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Logic of the Egotistical Sentence

A Reading of Descartes

Vincent Descombes

Question: How do philosophers derive a substantive (“the self”) from our use of a pronoun (“me”)?¹

After the epoch of Descartes, a new character occupies the philosophical scene: the *self* (whereas other characters are eclipsed, like the agent intellect and soon the soul). Where does it come from? By what alchemy have the philosophers succeeded in extracting from the vulgar material that is our ordinary speech about oneself this philosophical being that we willingly qualify as a “pure self” (*das reine Ich*)?

Ordinary language knows two uses of the French word “self” (*moi*). As a personal pronoun of the first person singular, it can serve as complement to a verb (“tell me about it/him”) as well as reinforces in apposition the subject of the phrase (“Me, I think,” *ego cogito*).² Furthermore, it can lose its pronominal status (and therefore its referential function) by becoming an adjective designating a quality of self-presence (like when we say after a furious outburst: “I was no longer myself”).

After the seventeenth century, the language of philosophers adds to these two uses a new meaning: to designate, as a noun, the subject of certain remarkable actions. Because it is assuredly about a subject in the sense of an agent that we can say of it things like: “the self posits itself absolutely,”³ “the *self* exists *for itself* only insofar as it knows itself, and knows itself only insofar as it *acts*”⁴ (and we could multiply examples of operations attributed to a subject – the *self* – whose activity philosophy attempts to describe, paradoxically, *in the third person*).

Thus there would be some operations in which the subject could only be identified as a *self*, whether as someone’s *self* or as nothing more than the *self*. But we fall then into an embarrassing situation, because we have the feeling that the ordinary system of grammatical persons does not allow us to locate this *self* in the place which ought to be its own. It would be necessary

for it to be found at the same time in the third person (so that we can say “the self”) and in the first person (since the whole idea is to explain how I am myself).

Can the question of the subject – namely the question “Who?” when we pose it for the purposes of identification – be posed otherwise than in the third person? We ask: who is this person? Who painted this picture? Who will guard the key to the house?⁵ Each time, if one knows the answer, one gives it by identifying someone. And if we pose the question of identity in the second person (“Who are you?”), we wait for an answer that allows us to speak about our interlocutor in the third person by naming him.

We suppose that the answer to our question about someone’s identity is “It’s me” (“*C’est moi*”). What are the transformations by which the philosophy of the *self* succeeds in exchanging this answer, “It’s me,” for an answer mentioning a being who calls itself *the self*?

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The Logic of the Egotistical Sentence

Now what about the second use, mentioned above, of the *self* taken substantively, the one in which it designates the thinking self given to itself in its act of thinking? This is the *self* of the philosophical doctrines that we can bring together under the label of egology. At first sight, an egology is a philosophical form of egotism. It is a philosophy that not only expresses itself in the first person, but can express itself only in the first person. If the philosopher did not have the right to employ the words “self” and “I,” he/she would not be able to formulate the argument of the *Cogito*.

In fact, the decisive time of the argument known by the name of the *Cogito* is when the philosopher expresses doubt as to his own identity. If this philosopher is Descartes, he will say: “I do not know if I am Descartes (the human individual named so by his parents), but I am certain that I exist as long as I am thinking.” The reader is invited to apply this reasoning to himself, by inserting his own name where Descartes would have mentioned his own, if it were formulated as his own doubt. In Caesarean language,⁶ this argument is impossible, because it would yield: Descartes does not know if Descartes is Descartes, but Descartes is certain that Descartes exists as long as he is thinking.

It seems then that the philosophy of the *Cogito* is a philosophy in the first person. Additionally, it begins by an interrogation of what the philosopher is when he thinks in the first person and is reduced to this activity of thinking. Therefore we could judge that it is a philosophical egotism. And

it is often in this way that the Cartesian innovation has been presented: a metaphysician dares to take to speaking in the first person.

However, there is room to wonder if an egological doctrine is able to maintain the egotist style through and through. It is a fact that it begins in the first person. But the time comes when it exchanges the pronoun “I” (*moi*) for the substantive “the *self*” (*le moi*). This substantive is supposed to refer to something that will be elucidated in the third person. Consequently, the style of egology ceases to be egotistical, and there we can discern in it the adoption of a manner of speaking that forbids taking for the self (*soi*) (by saying “I” [*moi*]) what we say about the *self* (*moi*). Egology, contrary to appearances, could indeed express itself in a form of “Caesarean idiom,” not for reasons of civility or morality (as with the Jansenist style), but for metaphysical reasons. I propose to brand it the “transcendental Caesarian idiom.”

These metaphysical reasons presuppose an analysis of the egotistical sentence, which is understood as a sentence starting with “I.” It is therefore necessary to attack this analysis in order to decide if we understand what the *self* means in the sense of the philosophers of egology.

What is an “egology”?

What is called, in the technical vocabulary of the philosophers, an egology? This term is the name that Husserl gives to a discipline that must found philosophy.⁷

Ricœur gives this explanation: Husserl, in his transcendental philosophy, wanted to elaborate “a philosophy that would be only an egology and never an ontology.”⁸ In other words, this philosophy would remain thoroughly phenomenological, a description of a lived experience giving rise to concepts, without ever passing through a thesis on what hinges are independently from us and from the manner in which they present themselves to us. Ricœur clarifies: “An egology, that is a *cogito* without *res cogitans* [...]”⁹ If we hold ourselves to this definition, Descartes, inasmuch as he makes the *ego* into a thinking thing, is still not a thinker of egology, but only the precursor of such a doctrine. Here, a thinking thing is to be taken in the strongest sense of a thinking substance.

