

## Sum, Ergo Cogito: Nietzsche Re-orders Descartes

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### I. Introduction

Nietzsche's aphorism 276 in *The Gay Science* addresses Descartes' epistemological scheme: "I still live, I still think: I still have to live, for I still have to think. *Sum, ergo cogito: cogito, ergo sum*" (GS 223). Ironically, Nietzsche inverts the logic in Descartes' famous statement "*Cogito, ergo sum*" as a caustic way, yet poetic and stylish, of creating his own statement.<sup>1</sup> He then delivers his critique by putting his own version prior to that of Descartes. Here, Nietzsche's critique can be interpreted as a twofold overlapping argument.

First, by reversing Descartes' axiom into "*Sum, ergo cogito,*" Nietzsche stresses that in fact a social ontology (which includes metaphysical, logical, linguistic, and conceptual elements) has been a condition that makes possible Descartes' inference of human existence from such pre-established values. Here, Descartes seems not to have applied his methodical doubt completely, since to arrive

1 In light of Nietzsche's inversion, this paper seeks to analyse Descartes' Meditation Project, in effect, the *cogito* as a device in itself. It does not consider the project's metaphysical background, including the issue of Descartes' substance dualism. For an introduction to Cartesian dualism, see Justin Skirry, "René Descartes: The Mind-Body Distinction," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

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at his axiom he has excluded some pre-existing factors from being put in doubt. For Nietzsche, this leads to a critique of Descartes' two basic points of departure in his Meditation Project: setting reason against doubt in order to reach certainty, and the idea of consciousness as the condition of one's existence.

Secondly, by asserting "*Sum, ergo cogito: cogito, ergo sum,*" Nietzsche seems to set forth this first point as a principle against which Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum* is a possible dictum for humans only as a superficial creation. In other words, Descartes' statement is only possible because of his *a priori* concept of thinking (*cogito*) that already is derived from a concept of existence (*sum*), both of which amount to social constructions. Moreover, both have validity only in the world of logic and language. Thus, Descartes does not call into doubt the conceptualization of thinking, existence, consciousness, and so on.

Still, Nietzsche takes issue with Descartes' *cogito* not only because its metaphysical underpinnings are needed to derive the certainty of human existence, but also due to its conception of a subject whose thinking seems to be disassociated from the Will to Power, and not a consequence of it. In Nietzsche's philosophy, "a thought comes when 'it' wants, not when 'I' want; so that it is a falsification of the facts to say: the subject 'I' is the condition of the predicate 'think'" (BGE 47). Nevertheless, this critique does not seem to address the conclusion of Descartes' reasoning. Indeed, even assuming that Nietzsche's critique is well founded, it is still the case that one is thinking, and therefore one exists. Thus, is the *cogito*—taking it as isolated from Descartes' metaphysics—immune to Nietzsche's critique? Was Nietzsche so misled by focusing on the metaphysical aspects of Descartes' Meditations that he ignored the reasoning central to the *cogito* itself?

In light of these observations, this paper aims to assess Nietzsche's critique of Descartes' "*Cogito, ergo sum*" in his books *The Gay Science* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. I shall first analyse Nietzsche's objections to Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy focusing on the notions of reason, consciousness, truth, and self. By doing this, one can better appreciate Nietzsche's inversion (*Sum, ergo cogito*) as a pre-condition for Descartes' "*Cogito, ergo sum*" recognizing that there are prior assumptions underlying Descartes' conception of

the *cogito*. Afterwards, I shall evaluate Nietzsche's objections, and I conclude by discussing whether Descartes' *cogito* eventually succumbs to Nietzsche's objections.

### Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy

Influenced by Euclidian geometry and Sextus Empiricus' skepticism, Descartes anticipates a Copernican revolution in philosophy by relying on his method of doubt to achieve certainty. In his First Meditation, Descartes asserts that his method requires the need "to demolish everything completely and to start again right from the foundations" (MFP 12), so that it seeks "to help 'set aside' preconceived opinions" (Newman 16). Descartes' requirement that "knowledge is to be based in complete, or perfect, certainty amounts to requiring a complete absence of doubt—an *indubitability*." (MFP 3) In other words, in applying the methodology of doubt, Descartes' Meditation Project aims to arrive at scientific certainty by rejecting all opinions whose truth in any way may be open to question. This hyperbolic doubt leads him to consider a range of hypothetical problems.

