DISCUSSION

ON THE CIRCULARITY OF THE COGITO

by Arnold Berleant

The Cartesian method is an admirable instance of the constant endeavor of philosophy to cut through received opinion by deliberately establishing a sounder basis for belief through specifying its grounds more completely. In this, Descartes is part of the great tradition of reconstructive analysis from Socrates, through Kant, to Dewey. That original efforts tend to draw criticism is no more surprising than that they generate wholly new directions for further inquiry. There is value in both support and opposition, and if I place myself with the latter, it is a like tribute to the seminal value of Descartes’ observations.

In establishing the subjectivist tradition in philosophy, Descartes treated the individual consciousness as a self-contained entity and thus separated it from the rest of a world whose existence he did not long question. Yet it is not with Descartes’ dualistic metaphysical presuppositions that I wish to take issue here; it is rather with the logic of his skeptical method. Ever since Descartes set a new style with his subjective method and changed the course of philosophic thought, men have tried to take that into account either by building or rebuilding on his foundation. Descartes’ method of doubt has been, too, the victim of many an attack which has disputed its cognitive claims. Not as often, however, has the logic of Descartes’ procedure been called into question. Yet it is at this point that his approach is most vulnerable, since such a charge does not rest on the prior commitment to an opposed metaphysic.

Briefly, as recounted in his Discourse on Method and Meditations, Descartes sets himself the task of critically reviewing the foundations of his belief by subjecting every opinion he holds to the test of doubt. Whatever he could conceive clearly and distinctly, he could continue to accept with confidence; whatever he could doubt, he must reject as insufficiently dependable to be regarded as true belief. And so, on this basis of the dubito, Descartes infers that he is thinking and, consequently, that he exists as a thinking being, from whence he proceeds to reconstruct the world with the assistance of a God who could not deceive.
him. Descartes' rationalistic method is impressive, and his argument, because it rests on assumptions congenial to our intellectual tradition, rarely fails to convince. Yet, as I hope to show, the logic of Descartes' ingenious train of inferences is open to serious question.

Descartes' procedure is to employ doubt methodologically: the *dubito* becomes his criterion for judging the credibility of an idea. In particular, the belief in his personal existence follows, he holds, from the uncompromising application of the standard of doubt to all beliefs. Yet Descartes' inability to find a single belief which he cannot doubt itself provides him with one, for it informs him vividly of the fact of his doubting, the only fact which he cannot doubt. Hence his conclusion. Yet, in a particularly subtle way, this procedure commits a *petitio principia*. For Descartes' proof of his existence as a doubting, and thus a thinking, being follows, not from his use of the method of doubt, but from his adoption of that method.

Let me illustrate this by a simple analogy. Suppose a man decides to shovel snow from his driveway. As he is shoveling, he asks himself whether there is anything he can infer from the fact of his shoveling. Finally, after continued exertion, he stops, stands erect, and concludes exultantly, "Aha! There is now one thing of which I can be certain. From the fact of my shoveling I am drawn irresistibly to a single conclusion: I can infer that there is a shoveler." And with pride he looks down at his hands and, yes, there rests a shovel.

Now while this analogy may not be exact, it is sufficiently similar to elucidate my point. Our protagonist, elated though he be at his conclusion, has not really arrived at anything new. There being a shoveler follows, not from his having observed that shoveling is taking place, but from his initial decision to perform that task. For there to have been shoveling, there must first have been a shoveler, and so in arriving at his conclusion he is simply drawn to reassert what is presupposed by his premise.

Similarly in the case of Descartes. By adopting the procedure of doubting whatever he could, Descartes was assured of his outcome. For the method of doubting *itself* contains the necessity for a doubter. That is, Descartes' conclusion follows not from the use of the method but from its adoption. To conclude that there must be a doubter because he is doubting is no different from concluding that there must be a shoveler because he is shoveling. Descartes based the certainty of his beliefs on his ability to conceive them as clear and distinct, and thus, by adopting the method of doubt, assured himself of his conclusion. For
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Descartes began with something he could not doubt - his resolve to doubt.¹ Therefore his conclusion was not the result of applying the method of doubt; it was the consequence of his decision to adopt it. There being a doubter follows from the decision to doubt and not from the doubting, itself. Thus the force of Descartes' conclusion should occasion little surprise, not to mention doubt.

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