Therefore, egology is what the philosophy of the *Cogito* becomes when it imposes on itself a methodical requirement whose watchwords are given by phenomenology: can I indicate what is the given experience that enables me to describe what I describe (here, myself [*moi-même*]) as I am doing it? From then on, the philosopher who resumes, in turn, the *Cogito* must ask himself: does this act of thinking present me to myself as an immaterial substance?

The answer is that consciousness does not give this evidence of a thinking subject who would have existed before the act of thinking or who

would persist in existing after this act. Moreover, Descartes recognizes it (at this stage of his development [*cheminement*] in the *Meditations*): I am certain of existing as long as I am thinking, but this certainty does not surpass the present. As he writes it in the Second Meditation:

I am, I exist: that is certain; but for how long? Namely, for as long as I am thinking, because perhaps it could be, if I were to cease thinking, that I would cease being or existing at the same time (AT, IX, 21).¹⁰

The (Negative) Egology of Descartes

Descartes, in the eyes of the philosophers of the subject who have succeeded him, would remain prisoner to a metaphysics of substance.

However, Merleau-Ponty pointed out that we find in the work of Descartes a non-“Cartesian” moment, if that means non-substantialist. Thus we can say, conforming to the definition suggested by Ricœur, that we already find there an egological moment. This is the moment when Descartes does not yet know how to say *what he is* as a thinking subject, but only *what he is not*. For a time, Descartes escapes from the dogmas of “grand rationalism” and shows himself in a surprising fashion to be our contemporary, which Merleau-Ponty explains thusly:

He had described the mind as a being which is *neither* subtle matter, *nor* a breath of spirit, nor any existing thing, but a being which itself dwells in the absence of all positive certainty. [...] It is in this respect that Descartes is more modern than the Cartesians, anticipating the philosophies of subjectivity and the negative.¹¹

Merleau-Ponty, in this reading, sketches an interpretation of the Cartesian philosophy of mind as egology. An egology that we could say is apophatic or negative (like the theology that on the subject of God only authorizes the negative way and refuses to speak of him as we do of his creatures). We can say what the pure subject is not, but not what it is (except that it is thinking).

This reading calls for a remark in terms of our reflection on the egotistical sentence. The thinking subject is posited as a pure mind, which means that it is “not any existing thing.” Merleau-Ponty writes that, as such, it “remains itself” even though it doubts. Yes, but how can it be itself, remain itself, be certain of remaining itself, even though it is not certain of anything (other than existing)? What is it when it is and remains itself? By hypothesis, it does not know anything of itself. Yet, remaining itself assumes that one remains the same thing (*aliquid*). If our egology must stay negative, how can it decide on the identity of the thinking subject? Such is the question that we cannot avoid posing when we find in the work of several contemporary

philosophers this same exaltation of a purely phenomenological moment in Descartes' thought.

The what? And the who?

The idea of a non-dogmatic step in the Cartesian demonstration was promised a great future. Several recent commentators have underscored that Descartes, in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, escaped – at least for a time, essentially throughout the Second Meditation – from what they took to be the constraints of traditional metaphysics. Here, Heidegger's influence has been decisive.

It is known that Heidegger argues that classical notions of being or existence are equivocal. The philosophical tradition interprets them with the help of a conceptual pair, which corresponds in Latin to the two words *quid* and *quod*. We can say of something what it is (*quid est*), and we can also say that it exists or that it is (*quod est*). Thus we oppose the question of existence (*an est?*, does that exist?) to the question of essence (*quid est?*, what is it?). The question *an est?* gives its content to the traditional notion of *existentia*. Where the tradition speaks of existence, Heidegger will speak of presence or of available presence (*Vorhandenheit*),¹² so as to reserve the word "existence" for a use that is meaningful only for us, for the sort of beings (or "entities") that we ourselves are. In order to introduce these distinctions, he pointed out that we have two interrogative words: one for things (*what?*), the other for people (*who?*). The fact that there are these two modes of being is already marked, according to Heidegger, by the way in which we pose elementary questions: "any entity is either a 'who' (existence) or a 'what' (presence-at-hand in the broadest sense)."¹³

In a Summer 1927 course, Heidegger would go as far as to forge a special term for designating the question of being posed about a person. Since Scholastic vocabulary provides the term "quiddity" – in German "*die Washeit*" – in order to designate the answer to the question, "What is that thing?", then we could say in German "*die Werheit*," literally the "being-who" or the "whoness" (*quissité*), in order to designate the answer to the question "Who is it?" (a question necessarily posed in regard to that which shares the same mode of being as us).¹⁴

I must immediately mark an initial perplexity in regard to this dichotomy between the *what* and the *who*. Heidegger explains in the course in question: "The answer does not give a thing but an I, you, we [*ein Ich, Du, Wir*]."¹⁵ This translation is confusing. If the question posed is for example: "Who will do this work?", the answer may indeed be held in a personal pronoun, but it will not be "I" or "You," but rather "Me (*Moi*)," "You" (or, more completely "It's me who will do it," "It's you," etc.).¹⁶ Thus it is necessary to say that in French the answer calls to the singular a *Me* (*Moi*) or a *You* (*Toi*).

