

Descartes is a  
conscious being? what  
is essential nature  
and why does he so  
respon...

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## Introduction

In Meditation I of *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes' goal is to rid himself of any beliefs that are false. He conducts a 'doubting experiment' in which he examines different types of beliefs and withholds assent to any beliefs that could be called into doubt, allowing him to find any beliefs that may be held with absolute certainty.

In his second meditation, he is able to conclude that the only indubitable belief that one may have is 'I am, I exist (Descartes, 1641: Meditation II).' He then proceeds further, and is able to conclude that he is 'a thinking thing (Descartes, 1641: Meditation II).'

In this essay, I will examine his method, and find that Descartes' conclusion that he is a *res cogitans* is not indubitable, but that it is still possible that his conclusion is correct. I will illustrate how it is possible that his essential nature is not that of a pure *res cogitans*, but rather a being with the ability to be conscious.

In Meditation I, Descartes states that he is aware that he has been assenting to multiple beliefs that may be dubitable (Descartes, 1641: Meditation I). He scrutinizes his beliefs with the aim to rid himself of all falsehoods, and assent to only indubitable beliefs (Descartes, 1641: Meditation I). In order to be confident that he is left with only indubitable beliefs, he must have a very strict criterion that anything that is doubtful at all, in any circumstance must not be assented to (Descartes, 1641: Meditation I). He withdraws assent to all posterior beliefs, on the basis he may be dreaming, or that because it is

possible that he may have been sleeping his entire life, it is possible that all beliefs he has acquired about past events, or people he knows, were entirely dreams, and that none such events occurred or such people ever existed (Descartes, 1641: Meditation I). He is then able to doubt a priori beliefs on the premise that it is possible that there is a God could have created him 'so that he is always deceived (Descartes, 1641: Meditation I).'

Descartes is then left in a state of utter confusion - and that it is possible that the only indubitable premise belief that 'nothing is certain (Descartes, 1641: Meditation II). However, he is able to conclude that because he is able to be convinced of something, or anything at all, then it must be certain that he exists (Descartes, 1641: Meditation II). He argues that even if he is dreaming, he must exist because he is able to experience his dreams - even if 'no earth, minds or bodies exist at all (Descartes, 1641: Meditation II).'

And even if there is a 'supremely powerful' being who is constantly deceiving him, he must exist in order to be deceived (Descartes, 1641: Meditation II). Therefore the premise 'I exist' is self-fulfilling, because it is impossible to entertain without existing. He is, therefore, able to conclude that the premise 'I am, I exist' is indubitable, or at least indubitable in the present tense (Descartes, 1641: Meditation II). He cannot assume that 'I existed in the past' is indubitable, or 'I will exist in the future,' is indubitable, because it is possible that his memories of past experience may be false, and there is no way of proving that one will exist in the future.

Having established certainty in his existence, Descartes aims to understand exactly what he is. He states that he must take care to avoid concluding that

he is something that he is not, (Descartes, 1641: Meditation II) and to do this, he examines various possibilities as to what he could be, choosing only what is undoubtedly part of his 'essence (Descartes, 1641: Meditation II).' Descartes states 'nothing without which a thing can still exist is comprised in its essence' (Malcolm, 1965: 317) and it is inferred that Descartes considers an essence of a thing anything that is essential to that thing's existence (Schiffer, 1976: 26). In general form: 'if it cannot be doubted that I have property P, then P is an essential property of I (Lecture notes).'

Descartes, therefore, is able to argue that he has nobody - because he can doubt that he has a body, (that his body is merely an illusion, possibly as the result of his creator deceiving him) and that therefore having a body is not an essential property of him. He considers how one could be a 'sensing being,' but argues that because he has nobody, he would not be able to sense, as sense requires the organs that are held within a body (Carney, 1962 : 494). Descartes, therefore, argues that his nature is not that of a physical being (Carney, 1962 : 494).

He questions whether he can doubt that he has the property of thinking (Descartes, 1641: Meditation II). In the same sense that I cannot doubt that I exist, because as soon as I doubt that I exist, I have proven that I must exist in order to be able to doubt, I cannot doubt that I think, because as soon as I have doubted that I think, I have thought. Therefore, thinking is an essential property of me or an essential property of any being that is able to entertain a thought, and Descartes, therefore, concludes that his essence is that of thinking being and that without thinking, he cannot exist (Malcolm, 1965:

317). I have thus far illustrated why Descartes believes that he is a thinking being. I now aim to illustrate that although it is possible that he is right, his conclusion is dubitable:

Using such an argument structure, (' if it cannot be doubted that I have property P, then P is an essential property of I') would it be possible to say that thinking, or experiencing is not an essential property of I, or that the ability to think or experience is not an essential property of my existence could argue that I would not think or experience if I were in a dreamless sleep or a coma, or that I did not experience or think as an embryo in the womb - but certainly must have existed. Descartes could reply that it can be doubted that I ever was an embryo in a womb, or that I have ever had a dreamless sleep, or been in a coma - that embryos, bodies and comas could be part of a reality brought about by one's creator, and hence not a true representation of reality, and therefore one should not consider such premises true (Long, 1969: 261). Because his premise ' I am, I exist' is only indubitable during the time in which it is entertained by the experiencer, the premise ' I existed but did not experience or think, because I was in a coma/was merely an embryo/in a dreamless sleep' would hold up to Cartesian hyperbolic doubt (Long, 1969: 261).