First, Descartes proceeds to analyse empirical knowledge gained by the senses. Based on Snell's Law of Refraction (e.g., a lapis immersed in a glass of water is perceived by human sight as if it were broken), Descartes doubts the senses: "But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once" (12). Here, it is clear just how radical is Descartes' project, since once something succumbs to hyperbolic doubt, it does not deserve complete trust. Thus, he sets forth the principle that everything reported by the senses under unfavorable conditions is doubtful, and therefore one should consider it as false.

Nevertheless, Descartes seems to be flexible regarding his doubting the senses. Although he assumes there are some conditions in which the senses fail as mechanisms to provide absolute certainty, in other situations the same senses can also establish certainty, as he puts it: "I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown,

holding this piece of paper in my hands, and soon. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine?" (13). It is worthwhile recognizing that in the same passage, Descartes excludes "madmen" contending that "such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself" (13). In other words, his experiment requires that one must be aware of their direct experiences of the senses—as a condition of not being deficient—in order to derive certainty. In this case, the principle that knowledge gained under adverse conditions of perception can be false succumbs to the proposition *I am here now doing such and such*. Nevertheless, this leads to another difficulty, which is known as the dream problem.

According to Descartes, the proposition *I am here doing such and such* is also doubtful since it is possible one can be dreaming and yet perceive that one is here (13). Although one can be aware of one's sensory experiences, there can be no consequent assurance that one is not dreaming, since those same sensory experiences can occur in a dream. However, Descartes will argue that there are some things that are not altered whether or not one is sleeping:

Arithmetic, geometry, and other subjects of this kind, which deal only with the simplest and most general things regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false. (14)

Significantly, although one's ideas and perceptions can be a dream that does not correspond to external factors but happens totally within the mind, one still conceives of arithmetic and geometry as true. Still, while the sciences of extension survive the dream problem, they will succumb to the Evil Deceiver problem.

In this scenario, Descartes wrestles with the possibility that there is an evil genius who makes one think that  $2+4=6$ , when in reality the total is 8 (14). How can one have certainty even of arithmetic and geometry when one may be the victim of an evil God who likes to deceive? Here, crucially, Descartes must address this problem

by arguing for the existence of a perfect God (who otherwise would not be God) to secure his *cogito*, an issue that, as was stated earlier, extends beyond the scope of this paper.

According to Descartes, however, even if one is being deceived, the fact that one can be aware of the capacity of thinking survives the evil deceiver problem (17). Since Descartes considers a human being to be a thinking entity, this requires that there be a subject who is aware of such a characteristic, so that the subject's existence follows. As one can see, Descartes' Meditations include as a necessary condition the affirmation of the subject as self-aware; otherwise, it would be not possible to conceive of the *cogito*. Hence, the *cogito*, survives even the evil genius problem.

To summarize, Descartes' Meditation Project includes a number of key points: a self-determined subject; the search for truth; full awareness during the meditation process in order to arrive at the *cogito*; reason as innate. In fact, those points will be challenged by Nietzsche's critiques of metaphysics and the self-sufficient subject. Moreover, Nietzsche will argue the flaws in deriving the *cogito* from such assumptions, as will be discussed below.

### Nietzsche's Critique: Sum, ergo cogito

Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* contends that Descartes' Cogito is possible only because it presupposes what "I" and "think" are. He states:

When I analyse the event expressed in the sentence 'I think', I acquire a series of rash assertions which are difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove—for example, that it is I who think, that it has to be something at all which thinks, that thinking is an activity and operation on the part of an entity thought as a cause, that "I" exists, finally that what is designed by 'thinking' has already been determined—that I know what thinking is. (46)

Here, Nietzsche criticizes Descartes' concept of an "I" disassociated from "think" who can be self-determined. In other words, he concludes that Descartes conceives of an "I" as the cause of thought, an "I" in this case who is not a result of the Will to Power but *a priori*

to it. The Nietzschean “I”, on the other hand, is the manifestation of various drives, which are “given” by the Will to Power in a body in the state of constant becoming. Singularity comes only from the particular constitution of those drives, although they are the result of constantly changing conflict among multiple forces. In this picture, thinking and feeling are associated only with apparent manifestations of those drives, as Nietzsche writes in *Daybreak*, “While ‘we’ believe we are complaining about the vehemence of a drive, at bottom it is one drive which is complaining about another (109). As a result, unlike Descartes’ subject, Nietzsche’s “I” is determined by the Will to Power and is not conceived of as a primary cause.