Even more disturbing, a second perplexity stops us. In front of a thing, we ask what it is (question of quiddity). In front of a person, we ask who it is (question of *Werheit*). But, if the question about the being of a person is carried by the word “who?”, it is a question of identity. Yet the answer that responds to a question of identity cannot be “I am myself,” “You are yourself,” “He is himself.” We expect something like a proper name or a set of identifying descriptions (“I am Mr. So-and-so,” “He is the plumber,” etc.). Can such answers, like “I am a *self*” or “I am this *self*,” therefore be considered identifying descriptions?

These difficulties, I believe, are inherent in the egological tradition, as can be confirmed by returning to Descartes.

Questions about an Untranslatable Question from Descartes

Heidegger has attracted attention to two ways of posing the question of “being” in regard to what is: one is reifying and the other is suited to the fact that we are dealing with someone, rather than something. According to him, when someone wonders about himself, about his own being, he must ask *who am I?* and not *what am I?*

But, as we have noted, this is exactly what Descartes does many times in the *Meditations*. He does not only pose the question of knowing what he is as a thinking thing, but he himself comes to pose the question “Who?”. However, and here things are complicated, it is necessary to read him in Latin in order to notice it, because the French translation by the Duke of Luynes (reviewed and corrected by Descartes) did not retain this personal side of the question. Indeed we read in the French, immediately after the achievement of the “I am, I exist”:

But I still do not know clearly enough what I am, I (*moi*)
who am certain that I am [...] (AT, IX, 19).¹⁷

The French translation makes Descartes say that he does not know *what he is*, as if there was *quid*. But the Latin text says:

Nondum vero satis intelligo, quisnam sim ego ille, qui jam
necessario sum (AT, VII, 25).¹⁸

This sentence is notable in at least two regards.

On the one hand, the question posed is indeed conveyed by the word “*quis?*” and not by “*quid?*”. If we follow Heidegger in his dichotomy, we could very well have here a sample of negative egology, of a thought of the self (*soi*) escaping from substantialism.

On the other hand, the question posed is in the first person, even though Descartes proceeds, inside of this sentence, to the substantification of the

pronoun “*ego*.” It had already come to him to write it in French in the *Discourse on Method*, where he speaks of “this self [*moi*].” But when he said “this self” in that text, it was in order to identify himself immediately with the soul, so that he was speaking in the third person about it:

[...] From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. Accordingly this ‘I’ [*moi*] – that is, the soul by which I am what I am – is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist (AT, VI, 33).¹⁹

Nevertheless, in the Second Meditation, Descartes questions himself about himself, this *ego*, in the first person. This surprising sentence from Descartes has exercised the interpretative talents of many interpreters, who have wanted to see there in Cartesian thought a phenomenological moment. Their glosses will help us to specify the principle of all egologies.

Étienne Balibar has noted that the French translations of this text are inexact.²⁰ The text says something that escapes them. However, he does not say this in order to reproach the translators for a misunderstanding about the text, but in order to highlight that the sentence is “untranslatable in French.”²¹ In fact, he correctly notes, the sentence in question is not any more translatable (without loss) into Latin.

Why is this untranslatable? Because, he writes, the sentence is “undecidable” from the point of view of verbal persons.²² Is it in the first person or the third person? We hesitate between “I wonder what this Ego is” and “I wonder who I am.” Balibar explains that it would be necessary to be able to merge these two incompatible versions.

If we construct the verb “being” in the third person, we get: “I wonder what this Ego is which now necessarily is (or which we now necessarily know that it is).” If we translate it thus, our egological doctrine would frankly assume the substantification of the pronoun “I” (*moi*): it would be necessary to construct the sentence in the third person.

If instead we put the verb “being” in the first person, our sentence becomes: “I wonder who I am, if it is now necessarily true that I am.” Here, egology looks to keep the egotistical style: it is about me (*moi*) that I will speak when, later, I will say that I am a pure mind and not a human being. About me (*moi*), that means: about the particular individual that I am.

In short, Balibar concludes, Descartes has written something in Latin that is rendered in French: “Who am I, I who am the one that now necessarily am” (“*Qui suis-je moi ce lui qui suis maintenant nécessairement*”).²³

What is, according to him, the problem that reveals this impossibility of translating? If the sentence mixes the two verbal persons in an inextricable way, it is because it wants to pose a question of essence (bearing on the nature of an *ego*) that is at the same time a question of identity (who am I?). A reader who has in mind Heidegger's theses on the difference between these two questions should conclude that it appears difficult to pose the question of identity without posing that of essence.

This diagnosis will be confirmed if we now turn towards the meticulous commentary that Vincent Carraud has made on this same sentence.

Carraud, as well, focuses his commentary on the interior discrepancy of this sentence. The sentence is in the third person since the word "*ego*" is substantivized there, but it is also considered to be in the first person since the interrogative word "who?" is used here in the first person (who am I?, not who is it?). Descartes dares to make a solecism in Latin (a deliberate solecism, of course, and not a fault of Latin usage). Carraud writes that it would be necessary to translate:

But I still do not quite understand who I am, this *I* (*moi*)
who "am" necessarily from now on.²⁴

This translation is obviously impossible.

Carraud insists on the fact that Descartes, in the Second Meditation, poses the question of identity before posing the question of essence. He even judges that Descartes opened – before closing it, of course – a "space" of phenomenological questioning, a space in which the question of being-self (*l'être-soi*) or being proper could be posed in a non-metaphysical way.²⁵ Thus we rediscover the idea of a Descartes who would be the precursor to the philosophies of existence that Merleau-Ponty put forward.

