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Descartes's Method of Doubt

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Enlightenment philosopher, René Descartes, set out to establish what could be known with certainty, untainted by a deceiving demon. With his method of doubt, he rejected all previous beliefs, allowing only those that survived rigorous scrutiny. In this essay, Leslie Allan examines whether Descartes's program of skeptical enquiry was successful in laying a firm foundation for our manifold beliefs. He subjects Descartes's conclusions to Descartes's own uncompromising methodology to determine whether Descartes escaped from a self-imposed radical skepticism.

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1. Introduction

René Descartes is widely regarded as the founder of modern philosophy. In rejecting the foundations of the scholastic school in which he was brought up, he sought to undertake a thoroughgoing review of claims to knowledge. Although there remained vestiges of scholasticism in Descartes's theory of knowledge, his systematic method of doubt was seen as a break with the authoritarian past. For Descartes, his method did not lead to the depressing solipsism later eloquently developed by David Hume. In contrast, he regarded his revolutionary approach as laying the ground for rationally accepting certain indubitable principles.

In his *Discourse on Method* [1637], Descartes shared his story of how his method of doubt crystallized out of his fascination with the analytic method of mathematics. This discipline, he believed, embodied the paradigm case of knowledge certainty. Although this view was later rescinded, albeit temporarily, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* [1641a], he believed this mathematical method of intuitive deduction of certainties from intuitively indubitable principles could be applied equally to other areas of knowledge to also yield incorrigible truths.

The starting point for Descartes's method of doubt was the rejection of all of his former beliefs. This was necessary, he thought, in order to leave a clean path for the indubitable knowledge he would derive from reason alone. For this initial purging, his method demanded that he reject all of those beliefs for which it was possible to entertain even the slightest amount of doubt. Since, he argued, all his former beliefs were derived either directly or indirectly from the senses and could not therefore be trusted, a complete and thoroughgoing skepticism was a necessary first step to arriving at the truth.

In the first part of this essay, I begin with an examination of Descartes's notion of the *cogito*. I argue that Descartes did not succeed in warding off the challenge of Humean solipsism and that he got no closer to uncovering the metaphysical nature of the self. A defining characteristic of Descartes's theory of knowledge is its reliance on the existence of a God to guarantee the veracity of his clear and distinct ideas. In §3, I examine Descartes's 'infinity' proof for the existence of such a divine being. I offer an alternative coherent theory of how we understand the concept of infinity that does not rely on theological presuppositions.

In the final section of this essay, I explore Descartes's other key arguments for the existence of God and his treatment of God's attributes. In determining God's qualities, I argue that Descartes's methodology depends heavily on the theologian's subjective impressions. Likewise, I argue that his proofs for the existence of God are inherently circular, relying as they do on the existence of God to underwrite the veracity of the premises used in his proofs.

2. Descartes's *Cogito*

In his [Meditations on First Philosophy](#) [1641a: 67], the first indubitable proposition that Descartes arrived at is his now famous *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). For Descartes, its utterance or conception in the mind renders it necessarily true. He recognized the difficulties in describing this demonstrative 'I'. Descartes [1641a: 71] candidly referred to it as "this something I know not what", which does not fall under imagination'. To answer this problem, Descartes [1641a: 74] examined a piece of wax, after which he triumphantly exclaimed, 'For if I judge that wax exists from the fact that I see this wax, it is much clearer that I myself exist because of this same fact that I see it.'

Note, however, that Descartes could not tell us what it is that he 'sees'. Following this line of inquiry, he got no closer to a description of his 'self' than when he began. Descartes failing here, I think, lies in the fact that he never questioned the existence of a metaphysical substratum for consciousness; the elusive 'self'. He was fooled by his repeated usage of the common language grammatical term, 'I', into hastily and uncritically admitting that self-consciousness is possible. Self-consciousness is crucial for Descartes as it is the instantiation of self-consciousness that provides the rational basis for Descartes's 'self'.

[David Hume](#) was the first Enlightenment philosopher to question seriously the existence of a metaphysical, self-conscious self. He could find no conscious state that was conscious of its own consciousness. Moreover, for Hume, it was impossible to find one. This state would itself be a state of consciousness and, therefore, could not be indicative of its metaphysical substratum. Secondly, as Hume argued in his [A Treatise of Human Nature](#) [1739: 301], all of these conscious states exist separately from each other and have no need of a substratum.

