly in term of timeless, non-tensed propositions, and many commentators...have managed fundamentally to distort Descartes' argument by trying to construe in 'blackboard fashion', as an exemplification of some timelessly valid formal structure.' (Cottingham, J. Descartes, 1986, p. 36) Aside from this point, it doesn't seem as if we can accept an additional premise at this stage, especially such a general claim as 'everything that thinks exists'; Descartes is only just on the cusp of proving his own existence and is therefore in no position to be making generalisations about other things, beings or objects which he has still not demonstrated, exist. He is still in the process of doubting everything, the hypothetical 'second premise' would therefore be dubitable. Descartes has not yet refuted the notion of a demon controlling our thoughts and so any conclusions or inferences could arguably still be deceptive.

However, although Descartes blatantly rejects the idea of condensing his cogito into a strict, syllogistic inference, he does seem to accept that the hidden premise exists and is needed. He does not deny that 'one must first know what thought, existence and certainty are, and that it is impossible that that which thinks should not exist, and so forth. (Descartes, The principles of Philosophy ')

However, it seems that Descartes, in accepting the addition of this premise, is still guilty of assuming knowledge he is not yet in a position to have. As Hatfield maintains: "'I exist" is supposed to be her first item of knowledge. If she really has cleared her mind of all other judgements, where do these premises come from?' (Hatfield, G. Descartes and the Meditations, P. 111) He argues that 'it appears so evident to the understanding that we cannot but believe it...' (Descartes' Letter to

Clerselier) But Descartes has forced himself to doubt everything, including the simplest of propositions at this stage. It seems, then, that if the premise that 'Everything that thinks must exist' cannot be maintained without undermining Descartes' claim to be doubting everything, the syllogism (which Descartes rejects anyway) fails and so does the idea that the premise is simply known to be true (the view which Descartes seems to support.)

I would now like to consider the cogito purely as an intuition. In order for the cogito conclusion to be asserted, both 'I think' and 'I exist' would have to be shown to be indubitable. For Descartes, the idea that he is thinking is a self-evident proposition; he states in the Principles that certain notions are 'sufficiently self-evident...the most simple notions.' (Descartes, *The principles of Philosophy*) We can perhaps support this idea with Cottingham's point that 'doubting is a special case of thinking.' (Cottingham, J. *Descartes*, 1986, p. 39) It does seem to be the case that in doubting that we are thinking, we are proving to ourselves that we are. 'Doubting it confirms its truth.' (ibid.) It seems that the only way to escape the indubitableness of 'I am thinking' is to deny that we are doubting which, I think most would agree, goes too far. There would be no way of moving forward if we were to do this. In addition, 'I think' is an incorrigible claim; because it is an internal belief, it cannot be doubted. It is not necessarily true but is certain in the sense of being beyond doubt.

From this indubitable premise, Descartes moves on to conclude that he exists in one unbroken leap. It seems clear to us that for something to be thinking, it does have to be existing, how can it be otherwise? But it is here that those in the 'inference-camp', so to speak, would claim Descartes is

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presupposing a hidden premise. I think that the way Descartes resolves the issue does seem to be the most convincing. He draws a distinction between the way in which we actually, in reality, come to the conclusion that we exist and what is actually going on philosophically behind the scenes. In other words, ' he argued that the judgement ' I think, therefore I am' is inferentially complex and contains an implicit major premise, but that everything needed is grasped in a single intuitive act of thought.' (Hatfield, G. Descartes and the Meditations, P. 112) Although this approach rather diplomatically seems to combine both the idea of inference and the idea of intuition, I cannot help but feel that Descartes is still championing the idea that he used an intuitive method to come to his conclusions. Although, after the fact, we can analyse an intuition and dissect its origins and the premises implicit within it, this doesn't mean we didn't arrive at a conclusion through intuition. Descartes seems to be saying that when he contemplated his thought and his existence and their interconnectedness, he was doing it by the method of intuition. This seems to me to be similar to arguing the following: that when we feel cold, we know we feel cold by virtue of feeling a sudden shiver. Though there are numerous anatomical factors which contributed to generating the shiver, it is through the shiver alone that we come to know we are cold. If my understanding is correct, then intuition in Descartes' case is like the shiver and the implicit premises the underlying reasons for it.

For Descartes, general principles such as the ones which many claim help us infer the cogito conclusion (for example, ' everything that thinks must exist') can only actually be discovered after the drawing of the conclusion. Hatfield

perfectly summaries the point here: ' Descartes believes that such general premises are at work in the logic of the cogito reasoning...but they come to awareness only through reflection on particular cases of intuitively evident knowledge...the inference is accepted in a single intuition and subsequently analysed to discover its logical structure, including the tacit general premises.'(Hatfield, G. Descartes and the Meditations, P. 115) By this understanding, Descartes escapes the issue of using a dubitable premise because he claims only to know about it after the fact. He is using only his intuitions, not any unjustified premises.

Markie adopts an interpretation of Descartes' cogito which marries almost exactly with the aforementioned approach; he calls it ' the self-evident intuition /immediate inference interpretation.' (Peter Markie. " The cogito and its importance", in the Cambridge Companion to Descartes.) Markie argues that ' Descartes intuits the self-evident proposition that he thinks and simultaneously immediately infers that he exists. His knowledge that he thinks is intuitive in the primary sense of being self-evident and entirely noninferential; his knowledge that he exists is intuitive in the extended sense of being immediately inferred from the simultaneously intuited premise that he thinks.' (ibid. ) This approach admits the use of both inferential and intuitive knowledge but covers them both with the umbrella of intuition. I think this represents a good example of Descartes recognising how nuanced our approach to this kind of question has to be; there is a point at which the formulaic nature of philosophy seems to be failing us since strictly speaking, Descartes' conclusion is an inference but it is understood intuitively in real life. Descartes couldn't say that he arrived at his conclusion through

following premises x, y and z to their conclusion validly because this would be a false impression of how he came to gain knowledge.

Therefore, it is evident that Descartes' cogito argument is not a straightforward case when it comes to establishing the type of reasoning used in drawing to his conclusion. The potential issues with claiming the cogito conclusion to have been inferred are many and, although the argument is laid out as a weak logical proof, it does seem as though 'I think, therefore I am' is a certainty arrived at primarily through intuition.