How does Carraud interpret the "*ego ille*" of Descartes? He rightly dismisses the construction of the "*ego*" as pronoun, followed by a relative one, as if one could say: "I (*Moi*), who am the one who...etc." In this case, he writes, the use would be a "pure designation" and it would be necessary to understand that it designates the author himself, Descartes.²⁶ But precisely, this cannot be the case. In fact, we have escaped from doubt only on a single point (*ego sum, ego existo*): all the rest is still struck with uncertainty. As he specifies further on: Descartes' *self* is not René Descartes (a human person), but is "the pure *self*," anticipating what Husserl calls "*das reine Ego*." Carraud concludes very accurately: "In other words, the self is not me."²⁷ And it is this which explains the "invention of the *self*," that is, the mutation by which the pronoun "*ego*" becomes a noun. Indeed we must understand that "the referent of the pronoun is not a particular, empirical person, René Descartes himself."²⁸ But if it is not Descartes, nor obviously anyone else, then who is it? The answer is that it is only the one who has victoriously resisted doubt: no more than one person in particular, a "personal *ego*," but an *ego* stripped of

all its “determinations” – an *ego* that, for this reason, Carraud compares and contrasts to Pascal’s *self* without qualities.²⁹ In this Cartesian *ego* remains only existence (which is not a determination) and the certainty of presently being in the process of thinking. However, if this *ego* is so little determined, is it still someone? The more we scrutinize Descartes’ untranslatable sentence, the more it becomes difficult to understand how it poses, as the interpreters have insisted, a question of identity. Carraud sees in doubt’s ascetic process a purification of the thought of oneself which, according to him, justifies the passage to the substantive. The thinker is no longer like a particular person; he is no more than a *self*.

Yet, if the answer to the posed question (“who am I?”) is that I am a *self*, it remains to be known *which one*. And if the answer is that I am *ego ille*, this *self* in the process of thinking, it remains to be specified how to distinguish this latter *self* from the former and from all the others. Unless, of course, the operation does not make any sense and I am neither this *self* nor that other, but only a *self* in general, a *self* and nothing more. Hence the question: what could be a Cartesian *ego*’s principle of individuation? Carraud himself emphasizes that there is not one in the work of Descartes. But this should have led him to call into question this distinction, picked up from Heidegger, between a question of identity and a question of quiddity. This is what we can conclude by reading a commentary by Guérout on the way in which the philosopher passes from *me, René Descartes* to *me, a self (moi) in general*.

The Individuation of an Ego

Martial Guérout explains why the *self*, which Descartes eventually reduces by the way of doubt, is neither a personal being nor an individual being. He writes this amazing commentary which deserves to be cited at length:

[...] For what does Descartes mean? He simply means this: What do I know if I am not deceived when I believe myself to be Descartes? Do not madmen believe themselves to be gourds, Louis XIII, or the Cardinal? Cannot the evil genius deceive me about my own individuality? Did not Mercury succeed, for an instant, in having Socius doubt his personal identity? But in order to be deceived in this case, I must at least be thinking; and since I am thinking, I exist, for in order to think one must exist. In brief, in order to be deceived about myself, it is not necessary that I be Socius, Descartes, the Cardinal, nor any such individual, nor even an individual or a person in general, but simply that I be “a thinking thing,” meaning a *self*, or thinking subject in general: any kind of thinking essence, whatever.³⁰

Therefore, Guérout concludes, the *Cogito* does not at all prove the reality (real existence) of “my personal concrete self, but that of my thinking self in general, as a universal condition of all possible knowledge.”³¹ A difference is introduced here. On one hand, there is the “personal concrete self,” who seems to be nothing other than the person of the philosopher (neither Louis XIII, nor the Cardinal, but me [*moi*]). On the other hand, there is the “thinking self in general,” which is posed as a condition of the possibility for all knowledge and, in this sense, as having a “transcendental” status.

Let us first note that this historian’s text allows us to attend the *in vitro* birth of the *self*, taken substantively in the metaphysical sense. It is here that the egological *self* enters the scene. Guérout, reproducing what he judges to be Cartesian reasoning, begins from an initial finding: it is not impossible for Descartes to put in doubt “his own individuality” and to tell himself, “perhaps I am not Descartes.” Starting from this possible doubt, philosophy frees up one certainty: even if I am deceived in thinking what I think, it does not hold any less that I am thinking. I am therefore a thinking thing. And that is when the pronoun taken substantively emerges: I am a thinking thing, that is, a *self*.

Is this derivation legitimate? Do we have here a “grammatical filiation” which could legitimate the fact of speaking about the *self* or the *ego*? Have we given a content to an assertion of the type, “I am a *self*”?

According to Guérout, the legitimacy of this substantification is assured by the steps of methodical doubt. It is possible to doubt one’s identity since it is possible to make an error about oneself. Descartes could deceive himself in believing to be Descartes. Guérout imagines situations of madness of increasing seriousness: to pretend to be another person than oneself (Descartes pretending to be Louis XIII), to pretend to be something other than a person (a madman pretending to be a jug [*cruche*]³²). However, one would like to object to him; there is a difference between *believing (wrongly) to be Louis XIII and not oneself* (as we find in Descartes) and *believing (wrongly) to be a jug and not a man*. It would be an error to say: in both cases, there would be an error concerning the identity of the thinker. In fact, in the first case, the error would be about individuality, thus about personal identity (I am not one of the human beings that I believed myself to be, there is a misunderstanding about the person). On the other hand, in the second case, it would be firstly an error about my nature (I believe myself to be a jug). In fact, the madman’s error is not in believing to be this jug, while he is really a jug, but not the one about which he says, “it’s me (*moi*).” His error is more radical: it is to take himself to be a jug when he is a human being.