Here, my experience mirrors Hume. I find it psychologically impossible to be conscious of a metaphysical 'self'. I cannot, no matter how hard I try, think of something and, at one and the same time, think that I am thinking of that something. As soon as I attempt this mental feat, my attention is immediately diverted from the thing I was originally thinking about. It seems the best we can say is that when one is thinking about thinking, it is always done about thoughts in the past. It may be thought that this counts as our conscious awareness of a metaphysical 'self'. Why this cannot be accepted as such, I will address in §4 below.

Hume [1739: 258], after rejecting the existence of a metaphysical 'self', found it necessary to define 'self' as a 'collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations'. At the time, the common retort to this was, 'How can a series of conscious states be aware of itself as a series?' It was considered that Hume's [1739: 330] assumed answer to this, that we only *feel* a connection between conscious states, was inadequate. It was inadequate only because the question itself makes an unwarranted assumption and Hume's only shortcoming lies in the fact that he did not convince Descartes's supporters of the question's invalidity.

The misguided nature of the question becomes clearer when we pay more attention to what Hume wrote. Consider, for example, Hume's [1739: 330] statement that 'the thought alone feels personal identity, when reflecting on the train of past perceptions that compose a mind'. For Hume, since it is only in the present conscious state that we are aware, it is only in this present state that we are aware of past conscious states. The past states are simply relegated to memory. Therefore, it is not a series of conscious states that is aware of itself, but a present conscious state that is aware of past conscious states and which we call a 'memory state'. It is the experience of this memory that gives us a feeling of 'self'.

How do we know that such a series of past conscious states ever existed? The answer is that we can never know with logical certitude. The veracity of memory cannot be proved *a priori*, since the description of a present memory event is logically distinct from descriptions of all past events. There is no logical contradiction involved in postulating that the world came into being a moment ago, complete with all of our memories. Furthermore, the veracity of memory cannot be proved *a posteriori*, for the notion of direct access to the past, unmediated by mind, is logically incoherent. Inductive inference is also useless. As Aune [1970: 68] has pointed out, using the method of induction here requires one to assess the incidence of conjunctions between inaccessible past events and certain memory states.

Descartes [1641a: 66] conceded the fallibility of memory when he entertained the possibility that 'none of the things my lying memory represents to have happened really did so'. However, he acknowledged this lack of certainty only with regard to past events. He considered that when he remembered his previous conscious states, he was somehow epistemically privileged as it was himself that he was observing. As I have tried to show above, whether it be past events or previous conscious states, neither is immune from doubt.

I think we must conclude that Descartes's metaphysical subject of consciousness, 'I', is not indubitably known. Self-consciousness is not, as he thought, a metaphysical act of mind-bending in which a non-material mind is aware of itself. 'Self-consciousness' is the name we give to that present conscious state which has, as its subject, past conscious states, remembering that the existence of these past conscious states is never guaranteed with certainty. One proposal that begs consideration is that the demonstrative 'I' is devoid of descriptive content and is used merely for grammatical convenience. For an early discussion of this view of the 'self' as a logical construct, see [A. J. Ayer](#) [1969: ch. 5, 1971: 166–8].

[Bertrand Russell](#) [1947: 550] contended that Descartes's basic premise should have been 'there are thoughts'. However, it seems that even this proposition is not indubitable. Hume's and Ayer's 'solipsism of the present moment' appears more defensible for, as I have argued above, memories of previous conscious states are never beyond reproach. Ayer's [1971: 63] basic proposition, 'there is a thought now', may appear to be the only proposition worthy of the title of indubitability in Descartes's sense of the term. Let us not

accept this proposition too hastily, though, for it presents us with its own set of epistemological problems. The first of these is that the proposition takes more than an infinitesimal amount of time to express, thereby utilising our uncertain memory. The second issue is that it is not possible to entertain the meaning of this proposition with reference to our present thought. As I tried to show above, this kind of self-referential thinking is psychologically impossible. I will not attempt a solution to these outstanding problems here. My present purpose will be satisfied if I have successfully argued that Descartes had failed in consistently and rigorously applying his own method of doubt to his notion of the *cogito*.

3. Descartes's *Sum* and Nature of Infinity

All of Descartes's later proofs that he offered in his [Meditations on First Philosophy](#) for the existence of God, the dualism of mind and body and the existence of corporeal substance presupposed and required the existence of his *sum*. On Descartes's schema, without a metaphysical substratum for thought, any attempt at these proofs will not even get off the ground. Descartes's God, though, is of paramount importance in his theory of knowledge. After deducing his *cogito ergo sum*, Descartes isolated the clearness and distinctness of this idea as validating its truth. Descartes realized, however, that he may be deceived about what he clearly and distinctly perceived. This included such evident truths as those of mathematics and geometry [1641a: 64, 77]. It was only the existence of a God that could not deceive that would save the indubitability of his intuitions. This, then, is what he set out to prove.