Furthermore, Descartes seems to take as a starting point the notion of the “I” as self-determined, a concept that conflicts with Nietzsche’s “ontology”. For Nietzsche, Will to Power—the conflicts among multiple forces in the process of constant change—determines everything, so that humans are in constant obedience to such impulses. In fact, Nietzsche asserts that one cannot know what is going on “under skin” (this conflict among multiple forces, Will to Power in itself), although one can observe and interpret the “skin” (have an appraisal of the manifestations of Will to Power). This underlies Nietzsche’s concept of superficiality, which in his philosophy is a positive notion. He states: “He who has seen deeply into the world knows what wisdom there is in the fact that men are superficial. It is their instinct for preservation which teaches them to be fickle, light, and false” (*BGE* 84–85). With this concept of the value of superficiality in mind, Nietzsche states in a key passage that from the “herd” of post-Socratic philosophers, “One might have to exclude Descartes, the father of rationalism (and consequently the grandfather of the Revolution), who recognized only the authority of reason: but reason is only an instrument, and Descartes was superficial” (114). Here, Nietzsche appears to be complimenting Descartes by excepting him from the philosophical-theological mainstream and by approving his superficiality. Is this the case?

Writing on this subject, Mota Itaparica argues that Nietzsche is indeed praising Descartes, while at the same time criticizing him. Nietzsche considers that Descartes was superficial because “he conceives of the idea in its superficiality—language—hiding the fact that the logic rests on the belief in a universal and necessary truth,

whose only foundation is the postulation of an extremely good God” (Itaparica 76).<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Descartes departs from the paraphernalia of social constructions (e.g., language, values, concepts which are pre-established) to reflect only the externals of what is happening “under skin” (Will to Power), where these usual human concepts have no validity. Nietzsche is also critical of Descartes’ pre-established values because of the moral content behind the reflection on the evil genius (the implication that deceiving is bad) and their positing of truth as a universal objectivity, since Nietzsche “does not criticize false claims to truths but truth itself and as an ideal” (Deleuze 95). As Nietzsche addressed an unnamed philosopher, but clearly intending Descartes: “My dear sir ... it is improbable you are not mistaken: but why do you want the truth at all?” (BGE 46) Hence, Nietzsche’s more positive view of Descartes’ project seems consider it as a search for premises to support his *Cogito*, while recognizing that Descartes’ method of doubt was not indeed so radical and preferable to the alternative.

### **Cogito, Ergo Sum: Descartes Defended?**

According to Itaparica, Nietzsche’s critique of Descartes seems to indicate he had misread Descartes’ *cogito* reasoning. Nietzsche argues that the *cogito* is possible only if an array of assumptions is determined before the experiment. Indeed, it is clear in the *Meditations* that during the whole process the subject must be aware, which is Descartes’ reason for excluding the insane. He affirms clearly, “But for all that I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of thing? As I have just said—a thinking thing” (MFP 18). In fact, it is within these conditions that Descartes creates his reasoning; differentiating the insane rests on whether or not one is aware of one’s thinking.

2 Author’s translation; the original reads: “... por conceber o pensamento em sua superfície—a linguagem—escondendo que a lógica repousa na crença em uma verdade universal e necessária, cujo único fundamento é postulação de um Deus sumamente bom.” In contrast to the suggestion of Moto Itaparica, this paper submits that in BGE, Sec. 191, Nietzsche uses the concept of superficiality in a denotative sense to criticize Descartes

In defense of Descartes, Peacocke attempts to clarify the issues by explaining Descartes' method. Peacocke's reasoning goes as follows. Descartes posits (1) a thinking thing, and (2) if the subject is aware of their thinking, the conclusion is (3) that the subject must exist (Peacocke 110). Relating Peacocke's reconstruction of the Cogito to Nietzsche's approach, the issue is that Nietzsche goes only from (2) to (3), when, logically speaking, (1) answers his objection. Accordingly, Nietzsche's critique of the Cogito, ergo sum, abstracting it from any of the Meditations' underlying principles, seems not entirely valid. Still, by isolating the logical character of the argument, Peacocke provides only a limited defense of Descartes' Cogito. Even given his defense, he freely concedes that "it relies on principles of metaphysics, in its treatment of conscious mental events and their relations to subjects" (Peacocke 122).

### "Cogito, ergo sum" or "Sum, ergo cogito" ?

Although "*Cogito, ergo sum*," understood as (1)-(3) above, may answer, at first glance, Nietzsche's objection, it seems still to succumb to his criticism of the "I" as cause and disassociated from the Will to Power (or the naturalist world, if one prefers). By considering "to think" as a consequence of one's drives, Nietzsche does not accept an "I" who is self-determined (a conscious Ego who commands mental states), but an "It" that thinks. Consequently, the "I" is a useful fiction that is secondary to the "It", which is the manifestation of Will to Power. The former is possible only because of the latter. Such an "I" is a simply one's interpretation of one's drives which we disassociate—but should not—from the whole:

Moreover, if certainty is sought, being aware that one is thinking requires a relationship with other subjects and objects. If Descartes' thinking thing is possible, is it the case that if one were alone in this world one would be aware that one is thinking?