However, in order to apply this second possibility of error to Descartes’ case, it is necessary to modify the content of it. The madman takes himself to be a jug. If Descartes were mad without having seen himself in that way – that happens to others, so why not to him? – and if he made an error about his

nature, it would be necessary to say that he takes himself to be a human being even though he is something completely different, for example, a jug.

Yet we are not at the end of our troubles. It is already impossible to bring together all the examples of misunderstandings in a single genre of error about oneself, as if they formed increasingly accented degrees of error. But it remains more difficult still to understand on this scale of degrees of error about oneself what Guérout has sketched: the passage from the error of taking oneself to be someone else or for something else to the error of taking oneself to be “an individual” or “a person in general.” This new extension of the field of possible error (a field conceded to the evil Genius) obviously aims to prepare the victorious response: whatever my error may be, I am nonetheless the one who is deceived about himself, who must indeed exist if he is deceived, thus I am “a self, or thinking subject in general: any kind of thinking essence, whatever.” Here is exactly the point which carries out the passage from the *I* (moi), who am deceived, to the thinking *self*. By a sort of philosophical alchemy, the purification of the pronoun “I” (“*moi*”) by doubt delivers the substantive noun which allows the thinker to regain an identity: I am this *self*.

In what would one have an identity there? Can one become aware of the demonstrative “this” in the definite description “this *self*”?

Does Guérout mean that the thinking subject can exist without being individuated? But, here, we want to ask: can I be a “subject in general”? Certainly not. To be a subject in general would be indeed to be a subject, but neither X, nor Y, nor any subject in particular. This would be like having an *address in general*, that is, living somewhere, yet not living in any place in particular. It can happen that I know I have an address in general without knowing what it is in particular. For example, someone could say: “Next month I will go to my friends’ house in Venice.” We would ask him: “Where in Venice?” And he would respond: “All that I know is that they live in Venice.” This answer would not mean that two sorts of address exist: particular ones and those which are general (and thereby immaterial).

The indefectible hold that the subject has on itself (by means of the *Cogito*) is supposed to give it its premiere certainty: even though it could be mistaken about everything, it would be a thinking thing, since it is in the process of thinking. But this answer teaches us *what I am* (a thinking subject), it does not say *who I am*. And if I do not know anything more about the *ego* than that, there is no possibility of posing a question of identity, because we do not have any principle of identity for an entity described as “the thinker of this thought.” Without such a principle, we cannot distinguish one particular subject from another.

To say that it is not necessary that I am “an individual or a person in general,” is to say only: regardless of this particular subject that I am, and although I do not know which one of the subjects I am, I exist. In order to go

further and pose the question of knowing which thinker I am, we would need a principle of individuation. But, as Guérout underlines, Descartes did not provide this principle and, moreover, did not pose the problem of individuation.

What are we calling individuation here? The principle of individuation is indicated by giving the criterion of identity to a kind of beings, which makes it possible to conceive of an enumeration of those entities. For example, we have a criterion of identity for cats so that we can count how many of them are in the house at a given moment. To count them – and to avoid counting the same one several times – we must give a meaning to the predicates “being the same cat (already counted)” or “being another cat (not yet counted).”

In ordinary life, our principle of individuation for an *ego* passes through the physical person of the speaker. In other words, we do not have any other criterion for the person, in which to report who states an egotistical sentence, than that of the human being producing this sentence. Therefore, here the use of the word “self” as a substantive appears “metaphysical” in Wittgenstein’s sense: all the conditions of an ordinary question of identity were refused, but the philosopher no longer gave the rules – thus in this case the criterion of identity – for the new use that he wanted to introduce.

The commentators who insist on the difference between a question of the type “who?” (question of identity) and a question of the type “what? what is it?” (question of essence) must explain to us how one can pose the question of the identity of a Cartesian *ego* when the latter, as they themselves underscore, is devoid of a principle of individuation. Ultimately, it seems that Luynes’ translation was the only possible one: at this stage of the argument, the thinker cannot ask who he is (which person, that is, which one of the persons), but only what he must be in order to exist as thinker.

Does the egotistical sentence have a subject?

How can we explain that several recent interpretations of Descartes are capable of saying two seemingly incompatible things?

On one side, they say that Descartes had the merit of posing the question “who?” concerning the “I think.” As long as Descartes poses this question of identity, he escapes the metaphysics of substance. On the other side, they say that Descartes had the merit of not confusing the “pure self” with a psychological or empirical “self,” which would be basically the human individual with its particularities. The subject thinking the *Cogito* and thinking itself by way of the *Cogito* can be conceived only negatively. And we find it here in Guérout’s commentary: such an *ego* does not have any principle of individuation.

We can return to the strange sentence from the *Meditations* that they have commented on. As Balibar emphasized, it is disconcerting that this

sentence, in order to be able to understand it, would need to be constructed *at the same time* in the first person (so that we must ask: *quis sum?*) and in the third person (so that it holds for *ego ille*, this *self*).

How can we get out of such an imbroglio? It is suitable, I think, to pose the radical question: does an egotistical sentence have a subject?