Descartes was ambivalent about including his *sum* in the intuitions it was possible for him to be deceived about. Before embarking on his proof for the existence of God, he grouped it with the questionable axioms of mathematics [1641a: 77]. However, when he came to set out his proof, he included his *sum* as an indubitable premise [1641a: 79]. First, I will examine Descartes's proof for the existence of God and then see whether it can be used as guarantor for the infallibility of his clear and distinct ideas.

To undertake a thorough review of Descartes's proof would require more words than space here allows. Much of Descartes's proof is clothed in scholastic and neoplatonic garb, the premises of which have been largely passed by with the advances in semantics and logic since Descartes's day. Here, I include Descartes [1641a: 80–5] premise that everything that actually exists has an actually existing cause and his premise that a cause must contain as much perfection and reality as is contained representatively and actually in its effect.

Nonetheless, Descartes raises two pertinent questions that deserve serious consideration. These are, firstly, 'Can our idea of infinity be explained without reference to an external infinite being from which it derives its cause?' and, secondly, 'If not, what predicates, if any, can we validly attribute to this being?' Descartes's answer to the first question is, of course, 'No'. In answer to the second question, he offered such attributes as omniscience, omnipotence, immutability, independence and eternity.

Perhaps the pervasive mystery surrounding the concept of infinity and the intellectual difficulty we experience in coming to grips with it made it very fertile ground from which metaphysicians and theologians historically have sought to grow their grand metaphysical schemes. Descartes cannot be blamed for following this seductive path. In this vein, Descartes [1641b: 268] considered the infinite as 'real and positive', while regarding the finite as a 'non entity, or a negation of existence'. From this, Descartes [1641b: 268] concluded that 'that which is not cannot bring us to the knowledge of that which is'. The Greek neoplatonic scheme that he relied upon, in which things in nature are placed on a graded scale of reality, is no longer required to understand the origins of the concept of

infinity. Things in nature are either real or not real, depending on whether its description has a referent or not. In his treatment, Descartes was only relating infinity to the notion of substance. But, of course, it can be applied to other concepts as well, such as space and time.

Is there an alternative, though, to Descartes's [1641a: 85] line of reasoning that 'I could not on that account have the idea of an infinite substance, for I myself am finite; unless, indeed, that idea proceeded from some substance that was really infinite'? He may have had some justification for this belief if it were the case that we finite beings could fully comprehend and imagine, in this case, infinite substance. However, needless to say, this mental feat is impossible.

One convincing way to understand the term 'infinite' is to see it as the denotation of the unimaginable result of a series of specific mental operations. Simply stated, the first of these operations is to imagine a given quantity, be it length, duration or any other suitable predicate, by means of a comparable standard. For example, imagine a three metre length (using the international standard metre bar). Secondly, by the mental process of addition, the given quantity is increased by a fixed, finite amount. In our example, imagine adding two metres in length to the original three metre length (yielding five metres in length). Thirdly, the same process of addition is applied to the new, resultant quantity. In our example, imagine adding an additional two metres to the five metre length.

The understanding of the operations just described does not require knowing beforehand what 'infinity' means. Such understanding does not require an infinite regress. The process of addition may begin and continue, as it so often does, from any point in time. Crucially, these steps can be *performed* by finite human beings. The final step is imagining this process of addition not halting. Here again, knowing the concept of infinity is not a prerequisite for understanding negation. The quantity that results from carrying out these three steps of fixing a finite quantity, successive addition and avoiding stopping, we call 'infinite'. We label the converse result, 'finite'.

By this reckoning, the words 'finite' and 'infinite' are appellations given to two distinct classes, one whose elements have a beginning and an end and the other whose elements have a beginning and no end or no beginning and an end or no beginning and no end. Although the two classes are distinct, the elements of the second class, to use Cartesian terminology, are by no means clear. This account of our understanding of the meaning of 'infinite' renders moot the requirement for the existence of an actual infinite being. In a sense, we have no positive understanding of 'infinity', the term serving as a logical construction fashioned from a finite number of mental operations and designed to aid our understanding of mathematics.