However, it there still is a problem with this form of argument, for it can be used to prove essential properties that seem arbitrary. Whether one is being deceived by one's creator, and what one is experiencing is a false representation of reality, one is still at least getting the impression, or ' feeling' that one is undergoing such a reality (Lecture notes). For example,

whether one is actually tired or merely under the illusion that one is tired, one still feels tired (Lecture notes). Therefore, if one is genuinely feeling tired one could say 'I cannot doubt that I am feeling tired, therefore, feeling tired is an essential property of me.' (And that therefore one cannot exist without feeling tired.) Feeling tired is certainly not an essential property of one, because one can still exist even without feeling tired. I argue that this form of argument is only able to show one what one's necessarily possible, but not necessarily essential properties are. It is therefore possible that one's essential nature is to be a conscious, or thinking being (Inferred from lecture notes). However, such an argument form cannot prove one's nature of thinking to be necessarily essential.

However, a different conjecture on Descartes' thought process, which provides support for Descartes' conclusion that he is a thinking being is suggested by Norman Malcolm, (1965, 319) who argues that one's essence could be tested in an argument in the form: 'P is the essence of I if it is that I am aware of P, then I am necessarily aware of myself, and if I am aware of myself, then I am necessarily aware of P, (Malcolm, 1965: 319).' With such an argument form it may be possible to prove that thinking is an essential essence to one's existence and not merely a possible essence.

If one applies Malcolm's argument form to test the possibility of thinking being an essence, one must question whether when one is thinking then one is necessarily aware of oneself, (Malcolm, 1965: 319) as well as questioning whether when one is aware of oneself, that one is necessarily thinking. The second requirement of Malcolm's argument is easily fulfilled: one cannot be

aware of oneself if one is unable to think, and therefore when one is aware of oneself, one necessarily thinks (Malcolm, 1965: 322). Malcolm argues that Descartes would believe that one is necessarily aware of oneself when one is thinking and hence fulfill the first requirement of the argument (Malcolm, 1965: 321). His reasoning is outlined below: Descartes can only be certain that he exists when he is thinking (Malcolm, 1965: 320). Descartes believes that he would cease to exist should he 'entirely cease to think, (Malcolm, 1965: 321) and there 'is no reason for believing' that one existed when one did not think (Malcolm, 1965: 321). Conversely, one 'has a reason' to believe in one's existence when one thinks (Malcolm, 1965: 321). Descartes premise 'I think therefore I am' is equivalent to 'I think therefore I am aware I exist (Malcolm, 1965: 321),' which leads Malcolm to believe that the first requirement of his argument is fulfilled, and hence a proof that thinking is part of one's essence (Malcolm, 1965: 321).

However, I argue that Malcolm's conjecture on Descartes thought is dubitable and does not prove that one's essence is a thinking being: If one accepts Malcolm's argument form, and its first requirement that one is 'necessarily made aware of oneself when one is aware of P', then if thinking is one's essence, then one is necessarily aware of oneself whenever one thinks. I argue that it is possible to be aware of occurrences without being aware of oneself. For example, when one is in a daze or engrossed in an immersing book or movie, one may be aware of a reality that is not a reality involving oneself, and hence not be aware of oneself, while still cogitating. Therefore, there are situations that involve thinking, but not thinking that makes one

aware of oneself. This implies that the first requirement of Malcolm's argument is not fulfilled by the notion of one's essential nature is thinking. If Malcolm's argument cannot support thinking as an essential nature, then it cannot offer support to Descartes's notion that his essence is that of a thinking being.

Thus far I have illustrated that the arguments ' if it cannot be doubted that I have property P, then P is an essential property of I,' and Malcolm's argument ' P is the essence of I if it is that I am aware of P, then I am necessarily aware of myself, and if I am aware of myself, then I am necessarily aware of P' to be dubitable when attempting to prove that Descartes essential nature is that of a *res cogitans*.

However, it still seems intuitive that one's nature is that of a thinking being – as, one knows within one's mind, that one is certainly conscious, and thus thinking is certainly a part of one's existence. Descartes is correct when he concludes that his essential nature is that of a *res cogitans*, at least in the sense that thinking is part of his nature. However, by his definition, his essence is something that without, he would not exist (Malcolm, 1965: 317).

I would therefore need to prove that one could exist without cogitating in order to prove that Descartes is mistaken. I may argue that as an embryo I existed without the ability to think, or that there are people in a brain-dead state that are unable to cogitate – and that they must surely exist. However, Descartes could doubt my argument on the premise that I may have been dreaming that I existed as an embryo or that brain-dead people exist at all



(Long, 1969: 261). Hyperbolic doubt from Descartes first meditation would stop any such arguments (Long, 1969: 261). Descartes has demonstrated that one can only be certain of one's existence when one cogitates (Malcolm, 1965: 317) and that one can only be certain of cogitation within one's own mind (Lecture notes). It would therefore be impossible to prove the premise 'I can exist without thinking,' as proving one's existence can only be proved to oneself, and only while one is thinking. I therefore cannot prove that one could exist without cogitating.

However, it does not follow that because I cannot prove that I could exist without thinking, (at least to a standard that would stand up to hyperbolic doubt) that I undoubtedly only exist when I am cogitating. I, therefore, argue that it is still theoretically possible for one to exist when one is not cogitating, but acknowledge that one cannot prove it. Therefore, it is theoretically possible that Descartes' essential nature is not that of a *res cogitans*, but rather that of a being that has the ability to cogitate, albeit, only able to prove its existence, to itself, when it is cogitating. Therefore, although it is still possible that Descartes is a pure *res cogitans*, and hence pure consciousness, fully independent of a physical body (Descartes, 1641: Meditation VI) it is possible that Descartes is not purely a *res cogitans*, but rather a being but of another nature, such a physical being, that is capable of thought, but whose existence, and ability to be conscious depends on its physical body.

## References

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