I will answer this question by drawing inspiration from Anscombe's lecture on the first person.³³ She supports a position there that seemed eccentric: "I-thoughts" are thoughts without a subject. The remark was sometimes held to be paradoxical, but it is not intended to be paradoxical in any way; it only claims to formulate explicitly what is entailed in the use of the first person. It is a use that everyone knows very well and of which we must in any case get away from if we want to invent another use, for example, in order to respond to some philosophical demands.

Does an egotistical sentence have a subject? Let's specify firstly the meaning of the question, which concerns all sentences in the first person (the utterance of "I think, I exist," was only an example). Let's first set aside two false tracks.

1. Does an egotist sentence have a *grammatical subject*? Assuredly, at least in French. However, we know that the ending of the verb is enough in other languages, for example in Latin. ("*Ambulo*" translates "I walk," it does not need a word to supply a subject to the verb, and it is not the function of the "*ego*" if we specify "*Ego ambulo.*") However, every French sentence comprising a grammatical subject does not have necessarily, from the point of view of logic, a subject of predication. Example: in the sentence "it is raining," the function of the pronoun "it" does not reflect, by anaphora, an agent of raining. The sentence is, as we say, impersonal.

2. Does this mean that an egotistical sentence describes in reality an impersonal process, a "process without a subject"? Is a sentence without a subject necessarily an "impersonal" sentence (like "it is raining"). Is it a matter of refusing that the egotistical sentence says something about someone, namely very precisely about its author, the speaker who produces the sentence in question? Certainly not. It is very clear that the speaker who produces an utterance of the type "I walk" intends to say something about himself and wants us to understand him as having said something about himself.

Neither sentences lacking a grammatical subject, nor descriptions of process without a subject: must the egotistical sentences for all that be analyzable like predicative propositions, with the mention of a subject of predication and the application of a predicate to this referent? Specified thusly, the question is then: does the egotistical sentence have a subject *in the logical sense*?

It is convenient to start from an observation bearing on the traditional explanation of third person singular verbs. Littré takes up the definition from the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* of 1798 in the article PERSON:

Grammatical term. Persons, the diverse positions of beings in relation to the act of speech: the first person, the one who speaks; the second person, the one to whom one speaks; the third person, the one of whom one speaks. In this sense, person also applies to things: all objects of which we speak are in the third person.

If we took these definitions literally, we would run into a conceptual difficulty. We read actually that *the person of which one speaks* is, by definition, the third. If a sentence focuses on an object whatsoever, it is in the third person. If this is the case, how can we avoid this consequence: when the speaker talks about someone, he designates him *ipso facto* this position of “person of which one speaks” that signals the third person. When I am speaking of a person, I have to place him or her in the position of an object.

If this is the case, how will someone be able to speak of himself in the first person? It seems impossible to speak *about oneself*, that is to speak about the person who speaks, without making oneself (first person) into the object of which one speaks (third person). And it seems equally impossible to speak about the person *to which one addresses oneself*, the person that one calls to by saying to him “you.” Speaking to someone in order to say something to him about himself: this would be to change the second person into the third person.

This difficulty that provokes the explanation of the word “person” as grammatical term reproduces a well-known difficulty that is inherent to the reflexive theory of subjectivity. The power of self-consciousness would rest upon the power that the thinking subject possesses of turning itself into an object – here, the passage to the third person – without for all that ceasing to be the subject of consciousness – there, the return to the first person.

It seems that there are only two conceivable ways of untying this conceptual knot:

a) Accepting the apparent paradox, and thus attempting to accommodate a third person, a moment of objectification, in the heart of the first person. It is only necessary that to speak about oneself is to speak about an object, but about an object in which the speaker can identify himself. I am speaking about myself (*moi*): I am speaking about an object that *appears to me* as myself (*moi*), which is both a *self* and among all the *selves*, the one that belongs to me or that defines me. Philosophically, this is the solution of reflexive identity according to which a self defines itself as a subject-

object, to repeat Fichte's expression. However, we then fall into the paradox of identity always lacking between the subject of the proposition (the subject of the utterance) and the one who speaks (the subject of enunciation). Speaking in the first person, and believing to speak about myself in the present, I speak in fact in the third person of a *self* from whom I just detached from myself by the simple fact of my being related to it.³⁴

b) Refusing this solution on the grounds that it leads back to eliminating what made the first person original. In fact, adopting this solution would be treating the first person like a "third person in reserve." Reserved to whom? To the one who uses the word "self" in order to refer to himself, of course. Or more precisely, to refer to the only *self* that he knows directly and to which he can refer directly (his own). It is necessary then, if we wish to refuse that the first person is a variety of the third person, to analyze personal sentences (starting from "I" and "you") as being, from a logical point of view, sentences without a subject.

This latter solution is essentially Anscombe's. It is judged paradoxical, but it seems to me that it only recalls what we have always understood since we learned to make use of egotistical forms.

Does the egotistical sentence speak about someone? Yes, but how does it do it? The sentence constructed with "I" really speaks about someone, but it does not say *of whom*, as a proposition containing a predicative connection (with a subject and a predicate) would do. What makes up the egotistical sentence, thanks to the markers of the first person, is referring the listener (or the reader) to a particular speech act, leaving it in his care, knowing this speech act, and determining who the author of it is.

The sentence starting with "you," in the same way, does not name the person about whom the sentence says something, but lets my interlocutor know – on the condition that he knows that this is his position in regard to our common speech act – he must apply to himself what my sentence says.

There is nothing paradoxical about a sentence that can have no subject while aiming to speak about someone. To say that it is without a subject is only to note that it does not say, by itself, of whom it is speaking. Indeed, the sentence speaks about someone, but it does not say about whom.

