

Ergo Sum?

EXCERPT FROM

How the World Can Be the Way It Is:

An Inquiry for the New Millennium Into Science, Philosophy and Perception

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The subtlety with which we make many of our assumptions is profound indeed. In fact, there is a basic unwarranted (i.e., not found in experience) assumption that goes unidentified by nearly everyone all the time. The consequences of this assumption—this ignorance—are great. The best example of this unwarranted assumption appears in Descartes' classic proposition, "I think, therefore, I am."

Descartes wanted to get to some statement that could not be doubted. He wanted certitude. In his day, religious authority had fallen under attack. There had been a renewed interest in the ancient skeptics, most notably Sextus Empiricus, and the unsettling idea was about that all propositions could be rendered equally improbable. It was even being seriously questioned whether there could be any knowledge at all. This was a very troubling problem in Descartes' time...it still is.

Descartes contemplated the possibility that all we commonly believe might be false. For him the question was, "What do I know?" He tried to find the answer by searching through the various beliefs he felt inclined to hold and, though he was not a skeptic himself, he used skeptical methods to bring himself to doubt all (or so he claimed)...even beliefs he had long held. He doubted all until he came upon his cogito—"I think"—which he regarded as a "primitive datum that the mind can recognize only when it encounters it."

Descartes set down the assumption that "I think" is the ground that is beyond all doubt. But even in the simple statement "I think," Descartes had already made an assumption—he assumed the existence of a self. Once he had done this, of course, it was not too difficult for him to "prove" the inevitable conclusion ("therefore I am"), since he had already arrived at that conclusion even before he stated his premise.

Such a tightly knit package is likely to appear as a truism to most of us—and, indeed Descartes' cogito does appear as a truism to many. But Descartes clearly did not doubt enough. In saying, "I think, therefore I am," we have already assumed the "I's" existence even before we begin. This merely reflects our normal way of thinking—we all assume a self most of the time.

Descartes "proved" that he existed by simply positing the "I" prior to setting out on his proof. But this is no proof. Just as it is not difficult to discover "God" if we begin with the foregone conclusion that "God is," so too it is not surprising that Descartes could discover "I am" after he had already posited the "I" in his thought. This isn't the unshakable proof, the indubitable

ground that Descartes was seeking. If he truly questioned his existence, how could he have gotten away with having already assumed it? He didn't say, "Suppose, just for the sake of argument, that I do exist, now what would this entail?" He came right out, first thing, with "I." In fact, what he said was:

I noticed that while I was trying to think everything false, it must needs be that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth, I am thinking, therefore I exist [Je pense, donc je suis] was so solid and secure that the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics could not overthrow it, I judged that I did not scruple to accept it as the first principle of [the] philosophy that I was seeking.

But where or what is this "I"? What does Descartes mean? Does he mean his mind is thinking? Does he mean his body is thinking? Notice how the "I" gets tossed into the picture from out of nowhere. What is doing the thinking here? What exactly is the "I" referring to?

The absurdity of this assertion becomes clearer once we switch subjects. We've all used the common expression "It's raining." But would we say, "It is raining, therefore it is"? What is raining? Do we suppose there is some entity corresponding to the word "it" which is doing the raining? No, of course not!

But how does this situation differ from "I am thinking"? What is raining? Who is thinking? Where are these hidden entities? What is this "I" we keep referring to? What thing corresponds to this word? What is this "I" that is doing the thinking?

You may say, "But, of course, when we use the expression 'it is raining,' there's nothing out there which corresponds to the word 'it'—it's just that we cannot construct a proper sentence in English unless it has a subject. And so, by convention, we insert one. But this is obviously not the case with the 'I' in 'I am thinking.'"

Oh? Then what is the "I" referring to? Where is it located? What are its properties? The more we try to grasp what "I" is, the more it slips away from us. As Ambrose Bierce put it, "I think I think, therefore, I think I am." We've assumed and have locked our homuncular self at the end of an endless regression...and we can't get to it. "I" seems to refer to something we tacitly assume is there, but which we can't seem to find. The "I" is deeply, profoundly, yet quietly assumed...but it's assumed without justification.

Recall how difficult it is to answer a simple question such as, "Is that you in your baby picture?" We can't find anything in experience which clearly corresponds to the word "you"—that is why we find it so difficult to answer this question.

So now, how does "I am thinking, therefore I am" differ from "it is raining, therefore it is"?

I is a most difficult thing to come to doubt—but we must go beyond Descartes and doubt it, for it is in fact no more than a mere construct, a concept, a belief, and it is nowhere to be found within direct experience (i.e., through perception). We do not find anything in our experience which corresponds to that word, "I."

Let's consider how Descartes might have constructed his "proof" in a manner that better reflects actual experience—i.e., which reflects perception rather than conception. Note that, short of its being demanded by the conventions of language, the "I" is absent. What Descartes was directly aware of was "thought" and not "I." Whichever way we might put it—"thought," "cognizance," "awareness," "mind," "consciousness"—these words more closely refer to immediate experience than the word I.

The problem with Descartes' cogito is that it admits of a self before it admits of other, and such is in direct violation of actual experience. (The old joke is that he put Descartes before de horse—but I hasten to add that putting Descartes after the horse doesn't work either.) If it is "thought" and not "I" which is directly experienced, then Descartes should have said, "thought, therefore I am." But, of course, such a proposition is clearly absurd, for now it is plain to see how the "I" just pops into the picture out of nowhere. The insertion of "I" follows neither logically nor experientially from the first statement.

To get his statement more in line with direct experience, Descartes might have said "cogitatio ergo esse"—"Thought, therefore to be." Or, "Thought, therefore existence." Thought, therefore something (without naming it) is. Something's going on, in other words.*

We must come to doubt the common-sense idea that we experience an "I" antecedent to, separate and distinct from what is "not-I." We must come to doubt the explanation that there can be a self (literally a "not-other") that is separate from an other.

*But the word "esse"—"to be, to exist"—is still not quite reflective of actual experience, for it has a static quality about it. Since all our experience is in (or of) time, the phrase "thought is to be" does not quite hit the mark, for "to be" implies an abiding, unchanging thing. To get closer to actual experience, then, Descartes might have said "cogitatio ergo existere," or better yet, "sensus ergo existere" (consciousness, therefore becoming).