4. Proof and Role of God

In the previous sections, I argued that Descartes was rather careless in his application of his method of doubt to the problems of consciousness and the infinite. In this section, I examine whether he fared any better in applying his method to determining the existence and attributes of God. Borrowed from the neoplatonists is Descartes's belief that the infinite has the most positive reality and is the most perfect. For Descartes [1641b: 268], God, 'the amplest of beings', was 'the infinite'. However, I think this assumption is mistaken. We can clearly imagine other 'perfect' entities that possess qualities to an infinite degree. We can entertain the possibility of a perfect solvent, a chemical that can dissolve any substance, and a perfect lifter, a being who can lift any weight, even an infinite weight. Descartes avoided putting a case for thinking that only God could possess the attributes of perfection and infinite. Similarly, he failed to elucidate the necessary connection between reality and perfection.

In what does God's perfection consist? One way to judge whether something is perfect is to compare it to its original manifestation. We judge whether something is a 'perfect replica' by seeing how closely it relates to an archetype or model. However, God is not a replica of something else. Another way is to evaluate how well it satisfies a pre-existing purpose, as when we say of something that it is a 'perfect design'. Here, again, God is not the vehicle for the furthering of some pre-existing objective. One way around the difficulty is to say that God conforms to his own standard; that divine perfection consists in that to which God conforms. But then, Euthyphro-fashion, saying that God conforms to perfection is just to say that God conforms to whatever God conforms to. This is true, but trivially true.

Descartes had a possible way around this dilemma. He intuited that

. . . all that I had to do in order to know God's nature, as far as my own allowed, was to consider, as regards every property of which I found any idea in myself, whether the possession of it was a perfection or not; and I was certain that no property that indicated any imperfection was in God, but that all others were. Thus, I saw that doubt, inconstancy, sorrow, and so on could not be in God; for I myself should have liked to be rid of them.

[Descartes 1637: 33f]

It is not at all clear that even from the short list of imperfections that Descartes lists that they are, in fact, imperfections. Getting rid of doubt, for example, leads to obstinacy and dogmatism, characteristics that Descartes surely detested. In another case, getting rid of sorrow leads to aloofness and hardheartedness, these also being less than perfect characteristics.

Even if Descartes resisted this counterargument, some other people as intelligent and empathetic as Descartes would disagree with him in his judgments about what are imperfections. This objection goes to the heart of the fundamental weakness with Descartes's approach. And that is that his method reduces the theological investigation

about God's attributes to a narrow psychologism in which what gets on or stays off the list depends exclusively on what a particular theologian 'liked'.

A second, related objection is that Descartes's list of divine attributes is constrained, as he himself admitted, by his own human 'nature'. This epistemic limitation is understandable and we ought not be too hard on Descartes on that count. However, this parochial standpoint raises the possibility that some characteristics that Descartes added to his list would require removing if our thinking were not limited by our imperfect human nature. We just don't know and there is no in principle argument that Cartesians could give that would lift the epistemic scales from our eyes.

As a second proof of God's existence, Descartes [1641a: 103f] utilised a form of the traditional ontological argument. Mackie [1982: 41–9] provides convincing objections against Descartes's formulation, drawing on Kant's analysis and the concept of existential quantification. So, I will not add to his critique here. I have also dealt with a more robust and modern modal version of the ontological argument in my Allan [2017].

An important question to ask is whether Descartes's introduction of God saved his epistemology based on innate intuitive truths. For Descartes, God's existence is required to stamp the mark of indubitability on all of his clear and distinct ideas. Otherwise, he could be deceived whenever he would 'add two and three, or count the sides of a square, or do any simpler thing that might be imagined' [1641a: 64]. The problem for Descartes, though, is that his initial scepticism over the principles of mathematics applies equally to his non-mathematical principles. For the sake of consistency, Descartes's scepticism ought to extend to the principles he used in his deductive proof for the existence of God. Descartes offered no reason for granting the premises used in his deductive proof any epistemic privilege over his doubtful mathematical principles. For Descartes to rely, therefore, on 'clear and distinct' principles to prove the existence of God, who in turn is required to underwrite the veracity of the 'clear and distinct' principles used in the deductive proof of his existence, is as clear a case of question begging that we could ever imagine.

In his *Reply to Objections* [1641c], Descartes attempted to avoid this devastating critique by replying that God's existence is only required to guarantee the reliability of our memory of previous steps in a deductive argument, and not of the truth of the principles. For Descartes [1641c: 42f], 'we can entertain the same firm and immutable certainty as to these conclusions [because] the faculty of understanding given by Him must tend towards truth'. However, even if we grant the incorrigibility of Descartes's 'clear and distinct' principles, his move will not save him from the charge of question-begging. This is because Descartes's proof of the existence of God is, itself, a piece of deductive logic utilizing a number of steps, each of which requires us to remember the previous steps in the argument.