An example will help us be able to figure out what this is about. In the taking of the roll call, you are assisting in the execution of this formality of social life that involves taking attendance. The person in charge must verify who is there and note who is absent. He thus calls names from his list one after another: "Dupont? – Present! – Martin? – Present, etc." If you correctly

hear (*entendez*) the whole of this exchange, you know who is there. Those responses mean each time: "I am present." But suppose that, seated where you are, you were only able to hear the responses, while you cannot hear the names called. Each time that a "Present!" is heard (*se fait entendre*), you know that someone is present without knowing who is present. On its own, the response "Present" does not say who is present if we separate it from the question "Is Mr. So-and-so present?" In the same way, taken by itself, the production of an egotistical sentence attests to a presence without identifying the one who is present.

The egotistical sentence does not say who the subject is that it speaks to us about. But the fact that it is in the first person indicates to the addressee how to determine it. How can it be done? It suffices to ask oneself: who is speaking? Knowing who is speaking, one is familiar with the unspoken subject of the egotistical sentence. Consequently, we see the subject, but we cannot give a subject to the sentence that starts with "I" without transforming it by completing it in such a way as to have it pass from the first to the third person. There are two familiar ways of carrying out this transformation.

1. The listener can use the technique of reported speech. Pierre says to me, "I will come." Knowing that the subject who spoke thusly was Pierre, I can report it back to you by saying, "Pierre said that he would be coming." In this case, it is I (*moi*) who names Pierre.

2. The speaker can respond in advance to his listener's request by introducing the third person into the egotistical sentence. In order to do this, he inserts his name into his egotistical sentence so as to identify who is speaking. I can say: "I (*Moi*), Vincent Descombes, I will come." You then find in the sentence all that is necessary to put the verb "to come" in the third person.

And this last possibility certainly gives us the key to Descartes' untranslatable sentence. Everything happens as if the egological theory were asking us to say: "I (*Moi*), this *self*, I will come." Everything happens as if it wanted to make the expression "this *self*" into the proper noun of the true subject inasmuch as this subject is not confused with the human being.

*

Let's summarize what this outline of a philosophy of egotism has taught us.

What is egotism? Egotism is a style of presentation of oneself to others. It is a way of presenting oneself and hence of conducting oneself in company with others. The philosophy of egotism is also above all a rhetoric and a morality. Since saying "I" or "me" ("*moi*") is asking others to be concerned

with one's own person, the question is posed of knowing if it is always well advised to do so (rhetoric) and if this is not unjust (morality). When can we do it and when is it necessary to avoid it?

As soon as an author says "I" ("*moi*"),³⁵ he asks us to turn our attention toward him in the sense of the human individual that he is. There is not any cause for doubt here that the word "I" refers to the human individual that I am. As for the *self* taken substantively (of which the moralists speak), it designates egotism's manifesting character trait, that is, the habit (*manie*) of speaking about oneself. The return of the substantive "I" to the pronoun thus comes about without difficulty: the attachment (*attachment*) to oneself is an attachment to the "empirical individual," to the particular human being.

On the other hand, philosophical egology makes use of the substantive "I" in view of instituting a dualism between the empirical individual and the "thinking subject in general." Yet this subject lacks a principle of individuation. How can we bring about the return from the noun to the pronoun if the *ego ille* that is supposed to attest to the act of thinking must not be the pronoun through which the speaker announces himself in first person? The *self* of egology is something about which we cannot speak in the first person. I can speak about the egological *self* which is my own only in the third person. Thus, this egological *self* is not *me* (*moi*). And, as a result, I do not know how to reach it while starting from my own person, the one that I express in saying "I," the one I can identify for you by telling you my name.

Translated by Jake Nabasny

¹ The following translation consists of extracts (pp. 13-15; 50-79) from *Le Parler de soi* by Vincent Descombes © Editions Gallimard: Paris, 2014. It is published here with permission from Gallimard. A not insignificant challenge will be posed to the reader of this essay in English. Much of the text analyzes the function of the French words *moi* (I, me, myself) and *le moi* (the self). In fact, the opening question of Descombes' book concerns how philosophers derive *le moi* from *moi*. An additional obstacle is presented by the title of the book, which includes the impersonal *soi* (oneself) rather than *moi*. Thus, the reader must think the relation of *moi* to *le moi* (substantification) as well as *moi* to *soi* (socialization). *Moi* is translated here as "self" or "myself" unless otherwise noted. If neither of these two, *moi* most often appears in the place of the grammatical subject and is thus translated as "I" when noted. The publication of this translation would not have been possible without generous funding from the Department of Comparative Literature at the University at Buffalo (SUNY) and its Chair, Krzysztof Ziarek. I would also like to thank editor Scott Davidson for

recommending changes that improved the flow of the translation, and Vanessa Cimon-Lambert for updating my knowledge of French pleasantries.

² Translator's note : I have tried to render the parenthetical examples as idiomatically as possible. To be clear, the point is that French speakers will attach the pronoun *moi* to emphasize the role of the "I" or self in the action.

³ J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, ed., trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 225.

⁴ Maine de Biran, *De l'aperception immédiate, Mémoire de Berlin, 1807*, ed. Anne Devarieux (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2005), 79.

⁵ Translator's note : These questions are a passing reference to the metaphors frequently used by Descartes (painting, guarding, building a house) to describe his project of securing the identity of the self.