There is some reason to think otherwise, since our minds need references to be aware of something. An interesting illustration occurs in an Alfred Hitchcock film, *The Lady Vanishes*. Although the young girl was aware that she had talked to the Lady, she was led to self-doubt because those around her tried to convince her otherwise. While the girl did not, of course, doubt her very existence,

her certainty, perhaps even her “consciousness”, was thrown into question because she lacked outside reference points. It returned only in seeing the Lady’s signature reappear in the frost on the train window, an external object on which the girl could rely. The illustration suggests a possibility that is the very opposite of Descartes’ approach: that there appears to be no such entity as “I” without an external reference. Descartes conceives of the subject as self-determined, as a cause, and thus succumbs to Nietzsche’s critique. Hence, Nietzsche’s “*Sum, ergo cogito*” proposes that the condition in which it is possible to have what is called an “I” is only if there is a “we” or an external world.

In fact, Nietzsche is taking issue with conceiving of a thinking thing as having a faculty that can cause and command mental states. This is because what delimits the whole being as a fictional Ego is social construction (words, concepts, structured content), but this fictional Ego remains only a “visible” conceptual expression of the whole. As Katsafanas explains it: “Since Nietzsche claims that conscious states, and only conscious states, have conceptually articulated content, it follows that unconscious mental states do not have conceptually articulated content; unconscious states must have a type of nonconceptual content” (Katsafanas 3). In other words, it is not the case that because one cannot conceptualize some unconscious states, one cannot conclude that these states do not exist or are subordinate to conscious states, nor is it the case that the conscious states constitute an Ego apart from and commanding the unconscious states. As a result, Descartes’ *cogito* represents just one aspect of the self that can be grasped only with an already given concept.

This not only evidences that Nietzsche had not misread Descartes’ *cogito* reasoning but also explains his move from Peacocke’s (2) to (3). A plausible interpretation may be that he understands the *Cogito* as simply the superficiality of consciousness that does not encompass the whole picture. Since in Nietzschean thought, “the movement from an unconscious state to a conscious state is the process of conceptualization” (Katsafanas 6), the *cogito* is de facto conceptualized content. As Katsafanas describes the process, “an unconscious perception becomes a conscious perception once the perceptual content has been conceptualized”(6).

Hence, Nietzsche's "*Sum, ergo cogito*" conveys the whole mental status (unconscious and conscious states) highlighting that it is an *a priori* conceptualization, which condition makes possible Descartes' "*Cogito, ergo sum*" as a superficiality.

### Final Considerations

For Nietzsche, Descartes' *cogito* is merely a partial picture of one's mental status and has a certain validity as a reflection of the human surface and a product of language (superficiality of consciousness) but it otherwise does not work without Descartes' pre-established metaphysical values. In fact, from Nietzsche's standpoint, it is quite unconvincing to start from the Cartesian principle that the "I", existing as an entity, is a cause of thinking, since this seems to rest on pre-conceived assumptions regarding both a self-defined subject and that subject's operations. More generally, Nietzsche observes that Descartes' *Meditations* is replete with metaphysics, something Nietzsche vehemently criticizes.

Still, nothing disallows the possibility of analysing Descartes' *cogito* by relying solely on its logical reasoning as a linguistic construct, as Peacocke does. However, even then, Nietzsche's critique of *cogito* argument would still be relevant as it applies to Descartes' conception of self. Here, the point is that Descartes' "I" is, for Nietzsche, merely a fictional Ego which expresses only conscious states (words, concepts, structured content) and does not take into account the unconscious ones. Moreover, in order to arrive at existence Descartes effectively departs from social constructions (conscious states, language, and concepts) without subjecting these concepts to doubt. In that sense, Descartes does not go beyond the surface, which provides reason for the negative side of Nietzsche's appraisal of him as superficial. In re-ordering Descartes, Nietzsche contends for a being *a priori* (something going on under skin, unconscious states) before considering the surface (conscious states, conceptualization, social construction). Nietzsche, therefore, is correct in stating that Descartes' "*Cogito, ergo sum*" is only possible as a suffix. As Nietzsche re-states it, "*Sum, ergo cogito: cogito, ergo sum*" (GS 223).

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