Without the surety of Descartes's God to underwrite the veracity of his 'clear and distinct' principles and his capacity to remember faithfully the steps in a deductive argument,

Descartes appears to be caught between a rock and a hard place. It seems that applying his method of doubt, Descartes had not been able to inoculate himself successfully against a deceiving demon. In his *Reply to Objections*, he seemed resigned to this radically sceptical conclusion. Descartes [1641c: 41] conceded that the principles we regard, after critical scrutiny, as certain may, nonetheless, be 'absolutely speaking, false'. However, Descartes [1641c: 41] still claimed victory on pragmatic grounds: 'We have assumed a conviction so strong that nothing can remove it, and this persuasion is clearly the same as perfect certitude.' The weak underbelly of Descartes's method that he exposed here is the same as that revealed in the discussion above of Descartes's proof of God's attributes. And that is that the certainty of his 'clear and distinct' intuitions is not grounded in a rock-solid foundation, as he had intimated earlier, but is floating on the sea of human psychological vagaries. For Descartes, it turns out, our 'perfect certitude' is measured by no more than the strength of our subjective feeling of 'conviction'.

I will end this section by making one final point about Descartes's approach to the status of logical laws and how it impacts the cogency of his method of doubt. On the basis of God's omniscience, Descartes argued that logical laws are necessarily true only through God's fiat. For Descartes, this fluidity even applies to the law of contradiction. Descartes [1641b: 291] concluded that 'nothing can have obliged God to make it true that contradictories cannot be together, and that consequently he could have done the contrary'.

Once Descartes allows the possibility that God could have made it true that contradictories can be together, then everything is possible. It could be the case that contradictories cannot be together in this world (as Descartes believed) and, at the same time, that contradictories *can* be together in this world. Descartes could have objected that this description of the state of affairs is itself a contradiction. However, given Descartes's view of God's omnipotence, then this contradictory state of affairs is not a bother for God. The upshot here is that on Descartes's schema, it's possible for God to be a deceiver in this world at one and the same time as him not being a deceiver. Descartes's [1641a: 91] assumption that God 'cannot be deceitful', it seems, has the same level of certainty as the belief that God is deceitful. Not only does this implication destroy the foundation for all of his other certainties about mathematics, matter and mind, but it leads to the absurd conclusion that for every proposition we can think of, it's possible that its contrary is true at one and the same time.

5. Conclusion

Descartes is rightly regarded as one of the forefathers of modern analytic philosophy. In seeking to wipe the epistemic slate clean and starting afresh, he sought to discover what we could know with certainty. His desire to avoid all preconception and prejudice in building a new science of knowledge is eminently admirable and his methods form the basis of schools of philosophical thought today.

The question remains whether he succeeded in his task of uncovering a set of beliefs that cannot be rationally disputed. Did Descartes apply his method of doubt to every type of proposition and with rigorous consistency? I have argued here that he failed on both counts. Descartes uncritically assumed that propositions about the self referred to a metaphysical substratum in which conscious states inhere. It turned out that whenever Descartes purportedly experienced this non-material substrate, he was simply having another conscious experience; an experience that failed to point to any underlying entity. For the sake of consistency, Descartes readily and rightly recognized the fallibility of his memory regarding previous events in his life. If he had applied his method of doubt more rigorously, he would have taken the same skeptical stance toward his past conscious states. These may never have existed also.

I argued that Descartes fared no better in his proofs for the existence of God. In Descartes's theory of knowledge, God held the indispensable role of guaranteeing the veracity of Descartes's clear and distinct ideas. However, it transpired that his proofs for the existence of God relied on clear and distinct principles, which, in turn, required the existence of God to validate. Once again, contradictorily, Descartes did not extend his initial skepticism over mathematical principles to the principles used in his proofs for God's existence. Recognizing this bifurcation, Descartes's later attempt to wrestle himself free from a deceiving demon, I argued, only led him down the path of psychologism. This ultimately subjectivist approach to epistemology surfaced as well in his method for uncovering God's attributes. I also devoted some time to showing, contra Descartes, how our understanding of the concept of infinity does not require the existence of an infinite, divine being and how Descartes's view of the nature of logic is self-defeating.

Modern philosophy is heavily indebted to Descartes's program for placing human knowledge on an incorrigible foundation. His rigorous approach to epistemology is the mainstay of philosophical argument to this day. In the end, he was not successful in warding off the deceiving demon and avoiding a radical skepticism and Humean solipsism. However, building on the work of Descartes's method of doubt, I think this task has now been more successfully completed by his philosophical descendants.

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