⁶ Translator's note : Early in the book, Descombes introduces the notion of Caesarean language, by which he simply means speaking of oneself in the third person.

⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), §13.

⁸ Paul Ricœur, "Étude sur les Méditations cartésiennes de Husserl" [1954], in *À l'école de la phénoménologie* [1986] (Paris: Vrin, 2004), 189.

⁹ Ricœur, *À l'école de la phénoménologie*, 190. It is fitting to recall that Ricœur, when he defines egology in Husserl's sense, does not pick up this doctrine in his own account, but on the contrary searches to identify the idealist part of the Husserlian heritage which he wishes to dissociate from.

¹⁰ Translator's note : Translations of Descartes are my own unless otherwise noted. Descombes often plays off of Descartes' literal expressions, which are rendered more idiomatically in the standard English translation by Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch. For instance, in this passage they translate *en même temps* as "totally," which would not convey Descombes' point that thinking and being are contemporaneous for Descartes.

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Everywhere and Nowhere," in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 149.

¹² On the reasons for not taking up the interpretative translation of "*Vorhandenheit*" by "presence-at-hand," see Françoise Dastur's remarks in *Heidegger and the Question of Time*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 74.

¹³ “*Seiendes ist ein Wer (Existenz) ode rein Was (Vorhandenheit im weitesten Sinne).*” [Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 71.]

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 119. “Whoness” is the word that Courtine proposes to translate the neologism *Werheit* (which would be a hapax in the Heideggerian corpus according to Vincent Carraud, *L’Invention du moi* (Paris: PUF, 2010), 256).

¹⁵ Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 120. [Translator’s note : the French translation that Descombes cites is slightly different: “La réponse à la question ‘qui?’ ne donne pas une res, mais un Je, un Tu, un Nous.” Martin Heidegger, *Les Problèmes fondamentaux de la phénoménologie*, trans. Jean-François Courtine (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 151.]

¹⁶ Translator’s note : Descombes is distinguishing between subject pronouns (*Je, Tu*) and object pronouns (*Moi, Toi*) to underscore that the entity which responds to the question “Who?” must be, at least grammatically, an object and not a subject.

¹⁷ Translator’s note : “Mais je ne connais pas encore assez clairement ce que je suis, moi qui suis certain que je suis.” The standard English translation of this sentence (quoted in the following footnote) is even less personal, so the point will not be lost on readers of Descartes in English.

¹⁸ Michèle Beyssade proposes this interpretative translation: “Mais je ne connais pas encore d’une intelligence suffisante ce qu’est ce moi, ce que je suis, moi qui à présent de toute nécessité suis” (Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques*, trans. Michèle Beyssade (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990), 53.) [Translator’s note : Beyssade’s translation can be rendered thusly: “But I still do not know with sufficient intelligence what this self is, which I am; I who now necessarily am.” This bears a striking resemblance to the standard English translation: “But I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this ‘I’ is, that now necessarily exists” (Descartes, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert, Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 81).] We find again the query into *quis?* in two other passages from the Second Meditation. Firstly, Descartes announces again that he must wonder about who he is (and again the question also applies to *ego ille*): *Novi me existere; quaero quis sim ego ille quem novi* (AT, VII, 27). Further on, before entering into the so-called analysis of the piece of wax, he says having made progress in his investigation: *ex quibus equidem aliquando melius incipio nosse quisnam sim* (AT, VII, 29).

¹⁹ Translator's note : René Descartes, *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 127.

²⁰ In his conference paper "Ego sum, ego existo" [1992], reprinted in his *Citizen Subject: Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 55-73.

²¹ Balibar, *Citizen Subject*, 61.

²² Balibar, *Citizen Subject*, 63.

²³ Balibar, *Citizen Subject*, 64. [Translator's note : It should be noted that the Cartesian sentence, as it is translated from Latin to French, sounds just as strange in French as it does here in English. This seems to be Balibar's point. As he mentions in the very next sentence, while there may not be an adequate translation of this sentence, we can understand it perfectly well]

²⁴ Vincent Carraud, *Pascal: Des connaissances naturelles à l'étude de l'homme* (Paris: Vrin, 2007), 122.

²⁵ Vincent Carraud, *L'Invention du moi*, 243-4.

²⁶ Carraud, *L'Invention du moi*, 58.

²⁷ Carraud, *L'Invention du moi*, 63. [Translator's note : le moi, ce n'est pas moi.]

²⁸ Carraud, *L'Invention du moi*, 48.

²⁹ See in the appendix of *Le parler de soi* the note on Pascal's self.

³⁰ Martial Guérout, *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons: The Soul and God*, Volume 1, trans. Roger Ariew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 288n8.

³¹ Guérout, *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*, 30.

³² Translator's note : *La cruche* means jug, but also idiot. In the following discussion, Descombes intentionally equivocates between a discussion about a person's ignorance of oneself (as idiot) and the thingliness of the self (as jug). - TN

³³ See also my commentary on Anscombe's lecture in the essay "The Hammer, the Mallet and the Nail," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 68: 4 (2010): 495-519.

³⁴ This solution of a "non-coincidence" of oneself to oneself, defended by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, was recovered in our day by Charles Larmore in his book *Les Pratiques du moi* (Paris: PUF, 2004). Larmore and I discussed this point in our exchange published under the title *Dernières nouvelles du moi* (Paris: PUF, 2009).

³⁵ Translator's note : Every instance of "I" (in quotes) throughout the rest of the text is an instance of *moi*.